

The Blink Between: Thinking About the (Un)Seen in Drone Warfare

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Abstract

Contemporary art and aesthetically informed activism addressing drone warfare often seek to make up for a lack in visuals. Their work is fueled by the assumption that images are needed to make people care and to build a case. Paradigmatic examples of this approach include the investigations into the clandestine US drone war in the border region of Pakistan by Forensic Architecture as well as the online campaign #NotABugSplat (2014). They employ the image as a witness, creating image testimonies geared against denial. Yet, however important such projects are to raise public attention, their belief in making visible needs to be complicated in order to account for the fact that the drone itself is a vision machine operating on images. As such, the image is complicit in dealing violence. It no longer only represents but actively takes part in conflict. Going unseen has hence become a viable counter-strategy when presented with the realities of this war.

Taking into consideration that invisibility has become a shield and refuge, I ask in the following essay why 'we' need and want images when thinking about drone warfare. I ponder this question in the context of visual ethics, touching upon the relation between words and images and their appeal to the imagination. Extrapolating on the latter, I not only draw unlikely connections between the blink in drone warfare and the metaphor of the lidless eye in Heinrich von Kleist's writing about Caspar David Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10), but I also argue for enacting a double vision and inhabiting a skewed point of view that marks my own position. It navigates the tension between the seen and the unseen as relational, thereby helping to build an idea of what an active aesthetics might look like in the age of drone warfare.

In Medias Res

The photo is black and white. It is an aerial shot of a courtyard; the stones on the ground form a regular grid pattern. There is a pond to the left, stairs on top. In the center, I see ten human figures. I see them twice. Once I see their heads and shoulders. They are small white dots, hardly discernable as bodies; hardly discernable as humans. And once I see their shadows, looming large, distorted, in action. It is these shadows that make the figures human. They put them into action. They let me see them. The shadows show bodies, gestures, a shadow theatre of human presence. The caption of the image reads: Signature Behavior.



Figure 1: Tomas van Houtryve: Signature Behavior.
From the Series *Blue Sky Days*. 2013. © Tomas van Houtryve.

The photo is part of the series *Blue Sky Days* that Belgium-American photographer Tomas van Houtryve published in 2013. The series shows black-and-white aerial views of American landscapes and social situations, in which people have been killed by US drone strikes abroad or in which drones are used in the US. Van Houtryve has photographed these scenes by mounting his camera onto a small drone designed for private use. His idea for the project grew out of the observation that "there is no visual narrative in the public mind's-eye to go along with this war."

... I was thinking of how I could fill in this visual gap, try to bring this war home, using photography."¹ Responding to the absence of images, he created new images: his own images. His images do not show the target regions but instead turn the gaze around and point it back at the country the drones come from. Due to their high level of abstraction, the photos are not easy to read. They are clear images with an ambiguous meaning. Van Houtryve explains:

Usually I want my photos to bring clarity. ... You believe your eyes. But I think I tried to get my mind in the imagined space of a drone pilot's point of view; if all somebody knew about my life was the infrared video feed of my life from 15,000 feet, could there be some confusion? Is that different from knowing somebody on the ground?²

Yet, how do you know someone on the ground? In van Houtryve's case, the link to the target region is maintained in the title of the series. *Blue Sky Days* refers to a statement 13-year-old Zubair Rehman made at a congressional hearing in 2013. Zubair Rehman's grandmother was killed by a drone strike in the border region of Pakistan in 2012, and he was injured by shrapnel. At a hearing in Washington DC investigating the US drone campaign, Rehman said: "I no longer love blue skies. In fact, I now prefer gray skies. The drones do not fly when the skies are grey."³

Weather plays a role in war. German military theorist Carl Clausewitz knew that when he pointed to fog as the decisive factor in battle. It is fog that clouds the enemy and yourself. It makes vision uncertain, functioning as a medium and metaphor at the same time.

