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Combat at Gamer's Pace. No Pause nor Reset Button

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The battlefield in Ukraine combines World War I-style trenches, counter-terrorism command centres and fleets of adapted commercial drones virtually wired together by everyday internet technology. The wide use of 'wedding' drones DJI Mavic on Ukrainian battlefields blurs the line between the type of drones used to fight wars and to film weddings. What happens when the military co-opts the underground world of DIY drone building and drone racing? The regular presence of small reconnaissance drones over conflict zones sows confusion, fear, and terror among soldiers. The small drones, the eyes in a sky, induce the feeling of exposure and lethal voyeurism wherever they are on the ground. Small drones are not classified as military hardware, although with millions of those already in circulation and the technology to build them freely available, the army of drones is on the battlefield for good. There are unconfirmed reports of Russia and Ukraine experimenting with drones that can identify and attack targets without human input, using artificial intelligence. Needless to say, the fully autonomous killer drones are changing the thinking about rules of war and demand new modes of diplomacy to prevent escalatory threat.

> *The claws were bad enough in the first place—nasty, crawling little death-robots. But when they began to imitate their creators, it was time for the human race to make peace—if it could! [...] Across the ground something small and metallic came, flashing in the dull sunlight of mid-day. A metal sphere. It raced up the hill after the Russian, its treads flying. It was small, one of the baby ones. Its claws were out, two razor projections spinning in a blur of white steel. The Russian heard it. He turned instantly, firing. The sphere dissolved into particles. But already a second had emerged and was following the first. The Russian fired again. A third sphere leaped up the Russian's leg, clicking and whirring. It jumped to the shoulder. The spinning blades disappeared into the Russian's throat.*
>
> *Eric relaxed. "Well, that's that. God, those damn things give me the creeps. Sometimes I think we were better off before."*
>
> (Dick, 1953)

Second Variety is a science novel by American writer Philip K. Dick set in a world where the war between the Soviet Union and the United Nations has reduced most of the world to a bare wasteland. The plot evolved from the discovery by the few remaining soldiers left that self-replicating robots originally built to assassinate Soviet agents have gained sentience and are plotting against both sides now. The novel's fascinating narrative is exemplary of our longtime obsession with autonomous weapons. Perhaps autonomous lethal weapons disgust us the most from an ethical point of view. The current discussions about LAWS (Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems) point out that autonomous weapons are unacceptable for two main reasons: they remove human oversight that separates the decision-maker from the consequences of their choices, and they deny the human dignity of the victim. While we enter the age of killer robots there is an urgent need for humanitarians, governments, media, policymakers and drone-makers to join action dealing with the specific issues around consumer drones in conflict and how they might be addressed. As noticed by Antoine Bousquet the 'scopic regime' of cultural theory calls for the inclusion of 'martial gaze' (Pong and Richardson, 2024). The ethics of seeing from a drone, aka god's eye view, which enables the conduct of war from a distance is controversial in terms of the dehumanising effect of killing as a practice of manhunting.

We Made it Beautiful. Because it's the Last Thing Some People Will Ever See.

In general, technology that largely shaped the public sphere also mobilised the power released from the unhinging and recollection of senses that was most evident in military technology, especially as this technology was increasingly trained on urban

sites in two world wars. Eventually, the organic perception is abolished altogether in order to replace it with a technological *super*-perception. The division between organic and technological formed an essential foundation for military technology. For instance, organic is considered too slow and imperfect; therefore, its augmentation by prosthetic addition ultimately requires complete replacement. In seeking to establish the underlying currents of contemporary perceptions, Ryan Bishop and John Philips (2010) observe that the development of contemporary military technology coincides with an era of active experiments in art. Even though theatres of war and museums of modern art coexist as separate entities, there is an overlooked connection between the two domains. This resonates with Bishop and Philips' analyses of military machine design, oddly striving to make its appearance as striking as its capabilities. In their view, military technology explores the power of the aesthetic, which is intimately connected to technology. The visionary and divisionary power resides at the heart of techno-science. Take the case of the Bell helicopter model, which is designed for all weather conditions, day or night, allowing four fields of view: wide, medium, narrow, and narrow zoom for long-distance precision targeting, moreover, targeting and firing can be controlled remotely, overcoming the pilot's limited point of view and so on. What would be the role of the aesthetic aspect of its beauty? The division between the instrumental and the aesthetic is blurred, as evident from this advertising text:

