Over the wall: a drone view of the ‘other’ side

Abstract

This study intervenes in the presumed remoteness of the visual condition and experience of the aerial image created by the drone apparatus, to create new knowledge about the cultural and societal spaces that these envisioning technologies reveal.

Using The Walls that Surround Us, a short drone-film of the Peace Walls in Belfast by local film-maker James Brennan, this study captures the participant’s lived experience of the place that is the film’s subject, and analyses how the system of visual signification captured within the film, operates to intervene, sustain, or subvert his association with this place.

This ethnographic framing of the other side of the wall using the drone apparatus, reveals how the human is interconnected with the wider material world, its histories, and events and thus, like the over general labels used to define the different communities in Belfast (Catholic and Protestant), cannot be reduced to dialectical opposition: as a technologically mediated condition there is at once difference and the same.

Introduction

Visualizations of landscape contribute to our social imaginary; we identify with how the image of the landscape reflects the ways in which humans live together and how the visual form of the landscape operates to represent collective life. The translation and interpretation of the image is born from the way in which the image is constructed and how it codifies information for the viewer.

Due to the accessibility of drone technologies the aerial view of the landscape has become more pervasive in today’s cultural consciousness (McCosker, 2015; Munster, 2014). While these new images have the potential to reveal more knowledge about the socio-spatial conditions of the landscapes in which we live, the aerial image is not however, considered to operate within the sensibilities of lived experience. The aerial image constructs a particular landscape, with the dominant vertical emphasis of narrative, space and landscape, and therefore the aerial image is understood to be interpreted through considered isolation and defined by topographic detail. With this vertical emphasis on space and form, the landscape image forms a topology that is abstracted from the lived experience of spaces; the visual schema it creates is essentially dismembered from the horizontal conditions of lived space and thus its interpretation is understood as being devoid of human sensibilities (Blaagaard,
Furthermore, research into the role of drones in contemporary culture has assigned a language of critique where a logic of distance and separation has been used to suggest that these mediated images ‘separate humans from the world and from each other’ (Campbell, 2018).

However, while the topographical emphasis in these images may operate to communicate the overall environmental schema rather than a more human-scale view, the performative element of the drone image, what is reduced and what is unified, is considered central to the possibilities of what can be communicated and interpreted in these landscape images (Harper and Rayner, 2010). As Hughes (2002) discussion on Delaunay’s model of vision highlights, vision is performed by the conjoining of what we know with want we see; how it is we know something, will have a profound effect on how the drone apparatus operates to inform meaning.

This study of the landscape from above looks again into the aerial image to further understand the nature of the gaze that is elicited by the aerial image when mediated by drone technologies. It is an attempt to move away from a rhetoric of anthropocentric humanism and apply a posthuman lens to address the entanglement of subject, object, and technology and the chain of associations through which representation and meaning of the drone landscape image emerges.

Responding to Braidotti’s (2011) appeal for “pragmatic experimentation” (2011: 45) in the posthuman condition to bridge the gap between critical thought and real-life issues in society today, this study deploys a situated visual practice upon which an examination of the reality of the space consciousness elicited by the drone image can be interrogated. The study proposes to intervene in what is already known in the visualized space of the drone image, using an anthropological approach to connect a visual literacy to the drone image that address the assemblage of people, technology and place.

**Looking at the drone image, a literature review**

The discourse on drone vision has gained a specific materiality that maps the drone image to the apparatus of the technology that produces it (Greene, 2015) and thus its aesthetic is assumed to rest upon a logic of technological rationalisation. Technologies have become part of the way in which we see and mediate the world around us, and as Legrady (2014) posits, how we draw meaning from the image systems, largely gains currency from the belief systems and values that are in place at the time of the technological tools that mediate the
image construction, and as such, images are understood to exist in a ‘socially defined world of visual continuum’ (2014, 266). In this regard, it is therefore unsurprising that whilst early literature connected the aerial image created in the geographical imagination to a spectacle of freedom and emancipation (Adey, 2010) and was widely promoted through visualisations of futurity in urban and architectural documentary traditions (Dunn et al., 2014), the aesthetics of the drone image in current literature has become linked to surveillance networks and a politics of verticality in which everything can be ‘monitored, policed or destroyed from above’ (Weizman, 2002).

The trajectory towards the weaponization of drone technology has become central to its political discourse (Stahl, 2013) and underpinned by the fallibility of human vision and decision-making, promotes an ontology of virtualisation and visualisation that embodies racial and imperial regimes of knowledge (Packer and Reeves, 2013; Nath, 2016). The resultant visual discourse has embedded an aesthetic of precariousness in response to this rhetoric of technology mediated by precision-based warfare (Vågnes, 2017).

