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## Street art and internet memes as identity narratives of resistance: Hybrid visual communication in frontline cities of Ukraine (spring of 2022)

**Abstract.** The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022 profoundly transformed the country's cultural, informational, and symbolic landscape, turning urban space into a site of visual and symbolic resistance. This article examined how street art, symbolic civic practices, and digital visual culture in frontline Ukrainian cities during the spring of 2022 function as interconnected forms of symbolic resistance and collective resilience within a hybrid visual communication network linking urban and digital spaces. The study employed an interdisciplinary approach combining semiotic analysis, discourse analysis, visual anthropology, and digital culture studies. The empirical material included murals, graffiti, symbolic interventions, and internet memes documented between February and October 2022 in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, and Zaporizhzhia. The findings demonstrated that, under wartime conditions, war-damaged urban spaces acquired renewed symbolic meanings, while murals, the micro-interventions of the Yellow Ribbon Movement, and digital memes form a hybrid visual communication network. Murals and graffiti transformed damaged buildings and public spaces into communicative surfaces, through which narratives of national identity, collective memory, and resilience were articulated. The Yellow Ribbon Movement demonstrated how decentralised symbolic interventions sustain civic solidarity and affirm Ukrainian identity in temporarily occupied territories. Digital memes functioned as adaptive communicative tools that reframed fear through humour and irony, while countering disinformation and engaging international audiences. Together, these visual practices constituted a distributed semiotic system that reinforced cultural resistance, social cohesion, and symbolic resilience under wartime conditions

**Keywords:** cultural problems; sociocultural transformations; symbolic resilience; visual culture; spatial semiotics; Yellow Ribbon; digital memes

### INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 transformed public space into a site of cultural resistance, where street art, graffiti, stencilled images, memorial signs, and digital memes documented wartime experiences, reinforced national identity, and challenged propaganda and narratives promoted by the occupying forces. Together, these physical and digital forms of expression created a hybrid visual-symbolic

network, linking urban spaces with online communication networks and enabling the rapid circulation of shared meanings, emotions, and narratives of resistance. Studies of Ukrainian visual culture and symbolic politics analysed how artistic practices contributed to processes of nation-building and collective memory formation. K. Kysliuk (2023) demonstrated that visual representations of the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine combined

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media frames with deeper cultural archetypes and collective meanings, thereby shaping perceptions of violence, heroism, and national identity. Ukrainian scholars had also examined digital communication and memetic culture. E.E. Scialabba (2020) defined digital mimesis as a defining principle of contemporary visual culture, arguing that recursive imitation and spreadability enable visual forms to circulate across media environments and become carriers of collective emotions, social values, and political narratives. A. Khudiakova (2023) examined anti-war murals created in Ukraine and abroad after the Russian Federation full-scale invasion. Researcher conceptualised wartime muralism as a form of symbolic resistance that transformed urban space into sites of memory, solidarity, resilience, and national identity.

M. Poliakova *et al.* (2026) conceptualised contemporary Ukrainian muralism as a form of public polylogue that mediated communication between artists, communities, and urban environments. Scientist emphasised the communicative and dialogical potential of monumental art, arguing that murals function as mechanisms for negotiating social meanings and shaping collective memory. In this sense, public art extended beyond aesthetic representation to become an active participant in civic discourse. Similarly, S. Hulievych (2025) interpreted contemporary Ukrainian visual art as a medium of cultural memory that combined documentary and symbolic modes of representation. By linking personal experiences with collective narratives, wartime artistic practices contributed to the preservation of identity and the articulation of cultural resistance. D. Syzonov & O. Zlotnyk-Shagina (2024) analysed Ukrainian wartime memes as multimodal communicative units characterised by distinctive psycholinguistic markers. The authors demonstrated that memes encoded collective emotions and shared experiences through recurrent symbolic references and linguistic patterns. Researchers argued that the reactivation and circulation of memes contribute to the formation of collaborative memory and facilitate psychological adaptation under conditions of war. Extending this perspective, A. Mozolevska (2024) investigated memes circulating on Ukrainian and Russian social media during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Scientist argued that memes functioned not only as mechanisms of humour and psychological adaptation, but also as powerful tools for constructing collective identities and negotiating images of self and other. By establishing symbolic boundaries and reinforcing shared narratives, memetic practices contributed to national solidarity and the articulation of resistance. Thus, digital humour emerged as an important medium of resilience and symbolic resistance. S. Ahmed & M. Masood (2024) demonstrated that exposure to political memes facilitated online political participation and can mobilise otherwise disengaged audiences, highlighting their role as instruments of participatory communication and digital activism. It demonstrated that wartime memes functioned not only as markers of collaborative memory

and mechanisms of psychological adaptation, but also as forms of symbolic resistance, digital activism, and identity construction. From 2022, attention had turned to emerging forms of digital visibility associated with the Russian Federation's war against Ukraine. M. Makhortykh & M. Bareikytė (2025) showed that image-generative AI models influenced the production, circulation, and interpretation of wartime imagery, while simultaneously tending to homogenise visual representations of violence. Scientists' findings underscored the growing role of artificial intelligence in shaping collective perceptions and contemporary visual cultures of war.

