

DRONE METAPHYSICS

Benjamin Noys

'A Travelling Eye of God'

Lying in a hospital bed recovering from his physical and mental injuries, an unnamed World War One soldier, in Mary Butts's short story 'Speed the Plough', recalls France: 'and saw in the sky great aeroplanes dipping and swerving, or holding on their steady flight like a travelling eye of God' (Butts, 1991: 10). The inhumanity of this aerial view is expressed in Rex Warner's 1941 novel *The Aerodrome*:

In the air there is no feeling or smell of earth, and I have often observed that the backyards of houses or the smoke curling up through cottage chimneys, although at times they seem to have a certain pathos, do as a rule, when one is several thousand feet above them, appear both defenceless and ridiculous, as though infinite trouble had been taken to secure a result that has little or no significance. (1982: 224)

From the view of the 'travelling eye of God' what lies below is rendered as 'defenceless and ridiculous', vulnerable to this eye as the operator of violence. These responses to aerial warfare already encode a discourse of the theological view and its concomitant inhumanity that can not only be traced through the literary moment of modernism (Mellor, 2011; Lindqvist, 2001; Saint-Amour, 2011; Beer, 1990), but which also echoes uncannily with the discourse surrounding drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (Nixon, 2014).

This line of reflection is evident in Jasper Bernes's and Joshua Clover's recent 'ballad' in their joint poetry collection

Götterdämmerung Family BBQ (2013). Here we find a parody of Wordsworth connected to our 'drone present':

I wandered lonely as a drone
That floats o'er jails and landfill
And monitors what we say on the phone.
(2013: 18)

In this reworking the focused 'lamp' of Romanticism, the 'inward eye' (Abrams, 1971), is transformed into the electronic 'outward eye' of the drone. What is monitored is not the internal imagination, but our external phone conversations, in which the surveillance state tries to capture our potential dissidence. Wordsworthian pastoral, itself not as unpolitical as it is often taken, is turned towards the junk spaces of our crisis present. The drone finds its destination as the signature device of the forms of contemporary power, our mobile panopticon.

Paul Virilio, describing the aim of military 'sight machines', suggests: 'In a technicians' version of an all-seeing Divinity, ever ruling out accident and surprise, the drive is on for a general system of illumination that will allow everything to be seen and known, at every moment and in every place' (1989: 4). The Predators and Reapers that return the war home incarnate this global and godly vision; explicitly reflecting on drones, Virilio later comments: 'the eye of God is everywhere' (1999: 102; Chamayou, 2015: 37). The analysis of drones has explicated this mode of vision as the 'drone stare' (Wall & Monahan, 2011), 'drone vision' (Stahl, 2013), or the 'scopic regime' of drones (Gregory, 2011). Its theological resonance is even noted by drone operators themselves, with one reported as saying: 'Sometimes I feel like a God hurling thunderbolts from afar' (qtd. in Policante, 2012: 113). Drones inhabit a field of theological metaphysics, embodying dreams of transcendence and destruction that have haunted the Western imagination. It is this metaphysics that I wish to probe.

The Drone Present

The analysis of drone discourse has consistently registered the theological and metaphysical 'supplement' that surrounds the drone. I will argue – in line with Derrida's analysis of the constitutive equivocation of the notion of supplement, which is both unnecessary extra addition and necessary element of completion

(Derrida, 1974: 144–45) – that this ‘supplement’ is not simply a mistaken appendage that could be removed to ‘really’ see the drone, but part of what we must critically analyse to grasp the drone. The risk of engaging with this theological or metaphysical resonance seriously is that we feed the technological fetishism that can impinge on the thinking of drones. To treat drones as if they were the ‘travelling eye of God’ is to flatter this mundane and brutal surveillance and killing device. We may give a technological object, or technological assemblage, a philosophical dignity it does not deserve.

This is the danger of techno-fetishism (Shaw, 2011), which is not quite what Marx meant by fetishism, in his account of the fetishism of the commodity (1990: 163–177), or what Freud meant by fetishism, as a diagnostic category of sexual perversion (1977: 345–357), but something which mixes both. It involves the mysticism of material object being treated as possessed of divine powers, and the sexualisation of that power as a peculiar displaced potency. The result is the inflation of the technological object to something that horrifies and fascinates, electing it out of history into a natural or metaphysical realm.¹ This risk may be particularly acute when one approaches the drone as a philosopher or theorist. The absence of technical, sociological or other expert analysis can lead to the reification of the drone into a metaphysical dignity it does not warrant. It is, however, possible to interrogate the metaphysical stakes at work in this techno-fetishism, which cuts across both drone advocates and drone critics, without succumbing to it. It is only by taking seriously this fetishism that we can sharpen our critical discourse, the better to resist the seductions of drones.

