

Cute Geopolitics and the Other AI

Written by Yelyzaveta Glybchenko

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After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukraine redefined the advertising industry by making an active civic position crucial in brand survival (MRKTNG, 2023). Beating the war with creativity, the city of Lutsk in Western Ukraine developed the country's most vibrant street culture including arts, crafts, startup hubs – all despite long hours of electricity blackouts (Shuba, 2024). Around the time of political tensions between U.S. President Trump and Ukraine, Ukrainian designers showed great resilience and the pleasure of showing their unique cultural identity at the *Paris Fashion Week* (Shoaib, 2025). The radiance of Ukrainian creativity, aesthetics and fashion during the dark times of the war may seem paradoxical. And it may even *seem* like a misplacement of effort and resources: is there not something more important than making aesthetic images and creating new fashion items?

When your house is bombed, you lose your possessions. Some of the first things you need to restart your life are clothes and home textiles. When someone else's house is bombed, you volunteer to help emergency services search for people and animals under the rubble. And while you do that, your clothes get torn because of the glass everywhere. You need new clothes all the time. Certainly, they do not *have to* be cute. But how does *ugly* help to win the war? Or how would *facelessly plain* support Ukraine? *Cute*, on the contrary, might help *significantly*!

Cute Geopolitics

Wars tend to have weapon-related effluvia of harmful and even illegal chemicals. Wars emit a stench of rape, burning blood and decaying corpses. Wars make air so caky with ashes that gasping becomes futile. In themselves, wars are utterly sensorily disgusting. They also give rise to different kinds of Cute (yet, not that it is a quality I or anyone should ascribe to wars).

Previously, Cute has been shown to have emerged out of the realities of World War II in the form of Mickey Mouse in the U.S.A. And in Japan, Cute grew to have official government-appointed ambassadors (May, 2019). The current center of Cute (and, unfortunately, of a disgusting war) is, however, Ukraine.

Researching the power of Cute, Simon May attempted to adumbrate “the sensibility, the style, the mood, the way of being that Cute expresses” (2019, p.xiii). While Cute is often superficially associated with the sweet and the childish, the phenomenon is so much more, particularly in conflict-affected societies. May shows that understanding Cute is especially challenging and important when it “gets uncanny, indeterminate – such as between a child and adult, masculine and feminine, nonhuman and human, familiar and unfamiliar, powerless and powerful, unknowing and knowing – and even monstrous. But, crucially, in a light-hearted and often frivolous register” (p.xii).

Not so long ago I chose to be light-hearted and frivolous about two terrible things at the same time: an honorable death I highly respect and my own war-affectedness as a Ukrainian. It was a difficult decision chosen out of strategic considerations. The figure below presents the content of the decision. And the paragraphs below explicate the strategy I wish I had never had to monstrously adopt, especially in my own artwork (figure 1).

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Cute may seem powerless, vulnerable, and innocent. It often has “anatomical features such as outsize heads, protruding foreheads, saucerlike eyes, retreating chins, and clumsy gaits” (May, 2019, p.19). And in the case of the sunflower and the poppy flower above, Cute expresses itself in the overwhelmingly round and unified petal sections, as well as respectively the saucer-like disc floret section and the pistil.

To emphasize the monstrous Cute, I chose cotton-candy pink frames, acquired for the occasion at a local Valentine's Day sale. I surely also made a high-quality professional digital photograph showing the Finnish flag among the Ukrainian flags very clearly. I thought including it into the artwork would have been letting too much outsiders' gaze onto a personal tragedy. But we can conveniently pretend the resolution of the Polaroid print, used instead the high-quality digital photo, is an artistic tool to convey the fleeting nature of life and the greater vulnerability of trauma-affected memory in the face of time.