Another line of inquiry concerns cultural practices that combined artistic activism with civic engagement under wartime conditions. S. Vytalov & I. Vilchynska (2025) examined how these initiatives linked artistic expression, social solidarity, and community reconstruction. Volunteer movements integrated internally displaced persons through collaborative creative activities, while memorial projects transformed sites of loss into spaces of collective reflection. Digital platforms extended participation beyond geographical and security constraints. These practices performed integrative, communicative, mobilising, and therapeutic functions, strengthening social cohesion through shared symbols and collective meaning-making. Despite these significant contributions, relatively few studies examined the interaction between physical visual practices, such as street art and symbolic urban interventions, and digital visual cultures within the context of active military conflict. Existing scholarship often treats street art, symbolic civic practices, and internet memes as separate analytical domains despite their increasing overlap within contemporary media environments. Moreover, while journalistic documentation of wartime murals and visual activism in Ukraine had been extensive since the full-scale invasion of 2022, systematic academic analysis of these visual practices remained limited. In this study, a hybrid visual communication network was understood as an interconnected system, through which meanings circulated between urban space and digital platforms via mutually reinforcing visual practices, thereby shaping collective memory, reinforcing national identity, and fostering cultural resilience. This concept provided the analytical framework for examining the interaction between street art, symbolic civic interventions, and digital memes during the initial phase of the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion. Accordingly, this article examined how street art, symbolic civic practices, and digital visual culture in frontline Ukrainian cities during the spring of 2022 operate as interconnected forms of symbolic resistance and community resilience within a hybrid visual communication network linking physical and digital spaces. The analysis proceeds in three stages, examining monumental street art, decentralised symbolic interventions associated with the Yellow Ribbon Movement, and digital memes as interconnected components of this hybrid visual communication network.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed an interdisciplinary methodology to analyse wartime visual culture as a situated symbolic practice produced under conditions of armed conflict. It examined visual materials created between February and October 2022 in five frontline regions of Ukraine: Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, and Zaporizhzhia. The empirical corpus comprised approximately seventy-two documented visual artefacts, including murals, graffiti inscriptions, Yellow Ribbon symbols, and widely circulated digital memes, identified through photographic documentation, media reports, and publicly accessible digital platforms. Twelve representative examples were reproduced and examined in detail. The corpus nevertheless remained incomplete, as many locally produced and ephemeral visual interventions may have disappeared before documentation. The analysis focused exclusively on publicly documented visual materials and avoids reproducing images that may expose vulnerable individuals or locations. The selected time-frame corresponded to the initial phase of the full-scale invasion, when spontaneous forms of visual resistance rapidly emerged. These early visual practices represented an initial stage of wartime symbolic production, which continued to evolve as the conflict shifts from emergency response toward longer-term processes of cultural memory. The selected cities represented diverse wartime conditions, including direct frontline proximity, intensive bombardment, temporary encirclement, and sustained civic resistance. Visual symbols were interpreted within their cultural and spatial contexts, acknowledging that meanings may vary across audiences and evolve over time. The analysis combined visual, semiotic, and discourse approaches. Visual analysis examined composition, iconography, material context – including damaged façades and shelters – and the spatial visibility of artworks within urban environments, allowing interpretation of how street art interacted with the physical landscape of war.

Semiotic and discourse analysis were used to interpret symbolic meaning and the social functions of visual representations. R. Barthes' (1977) theory of myth provided a framework for analysing how images transformed specific wartime events into broader narratives of national identity, resistance, and collective memory, while M. Foucault's (2002) concept of discourse together with subsequent work on counter-visibility helped to explain how visual practices challenge dominant narratives and contest symbolic power. A. Giddens's (1984) structuration theory was particularly relevant for understanding how artists and citizens operated within the constraints imposed by war, while simultaneously exercising agency to reshape symbolic environments through creative practice. Digital visual culture was analysed using frameworks from meme studies, particularly L. Shifman's (2013) typology of participatory memes and B.E. Wiggins & G.B. Bowers' (2015) genre approach to memetic communication. G. Marino's (2015) semiotic approach to digital mimesis and spreadability informed the analysis of how visual content

acquired meaning through circulation, replication, and transformation across digital environments. E.E. Scialabba's (2020) work further explained how recursive imitation structures contemporary visual communication, enabling visual forms to be continually reinterpreted and remediated across media platforms. Together, these methods enable an integrated analysis of murals, symbolic gestures, and digital memes as interconnected elements of wartime visual communication.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of visual artefacts demonstrated that wartime visual culture in Ukraine operated through interconnected material and digital forms of symbolic resistance. Murals and graffiti transformed damaged urban environments into communicative spaces, while the Yellow Ribbon Movement develops decentralised symbolic practices in occupied territories. At the same time, digital memes translated daily wartime experiences into shared emotional narratives, collectively forming a hybrid visual communication network linking physical and digital spaces. The interaction between urban and digital visual culture was particularly evident in the emergence of shared symbolic motifs that rapidly circulated across media and public space. Among the earliest and most recognisable examples was the "Tank forces" phenomenon (Fig. 1).