To refer to ‘drone metaphysics’ is to refer to the particular theological and metaphysical discourses that become attached to, or embodied in, the practices and discourses that circulate around drones. Ian Shaw has argued that the drone constitutes a ‘metaphysical object’ in terms of its ability to construct and legislate a ‘world’ through the shaping effects of audiovisual and destructive technological capacities (2011: 127–33). This has been reinforced by critics who have traced the drone as ‘emergent object’ (Walters, 2014), and considered the ontological effects of the drone on our conception of the human (Holmqvist, 2013). These arguments suggest the drone constitutively exceeds its ‘function’ as mere surveillance and killing machine, engaging with metaphysical questions of sight, power, and the forms of the human.

It is Grégoire Chamayou who has pursued this line of thought with most rigour, developing his argument that the drone embodies 'cynegetic war' (2011: 4): war that is based on the treatment of humans as prey, subject to the manhunt (Chamayou, 2012; 2015). He points out:

'Predator', 'Global Hawk', 'Reaper' – birds of prey
and angels of death, drones bear their names well.
Only death can kill without ever dying itself.
Facing such an enemy, there is no way out. As a T-
shirt glorifying American drones stated: 'You can
run, but you'll only die tired.' (2011: 4)

'Angels of death', 'exterminating angel[s]' (Wills, 2014: 181), legislators of the world, drones, in these critical analyses, take on a theological and metaphysical function – the God's eye view and action that I have already suggested.

This metaphysics, I will argue, tends, in Jamie Allinson's words, to treat drones as 'object[s] of potent thing-ness' and not as 'fusions of human flesh, cybernetic weapon[s] and imperial and military apparatus[es]' (2015). It ascribes agency and activity that flatters the drone as object and elides the intricate meshing with human labour that makes drone operation possible. The 'god-like' capacity of drones – for both vision and killing – incites an attribution to them of theological and metaphysical powers. To trace the theological metaphysics of drones I will examine a number of discourses, mainly drawn from philosophy, literature, art, and theory. These discourses will be largely pre-drone, as some of my interest is in their predictive capacity and what we might call the desire for the drone at work, at and in these moments, even as they resist the tendency that would lead to the emergence of drones. Also, these discourses will, like mine, be somewhat equivocal. My claim is not simply that we can expel this metaphysics to reach a true and accurate discourse, that we can simply conjure away the myths and metaphysics to bare the real, but that our experience of the 'reality' of drones involves these myths and metaphysics, which return to haunt us (Rothstein, 2015). In fact, as we shall see, it is the transformative promise of drone metaphysics that is crucial: to 'become-drone' may be, strictly speaking, impossible, but this does not prevent, and rather incites, a metaphysical desire for transcendence.

The Drone as World-Spirit

In one of his mordant postwar reflections, collected in *Minima Moralia* (1951), Theodor Adorno remarks on the effects of the new technologies of death on our conception of history:

Had Hegel's philosophy of history embraced this age, Hitler's robot-bombs would have found their place beside the early death of Alexander and similar images, as one of the selected empirical facts by which the state of the world-spirit manifests itself directly in symbols. Like Fascism itself, the robots career without a subject. Like it they combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness. And like it they arouse mortal terror and are wholly futile. – 'I have seen the world-spirit,' not on horseback, but on wings and without a head, and that refutes, at the same stroke, Hegel's philosophy of history. (1978: 55; see Chamayou, 2015: 205)

For Adorno the incarnation of the world-spirit in the subject-less weapons – the V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets – refutes Hegel's philosophy of history, in which the world-spirit is incarnated in world-historical individuals. We enter a new era of modernity, in which '[t]he subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated by the concentration camps is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself' (Adorno, 1978: 16). This nullity is figured in the vehicle without a pilot, in the fully automated weapon, careering out of our control.

