
Hannah Rose Shell is the Leo Marx Career Development Assistant Professor of Science, Technology, and Society at MIT. Based on Shell’s doctoral work, Hide and Seek explores the confluent history of art and military tactics. Beginning with the etymology of the word camouflage, Shell explores theories and evolution of reconnaissance and the human desire for invisibility. Three structural formations of concealment are examined: the static, the serial, and the dynamic.

In the first chapter Shell presents Abbott Thayer’s concepts of obliterative countershading and disruptive patterning found in nature. The artist employed photography and collage in his proposal of military uniform redesign, drawing accusations from Theodore Roosevelt of Thayer’s using biased and manipulative techniques. In addition to photography and painting, Thayer frequently used taxidermies. The concept of film as a surrogate for skin is explored throughout the title, as both a barrier to the natural environment and a form of cover. Concealing coloration found in nature was eventually adapted into counter-reconnaissance military tactics, and Shell explores the cyclical relationship of art and military subterfuge.

The advent of in-flight reconnaissance and aerial photography forever altered the acts of seeing and interpreting. Freed from constraints of time, these serial images comprised of abstracted shapes and textures, necessitated the training of specialists to infer their information. Military camofleurs responded with the use of netting and materials from the natural environment, imagining a vertical perspective that had only recently become attainable. Military training increasingly focused on the art of continuously adapting materially, visually, and psychologically to one’s environment.

The World War II training film Kill or be Killed, directed by Len Lye, uses various points of view in examination of the psychological influence of alternating first person and third person perspectives. Lye employed direct animation techniques in many films, and the resulting contrasting shapes and hues bear resemblance to strategies of military concealment. Video games and first person shooters are only given brief mention in the context of military training and human behavior. Closing with examples of camouflage inventions drawn directly from works of science fiction, Shell speculates on the future of subterfuge and reconnaissance.

Supporting black and white images are located throughout the text with a segment of color reproductions at the end. This book contributes a theoretical perspective to existing publications on the topics of art, camouflage, and reconnaissance. It is best suited for a scholarly audience, graduate level studies, and researchers.

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