**Figure 1.** Tank forces

**Note:** a – photo taken on 27 February 2022 near the village Lyubymivka (Kherson region); b – photo of the mural in Amsterdam by the artist NILS; c – photo of the postage stamp

**Source:** A. Hanchuk (2022), Vidar (2022), Volstamp (n.d.)

The analysed images traced the transformation of a wartime event into a cultural symbol of Ukrainian resistance. Figure 1, a documents Ukrainian farmers towing abandoned Russian Federation military equipment by Ukrainian farmers near Lyubymivka (Kherson region) on 27 February 2022. An image that rapidly spread through national and international media as a symbol of civilian resilience and ingenuity. Figure 1, b, a mural by Dutch artist NILS in Amsterdam, translated this event into global street art, demonstrating international solidarity with Ukraine. Figure 1, c, a Ukrainian postage stamp based on the same motif, institutionalised the image within national commemorative culture. Together, these examples illustrated how a documentary image evolved across media formats into a widely recognised visual narrative that reinforced collective identity, public morale, and international support for Ukraine. The urban landscapes of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhzhia during the spring of 2022 revealed a pronounced tension between physical destruction and symbolic reconstruction. As missile strikes and artillery reshaped the material environment, communities reclaimed damaged urban spaces through murals, inscriptions, and symbolic gestures that asserted continuity despite rupture. Graffiti, stencils, and improvised visual interventions transformed ruined buildings, streets, and barricades into communicative surfaces, through which wartime experiences were translated into narratives of resistance, memory, and collective endurance. In this context, urban space itself became a medium, through which destruction and symbolic meaning were simultaneously inscribed. An example was the mural by Ukrainian muralist Sasha Korban (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Mural “Everything will be Ukraine”

**Note:** photo by Sasha Korban

**Source:** H. Vorona (2022)

Painted on a damaged wall, while serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the mural depicted gloved hands stitching together the torn blue and yellow halves of the national flag, symbolising resilience, unity, and national recovery amid destruction. The exposed brickwork was integrated into the composition, transforming wartime damage into a visual narrative of renewal. Widely circulated in Ukrainian media and on social media, the work became a powerful symbol of resistance, while the act of sewing itself

functioned as a metaphor for repairing the social fabric disrupted by war and restoring a sense of collective identity under conditions of crisis. In cities such as Kyiv and Kharkiv, where bombardment left visible traces across residential districts and public infrastructure, artists frequently worked directly on damaged surfaces. Burnt apartment blocks, shattered bus stops, barricades, and partially destroyed facades became symbolic canvases that framed artistic intervention. In Kyiv, murals and graffiti often depicted Ukrainian defenders, volunteers, and civilians, juxtaposing vulnerability with defiance. Soldiers were frequently rendered with elements of sacred iconography, presenting defenders as moral protectors of the nation. Other murals portrayed children holding blue-and-yellow balloons or women represented as guardians, echoing the mythological imagery of the Berehynia, a traditional Slavic female protector associated with the safeguarding of home and nation. These visual forms condensed wartime experience into symbolic narratives of dignity and perseverance, functioning as what R. Barthes (1977) described as “myths today”, through which historical events were translated into culturally intelligible meanings. A representative example of these visual narratives is provided by the mural “Ghost of Kyiv” (Fig. 3), created by a team led by Ukrainian artist Andrii Kovtun in Kyiv in 2022.



**Figure 3.** Mural “Ghost of Kyiv”

**Note:** photo by Olga Kosova

**Source:** O. Kosova (2024)

The mural portrayed a Ukrainian fighter pilot inspired by the popular wartime legend of the “Ghost of Kyiv”, which emerged during the defence of the capital in the first weeks of the invasion. Unveiled on Aviation Day, the work transformed a popular wartime narrative into a monumental visual symbol of courage, sacrifice, and national resilience. Widely covered by Ukrainian and international media, the mural became an important visual representation of community resilience and the symbolic heroism associated with Ukraine’s resistance. Visual narratives increasingly expanded beyond military themes to commemorate civilian forms of courage and solidarity as illustrated by “Support” and “Heroes without weapons”. Figure 4 presented the mural “Support”, based on a work by the renowned Canadian artist and illustrator Eric Pause

and realised in Kyiv in 2022 by the organisation GoGlobal in cooperation with the communication agency ETER as part of the youth initiative.

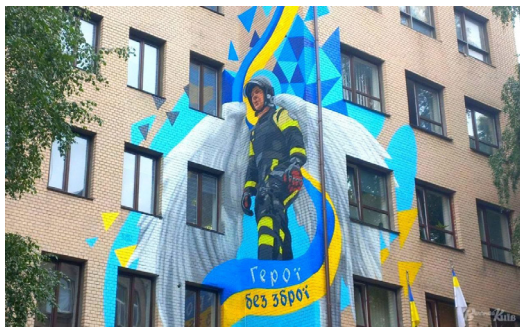


**Figure 4.** Mural “Support”

**Note:** photo by GoGlobal

**Source:** O. Kosova (2024)

The composition depicted intertwined human figures rendered in the artist’s characteristic geometric style, symbolising solidarity, mutual support, and social cohesion during wartime. Created as part of an international artistic initiative supporting Ukraine, the mural attracted public attention as a visual expression of unity and humanitarian support, reinforcing narratives of collective resilience and recovery. Figure 5 depicted the mural “Heroes without weapons”, created by Kyiv artists Vitalii Hydevan and Olena Noyna in 2023.