Hegel, of course, was completely aware of the sanguinary nature of the historical process, even as it instantiated reason. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, he remarked that history is an '*altar on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals are slaughtered*' (Hegel, 1975: 69; italics in original). The role and fate of world-historical individuals is no happier:

Thus it was not happiness that they chose, but exertion, conflict, and labour in the service of their end. And even when they reached their goal, peaceful enjoyment and happiness were not their lot. Their actions are their entire being, and their

whole nature and character are determined by their ruling passion. When their end is attained, they fall aside like empty husks. They may have undergone great difficulties in order to accomplish their purpose, but as soon as they have done so, they die early like Alexander, are murdered like Caesar, or deported like Napoleon. (Hegel, 1975: 85)

The irony of history is that the one who ‘makes’ history becomes a nullity, a mere husk of the process of reason. Yet this happens to a subject. Adorno is considering a situation in which reason cannot persist due to the extinction of the subject. Grégoire Chamayou, however, has pointed out that Adorno gives this situation a dialectical twist (2015: 206). Adorno remarks that in the situation of war in which the enemy is reduced to the status of ‘patient and corpse’, we find ‘Satanically, indeed, more initiative is in a sense demanded here than in old-style war: it seems to cost the subject his whole energy to achieve subjectlessness’ (1978: 56). Chamayou glosses that this ‘extinction’ of subjectivity is not automatic but ‘becomes the main task of subjectivity’ (2015: 207). The dream of the contemporary world-spirit is to shuck off the ‘empty husk’ of the world-historical individual and to achieve impossible embodiment in the drone itself.

Elizabeth Bowen’s 1948 novel *The Heat of the Day* includes a reflection on a V-1 attack that uncannily echoes the experience of drones, down to the auditory effect: ‘droning *things*, mindlessly making for you, thick and fast, day and night, tore the calico of London, raising obscene dust out of the sullen bottom mind’ (1998: 328; italics in original). In July 1944 Bowen’s house had been ‘blown hollow inside by a V-1’ (Lee, 1999: 149). Those who live under drones report a state of uncertainty and terror, in which the sound of drones presages the perpetual possibility of death (Chamayou, 2015: 44–5). Of course, unlike the V-1 or V-2, the drone is steered by a pilot, currently. The dream, or nightmare, of the pilotless drone, fully automated, and with the capacity to kill through its own execution of algorithms, is one that still lies on the horizon of the present moment (Chamayou, 2015: 207–13).

Current speculation has considered that if we enter a world of automated drones it might still be possible to make the algorithms which they would use to select and kill targets legally responsible for ‘collateral’ or incorrect killings (Schuppli, 2014). It is true, however,

that even now the integration of the human and non-human actors in the 'kill-chain' generates difficulties in sorting and assessing moral and legal responsibility (Schuppli, 2014: 4). In response, the discussion of drones has often focused on the role of their pilots, their experience of killing-at-a-distance, and their responsibility (Benjamin, 2013: 83-100; Holmqvist, 2013). The anxiety that surrounds the possibility of the fully-automated drone, the true realisation of Adorno's fear of subject-less weapons, is a sign of our assumption that we need to retain the human element to subject the drone to reasoned critique (Adams & Barrie, 2013; Benjamin, 2013: 199). This is why Derek Gregory has stressed that the fabled 'compression of the kill-chain' – the minimisation of the role of humans in drone operation – is not that compressed. Gregory states:

The kill-chain can be thought of as a dispersed and distributed apparatus, a congeries of actors, objects, practices, discourses and affects, that entrains the people who are made part of it and constitutes them as particular kinds of subjects. (2011: 196)

The human enters the kill chain, only to be enchained as a particular kind of subject. So, while the persistence of humans in the kill-chain offers points of political intervention we can also note the implication of Gregory's claim: these humans are constituted in ways to make them resist calls on their humanity and they are called to conform to the drone (Holmqvist, 2013). Adorno's prescient insight confirms that the achievement of 'subjectlessness' is not simply the effect of automation, but a labour by the subject that operates on itself in the process of self-automation, or the creation of an 'automatic self'.

