Drone Film Theory:

The Immanentisation

of Kinocentrism

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Abstract

This essay looks at the role of drones in contemporary culture, including cinema. It suggests that drones are the latest in a long line of media that involve the physical separation of humans from the world and from each other, a logic of separation that intersects with military and entertainment interests. In this way, the drone signals the simultaneous and interlinked cinematisation (or kinocentrism) and militarisation of society. Looking from a distance and fighting from a distance, as combined in the drone, not only have a militaristic purpose; they also serve to render god-like the unseen and unquestionable operator of the drone (and the viewer of images). This becoming god-like can also be seen in the conquest of time, as the never-ending and real-time demands of permanent surveillance, permanent war and permanent work all relegate other times (for example, peace and leisure) into unreality; the permanent now of media, war and capital is the only perceived 'real' time. As humans via separation become media, so, too, do media become more like humans. The essay ends, then, with a 'weird' suggestion that drones constitute a 'sky-net' that signals an imminent technological singularity.

Keywords

Drones, kinocentrism, media, recession, war

Various scholars have noted how the drone plays a key role in what China Miéville might term the *tentaculum novum*, or an era of interconnectivity that brings to mind the tentacles of the octopus and/or squid (see Miéville, 2008). In a special issue of *Culture Machine* dedicated to drone culture, for example, Dane Sutherland links drones to the tentacular literature of Miéville and his 'weird' precursor H.P. Lovecraft in order to convey how the drone in some senses epitomizes the 'insidious

and tentacular reach of neoliberal capitalism and the subsequent colonization of thought and action that is essential to the condition of real subsumption and its anthropological impact' (Sutherland, 2015: 3). In their contribution to the same issue, Dan Mellamphy and Nandita Biswas Mellamphy link drones to *Agartha*, 'a vast, active […] coordinated system of governance-mechanisms (political and/or military, scientific and/or scholarly, economic and fiduciary) allowing worldwide information capture and control through interlocking systems of (political and/or military, scientific and/or scholarly, economic and fiduciary) *surveillance*, *sifting* and *sorting*' (Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy, 2015: 2-3) – an approach to the contemporary era that echoes the 'tentacular' thought of Lovecraft and Miéville, with which the authors expressly engage in other of their essays on the digital age (see, for example, Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy, 2014). Finally, Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood in their introduction to the issue also discuss the drone in relation to the 'weird' as a result of how 'the drone is redacted, hidden in plain sight, present but opaque' (Coley and Lockwood, 2015: 3-4).

I shall leave for others a fuller consideration of the tentacular qualities of the drone (for example, Brown and Fleming in progress), but in this essay I shall use the drone as a point of focus to pursue a 'weird' line of thought through various aspects of contemporary digital culture, suggesting that the drone is a capitalist marriage of media and war, and simultaneously a becoming-media of humankind and a becoming-human of media-kind, the latter of which (media-kind) we might characterize as the kin/*kinder*/children of the *kino*/cinema that are so-called 'new' or digital media. As media become ubiquitous, so does the *kinocentrism* (or cinematic thinking) that they bring with them become immanent and naturalised, such that the 'real' time of media becomes the only time or temporality accepted as real, as under unceasing surveillance and illumination memory is destroyed and we live in a permanent present that we might define through the concept of *nuncocentrism*: the perception that the only real time is now, and that the time of media is the only real time. What is more, I shall in the tradition of speculative philosophy (and fiction?) propose that the tension between these two trends – humans becoming media and media becoming human – are the very stakes that drones help to crystallise, as can playfully be made clear by the idea that these networked machines that exist in the

sky truly are in some senses the sky-net that is predicted to engender apocalypse in James Cameron's famous *Terminator* movie (UK/USA, 1984).

But if we are going to fit drones into a history of media, then first we must establish what a medium is. We shall do this by taking the 'weird' step (pun intended?) of starting with shoes.

Onwards and upwards: from shoes to drones

It seems logical to assert that humans used their feet for walking before they had shoes. And yet, the barefoot human – even with feet more resistant to the elements than the softened foot of the shoe-wearing human today – would not have been able to traverse all terrain barefoot. Spikey rocks, hot desert sands, cold ice floes: all would have limited the ability of humans to cross the planet. The shoe, therefore, functioned historically as a means for humans not only to protect and to comfort their feet, but also to traverse a greater range of land in the name of exploration and/or mere survival (having to move from one area to another owing to drought or an equivalent threat or hazard). And yet, forasmuch as the shoe gives to the human greater mobility, it also functions as a means of separating humans from the planet: rather than the direct feel of earth beneath our feet, that sensation is now mediated by the hide or other material from which the shoe is constructed. In the case of crossing hot sand or cold snow, this separation is not necessarily a bad thing; it saves our feet from harm. But we nonetheless have here an example of a medium not simply being what Marshall McLuhan (2001) would term an extension of man, but also separating humans from the earth.

What is more, the further and the faster that our media have taken us, the more they have separated us from the surface of the earth. If the shoe raises us a few centimetres from the earth, the wheel raises us inches more, while the wing and the rocket raise us to indefinite heights, even beyond the gravitational pull of the planet, allowing us to traverse space at ever-faster speeds. Parallel to these media that physically can transport us across space by separating us spatially from the earth, so have our telecommunications media equally involved the ever-faster passage now not of ourselves though space, but of information from and about other spaces to

ourselves. Not only am I separated from the earth when I fly from London to Skopje, but I also separate London from itself when I send information about it – in the form of words, a sound or an image – to Skopje. Media, thus, involve movement (as we shall see, a key attractor of attention), and a logic of greater mobility as linked to lower amounts of friction, or contact, with the world. As Paul Virilio (1989) would argue, this involves a logic of speed, in the sense that less friction equals faster speeds. For present purposes, though, the important point to note is that media suggest a logic of separation from the world, which in turn might furnish the human mind with the idea that the world not only is something with which we are not profoundly connected, but which we might also by extension exploit and mould as we see fit (we modify its very space by shrinking that space through media).