This literature into drone generated aesthetics draws upon the politics of surveillance that privileges looking at a distance and the depersonalised anonymous gaze (Gregory, 2012). Leveraging visual cultures theory that posit where a gap is created between the spectator and the spectacle, a sense of detachment and separation is assumed to resolve itself in how we see and know the world through the aerial image (Robbins, 1996). The logic of surveillance in the drone image has been explored in contemporary cinema with films such as Eye in the Sky (Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015) and Good Kill (Andrew Niccol, USA, 2014), that narrativize concepts of cognitive detachment and separation. With cinematic renderings of drone warfare in which the drone can inflict (and document) killing, these films intervene in the depersonalising effects of drone warfare by creating counter narrative schemes that position and prioritise the actions and trauma of the drone pilot over the death and destruction of the enemy (Campbell, 2018; Horsman, 2020).

Visuality and making visible has become part of the forensic exercise in reading the drone image within the field of journalism practice (Tremayne and Clark, 2014; Bartzen Culver, 2014). Remotely sensed images from satellites have been used and reported by individuals and organisations as a forensic testimony of witness for acts of war and situations of crisis in places made inaccessible by state actors. James Bridle’s Dronstagram satellite images reveal the realities of the effect of drone strikes in remote geographies. The testimony of the act of war captured in these images is defiant and irrefutable, creating a visual language that speaks
to the politics of witnessing. However, while these images are credited with the ability to expand the abilities to see and impose a visual indexicality upon the landscape by engaging in the politics of witnessing, this topology of the vertical creates an inversion and complexity in the act of witness. Where eye-witness testimony gains credibility to speak to an event or occurrence through physical presence, operating as the indexical image of objective scientific fact, enabling these objects to speak as such, the satellite or drone image is understood to gain priority over the testimony of presence and thus operates to disregard the human testimony of truth and subsequently disempower the human voice as political subject (Awan, 2016; Gynnild, 2014).

Video artist Omar Fast considers these paradoxes of visibility and opacity created by the problematic filtering of the technological gaze and promotes caution in reading an image that is devoid of the relevant signs and signifiers that are pertinent to the meaning and representation that is perceived in the image. Juxtaposing audio in the form of narration and video in tableaux vivants, *5000 feet is best* (Fast, 2011) illuminates the alternative realities that exist between the human horizontal plane of observation and the vertical drone vision, that operate to fog inconsistencies between truth and fiction. Thus, where eye-witnessing is performed by robots, the objective account of the machine lens is without the subjectivity of the human account and is subsequently “exposure without intelligibility” (Holert, 2016:278), and what is mapped into a system of information relationships, both temporal and spatial, creates “an aesthetic realism emptied of any substantial social critique” (Hecker, 2010: 257).

Yet, as Tufekci (2014) argues, surveillance and resistance form part of the same continuum, and where these same technologies have been deployed by communities as acts of resistance in themselves, the visibilities of control associated with surveillance have been subverted through alternate visibilities of recognition (Zuev and Bratchford, 2020).

Jensen (2016) highlights that while the aesthetic of the drone image is inextricably linked to a language of surveillance, the mobility of the drone technology may in fact alter the “notion of surveillance by means of being mobile” (2016: 67). Where CCTV provides a mode of observation that is static and fixed within specific geographies, the drone has aerial mobility, its gaze is unfixed and untethered, and it is free to roam, track and find. A fluid vertical geography is therefore performed, one that creates voids and volumes between and around buildings and nature, and this volume, verticality and three-dimensionality subsequently become part of the spatial imagination in the interpretation of the drone image.
This mobility of the drone camera has turned surveillance into a spectacle and operates as a creative act with which to create new visualisations of contemporary life. These new visualisations are more often playful than political (Koskela and Mäkinen, 2016), with gap between the spectator and the spectacle creating a transformative effect in formalising the logic of the geography, and how it is known. The low obliques both frame the familiar and recognisable, and these enfold three dimensional volumes into cartographic maps creating a new interface between geosciences and social sciences (Birtchnell and Gibson, 2015).

Pugliese’s (2018) analysis of Adrian Stimson’s video installation As Above So Below argues that these transformative visual affects create a visuality that reveals ‘more than human testimonies.’ Here, Stimson’s use of drone video to narrativize the genocidal history of the displacement of indigenous communities, manipulates a spatial consciousness in which the traces of the absent human voices is revealed in the living landscape and subsequently defies deliberate acts of obliteration.

