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An Investigation into Trevor Paglen's *Drones* Photographs, Military Targeting, and Looking Slowly

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The technology of unilateral remote warfare develops continuously, and with it, an ever-rising threat to human lives and freedom from an array of actors, mostly state powers, that seek to use oppressive force against civilian populations. Trevor Paglen is a political visual artist, whose project *Drones* represents military operations and resources in ways that recontextualize the processes of visual targeting enacted by military drones. Paglen's work highlights the differences between human and machine vision and creates deliberate obfuscation that renders his photographs visually abstract. Following work by TJ Clark, Ariella Azoulay and Arden Reed, I approach Paglen's photograph *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* in the form of a slow investigation that highlights durational viewing. Slowness in this form creates a conversation between myself and the image that acknowledges the temporal dimension of art-viewing and resists the unilateral gaze of the drone.

KEYWORDS *Drones*, Trevor Paglen, photography, warfare, art, slowness, contemporary war studies

Introduction

In the opening monologue of the television series *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger notes that 'the human eye can only be in one place at a time' (Berger, 1972: 01:43). In contrast, the military drone, or Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicle (UCAV), has many 'eyes', bearing numerous types of cameras and sensors (Asaro, 2017: 295–96). What they create are 'working' or 'utility images', tools designed to aid in the tasks of targeting, reconnaissance, and killing (Hoel, 2018: 12). Their machine vision and its

purposes lie very much beyond what I consider my practice of art-watching. I cannot take in an entire artwork in one glance in the way that the drone can 'see' many miles of terrain from one position. I cannot hover at a distance, I must get close to an image, and let my eyes travel over its surface. I take it in section by section, not cutting it into pieces but seeing what jumps out at me; what calls to be seen. What I watch is not moving, not escaping my vision, like a human stalked by the drone might attempt to do. It is I who move, whether to travel to see an image in a gallery or simply to turn my head this way and that, leaning closer or taking steps back, or zooming in on my laptop screen to see a brush stroke or a drone hidden in a cloud.

Military drones have been in operation in a variety of forms since the First World War (Gregory, 2011: 189). Their development and operation demonstrate that technologically mediated sight and killing have become increasingly interconnected. Drones incorporate image-reading systems to automate a process of machine vision for the interpretation of what is being captured by their visualizing technologies. Part of what these technologies create are 'images made by machines for other machines' (Paglen, 2014). As humans are increasingly an accessory to systems of machinic vision that omit our involvement, I attempt here to enact a form of viewership, of image-watching, via which I seek to learn about the visual politics of the military drone.

In this article I discuss photographer Trevor Paglen's series *Drones* (2010–2015), using a single image from the project as my starting point. *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* (Figure 1) guides an analysis that traverses the surface of the image, an expanse that contains themes of clouds, insects, and the boundary world between what is visible and what is hidden from view. Paglen's photograph represents the drone's potential power, its training stage, while it still resides near its place of development in the United States. I consult this artwork to question how the drone's scopic regime of remote surveillance and targeting is harnessed and interrogated by Paglen. The term 'scopic regime' first appears in the article 'The Imaginary Signifier' by
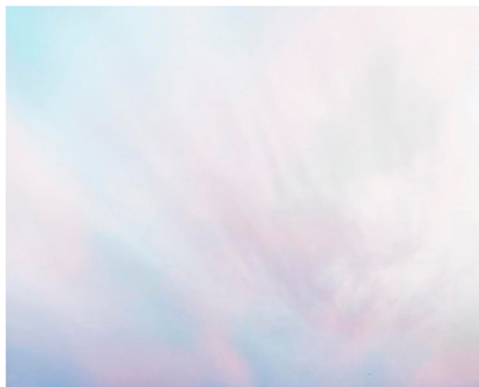

FIGURE 1   *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2013, C-Print, 48 x 60 in. Copyright Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist, Metro Pictures, New York and Altman Siegel, San Francisco.

Christian Metz, published in *Screen*: 'What defines the specifically cinematic scopic regime is not so much the distance kept, the 'keeping' itself (first figure of the lack, common to all voyeurism), as the absence of the object seen' (1975). Here Metz uses the term to discuss a cinematic framework of presence and absence between the viewer and the screened object. In 'From A View To A Kill: Drones and Late Modern War', Derek Gregory applies the notion of the scopic regime to drone warfare to argue that the drones' role in creating 'new visibilities of the battlespace' has led to the production of 'a special kind of intimacy that consistently privileges the view of the hunter-killer' (2011: 193). Paglen's work, made from the ground looking up at the drone, resists the privileging that Gregory describes. Here, I reposition Metz's and Gregory's uses of the term scopic regime to create a vantage point from which to understand the way Paglen returns the drone's gaze and how his work can be understood as a form of watching that helps us to see what appears to be inscrutable, and in so doing involves a civilian viewership in a process of looking and watching via which we might learn how the machines see us.