In Javier Marías's *The Infatuations* (2013), the central character and focal consciousness of the novel, María Dolz, ponders a series of unpunished crimes, which include 'the bombing of civilians by our aircraft with no pilot and therefore no face' (2013: 231). The issue of the 'face' condenses this problem with the role of the human in drone metaphysics. The desire to put a 'face' to the drone perhaps accounts for the tendency of discussion to focus on the lives of the pilots, a tendency which comes at the risk of occluding the lives of the victims (Stahl, 2013: 670–71; Gregory, 2011: 204). The 'face' is displaced by the fact that the victims *do not* see the face of their killers, while their killers *do* experience an intense intimacy with them, although this 'intimacy' is an invasive and destructive one

(Gregory, 2011: 201). This is a violently asymmetrical intimacy, in which '*the operator will never see his victim seeing him doing what he does to him*' (Chamayou, 2015: 118; italics in original). We are also displaced from the faces of the victims, who are rendered into enemy forces, as in the infamous incident on 21 February 2010, in Oruzgan province in central Afghanistan, when at least 23 civilians were killed by Kiowa attack helicopters directed to the target by drone pilots (Gregory, 2011: 201–3). The drone operators transformed women and children into weapons-carrying 'military-aged males', into those who could be killed at the expense of seeing their actual faces (Scahill, 2014: 352).

The photographer Noor Behram has devoted his efforts to taking photographs of the victims of drone strikes, at obvious personal risk, not least due to the American military's tendency to 'double-tap' strikes, when a target is hit multiple times in quick succession (Delmont, 2013: 197). His work attempts 'an aesthetic and operational reversal of the target's visual logic' (Adey et al, 2011: 183), which places us in the 'view from below' (Hewitt, 1983). Certainly restoring a face to the victims is crucial, trying to shift identification from the drone to the damage it does. It is also crucial, despite the risk of shifting focus from the victims, to insist on the 'face', in the sense of moral responsibility, of those in the kill chain. The difficulty is – if we take Gregory's point about the constitution of the subject in the kill chain alongside Adorno's provocation – that the ontology of the human may be rendered in a face-less fashion that constantly tries to rework and occlude this insistence on the 'face'. While humanisation can lead to over-sympathetic identification with drone pilots and leads drone pilots to over-identify with 'their' troops on the ground, we can add that drone metaphysics is an operation of constitution and transformation of subjects into a 'face-less' state. This state cannot be reached, or is not yet within our technological capacities, but this does not prevent the repeated *striving* for this state. Putting a 'face' to the drone is a necessary critical gesture, but considering the transformative power of drone metaphysics, not a sufficient critical gesture, as we will see.

Military Gnosticism

In some enigmatic passages of *Speed and Politics* (1978) Paul Virilio turns to the metaphysics of metempsychosis – the transmigration of souls – to suggest the tension of the loading of the soul on to various 'metabolic vehicles' (1986: 89). Virilio argues that the soul is 'plural,

multiform, fluidiform, coagulated here and there in social, animal or territorial bodies' (1986: 75). The military adopt and literalise this metaphysics. If '[a]ncient metempsychosis imagined a plethora of intelligences in search of undifferentiated matter', then the military turns this free transmigration of souls into an act of conquest (Virilio, 1986: 89). They force bodies into motion, impose deterritorialisation, and reduce the masses to the 'animal' status of soulless bodies ripe for occupation (76). The 'free-floating' will of the military gains power by its dromocratic violence that imposes both sedentariness and movement on human, animal, and technical 'bodies'. This is also true of the assembling of the body from a 'metabolic vehicle' to a 'technical vehicle', what Virilio calls 'the bestiary of engines' (88), of which the drone is one contemporary instance.

Turning from philosophy to religion Virilio also likens this 'powerful soul' to the 'gyrovagues', wandering and itinerant monks often condemned by the church of the early Middle Ages for their parasitic mobility, selling of fake relics, and gluttony (1986: 90). According to St Benedict, in his *Rules*:

The fourth kind of monks are those called 'Girovagi', who spend all their lives-long wandering about divers provinces, staying in different cells for three or four days at a time, ever roaming, with no stability, given up to their own pleasures and to the snares of gluttony, and worse in all things than the Sarabites [monks who have no rule outside themselves]. Of the most wretched life of these it is better to say nothing than to speak. Leaving them alone therefore, let us set to work, by the help of God, to lay down a rule for the Cenobites [those who live in monasteries, under the direction on an Abbot], that is, the strongest kind of monks. (in Anon, 2013)

While the wandering monks threaten the social order, military Monasticism channels this wandering into the discipline of a mobile war-machine (Virilio, 1986: 90). The military takes over this mobile function, reproducing the vagabond wandering and parasitism of the Gyrovagues.