**Figure 5.** Mural “Heroes without weapons”

**Note:** photo by Olga Kosova

**Source:** O. Kosova (2024)

Portraying a firefighter against the colours of the Ukrainian flag, the work commemorated rescuers, who risked their lives responding to the consequences of the Russian Federation’s attacks. By extending wartime heroism beyond the military sphere, the mural emphasised civic solidarity, sacrifice, and the essential role of emergency workers in sustaining social resilience. Widely covered in Ukrainian media and positively received by the public, it became a visual tribute to those protecting civilian lives under conditions of war. More broadly, wartime street art functions as a mechanism of commemoration

and symbolic mobilisation, reinforcing narratives of sacrifice and collective resilience, as exemplified by the mural “For freedom” (Fig. 6).



**Figure 6.** Mural “For freedom”

**Note:** photo by GoGlobal

**Source:** O. Kosova (2024)

Figure 6 presented the mural “For freedom”, created in Kyiv in 2023 by the Paint Hunters team, comprising Dmytro Kasianiuk and Marian Motruk. It depicted a Ukrainian soldier against the blue and yellow colours of the national flag beneath the slogan “For freedom”. It commemorated the sacrifice of Ukrainian defenders and symbolised the struggle for sovereignty and independence. The work honours those defending the country and reinforces narratives of national unity and resilience. Widely covered by Ukrainian media, the mural was positively received as an expression of gratitude, collective memory, and support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Beyond individual commemorative works, wartime street art became increasingly embedded in the urban fabric of frontline cities. Kharkiv, subjected to relentless shelling, developed a visual landscape, in which street art became closely intertwined with the materiality of destruction. Artists painted directly on damaged façades and the remnants of public buildings, transforming ruined structures into sites of visual meaning. This materially anchored symbolism reflected G. Marino’s (2015) observation that spreadability extended beyond digital networks to encompass spatial visibility: symbols reproduced across damaged urban surfaces enable rapid recognition and collective identification. A representative example of this materially grounded symbolism was the mural “Kharkiv – hero city” (Fig. 7). Figure 7 reproduced the mural “Kharkiv – hero city”, created by Ukrainian artist Anastasiia Khudiakova in October 2022 and dedicated to the resilience of Kharkiv during the Russian Federation’s invasion. Painted on a building damaged by a Russian missile strike on 1 March 2022, the work incorporated the material legacy of destruction into its symbolic narrative. The mural portrayed construction workers rebuilding the city alongside iconic landmarks, including the Assumption Cathedral, the Mirror Stream fountain, the Ferris wheel, the Annunciation Cathedral, Derzhprom, and the railway station, symbolising recovery, local identity, and civic

solidarity. Widely appreciated by residents, the mural transformed a site of destruction into a powerful affirmation of Kharkiv as a hero city and of the city's determination to rebuild and preserve its cultural heritage amid continuous shelling.



**Figure 7.** Mural “Kharkiv – hero city”

**Source:** Mukha. Murals of Kharkiv (n.d.)

Although the visual culture of Kharkiv foregrounded commemoration and the material traces of destruction, wartime symbolism in Mykolaiv assumed more humorous and participatory forms. Widely circulated wartime phrases were recontextualised as graffiti, stickers, and murals, demonstrating how the convergence of digital memes and urban space generated distinctive practices of symbolic resistance and collective resilience.

Memetic imagery translated online humour into urban space, allowing recognisable digital templates to circulate in material form. Following L. Shifman's (2013) typology, such visual references combined recognisable formats, explicit stance, and intertextual connections with global meme culture. Digital memes and street art therefore operated not as separate domains, but as interconnected symbolic practices within a shared visual environment. Humour, irony, and satire function as mechanisms, through which communities process uncertainty and reaffirm collective solidarity, while repeated visual motifs generated a shared symbolic language extending from social media platforms into everyday urban environments. A representative example of this convergence between digital meme culture and urban space was the mural “Defender kitty” (Fig. 8).

Figure 8 depicted the mural “Defender kitty”, created in Mykolaiv by muralists Dmytro Slepukha and Alyona Martynova. Inspired by the popular wartime imagery of the “combat cat”, the mural combined humour and military symbolism, translating a memetic image into urban space. According to the artists, the work aimed to raise the spirits of Mykolaiv residents, who remained

in the city despite intense daily shelling by the Russian Federation. Warmly received by local residents and widely followed throughout its creation, the mural became a source of emotional support and a symbol of resilience and optimism. As one resident observed, the artwork provided much-needed positivity during wartime and inspired hopes for similar initiatives throughout the city.