'Fog functions' ... to give shape to the vague and unpredictable; it is evidently not as foggy as 'uncertainty' itself, which it is supposed to make more tangible. This fog does not obscure so much as it provides a form, albeit a hazy, shifting one, for something more abstract that is not directly accessible to the senses. ... Fog straddles the literal-figurative divide, representing intangibles, clarifying other figurative terms, and sometimes standing in as 'itself,' a meteorological phenomenon in the atmosphere.⁴

In the case of the drone, clouds and fog can be a shield. They hinder the view of the vision machine and make it impossible for it to aim. "Death is so close that it doesn't see you anymore. It mistakes you for trees, and trees for you. You pray in thanks for this strange fog, this blindness,"⁵ writes Palestinian author Atef Abu Saif in his poetic memoir *The Drone Eats With Me* (2015) that chronicles Israel's military campaign against Gaza in 2014. You can hide under a tree, under a cloud. In the eyes of the drone, you can become a tree, you can become a cloud. In his *Drone Survival Guide* (2013), Ruben Pater has listed the options and techniques how to go unseen using the natural environment. If you do, the drone might not see you, because you do not register. You are not a target any more. Your strategy should be: Don't be a signal; become noise. Avoid to be seen.

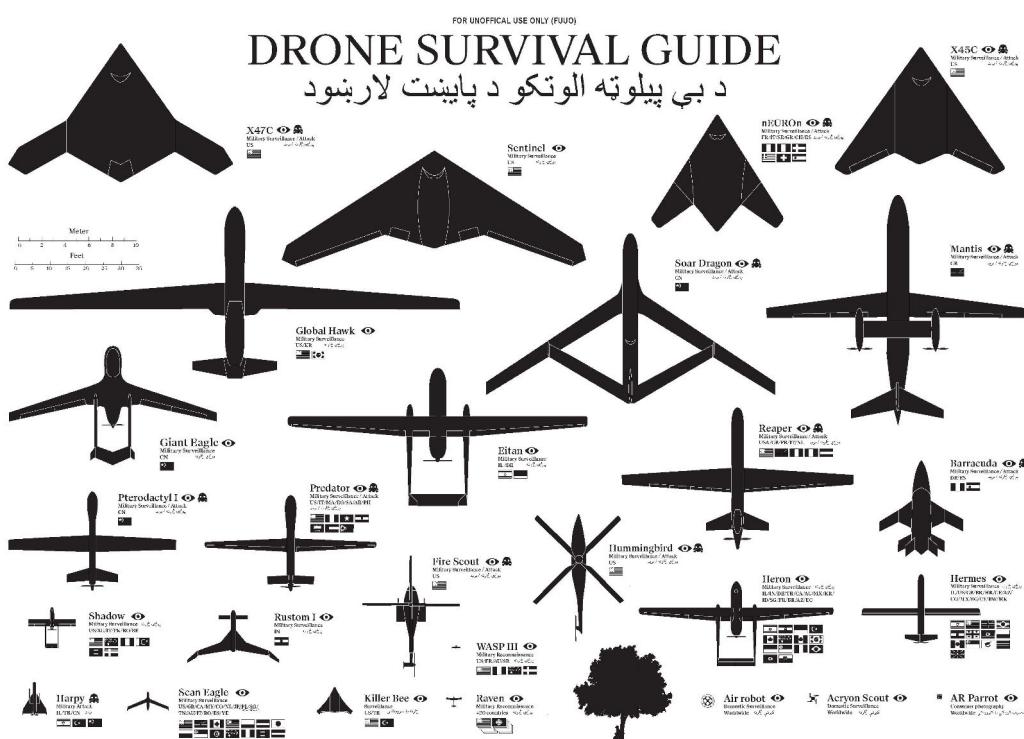


Figure 2: Front of Ruben Pater: Drone Survival Guide. 2013.

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Figure 3: Back of Ruben Pater: Drone Survival Guide. 2013.