> We made it beautiful. Because it's the last thing some people will ever see. The AH-IZ. First, it frustrates the enemy with a Target Sight System that detects, recognises and identifies them at extreme ranges. Then, it demonstrates the versatility of the widest array of ordnance available. Finally, if you wish, it permits the enemy to view a state-of -the-art helicopter like no other. The AH-IZ. Unbeatable proof that your mission is our mission. (Bell Textron Helicopter ad).
>
> (cited in Bishop and Philips 2010: 50)

The rapid development of technology was prompted by the requirements of the military industry, which needs technological advances to remove warfare from the constraints of reality. According to military tactics, if the target can be seen, it can be destroyed. The advertising slogan for the Comanche helicopter: 'Whatever threat Comanche detects is history', is particularly noteworthy in this respect (cited in 2010: 63). This example reflects the thinking of Paul Virilio about the relation between speed and the aesthetics of disappearance, mainly the converge of perception and lethality. He suggests that 'with the invention of the photogramme, that is of instant photography and cinematography, from that movement onwards one enters into an aesthetic of disappearance' (Armitage

2001: 33). The main shift occurred in the grounds of perception and the expansion of knowledge (or at least, data) now accessible solely by machines. In the same way, modern life, which is subjected to the camera's gaze, incorporates previously external attributes. The power of division, which remains unpresentable, brings the subject and object together to synthesise presence.

Within the domain of technology, the division emerges as the difference between the predicative truth of technology (for instance, the jet engine is fast) and its expressive qualities that have no natural or necessary relations to the truth or falsity but establish a performative level of discourse into play. To exemplify this idea, consider the example of slow-motion footage. A particular example is one of the widely recognised stock shots in contemporary films – a take-off of a military fighter, which does so in slow motion such that the audience can perceive its technological splendour. The two forms of technology merge here to create the image of the impossible: the military technology speeding up of the plane reveals the technology of speed; the aesthetic treatment deploying new media technologies slowing down the plane on film reveals the performative operation of technology in contemporary visual culture. For the past decades, our worldview was extended by the 'drone aesthetic'- 'the machinic capacities for sensing and sense-making, which constitutes drone system themselves' (Pong and Richardson 2024:11). When boundaries between military and domestic are disintegrated, we might ask what makes current politics visible and possible. The performative level questions who address whom, how the power works and to what effect. It is worth remembering that we do not simply become freer with increased technological capabilities; rather, the technologies that constitute our capabilities also, at the same time, constitute the power relations according to which bodies function in the system (Michelle Foucault 1991). Unsurprisingly, the complex structure of the 'performative condition' of the modern world requires new knowledge and a different set of tools for critical analysis than those developed within traditional philosophical concepts.

As our perception was irreversibly altered by technology, so was the notion of performance. John McKenzie extends the idea of performance with his argument about the intersections between different types of cultural, organisational and technological performances. He traces military research in the USA at the time of the Cold War, which redefined American science. In response to the demands for sophisticated weaponry, backed up by political and social forces, scientists pushed the limits of materials, machines, and entire systems by creating higher standards of technological performance. Furthermore, beyond the criteria of 'high performance' the criteria of 'very high performance' and 'ultra-high performance' emerged (McKenzie, 2001:

101–102). Eventually, high-performance devices originally developed for the military made their way into our everyday life, by transferring of high-performance technologies into consumer and business markets. With the 'robotization of urban services', the notion is that to 'foresight to the year 2050' is to 'imagine drones as commonplace in the aerial of smart cities alongside birds' (Rachel Macrorie et al, cited in Jackman, 2022).