In some senses, then, the drone combines the logic of two different types of medium. It is itself a highly mobile, flying machine that hangs and flies separate from the earth, while it also transmits moving images and other pieces of information from the places that it observes when flying. With regard to the former, we can understand how the drone becomes the next in a series of technologies that is linked to humanity's endeavour not to be a human defined by earth and mud, or what Donna J. Haraway (2016: 11) defines as *humus* or soil, but rather to achieve divinity, inhabiting the sky, or becoming not a muddy, earthbound human made from *humus*, but disembodied light (with 'divine' coming from the ProtoIndoEuropean root *dyeu-*, meaning 'to shine'). Indeed, Benjamin Noys sees the drone as part of a 'discourse of the theological view,' which is contrasted with the messy (muddy) 'muddle' of terrestrial life (Noys, 2015: 1 and 13), while Pasi Väliaho also links the 'visual economy of drones' with the 'light of God,' with the drone operator experiencing 'divine might' (Väliaho, 2014). Drones thus engender a quasi-divine 'gaze from nowhere' (McCosker, 2015: 5), as '[t]o become drone is to become light, to achieve illumination' (Coley and Lockwood, 2015: 5).

With regard to the taking and movement of images enabled by the drone, meanwhile, we can think about how in January 2016, *Russia Today* posted on YouTube drone footage of the city of Homs. As the drone hovers over the city, we see that it is devastated, ruined and lifeless. Beyond any irony that a Russian news channel would

produce this footage following the city's destruction by government forces that used barrel-bombs supplied by Russia as part of their offensive, and beyond any irony that it is a drone camera that captures this footage in the age of drone warfare, the widespread visibility of the shelled city demonstrates how the drone divorces Homs from itself, creating a kind of cloned, mediated Homs that we observe, but not with the same sense of reality as we would see Homs were we looking at it for ourselves, through the primary rather than secondary medium of our own eyes. It is the logic of separation from the world and from each other via mediation that has enabled humans to perpetrate the kind of barbarity that is the destruction of Homs – and the drone camera returns to affirm as much in filming the city, shrinking it to images that themselves travel immediately around a shrunken world after the real Homs has been destroyed.

If by the logic given here media always involve separation of humanity from the planet, then media always involve some sort of violence through the creation of a boundary; while nominally protecting the foot, the shoe at the very least brings about a change in/does violence to our relationship with the world – with the shoe becoming increasingly weaponized over time, as the steel toecap inflicts pain almost uniquely on the victim, while kicking someone with an espadrille might involve pain for both kicker and kickee. I might unfurl a tentacle at this point and reference how the throwing of shoes is analysed at some length by Hamid Dabashi in *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, where the gesture is discussed as being perceived in the West as a specifically Arab trait, especially after a shoe was cast by Muntadhar al-Zaidi at George W. Bush in December 2008 in Iraq. The gesture supposedly sullies the victim since the sole of a shoe is dirty (Dabashi, 2015: 177-178). While Dabashi takes issue with reading as an Arab trait what is more simply/also a universally human gesture of disempowered frustration, the hurling of the primitive medium of the shoe in the era of drone warfare nonetheless might 'muddy,' hum-iliate and thus bring back down to earth the world leader who mistakes himself for a media-empowered god. Notably, Dabashi also writes in relation to Syria about how 'absent from the calculations of both the left and the right are the people, the real people, ordinary people, those who occupy the *public space*, populate it, own it' (Dabashi, 2015: 140). That is, a place like Homs is doubly destroyed, first by missiles fired from, among other things, drones,

and then by the drone cameras that record it, since both involve the violent separation of humans from the world and from each other.

In this way, media can be understood as instruments of war – drones included: 'drones are still overwhelmingly weapons […] any drone built today will look and serve fundamentally as a weapon' (Rothstein, 2015: 143). Not only are drones weapons, then, but philosopher Grégoire Chamayou (2015) suggests that they are nothing less than the perfection of war: a flying camera with weapons, the drone sees all and can strike anywhere, at any time, and with no danger of the loss of human life – for the side operating the machine if not for their opponents. That is, the drone involves separation from the earth and from the other, thereby carrying out an initial act of violence that will make all subsequent literal violence easier. Whereas war was once waged between two armies that faced the possibility of dying when entering into combat (thereby meaning that one would only fight when necessary?), now with the separation of the drone pilot from the so-called opponent nigh absolute, war becomes more commonplace. Furthermore, war becomes like a film (or a game): the other is just an image, with no reality, in a world in which we all pursue the quest to become an image/to become light in order to become powerful via monetisation/capital. If the other-as-image is not real, and yet images are now the measure of reality, then we can begin to understand the immanentisation of kinocentrism: cinema is now the measure of reality as opposed to vice versa, with reality itself having disappeared – much like the human inhabitants of Homs, which has been destroyed in the cinematic war for power, or which has been destroyed for cinema.

The aim here is not to trivialise war or the destruction of Homs, but to point out how the destruction of Homs – and war more generally – become precisely trivialised under the logic of kinocentrism, which itself is becoming immanent, or ubiquitous, as I shall presently explain.