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Image Testimonies

So, if invisibility is a refuge, why do we need images? Why do we want images? What do we want from them? It is a widespread assumption that we need images for people to care. Images allow people to make connections, imagine relations, and have empathy with a suffering that is not their own. This is why human rights campaigns rely heavily on individual portraits of people looking at us—who are far away. The image is meant to bridge the distance between you and me. It is meant to establish the kind of relation that comes out of looking and being looked at, giving you and me the experience of being a subject and an object at the same time. In the case of drone warfare, giving the people on the ground a face is particularly important, as only very few images exist. This non-existence, as critic and architect Eyal Weizman from Forensic Architecture has argued, is an enabling condition of drone warfare. It is the basis for negation. Weizman writes:

The ability to hide and deny a drone strike is not an insignificant side effect of this technology, but a central part of a campaign that relies to a great extent on secrecy and deniability. The violence inflicted by drone warfare is thus typically compounded by the perpetrators' negation: the violence against people and things redoubled by violence against the evidence that violence has taken place.⁶

If there were images, they could serve as evidence. They would be there to proof something. They would be witness to the fact that someone was there and that something did indeed take place. They would attest to the photographic having-been-there. The work of Forensic Architecture proves the validity of this point. The cases they have built around image testimonies, including the mental images of memory in the case of a woman who survived a drone attack and was later asked to reconstruct her house, and the material images of architecture recorded on a clandestine cellphone video are convincing.⁷

Also, the photos Pakistani journalist Noor Behram has taken under great duress and danger in the border region are no doubt important. His photos of survivors, maimed victims, and corpses are rare image testimonies of the drone war.⁸ One of them—the photo of a young girl who lost several members of her family in a drone strike—gained worldwide attention under the #NotABugSplat (2014). Her portrait was laid out on a field in Pakistan. It was enlarged to a size that would allow a drone operator to see her face. She would face the drone, returning its gaze. I cannot be sure if a drone operator actually saw her. What I can be sure of, however, is that we saw her. 'We,' an international audience on the internet. We saw her as if a drone would see her. #NotABugSplat thus put us in the position of the drone. And I wonder: How do I get out of there?



Figure 4: #NotABugSplat. 2014. © Ali Rez, Saks Afridi, Assam Khalid, Akash Goel, Insiya Syed, Noor Behram, Jamil Akhtar.

How do I get out of there, out of the gimble that sits underneath the robotic body that is the drone; out of the climate-controlled trailer in the Nevada desert from which the drones are flown? Maybe I can blink in order to get out of the compromising position that is the drone. Maybe I can blink to interrupt the flow of images that comes out of the drone's constant stare. As the Intercept's *Drone Papers* tell me, "a 'blink' happens when a drone has to move and there isn't another aircraft to continue watching a target. According to classified documents, this is a major challenge facing the military, which always wants to have a 'persistent stare.'"⁹ If I blink, there are no drones and there are no images, which makes me ask one more time: If invisibility is a refuge, why do we need images? Why do we want images? What do we want from them?

Evoking Imagination

The text and image collective Our Literal Speed has suggested that counter to what most people believe, visibility may actually not always be the most activating mode of expression. Looking at the American civil rights movement, as it developed between radio and television, they suggest that images can sometimes hinder political action, because they induce complacency and stand in the way of a radical imagination. Our Literal Speed write:

[The] lack of an incorporative picture is generally assumed to be a liability for social movements. It is taken as almost axiomatic that to have images of something, to have evidence of wrongs and proof of what is right, makes an undertaking more relevant and more available for having some effect in the world. This seems to be a false assumption and one growing more obviously false everyday. Most likely, non-visibility will produce the most revolutionary visibilities of all, and we will never see it coming.¹⁰

Their reasons for turning away from images have to do with the link between seeing and knowing. I see, and hence I know. I believe my eyes. I trust what I see. "There is a sense in which such images make something unfamiliar part of one's world. And this no doubt has its uses, but such a process also necessarily involves a colonizing about something Other by the eye, to the false sense that 'I already know about that situation.' That 'something is already being done.'

As a result, nothing happens.¹¹ If I don't have an image, my imagination has to fill in the blank, and fantasy can take over. Taking the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott as their case in point, Our Literal Speed argue that "the Boycott was fundamentally a product of fantasy, rather than evidence. Citizens had to imagine what it would be like to survive without access to the public transportation system of an American city, and they had to imagine how the Boycott would function in everyday terms without a pre-existing visual template. One might even say that this on-the-spot conceptualizing was the principal progressive achievement of the Boycott."¹² Or as George Didi-Huberman put it: "In order to know, we must imagine."¹³ And it is imagination that will ultimately propel us into action.

