God, the Pilot, and the Bugsplat
Performance and the Drone Effect [1]

Sara Brady

Abstract:

Engaging a performance studies lens, this essay examines the role of the drone in contemporary society with special attention paid to representations of drones in popular culture. Anchored by critical analysis of three examples – George Brandt's play *Grounded*; the major motion picture *Good Kill*; and the short film *5,000 Feet Is the Best* – I argue that the role of the drone in culture is complex and that the effects of drones are disseminated around the world in uneven amounts of good and harm. Where the drone exists and where the drone goes there is drone culture. Furthermore, drones exist in a larger context of drone states. I argue that wherever the drone goes, one constant remains: the possession, development, and deployment of drones of all kinds lead to a circumstance reminiscent of the *observer effect* in science: by observing a phenomenon, one changes the phenomenon. By having drones, particularly weaponized drones, the nation-state is permanently altered-for better and for the *worst*-by such possession: the *drone effect*.

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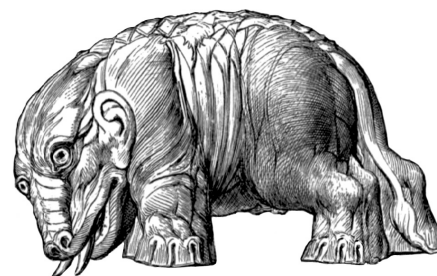
Drones: We Can't Resist

Drones are everywhere. They are here… but there. And drones are every*thing*: They are good and evil; savior and executioner; small and large; piloted and autonomous; military and civilian; top-shelf and DIY. They are remote, they are like toys, they are object theatre, they are the ultimate bow and arrow; they are war; they are peace. But oh, can they *deliver*. They can drop food and they can drop hellfire. And *watch*?! They can watch for *hours, days, weeks*. We *love* them. They are the farthest step *away* from … reality. In fact, they aren't even real—they aren't even drones. They are UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles); they are RPAs (Remotely Piloted Aircraft); but who would bother with such boring names? No, it's "drones" all the way.

I am not a scientist or technical expert. I study performance. So I can't pretend to talk about the drone as a machine. But I can talk about the drone as performance. Drones are spectacular; they perform for us. They are not puppets but they are not *not* puppets. They also create their own performances — their surveillance cameras deliver a show to those who watch; they make performers out of those on the ground. They frame life as a performance — and the unwitting actors must perform in a certain way… or else. Drones have also inspired performances that offer responses to the political, social, cultural, and ethical issues they conjure. In this essay I investigate and interrogate the ways in which the concept of the drone has inspired performances like *Grounded*, *Good Kill*, and *5,000 Feet Is the Best*, which not only originate from but also perpetuate popular, often misinformed perceptions of what drones are, how they function in the world, who they affect, and how they relate to culture, society, and especially, power.

Grounded

May, 2015. I enter a dim theatre with a thrust stage: the Anspacher at New York's Public Theater. I'm here to see a play about drones. From the top corner of the space, I look down at a set that — at first — seems to have nothing to do with drones or the sky they fly in; rather, the stage is full of *sand* — sand deep enough to cover the entire floor. Even audience members headed for the first row have to walk on the sand to get to their seats. As I take my own seat a few rows up, I notice a pyramid, about 2 x 2 feet, at the upstage left corner. The pyramid puts the sand into a different perspective. From where I sit, I feel like I have a view from afar — from the sky. The lights dim, and out of the dark a woman enters and walks across the pile of sand, stopping in the center of the desert-set. Soon a trickle lit by a pinpoint of light begins to fall on her helmet. After a few seconds it becomes clear that the trickle is yet more sand, coming from the light above and it continues to fall, steadily, over her body. It eventually stops, and the lights begin to brighten the stage more evenly. Finally, the woman, "the Pilot," focuses on her audience and begins to speak, spinning a story of her journey from a life as a jet fighter pilot to the sedentary everyday of a drone pilot-commuter.

With only one character *Grounded* delivers one version of the story of operating remotely piloted aircraft from the perspective of an experienced female Air Force pilot who, upon returning from maternity leave, is told she will not get her jet back, but instead fly a Reaper. The Pilot becomes a storyteller, explaining to the audience how she fought in Iraq, how she went on leave, how she met a guy who, she proudly claims "kisses me in the parking lot like I'm the rock star I am" (11), how she gets pregnant, gets sent home, marries Eric, has a little girl, and decides to return to "the blue." She loves the baby but after three years can no longer ignore her desire to return: "I'll scream," she says, "if I don't get out and up." (17) She longs to again be *above* — the blue is the sky, what the Pilot was "born for."

Her commander, however, disappoints by informing her that she will be stationed in a different desert: Nevada. The small pyramid perched in the back corner of the set suddenly makes sense. Vegas, of course. The Pilot is grounded. To be sent to the "chair force" is humiliating for her; it's the ultimate failure for a jet pilot. She has a point; one does not have to be a trained pilot let alone fighter pilot to learn how to fly a drone, and in fact, the costs of training novices are a fraction of the costs of re-training former fighter pilots. But the Pilot's commander assures her that not only is her assignment not a punishment for having a baby, it is the future: "They're not making F-16s anymore Major," he tells her (20). Soon, he promises, "The drone will be king" (20). She is dismissed.

Resigned, the Pilot describes how she, Eric, and Sam, their baby, settle in to a suburb outside of the city. She commutes to Creech every day, in her flight suit, to "Stare at the sand from above" (29) until another pilot taps her on the shoulder and takes her place, her shift over. Her flight suit is needed for the same reason actors wear costumes in dress rehearsal — it's a way to *believe* in what she does at work, and by believe I don't mean believe that it is right or good but that it is *real*. The weeks and months that follow become the Pilot's unraveling. She confuses the vehicles she sees through the drone's camera with her own; she confuses the reality of her own drive home through the desert with what she watches at work. Instead of seeing blue, she sees grey; on the screen at work, and at home. She gets lost in her own house; she gets lost looking out of her own eyes. She doesn't recognize her family; her daughter becomes mixed up with the child she sees on the screen; the child *is* Sam.