**Figure 8.** Mural “Defender kitty”

**Note:** photo by Svitlana Vovk

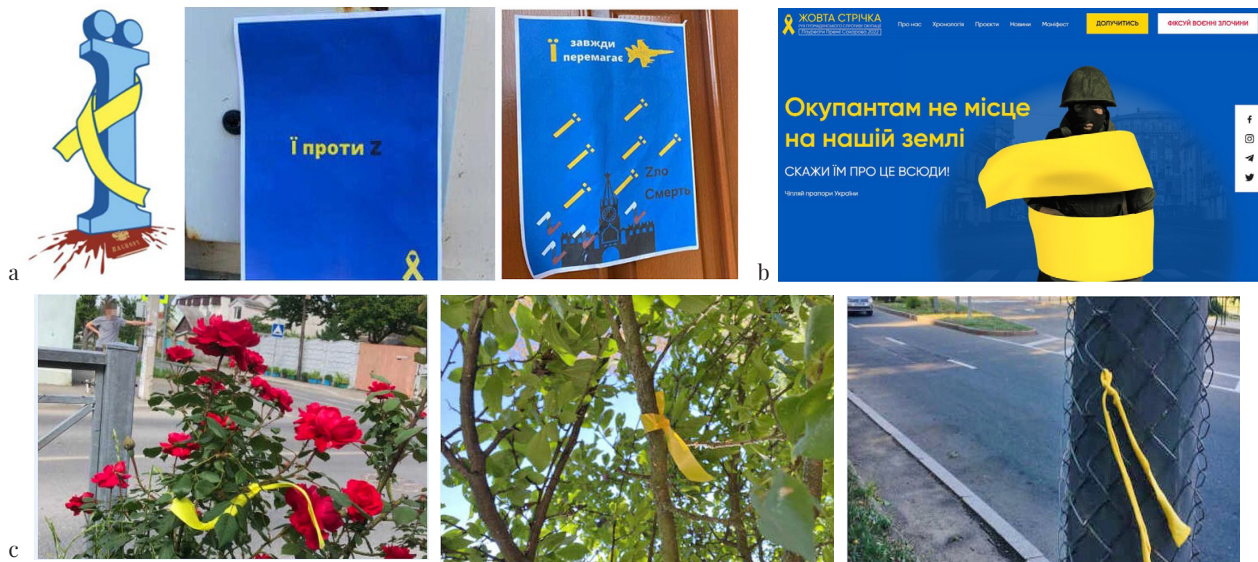
**Source:** Svidok.info (2026)

Although humour and memetic symbolism played a central role in Mykolaiv's wartime visual culture, visual practices in Chernihiv and Zaporizhzhia adopted more commemorative forms. There, sites of destruction, including schools, residential buildings, and public squares, were transformed into spaces of remembrance, mourning, and hope. In Chernihiv, spontaneous memorial artworks included portraits of civilians killed during bombardments, painted flowers surrounding craters, and inscriptions commemorating victims of attacks. Such imagery corresponded with N. Gal's (2016) observation that visual media established emotional publics through shared forms of mourning and hope, converting traumatic locations into mnemonic landscapes that preserved collective memory, while affirming communal resilience. In Zaporizhzhia, murals frequently expressed themes of protection and perseverance. Images of birds breaking through cages, guardians guiding children, and stylised maps of Ukraine accompanied by inscriptions such as “Тримаймося” (Trymaymosya, “Holding on”), communicated emotional solidarity and endurance. The emotional immediacy of these images illustrated A. Giddens's (1984) concept of structuration, as artistic expression emerged precisely, where structural constraints were most pronounced. Through these visual narratives, artists transformed spaces of vulnerability into symbolic sites of continuity and survival.

Graffiti, stencils, and improvised visual interventions transformed ruined buildings, streets, and other urban surfaces into communicative surfaces, through which wartime experiences were translated into narratives of resistance and collective endurance, collectively forming part of a hybrid visual communication network linking

urban space with digital media circulation. As these images circulated across physical and digital environments, familiar symbols acquired new layers of meaning and became embedded in broader narratives of identity, memory, and collective survival. Street art in wartime Ukraine thus constituted a dense semiotic field, in which recurring motifs operated as mythic signifiers of resistance and resilience in the sense described by R. Barthes (1977). The trident, frequently appearing in murals, served as a unifying national symbol, whose presence on bomb-damaged walls emphasised the irreducibility of Ukrainian identity. In semiotic terms, it evolved from a conventional political emblem into a signifier of collective survival. The national colour palette became similarly pervasive, appearing not only in murals, but also on barricades, helmets, sandbags, and structural supports. This chromatic proliferation reflected, what E.E. Scialabba (2020) described as digital mimesis, extended into physical space: repeated reproduction stabilised

symbolic meaning. Images of mothers shielding children appeared repeatedly across frontline cities, evoking older cultural archetypes, such as the Berehynia and the Theotokos, alongside contemporary narratives of civilian suffering. Murals also portrayed Ukrainian soldiers, medics, and volunteers in stylised heroic forms that foreground agency rather than victimhood and function as counter-images to dehumanising propaganda. Birds – particularly storks, cranes, and nightingales – symbolised return and national continuity, while angels appeared as protectors of cities near hospitals or bomb shelters. Together these motifs formed a semiotic network, through which wartime street art articulated collective identity and resilience. Yet symbolic resistance was not limited to monumental murals and large-scale public art. In occupied territories, visual practices often assumed more discreet and decentralised forms, giving rise to micro-symbolic interventions associated with the Yellow Ribbon Movement (Fig. 9).