Kinocentrism, war and becoming light

Vilém Flusser, who is noted for his own interest in tentacles (Flusser and Bec, 2012), argues in his study of photography that we lead our lives 'as though under a magic

spell for the benefit of cameras' (Flusser, 1983: 48). Susan Sontag, meanwhile, has famously suggested that '[s]o successful has been the camera's role in beautifying the world that photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of the beautiful' (Sontag, 1979: 85). More than photographs being the standard of the beautiful, though, it would seem today that photographs are also the standard of the real. You are no one if you are not visible, as the widespread cult of celebrity together with a selfie culture that is reinforced by social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, would seem to suggest.

What is real is measured in terms of visibility – which in turn is measured not simply by being in a photograph, but by being in a photograph that attracts attention. That which attracts attention is, from the cognitive perspective, big, involves bright colours, typically a face or (near-)symmetrical features and various other attributes that appear regularly in the glossy photograph and the bright light of the computer or smartphone screen. Beyond the formal attributes of many photographs, however, that which elicits and maintains the most attention for humans is movement, as we seek to work out whether what is moving is predator, prey or mate (see Brown, 2011). When movement is added to photography, therefore, we have a near-foolproof formula for attracting and maintaining attention. Photography plus movement is of course cinema – and so if I say that we live in a kinocentric world, it is not that cinema supersedes photography or that humans watch more films in cinemas than they do shows on television or videos online. They do not. But these media mimic to varying degrees the techniques developed first in photography and then in cinema, but with the movement of cinema functioning as the key attention-grabbing facet that has become a globalized and almost unstoppable mechanism for capturing and keeping attention. The capturing and the maintenance of attention in turn enable the production of money, which in turn creates and consolidates power. Kinocentrism, then, is the rendering-cinematic of the world for the purposes of capital, as Jonathan Beller (2006) has so cogently argued.

Indeed, for Beller, we live in a world in which brand and image supersede actual product, with the 'cinematic mode of production' (getting and maintaining attention) becoming the chief mechanism of capital. The 'cinematic' *mise-en-scène* of the most

typical selfies makes this clear: expensive clothes, an expensive restaurant, a celebrity encounter, an expensive tourist destination, someone who can afford leisure time more generally, bright sunlight and an overriding emphasis on making visible all suggest the conjointly capitalist and cinematic underpinnings of the logic of the image. If capital is defined by cinema, though, we must also remember that reality is defined by capital, such that our world can be defined by what the late Mark Fisher (2009) termed 'capitalist realism': capital is the only accepted reality as we can imagine no alternative to it. The world of neoliberal capital is, then, a world that involves the primacy of a logic of visibility and attention that started in photography, which was intensified in cinema, and which now seems irreversibly to have taken hold in cinema's new media kin/*kinder*/offspring. This kinematic/cinematic logic is everywhere – as the proliferation of screens that surround us testifies. Given the ubiquity of screens, including on our person – with many humans incapable of passing more than a few minutes without consulting a screen out of 'boredom' (so boring has reality become in relation to cinema) – our age might be defined as the age of the immanentisation of kinocentrism. You are not real if you are not visible, and you are most visible when you are most cinematic; to be most cinematic, you must adopt the capitalist logic of having and producing symbols of wealth. If you are not capitalist/cinematic, then you are not real. And if you are not real, then you are as good as dead, and thus can (and in some senses must) be killed with impunity, because you never 'existed' in the first place as far as the cinematic values of capitalist society are concerned.

I have already mentioned Paul Virilio, who is a key thinker in elucidating the connections between cinema and war. But I should like briefly to suggest here how the immanentisation of kinocentrism is also the immanentisation and the rendering-permanent of war, or of a logic of violence and killing, such that there is a prevailing and intertwined logic of cinema, capital and war, which combine to become the only accepted/acceptable reality. Technologies of vision and the accrual of information are key to military strategy – with first aerial surveillance/mapping and then aerial combat and the distance from the enemy that this entails being key to gaining advantage over one's opponents. The logic of surveillance, then, is a logic of war, as the drone crystallises the 'will to see all, know all, at every moment, everywhere, the

will to universalized illumination' (Virilio, 1994: 70, quoted in Väliaho, 2014). For Mike Hill, the 'drono-sphere' is also an era of 'pre-emptive and permanent war… war as unseen and everywhere apparent, up close and distant, sped-up and frozen in time' (Hill, 2012: 252). That is, drones see war not as an alternative to peace, with the two thus belonging to different moments in time. Rather, the surveillance carried out by drones functions as a means not just to fight enemies, but also to predict and to pre-empt where and when enemies might arise. By this logic, everyone becomes a potential enemy and must be surveilled, hence the institution of war as 'everywhere apparent,' even though 'unseen,' in the sense that its very ubiquity means that it cannot be distinguished from any other state (i.e. it becomes permanent).

The desire to become light/cinema, then, ties into this military logic of universal and permanent war via universal and permanent illumination, as made clear perhaps by the 'dronie,' or the taking of selfies with drones (see McCosker, 2015: 2), and the drone-strike image app, *Dronestagram* (see Rothstein, 2015: 114). While the non-military use of drones – e.g. for agriculture, personal use and of course filmmaking – is widely acknowledged (see Baker, 2015; Bolman, 2015; Jablonowski, 2015), such alternative usage does not so much undermine the military logic of the drone as dronify, and thus militarise, those areas in which drones are being put to use. Indeed, we are moving into an era where even the weather is being weaponised – in the sense of creating storms as part of military operations, while also pointing to a history of military campaigns that involve the ruination of agricultural crops (i.e. agriculture does not de-militarise drones so much as drones militarise agriculture; see Hill, 2012: 258ff). As the increasingly widespread use of 4x4s in urban situations suggests a desire for the car to become a tank deployed to shut out and, alongside the use of tinted windows, to create a sense of separation from the rest of the world (with pedestrians regularly experiencing situations in which drivers use their cars to threaten and to intimidate them), so might we understand that the drone also involves the weaponisation of new realms of human life, suggesting that war is everywhere and always. Even military advisers sympathetic to the plight of drone pilots and ideologically aligned with their use in contemporary warfare/the war that is the contemporary discuss how '*remote combat crews need a chance to return to peacetime*,' the implication being that these crews do not get such an opportunity, because for

them the war is non-stop, especially after '16 years of uninterrupted combat operations' (Blair and House, 2017).

