# *Living in Digital Warfare: A Review Essay*

Parks, Lisa, and Kaplan, Caren (eds.). **Life in the Age of Drone Warfare**. Duke University Press, 2017.

Steyerl, Hito. **Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War**. Verso, 2017

Bishop, Ryan, Gansing, Kristoffer, Parikka, Jussi, and Wilk, Elvia (eds.). **Across and Beyond: A transmediale Reader on Post-digital Practices, Concepts, and Institutions**. Sternberg, 2016

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Drones, planetary civil war, post-digital practices. Three uneasy bedfellows, and on the surface, far removed from the study of art and media texts.

However, the three books from which I am drawing these broader subjects—*Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, edited by Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan (2017); *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, by Hito Steyerl (2017); and *Across and Beyond: A transmediale Reader on Post-digital Practices, Concepts, and Institutions*, edited by Ryan Bishop, Kristoffer Gansing, Jussi Parikka, and Elvia Wilk (2016)—share a number of common threads, which I will quite widely and swiftly articulate below. The three books and the authors represented within them offer chances to reflect on *life* and *practice* underneath arrangements of digitized and militarized capital that appear to subsume everything in their path. While coming from slightly different disciplinary arrangements—Parks and Kaplan are figureheads of feminist science and technology studies (STS), Steyerl an artist and media theorist, and the latter a team of editors formed around a trans-disciplinary research cluster called transmediale—I would argue that, like much of current media studies, each piece is concerned with vocalizing and mapping out a particular arrangement of global capitalism, and the local instances of resistant practice through which we can understand how to work under the oppressive umbrella of increasingly militarized infrastructural violence.

The collection of essays in *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare* offers a nice corrective to the over-proliferation of studies and artistic practices using drones in contemporary media studies, as Parks and Kaplan (2017, 5) themselves note. The focus is of course infrastructural and geopolitical, but a useful through-line (especially with regards to other books under discussion) is the construction of a drone aesthetics, of a visuality of drones that both comes from their operational use within warfare and their incursion into the more everyday life of populations across the world (both, and most violently, in warzones but also in terms of policing, automated work, and consumer use). While a number of essays address artistic production in terms of drone aesthetics, from Thomas

Stubblefield's investigation of the potential "anti-webs" of drone art to Anjali Nath's discussion of rapper Heems' video for "Soup Boys (Pretty Drones)," what the collection offers is a series of pressing analyses of drone aesthetics as a military and consumer technology. As Parks and Kaplan detail in their introduction, "what is often missing from the reportage [on drones] is an understanding of the material ecologies through which drones are operationalized" (2). Within the context of this kind of over-visibility, they provide an insight into what Kaplan calls "drone-o-rama": "In short, the drone has been such an avid object of scholarly focus precisely because it connects to so many different issues, from digitization to sovereignty, from surveillance to geopolitics, from labor to affect" (5). As Parks has seminally detailed in her other work, the stretch between ground and sky within which the drone operates is a space of strategic operations, world histories, and biopolitics (8). The material ecologies mobilized thus, they argue, must be thought of within wider feminist approaches to transnational and intersectional axiomatics, keeping in mind that:

> gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, class, and national identities are constituted intersectionally and transnationally; that humans, animals, and technologies are materially integrated and hybridized; that militarization and violence are embodied in multiple ways; that the rule of law is applied differentially and unevenly within territories and upon bodies; and that postcolonial tensions persist, subalterns speak, and hegemonies are scattered. (Parks and Kaplan 2017, 9)

These issues are as much cultural as technological, as epistemological as infrastructural, and as related to everyday life as they are to governance. In a way, the proliferation of drones represents an example of what Michelle Murphy (2017, 6) calls the "epistemic infrastructures" of contemporary geopolitics.

The contributions in Parks and Kaplan's collection range from geographical analyses of military strategies, governance, and drone strikes (Derek Gregory, Lisa Hajjar, Parks' own contribution, Kaplan's own contribution, Madiha Tahir), to historical genealogies of drone technology (Katherine Chandler), discourse analyses (Andrea Miller, Jeremy Packer and Josh Reeves), the aforementioned studies and enactments of art practice and literature (Ricardo Dominguez, Inderpal Grewal), and finally embodiment and labor (Peter Asaro, Jeremy Packer and Joshua Reeves, and a fascinating account from former drone operator Brandon Bryant). Taken together, the pieces map a fairly comprehensive landscape of the discourse and lived realities around the drone war, in particular the militarization of consumption across the racialized divides of the Global North and the Global South.