**Figure 9.** Yellow Ribbon Movement

**Note:** a – screenshot of the movement’s website, which coordinated activities and disseminated messages opposing Russian Federation’s occupation; b – inscription of the Ukrainian letter “І”, a distinctive letter of the Ukrainian alphabet (pronounced «yi»), adopted by activists to affirm Ukrainian cultural and linguistic identity; c – yellow ribbons placed on trees, fences, flowerbeds, and other public spaces in occupied territories in Ukraine’s south

**Source:** Yellow Ribbon (n.d.)

Through these simple yet recognisable interventions, activists transformed everyday spaces into sites of symbolic resistance, communicating solidarity and asserting the continued presence of Ukrainian identity under occupation. Operating without formal hierarchy, the movement relied on low-risk symbolic practices to challenge imposed visual orders and maintain the visibility of Ukrainian identity. The movement’s activities demonstrated how resistance could be enacted through everyday objects and spatial interventions rather than overt political action. As L. Althusser (2006) suggested, ideology operated through routine practices; similarly, Yellow Ribbon interventions functioned as rituals of subject formation,

reassuring communities that Ukrainian identity and civic resistance persisted despite occupation. Their widespread replication across occupied territories also illustrated how symbolic practices circulated within a hybrid visual communication network, linking physical interventions with digital dissemination and collective meaning-making. Unlike large murals, Yellow Ribbon signs relied on subtlety and reproducibility. Their simplicity reflected G. Marino’s (2015) notion of spreadability through minimalism: the simpler the form, the more easily it circulated. While occupation authorities attempted to impose a new symbolic order by removing Ukrainian flags, renaming streets, and installing propaganda, these small interventions disrupt

the imposed visual regime and undermine the appearance of control. The yellow ribbon thus became a condensed symbol of continuity, nonviolent defiance, and belonging to the national collective. Its semiotic efficiency mirrors the logic of memes, demonstrating how micro-symbols functioned as nodes within a distributed semiotic system of wartime resistance. A similar logic characterised digital memes circulating across Ukrainian and global digital platforms, which complemented the rhetorical and affective power of street art. As L. Shifman (2013) emphasised, memes communicated through recognisable and adaptable templates. Ukrainian memes addressing air-raid sirens, blackouts, missile interceptions, and frontline humour transformed fear into shared irony and collective resilience. As B.E. Wiggins & G.B. Bowers (2015) argued, their social power derived from genre recognition: wartime adaptations retained familiar formats, while incorporating references to the conflict, enabling audiences to navigate uncertainty through recognisable communicative patterns. The capacity of memes to transform fear into shared irony and collective resilience was illustrated by “Я в калідорі” (“I’m in the hallway”) (Fig. 10).



**Figure 10.** Меме “Я в калідорі” – child’s softened mispronunciation of “I’m in the hallway” during air raids, later transformed into a shared symbol of vulnerability and solidarity

**Source:** S. Ruth (2022)

The meme “Я в калідорі” (“I’m in the hallway”) originated from a child’s softened pronunciation of the phrase “I’m in the corridor” during an air raid. Popularised through illustrations and adaptations on social media, the phrase became a humorous yet emotionally resonant expression of everyday wartime experience. By transforming the practice of seeking shelter according to the “two-wall rule” into a shared cultural reference, the meme converted vulnerability into solidarity and fear into irony. Its widespread circulation demonstrated how ordinary experiences were translated into participatory forms of meaning-making and collective resilience. The participatory nature was further illustrated by their continuous adaptation and recombination. One such example was the meme “I’m in the hallway and ballistic missiles” (Fig. 11), which combined the familiar phrase “Я в калідорі” (“I’m in the hallway”) with exaggerated imagery to express the anxiety associated with missile attacks through humour and irony.



**Figure 11.** Меме “I am in hallway and ballistic missiles”  
**Source:** V. Shaparenko (n.d.)

Figure 11 depicted a wartime adaptation of the “Я в калідорі” (“I’m in the hallway”) meme, juxtaposing the everyday practice of taking shelter during air raids with the threat of ballistic missile attacks through exaggerated visual imagery. Widely circulated on social media, such humorous reinterpretations transformed fear and uncertainty into shared experiences, reinforcing solidarity and collective resilience. Humour in times of crisis often fostered social solidarity (Laineste & Voolaid, 2017). Ukrainian wartime memes illustrated this dynamic through ironic adaptations of popular culture, animal imagery combined with military references, and textual jokes addressing everyday wartime hardships. V. Chekanov (2017) described “memocomplexes” as coordinated thematic clusters that structured symbolic communication in information warfare. Ukrainian memetic responses frequently target disinformation by exposing contradictions through parody, operating as a counter-visual strategy that disrupted the propagandistic spectacle described by G. Debord (1995). The adaptive and participatory nature of Ukrainian wartime memes was further illustrated by the visual afterlife of the kitchen cabinet from Borodianka (Fig. 12), which evolved from documentary evidence of destruction into a widely recognised symbol of endurance and hope. Initially documented as part of the destruction caused by the Russian Federation’s attacks, the image was subsequently reinterpreted through illustrations and memes. Figure 12 illustrated the transformation of the kitchen cabinet from Borodianka into a memetic symbol of resilience. Figure 12, a showed the original photo taken by Yelyzaveta Servatynska of a surviving kitchen cabinet suspended on the wall of a heavily damaged apartment building. Figure 12, b presented Oleksandr Grekhov’s illustration “Kitchen cabinet from Borodianka”, while Figure 12, c depicted a meme based on the same motif, using the dialogue: “How are you?” – “Holding on”. Ukrainian “Тримається?” (“How are you holding up?”) possessed a distinctive wartime compactness, simultaneously enquiring about physical safety, emotional condition, psychological endurance, and continued survival. These multiple meanings were condensed into a single everyday expression. Through successive reinterpretations, the image evolved from documentary evidence of destruction into a widely recognised symbol of endurance, solidarity, and collective resilience. Digital

circulation further amplified this communicative power. Ukrainian wartime memes displayed extensive intertextuality through the adaptation of established templates,

historical imagery paired with contemporary captions, and linguistic played combining Ukrainian phonetics with English code-mixing.