I viewed this artwork primarily on my laptop screen while writing this article. I have since viewed it in person, in the space of the gallery. These experiences were very different, and the mediation of the laptop created a particular machine-bound relation with the image. The photograph in its on-screen form is viewed via a secondary form of mediation, which while potentially reductive grants me the ability to zoom in and out (an imitation of the movement of the gaze and of the position of the body in relation to a print in a gallery space) and thus provided the opportunity for a closer look. In repeated viewings of Paglen's photograph, mediated through my screen, I attempted to recreate the actions of TJ Clark in his work *The Sight of Death*, in which he continually visits two paintings over a sustained period of time, recording how his viewings changed and augmented his understanding of the images. Clark establishes an argument for employing a slow, returning gaze: 'astonishing things happen if one gives oneself over to the process of seeing again and again: aspect after aspect of the picture seems to surface' (Clark 2006: 5). He employs a reflective tone throughout his work, questioning his own methodology, sometimes doubting his process or objecting to his own ideas as time progresses. This is all in the spirit of an exploration that seeks to resist dogma through allowing, in some form, a dialogue to take place (Clark, 2006: 12).

Since military drones are used to create one-sided information gathering and destruction, it is my task here to create an operation that is conversational, that resists the unilateralism of the drone. It is for this reason that I choose to place the factor of temporality at the centre of this work, and to engage directly with slowness as my operational strategy. In her book *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ariella Azoulay rejects the term 'viewing' a photograph in favour of an act of watching, indicating time spent with an image, and a directed gaze that embraces duration (2008). In the context of political art representing drones, this act of watching can mimic the drone's scopic regime in the sense of echoing its targeted surveillance. Indeed, drone operations depend upon long-term (and therefore slow) surveillance.

The reason art is important in discussions of drone warfare is both because of the tradition of war art and because of what Ryan Bishop and John Phillips have denoted as the opposing temporal modalities of art and technology: they describe 'the temporal and spatial lag that is always implied as the condition of human perception', claiming that 'the synaesthetic qualities of sensate experience presuppose a non-sensible "space" or "gap" of "exchange", which is nothing other than the division *itself*' (2010: 8). Bishop and Phillips find that 'as the history of visual technology manifests repeated attempts to […] narrow the gap, modernist aesthetics tries to highlight its unbridgeable nature' (2010: 27). I extend their argument to include Paglen's contemporary work here, which operates by creating space and time with which we may be able to apprehend military and state apparatus and their cultural and political effects. Paglen has stated, in conversation with Julian Stallabrass, that 'the space for paying slow attention is becoming more relevant and significant as our forms of everyday communicating, imaging, and viewing increasingly speed up' (Stallabrass & Paglen, 2011: 4). The 'efficacy' of military drones does in fact depend hugely on the patience of their operators, and their deployment involves vast quantities of time spent waiting. Although this seems to refute the logic of my methodology and critical approach, I am not attesting that they are the pinnacle of late capitalism's desire for instantaneity, but that the logic of their design and deployment is founded upon the possibility of near-instant communication between image, machine, and operator (and then along the so-called kill chain) (Currier, 2015).

Visual art, whatever its subject matter, invites a conversation with a human audience, which amounts to an acceptance that this human audience brings with it a body entwined with a spatial and temporal existence. In these pages, I accept and agree to the conversation initiated by Paglen's artworks, and I acknowledge the presence of my body and my perceptual experience as part of the creation of meaning. With this conversation between myself and *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* I seek to learn how art-watching and art-making inform us about the military technologies that we pay for and employ, not only by rendering them visible, but also by exploring a praxis of delay and slowness that their fundamental operational politics seeks to negate.

The absence of the object

My first and immediate thought upon observing Trevor Paglen's *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* is a question. It is not a question in response to the technical features of the image, nor a product of a philosophical or professional mode of observation that I arrive with at the moment of seeing. I ask, simply, where is the drone? It is a question of absence; the omission from the frame (I assume) of the material content, the referent indicated by a tantalizing caption. The context of this image becomes essential, as the photograph provides as little information as possible while remaining an image — captured and developed — of *some thing*; the sky, a hint of colour and an amorphous implication of a cloud. This image is showing me, then, (more than nothing) the lack of an object. I cannot yet, in these first

few seconds, begin to know why it is absent. I cannot know if it has been lost, or if it will appear, for I see only the sliver of time (a lack of time) captured in the stillness of the photograph. I am aware only of a rejection of what I had known photography to be, until now: the framing of (what I would later understand to be) an event. One of many in Paglen's *Drones* series, this image is then a non-event, although something is happening, which is the convergence of two promises: the representation of an object, and the event of the object's existence at this moment in the past. These unfulfilled promises form a paradox, or, less than a paradox, an absence. In the image, I find neither event nor object. Paglen's caption tells me that he has photographed a drone, but I cannot look at the image and feel the satisfaction of saying, however simply, yes, I see it, I know now, that this is — or has been — a truth, a moment of the reality of which I am part. Paglen has broken the promise of *knowing* something that I had presumed to share with him in this moment.