If *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare* is an STS book dabbling in artistic production and cultural studies, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* is a book by a hungry, irrepressible theorist dabbling in as many fields as possible. This is, of course, Steyerl's purview and greatest draw—a sort of wildly associative scholarship that takes, as its starting point, a kind of visuality. In her last book, she was concerned with the accelerated and self-proliferating production of digital imagery and the feeling of groundlessness related to a collapse of linear perspective in what may now be called "post-digital art." She begins her new book with a particularly strong military visual, that of a "tank on a pedestal," asking the questions: "Is the museum a garage? An arsenal? Is a monument pedestal a military base?" (Steyerl 2017, 1).

This kind of circular reasoning, a staple of Steyerl's most interesting essays, leads down a series of highly generative pathways throughout the course of the book, especially in terms of the geopolitical—and geo-economic—administration of artistic and cultural production in the era of militarized financial capital. Like the tank on a pedestal, military visuality haunts every essay in the book, particularly the figure of the drone, hovering over a good deal of the essays and only appearing in passing. In discussing the SKYNET US military program, she states that: "It was most certainly not the only factor in determining drone targets. But the example of SKYNET demonstrates just as strongly that a 'signal' extracted by assessing correlations and probabilities is not the same as an actual fact, but is determined by the inputs the software uses to learn, and the parameters for filtering, correlating, and 'identifying.' The old engineer wisdom 'crap in—crap out' seems still to apply" (Steyerl 2017, 54). The subsumption of politics into the commercialized, militarized, and de-humanized determinations of "signal and noise," which is at the same time a column on the NSA website, a seminal techno-infrastructural concept (see Larkin 2008), as

well as the subtitle to her chapter on proxy politics, hard-codes racist, colonial, and gendered logics into digital media infrastructure.

Her analysis of the "proxy" in the digital realm—which has arguably transmuted quite disturbingly into the physical, as "proxy politics" seems to her the most prescient articulation of fascism in this current moment of "representative" democracy—is an automated figure, a mirror to a particular kind of representation (visual or political) that contains the social circulations once reserved for only the political. And this is an issue of knowledge production as much as reality. At some point, by her analysis, the representational equations of cultural studies—where greater *cultural* representation, translated as "visual democracy," could at some point liberate those excluded from the mainstream—has paradoxically led to a co-optation of identity politics by the Right via fascism (Steyerl 2017, 174-176), and, by my extension, whose attempted, and quite violent, collapse with the non-consenting social contexts of the Global South (often via drone warfare) has revealed that at some point, these equations went haywire. Political representation was equated with cultural representation, overwhelmingly captured by private corporations and their militarized state protectors. But in the end, she proposes a kind of resistance to the "no way out" arguments of a growing contingent of technoculture scholars:

> Instead of denying these challenges, we should face up to them. We should face up to the complete unhinging of reality by reintroducing checks and balances, by renegotiating value and information, by insisting on representation and human solidarity. This also includes acknowledging and opposing real and existing fascism and its countless derivatives and franchises. Denying its existence means surrendering to a newly emerging paradigm of post-politics and post-democracy; to a complete turning-away from reality. (Steyerl 2017, 180)

Her analysis is thus impossible to separate from a moment of backlash against the popular in the face of "fake news" and the spectacular co-optation of democracy and geopolitics by Twitter and reality TV. But if we confront how post-politics and post-democracy are organized in relation to the current organization of global capital and power, we must also confront its digital analogue made real, the post-digital.

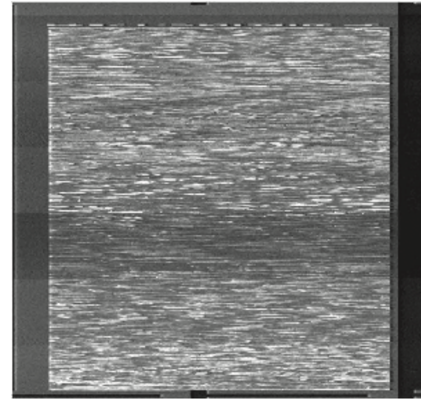

*Fig. 1* "Is this a document of the drone war's optical unconscious?" (Steyerl 2017, 61)