Subversion of Military Power

Figure 1: Saint Javelin campaign created by Christian @ukrainian.war.ar [original image by Chris Shaw], 1 May 2023.

While the main scholarship interrogates the high-end military technologies and state violence, the tactics developed at the Ukrainian frontline make us think about military use of devices that have more in common with toys than military hardware. The wide use of 'wedding' drones DJI Mavic on Ukrainian battlefields blurs the line between the type of drones used to fight wars and to film weddings. With this new technological leap, the drones built for thrills are now rewriting military doctrine. The state-controlled military equipment is submerged into a chaos of gorilla-style war tactics in the mess of trench warfare, where formidable high-tech military vehicles can be destroyed by a grenade attached to a consumer drone dropped with the right precision. Today's battlefield commercial drones are rooted in hobbyist experimentation, which affects how war is conducted and perceived. Commonly referred to as the 'eyes in the sky', small drones became essential for maintaining battlefield awareness so that soldiers felt like 'blind kittens' on the frontline without the UAVs. The drone usage will only escalate as both the defending and attacking forces seek an edge in identifying and striking their targets. Ukrainian government initiative 'Drone Amy' collects civilian and commercial drones for the Ukrainian regular and volunteer forces.

As suggested by the media, consumer drones are democratising warfare by providing militaries with new ways to conduct reconnaissance, gather intelligence, and deliver weapons. With the development of consumer devices, people have the means to participate in war in ways that have never previously been available. The regular presence of small, unidentifiable drones over conflict confuses and creates fear and disgust. Civilians cannot know who's watching them and for what purpose. The drone war is a catastrophe for people on the ground. Both sides repeatedly strike blows on the enemy with cheap kamikaze drones. Even if these drones don't release bombs, soldiers have learned to fear the buzzing of quadcopter engines overhead as the flights often foreshadow an incoming artillery barrage. In one moment, a squad is a flicker of light, visible in thermal imaging, captured by a drone camera and shared with the tablet of an enemy hiding nearby. In the next, the soldiers' execution is filmed from above, captured in 4K resolution by a weapon available for sale at any Best Buy. On Twitter in July 2022, Mykhailo Federov, Ukraine's minister of digital transformation, made an appeal for 'dronations' (in addition to crowdfunding campaigns for cryptocurrency donations) for building up the country's 'army of drones' (cited in Pong, 2022).