We must imagine what it means that "the drone keeps us company all night long. Its whirring, whirring, whirring, whirring is incessant—as if it wants to remind us it's there, it's not going anywhere. It hangs just a little above our heads."¹⁴ We must imagine what it means to keep up with technology, because "war changes very fast: the technology, the rhetoric, the justifications, the media packaging. These men were keeping up with it at every stage; they were ahead of it almost. It was a skill they had inherited as Palestinians."¹⁵ And we must listen to Atef Abu Saif whose voice I have just quoted. His wish is not to

be a number, a piece of news, a name on the tongue of a beautiful TV presenter waiting impatiently to finish reading boring news from Gaza. I do not want to be a small number in a large one, a part of the data. I do not want to be an image, among thousands of images that the activists and sympathizers share and post on their Facebook walls, or Twitter accounts, rained down on with likes and comments.¹⁶

Abu Saif does not want to become an image. In the war he is trying to survive, invisibility is a shield and images are meant for others: They are meant for an internet audience out there—in a different world, in safety, 'us'. Nevertheless, the question remains what to do. On the one hand, there is the need for images and representation. There is the need to counter the absence of images from the frontier regions of the world. As Weizman said, the lack of images enables negation. Hence, we need images to serve as evidence and to make an ethical claim. And we need images to think and to understand. On the other hand, however, images are an active agent in drone warfare. It is a war based on operative images and the promise of unrestricted vision. In it, becoming invisible and going unseen is a promising counter-strategy, since "the conceptual metaphor of surveillance is seeing. Perfect surveillance would be like having a lidless eye."¹⁷

A Lidless Eye

This definition of surveillance from the *Drone Papers* makes me halt. It makes me halt due to the phrase "having a lidless eye." For although the reference is clearly the promise of visual mastery, of having an all-seeing, tireless eye that never blinks, the wording is also reminiscent of an unlikely and most certainly unintended subtext: German poet Heinrich von Kleist's essay on Caspar David Friedrich's painting *Monk by the Sea* (1808-10). It is a painting that renders vision uncertain. On it, I see washes of blue, gray, and white. The cloudy sky takes up about two thirds of the canvas. It speaks of stormy weathers, of a darkening towards the ground, some light breaking through the dark in the corner and shining on the scene. In the lower third, I see the dark sea, waves rolling, foam on top. Offshore is a greyish-white landscape of dunes and rocks, also rolling, just like the sea. And amidst all of this, barely noticeable, stands a small figure. It is the monk, whose figure blends into the ground, almost becoming part of it. Once you have seen him, though, you can't take your eyes off him. His presence pricks you. He is there—for you to see. Indeed, he is there, as Kleist writes, for you to become him (in the act of seeing him).¹⁸ And then Kleist goes on and writes: "With its two or three enigmatic objects, the painting lies there like the apocalypse; and since, due to its monotony and excess, it has little in the foreground besides its frame, one feels upon viewing it, as if one's eyelids had been cut off."¹⁹



Figure 5: Caspar David Friedrich: Monk by the Sea. 1808-10.
© bpk Bildagentur / Alte Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Photo: Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY.

Having your eyelids cut off creates exactly the “lidless eye” that is the phantasy of surveillance. But beware of the image that this eye beholds! For Friedrich’s *Monk by the Sea* is all but certain. It is the kind of image W.J.T. Mitchell has called a meta-picture. “Metapictures are pictures that show us what pictures are, how they function, where they are located.”²⁰ Kleist’s *Monk by the Sea* makes me think because it shows me my own seeing. It shows me how vision works, because representation becomes unintelligible. Due to this quality, Friedrich’s painting from the 19th century comes surprisingly close to the works of a number of contemporary artists dealing with drone warfare, among them Trevor Paglen, Hito Steyerl, Louise Lawler, and Seth Price. Take for instance Trevor Paglen’s large-scale photographs of cloud formations in the sky that are reminiscent of abstraction and color field painting. They show colors, blurs, and the sky; and somewhere, barely noticeable, there is a speck that is the drone. Its presence is similar to Friedrich’s monk; it is there but its figure blends into the ground. Or think of Seth Price’s extreme close-ups of people’s skin in his photo series entailing, among others, *Danny, Mila, Hannah, Ariana, Bob, Brad* (2015). Using different imaging techniques, including satellite imaging, Price turned body parts into landscapes, thus confusing the relationship between figure and ground similar to how Friedrich did it in *Monk by the Sea*.

