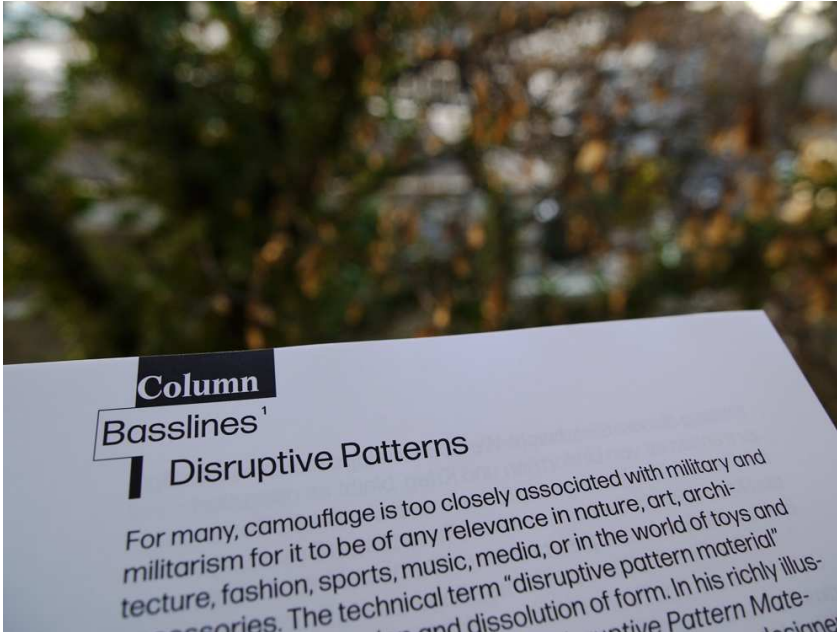


# Basslines 5: Disruptive Patterns

Column in the zweikommasieben Magazin #14, 2016 ([www.zweikommasieben.ch](http://www.zweikommasieben.ch))  
*Annotated version with sound and text references*

Text: Marius ‚Comfortnoise‘ Neukom ([www.comfortnoise.com](http://www.comfortnoise.com))



*For many, camouflage is too closely associated with military and militarism for it to be of any relevance in nature, art, architecture, fashion, sports, music, media, or in the world of toys and accessories. The technical term „disruptive pattern material“ implies visual confusion and dissolution of form. In his richly illustrated, seven-hundred-page book, Disruptive Pattern Material: An Encyclopedia of Camouflage (2004), fashion designer and archivist Hardy Blechman documents all facets of camouflage including those pertaining to music.*

In 1910, gestalt psychologists<sup>1</sup> began formulating scientific principles that distinguish between perceptions of figure and field. These optical configurations of stimuli and neural processing procedures are precisely the phenomena camouflage deliberately subverts. This can be observed directly in nature: the stripes of a tiger's fur<sup>2</sup>, or the wings of a butterfly with their leaf-like patterns.<sup>3</sup> The strategy of camouflage is one of deception – its objective is to help one remain unnoticed while blending in with the natural environment. It's no wonder that camouflage is so integral to both hunting and wildlife observation. Since it mimics and takes as its example the animal kingdom, camouflage signifies, not least of which in its color, a connection to or desire for nature. It is camouflage's association with nature that creates a tinge of subversive irony when it is applied in an urban environment.

Following World War I, however, conventional camouflage began to be mass-produced for military purposes. Since then, it has inevitably carried with it a strong association with military. Just how strong is this association and to what extent can camouflage be disentangled from it? That is the question addressed in Blechman's book, whose mission is to present a fuller spectrum of camouflage and to liberate it from accusations that it (latently) glorifies war.<sup>4</sup> Blechman uses the motto

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<sup>1</sup> Blechman, p. 26

<sup>2</sup> Blechman, pp. 80/82

<sup>3</sup> Blechman, p. 48

<sup>4</sup> [http://dpm-studio.com/?page\\_id=2](http://dpm-studio.com/?page_id=2)

„pacifist military design“<sup>5</sup> for his fashion label Maharishi. Though the logic is debatable, it is an admittedly clever slogan. Indeed, military does not necessarily serve only the purpose of warfare. Nevertheless, since camouflage is not entirely disassociable from uniforms and war, it remains connected to violence, destruction, and death as well as to authority, dominance, and masculinity. Alas, even after the cleverest of attempts at disassociation, the pattern retains a provocative and ambivalent character.<sup>6</sup>

One of the first attempts at disentangling camouflage from its military bias came in a 1966 exhibition in which the Turin artist Alighiero e Boetti (1940-1994) stretched the Italian and first mass-produced camouflage fabric, called „Telo Mimetico“, on a picture frame.<sup>7</sup> Free of any political message, he later developed his own camouflage pattern and eventually his own design language. His series of work from the eighties, *Tutto*, consists of huge tapestries with seamlessly interconnected, color figures. As an artist who often conveys in various ways the relationship between order and chaos, it is fitting that he has worked with camouflage. Following Boetti, camouflage has gradually become more aestheticized. It has been designed and modified beyond its (military) function and applied to all conceivable surfaces, and it has long been considered a valid form of design. Blechman’s encyclopedia is a treasure trove of ingenious, curious and deterrent examples.