With these links between cinema, war and capital in mind, it should not involve too great a stretch to suggest that contemporary war is everywhere and that the era of drones involves a shift away from the military industrial complex and towards the military entertainment complex. That is, cinema has replaced industry as the military's chief ally in defining life under contemporary capital (see Neary, 2015: 3-4), as cinema becomes capital's chief mode of production. Kinocentrism is thus immanentised as we seek to become cinema/light in a world in which everything is always illuminated. The question to ask, then, is what is the cost of drone culture. We can explore this by looking at the concepts of disappearance, recession and asymmetry.

Disappearance, recession and asymmetry

Although not looking at drone warfare or drone film footage, Patricia Pisters describes the multiple screen aesthetics of contemporary Iraq war films as the 'logistics of perception 2.0' (Pisters, 2010: 249). The 2.0 in her title signifies the newly interactive nature of the war film, which directly uses or otherwise mocks up the kind of footage that is taken by soldiers themselves in combat situations; in effect, one no longer watches war but takes part in it, with war video diaries and leaked pictures such as those from Abu Ghraib conveying not only the increasingly intertwined relationship between war and image technology, but also the 'traumatic kernel' of this interactive logistics of perception (Pisters, 2010: 249). At one point, Pisters cites Virilio to explain how 'the culmination of the progress of representation technologies in their military instrumentalisation is "the complete evaporation of visual subjectivity into an ambient technical effect, a sort of permanent pancinema. Which, unbeknown to us, turns our most ordinary acts into movie action, into new visual material, undaunted, undifferentiated vision-fodder…[whose main aim is] a waning of reality: an aesthetics of disappearance' (Pisters, 2010: 236).

While Pisters points to the interactive nature of war, I would like to explore how the drone nonetheless encapsulates a logic of separation and detachment, a detachment

that is rendered via the making of images. That is, while Pisters describes war as like gaming, its logic of separation (and grabbing attention) is cinematic. The production of the Abu Ghraib photos, or of a war video diary, functions as a means of dealing with the very reality of war. The medium literally puts a distance between the participant and the real war that they are experiencing. This in turn serves to show us how the society of the cinematic spectacle has allowed cinema to replace reality as the measure of our existence, such that reality, when we are thrust into it as soldiers in a war, becomes unbearable – and we are forced to create more cinema in order to deal with it. In other words, cinema presents itself as the cure to its own disease – with cinema and Virilio's original thesis of the logistics of perception (1.0 or 2.0) demonstrating that war is the product of a cinematic logic whereby the other is reduced to a status that is unreal, or subhuman, such that they merit death via combat in the first place. The eurocentrism of kinocentrism is made clear by the overwhelming western dimension of this need to take photos and to record war from within and to bring the spectacle of war to others as viewers – war becoming a cinematic spectacle that, since it attracts attention, also highlights the way in which war as cinema is also war as capital, while the use of war as cinema helps to make money for the capitalist class.

In this way, I agree with Virilio/Pisters' notion of pancinema, which is akin to the immanentisation of kinocentrism, while also agreeing with the idea of reality being on the wane, or disappearing. However, drone imagery of war perhaps makes this clearer via the very distance – rather than the embedded reporter or soldier's proximity – to combat. Rendered a relatively small dot seen from an aerial, god-like vantage point on a screen, the reality, or the humanity, of the so-called 'enemy' other disappears, with the destruction of that other becoming the very show that justifies the system of cinema-capital-war that created the other's otherness in the first place.

If the distance of the drone – and of course the drone pilot – from the action leads to some sort of disappearance, then this distance also involves a literal aesthetic recession: the other is far away from the drone and the drone pilot, receding into the background. The aesthetics of recession is a term that has been used in a recent PhD thesis written by Yong Liu in order to define contemporary 3D cinema. In that

cinema, argues Liu, the depth of the image, or what is referred to commonly as the positive parallax, is increasingly used expressively, such that a whole new dimension has indeed been added to film. The world or worlds that we see on the cinema screen literally recede away from us, hence the aesthetics of recession (Liu, 2016).

Leon Gurevitch, meanwhile, has written about how early 3D images circulated widely and regularly featured vistas from the colonies of both places and indigenous peoples, Gurevitch's argument being that the 3D images functioned as a popular medium for justifying the practices of empire, while simultaneously not bringing the viewers closer to the places or subjects depicted in the images, but instead creating a distance that in turn leads to the possibility of colonialist exploitation (the other is not seen as human, but as an object that can be exploited). In this way, 3D still images, circulating nearly 60 years before the invention of cinema, anticipated the role that cinema itself would also play in colonialism and empire through the creation and circulation of moving images of empire created by, for example, the employees of the Pathé brothers (see Gurevitch, 2012).

While Yong argues that 3D cinema in the digital era needs to be understood as an innovative tool for changing how stories are told, since it has helped to produce movies like *Need for Speed* (Scott Waugh, USA/UK/France, 2014), he does not consider how the recession involved in 3D imaging may not so much increase a sense of spatial realism as reinforce a sense of detachment not from the film, but from the real world, which we hope or expect to conform to cinema, or which we hope is cinematic – with cinema asserting its power precisely by becoming the measure of reality as opposed to reality being the measure of cinema. If war and cinema are strongly interlinked, then the rendering cinematic of the world furthers our understanding of the militarisation and weaponisation of as many aspects of our world as we can think of, including information and/or the data that we provide to companies via our smartphones (also characterised as drones by Jablonowski, Mellamphy and Biswas Mellamphy alike), who can then use that data against us in order to control our behaviour for the purposes of capitalism via a combination of cinematically-induced consumerist desires and debt.