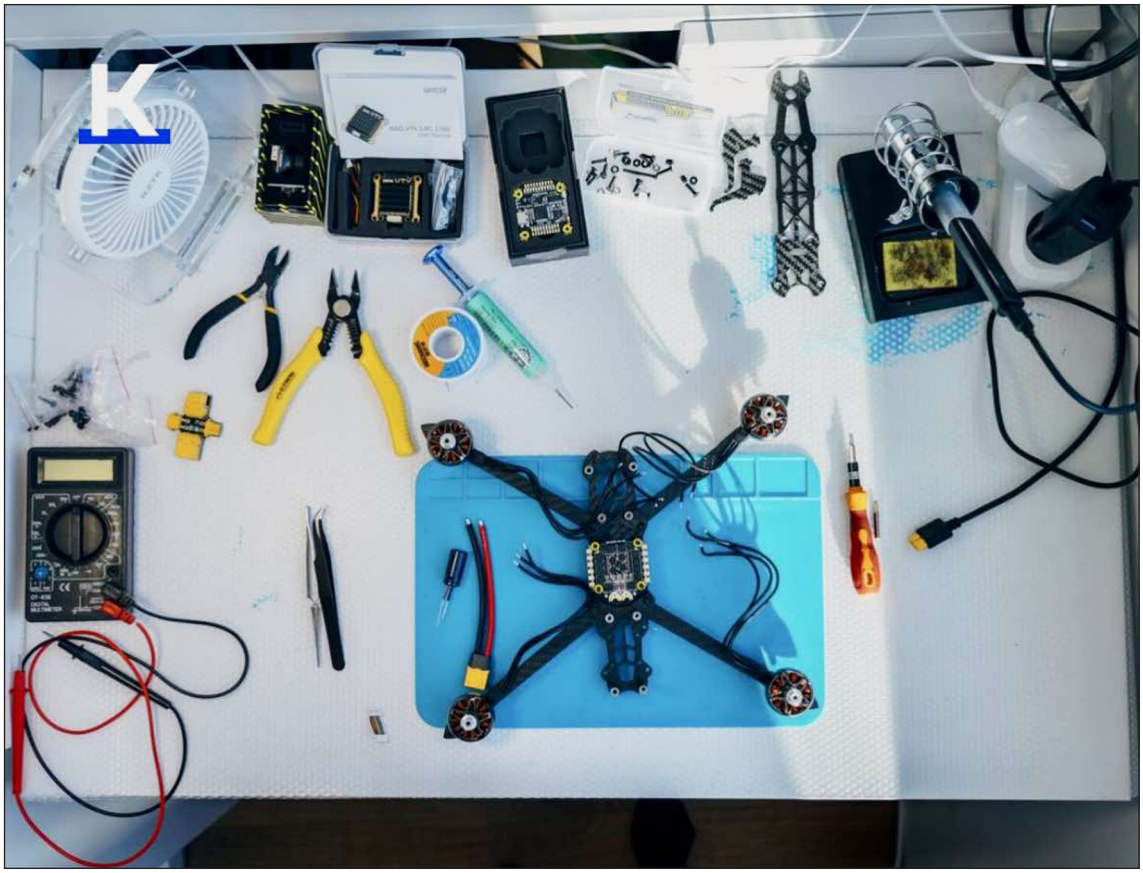

Figure 2: The Ukrainian government began to promote initiatives like People's FPV ('Narodny FPV') for non-engineers making drones at home.@kyivendependent_official, 16 February 2024.

The proliferation of consumer drones in war challenges the promise of a 'brave new world ', this world that is 'white', it is 'clean' and just 'better' because it is created by 'white'. 'clean' and 'better' media technologies (Hepp, 2019). What happens when the military co-opts the underground world of DIY drone building and drone racing? The main shift occurred in perception to a post-human transformation of vision and war. The aesthetic of drone visions became common for marketing videos and film footage, which alienate and glamorise drone operations, making them socially acceptable. The role of social media in promoting drone warfare in the Ukraine-Russian conflict can't be underestimated. Hence, the 'first Tik Tok war' (Kyle Chayka 2022) was key in normalising public opinion by presenting the battlefield through the metaphor of drone piloting as video-game playing.

Figure 3: Ukrainian UAV, @easternherald, 10 May 2024.

This may all sound like a fabulously democratic vision of war where transparency and knowledge imply that states and participants can be identified from digital flows of information and, as a result, held to account. Smart devices, apps, archives and algorithms remove the bystander from war, collapsing the distinctions between witnessing and action, soldier and civilian, and media and weapon. Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins identified this mediatised field of perception as 'radical war' (2022:11). Far from producing transparency, however, radical war in practice yields the opposite effect. The data flow leads to ambiguity, opaqueness, and cover-up, as well as multiple, fragmentary, and discordant narratives about war. Unable to contain the monsters created out of social media, this processes not only provide cover for traditional forms of warfare and genocide but also enables entirely new forms of warfare (Ford and Hoskins, 2022: 30). As Devin McKinney points out:

> More and more, violence – not merely as an aspect of art but as an everyday presence – seems to come equipped with its own escape hatch, its own assurance that involvement can be avoided. Those who communicate violence in its varied forms are eager to provide the means by which the receptor can reify it into a construct, something not messy and uncontrollable but regimented, with the workable outlines of fiction.
>
> (Cited in Prince, 2000: 108)

Figure 4: A Girl and Bird by artist Yura Shapoval@ukrainianartofwar, 9 August 2022.