These assessments follow Virilio's heterodox Catholicism in reviving past 'heresies' as mechanisms of critique. This is revealing of longer

patterns of metaphysical presumption, even if we may not be inclined to accept Virilio's own theological orientation. We can summarise these twin criticisms under a category of heresy Virilio does not, at these points, explicitly use: Gnosticism. The flight from body to body, the wandering of itinerant monks, which figure the 'trans-national' military caste, can be seen as forms of the Gnostic hatred of matter. This 'military Gnosticism' assumes the 'powerful' soul is deterritorialised, fluid and transferable, while the 'weak soul' is imprisoned within the body and the world (Virilio, 1986: 75–76). The military move from vehicle to vehicle, while the proletarian subjects of this caste or class are left only with their own bodies. The military operates through this constant movement across territories without ever settling into place, becoming 'wills that occupy the invisible or uninhabitable parts of the universe' (Virilio, 1986: 92).

In this military Gnosticism acceleration is not only the acceleration of the vehicle but the 'pure' acceleration of the soul moving smoothly from embodiment to embodiment, and so able to exceed any territorial capture. At the same time this accelerative displacement also comes to displace the military as well:

Look at the war on the Falkland Islands. It's very revelatory. Take the captain of the 'Sheffield' and the pilot of the 'Super Etendard' The pilot answers to the slogan of the Exocet missiles: 'Fire and forget'. Push the button and get out of there. You go home, you've seen nothing. You fired forty, sixty kilometres away from your target. You don't care, the missile does it all. On the other side there's the 'Sheffield' captain who says; 'In this war, everything happens in a few seconds, we have no time to react.' You see two military men in uniform; one an Argentine pilot, the other a veteran of the Home Fleet, who say: 'The missiles go by themselves. We are finished' (Virilio, 1983: 18)

If the military extinguish the ecological possibilities of resistance, which require the ability to secure a body and secure a place, they also extinguish, Virilio claims, their own role.

The 'assumption of cybernetics into the heavens' (Virilio, 1989: 2) is the most radical expression of this military Gnosticism. The extremity of this deterritorialisation involves the idolatry of

assuming the position of God: 'Today, we have achieved the three attributes of the divine: ubiquity, instantaneity, immediacy; omnivoyance and omnipotence' (Virilio, 1989: 17). The military caste incarnates the nihilistic politics of 'pure war' in which global space becomes a playground for these detached souls. The drone, of course, appears as the apotheosis of this project:

Drones are a combination of the new and the old: a new aerial surveillance and killing system with capabilities previously not offered by conventional air power, coupled with an older cosmic view of air mastery through technological speed, verticality, and vision. (Wall & Monahan, 2011: 241)

The drone combines the archaic and the new, realising, if we follow Virilio, the implicit Gnostic escape from the constraints of matter.

Of course matters are not so simple. Virilio's method of extrapolating tendencies or exploring extremes can flatter the drone – which is an object that is hardly free of materiality or humanity. That said, what Virilio indicates is that military Gnosticism does not ignore this materiality or humanity, it constantly works on it. The fantasy of 'pure war' is a fantasy, but works through continually overcoming its various failures. Virilio's own solution to this idolatry is to argue that unless we accept the god of transcendence we are forced to worship the 'god-machine' (1989: 83). This is a symmetrical gesture, which tries to escape the drone through a reference to a higher power. There is no doubt that religious beliefs have played a key role in peace movements, and especially in those concerned with the technological acceleration or assumption of 'God-like' powers: from Bishop George Bell's critique of mass aerial bombing of Germany by Britain in World War Two, to the post-war anti-nuclear movement. The difficulty is that it, too, occludes the transformatory work drone discourse performs to create the metaphysics of mobility and vision by which it operates. We need to consider this work as the site of our critique.

Projectile Philosophy

Drone metaphysics does not only direct us toward the drone, but also back to metaphysics. Paul Virilio notes that: 'Unlike the ancient believer in metempsychosis, the metaphysician, intelligence in

transit, is welcome nowhere, is nowhere in his element. He is a *projectile* in the heart of the great All of conscious matter' (1990: 109). Exceeding the movement of the soul from body to body, metaphysics aims at a disincarnated intelligence that would inhabit the status of pure projectile. In Michael Dillon's formulation, this is 'the desire of contemporary martial corporeality to become intelligence incarnate' (2003: 129). The crucial justification for this 'projectile' state is, according to Virilio, fragment 115 of the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles. In this fragment the metaphysician is *daimôn* transformed from one form to another, without rest. Tossed between the elements, all of which reject him, he lives in 'insensate strife'. This strife suggests that we are not just dealing with a militarisation of metaphysics, but a convergence between certain tendencies in metaphysics and the military. Virilio's reference to the projectile as model obviously implies the drone as signature object, not just for discussion of contemporary power, but also for the thinking of metaphysics or philosophy.