This artwork was part of a series I did on the topic of memory of war for an international exhibition. And the Cute aesthetic, which I kept feeling very conflicted about in the execution process, was a strategic choice to highlight how much of a cartoon this war was from the beginning and has grown to become for the international audiences. If it was not, Ukraine would have been armed enough and supported enough in 2014, let alone 2022 or 2025 (when this essay is being written). This cartoon may have been an on-the-screen entertainment for many, but the Finnish family and friends of the likely fallen volunteer soldier now probably feel it very differently. As of November 2024, six Finnish volunteers have been reported to have died while fighting in Ukraine against Russian forces (Yle, 2024).

I chose to select the poppy flower for the artwork because it is a culturally important symbol, used by many Finns every day, particularly in the home décor and clothing by the Finnish design house *Marimekko*. While *Marimekko*'s original poppy flower, called “*Unikko*”, has more elongated petals, an edgier pestil and a stem, my poppy flower *strategically* displays certain qualities of *uncanny* Cute.

As identified by May, *uncanny* Cute can “combine the familiar and the unfamiliar, such as a human and a god, or else [...] merge two seemingly familiar realms – such as the masculine and the feminine, the child and the adult, the animal and the human, the menacing and the gentle – in playful incongruous ways that enhance, rather than resolve, the mystery of each” (2019, p.102). The poppy flower and the respective roundness of the sunflower can exemplify the latter. And in terms of the former – the familiar and the foreign, nobody lives through Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine like Ukraine does.

This experience of the war is foreign to most non-Ukrainians, and strategic Cute can be one of the few ways to communicate this experience. Cute “draws others into our moral circle, pulls strangers closer, and endows them with new value” (May, 2019, pp.120-121) – the value of supporting Ukraine and freedom. Cute has been well understood by such campaigns of *UNITED24*, the official platform of the Government of Ukraine, as “This is Azovstal” manufacturing steel bracelets with the Ukrainian trident. Each bracelet was made out of 5 grams of steel from Azovstal, the steel plant in Mariupol, Ukraine, that became the city's last heroically standing defensive fortress in 2022. The proceeds from the sold-out bracelets supported the development of the Fleet of Naval Drone of Ukraine (see *UNITED24*). And the bracelets created an army of supporters of Ukraine wearing those Cute symbols of perseverance (I am a proud member of that army).

“The uncanny [Cute] is an eeriness by which we are mesmerized” (May, 2019, p103). The Azovstal bracelets are also mysteriously eerie because the bracelets were made from the limited amount of steel produced at the metallurgical plant before the siege, while the last of the few batches “was made of the steel letters “BELIEVE IN THE ARMED FORCES OF UKRAINE,” which [had been] installed in the center of Kyiv” (*UNITED24*). This mesmerizing eeriness is also why I adorned loss and memory in a sweet Valentine's picture frame.

Yet, no matter how hard I would have tried as an artist to use Cute as a strategic tool to communicate about the need to support Ukraine, I would not be able to surpass a certain Cute entity I consider the current world leader of Cute. It would be hard to find something Cuter than the *Armed Forces of Ukraine*.

The European Union and the United Nations may be in a way Cute. This can be said particularly because the

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emergence of these organizations and the comprehensive concept of Cute was “in no small part catalyzed by the fear of the ever-present threat of violence” (May, 2019, p.58). The EU may be Cute, but have you seen Bavovnyatko of the Armed Forces of Ukraine?

On August 30, 2022, the *Instagram* account *Ukraine Shortly*, normally sharing news on Russia’s war in Ukraine, posted an image of Bavovnyatko as an update on day 187 (29.08.2022) of the full-scale invasion (the image was credited to artist S.Olsevska). The depiction read: “Usually, at night, Bavovnyatko quietly comes to the occupiers’ bases, depots, airfield, oil refineries, and other places full of flammable items and starts playing with fire there”. Bavovnyatko certainly had the characteristic features of Cute: an outsize head, a protruding forehead, blue saucer-like eyes, as well as white fluffy fur juxtaposed to the tasks Bavovnyatko engages in and the colors of fire. As soon as I saw that Bavovnyatko, I wanted to draw my own (figure 2)!