In the failure of knowing, the absence of visual clarity, a new knowledge emerges, for no image is without meaning. My gaze tracks across the plane of the photograph, and I become aware that I do not see the promised object. This statement begins to grow, to evolve, as the failure of the presence of the drone expands into an enduring reality of the photograph. I cannot see the drone. Is this referent, which I was given to expect from the single accompanying word *drone*, forbidden? Already I know something, then, which emerges from a lack of knowledge. The role which I am accustomed to playing so efficiently that I need not give it a moment's thought has been denied me, by the lack of what I am supposed to see. My position in relation to the image has thus been changed, and so has that of the drone.

Watching *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* invites an ontological shifting of my role between states of observation, witnessing, and targeting. I arrived at the image with a generic aim of spectatorship, and had expected to achieve this end by seeking and spectating the pictured object — the drone. The process, in its simplified form, begins with a glance at the photograph, followed by a reference to the caption, and back to the photograph, to acknowledge what I have seen with the new context of its explanation. By denying me an easy resolution to this process (in which I understand what I am looking at without further analysis), Paglen rewrites my task, leaving me with a responsibility to understand, to know, what this photograph means in a new way. My observations are necessarily more active now. I am not shown; I seek. This active form of spectatorship brings me closer to the paradigm of the operational image, while at once emphasizing the difference between human and machinic visual interpretation.

The eye and the gaze

The drone-eye is part of a process whereby war is technologized, and the human element removed, or reduced, to operator and target. Grégoire Chamayou describes the process thus:

> The conceptual genesis of the drone takes place within the framework of an ethico-technical economy of life and death in which technological power takes over from a form of undemandable sacrifice. (2015: 86)

When all the parts of a pilot are removed 'save an electronic retina', an entire hypothetical force of combatants is reduced to 'ghostly machines' (Chamayou, 2015: 86). (Reduced is not necessarily the correct word, here — superseded, perhaps, or, augmented, depending on one's perspective.) As with Chamayou's invocation of the spectral, Paglen's *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* communicates a sense of exposure and reduction via its emptiness, leaving only a retina, or black iris, to indicate the signified military force.

When I watch *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, I see — in the place of the machine — the eye. The drone in this incarnation is a perfect rendering of state power in its most tyrannical form; remaining invisible yet casting a shadow so long that the subject of its gaze is never free of the threat of death. Predator and Reaper drones are far more often surveillance-gatherers than executioners, functioning via continual threat as itinerant oppressors. It is an efficient system, one that forges a new spatial relation between warfare and the individual. In the model of the hunter-prey relationship, as Chamayou summarizes, 'armed violence is no longer defined within a demarcated zone but simply by the presence of an enemy-prey, who […] carries with it its own little mobile zone of hostility' (2015: 52). Thus, as Gilles Deleuze imagined, control is no longer framed spatially as an enclosure, (despite the notion of the kill box) (Stubblefield, 2020: 64), but has dispersed into the continuous and inescapable (Deleuze, 1992). Paglen's drones, sometimes visible and sometimes hidden, can therefore be ubiquitous, everywhere and anywhere.

My sense of the drone's threat when looking at *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* emerges due to my awareness of myself as a human observer. The vast distances Paglen emphasizes in his photography expound an abstract sense of difference in my experience to that of the machine (and indeed, to the military-industrial state). The image asks me to seek out the drone, and thus to take on its methodology, but this enactment does not require me to see myself as a machine or as an enactor of oppressive force, rather, it draws attention to my position beyond what Harun Farocki termed the 'operational image', the image made by a machine for a machine (Paglen, 2014). The unreadability of Paglen's photograph speaks to a language of viewership that takes place outside human involvement or understanding, a dialogue from which we are omitted.

In response to images taken of the 1991 Gulf War, Harun Farocki recreated the machine's-eye-view in his *Eye/Machine* trilogy, a collage of footage from various automated viewing systems which examined the human figure from a non-human perspective. It is as though humans are completely absent. One intertitle claims that the images 'are not really intended for human eyes' (Barby, 2015: 334). As Paglen points out, 'Farocki's film is not actually a film composed of operational images. It's a film composed of operational images that have been configured by machines to be

interpretable by humans' (Paglen, 2014). Central to Farocki's work is the artificial 'eye' of the scopic machine. To watch the footage of suicide cameras is to simulate the inhabiting of the same space as the machine; to be as one with a missile, drone or other structure removed from what Farocki calls 'the human scale.' We are accustomed to discourse emphasizing the drones' astonishing, novel, and divine qualities, as Naief Yehya has noted in his work on drone cultures (Yehya, 2015: 1). Following Farocki's work highlighting operational images, Paglen offers us a glimpse of the unhindered expanse of dronic sight, but from the point of view of a human, on the ground. This perspective mimics the drone's-eye-view, but his camera points upwards; we retain our humanity instead of becoming one with the machine.