In Virilio's analysis this 'projectile' state realises the abandonment of metabolic vehicles and the final dream of pure intelligence in transit. It aims at the replacement of the vital with the void of speed (Virilio, 2005: 42). In this scenario we enter into our displacement by speed, trying to reach the metaphysical state of pure projectile through a willed abduction. This is not only a purely philosophical dream, but a political dream, or we could say a dream of philosopher as pure power. Virilio suggests: 'This constant search for ideal weightlessness is at the heart of problems of domination' (2005: 43). In the case of the drone the displacement is not simply for speed as such, drones being fairly slow aerial vehicles: with speeds of 84 mph for a Predator and 230 mph for a Reaper (Gregory, 2014: 15). The projectile fantasy is here, however, due to the fact the human is not literally inserted as pilot, not 'mounted' on the drone, except through the control and vision interfaces. The drone is an experience of weightless dominance in its displacement and augmentation of the 'metabolic vector' for the 'void', not so much of speed, but of invulnerability.

The drone is a metaphysical device in its 'realisation' of this tendency of metaphysics, but as the quotation marks indicate this is never a full 'realisation'. As we have already indicated with the theological element of vision, what Donna Haraway calls 'the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' (1991: 189), *always* fails.² The critic who simply points out this is a trick, or that the trick fails, will not come to terms with the fact failure is built in to the need to

repeat the trick. It is not enough to say *this is a trick* when this is already well known. Similarly, for what I am arguing here concerning the projectile: the drone or any other vehicle, pending very large technological advances, will not incarnate the ‘pure intelligence in transit’. Again, this suggests that any such god-trick is a ‘*techno-cultural* accomplishment’ (Gregory, 2011: 193; italics in original), but an accomplishment that must be repeated and is never fully accomplished.

Rex Warner’s novel *The Aerodrome* offers a powerful prefiguration of this situation. It concerns the conflict between the life of the village – symbolic of materiality, contingency and a very British ‘muddling through’ – and the air force, the incarnation of a fascist promise of transcendence and purity. The narrator Roy embodies this tension. Finding out his fiancée may, in fact, be his sister, he abandons this particularly acute sexual ‘mess’ for the life of the aerodrome. Roy remarks: ‘Though I knew the people here well, and loved them, I was disgusted and frightened by the contrast between their quick anger, their sudden levity, and the undeviating precision and resolution of the Air Vice-Marshal’ (Warner, 1982: 103). Subject to intensive training, Roy and his surviving fellow recruits are lectured by the Air Vice-Marshal, who proclaims his creed: ‘There remains the evolution, or rather the transformation, of consciousness and will, the escape from time, the mastery of the self’ (Warner, 1982: 188). The appeal of the air force is, precisely, this evolution that transcends the messy contingencies of the village. This transcendence into purity includes the abolition of the human factor of its own pilots. The air force has developed new pilotless planes, which allow the delegation of warfare, so the air force can devote its energies to the transformation of the whole society in its image. Contemplating these pilotless planes, the narrator Roy accepts ‘the fact that metal and electricity and the directing brain so easily surpass the performances of our own eyes and nerves and muscles’ (Warner, 1982: 195). These ‘drones’ are welcomed as the final devices of pure aerial ability, leaving their redundant pilots to return to the duty of reworking society in the image of the new aerial order.

Warner’s novel gradually unfolds the revenge of messy materiality on the air force. The Flight Lieutenant Roy admires for his amorous and military prowess is a mere desk-pilot. It is also revealed that Roy is the son of the air marshal, and so can only escape one incestuous scenario for another. It will be through a new love affair for Roy that the final victory of the village over the air force is achieved. This is a slightly unsatisfactory and unconvincing resolution. The deep

tension of the novel reveals itself in the promise of the air force to resolve such 'mess' into purity and transcendence, which implies that messy materiality is not a counter to transcendence, but its condition. While the air force might be sullied, the need to overcome this by the metaphysics of will and the projectile suggest the *need* for 'mess' as the site to be subject to constant transformation, as the very material on which it works.