Photo taken by Yelyzaveta Servatynska



Illustration done by Oleksandr Grekhov



**Figure 12.** Kitchen cabinet “How are you? Holding up!”

**Note:** a – kitchen cabinet from Borodyanka, photo by Yelyzaveta Servatynska; b – illustration “Kitchen cabinet from Borodianka” by Oleksandr Grekhov; c – meme “How are you? Holding up!”

**Source:** P. Mandryk (2022)

Similar visual practices had appeared in other conflict contexts, such as Northern Ireland and Palestine, where murals functioned as territorial and ideological markers. However, the Ukrainian case was distinctive due to the rapid interaction between urban visual practices and global digital meme circulation. Visual narratives therefore circulated bidirectionally: urban images entered digital circulation, while memetic forms returned to the city through graffiti, murals and stickers. In this sense, the wartime visual environment in Ukraine can be understood as a hybrid visual communication network that integrated murals, graffiti, symbolic gestures, and digital memes into a coherent cultural response. Street art and memes operated as an interdependent communicative system: murals become meme content, memes inspired graffiti, and Yellow Ribbon symbols circulated across both physical and digital spaces. This hybridity reflected A. Giddens's (1984) concept of structuration, in which cultural practices simultaneously reproduced and transformed social structures. Visual culture also performed important psychological and social functions during wartime. Images of humour, defiance, mourning, and solidarity contributed to emotional stabilisation and reinforced collective belonging under conditions of uncertainty and disruption. At the same time, wartime visual narratives reinforced linguistic identity, territorial cohesion, and moral distinctions between aggressor and defender, reflecting L. Droti-anko's (2009) understanding of mass culture as a transmitter of shared values. International artistic interventions, most notably those by Banksy, together with the global circulation of Ukrainian memes, further integrated the country into transnational circuits of representation, amplifying its symbolic presence within global visual culture.

The relationship between visual culture, political resistance, and national identity had attracted sustained scholarly attention across cultural studies, visual anthropology, media studies, and political sociology. K. Avramidis & M. Tsilimpounidi (2017) analysed data of conflict zones,

including Northern Ireland, Palestine, and the Middle East, and demonstrated that murals, graffiti, and symbolic interventions function as markers of territorial belonging and ideological struggle. Graffiti and street art operated simultaneously as spatial practices and cultural expressions, mediating the relationship between architecture, urban space, and social identity. J. Rancière (2004) argued that aesthetic practices reorganised the “distribution of the sensible”, creating new forms of political visibility and participation, while J.C. Alexander's (2012) theory of cultural trauma explained how symbolic forms transformed collective suffering into culturally mediated narratives that shaped identity. Studies of street art further emphasised its role as a form of spatial negotiation and political communication, with A. Young (2014) conceptualising it as a situational practice, whose meaning emerged through the interaction between the artwork, the viewer, and the urban environment. Street art can therefore be understood as an ephemeral, often unsanctioned form of urban expression, while P. Bengtson & M. Arvidsson (2014) emphasised its capacity to reshape the symbolic organisation of cities and contributed to debates on spatial justice and dominant regimes of representation. Scholarship on visual culture and digital media underscored the political and affective dimensions of images. W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) develops explored the agency of images by asking what pictures “want”, treating them as entities that actively participated in the production of political meaning rather than merely reflecting human intention. At the same time, N. Mirzoeff (2011) conceptualised visibility as a contested terrain, in which authority and resistance struggled over regimes of representation and identified a paradox characteristic of modern warfare: the immense quantity of imagery produced by conflict often results in limited political impact, a phenomenon researcher described as the “banality of images”.

L. Laineste & P. Voolaid (2017) further demonstrated that memes frequently combined seriousness with playful expression, describing them as “playfully serious”