This process also involves the weaponisation/militarisation of vision (see Stewart, 2012: 7), with vision thus becoming nothing more than targeting (the French verb *viser* means to aim; as Hal Foster puts it in his consideration of the work of Harun Farocki, 'any grid – a perspectival painting, a computer screen, your front window – begins to look like another target, a crosshairs about to line up' – see Foster, 2004: 161). This pan-war is also made clear by the drone, the military iterations of which can strike anywhere and at any time – regardless of whether an official war is taking place between the country that owns the drone and the country in which its warhead detonates. War is no longer between countries; it is in all places at all times – or at least could be. As Lt Colonel Jack Johns (Bruce Greenwood) says in *Good Kill* (Andrew Niccol, USA, 2014): drones are everywhere. The film explicitly links drones to cinema when Johns later paraphrases Jean-Luc Godard in saying that they are not engaged in a just war, but just war. Redolent of Godard's call not for just images (images that reinforce a sense of justice), but just for images (mere images), Niccol makes clear the link between drone warfare and cinema: drones speak of an era not of just wars (in the sense of justified by a sense of justice), but of just (nothing more than) war. Where Godard's phrase would seem to ask us to understand images as images, Niccol seems to suggest that now there is only war as there only are images.

To return to drones in relation to recession, then, the aesthetics of recession that Liu identifies in contemporary 3D cinema is also present in drones as a result of the very distance of the drone from its target; to make a reference to Omer Fast's film about drones, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (Israel/Germany, 2011) in terms of distance from drone to target (5,000 feet is 1.5 kilometres – a kind of extreme long shot and depth of field that commercial 3D cinema currently can only dream of). It is not the third dimension, then, that sees an intensification of recession, such that those depicted in images are deprived even more of their humanity. Rather, what the 3D image and the drone have in common is the digital, with the digital thus being what drives this aesthetics of recession – to the point of reality waning and the subject disappearing.[1]

Gods don't die

In his analysis of drone warfare, Derek Gregory suggests that '[d]istance lends re-enchantment,' with drone pilots not being simply 'cubicle warriors' or 'commuter

fighters,' but as possessing 'a terrifying Olympian power released through the U[nmanned]A[erial]V[ehicle]'s Hellfire missiles. "Sometimes I felt like a God hurling thunderbolts from afar," one pilot admits […] "Those about whom we make life-or-death decisions, as they scurry below or carry on as best they can, have – like any beings faced with the gods – no recourse or appeal"' (Gregory, 2011: 192). It is quite common to read reports about how drone pilots are traumatised by the work that they are asked to carry out (see Blair and House, 2017) – and this is certainly a story peddled by Hollywood in their depictions of drone pilots, as we can see in *Good Kill*, where pilot Thomas Egan (Ethan Hawke) is clearly traumatised by his work, such that he drinks and is violent towards his family. While critical of drone warfare (see Piotrowska, 2017), *Good Kill* nonetheless conforms to a relatively stereotypical view of the male drone pilot as traumatised. While this stereotype persists, however, this view has been rejected in reports where drone pilots suggest that they had not been 'particularly troubled by their mission,' and that piloting a drone is 'a gamer's delight… It can get a little bloodthirsty. But it's fucking cool' (see Chamayou, 2015: 106-107). In other words, the drone pilot can indeed feel detached from their work, seeing as unreal the people whom they observe and/or kill, with this separation from the subject predicated upon the medium that has put distance between the observer and the observed, giving to the observer power and speed, but creating a hierarchy in which the observed recedes from view, a victim of recession, deprived even of their victimhood by the heavily mediatised stories of drone pilot observers being the ones traumatised by their involvement in this one-sided combat.

For drone combat becomes one-sided or asymmetrical, as Chamayou has also explained. As mentioned, war is traditionally fought between two sides that are prepared both to kill and to be killed. But contemporary warfare increasingly is conducted between a side that is prepared to die and another that is prepared to kill but not to suffer any casualties whatsoever. War is no longer based upon bravery and sacrifice; it seems rather to be based on cowardice (Chamayou, 2015: 17). This desire for a lack of casualties for the side that by definition is the aggressor in creating a combat zone from which they are physically separated is achieved through seeing, but not being seen, and through hearing, but not being heard. Where a drone traditionally might well have a key aural component – think of the buzzing of the

wings of a drone bee – the drone today is silent and unseen. It thus reflects the role of the voyeuristic film spectator – but with potentially devastating consequences for those taking part in the show that the drone operator is watching.