The Pilot clings to her uniform; she leaves it on too much, even at home — but still the flight suit isn't enough. After weeks of watching a target ("the Prophet"), and watching, and watching, and upon being given the order to fire a missile at the ground, she abruptly abandons her weapon, unable (unwilling) to distinguish between her own daughter safe at home and the figure of a child on the ground. But, she finds out, her moral interruption was in vain: she tells the audience "There was another Reaper above me I didn't know/there was another god above me but there was." (62) Her commander tells her "We had our eye on you Major/ For weeks/ The warning signs/Everything is Witnessed." (62) Her colleagues, she implies, do not hesitate to take the shot from the "god above" her. What to them

is perhaps the infamous "bug splat" **[2]** is for the Pilot much larger. Her inability to *not* see the child manifests the intention of another piece of drone art, the 2014 installation in Pakistan *Not a Bug Splat*, in which an image of a child killed by a drone strike large enough to be seen from high altitudes lay in a field. **[3]**

In the last moments of the piece, the Pilot, defeated, addresses the audience. The stage direction reads: "(*She takes in the audience, addresses them even more directly than before.*)" (63) "You," she says.

> "You who watch me
> Who observe me watch my every move here and I know
> you watch me I know there is a camera somewhere for
> Everything is Witnessed
> You who have slaughtered my child
> Sealed me in this tomb
> Away from my husband
> My blue
> You who seal me in a tomb and think you are safe
> Know this
> Know That You Are Not Safe
> Know That You Can Keep Me Here Forever You Can
> Bury Me in a Bunker of Grey But That Does Not Protect
> You for One Day it Will Be Your Turn Your Child's Turn
> and Yea Though You Mark Each and Every Door with
> Blood None of the Guilty Will Be Spared
> None
> None
> None
> (*She successfully performs her motion.*)
> boom
> (*Sound and lights out.*)" (Brandt 2014, 64)

At the Public Theatre, Anne Hathaway performed this final message to the audience with the exceedingly confrontational style suggested by the playwright—a tone and focus rarely seen in conventional theatre, where we don't point guns at the audience, criticize them (they have paid to watch, after all), or chastise them. The process of dehumanization that she has gone through is complete. The effect of the drone — the drone effect — is complete. What she is left to understand is that "Everything is Witnessed." War, for this Pilot, is real, not real, too real. It's normal, it's peace, it's a grey screen. She knows now that watching doesn't make you innocent; being watched doesn't make you guilty. *No* one is *not* watched, and this is where the drone effect inhabits the everyday. By the end of the play, the mall has become just as scary a place for the Pilot as war. There, we are watched, and the Pilot understands over time that just as she looks at her target ("the Prophet") she is looked at by surveillance cameras in her local shopping center. She begins to understand that the war zone, the battlefield, the theatre of war are arbitrary terms, and that the reality of "war" is far more complex.

As she finishes her final monologue implicating the audience, I am struck by the silent bodies surrounding me. They are captivated — I can smell the liberal guilt. When the final blackout yields to the lonely curtain call, the

audience applauds the moviestar Anne Hathaway with great enthusiasm. As I shuffle through the New Yorkers heading back through the awkward stairways at the Public Theater, I listen to the praise around me. Everyone seems to make their exit exuding indignation around the drone issue.

This, I thought, is our culture now: this is drone culture.

Drone Cultures

George Brandt's 2013 play *Grounded* is but one of many pop culture meditations on the drone in culture. It is important to contextualize the cultural milieu that has produced *Grounded* and the other examples analysed in this essay. Adam Rothstein picks up on this ever-increasing fascination in his essay "Drone Ethnography" telling the reader: "You are obsessed with drones. We all are. We live in a drone culture, just as we once lived in a car culture. The Northrop-Grumman RQ-4 Global Hawk is your '55 Chevrolet." (Rothstein 2011). Cultural texts about the drone have emerged out of a growing awareness around the world of the use of surveillance and weaponized UAVs by the U.S. military and the C.I.A. This awareness, made visible in the mass media, implicates American culture. The U.S. is only one of many nations using drones — and it is important not to forget that the terms drone, UAV, and RPA (alongside their good friends, robots) encompass an extremely broad range of machines that vary in size from that of an insect to a jet — and yet the power of American exceptionalism allows popular perceptions to emphasize the Americanness of the drone *pilot*. Americans are riveted by the idea that their "heroes" who used to fly jet fighters — who, on the morning of 11 September 2001 were prepared to give their lives to stop planes from reaching their targets **[4]** — are now stuck in containers in the desert playing video games with real missiles. American culture has "gotten to know" drones. But what exactly is drone culture?

Citing Trevor Paglen's photograph entitled *Reaper Drone* (2012) taken from two miles away, Lenny Simon credits artist and geographer Paglen with "represent[ing] the space that drones inhabit in the public imagination." (2013) Looking more like a mistake than an example of powerful conceptual art, the grainy photograph "is extremely distorted", but "the hulking Reaper is immediately recognizable as a drone." Simon explains that this image, at once "highly obscured and abstracted and yet eminently recognizable", is one of many works by Paglen that captures the "tension between [drones'] outsize presence in mass media and the fact that they are rarely, if ever, physically seen." (ibid.) This tension — between visibility and invisibility, one of the many binaries produced by the drone — guides me as I try to pinpoint the nature of "drone culture." Actually, I should say drone cultures. I can think of at least four:

1) Drone culture could refer to a way of life for those who work directly with drones — those who are distant, but adjacent, and "safely" behind the drone. Those who — as American popular culture loves to represent — get to fight a war and still make it to their kids' baseball games. Those who — as is

[4] Heather Penney, one of the first female F-16 pilots, was given orders on 9/11 to stop flight 93 at any cost, even if it meant flying into the hijacked plane. See Hendrix (2011).

becoming increasingly clear — suffer from a unique type of post-traumatic stress. **[5]** The pilots in *Grounded*, *Good Kill*, and *5,000 Feet Is the Best* fall into this category.

2) Drone culture could also be about the lives of those *below* the drone; the people who are watched, threatened, traumatized, injured or killed by weaponized UAV. The people who hear the *droning* of the drone, day after day — a sound that some argue creates a unique form of "terror" over villages in Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia, and other countries. These are the "bugsplats".