Co-Presence and Double Vision

It is a confusion that weaves like a red thread through the visual cultures of drone warfare.²¹ It is present in the way the drone is used as a weapon, and it repeats itself with even more force in the art tackling its visual politics. This is true of most of the conceptual pairs that I find when dealing with the topic. Most notably, they are figure and ground, body and landscape, realism and abstraction. In the age of drone warfare, their mutually exclusive relationship is re-negotiated as a co-presence. It is a co-presence that prompts me to stop and return to the question of whether or not we need and want images in a new and different way. It allows me to get out of the binary thinking that needs to decide between images or no images, seeing or not seeing, visibility or invisibility. Instead, I can address the visual culture of drone warfare as if I was looking at a tilted image—something the German language knows as a *Kippbild*.

In a tilted image, two images are present in one picture, yet I can only see one at a time. Canonical examples include the picture of a duck and a rabbit, a young and an old woman, a vase and two faces in profile. You have to adjust and re-adjust your eyes and switch back and forth between duck and rabbit, duck and rabbit, duck and rabbit. What I want to suggest is not to try the impossible and see both at the same time. Instead, I want to dwell in the moment of blinking when neither is visible and when a double kind of vision is used in service of a switching and twitching and transitioning. It is the moment of moving from one image to another that allows for a thinking of a different kind of vision. It asks us to see with more than two eyes. No gorgon stare though but a blink. It is the realm in which image and imagination come together to suggest an active aesthetics that changes the ways in which we know and see and sense.²²



Figure 6: Kaninchen und Ente. In: Fliegende Blätter, October 23, 1892.
Work in the Public Domain.

The type of vision I have in mind is close to what Donna Haraway has spelled out as a feminist view of partial and embodied perspective that is based on "the sciences and politics of interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood. Feminism is about the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision."²³ It is this kind of double vision that I imagine when I think about the fissure in the tilted image between duck and rabbit that is equally the fissure between figure and ground, body and landscape, realism and abstraction. It is the fissure in the moment of blinking when one thing goes over into another. The blink interrupts the drone's persistent stare. In warfare, "a 'blink' happens when a drone has to move and there isn't another aircraft to continue watching a target."²⁴

In art, a blink happens when I look at Friedrich's *Monk by the Sea* and I think of Kleist's image of the lidless eye. The metaphor may be all about vision, but it is the kind of excessive vision that draws you into the picture. Once inside, you become the figure that blends into the ground and you speak from that point of view. Simultaneously inside and outside, your voice has to shuffle back and forth.

Your voice has to take on the task of looking askew. It has to look awry as if it too is about double vision. Translating images into words may be one way to do this. When I originally presented these ideas at the Night of Philosophy and Ideas in New York, I had to do it out of necessity, because there was no way for me to show the audience any images.²⁵ Instead, I had to paint them with words. I had to call on their imagination. I had to rely on their imagination. It was a good exercise in ekphrasis, because it made me reconsider the status of images in drone warfare and ask: If invisibility is a refuge, why do we need images? Why do we want images? What do we want from them? I believe there is a great deal we want from images, and they want from us. However, in order to see that desire and do justice to the ethical claim that the image as witness holds, we have to look at it from ever shifting points of view, give it over to translation, mutation, and a looking askew. We have to say I, and mark the position we speak from. I have to translate images into words that can enter the imagination. And these words and images speak to each other, changing each other, explicating and unsettling each other. They remind me that a relational way of looking changes you and me. I hence want to be careful not to take up your room, but look at you and consider the fact that you are looking at me just the same.