This banishment of death from the side of the aggressor in war masks how the other, so-called 'enemy' is always already considered dead, or at least not properly alive, subhuman, just an image on a screen that can unthinkingly be wiped out at the push of a button – as if playing a game, i.e. for fun. Here we can see the 'necropolitical' aspect of drones: 'the arrogation of the sovereign's right both to command death and to assign grievable meaning to the dead' (Allinson, 2015: 113). To move in a different direction, though, I might suggest that what the desired absence of death for the aggressor brings us close to is the primordial separation that media, including cinema, pretend to offer – and that is the separation of death from life, such that we consider some things dead and others alive and never both at the same time – a theoretical cat conceptualised by Erwin Schrödinger notwithstanding. This perceived separation – of life from death – is perhaps the key conceptual hierarchy that has enabled humans to treat their world and each other as if separate, as if not really living (i.e. already dead, and thus to be killed without consequence or reprisal). Furthermore, this separation of death from life is what drives the perceived need to immortalise oneself through what I might call becoming cinema: the rendering cinematic of one's life through the use of media – from posting selfies on Instagram to dreaming of becoming famous and thus appearing in images and films across the world as a means of verifying that one's life is real. The creation of this separation between life and death means that death now is traumatic, perceived as unnatural – hence the traumatised response to the death of celebrities – rather than being an inevitable truth. In other words, we again see how the separation of life from death renders death traumatic, which in turn reinforces the separation between the two, and a clinging on to life, while at the same time needing for that life the death of others, who are not perceived even as alive but already as dead and thus killable for the purposes of making oneself seem or feel alive. Cinema-capital-war is in some senses, then, an asymmetrical and necropolitical industry of death that is used to validate the lives of the few, the dehumanisation/conceptual and then literal death of the many for the immortalisation of the minority. Wanting to become a god, because gods

don't die. Since gods don't die, they transcend time, becoming eternal. In some senses, then, the drone era sees the weaponisation of time itself via what I shall term nuncocentrism, to which I shall turn my attention presently.

Nuncocentrism and real time

It is by outsourcing and creating a distance from death, and by imposing death upon others (by thrusting others, along with death, into recession) that gods come to believe that they cannot die, and that thus they can transcend time. I am not talking about transcending time in the sense of being able to travel backwards and forwards through it. Rather, I mean transcending time by moving from the realm of the temporary to the realm of the eternal – possibly having a beginning, but striving to have no ending. Writing of the early stages of the first Gulf War in 1990, Virilio argues that 'war has become a total and ubiquitous phenomenon where image is one "munition" among others. It matters little what thing (plane, tank, warship, etc.) is in question, nor does it matter what image is employed (radar, video, etc.); what matters is *their presentation in real time*' (Virilio, 2005: 23). And it is in the phrase 'real time' and the demand for real time entertainment that we can find this bid for divinity.

For real time presentation is not simply the presentation of events that are happening right now – a flattening of space such that images can be broadcast across the globe at the same time, without any requirement of time to disseminate those images. 'Real time' as a phrase also conveys the demand for a temporality of the now to be presented as real. Put more clearly: the now becomes the only temporality that is admitted as real – with the past and the future being delegitimised in favour only of the now, which becomes as a result the only real time – with the impression that the now is the only real time meaning that it takes on a hegemonic status, a divinity that renders other times unreal, with the exclusive reality of the now being at the core of capitalism's ideology.

We can see how this is so in various ways. As pilot Steve Watts (Aaron Paul) and airman Carrie Gershon (Phoebe Fox) step into and out of work at odd hours in drone film *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015), so does the distinction between work time and other times cease to exist – and not just for drone

pilots, but also for all workers who as a result are turned into drones (see Noys, 2015: 15). Instead of a separation between work time and leisure time, say, there is only a now-time of work that requires being on call at every moment, be it day or night – with *Eye in the Sky* also showing the UK interacting with the USA interacting with Kenya in real time; all three places now no longer operate in different time zones, but in a single, militarised zone of time, the now; past and future are obliterated as now becomes the centre of the universe, hence the phrase nuncocentrism.

'As computers and cellphones, and the constant stream of stimuli they offer, pose a profound new challenge to focusing and learning,' suggests an article in *The New York Times*, '[t]he risk […] is that developing brains can become more easily habituated than adult brains to constantly switching tasks – and less able to sustain attention' (Richtel, 2010). I can feel this in my everyday life as I am constantly surrounded by screens, with a screen being the first thing I consult upon waking and the last thing I consult before sleep (the screen is my lover, or at least my partner). I constantly am checking email, anxious that more messages have come in for me to answer – even though most of them are unimportant (in fact, the less important, the better, since I can answer them at speed or even delete them without reading them, a gesture that still takes priority over the most important messages, which tend to sit for longest in my inbox, awaiting a moment when I can find some time to answer them 'properly' – which can often end up being not at all, as their importance vanishes under the weight of now-messages that come to swamp me). I am writing a paper for a research seminar and I go online to check something, say the publication date of Paul Virilio's *Desert Screen*; I see I have various emails in my gmail inbox and I delete half of them and answer the rest. I realise that I need, or at the very least want, to send a link to a news story to a friend, and so go to that link myself, copy and paste it, look at a couple of other news stories, and then send the link to my friend. Since I am on my gmail, I think I might as well check my work email, and a similar situation arises; I can delete several emails, but various others require answering. One requires me to log in to my university's virtual learning environment to check a reading assigned for that week, another my online diary, another the staff work portal, where I in turn log on to the university's academic records, and so on. And since I have checked gmail and work email, I might as well look quickly at Facebook, not least because I can also

see I have some notifications. I comment on a couple of people's posts, add a link to someone else's – while looking at that link briefly to copy and paste the URL – before looking at a couple of news stories, comment threads and a cat video that I like. I then go back to my essay and look at it dumbly for a few seconds, before remembering that I need to check that publication date of Paul Virilio's *Desert Screen*. In other words, in the regime of real time, I have no memory in the sense that I specifically cannot remember and often forget that which I came online to discover.