Paglen's art refuses the drone's-eye-view by emphasizing the limits of human vision. A terrestrial viewpoint such as that used in *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* effectively explores the discursive amorphousness of the weaponized drone. Drawing on Paul Virilio's links between war and cinema to discuss drone footage, Nasser Hussain writes that 'the overhead shot excludes the shot/reverse shot, the series of frontal angles and edits that make up face-to-face dialogue […] there is no possibility of returning the gaze' (2013). Following this notion, Paglen's photographs function as the reverse shot in a filmic dialogue, responding to the drone's capturing of a human image by returning its gaze. If an overhead shot is for Hussain 'the filmic cognate of asymmetric war' (2013), Paglen's reverse shots attempt to resist the drone's unilateral power by creating a conversation in images.

The position of Paglen's camera is as much part of the meaning of the image as the location of the drone. Locating myself is of equal significance: my place and that of the final image as I view it create new meanings for the text insofar as the external conditions influence the photograph: a gallery space and a news article will provoke different encounters. Crucially, I am in all potential scenarios watching from a safe space, untouched by the violence of the drone, out of view of its all-seeing eye, detached even from its incessant auditory signature, as described by Atef Abu Saif: 'If you allow yourself to listen to them, you'll never sleep' (Abu Saif, 2015: 189). The sky Paglen watches over Nevada is unmarked by the violent political oppression that the drones create elsewhere. Both Paglen and myself are watching from a place of safety, a position taken up in nearly all scenarios that involve the viewing of war images. In this safety there lies an abyss between myself and the subject. As I spend time with the image, I become increasingly aware of this abyss, of a distance between myself and the drone, not only in terms of space, but time.

The drone bears a camera (in fact multiple forms of sensor, with different imaging capabilities) which see not just the artist and his camera but everything below them. Some of these are designed to work without the involvement of the human operator, as I have mentioned, but others are built to be viewed and interpreted by human eyes. The images they produce are transmitted to the operator's screen, just as Paglen directs his image to mine (or that of whoever views his photographs via a screen). The drone operator, in this way my counterpart, watches the screen and

attempts to interpret the image shown there just as I do. Working with this conception of the image as the point at which two opposing gazes meet, I consider how the reflecting processes diverge.

My comparison between myself and the operator of the drone makes apparent the political differences of our positions. The operator's gaze is a preliminary attack, motivated by specific military purposes. My self-conscious gaze seeks to be multifaceted, slow, and creative, rather than destructive. I aim not to reduce what I see but to expand it. Paglen's gaze reflects the drone's only insofar as they behold one another: his perspective, as we have seen, is spatially (and therefore politically) opposed to that of the machine. His camera points upward, while the drone and its operators see him from a God's-eye-view. An aerial view is a symptom of a desire for mastery of vision. The overhead view attempts to see everything, and therefore to know all things. Ryan Bishop shows that this perspective has its limitations, since the aerial view is subject to the opaque barrier of the ground, and thus 'remain[s] stuck in producing surface readings' (2011: 276). The drone, although it may be equipped with different kinds of cameras, sees only from above by virtue of its overhead location. It follows that Paglen, whose backdrop is the vast openness of space, has created an image that is not susceptible to the superficial or flattening effects of the God's-eye-view.

Parentheses

Considering Paglen's positioning as the artist and the decisions of framing that he has made lead me to consider the photograph in terms of its art-object status. I look back at the photograph's title: *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*. In *The Truth in Painting* Jacques Derrida asks,

> what happens when one entitles a 'work of art'? What is the topos of the title? Does it take place (and where?) in relation to the work? On the edge? Over the edge? On the internal border? […] Or between that which is framed and that which is framing in the frame? (1987: 24)

I consider the words *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* in light of topos, edges and frames. The parentheses are a manner of frame, shielding the words *Reaper Drone* from the light, and indicating the drone's unavailability. Why call something *Untitled*? The title is useful for my present writing task, but even in this purely functional sense it frustrates me — there are many images in the series named *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*. Ruth Bernard Yeazell describes how the word 'untitled' resonates as an art world gesture even in its seeming lack of meaning: 'under modern circumstances of display and reproduction […] *Untitled*, too, is a kind of title: a word that routinely accompanies the work as it circulates in the culture and that instructs us, if only by negation, how to view it' (Yeazell, 2015: 19). The title in this instance is a shadow version of the image, emphasizing the same opacity and refusal to be seen as the photograph itself, while simultaneously recalling a history of art that places

Paglen's work along a spectrum of abstract artists that includes Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko. Paglen's photograph *Chemical and Biological Weapons Proving Ground; Dugway, UT; Distance approx. 42 miles; 11:17 am, 2006* is particularly Rothko-like, taken at a distance so great that the horizon resembles a division between two flat shades on the same plane. If, after Yeazell, Paglen's word *Untitled* offers me instruction on how to view his photograph, it is an indicator of how his work is situated, of its role as an art object that lies beyond operational imagery in the domain of civilian art world viewership, even if in this instance I am watching it on a screen.