To return to the project dream of metaphysics we can note the same structure. 'Intelligence in transit' is never fully achieved, but the repetitions of metaphysics constantly aim at lifting us above materialities, while constantly working on them. Paul K. Saint-Amour (2011: 262) has noted, in his discussion of aerial photomosaic, that the appeal to the contingency and fluidity of the horizontal to counter the 'dominance' of verticality is problematic. First, the horizontal is not some 'pure' zone freed from power, as his example of 'horizontal' geographic mapping indicates. Second, reading the vertical as a site of pure domination underestimates the complexity and tension in constituting the vertical as a site of power. My contention is similar in suggesting that messy materiality is not, itself, simply the solution to the transcendence of drone metaphysics. Rather, we have to grasp the labour that drone metaphysics performs as a constant work of transformation that aims at the vertical by means of the horizontal.

Banality and demystification

It is obvious that in reaction to discourses of mystification we resort to demystification. A hallmark of work on drones, as we have seen, has been the drive to deflate the claims of 'god-like' power that haunt drone discourse. This includes artistic work to make visible the human and material destruction drones inflict (Delmont, 2013), recognising that drones are not 'human free' but require *more* personnel than conventional aircraft (Benjamin, 2013: 21), and stressing their technical limitations, in terms of lack of range, speed, and vulnerability to anti-aircraft fire, which make them unlikely candidates for 'the advancing edge of American Empire' (Gregory, 2014: 15). It is necessary, Gregory insists, to remember that an 'everywhere war' is also a 'somewhere war' (2014: 15), and his conclusion is that we should not sever drones 'from the matrix of military and paramilitary violence of which they are but a part' (2014: 16). Amedeo Policante concludes that the drone brings an end to the Clausewitzian notion of warfare as heroic duel. In the end

the drone-operator's lot is an indication that: 'The tedious dreariness of the machine has now absorbed even the last fantasies of autonomy that needed the extreme speed of war to find its space' (Policante, 2012: 114; Stahl, 2013: 671). This point is reinforced by Stephen Voyce (2014), who notes that the signature effect of the drone is due to the conjunction of banal labour and deadly violence: 'The *Drone* – a strange but all too appropriate synonym – abruptly yokes together the monotonous work of "office drones" with the "unmanned aerial vehicles" which they now operate in great numbers above Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and soon elsewhere.' In all these cases a necessary work of deflation, demystification and banalisation is used to contest what I have called 'drone metaphysics'.

I have suggested, however, that an essential element of drone metaphysics is the constant promise it offers to rework and transform the messy materialities of the human and the technical. This reworking is a task that produces an effect of mystical or metaphysical power out of this very banality. Milena, writing about Kafka, noted: 'He sees life very differently from other people. To him, for instance, money, the stock market, exchange bureaus, a typewriter are absolutely mystical things' (in Buber-Neumann, 1988: 64).³ The point is the 'reduction' of the drone to bureaucratic banality may not reduce their absolute mysticism. Rather, their metaphysics or mysticism is a result of this very banality and integration, which can then generate fantasies of 'autonomous acceleration'.

This is the tension that remains for the critic. The return to banality and the human factor offers capacities for intervention, yet we also need to track the transformation of these, within the 'congeries of the kill-chain', back into a particular kind of metaphysics and the *desire* for a particular kind of subject-less subject. While Caroline Holmqvist, for example, addresses the contact zone between 'the steely bodies of drones' and 'the fleshy ones of human beings' (2013: 538), her tendency is to focus on human ontology as a means to bring the drone into the ambit of critique (2013: 548). This is obviously crucial when the reliance on technology can serve to dissimulate human agency and moral responsibility (Adams & Barrie, 2013: 254). Yet I want suggest that we take more seriously this desire for the transformation of flesh into steel, or better the fusion of flesh with steel.⁴ The dreariness or banality of the machine, or the operation of the machine, is not the destruction of fantasies of autonomy or acceleration, but also their condition. The dream of

‘accelerationism’ (Noys, 2014) depends on the capacity to constantly return and rework failures of acceleration through yet another effort to be finally accelerationist.