According to May, the strength and power of Cute objects is in their capacity for survival and for enduring with remarkable stamina in the face of great challenges: “If they were to collapse, shrivel and die, they wouldn’t be cute at all” (2019, p.152). Far from being *only* skilled survivors, the Cute, most importantly, are “protective of others” (p.153) – just like Bavovnyatko and the Armed Forces of Ukraine. My version of Bavovnyatko has stylized Ukrainian tridents (like the Azovstal bracelets) on its ears and forehead. And Bavovnyatko’s eyes are the color of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to highlight Ukraine’s contribution to freedom and democracy around the world.

“Be Brave Like Ukraine” is already a world-famous slogan and symbol of freedom. But “Be Cute Like Ukraine” could also become the next tagline of moral ambition and even a strategy of International Relations. And I am making it so with a few like-minded companions in Finland and Ukraine.

AI of Victory, But Make It Aesthetic and Make It Sell

When something that “at first sight seems unfamiliar becomes streaked with the familiar” (May, 2019, p.107), we can speak of Cute being *operationalized*. Figure 3 below shows a quick fashion sketch I did for a special workshop I developed and conducted for displaced Ukrainians in Finland on the occasion of the 2025 Vyshyvanka Day. Vyshyvanka is a piece of the Ukrainian traditional attire – an embroidered shirt, the embroidery of which has deep symbolic meaning and varies from region to region of Ukraine. I chose to combine the familiar vyshyvanka with the popular in Finland, but less familiar to Ukrainians, denim designs of the Finnish design house *Marimekko*. The vyshyvanka features poppy flower embroidery. And the jeans also have *Marimekko*’s *Unikko* pattern of poppy flowers. (This is not an imaginary design of the jeans. They are already being sold. My sketch shows a stylized version of the existing jeans.)

This version of Cute was especially suitable for the occasion, since the workshop was conducted with the help of a Finnish-Ukrainian association mobilizing support for Ukraine in Finland (anonymized for ethical reasons). And based on the silhouette outlines I prepared for the workshop, the participants create their own Finnish-Ukrainian fashion designs. Each was actionably Cute in its own way: symbolizing Finnish-Ukrainian cooperation.

From my own experience, I can say Ukrainians are often asked about the point of such cultural celebratory events. How can we celebrate something like a Vyshyvanka Day when war is raging? How can we gather and spend time and resources on an art workshop? And out of all kinds of art, why would we make fashion sketches? After all, some other artistic expression and events may directly contribute to fundraising for Ukraine or building a clearer understanding of Ukraine’s culture for foreigners. Many things along these kinds of lines flew by my ears since the war started in 2014, and especially after 2022.

The answer to those questions is AI – Aesthetic Intelligence. Pauline Brown, who developed the concept called it “the other AI” and “a crucial element of business strategy”, which both seasoned companies and start-up businesses need to become serious about (2019, p.x). And building up support for Ukraine, either from scratch or from barely any interest in the 2014-2022 stage of the war, can be considered an immense (and immensely successful) startup endeavor. Thus, let’s talk business strategy.

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For Brown, aesthetics is “the pleasure we [...] derive from perceiving an object or experience through our senses” (2019, p.4). In turn, aesthetic intelligence “is our ability to understand, interpret, and articulate feelings that are elicited by a particular object or experience” (ibid.). In business, aesthetic intelligence can express itself in product design (certain quality of fabric, color choices), brand identity development (stories of brands’ original, visual identities), and interactions between a company and its clients (personal or hand-made touches to a products’ packaging, communications). Such “[a]esthetic propositions shift consumers’ motivations from functional and transactional to experimental, aspirational, and memorable” (Brown, 2019, p.4).