This is what is attempted by the quite scattershot series of artistic contributions, reflections, and essays presented in *Across and Beyond*. Of varying degrees of success and clarity within such a wide-ranging collection, this practice of collage is actually quite indicative of the practice of the post-digital in general. While this is not always enacted in a kind of "digital aesthetics made real," in the sense that *Across and Beyond* comes to this reviewer as a physical, high-gloss, cryptically-designed piece of material, the idea of the constant transit between the real and the digital, and the fear of the "digital-made-real" in the aftermath of regressively violent, mostly white-male populisms in the Global North cultivated within online forums and chatrooms, should be under constant investigation. Steyerl comes at this quite strongly from the field of artistic practice, whereas Parks and Kaplan are undoubtedly coming at it from an infrastructural standpoint as a way to figure out just where and how this power is physically enacted, while also dealing with visual culture. However, *Across and Beyond* is somewhere in-between, or perhaps both all at once, due to the wide range of interventions made by the various authors within (it would take half the length of this review to detail them all). A crucial intervention can be found in the introduction: "The post-anthropocentric is one response, but one that demands specification: if the human is not the center of action, then what is? Infrastructures, ecologies, processes? How is that elusive notion of the nonhuman to be situated in relation to media in the post-digital age? How can such contextualizing reveal the equally elusive notion of media? How might the post-digital offer new means of critically linking technology, culture, and

nature?" (Bishop et al. 2016, 15). Such questions seem ripped from the pages of a rather orthodox new materialism, but they offer an entry-point for a welcome critique of the idea of the "Anthropocene" that has gained currency in recent years. If we are to center the non-human, how do we account for the very human incursions of military power and capital across the highly strategic divides between the Global North and the Global South, and the variegated borders across and within—and beyond—these too-simple dualisms? If the line between the digital and the real needs to be redrawn, perhaps re-conceived as a channel of constant flow rather than a threshold of emergence, how does critical and artistic practice mobilize (and circulate) within and through this channel, which is always-already captured and enclosed within the infrastructures of digital capitalism? How are we to conceive of the violent divides mobilized across these channels, as data sovereignty and struggles over high-tech investment occur geopolitically while the internet circulates with racialized, gendered, and classed violence?

Even if we look at only the star contributors, *Across and Beyond* offers some basic propositions, from Tiziana Terranova's practice of speculating *for* the common (rather than on and against it), Keller Easterling's well-tread idea of *innovating* infrastructure, to Clemens Apprich and Ned Rossiter's proposition to build autonomous internet infrastructures in the form of hacker labs. The latter is interesting, because while moving away from the digital utopianism of pirate and hacker discourse that may have led to an unsavory valorization of libertarian figures like Lawrence Lessig and the Pirate Party, they also avoid the no-way-out logic that some of Rossiter's (2016) recent work on software and logistics falls into,[2] although with good reason in the case of something like Amazon's biometric scanning technologies (in which case, it would seem as though the only option is outright revolt). But, as they themselves argue, "Hackers don't necessarily make good social theorists" (Apprich and Rossiter 2016, 280), which is in a way a problem that extends to a perhaps too-quaint ideal of any imaginable digital infrastructure as autonomous. They argue:

> Instead, we might find some certainty in knowledge that subsists beyond the materiality of infrastructure—the culture and affect made possible through the work of design and concept production, which has a special autonomy related to its generative force on infrastructural apparatuses. Capture from above, in other words, is never total. Debates around whether metadata as a regulatory device is able to preempt social deviation, political dissent, criminal activity, or terrorist outburst are all too often steeped in an assurance that these encoding schemes will instantiate governance on a global scale. (Apprich and Rossiter 2016, 280)

So while capture from above is never total, escape from below is not either.

This final point is a good place to wrap up, as we can draw a few final conclusions from these wide-ranging discourses. Digital (and digitized) infrastructure imagines and visualizes governance on a global scale, and its violence is enacted unevenly, whether by direct military intervention or within the more hidden logics of everyday consumption. It also proliferates the conditions of social reproduction which generate its own naturalization—for example, drone imagery in US consumer culture and artistic practice, however critical, contributes to a form of visuality directly related to the aerial mapping, surveillance, and killing of racialized populations both at home and abroad. Something that may activate connections across these various topics, and which seems to fall into the background of many of the analyses, is the governance of territory by financialized actors. For example, discourses of digital piracy, international intervention in the horn of Africa, and the transferal of risk to already-precarious territories and populations are all related to trans-, supra-, and multinational arrangements of laws and trade administered by strategic exceptions and various divides of legitimacy and legality. This logistical production of territory outside of the purview of states, circulated by the private sector and administered by digitized and biometric technologies, as Deborah Cowen (2014) as well as Ned Rossiter (2016) have articulated in terms of militarization and violence, should be thought about in terms of the circulation through pipelines of flow, whether between the virtual and the real or the near and the far. If Steyerl's right about this representational collapse, these strategic ideologies are also always-already here and now.

## References

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## Endnotes

1 The above image—and quote—conclude an essay in Duty Free Art, in reference to drone "pattern recognition" and civilian casualties in Gaza (61), where we may say "noise" is calculated as criminalized and racialized bodies to be eliminated.

2 Ned Rossiter (2016) is extremely generative and useful, but sometimes assumes a global form of living too tightly determined by technological infrastructure.