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## THE MISSILE AND THE PAPER CLIP

Lisa Barnard's forthcoming book illustrates the deadly bureaucracy and remote technology that allows the War on Terror to take place, writes Julian Stallabrass

The system of drone killing may be thought of as an intricate and overlapping series of circuits: it begins with intelligence gathering, including observation from drones; moves to the analysis of the vast quantities of data produced and the production of disposition matrices; then to the moment of decision, in which Obama (so we are led to believe) sits in the White House Situation Room, like a grisly fate, his scissors hovering over the various threads of life laid out before him; then to the pilot, whose immensely tedious job of watching and waiting is occasionally punctuated by the command to launch a missile at an individual or a building; then to the mechanism that delivers the Hellfire missile to its destination.

Its fragmentation warhead destroys its target and anybody else nearby, and that in turn produces a series of reactions. People who try to help the wounded are often hit by another missile in a double-tap operation – a familiar terrorist tactic. There is shock, trauma and grief. Armed groups may exact revenge on those they believe to be informants, so murder follows on murder. Among those who lose loved ones, some may choose to fight back. These reactions are then reassessed with the intelligence-gathering

operations with which we began, and the cycle of death continues.

Much of this mechanism, like the running of the associated death squads, is designed to be out of sight of the mediated public. The parts designed for media exposure include the posturing of politicians, who garb themselves in military dignity, trying to assure viewers through propaganda images that they are fit to decide on issues of life and death, and that they do so with measured integrity. Also visible are images of the sleek technology of death – the drones in flight or in the factory. When a prominent target is supposed to have been blown up, the results are announced in words alone. In one notorious image, we (the mediated public) are vouchsafed an image of the state executioners in the White House Situation Room watching their assassination agents at work. The image is banal: some people in a dull meeting room watching a screen. Only one of them shows any emotion. But we are not allowed to see what they see.

Largely out of public sight lie many more elements of the operation: the drone operator at work; the business of war (the private companies that make and sell drones, missiles and warheads); the destruction of people, animals and homes that the weapons cause;

the consequences of retaliatory killings; the widespread trauma of those who live under the drones; the dissolution of communal life; and the fostering of what is called 'extremism' – though what, we might ask, would count as an extreme reaction to such a campaign of surveillance, fear, destruction, maiming and murder?

So the drama of this situation could hardly be greater; yet in no sense is that drama matched by the representations of it that circulate in the mass media. The drone and death squad system are beyond the remit of law, political oversight and, above all, lenses. Imagine the impossibility of using it in places where a developed media operate: a government believes a terrorist is shopping in a mall or teaching in a school in Frankfurt, New York, Paris or Birmingham, so a missile is fired into the building to kill the suspect, along with whoever happens to be near. Swiftly, we would know the names of those who died, learn about their lives, and hear grieving relatives and friends talk about them: we would know them as individuals, in other words – as people much like us.

The invisibility of the murder campaign and its victims is then central to its very existence. We must not see the scenes of carnage, learn the names of those who



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- 1 *Primitive Piece #1: Hellfire missile fragment from Waziristan*
- 2 *Crates and Boxes: Northrup Grunman*
- 3 *Not Learning from Anything #1: Las Vegas*
- 4 The Institute for Creative Technology (ICT) – Marina Del Rey, Los Angeles
- 5 *Trigger in Everyday Life #2: shopping trolley, downtown Los Angeles*
- 6 *Interrogation Set: part of the FlatWorld Immersive system at ICT*

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died (unless they are prominent terrorists), or hear from the victims of their maiming, or from their loved ones. The media must not report and the people themselves must not be able to speak to us.

The circulation of photographic and TV images has become central to the operation of democracy itself. Foreign policy intellectuals – those who think in the service of empire – worry that rational decision-making can be unduly affected by responses to media images. Where there are no images, there is little or no news, and so no restraint of power. Here, the state of exception – the declaration of some area or group as being beyond the remit of law – is easily declared, and the state acts as a fascist. It does so explicitly: putting a class of people to death because of where and how they live.

### Artistic interpretations

In these harsh circumstances of murder and censorship, and given that the mainstream media lacks the means and, it seems, often the motive to raise the lid, various artists have tried to find ways of visualising the programme. Sometimes they imagine or fictionalise what is only scantily documented. Many artists, including Raphaël Dallaporta, Harun Farocki, Mishka Henner, Louise Lawler and Jay Zehngbot,

using diverse means and media, have worked to highlight the drone campaign and its associated technologies. Some, including Edmund Clark and Lisa Barnard, have worked under the auspices of Reprieve, a charity that assists victims in legal actions against the campaign.

Barnard's work, then, is part of a wider movement that works more or less explicitly in the service of political agendas, to make visible the extent of the secret security apparatus and the drone campaign. She has evolved a complex, multi-part project that, while it cannot address the whole system since much of it lies in the deepest of shadows, is a consistent attempt to illuminate many parts of it. She has interviewed victims of missile attacks and drone pilots, along with leading psychologists working with the US Air Force who deal with trauma. What clearly emerges is a complex in which images are analysed by algorithms to yield operational data: a convergence of video feeds, still photographs and computer simulations, in which the rich, contingent life of photography and the world it records is stripped out or disciplined to provide usable, identifiable data objects. Can a machine tell a man from a woman or a child through a drone camera? Or a rifle from a hoe?