Support for Ukraine, if we are to grow it, needs to focus not *only* on the functional – countering and stopping disgusting aggression. More than that, it needs to focus on the aesthetically intelligent aspect of such Cute geopolitics: what is our personal reason to support Ukraine on our way to building the world we aspire to live in? So I interviewed a displaced Ukrainian in Finland about it. And a part of our interview, in my translation from Ukrainian, reads as follows:

[Dear anonymous Brave Ukrainian,] has your attitude towards aesthetics or beauty changed since the full-scale invasion?

To reduce stress, I started paying more attention to watching *YouTube* videos about beauty and aesthetics [...] These videos inspire me and help me a lot in my everyday life. Because the main thing is to appreciate beauty and have a lot of experience with and of beauty. I organize many events and master classes for Ukrainians [...]. This gives me inspiration, lifts my spirits, and strengthens my love for all the beautiful things.

[Anonymous Brave Ukrainian,] do you think that Ukrainian and Finnish aesthetics somehow complement each other? Or how do you combine them?

Lately, I have been noticing that Finns enjoy watching the table setting at [our Ukrainian] events and the design of [our] clothes, which is totally different from theirs. But there is a lot to learn from Finns... I also collect vintage and modern mugs, mainly from Finnish brands such as *Marimekko*, *Arabia*, *Moomin*, and *Iittala*.

Supporting Ukraine is building a world *with* Ukraine that not only functions well, but is pleasurable to be part of. It may be relatively easy to scroll through another photo of disgusting aggression on social media. But taking oneself away from the mesmerizingly Cute, aesthetically intelligent and engaging geopolitical would not make much sense at all.

Cute geopolitics and the other AI could be operationalized through artwork like the one I created, through tableware like what the anonymous Brave Ukrainian collects, or through fashion. Let’s return to the fashion sketch at the beginning of this section and think of it from the angle textile world-making.

Researching the fabric of civilization and how textiles created the world we live in, Virginia Postrel highlights that “civilization is a *survival technology*” (2020, p.4, italics as in original). And so, by extension, are textiles. This makes textile designs even more important in places where survival is more of an everyday challenge and a burning topic, like in war zones. This survival technology “comprises the many artefacts [...] that stand between vulnerable human beings and natural threats, and that invest the world with meaning. Providing protection and adornment, textiles are themselves among such artifacts. So, too, are the innovations they inspire, from better seeds to weaving patterns to new ways of recording information” (Postrel, 2020, p.4).

Creating Finnish-Ukrainian fashion designs is therefore also a security-building strategy, resulting in imaginative artifacts of a new life in displacement. And my own first acquisitions of textiles from the Finnish design house *Marimekko* were all about security. I wanted to be covered in *Unikko* to blend in, not draw any gazes to myself (as a Ukrainian and as a young woman) in the streets, to indicate my cultural belonging in places like airports and other transport hubs, and to look like my place here in Finland cannot be contested.

Purchasing my first *Marimekko* fashion item like that, I thought someone should one day research the security

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implications of owning a *Marimekko* tote bag, for example. Several years later, this idea is drawn into fashion sketches and written into intelligent cuteness. Textiles, as Postrel shows, made the world already. And if they contribute to Cute geopolitics in support of Ukraine, they can make the world again and, crucially, they can make it *better*.

Dignity in Cute Geopolitics of Supporting Ukraine

Developing the contending and complementary forces within the concept of Cute, May asks: “How much does power matter? The cute might indeed be passive and vulnerable – and yet they might also be resistant to manipulation, impervious to force, unmoved by the control of their viewers” (2019, p.45). While Ukraine is a vulnerable victim of illegal aggression, it is also a powerful winning force.

Drawing on the work of Nietzsche, May points out that “selflessness, compassion and humility [of Cute] can serve the function of securing power for the individual – over others, over life” (2019, p.45). Then we, Ukrainians, are Cute at geopolitics and at life because we are better than the effluvia and the stench of the war violently thrown upon us.