Author Biography

Svea Braeunert is DAAD Visiting Associate Professor in German Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Her research interests include twentieth- and twenty-first-century art, literature, and film, media theory and visual culture, concepts of memory, trauma, and deferred action, and gender studies. She is the author of *Gespenstergeschichten: Der linke Terrorismus der RAF und die Künste* (Kadmos, 2015), and co-author and co-curator of *To See Without Being Seen: Contemporary Art and Drone Warfare* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) and *Method: Sasha Kurmaz* (Kehrer, 2016). She is currently working on a book project tentatively titled *Urgency and Uncertainty: Media Cultures of Drone Warfare*.

Notes

1. Tomas van Houtryve, interview by Dan Gettinger, Arthur Holland Michel, *Center for the Study of the Drone*, May 13, 2014, <http://dronecenter.bard.edu/interview-tomas-van-houtryve/>.
2. van Houtryve, interview.
3. Alexander Abad Santos, "This 13-Year-Old is Scared When the Sky Is Blue Because of Our Drones," *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2013, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/10/saddest-words-congresss-briefing-drone-strikes/354548/.
4. Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 19-20.
5. Atef Abu Saif, *The Drone Eats With Me: A Gaza Diary* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 21.
6. Eyal Weizman, "Introduction, Part II: Matter against Memory," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic Architecture (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 369-370.
7. Forensic Architecture, "The Drone Strikes Platform," *Forensic Architecture*, May 23, 2014, <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-drone-strikes-platform>.
8. Spencer Ackerman, "Rare Photographs Show Ground Zero of the Drone War," *Wired*, December 12, 2011) www.wired.com/2011/12/photos-pakistan-drone-war/.
9. Josh Begley, "A Visual Glossary: Decoding the Language of Covert Warfare," *The Intercept*, The Drone Papers, October 15, 2015, [https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/a-visual-glossary/](http://theintercept.com/drone-papers/a-visual-glossary/).
10. Our Literal Speed, "Notes from Selma: On Non-Visibility," December 2009, www.academia.edu/36538855/Our_Literal_Speed_presents_Notes_From_Selma_On_Non-Visibility_2009.
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12. Our Literal Speed, "Notes from Selma."
13. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.
14. Abu Saif, *The Drone Eats With Me*, 31.
15. Abu Saif, *The Drone Eats With Me*, 40.
16. Abu Saif, *The Drone Eats With Me*, 78.
17. Begley, "A Visual Glossary."

18. Kleist writes: "So I became myself the Capuchin." The original German reads: "So ward ich selbst der Kapuziner." (Translation Svea Braeunert) Heinrich von Kleist, "Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelenlandschaft," in Heinrich von Kleist, *Anekdoten, Kleine Schriften, dtv Gesamtausgabe Band 5* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1964), 61.
19. The original German reads: "Das Bild liegt, mit seinen zwei oder drei geheimnisvollen Gegenständen, wie die Apokalypse da, als ob es Jungs Nachtgedanken hätte, und da es, in seiner Einförmigkeit und Uferlosigkeit, nichts, als den Rahmen zum Vordergrund hat, so ist es, wenn man es betrachtet, als ob einem die Augenlider weggeschnitten wären." (Kleist, "Empfindungen vor Friedrichs Seelenlandschaft," 61.)
20. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 27.
21. I have developed this argument in my more detail in my forthcoming article Svea Braeunert, "On the Dis/appearance of the Human Figure: Imaging Drone Warfare," in *Drone Imaginaries: Aesthetics and Communities*, ed. Kathrin Maurer, Andreas Immanuel Graae (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2020).
22. The term active aesthetics was coined by Luis Camnitzer in "The Tupamaros," in Luise Camnitzer, *Conceptualism in Latin American Art: Didactics od Liberation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 58.
23. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn 1988), 589
24. Begley, "A Visual Glossary."
25. The essay follows to the most part the presentation *Media Cultures of Drone Warfare: Thinking About the (Un)See* I gave at A Night of Philosophy and Thought at the Brooklyn Public Library on February 2, 2019.