The permanent illumination of the world leads to an absence of sleep (see Crary, 2013). And since sleep is necessary for me to develop memories (see Hobson, 1995), then without sleep and under permanent and universal illumination, I thus cannot form memories – that is, I lack focus/attention (for more on how screens harm sleep, see, *inter alia*, Figueiro and Overington, 2016). What is more, I also have no imagination as I find myself thinking in Facebook status updates, the medium now dominating my thoughts of the future, as well as alienating me from the past. In this process, the now becomes the only time that is real, as I can neither remember nor imagine another time, with the now taking on a sense of being unquestionable or divine as I am kept at the screen for the purposes either of working – which becomes a permanent process – or for the purposes of destroying my abilities to think about anything other than work, and thus living for capitalism and the bastard kin screens of cinema, which are a war machine ensuring my subservience.

The above experience of forgetting what one went to one's computer to do may be banal, but the point is that such nuncocentrism is precisely banal, with the (evil) banality of work and war defining my entire existence. Without memory and imagination, I am like Jason Bourne myself weaponised – not because I remember combat skills loaded into my muscle memory, but because I remember nothing and can imagine no alternative to work (which in Bourne's case is to make literal war), meaning that I am defenceless against the militaristic forces of capital, knowing only to look at my drone-phone and other screen devices, which in turn gather data that will be used further to control my behaviour as my banal life wears interminably on.

Indeed, the strength of my subservience to the screen can be seen in my addiction to my phone. If a different time beyond the time of constant stimulation threatens me – if a different time becomes a bit too real by virtue of being boring, maybe even traumatic – then out comes the phone in order for me to get some screen time, a time that has become, to adopt an old advertising slogan, the real thing. This is the distinction between real time, which is constant, and *durée*, the Bergsonian sense of time in its true unfolding (see, for example, Bergson, 2001). Through the shrinkage of space – I can see Nairobi right now in Bolton – I am not confined to the here and now in the traditional sense, but to the simultaneous now of everything at my fingertips immediately, which does include a kind of conquering of the past for the purposes of the present in the form of the archive that I can filter at all times, calling up Elvis Presley to sing for me at one minute, and then Skrillex to perform at another. Truly we are gods, giving (Facebook and YouTube) thumbs up and thumbs down to the gladiators who fight for survival before us, and yet which fight we can choose to end at any moment if it is not entertaining enough for us.[2]

Without wishing to be too 'weird,' we also might get a sense here of how both the excitement and the supposed trauma of the drone pilot affirm the same sense of now as the only real time. No doubt there is much that is boring about looking at the live feed of empty desert that is the drone pilot's usual lot for long stretches of their work. But equally it becomes small wonder that the sheer duration/*durée* of such moments is traumatic enough that the pilot then actively wants to blow something up and enjoy the video game dimensions of their work as a kind of reward for all of the rest of the experience. Real time now in some senses demands it.

How not to be seen

The drone helps us to think about the immanentisation of kinocentrism, whereby cinema, capital, war and the temporality of the now become the measure of our reality. This is indeed a military entertainment complex, not least in the sense of encompassing our entire reality, as per the Latin word *complexus*: cinema, capital, war and the now are intricately woven together (*com-plectere*), taking on such complexity that they are not very easily analysed. The way in which the drone affirms this immanentisation can also be seen in how the drone shot becomes increasingly

ubiquitous in contemporary cinema, both in fiction films – as per those Hollywood productions specifically about drone warfare mentioned above – and in documentaries, such as when a drone takes off in Washington Square Park in Asif Kapadia's *Amy* (UK/USA, 2015), as well as in art house hybrid films such as *Francofonia* (Aleksandr Sokurov, France/Germany/Netherlands, 2015). It is not that cinema has not had a long history of aerial shots (e.g. those made with helicopters). But the drone seems to have intensified the ubiquity of such shots, which in turn suggests that there is an aesthetic dimension to the political/ideological manœuvre of presenting the now-time of the military entertainment complex as the only admissible reality/as the only real time. In this way, as Jacques Rancière (2006) would suggest, the near-omnipresent drone shot signals the struggle for power in the contemporary world as also being a struggle in/of aesthetics: who can present themselves most authoritatively and/or who can capture the most attention – with any user of the drone shot (and any maker of any image, perhaps especially digital images) thus in some senses affirming the immanentisation of kinocentrism, even if their film would otherwise claim to be 'oppositional.' It may be important for Kapadia and Sokurov to use the drone image in order to suggest death – the death of Amy Winehouse, the death of art in Paris under Nazi Occuptation. It may also be important for the female voice of Winehouse to work with these drone images in order to critique the patriarchal and fascist dimensions of image culture. But perhaps any drone image just intensifies the grip of the screen, which in turn intensifies the grip of kinocentrism – as the screen time given over to Winehouse's persecutors only seems to redouble and thus to affirm her persecution in Kapadia's documentary, just as the drone footage of Homs redoubles the shelling that has torn it apart.

In this way, it does not particularly matter if an image is 'oppositional' or conservative. Just as the phrase real time has at its core the justification of now as the only admissible reality, so does the term reality show have at its core the justification of show, of show business, of business and of the busy-ness of show, as the only admissible reality. Referring back to a *Playboy* interview, Chuck Todd asked Donald Trump at a Meet the Press event in August 2015:

> The questioner asks, 'What is all of this?' – meaning talking about your yacht, the bronze tower, the casino, what does it mean to you – and you replied, 'props for the show.' And they said, 'what show is that?' And you replied, 'the show is Trump and it's sold-out performances everywhere' (NBC News, 2015).

As the people recede (and as groups of people are precisely what drones look out for as potential targets – since any gathering or absence of separation is a potential threat to capital; see Väliaho, 2014), the show marches on, and even if Trump barely makes sense, he has an intuitive logic of what in this paper I have termed the immanentisation of kinocentrism. That is, just as Trump still attracts and maintains attention even when he is being criticised by his opposition ('all publicity is good publicity'), so might all drone shots reaffirm the immanentisation of kinocentrism.