Cute and its aesthetic intelligence are essentially about dignity within peace arrangements. As Yelyzaveta Glybchenko shows in her visual arts-based research of peace arrangements in and by Ukraine, sensible non-colonial recovery from war “will at least allow those against whom violence is senselessly waged to take part in a peace-oriented process that allows them *to have a life and develop in dignity*” (2025, p.105, bolding and italics as in original). Within such peace-oriented processes, Cute can be used to, for instance, create and negotiate demonstration models of peaceful futures (see Glybchenko, 2024) and create new norms of behaviors and ways of doing things (see Glybchenko, 2022).

Being Cute with Ukraine is building peace with Ukraine – an entrepreneurial, political and cultural strategy for victory. Be Cute like Ukraine!

Notes

Figure 1. Scrapbooking. Original Artwork. 2025.

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Artwork Description:

This two-piece artwork (each piece in A4 size) explores the simultaneous coexistence of multiple truths and rifts between realities in the contexts of Finland and Ukraine. The cotton-candy sweet aesthetic and the practice of scrapbooking, often associated with making memories of travels, here show the movement of a diaspora Ukrainian in Finland (the artist herself) between Tampere, Finland, and Kyiv, Ukraine, in April-May 2024. The instant prints, collaged into the artwork, show respectively:

1. Maidan Nezalezhnosti (the Square of Independence) in Kyiv, Ukraine, where Ukrainians install flags in memory of the soldiers who died defending Ukraine. Among the Ukrainian flags, a Finnish flag can now be seen too, perhaps signifying the death of a Finnish volunteer soldier defending Ukraine.
2. The water seen from the turn off the Hämeenkatu bridge, a usual place for the artist to walk when in Tampere, Finland.

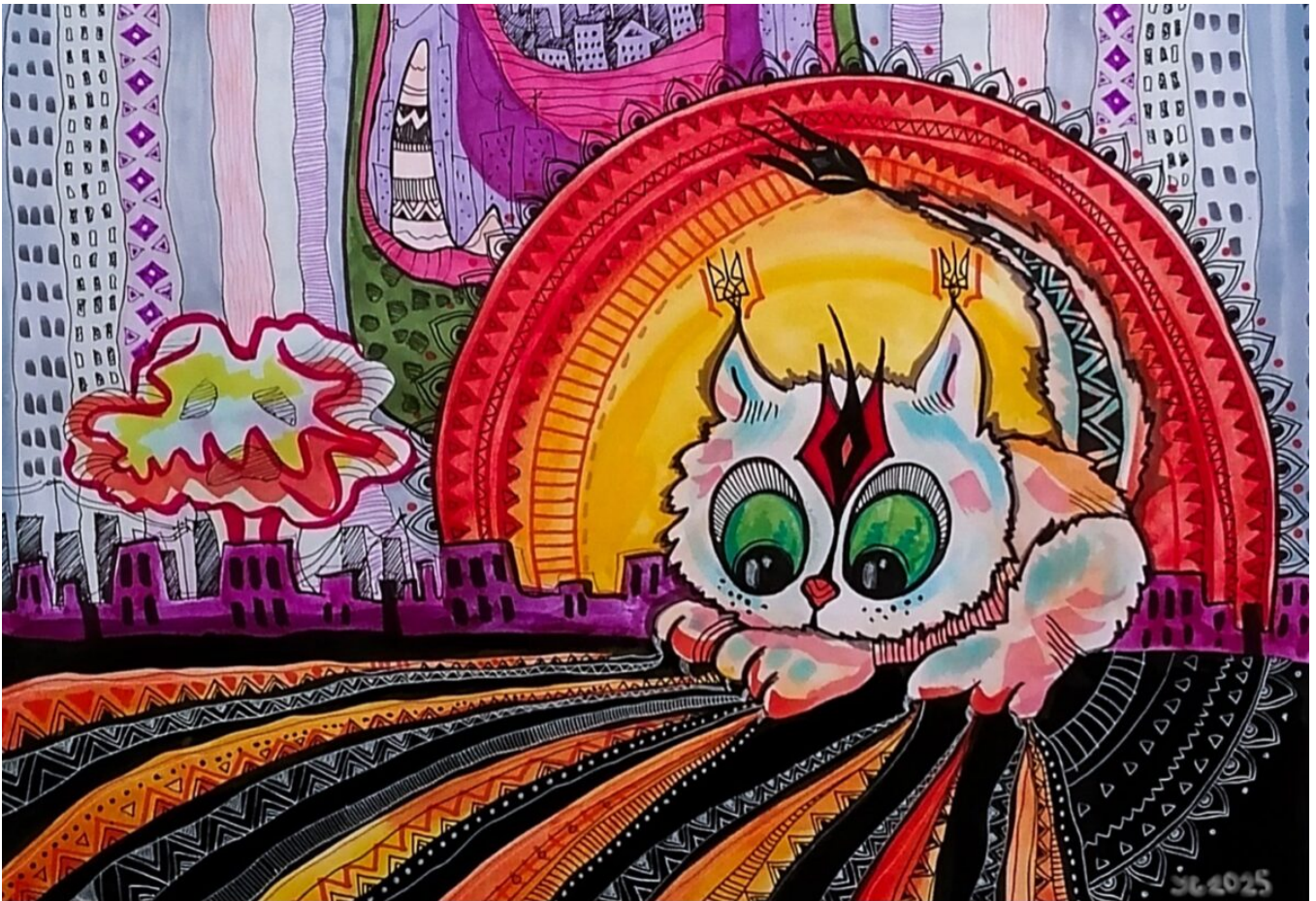
The stylized sunflower and poppy flower respectively are symbols of memory and loss: of life, of peaceful realities and of continuous truth.