Bertolt Brecht's phrase, a 'hyena of the battlefield', comes from his 1939 play *Mother Courage* and is a charge laid against the protagonist by a chaplain, when she worries aloud that peace might put her out of a job. Profiteering from war used to be a charge of severe moral deficiency, and if it has now become more respectable, it is still kept largely under wraps as far as the public is concerned.

In her work, Barnard shows crates for drones from the AUVSI (Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International) Fair, where they are bought and sold. They look like the crates art comes packed in, often bearing the warning 'fragile', though it is a term better used to refer to their fleshy targets.

In Barnard's hands, the crates are cut out, like samples in a sales catalogue, and juxtaposed with a blueprint-style map of the AUVSI Fair, listing the participants and showing their spatial disposition. As in all such spatial configuration, there is the cutting of reality into discrete fragments and the arrangement of those fragments in an order, pointing to abstraction, instrumentalism, surveillance and bureaucracy. Yet the crates also bear the signs of work – of marking, labelling and scuffs from lifting. The polish of the commodity, which is supposed to banish any thought

of the labour that formed it, is seen here in its shipping containers.

The metal objects shown at the fair may appear to be artefacts of the old industrial age. The Hellfire missile, though frequently updated and modified to work against different targets, was designed in the late 1970s and first deployed in 1984; drones are older still. Yet computing, cameras and machine visualisation are key to their operation; like the film cameras that first incorporated digital circuitry, they bind up mechanical, optical and chemical elements. But it is the screen that Barnard sees as being the presiding symbol and presence of the military-industrial-entertainment regime.

Postmodern Las Vegas is gaudy, glitzy, kitsch and trippy – a crazed, eclectic mix of promiscuous styles and a fitting place for Hunter S Thompson's chemical reveries. Barnard's Las Vegas [3], in contrast, drawing on the subtle, everyday aesthetics of the New Topographics photographers, is decorated with massive screens but is largely bleached of colour, and appears mundane and regulated. Even the signal casino buildings (like New York, New York) seem distant and unprepossessing, while other casinos, more typically, have the severe look of a bunker. Las Vegas is the nearest city to the Creech



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Air Force Base, from which drones are operated; drones fly near the city, and its military role is clear in signage and architecture. Here the city is dull but also sinister.

Las Vegas is also the city of games, and as screens complement and replace clockwork mechanisms in gaming devices, another circle closes: the mostly poor folk who 'volunteer' for the US military are increasingly lured into service by computer games, many made either directly by or with the collaboration of the armed forces. They may play a part in inuring recruits to the kill, even before they join. Some drone pilots play combat games in their time off. Computer simulations are also used to provide a reassuring environment in which to counter post-traumatic stress disorder on return from combat operations in the service of the empire.

Barnard takes a tour of Virtual Iraq, a programme designed for the military by Medical Virtual Reality to act as an individually tailored environment to help returning soldiers deal with their trauma. In a simulated and generic Iraqi urban scenario, elements are slowly introduced that bring back traumatic events so they can be controlled emotionally. Barnard, acting as a photojournalist, has a minder give her a tour of the virtual city and takes stills.

These virtual landscapes are banal and unremarkable: pixellated figures, dusty and largely empty streets, a car parked by the side of the road, a crack in the pavement. Here, and in the computer-rendered versions of photographs of blast marks, severed limbs and wounded people sent in by serving soldiers, instrumental machine vision comes to the fore. In giving soldiers the ability to emotionally handle the trauma they have experienced, or are yet to experience, a balance of denatured and visceral elements is struck: a virtual reality environment in which fruit and vegetables are reduced to flat patches of colour, and the comforting limits of the game are set against that environment, physical sounds, vibrations, smells and objects of the domestic occupied land. The real, then, is portioned out in small doses, to be managed against the virtual environment in which each discrete element, including the avatars meant for interrogation, is there to be used or destroyed.

In Los Angeles, Barnard has made a series of urban scenes. As in Las Vegas, they are bleached and mundane, and again they fix on possible triggers for panic attacks: piles of rubbish that in Afghanistan or Iraq could contain hidden bombs, uneven paving,

parked cars. The range of possible triggers is extraordinarily broad and can include any irregularity in the environment. So, through the rehearsal of traumatic memories in controlled conditions, in which – as they are rehearsed – memories are altered, a flattening and controlling mentality is produced in the traumatised soldier.

Unruly memory, which cannot handle the horror of what has been done to the troops, and what they did to civilians, is reduced to bare, flat elements, in the way that fruit is rendered as blocky areas of colour in a computer game. It is a logical capitalist solution, geared to the rationalisation of work and the way that business treats its human assets, its resources and environment. The violence of technology is partly about how it cuts the link between people and their sensory interaction with the world.