3) Still another way of looking at drone culture, and the example that can be applied globally if not experienced similarly by all, is the massive geopolitical status quo within which a privileged few can buy, make, or operate a drone if they so chose (i.e., be "above"); while others can only hope that a drone will be their *deus ex machina*, an unlikely but sudden lifesaver carrying food or medicine. In this context, everyone shares only one characteristic: everyone exists, at one time or another, potentially "below" *some* drone.

4) Next to this actual global drone culture is the realm of expressive culture — the artistic representations of the drone, including poetry, fiction, photography, film, video, television, theatre, performance and installation art, music, and digital art. "A key feature of the drone art movement," explain the authors of "The Drone Primer", is that "the drone has served a dual role as both a subject of the artwork and a tool for creating it." (Gettinger, et al. 2014, 15) Drone culture — drone art — therefore, refers to the growing work of artists who *use* the drone as an artmaking tool, as is the case for the grafitti artist KATSU. Yet another way of looking would include those who *use* art to *respond* to the drone, as an artist such as James Bridle does. Drone art/culture is both high- and low-brow, subversive and sanctioned. Drone art/culture includes the work of Trevor Paglen, whose photographs have been shown in art galleries and Omer Fast's *5,000 Feet Is the Best*; but it also includes conventional plays like *Grounded* and Hollywood movies like *Good Kill*.

Of course there are many more than four ways to define drone culture. For all of these definitions, however, there remains one constant, relentless question: How does the weaponized, targeted-killing drone *relate* to the "harmless" machines that hobbyists, corporations, artists, healthcare providers, and many more are so eager to exploit for "good", for profit, and even for debate? They are all real objects, but the way they perform in our imaginations turns them into something we can't really process on a serious level — how can the mind process the aircraft that fires a laser-guided missile with a film student's new toy that flies in the park and films a scene? For Adam Rothstein, "Drones are a cultural node — a collection of thoughts, feelings, isolated facts, and nebulous paranoias related to a future-weird environment." (2013) How do we make sense — how do we *justify* — using the same word: drone? Or are these two — the weapon and the toy-tool — really not that different at all? Even the weapon-wielding drone is often used as a protector for troops on the ground, looking out for IEDs and nearby

[5] See, for example, Dao 2013.

enemy combatants. How can these functions be reconciled?

Drones Are Not Real. Drones Are Real.

Perhaps they can't. Adam Rothstein makes this clear using a lens of "fiction" vs. "non-fiction": "Drones are not real", he writes. "[T]hey are a cultural characterization of many different things, compiled into a single concept. [...] A[n] iParrot quadrocopter has more to do with a model train than it does with a Global Hawk, and yet when we write about 'drones' we are always referencing both of these together, and therefore, we are already out of the domain of non-fiction, even if we still surround ourselves in facts." (2013) Rothstein's analysis of the drone acknowledges how monumental the technology's impact is and will continue to be in the future.

It is crucial for anyone with a serious interest in understanding drone cultures to at least get a sense of this magnitude. For starters, the vast majority of UAVs are not armed (Abizaid/Brooks 2014, 22). Much of the job of drones is surveillance — and to that end, the U.S. has placed a lot of these planes in the air. A former counterterrorism official told the *New Yorker*'s Jane Mayer in 2009, "At any given moment [...] the C.I.A. has multiple drones flying over Pakistan, scouting for targets." In fact, "'there are so many drones' in the air that arguments have erupted over which remote operators can claim which targets, provoking 'command-and-control issues.'" (Mayer 2009) More recently, the *New York Times* published numbers on U.S. drone pilots and flights. There are currently 1,200 UAV pilots. Furthermore, the Air Force plans to decrease the number of "armed surveillance drones to 60 a day by October from a recent peak of 65" in part because so many pilots are leaving the program (Drew/Philipps 2015). Pilots have cited long hours, boredom, fatigue and stress as reasons for quitting. They spend most of their work hours essentially "flying" cameras that watch. Drones provide surveillance often for months before taking a shot.

That does not, of course, diminish the impact of civilian deaths and injuries attributable to drone strikes. The UK's Bureau of Investigative Journalism regularly updates their statistics page — here are some sample numbers that appeared in June 2015:

> **Pakistan CIA Drone Strikes 2004-2015**
> Total strikes: 419
> Obama strikes: 368
> Total killed: 2,467-3,976
> Civilians killed: 423-965
> Children killed: 172-207
> Injured: 1,152-1,731
>
> **Yemen 2002-2015 US Covert Action**
> Confirmed drone strikes: 99-119
> Total killed: 460-681
> Civilians killed: 65-97
> Children killed: 8-9
> Injured: 88-221

The website indicates that there are additional suspected strikes in Yemen. The same page also lists confirmed strikes in Afghanistan as part of the military campaign there, and a smaller number of strikes in Somalia (BIJ 2015). Keeping track of people injured and killed in drone strikes, is, for better or worse, a task that has been relegated to investigative journalists, because the White House does not officially acknowledge many of the U.S. strikes. Furthermore, the Stimson Report points out that "few strikes are 'all military' or 'all CIA'", resulting in more potential ambiguity (Abizaid/ Brooks 2014, 14). Jane Mayer writes:

> "In contrast to Gaza, where the targeted killing of Hamas fighters by the Israeli military has been extensively documented—making clear that the collateral damage, and the loss of civilian life, can be severe—Pakistan's tribal areas have become largely forbidden territory for media organizations. As a result, no videos of a drone attack in progress have been released, and only a few photographs of the immediate aftermath of a Predator strike have been published." (2009)

Without documentation, the U.S. drone program itself is not visible for "average Americans", for those privileged enough to be spared the gaze or the weapons of the Reaper. For them, the drone is invisible, the drone is not real. Popular culture *makes* it real; mainstream representations of the drone perform its stories, whether on the news or in the movies. As Timothy Melley explains,

> "the public "knows" about covert action through popular *fiction*. A key cultural consequence of covert warfare, in fact, is that fiction is one of the few permissible discourses through which writers can represent the secret work of the state, which the public must ultimately approve "sight unseen." Foreign and domestic intelligence is thus a major subject of popular culture, central to thousands of films, television serials, novels, and electronic games." (2012, 9)

The plots of "covert" actions need to be pieced back together by observers: creators and audiences. Melley points out that these stories sometimes lead to "virtual propaganda for the National Security State," and at other times to "a major stimulus for postmodern epistemological skepticism." (10) For the drone, the result of this confusion and contradiction ultimately leads to far more attention paid to the weaponized UAVs, and in the resulting public perception, these machines dominate the popular imagination. Pop culture, therefore, enables the Predator and the Reaper to become known as the go-to definition of "drone".