The parentheses of *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* contain the object held parenthetically within the pictured clouds. There is humour in the title, and I feel the butt of the joke is all of us, terrestrial civilian humans, who stand upon the ground looking up at a newly politicized and weaponized sky. If I look at this photograph and think only about how beautiful the pretty colours are, the joke is on me. The image is beautiful, though, with its pink and lilac tints, ethereal and calming like a gentle exhale or the soft texture of a flower petal. There is a dynamism to the cloud pattern, too. A fluffy concentration of bubbling cloud emerges in the photograph's lower right-hand corner, with beams of light shining up and out into the corners of the image, creating the lighter tones and patches of deeper pinks and blues. Before I get too lost in it, I draw myself away from the 'untitled' cloud and back to my targeting mission. Humour there may be, but it does not last long. Esther Leslie recalls Walter Benjamin's interest in the photomontage and its relation to captions and titles, quoting a lecture of his in *On Photography*: 'what we require of the photographer is the ability to give his picture the caption that wrenches it from modish commerce and gives it a revolutionary use value' (2015: 26). Paglen's image has indeed been wrenched from one visual mode to another, from something pleasant on the eye to something sinister, by the caption that 'cuts into the surface gleam […] in the process making it unusable for commodity ends that aim to sell the dream of social repletion' (Leslie in Benjamin, 2015: 26). In Paglen's photograph, the title achieves this gesture of undercutting visual beauty, and of showing us its artifice.

I cannot see the drone. I suspend this thought, further, and find it leads me to apprehension. I am not permitted to see the drone, and yet I am still searching for it, still playing the role of observer, for I know there is more to be understood from this photograph. Consequently, the act of observation is one of defiance, or rebellion. I have been given a role to play, one in which I must, yet cannot, observe an object in a photograph. The caption taunts me. I am being dared to look further, to enter into a game. The drone is hidden, so I hunt for it. I have become a predator and the drone is my prey. A dramatic metaphor, but appropriate: it is the (safe and silent) inversion of the drone's relation to humans in the real world. As I hunt for Paglen's drone, my relationship with the image makes relevant what it claims to represent: the real-world drone. I am enacting its methodology, and in this way Paglen's photograph effectively communicates a process of movement and destruction far beyond the scope of a still and silent image.

In the act of concealing the drone, Paglen alters the praxis of viewership. Our process of creating knowledge cannot here follow an expected path, wherein we witness the realization of a photographic subject. The lack of the drone shows us that a visual image does not have to express meaning via proximity. Paglen shows us the efficacy of the opposite strategy: the distance between the drone and the lens is essential to the photograph and to an understanding of the machine. Paglen chose not to use a lens that would have rendered the drone more clearly. As Christy Lange writes for the contemporary art magazine *frieze*, '[Paglen] chooses to place [the drones] at the limits of our vision' (2013). This edge of seeing and of knowing reflects the political landscape these machines inhabit. What we are told about how these weapons are used and the damage they deal is barely representative of the truth — as in the photograph, all we know is that we know very little.

The edge of the visible

As I continue to watch *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* in its small on-screen form, I see, unbelievingly, a drone, in the bottom right-hand corner of the photograph. My investigation takes a turn. What I see is not strictly a drone. I know it is a drone because I trust in Paglen's caption (although we know titles are not always to be relied upon), but what I see is a tiny black smudge. The smudge once again defies my understanding of photographic subjects. I learn nothing from this image about the proportions, dimensions, or physical form of the drone. I am not able to ascertain from the photograph what kind of drone is pictured, although each image's title confidently claims to know. The photograph conveys its version of truth through near absence, the pictured drone barely visible. Recalling a coded equivalence between size and power, exemplified for Paul Virilio by the 'overblown stone or bronze colossi' of Rameses and Stalin, Paglen suggests the miniscule object's impotence (2009: 32). If anything, the photographed object, failing to be a subject, (I use the word object to evoke the drone's physical properties, its thing-ness), is rendered entirely insignificant. Just as in the photograph's title, the drone itself seems to be an afterthought, a parenthetical inclusion in an image otherwise populated by the drifting shapes of clouds.

I am watching a smudge, its shape distorted and unreadable. I see an expanse of sky which surrounds it; pink and blue, held together by the illusion of stillness which is shared by photographs and landscapes seen from great distances. Unmoving, the drone is made safe. I am the only one with time on my side. Still, I struggle against the near invisibility of the drone. Two digressing thoughts emerge: one, I see a black stain. Two, I do not see the shape of a drone. These thoughts each bring about their own lines of questioning.