If we discount the footage from the drones themselves, missile explosions are not caught on camera, and even their aftermath is only rarely seen by journalists and activists. How to envision the killing, if you are unable to do what the artist Noor Behram did at great personal risk, and speak to the victims of the drone campaign? On her tour of Virtual Iraq, Barnard photographs clouds of smoke, the product of simulated explosions,

and this serves as one indication. Smoke and virtually burning palms are set in crude digital landscapes. They bring to mind that sectarian warfare (from Palestine to Iraq) has often targeted trees, date palms and olives, in particular – sources of income and deep attachment for those who tend them, which are quick to destroy and slow to replace. Smoke is one of the hardest phenomena to model convincingly in computer simulations, and these are clumsy renditions. This may be the point: that the system of intelligence and killing is played like a game, and that the act is heavily abstracted in the minds of most of those involved.

The other thing that Barnard does, in a distinctive series called *Primitive Pieces*, is to photograph Hellfire missile fragments, picked up from murder sites in Waziristan and brought to Islamabad by Behram. While, as we have seen, most of Barnard's work deliberately eschews visual drama, here she photographs the fragments in monochrome, against black backgrounds, lit as if they were pieces of sculpture. Some look like mutilated skulls or helmets, and in each picture the distorted and torn steel is a ruin that has created ruins, and displays the force that blew it and other bodies and structures apart. The results are



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reminiscent of modernist sculpture, particularly Anthony Caro's bronzes of the 1970s and 1980s. Is this, too, a jibe about abstraction? That the modernist aesthetic lives on blithely in the military, where the image of intimidating power is as important as force itself (or rather, is another kind of force); and that a mordant abstraction also hangs about the entire system of drone killing, as the targets remain mostly abstract in the public mind, at least in the nations that launch the missiles, and the system of abstract calculation is untainted by what is implied by these distressed surfaces: chaos, blood and grief.

### The unspectacular

Barnard's general resistance to spectacle runs through much of this work, including the long and incident-free videos she has made of the commute to and from the Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas, and the proceedings of the AUVSI Fair and a Jirga held in Pakistan that brought anti-drone activists together. Barnard appears in the AUVSI Fair and Jirga films, sometimes seen through the lens of a drone camera, switched from artist to subject and target. The negative model here is the spectacular war so often represented in photojournalism, movies, television

and games. Instead, war through the screen is a matter of boredom, clumsy simulations, bureaucracy, tedious architecture and urban environments, all of which force on the participant and viewer a cold emotional distance. A bleak repetitiveness is meant to hold back realisation of the terror with which it is so closely intertwined.

All this is reminiscent of the view of the grey experience of new media laid out by Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey in their book, *Evil Media*, which sets spectacle against the listlessness and boredom that the screen and the interface produce. In this sense, the x-ray wave traces that appear on the Las Vegas pictures, and which Barnard had made through repeated exposure of the film to airport scanners and highlighted by pushing the film, may serve as a metaphor for the whole project. Coinciding with and interrupting the regular boredom of the image, there lies an instrumental element of force, an impact that marks the scene and that normally remains hidden while affecting everything we see. It also points to the tight binding up of military entertainment and media systems: handing government great propaganda powers, but also exposing vulnerabilities as the areas in which the fascist power

of exception can be exercised shrink, and as the old legal powers governing the ownership and circulation of images erode.

What is assembled through Barnard's various series of images and texts is a view of war as a system, as a series of interacting components in which labour, profit, entertainment, the scramble for resources, and the management of human feeling all play a part. In the continual and intensifying struggle to create new opportunities for profit in a shrinking world, war offers distinct advantages: if a nation can be destroyed (as Iraq was comprehensively and deliberately), then that 'creative destruction' is as good as a recession in offering new business opportunities; military spending is one of the few untouchable arenas for the state subsidy of corporations; and war can be used to put a lock on scarce resources and ensure they flow to the advantage of the already powerful. The hyenas of the battlefield are many.

Yet at the same time, the system is not functioning well. In Iraq, the sectarian violence that was encouraged in a typical imperial divide-and-rule policy escaped the aims of its architects and now threatens to tear apart the nation, disrupt oil supplies, aid steadfast enemies of the US, and

has largely prevented the economic stimulus that reconstruction could have provided. Partly as a result of this catastrophe, the empire seems reluctant to commit troops anywhere, and in this sense the drone and assassination campaign is a symptom of weakness.

One of Virginia Woolf's recommendations for anti-war activists was that they should puncture the pretensions of the military, of its absurd pomp, ceremony, costumes and rituals. Barnard has applied that strategy to one political warmonger in a well-known series of aged and rotting propaganda photographs of Margaret Thatcher, found at a former Tory party headquarters. Here, though, her tactic is different: to make visible the system of war in a way that drains it of its spectacle and glamour, connecting it with the general bureaucratisation, auditing, regulation and timetabling of life and labour, separating war from its heavy investment in entertainment to place it firmly within the world of work and profit: of strip lighting, the screen, the paperclip, the cubicle. *BJP*

*This text is an extract from Julian Stallabrass' introduction to Lisa Barnard's forthcoming book, Hyenas of the Battlefield, Machines in the Garden, which will be published by Gost Books (www.gostbooks.com) in autumn. www.lisabarnard.co.uk*