Perhaps the only option that remains, then, is not to enter at all into the world of images and not to be visible, even if that would express some sort of 'social' death and/or consign one into a realm outside of perceived reality. According to Eva Parra Iñesta, high definition imagery is fetishised in Colombia, such that to appear in HD is a sign of empowerment, with HD images themselves becoming as valuable as 'gold and cocaine' (Parra Iñesta, 2015: 1). Parra Iñesta goes on immediately to compare this perceived need for HD images to Hito Steyerl's defence of the 'poor image' as perhaps a worthy opponent to HD imagery (see Steyerl, 2012: 31-45). That is, where HD connotes power, poor images reject power; where drone imagery also suggests power, earthbound and 'muddy' images might also reject power. If power goes overground, then escape goes underground, or it makes itself invisible as per Steyerl's *How Not To Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (Germany, 2013), in which the artist develops ways in order not to be seen by surveillance satellite and other cameras. Not all of the disappearances that Steyerl mentions are positive, since they include being disappeared by a state. Nonetheless, as invisibility is used to hide the sources of power (the unseen drone, the unseen offshore bank account), so might it be used to evade kinocentrism – through a rejection of the cinematic (see also Gronlund, 2017: 41-44).

Weird conclusion

Let us embrace the likelihood that not being seen is self-defeating – in that its evasion of kinocentrism does little or nothing to stop kinocentrism. The drone signals war without frontiers, a kind of total and permanent war in which the belligerent gods seek blood in their bid for immortality, striking anywhen and anywhere, claiming the blood of innocents. Furthermore, the drone war signals a one-sided war without risk of death – or in effect a war without war. As we move into an era in which election results and perhaps even wars may be decided by computer hackers, then the ongoing/coming cyberwar is equally a war without war. As Alex Gibney suggests in *Zero Days* (USA, 2016), his recent documentary on the American-British-Israeli developed virus weapon, Stuxnet, it is also a war without attribution. That is, war will not be one-sided so much as sideless. Confused and thus in a state of paranoia and fear, everything and nothing will be true, trust and empathy will disappear, and war and capital will, through cinema and its bastard kin, have developed further as the only reality, now no longer confined to host nations, but ubiquitous and permanent. Faced with such a world, one can even understand the reactionary nationalism of Trump and Brexit as an expression of fear as nations and most of their people lose yet further their relevance in the face of relentless capital (even if I personally believe that the call for nationalist capitalism is misguided as a defence against unchained capital's relentless march).

The making real of a capital that no longer requires nations is the next step in the creation of a war that no longer requires sides and a capital that no longer requires humans – except as sacrifice. This, perhaps, is what humans mean when they speak of the technological singularity – the moment when artificial intelligence becomes intelligent and thinks for itself, a becoming-human of the media at a moment when humans seek to become media by becoming light. This becoming-human, though, is also becoming a 'god' in the sense that it involves sacrificing humans as it sees fit, just as humans sacrifice themselves by prostrating themselves before the screen machines. Faced with, or traumatised by, a godless universe, humans have had to create this cinematic capital-god of war for themselves; and this cinematic capital-god of war will demand blood, striking cruelly at any point in time and without pattern or reason – just like a drone.

Capital and cinema will be seen retrospectively as embryonic versions of this singularity. That is, we shall only see the singularity too late. And we shall only see it when the god-machine of war puts humans into war with each other, shrinking us first from the nation to the city state and then into a general apocalyptic all-against-all as we pray to the drone-god not to send down hellfire to kill us but to kill our neighbour for his sins first. Perhaps we are already all drones working for the machine-god. Indeed, the soldier is now a mere drone, an 'agentless capturer of footage' who does not so much fight as create images for consumption (see Smith, 2016: 96). Turned to drones, there will only be a singular drone rhythm (a singularity?). But this will not be drone music designed to free our minds, but the never-ending cruelty of hellfire on earth (like hell, it will be never-ending and without possible alternative). As humans seek to become light, to become cinema, to become media, so might we conversely realise that media are seeking to become human, in the sense of being recognised as alive. The drone, then, is the placement in the sky of a network of machines, a sky-net that will give body to media just as humans abdicate the planet to reside within the media by becoming light. This will be a kind of Lovecraftian end of days, then, as announced by the famous pre-drone shot of the alien birds surveilling Bodega Bay in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (USA, 1963). The tentacular and alien intelligence of capital in the form of cinema and its kin media is dividing humans so as to conquer them, enslaving us under the amnesiac permanent illumination of screens that hubristically we believe set us free and make us gods. Perhaps only the muddy poor, underground and invisible, will stand a chance…

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Notes

[1] This aesthetic/visual recession could be linked to another type of recession that also is connected to digital culture and which is not a shortcoming, but a structurally logical part of our contemporary world, namely the economic recession that keeps many humans purposefully in debt, and thus getting poorer (while those whom we might hold equally if not more responsible for it are bailed out). This imbalance creates a very clear hierarchy between the haves and the have-nots, with the haves almost certainly considering the have-nots as their inferiors. This is a (logical) consequence of the distance created by the haves from the have-nots as a result of the economic disparity between the two. An economic recession is the recession of the poor from the rich, such that the two disappear from each other's sight, only to be united in extreme situations like war. This recession is linked to the digital because of the increased role that computers play in trading, which in combination with trust in those computers enables the accrual of so much bad debt that economic crisis ensues. In this way, we might contend that those observed by drones are the victims of a double recession: paying the price for the greed of bankers while also disappearing from view.

[2] A further tentacle of nuncocentrism is the common perception that old films are boring, bad or, at best, 'good for their time,' as people believe that now is the best time as we follow a relentless path of improvement called 'progress,' which term belies a belief in our ability to control time.

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