The tiny black stain, a speck on the photographic plane, summons a wealth of associations. It is smudge-like, an imperfection on the smooth cleanliness of the image. It is the only mark that is inorganic, incongruous, a disturbance to the

homogeneity of flowing, atmospheric lightness. It disturbs the 'wandering or swept gaze' (Azoulay, 2010: 254–55). It is not an object of pleasure, instead calling to mind the insectile, or an unwanted invader. The disturbance is caused in part by the invader's surroundings. There is a profound calmness to the sky in the photograph. The warm pink is almost too sweet. It is a comfortable, easy image, of the kind reproduced *en masse* for the walls of waiting rooms and rental apartments. These qualities make the presence of the tiny smudge all the more frustrating. On my computer screen, I invariably scrape at it with a finger, in the hope it will disappear at my touch. For all the attention I pay it, I can never see the black smudge approaching the status of a sign. It remains a signifier, and even then, I cannot reconcile the image of the machine in my mind to the mark on the photograph as I view it on my computer screen. The drone is rendered amorphous by distance and the failure of sight and capture, and by the secondary mediation provided by my laptop. In this incarnation, it is an 'unknown known' (Žižek, 2004), a representation of state practices which I know to exist but cannot truly know or see, due to its distance from the lens, and due to my privileged place of writing, which renders the consequences of the drone's reality incomprehensible.

While frustrating to the observer, Paglen's drone-smudge is a deliberate artistic choice. The details of the drone's shape are concealed, which leads to additional effects. Blurriness can tell me a great deal, even, or especially, if it means the loss of a detailed view. For Raymond Bellour, a blurred form is significant because it marks the point at which the camera creates an image beyond the capability of the human eye (1993). We may recall freeze-frame images in our minds or on canvas, but to capture movement, with all its distortion of form and surface, in an enduring image, is a skill of the machine. Blur, writes Bellour, 'offers up the perception of […] duration' (1993: 167). There is an alive-ness implied in the out-of-focus object. Like an insect on a screen, Paglen's drone bears this life, this 'internal rumbling,' a suggestion that it might move across the image surface at any moment (1993: 166). It is a fearful and threatening effect, which even beyond any contextual knowledge of drones creates discomfort by suggesting the photographic image may suddenly lose its logical, motionless form, and begin to move off the image surface. By blurring the drone, Paglen indicates a potential for escape, both from the image surface and from our political comprehension. This threat, this determined obscurity, mimics the dynamic of power between the drone and its target, because the drone's movements are not predictable to those it watches, and because the state policies that operate it are not available to the scrutiny of those whom they affect. This lack of transparency is also apparent in the unspecific language used, for instance, by the United States in their 'most basic category of drone targeting, the military-aged male' as described by Thomas Stubblefield (2020: 38), a category so vague it engenders a 'semiotic helplessness' in which the drone operator is free to interpret images into data along very broad terms, thus minimizing their accountability (Stubblefield, 2020: 47).

Clouds

Considering *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* as a component of a broader photographic series provides an alternative exploratory perspective. Viewing the other images in the *Drones* series, I am drawn to a visual trend. Prominent in many of the photographs are clouds. The clouds exist at the content or narrative level of the photographs. They form the substance of the images, and along with the array of colours, provide each with its specific, identifying quality. The blues and pinks of *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* are unlike most of its companion images, and its cloud forms are particularly amorphous. The clouds are distant but seem to radiate across the image in a way that guides the eye towards the drone at the photograph's bottom right corner. The relationship between the clouds and the drone created by their positioning creates a sense that each has autonomy with regard to their relationship with the other. Both clouds and drone seem laden with intention. Paglen's drones fly in a sky populated in visual culture by an array of mythical and theological figures, who spring to mind as I consider the agency of the heavens. The many meanings of the sky in art have not passed Paglen by; he acknowledges his place within a long tradition of artists 'who look up at the clouds,' and makes specific reference to the JMW Turner painting *Angel Standing in the Sun* (1846) while discussing his photograph called *Reaper in the Sun* from 2013 (*Trevor Paglen: Power & Perspective | ART21 'Exclusive'*, 2015, 03:33).

My struggle to make out the tiny drone among the clouds recalls a comment by art historian Hubert Damisch:

> bodies entwined in clouds defy the laws of gravity and likewise the principles of linear perspective, and they lend themselves to the most arbitrary of positions, to foreshortenings, deformations, divisions, magnifications, and fanciful nonsense. (2002: 15)

The clouds do not provide a useful framework with which to interpret the drone's shape: there is no possibility of measuring distance, altitude, or direction (at this stage). Writing on the baroque aesthetics of military technology, Mark Dorrian cites two interpretations of amorphous or distorted structures: on the one hand, such objects suggest the awesome power of God, against which the gentle beauty of nature is defined (2003). On the other are the 'horrific or abject […] phenomena which must be disavowed' (Dorrian, 2003: 99–100). It is impossible to be sure of the provenance of Paglen's smudge simply from looking at the image. Whether it erupts from the glory of God, or indicates something entirely aberrant, remains ambiguous. By obscuring the drone, Paglen presents the possibility that there is nothing more to see (and nothing more needed) in this photograph than the world's natural beauty — but this possibility is undermined by the image's title. The second look, the knowing return, is not filled with hope, but the apprehension of discovering the ugliness of the drone and the politics with which it is laden within the boundless sky.