Good Kill

With names like *Predator* and *Reaper* it can hardly surprise that Hollywood has fallen for the drone. The 2014 film *Good Kill*, like *Grounded*, presents a fictional representation of a drone pilot. If *Grounded* tends to turn on its comparatively elitist theatre audience with an awareness of the collective

harm that drones suggest, the major motion picture *Good Kill*, which ran in U.S. cinemas in May 2015, delivers a far more sinister pill. Taking its name from the military slang "good kill", the film's seemingly harsh criticism of a flawed policy is strangled in its own ideology from the start. Written and directed by New Zealand — born Andrew Niccol, *Good Kill* did not have the blessing of the U.S. government, and for this reason was financed in Euros (Pasternack 2015).

Ethan Hawke stars in *Good Kill* as another disappointed former fighter pilot who gets assigned to fly a UAV after years of combat missions. As in *Grounded* the desert landscape dominates the mise-en-scene — drawing clear comparisons between the deserts being watched and targeted on screen with the desert inhabited by bored pilots who would rather be miles above. The film makes clear that Egan is haunted by what he can see on his screen. In contrast, the Pilot in *Grounded* is often tortured by what she *can't* see, by the fuzziness of the picture. *Good Kill* portrays the drone strikes as calculated and precise; there are "good" ones and "bad" ones. When the team hits a bad guy, the viewer is pleased. When the god-like voice of the C.I.A. on speakerphone tells Egan to strike even when there is a woman or a child present, the bad guy is the C.I.A. The longing of former jet pilots to be able to get up into the sky and kill bad guys themselves, on their own terms, is portrayed in the film both by removing the decision-maker from the visual field on the film ("he" is on speakerphone) but also through the line of fighter jets lined up in a row, parked — grounded — on the base. Nearby rows of shipping containers are also lined up, actively flying drones thousands of miles away. Tommy Egan spends much of the film looking at the sky and looking at the horizon. Like *Grounded*'s Pilot, he seems to be constantly trying to get his bearings, trying to get perspective from the ground, trying to adjust the "normal" perspective that becomes increasingly distorted with hours spent in front of the screen. There is nothing normal at Creech, this movie wants to say. When Egan drives his (very fast, like *Grounded*'s Pilot) car to work, he stops along the way and greets a police officer standing in the road with a radar gun: "Hi Major", says the copy, "how's the war on terror going?" Tommy replies: "About the same as your war on drugs" and speeds off.

Good Kill attempts to show the tension between real and virtual, good and bad, peaceful and violent, ordinary and extraordinary. Like *Grounded*, much is made of the irony that Las Vegas, like Baudrillard's Disneyland, is home to the real-fake, and contains much violence. In Vegas the everyday is where a fantasy, the strip, confronts reality, which is depicted in *Good Kill* well within the liquor store Egan frequents, and where he at one point becomes violent. Egan, like his colleagues, are casualties of the buzz of war. Pilots get their own "rush" from flight, but troops on the ground also describe the heightened, violent reality that can become in its own way addictive. Egan is not just "home" from battle; he is confronted with having to wear his flight suit into battle every day for hours of mundane, mind-numbing boredom.

The flight suit is an issue for both pilots: *Grounded*'s has sex with her husband in it; it is the actor's only costume; it brings her comfort and torment. In *Good Kill*, Tommy Egan abruptly asks his commanding officer, Lt. Colonel Jack Johns, "Why do we wear our flight suits?" with a tone that points to an obvious fact no one wants to acknowledge: the suit is a costume worn for a performance in which one plays a pilot. Johns acts as well—early in the movie he delivers a quick and catchy speech to trainees ("younger than some of the food in his fridge") about drones ("the future"). Later in the film, and with some serious disillusionment under his belt, Egan sees Johns performing the same monologue for a new group.

Egan is disillusioned in the film because he *has* to be; it's the only way for the audience in the cinema will be able to process the story of the drone. There is only one story of the drone, just as there is only one story of the clone, robot, or alien with weapon capabilities. That story is fiction. As Tim Melley points out, "the public 'knows' about covert action through popular *fiction*." The film begins with the authoritative "based on actual events" tag, and inserts news stories sporadically. **[6]** At one point Tommy Egan, looking up at the sky, tells his wife, "Imagine praying for gray skies," explaining that civilians below the drones know they fly more often in clear skies. His comment seems to refer to the testimony of 13-year-old Zubair ur Rehman, who, in October 2013, told the five members of the U.S. Congress present:

> "Now I prefer cloudy days when the drones don't fly. When the sky brightens and becomes blue, the drones return and so does the fear. Children don't play so often now, and have stopped going to school. Education isn't possible as long as the drones circle overhead." (quoted in McVeigh 2013)

Zubair's words have been quoted in many publications. His testimony describing the day his grandmother was killed by a drone strike is not only compelling; it aggressively inserts the everyday reality of living "below" the drones. Embarrassing as it may have seemed, it makes sense that so many members of the U.S. Congress were not willing to be present to listen. Yet his words are erased in *Good Kill* as they are paraphrased and spoken by the *fictional* American pilot. In fact, this is the problem with *Good Kill* — and I'm being more than kind, because there are many problems with the movie (!). In *Good Kill*, the Hollywood protagonist is the figure that receives the story, suffers the emotional journey of realizing he can't go on, can't condone the drone, and purposefully (like *Grounded*'s Pilot) slips and misses the shot. That action — *not* taking the shot — is apparently what needs to be done; what we would do; what those of us watching should-would do. That action also *injures* the actor.