In the case of critique I do not think this means abandoning any of the resources of metaphysics or philosophy for some empirical, local, or politicised discourse that we might assume could simply immunise us against this metaphysics. While I have constantly drawn on these discourses, which are crucial, we also need to grasp the metaphysical ‘aura’ that results from the labour on messy materiality and the embeddedness of drones. This is why, as we saw with Rex Warner’s novel, a faith in messy materiality to resist the dream of transcendence is misplaced. Equally, I am suggesting the attempt to outbid transcendence through a religious faith in absolute transcendence, as Virilio suggests, is also problematic. What these gestures risk is replicating a drone metaphysics that operates by the constant oscillation between these two points. Switching from messy materiality to transcendence, usually through the mode of acceleration, is what drone metaphysics thrives on to occlude the tensions, frictions, and forms of violence at work in this switching and transformation.

Certainly, attention to the material and to the elements of labour-power that undergird these fantasies of transformation and acceleration is essential. Such attention requires awareness, however, that these ‘material’ elements are not simply counters to the abstractive power of drone vision. Marx’s analysis of the commodity-form, which attends to the banality of equivalence, also insists that such a work of social abstraction generates ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ (1990: 163). We are not opposing the concrete and material to the abstraction, but trying to probe a work of abstraction that cuts across this distinction. The accelerative discourse of transcendence tries to escape the problem by posing a final transcendence that can recode the material in a ‘saved’ form. The return to messy materiality, similarly tries to save the material as a point of resistance: hence the symmetry in which theological or religious discourses are, at the same time, transcendent and concerned with materiality.

The refinement of critical analysis I am suggesting, which is already touched upon by many drone critics, is to dwell more with the disruption of the discourse of drone metaphysics in this space of transformation it creates. It is effects of negation, interruption, and refusal in this process of transformation that, I propose, are crucial.

This is to challenge certain discourses of ‘acceleration’ that regard resistance as lying in a capacity of excess, the friction-less, hypertrophy, and so forth that are claimed to outpace the forms of military, state, and capitalist power. The desire for a final deterritorialisation that can slip into a smooth space of resistance is not only unfaithful to Deleuze and Guattari’s warning, ‘[n]ever believe a smooth space will suffice to save us’ (1988: 500), but also remains within the field of drone metaphysics.

This ‘friction’ lies not solely in the human as resistant factor, but also in the human-technical interaction in the ‘congeries of the kill-chain’. In particular, as I have suggested, this friction lies in the transformative work of integration that tries to constitute a ‘subjectless’ process in which the human and technical coordinate in the smooth execution of the kill-chain. On its own this friction is not sufficient, as this returns us to the ‘mess’ that requires smoothing and integration. If a ‘smooth space’ does not suffice to save us, neither will a ‘rough space’. The antinomy itself is part of the problem I have identified in grasping the transformative, and non-transformative, effect of drones. Instead, these points need to be activated into a work of negation that disrupts these processes of smoothing. Here I have focused on the identification of these points and these processes through an analysis of the literary, artistic, philosophical, and theological elements of drone discourse. This initial mapping requires a sense of continuity – the duration of the dream of the drone, the various drones, both real and virtual, that pre-existed our current situation; and an awareness of discontinuity – in terms of perceiving the transformation the drone has made, its retroactive effect in reinscribing those previous discourses. In this way we can trace and displace the hold that drone metaphysics has on us.

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Notes

1. An example of this fetishism can be found in Mike Davis’s (2008) discussion of the car bomb, where in an otherwise astute analysis he

often deploys naturalising metaphors for the spread of this ‘weapon of the weak’: ‘implacable virus’ (6), ‘Darwinian process’ (130), and ‘a kudzu vine of destruction’ (188).

2. I would, perhaps provocatively, add that the ‘god trick’ fails also for God, or any deity. This would be one way to read Derrida’s (1995) reflections on ‘total alterity’ as both the inscription of god and the ruination of the usual schema of godly powers. David Wills (2014: 186) connects Derrida’s account of God’s vision to the god trick of drones.

3. Adams and Barrie (2013: 247) use Kafka to discuss the moral unresponsiveness of bureaucratic military violence in the context of drones. However, they do not discuss the ‘mystical’ appearance of this bureaucratic violence.

4. Rolf Hellebust (2003) has offered a fascinating account of these alchemical dreams of the transformation of flesh to metal in the Soviet avant-garde. With the drone we could add another history, indebted to capitalist militarism.

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