Materials: Markers, instant prints, pens.

Figure 2. My artistic rendition of Bavovnyatko. 2022.

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Artwork Description:

This is a cutout of a larger artwork that was part of an exhibition in Finland in 2023. Back then, I prepared the following artwork description: “One thing I have personally appreciated is how Ukrainians started to integrate into our culture the war-related stories of resistance and smaller victories on the way to the very-soon-coming HUGE VICTORY. One such example is Bavovnyatko (from Ukrainian, something like “a tiny-tiny cotton ball”). The name is a play on words with some of Ukrainian humor to describe explosions on Russian military bases. Bavovnyatko blows them up. And in contrast to Russian war crimes and international crimes and crimes against humanity, the Ukrainian Bavovnyatko blows up what is allowed to strike according to the laws of war – what is a legitimate target. ... [My Bavovnyatko] is scratching the surface and you can see light/fire coming out with stylized Ukrainian vyshyvanka (traditional Ukrainian clothing) patterns.

The explosion behind Bavovnyatko has circular shapes and patterns, in many contexts referencing harmony. That’s because Bavovnyatko makes good/needed explosions (read above). There is an ugly explosion too, which is purposefully made out of style in the drawing and out of style in my artwork in general. That one is an indicator of war crimes committed against Ukraine. And one thing I think we, Ukrainian artists, had to learn is how to let ugliness (like that explosion) into our work – because we would be very unworthy to be called artists if we beautified cruelty. [...] This piece was made with markers, liners, ink, watercolors, pens.”

Figure 3. Finnish and Ukrainian Poppy Fashion Designs. 2025.

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About the author:

Yelyzaveta Glybchenko holds a Ph.D. in International Relations for her project “Visual PeaceTech” at Tampere University, Finland (defended in May 2025). Yelyzaveta’s academic and professional work in the area of international relations has been awarded the 2024 Transformative Futures in Peace and Security Prize (Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 3rd prize), 2023 Jon Rieger award for exceptional work in visual sociology (International Visual Sociology Association), and the 2023 Creative Achievement Award (International Visual Literacy Association).