Good Kill attempts to expose the "moral injury" suffered by drone pilots — the particular kind of PTSD that someone killing remotely experiences. Although Niccol and Hawke spoke to drone pilots as the movie was in development, at least one former pilot is not happy. Brandon Bryant, who has become well known for speaking out about the unique and troubling realities of being a drone pilot, told Alex Pasternack that "he was approached

[6] For example, one scene in the film during which a drone strike kills several people and is followed up with another strike on the victims' funeral, sounds much like Jane Mayer's (2009) report: "On June 23rd, the C.I.A. reportedly killed between two and six unidentified militants outside Makeen, and then killed dozens more people—possibly as many as eighty-six—during funeral prayers for the earlier casualties. An account in the Pakistani publication The News described ten of the dead as children. Four were identified as elderly tribal leaders. One eyewitness, who lost his right leg during the bombing, told Agence France-Presse that the mourners suspected what was coming: 'After the prayers ended, people were asking each other to leave the area, as drones were hovering.' The drones, which make a buzzing noise, are nicknamed machay ('wasps') by the Pashtun natives, and can sometimes be seen and heard, depending on weather conditions. Before the mourners could clear out, the eyewitness said, two drones started firing into the crowd. 'It created havoc,' he said. 'There was smoke and dust everywhere. Injured people were crying and asking for help.' Then a third missile hit. 'I fell to the ground', he said."

by the producers of *Good Kill* in 2013 and gave notes on an early script, but hasn't heard from the filmmakers since then." Pasternack quotes Bryant's criticisms of the film:

> "'Andrew Niccol took my story and warped it to his own,' says Bryant, who has seen the film. 'They snubbed me and created a terrible film with no intelligence behind it.' [...] Bryant says he fears the movie will be lost on its audiences. 'All it is going to do as it stands', he says, 'is make people who are in the service angry. The people who associate themselves with being 'grunts' are going to be further wound up and ignorant about the whole mess. Kids who think that this is video gaming IRL are going to eat it up without actually realizing the true impact of what it does to the human mind and soul. And Americans are going to find it mildly entertaining at best and forgettable at its worst. It doesn't allow people to question or care.'"(Pasternack 2015)

Bryant told *Newsweek*'s Lauren Walker that the film does not deal fairly with the real issues faced by drone operators. The "filmmakers [...] have a responsibility to weigh in on the remorse that many of them face." By not calling what the pilot goes through PTSD, Bryant told Walker, the filmmakers are "'marginalizing the traumatic effects of personal experiences.'" (Walker 2015) Considering that Egan is drunk for much of the film, throws his wife up against the wall and pounds his fist through it, drives while intoxicated, is haunted by what he sees on his console screen, and has trouble going on with the status quo of "normal" life, PTSD may not be named but it is implied. The filmmakers argue that they were trying to leave the conversation an open one without confining the pilot, Tommy Egan, to a diagnosis.

In the end, *Good Kill* is not only polemical, didactic, and heavy-handed; it's also weak — it has more in common with *Top Gun* than it should, it has too many two-dimensional characters, and it conflates drones with strikes, which leads not to the public debate the filmmakers wanted, but to more assumptions that all drones do is drop missiles. The reality is that a feature-length film is not capable of instilling the sense of boredom experienced by real drone operators. This is part of the reason why a film cannot capture the magnitude of the 'drone effect'. **[7]** However, *Good Kill* performs the drone effect *perfectly*. In a drone state disconnected with the reality of the drone — with the reality of who is above and who is below — the plot, theme, characters, production design, and audience reception of *Good Kill* doesn't come close to opening a discussion about the concept of the drone — not its past, present, or future. And yet, criticized or praised, *Good Kill* is "the movie about drones." *Good Kill* elides necessary discussions about the nature of drone cultures, drone states, and the drone effect. It is a movie that tells audiences something about drones that, under the guise of "actual events", produces only a fiction in which the drone is not real.

The Bow and Arrow

The claim that the drone is not real is, of course, a facetious one. The issue

[7] An exception might be *5,000 Feet Is the Best*. A 2011 short film by Omer Fast, 5,000 Feet juxtaposes a fictional interview with a drone pilot in a hotel room conducted documentary-style with a scene of an "American" suburban family headed for a country outing in an "occupied" Nevada. The family dies in a drone strike.

is perhaps not about whether it's real, but about what the distance between shooter and target really means. The Predator isn't just a weapon; it's the ultimate bow and arrow. It takes its place in a long history of advantage gained through distance in war. The authors of the 2014 Stimson report on drone policy explain:

> "Throughout human history, the ability to project force across significant distances has been a sought-after military capability, and innovations in the creation and use of long-distance weapons have at times enabled major social and political shifts. [...] In our own era, the development of lethal unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has generated similar consternation. Like the crossbow, the longbow, the cannon, the machine gun, the long-distance bomber and the cruise missile, UAVs [...] are often viewed as a military "game-changer," offering soldiers and policymakers expanded tactical options against a broad array of targets. [...] And like other long-distance weapon innovations from times past, lethal UAVs have been both praised and vilified." (Abizaid/Brooks 2014, 17)

In other words, every time we change the game of war, we change everything. And *that's* why there are drones in the park. In *Wired for War* Peter W. Singer describes tiny drones that will follow people like a buzzing fly. The "harmless" drone isn't even necessarily harmless. The game is changed.

But what kind of game? Sitting at a console with video screens, buttons to press, joysticks to manipulate, is flying a drone like playing a videogame? That is what Philip Alston argued in his UN report: "because operators are based thousands of miles away from the battlefield, and undertake operations entirely through computer screens and remote audiofeed, there is a risk of developing a 'Playstation' mentality to killing." (2010, 25) As many other critics have argued, not only would the experience of flying a drone and releasing a weapon from a screen be problematic for its similarity to playing a videogame; by conducting war remotely and safely pilots cannot operate with the same sense of risk and gravity that they would in the actual war theatre.

Alston's argument makes enormous sense; and yet, it may not be accurate. The pilot interviewed in *5,000 Feet Is the Best* talks about how he returns home from work and plays videogames for several hours to wind down — an activity that implies something different than what happens at work. For the authors of the Stimson report, conflating the drone and the videogame is definitely a misconception.