The amorphous quality of clouds is reflected in the range of meanings they point to when deployed in language. In English we use clouds as everyday indicators of a range of emotions: they hang over us, we search for their silver linings, or our heads are in the clouds. We find in them a power of expression which aids us, we invoke them to create a symbolic and shared understanding, and we turn to them to help us find language for the inexpressible. Mary Jacobus writes:

> Clouds draw the eye upward: to movement, distance, and height, to the dynamics of space and the overarching sky. For most of us, they provoke ideas about transcendence and inwardness. (2012: 10)

Jacobus's words suggest a more poetic relation to clouds than Damisch's 'foreshortenings, deformations, [and] divisions', conjuring a sense of cosmic awareness that recalls the sublime. Her words invoke spatiality and verticality and indicate that while our position beneath the 'overarching sky' is central to our relation to clouds, they do not necessarily ground us. Instead, 'when we look up, we lose ourselves' (2012: 10–11). This is the effect of *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, in which the lack of an earth-based structure or context creates a sense of placelessness for the viewer, whose location in relation to the image content is unknowable. By looking up to the clouds we are transported to a location elsewhere that we cannot place, for the clouds above us can be located anywhere, and are not framed or grounded by any recognizable terrestrial forms.

Phantoms and the paranormal

The invocation of the recognizable and terrestrial implies the possibility of the unrecognizable and extra-terrestrial. Karen Beckman has touched on Paglen's harnessing of visual inscrutability in her work on contemporary political art, writing that Paglen uses a 'logic of opacity […] recognizing the existence of spaces, people, and information that are unknown' (2007: 67). For Beckman, Paglen eschews photography as revelation, in a conventional sense of making the unknown clear or prominent. *Drones* illuminates the limits of the known or viewable, exposing concealment as a political methodology rather than focusing on concealed subjects. The invisibility of the object is more usefully exposed than the object's form or nature. The cloudiness is a necessary part of what is being communicated. Here I shift my wording, and thus my thinking, from cloudiness to blurriness. As we have seen, Paglen only suggests a drone. I have considered blurriness as an indication of movement, but blur also evokes the eerie or ghostly. An association with phantom images complicates both my sense of my own viewership and of Paglen's role as the photographer since it targets my intention to trust the truth of the photograph.

In an early episode of *The X Files*, Mulder and Scully visit a small-town bar in Idaho while investigating the disappearance of an Air Force pilot (1993). Mulder, convinced the local air base is using UFO technology to develop secret military

aircraft, sees a photograph on display which captivates him. It is an out-of-focus photograph of a blue sky in which a triangular metallic object is suspended. He is entranced by the possibility of truth offered by the photograph, and despite Scully's mockery, is convinced of its authenticity. He 'wants to believe', as his famous office poster declares. Mulder returns to the photograph throughout the episode, keeping it on hand to thrust in the face of nonbelievers. Later, after spying on the military base and experiencing a close encounter with the aircraft, he is captured by a group of government officials and his memory of the evening is erased. The photograph is all that remains of the truth he may have uncovered but now cannot recall. It suggests, as Barthes said, only that this truth *has been* (1993): it will always fail as proof of what exists right now. A memento of something unknowable, the photograph endures, a symbol of the illusion of reality promised by all photographs.

When *The X Files* was first aired, America was experiencing what Elaine Showalter describes as 'panic [of] epidemic proportions' due to alleged alien abductions (1998: 5). Whole communities rallied against their accused abductors, and stories sprang up from individuals across America describing the same or similar traumatic experiences at the hands of a technologically superior alien race (Showalter, 1998: 195–97). UFO stories have developed a nostalgic association. In the 1990s, Americans were seeing something in the sky quite unlike the angels of Romantic or Victorian Britain. After half a century waiting for death to arrive via ICBM, perhaps it is little wonder that the terrifying flying machines were eventually spotted and attributed to an invader almost impossible to disavow. I recall these tantalizing flying objects when I see Paglen's photographs. The comparison is related both to the mystery of the photographed machines and to a questioning skyward gaze. Looking to the sky can be a futile act; an acknowledgement of a greater power or of one's own vulnerability, perhaps a daydream or abstraction.

Just as *The X Files* implied, UFO sightings are often linked to military operations. Indeed, Mulder's UFO hardly seems unusual in the wake of the stealth program's aircraft designs. Like all paranormal photography, UFO pictures are often blurry enough to suggest, to hint at, the implied object. Anything too clear is easily disproved or held to task. Mark Alice Durant finds an inevitable connection between blur and the paranormal, describing photography as the ideal way to explore images of the unknown: 'born of science and magic, alchemy and optics — [photography] produces images that are familiar and strange, anchored in time yet violently detached from its flow', a description that might just as easily apply to ghosts (2003: 15). Perhaps many of our hoax paranormal or mystery photographs are indeed real — but rather than spectres and aliens, they may show secret aircraft test-flown above the desert, as Paglen himself looks toward in his project *The Other Night Sky* (2010–ongoing).