Gamification of War

As stated by researcher James Pathon Rogers, we are in a 'second drone age', and drones are the fastest home-building vehicles, zipping through the air and changing direction in no time. With the 'second drone age,' we enter the 'gamification of war', the assembling of virtual and reality that challenges how civil-military relations are conceptualised. Gamification was one of the major forces for mediatization, and we might argue that war is mediatised through gaming technology. Gamification is also the way it is perceived and conducted. Foreseeably, governments around the world are increasingly looking to recruit young people with gaming experience to join their fights.

The controversy of targeted killing with drones contends with the notion of a scopic regime, which is mostly concerned with the politics of images, mainly how politics shapes visuals. On the contrary, the drone view determines how visual determines politics, giving the privileged position of those who can see from a drone. Hyper-sensing technology supposedly can reveal the true essence of targets, the assumption that underlines the legitimacy of violence delivered from this perspective. The complete terror from above threatens to wipe up the possibility of humanity, especially in the case of human observers lacking a clear vision of targets. Technology and information sharing are not the ultimate tools to overcome invisibility. In the field of international relations, Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley argue that 'there is always the imperceptible, that over which we cannot be certain, in everything we see' (2018: 2). There is always more to every situation that is visible and the presence of invisible might be accepted into the visual field of knowledge. The Russo-Ukrainian war is the largest drone war in history. With Ukraine losing approximately 10,000 drones a month, the war is a real-time laboratory for the use of commercial UAVs in warfighting by both sides on an unprecedented level (Palathra, 2024). While the military innovations have significantly helped Ukrainian defence, we must consider the ethical implications of technological progress. Overall, the fields of war dominated by robots that cannot negotiate or show kindness but can only follow and kill are probably not the way to resolve human conflicts.

Figure 5: Ukrainian & Russian drones in a sky. DroneCatcher is a multicopter armed with a net gun. @airspaceview, 25 June 2024.

According to Dick,

> The Americans were losing the war, and badly; thus a super-weapon was needed to push back the enemy, and in this case the Americans got the bright idea to build the claws. Now the claws aren't just killer robots: these are robots that are not only rabidly bloodthirsty but also granted enough cognitive capacity to be able to reproduce themselves, in that they're able to run their own factories where they can build and program more claws, independent of human input. Since the top brass couldn't figure out a way to program faction loyalty into the claws (an RPG, after all, cannot know anything about nationalism), they're designed to go after anything that moves, making them not-too-picky killers.
>
> (1953)

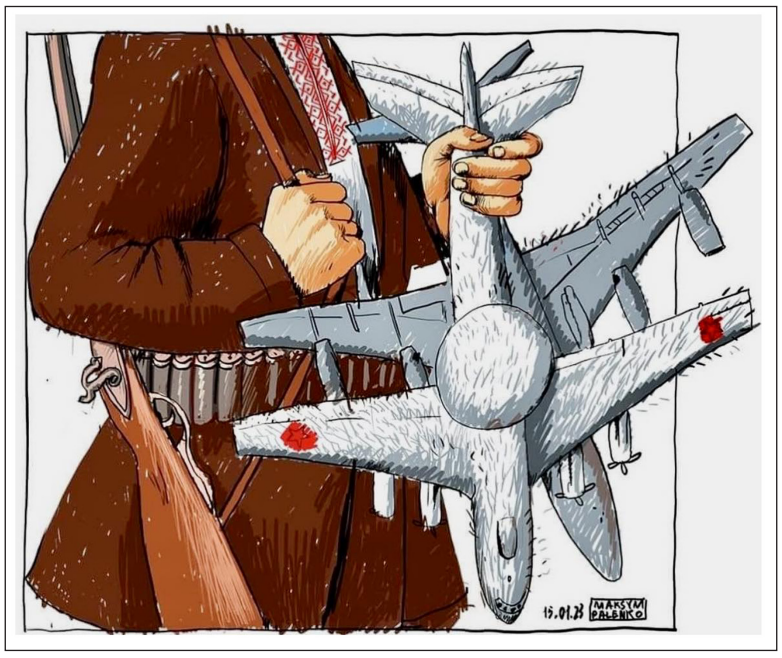

Figure 6: Art by @maksympalenko, @ukrainian.war.art, 16 January 2024.

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