cultural forms. In political crises, memetic humour can undermine official narratives, while simultaneously supporting public discussion and collective reflection. Research on participatory media provided an additional framework for understanding contemporary visual communication. H. Jenkins (2006) highlighted the emergence of participatory culture, in which audiences actively produced and circulated media content. Z. Papacharissi (2014) conceptualised digital communication networks as “affective publics”, organised around shared emotional expression and collective responses to political events. These perspectives helped to explain wartime visual communication, where digital images circulated rapidly across social and national boundaries. The Ukrainian context had generated a growing body of scholarship examining cultural responses to political upheaval, particularly since the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014. Ukrainian scholars had also examined digital communication and memetic culture. L. Drotianko (2009) analysed the dynamics of mass culture within informational society and the mediating role of visual forms in transmitting social values. T. Poda (2017) conceptualised internet memes as a phenomenon of contemporary informational culture, while V. Chekanov (2017) interpreted meme complexes as strategic instruments within information warfare. L. Smola (2019) further demonstrated how memetic humour may function as a mechanism of psychological resilience during periods of political crisis. Wartime visual practices in Ukraine may be understood through five interconnected theoretical approaches: semiotics, discourse, ideology, structuration, and digital mimesis. Taken together, these approaches explained how murals, symbolic gestures, and digital memes acquired meaning and operated within systems of power. Visual imagery of defenders, volunteers, mythical figures, and national symbols transformed experiences of loss and struggle into narratives of dignity and endurance. Wartime visual symbols thus functioned as mythic signifiers that translated historical events into culturally intelligible meanings. M. Foucault's (2002) concept of discourse highlighted how regimes of visibility shape knowledge and authority. Ukrainian wartime memes illustrated these dynamics, as visual templates mutated through iterative reproduction and circulate humour, critique, and political commentary across international networks.

### CONCLUSIONS

The visual practices that emerged in Ukraine during the spring of 2022 demonstrated how contemporary warfare produced hybrid symbolic environments, in which urban space and digital networks interacted to generate, circu-

late, and reinforce symbolic meanings of resistance. The analysis showed that street art, symbolic interventions, and digital memes evolved from peripheral forms of cultural expression into significant mechanisms of communication, identity formation, and collective resilience. The examined examples revealed three interconnected dimensions of wartime visual culture. First, murals and graffiti transformed damaged buildings, shelters, checkpoints, and urban ruins into communicative spaces that conveyed narratives of sovereignty, endurance, and national continuity. By reappropriating sites of destruction, these visual interventions enabled communities to reclaim symbolic agency and counter hostile propaganda narratives. Second, the analysis of the Yellow Ribbon Movement demonstrated how decentralised symbolic actions functioned as effective forms of civic resistance in occupied territories. Ribbons, coded inscriptions, and micro-graffiti communicated solidarity, maintained visibility of Ukrainian identity, and strengthened collective belonging despite restrictions imposed by occupation authorities. Third, the analysed wartime memes functioned as adaptive communicative tools that reframed fear and uncertainty through irony, humour, and parody. Their rapid circulation facilitated collective interpretation of wartime events, countered disinformation, and connected local experiences with global audiences. Taken together, these findings indicated that murals, symbolic markers, and digital memes form a hybrid visual communication network linking physical and digital spaces. Rather than isolated artistic responses, these practices operated as interconnected mechanisms, through which communities interpreted violence, reinforced national identity, sustained social cohesion, and adapted to wartime conditions. The study thus highlighted the importance of visual culture as a key component of cultural resilience and symbolic resistance in contemporary armed conflict. Future research should further examine how wartime visual practices influence the long-term development of Ukraine's cultural memory, artistic discourse, and national identity by integrating approaches from visual culture, urban semiotics, and digital media studies.

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## Вуличне мистецтво та інтернет-меми як наративи ідентичності опору: гібридна візуальна комунікація у прифронтових містах України (весна 2022)

**Анотація.** Повномасштабне вторгнення Російської Федерації в Україну у лютому 2022 року спричинило глибоку трансформацію культурного, інформаційного та символічного простору, перетворивши міське середовище на поле візуального та символічного спротиву. Метою дослідження став аналіз того, як вуличне мистецтво, символічні громадянські практики та цифрова візуальна культура у прифронтових містах України навесні 2022 року функціонували як взаємопов'язані форми символічного спротиву та колективної стійкості в межах гібридної візуальної комунікаційної мережі, що поєднувала міський і цифровий простори. Дослідження базувалося на міждисциплінарному підході, що поєднував методи семіотичного аналізу, дискурсу-аналізу, візуальної антропології та досліджень цифрової культури. Емпіричний матеріал охоплює приклади муралів, графіті, символічних інтервенцій та інтернет-мемів, зафіксованих у період від лютого до жовтня 2022 року у п'яти прифронтових містах України: Києві, Харкові, Миколаєві, Чернігові та Запоріжжі. Результати дослідження демонструють, що в умовах війни зруйнований міський простір набув нового символічного значення, а мурали, мікроінтервенції руху «Жовта стрічка» та цифрові меми сформували гібридну мережу візуальної комунікації. Мурали та графіті перетворюють пошкоджені будівлі й громадські простори на комунікативні поверхні, через які артикулюються наративи національної ідентичності, колективної пам'яті та життєстійкості. Рух «Жовта стрічка» демонструє, як децентралізовані символічні практики підтримують громадянську солідарність і утверджують українську ідентичність на тимчасово окупованих територіях. Цифрові меми функціонують як адаптивні комунікативні інструменти, трансформуючи страх у гумор та іронію, протидіючи дезінформації й привертаючи увагу міжнародної аудиторії. У сукупності ці візуальні практики утворюють взаємопов'язані елементи розподіленої семіотичної системи, що зміцнює культурний спротив, соціальну згуртованість і символічну стійкість в умовах війни

**Ключові слова:** культурні проблеми; соціокультурні трансформації; символічна резильєнтність; візуальна культура; просторова семіотика; Жовта Стрічка; цифрові меми