Following Durant's impressions of the trends of paranormal photography, I note the same 'contradictory impulses' in Trevor Paglen's *Drones* series (Durant, 2003: 15). I question why Paglen has drawn on the tropes of paranormal photography to

convey objects which are already so invisible. What does he achieve by emphasizing what Durant summarizes as 'refractions, foggy figures, and ambiguity' (2003: 14)? The connection indicates that military drones are illusory objects, but further, it points to the illusory nature of images and interrogates the totalizing power of visuality central to the operation of drones in war. Paglen's evocation of ufology is a logical extension of his role as a photographer of covert government operations. His photographs fit within a pre-existing system of visual apprehension of new technologies. By evoking this tradition, Paglen calls on his viewers' practised responses of scepticism, intrigue, a distaste for the uncanny, perhaps disrespect for the object or for the photograph. These are practiced reactions to paranormal images, helping us to contextualize new photographs that resist our conventions of viewership. The primary question which obsesses Fox Mulder and is raised by all paranormal photography is that of veracity. Is the image real? By raising the question of the reality of the drone, Paglen invites the viewer to question the truth-fulness — and, by extension, the politics — of the social and military systems that it represents.

Conclusion

Esther Leslie writes, after Benjamin, that

> Photography captures a moment in time, but what it captures exceeds the intention of the photographer. Photography, for Benjamin, accesses a differently constituted reality, with layers unseeable by the naked eye and made perceptible only by technological means. A spark of contingency finds its way onto the photographic image. In this splinter of space and time, in its margins or previously unseen elements, history rests, awaiting rediscovery. (Leslie in Benjamin, 2015: 19)

By exploring visual associations that emerge from repeated viewings, it is not only the snapshot of time captured in the photograph that can be rediscovered, but also the multiplicity of meanings that extend from each viewer's conversation with an image, brought forth by individual experience, the site of viewing, the slowness of the affect-based gaze.

We have travelled across the landscape of Paglen's *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, stopping to take in its views. My wandering gaze has considered the drone's initial absence, its represented form, the clouds, phantoms, the eye of the drone, and the photographic watcher's role in meaning-making. In the photograph, a huge expanse of sky is visible, but within the borders of the image is the haunting drone. Is the drone's scopic regime echoed in *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, or rejected? How has a slow gaze helped to elucidate the meaning of this photograph? Paglen has mimicked the dual gestures of seeing and killing: his camera has caught and trapped a drone, which now resides forever in the image. In the photographic gesture of capture he non-violently re-enacts the seeing-killing of the drone by

targeting it with his camera. The drone is trapped and performatively rendered inactive, contained within the edges of the photograph. Paglen positions himself and his camera on the ground, resisting the aerial gaze, although he leaves ambiguity about the viewer's position to create a vertiginous and expansive feeling similar to that of the aerial view.

Paglen presents machines in his photographs in aesthetically familiar ways, as we have seen through their commonality with paranormal imagery. While recognizable these aesthetic associations nonetheless help to entrench a sense of the unknown in Paglen's images, through their determined resistance against clarity and communication. An inscrutability present in the work points to the drone's deployment of operational imagery, of machine vision that is not for human eyes. Here, the unreadability of the image invites me to recall the intended watcher of the photograph, and by extension, its intended purpose.

Paglen is not concerned with communicating information about his target — not in the same manner of surveillance and reconnaissance as the drone, at least — because he chooses to invite blur, ambiguity, and doubt into his image. These are accidental side effects for the drone's image capturing technologies, but in using them deliberately Paglen shows us the ambiguity — politically, ethically and spatially — of the drone. The blur also suggests an uncertainty that looks forward: what will the future of drone technology bring to our world? The future, like the photograph, is hard to make out.

The initial absence of the object is indicative of the political schema in which the drone operates. Misinformation and secrecy are endemic to drone use, as Paglen shows us in his images. Finding the drone in *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* creates a targeting-like process for the viewer, while also adding the dimension of temporality to the still image through creating a sense of the photograph changing over time. It is thus an ideal image with which to converse, as it were, over a long period of time, allowing the meaning of the image to develop with repeated viewings. We have seen that making space for duration or conversation with an image allows for initial impressions to be rewritten, and for new ones to emerge. Ambiguity and complexity invite a continuing return, an appeal for us to keep looking, even if what we gain is an understanding of how little we know. As James Bridle concludes in his book *New Dark Age*, 'we only have to think, and think again, and keep thinking' (2018: 252). Paglen's work shows us that achieving understanding of, and therefore finding the potential to resist, the political inscrutability of drone operations and the inequity of the power held by the drone operator and its target lies in creating our own scopic regime, defined by a slow gaze that returns repeatedly to its object, and in the centring of conversational, durational image-watching.

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S. F. Maxwell completed her doctoral thesis, entitled 'The Art of Watching: Military Drones in 21st Century Visual Artwork' at the University of Sheffield in 2021. Her research focuses on affect and aesthetics in contemporary art, war studies, and contemporary cinema.

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