> **"UAVs do not turn killing into 'a video-game.'**
> [...T]here is nothing new about discomfort with innovations in long-distance weapons. UAVs permit killing from a safe distance — but so do cruise missiles and snipers' guns. And ironically, the men and women who remotely operate lethal UAVs have a far more 'up close and personal' view of the damage they inflict than the pilots of manned aircraft, who speed past their targets in seconds from far above. In fact, some evidence suggests that UAV operators are particularly vulnerable to post-traumatic stress: they may watch their

> targets for weeks or even months, seeing them go about the routines of daily life, before one day watching on-screen as they are obliterated. [...]" (Abizaid/Brooks 2014, 25)

Operating a drone is not playing a videogame, and yet, because it's *not* a bow and arrow — because the pilot sees through a screen close-up what a human would naturally never see from far away — s/he can experience trauma as if s/he were 'right there'. A similar argument could be made for snipers who see and watch a magnified image of their target from afar. Writing in the *New Inquiry* Aaron Bady even compared the famous U.S. sniper Chris Kyle, who killed hundreds with his rifle, to the drone. "[Kyle] was a drone, a machine for killing without conscience. You might even describe him as 'un-manned.'" (Bady 2015) On the one hand, the comparison is a provocative one — indeed, doesn't the military regularly dehumanize people as they train to be "warriors" with the ability to target and kill another human? On the other hand, the comparison doesn't hold; not only does it not account for the major issue of autonomy (i.e., humans have more autonomy and decision-making capabilities than drones), but it also misses the mark of the very human characteristic of creativity. In his memoir *American Sniper*, Kyle writes: "When you're in a profession where your job is to kill people, you start getting creative about doing it." (2012, 238) The question perhaps is less whether mediation makes killing a videogame, but whether killing can be called a game.

The fact that a console, screens, buttons and joysticks makes a drone operator *feel* like she is on PlayStation may make it easier to pull the trigger (the 7,000 mile distance certainly makes it safer), but the uncanny proximity offered on the screen and the particular mediation of images such as thermal detection, which allows for drone operators to watch as a body turns cold, make for a scene that could very well replay in a loop in the pilot's mind. Or, they may just be tormented by the *possibility*: Colonel James Cluff, who leads the drone operations from Creech Air Force Base, told the *New York Times* that an internal, yet-unreleased military study "found that the fear of occasionally causing civilian casualties was another major cause of stress, even more than seeing the gory aftermath of the missile strikes in general." (Drew/Philipps 2015). The ultimate bow and arrow clearly carries its own unique baggage:

> "What had seemed to be a benefit of the job, the novel way that the crews could fly Predator and Reaper drones via satellite links while living safely in the United States with their families, has created new types of stresses as they constantly shift back and forth between war and family activities and become, in effect, perpetually deployed."(Drew/Philipps 2015)

Don't forget the classified nature of most of the work-day, leaving pilots with little to talk about with their families. Being so far away from the danger of the battlefield that you commute to the war isn't necessarily what it is cracked up to be.

The Battlefield

It is really no wonder that some critics begin to think about the drone as something impossible to discuss in fact-based language. How can the drone be 'real' when it is essentially a website? Pilots look at what the camera shows them *via the web*. It's a webcam and the remote controls keep the plane in the air by relying on enormous amounts of data exchanged per second. It's a kind of war only possible in the information age: the war on terror. The post 9/11 status quo, originated in the Bush White House and taken around the world, has involved one fundamental shift in understanding conflict: Terrorism, once treated as a crime (whether war crime or plain-old crime) and prosecuted using the justice system, is now war. The Stimson report states: "Basic categories such as 'battlefield', 'combatant' and 'hostilities' no longer have clear or stable meaning. When this happens, the rule of law is threatened." (Abizaid/Brooks 2014, 12) Acts of terror are acts of war. Where there is terrorism, there is war. Where there is a terrorist, there is a battle. The battlefield can be anywhere. The battlefield is everywhere. Which is great, because that's what drones are for — to go *anywhere*. To get to inhospitable corners of the world where, of course, terrorists love to 'hide'.

Even without my own hopefully healthy dose of cynicism, it can't be denied that the particular nature of terrorism in the 21st century, as the Stimson report authors argue, challenges traditional war geographies. "The rise of transnational non-state terrorist organizations confounds preexisting legal categories. In a conflict so sporadic and protean, the process of determining where and when the law of armed conflict applies, who should be considered a combatant and what count as 'hostilities' is inevitably fraught with difficulty." (12) The Stimson task force members acknowledge that *where* the rules of war should apply is a tricky question. But assuming that anywhere and everywhere is the answer, the next problematic war question is *who*? Who gets targeted as an enemy combatant not worthy of due process but assassination?

> "While our military and intelligence communities have grown increasingly adept both at identifying and confirming the identities of al-Qaida affiliates and at precise and careful targeting, the criteria used to determine who might be considered targetable remain unknown to the public."(12)

The very nature of the war on terror and its proclamation in the form of the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) continue to justify "targeted strikes outside of 'hot' battlefields" (13). Although the Obama administration defends its actions as legal, there is little attention paid to adherence to law for numerous reasons, from the lack of public debate to creative and secret interpretations of phrases such as "imminent threat". These shortcuts are part of the larger drone culture that we now live in. They are part of the *drone state*.

The Drone Effect

In his philosophical inquiry into the concept of the drone, Grégoire Chamayou argues that the state that uses the drone is inevitably and completely changed by such use:

> "By inventing the armed drone one has also, almost inadvertently, discovered something else: a solution to the central contradiction that for several centuries has affected the modern theory of political sovereignty in matters of warfare. The generalization of such a weapon implies a change in the conditions that apply in the exercise of the power of war, this time in the context of the relations between the state and its own subjects. It would be mistaken to limit the question of weaponry solely to the sphere of external violence. What would the consequences of becoming the subjects of a drone-state be for that state's own population?" (Chamayou 2015, 18)

So by having drones, we are affected by drones. It may not quite be the observer effect — but there seems to be a *drone effect* inherent in this argument. We — those consituents of the drone state, the state-with-drones — are fundamentally changed by the possession and use of such technology. The idea is not completely new; the nuclear state has the same logic. The difference, I would argue, is the accessibility of the technology at hand. Although we are still very far from every home having a fusion-powered cooker, we have arrived at the moment of the drone, and the deliveries from Amazon are imminent (in the U.S.) if not already there (in China).