And what about the connection between camouflage and music? Camouflage signifies provocation, resistance, and unknown, underground art. Hence it is predestined to appear on clothing and on covers of rock, punk, hip-hop, techno and, of course reggae records.<sup>8</sup> The lyrics in reggae are often characterized as „militant“ – with combative texts, they vilify capitalism and imperialism („Babylon“<sup>9</sup>) and advocate for the Rastafarian movement.<sup>10</sup> It is no coincidence that there are hardly any press photos of Kode9<sup>11</sup> (the head of the Hyperdub record label; see the Basslines column in zweikommasieben #13) in which he is not sporting one of Maharishi’s camo designs. Seen from an aesthetic standpoint, camouflage and dub are practically twins. The dub techniques influential for the above-mentioned musical genres, equally aim to dissolve forms and perceptual processes while creating a potentially limitless, minimalist texture (see Basslines column in zweikommasieben #11). The aesthetic effect of transcending forms is connected to visions of trips to outer space but also to the kinder, smoked conception of a fusion with nature. Thus, Dub is nothing more than a brown tree frog on the forest floor<sup>12</sup> – and a tiger in the shrubbery.

## Literature

Hardy Blechman (2004). *Disruptive Pattern Material: An Encyclopedia of Camouflage*. Buffalo, New York: Firefly Books.

In this column, Marius ‘Comfortnoise’ Neukom introduces book publications that relate in various ways to dub culture. He contextualizes each publication, describes its guiding principles, and expands on its author’s thoughts.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.maharishistore.com/about-us](http://www.maharishistore.com/about-us)

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Veronica Horwell who raises moral concerns in her generally appreciative review („The Guardian“, 18.12.2004): [www.theguardian.com/books/2004/dec/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/dec/18/featuresreviews.guardianreview)

<sup>7</sup> Blechman, pp. 288/289

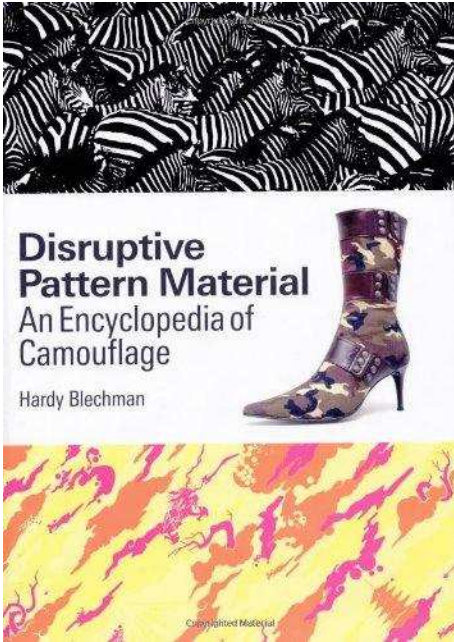
<sup>8</sup> Blechman, pp. 550ff.

<sup>9</sup> Similar as with camouflage, there are counter-examples as harmless as disarming. What do phrases like „Burn down Babylon“ or „Posse form a line“ call upon? Can they be justified as a symbolic message? This kind of militancy belongs to Jamaican folklore – fakelore, when reproduced today.

<sup>10</sup> Precisely as with camouflage, there are counter-examples as harmless as disarming. On the great album cover of „Reggae Magic“ (1972), we can see Jackie Mittoo who wears only an open camouflage jacket and grasps some fruit in the display of a supermarket. This picture appears ironical, even more so since we are served with reggae pop that is even shallower than any soundtrack of a soft porn movie from the 70s: [www.discogs.com/Jackie-Mittoo-Reggae-Magic/release/3818016](http://www.discogs.com/Jackie-Mittoo-Reggae-Magic/release/3818016).

<sup>11</sup> Neither is it by chance that Steve Goodman’s (a.k.a. Kode9) dissertation is about sonic warfare: <https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/sonic-warfare>.

<sup>12</sup> Blechman, p. 38



Alighiero Boetti: Mimetico (1966)



Alighiero e Boetti: Tutto (1988)