For Nicholas Mirzoeff (2015), the drone "epitomizes the new moment in visual culture." He writes:

> "War has gone back into the air—but with a twist. The now ubiquitous Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or drone visualizes its operations from above, consistent with the long history of seeing the world as a battlefield from the air. [...] There is no longer a battlefield, only zones of surveillance. Those zones have moved beyond the official conflict areas to all the major areas of government concern that have been designated as 'wars', in the metaphorical sense, such as border security and drugs. The drone literally makes politics into war by other means. Political officials decide whether or not to target specific individuals and even watch the results."

The top of this chain is represented in the executive power of the U.S. Presidency and the so-called kill list. Philip Alston explained to Jane Mayer why kill lists, targeted killing, signature strikes and the like are a slippery slope:

> "Alston describes the C.I.A. [drone] program as operating in 'an accountability void', adding, 'It's a lot like the torture issue. You start by saying we'll just go after the handful of 9/11 masterminds. But, once you've put the regimen for waterboarding and other techniques in place, you use it much more indiscriminately. It becomes standard operating pro-

cedure. It becomes all too easy. Planners start saying, 'Let's use drones in a broader context.' Once you use targeting less stringently, it can become indiscriminate." (Mayer 2009)

Mirzoeff further explains the political power wielded by the drone:

> "Here politics is again war by other means. The goal is no longer to win the war, but to make sufficient political gains, especially at home, to justify the action. Seen in this way, it is perhaps less surprising that the current means of visualized war are missiles fired from drones, controlled from home territory, based on sovereign decisions also taken remotely, at home." (Mirzoeff 2015)

For Mirzoeff, these actions are quite simply not only an extension of war's "distance", but a farther step away of the general from the battlefield. The drone, he argues, produces a "militarized way of seeing the battlefield" and the growth in drone numbers represents the extension of this militarization to other areas of everyday life, especially in the context of surveillance (ibid.).

In this sense, the drone strike is not far removed from the private or commercial use of drones; they are of the same kin; they *look* at the same "battlefield" (the park?). And "we" are potentially equally "below", within view. For both Chamayou and Mirzoeff, the effect of the drone is precisely the collapse of "above" and "below". As Melley argues, the covert operation will never be known, but will always be known — through *fiction*. Because the drone state exists, we (the whole world) are all its subjects. By developing and/or flying the weaponized drone, the U.S., the U.K., Israel, Pakistan, Russia, and Iran have produced a global drone effect.

COIN and the Drone

The drone effect makes us all potential targets. So far, however, the lived experience of weaponized drones around the world has been much more uneven than that. Life in much of the "battlefield" is dangerous and difficult. But for those privileged enough, civilian life is a peaceful life; a life of *violent* peace. Peace enabled by the violence happening elsewhere. Slavoj Žižek explains this cunundrum in terms of the word "terrorism" — the word that justifies the drone strike:

> "What is your [...] 'terrorism' compared to the terrorism which we simply accept, which has to go on day by day so that things just remain the way they are? [...] When we talk about violent terrorism, we always think about acts which interrupt the normal run of things. But what about violence which has to be here in order for things to function the way they are?" (quoted in Democracy Now 2011)

In a sense, the drone flying performs the idea of distance from violence. So high in the air, so powerful with its hellfire attached and its ability to assure its pilot complete protection from physical harm, the drone symbolizes a sanitized, preferred notion of war, and of culture. This sanitized theatre

of peace asserts the culture of counter-insurgency, the policy that General David Petraeus was credited with thoroughly revising in 2006. The drone enforces counter-insurgency: be good, abandon the insurgents, join "our" culture, or be targeted. Acquiesce. Or else. Nicholas Mirzoeff explains that "[i]n the era of United States global policing, war is counterinsurgency, and the means of counterinsurgency are cultural. War is culture." (2009, 1737). Terrorists, or insurgents, exist within the framework of the culture of counterinsurgency as the enemy — a distinction often subverted by the insurgents. Terrorist networks are more difficult to accurately identify and combat than, for example, Cold War enemies. War as culture had a more concrete role during the Cold War, when the enemy was a clearcut figure of opposing ideology. The turn-of-the-21st-century war-culture is more inchoate, returning to previous centuries with an emphasis on religion, imperialism, and colonialism in the form of counterinsurgency: the ongoing, perhaps eternal, process of attempting to "bring around" insurgents, rebels, resisters, protestors, those who go against the "host-nation" as the U.S. military refers to such states. Although the essence of COIN — hearts and minds — must happen on the ground, Mirzeoff describes the importance of the visual realm in counterinsurgency — the need for COIN missions to have a constant sense of the domain, of the map, the space, the place, the battlefield, the theatre of counterinsurgency. By providing much of the visual intelligence, the drones, looking from above, allow troops below to see what others — surrounding civilians, possible insurgents — cannot.

The 2006 Counterinsurgency Manual published by the U.S. Army defines insurgency and counterinsurgency in broad terms:

> "**Insurgency** and its tactics are as old as warfare itself. Joint doctrine defines an insurgency as an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict (JP 1-02). Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.
>
> **Counterinsurgency** is military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency (JP 1-02). These definitions are a good starting point, but they do not properly highlight a key paradox: though insurgency and COIN are two sides of a phenomenon that has been called revolutionary war or internal war, they are distinctly different types of operations. In addition, insurgency and COIN are included within a broad category of conflict known as irregular warfare." (2006, 1)

Counterinsurgency must bring these insurgents — who must be distinguished *from* the general public and yet whose defeat relies on the conversion of the same general public—into acquiesence; into harmony — through an intercultural communication not distinctively marked by difference. "Victory", the Manual reads, "is achieved when the populace

consents to the government's legitimacy and stops actively and passively supporting the insurgency." (1ff.) The targeted and signature strikes are intended to hasten such a victory — but many fear that these actions — with their civilian casualties — merely serves to create new insurgents.

The Moral of the Stories

Civilian casualties, collateral damage, and the targeting of U.S. citizens: These ideas populate the most salient questions regarding drones and the type of war waged by UAVs. Is it right — is it justified — to target designated "enemies" and remotely fire a weapon that may do more damage than planned? Or are such missions the end of morality for the U.S? Torture was bad enough, but now we *really* don't have to get our hands dirty. Obama has used drones more than Bush. And what about the pilots of said drones? Aren't they in an awkward position?

Ah, the pilots.

In the U.S., where we love the idea of the hero/ine, fictional representations of drone culture have focused on the protagonist-pilot. Not surprisingly, politically charged documentaries such as Robert Greenwald's *Unmanned: America's Drone Wars* (2013), Jeremy Scahill's *Dirty Wars* (2013), and Tonje Hessen Schei's *Drone* (2014) have emphasized political and legal issues. *Good Kill* and *Grounded* both take on the drone issue through the use of a main character who pilots a drone. Both stories clearly attempt to approach the issue with kid gloves, at times desperately trying to valorize the "veteran" while stirring up juicy drama. However, neither story handles the drone effect in a critical way. If documentaries are inevitably wrapped up in the "truth" of their own political agenda, and fictional films are tangled in narrative, then perhaps an "art film" can help.

Omer Fast's *5,000 Feet Is the Best*

The Berlin-based artist Omer Fast is a filmmaker whose works collapse the distinction between documentary and fiction. His 30-minute film *5,000 Feet Is the Best*, which premiered at the Venice Biennale in 2011, juxtaposes a 'real' interview conducted with a drone operator and a fictional nonlinear narrative of an interview with a drone pilot. Fast, who grew up in Israel and the U.S., works through repetition, detached voiceover, and anecdotes throughout the film. The piece opens with the actor Denis O'Hare walking through a hotel hallway, passing a stranger (or another drone pilot?), and knocking on a door. Someone unseen opens the door, and the shot cuts to the inside of the room and a seated man, who asks: "Everything OK?" The camera pans to reveal O'Hare comfortably lounging on the hotel bed. Everything is OK, he assures the man, and asks him "So what do you want to talk about?" Like a therapist, the man asks: "That's what I was going to ask you." But O'Hare, like a reluctant patient, scoffs. "Man, I don't want to talk about anything. You're the one paying, remember?" The composition and tone of the scene recalls a therapy session as much as a prostitute's trick.

The opening sequence continues with a loud beep, that, the viewer realizes, is a noise only the pilot hears. He seems stressed, annoyed. The interviewer probes him to explain the difference between flying a drone and flying a plane. Instead of answering, the pilot tells a story. This scenario is repeated in the film three times, and is interspersed with footage of Fast's interview with a drone operator. That pilot's face is blurred on screen as he describes the technical details of working a Predator. When he talks about his PTSD, about the view from above ("5,000 feet is the best", he says. "You have more description […] plus, at 5,000 feet I can tell you what shoes you are wearing") the screen cuts to aerial shots. The first begins with what appears to be a young man riding a bike in a desert landscape. We assume, as we listen to the pilot talk about the level of detail he could see from 5,000 feet, that the desert we watch is somewhere far away from the hotel room. As the bike enters a residential area, the viewer may be caught off guard — the roofs look more like an American suburb than a Middle Eastern village. The bike continues, the camera follows, and it becomes clear that we are watching from above ... the outskirts of Las Vegas, Nevada. Many drone pilots — including those depicted in *Grounded* and *Good Kill* — live in these suburbs and work an hour away from Las Vegas at Creech Air Force Base. It is the shot of the desert in *5,000 Feet,* however, that most effectively brings the two landscapes together: the landscape of the American desert and that of Afghanistan/Pakistan/Iraq/etc.

Fast layers the drone's interview — and the drone's *view* — with three stories that seem completely unrelated to the life of a drone pilot. In the first, O'Hare describes a train enthusiast who secretly hijacks a commuter train, making it run on schedule all day before — upon returning home where he is locked out of his own house — getting arrested for breaking and entering. The second is more clearly related to Las Vegas: O'Hare relates the con scheme that a couple use to work the casinos, robbing horny men and leaving them trouser-less in hotel hallways. Just as the viewer begins to question where these stories belong in drone culture, the third story justifies the first two. In this tale, a family of four embark on a weekend getaway. Without any explanation, O'Hare describes the life this family leaves in a Vegas suburb under what appears to be an Asian — Chinese? — occupation. They dutifully show their papers at a checkpoint and leave the city. They drive to a rugged area with bad roads. The father — the only one still awake in the car — sees some men with shovels and a pickup truck ahead. O'Hare explains that this is a common sight to the man. They may be farmers, shepherds — or maybe something else. The man just wants to pass. And he does. But the camera shows the scene abruptly from the view above—from the drone, which strikes the shovel men as well as the family as their car drives away. Finally, the dead family exit their car and continue to walk down the road with bloody head injuries: "The family continues their journey. Their bodies will never be buried", O'Hare says. The scene returns to the hotel room and then to an aerial shot — not from directly above but from the horizontal angle — the view from a helicopter — and the voiceover begins a story told by the "real" pilot of one particular event. He

describes a mission involving a hellfire strike on men who placed a roadside bomb. After getting all of the necessary approvals, he explains, the drone sent a laser beam of light onto the target. He calls it the "light of god" — a secret warning to troops who can see it with night vision goggles. "It's quite beautiful", he says.

Conclusion: *We're all God, We're all Bugsplats*

I will end rather abruptly, as Fast's film does. The real pilot stopped the interview, and Fast allowed *5,000 feet* to leave the viewer with the same unfinished feeling he undoubtedly felt when the pilot cut off his story. What I have worked toward in this essay is to understand how the drone has created and will continue to influence a status quo that implicates power and those who have no choice but to trust power. The paradigm of performance allows us to see the drone as a performer and spectator: the drone completes the job (performer) and the drone will endlessly watch unwitting performers on the ground (spectator). The drone is god, and since I can buy a drone, that makes me god. But the drone is also above me, and that makes me a bugsplat. Once I begin to think in these terms, I begin to understand the drone effect. And the lens of performance, which enables representation, opens a space in which we can try to make sense of the drone—through film, installation, theatre, performance. The drone state exists, and the drone effect has come to pass. Performance may however offer a useful way to navigate this new time and space.

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