This mobility also promotes a posthuman anthropomorphic identity. As the drone’s machine intelligence grows, it breaks free from its human author and becomes a sentient being. Technological pragmatism that underlines the politics of the surveillance, that was so firmly connected to questions of control and power, now raises concerns of disorder and disempowerment created by the rouge, lonely drone (Morrison et al., 2013). The performative engagement of the drone gains an autonomous nature and becomes part of the unfolding dynamics in the complexity of what is seen, and how it is known.

**Method and visual materials**

As demonstrated in the review of literature, the global apparatus in which the drone image forms a mode of spectatorship, is underpinned by conditions of remoteness. This ability to remotely sense places and create narratives at a distance from which the drone image is sensing these places promotes a depersonalised gaze that is a technological consequence of distance and absence. While this at-a-distance discourse does raise critical questions about the human-machine assemblage, the subsequent ontology for these technologically mediated visions have largely imposed a set of material constraints of vision, and thus ignores the situated practice of phenomenological, cultural, and historical conditions of these remotely sensed places and our relationship with these places.

When approaching space of places using a sociological discourse in which the body is understood to impose the schema on space (McCullough, 2011), this creates topologies in
which the human experience of space becomes the logic on which effectives bonds are created between people and places (Entrikin, 1991). Hence this study is an attempt to create and understand the visual language of the drone image by approaching drone vision as a posthuman condition of seeing and being relevant to places that are known. Analysing process, object, event, and experience connected to drone technologies using a situated practice of seeing that emphasises the agentic contributions of nonhuman forces (Bennett, 2010), this study intervenes in the presumed remoteness of the visual condition and experience of the aerial image created by the drone apparatus, to create new knowledge about the cultural and societal spaces that these envisioning technologies reveal.

Operating to illuminate and make visible the symbolic value of the messages of the socio-spatial conditions of the landscape mediated by the drone image, the study constructs an ethnographic fieldwork methodology, using participant research to evolve a reflexive strategy for understanding how the drone image mediates the gaze in the visual system communicated.

In doing so, this study uses The Walls that Surround Us, a short drone-film by Belfast filmmaker James Brennan as a catalyst to initiate a conversation with Brennan about the signs and the signifiers contained in the drone film, and subsequently document the narrative scheme that he positions upon the film, and his reflections on the situated practice of place captured in the film. The study captures the participant’s lived experience of the place that is the film’s subject, and analyses how the system of visual signification captured within the film, operates to intervene, sustain, or subvert his association with this place.

**Peace walls, a context**

The Walls that Surround Us is a drone film that captures the ‘peace wall’ that forms part of the immediate architectural fabric of the community in which Brennan grew up. The role and significance of such security features are part of the legacy of conflict and violence in Northern Ireland. These so-called ‘peace walls’ are architectural features authorised and built by the Northern Ireland Office in response to the safety and security needs of the residents that live in interface areas. In these areas Catholic and Protestant communities live in very close geographical proximity to each other but are kept apart to provide safety and security for both communities.

It is important to highlight that those living at these interfaces have experienced to a much greater extent the trauma associated with the conflict in Northern Ireland, than other
communities living in the country. Statistical generated data sets have identified that 84.25% of all deaths occurred within 1 km of an interface, while two thirds occurred within 500 meters (O’Halloran, 2004).

These physical barriers that frame the residential segregation of Catholics and Protestants are defined by various visible and material manifestations, including walls, fences, gates, and buffer zones of derelict land or brownfield sites (Boal, 2002). Research commissioned by the Community Relations Council has identified that there are 88 segregation and security barriers across Belfast.

The physical manifestations of residential segregation of Catholics and Protestants in Belfast has framed particular vocabularies of those who live within them, including fear, victimhood, anxiety (Shirlow, 2002), and security, normality and even optimism (Leonard and McKnight, 2011). Perceptions of the rationale behind the implementation, and subsequent continuation of these peace lines differs in these communities: Catholics living in close proximity to the peace walls are more likely to perceive the walls to operate as a means of control, whereas the Protestant communities living at these interfaces, identify the wall as a tactic of protection (Byrne et al., 2012).

Image 1: Still image from The Walls that Surround Us, by permission of James Brennan

Peace walls as a mode defensive architecture, are a means by which order and control have been implemented in zones of conflict; as physical structures they isolate communities in
order to both defend and protect them. Studies into the role of defensive architecture and the materiality of the physical division created by these features, that are linked to questions of the sociological conditions experiences by those living within these communities, point to discourses and social practices that are framed by questions of division, ‘the other’ and ‘outsideness’ (Keenan, 2010; McAtackney, 2011).

**Process and event: filming from ‘inside’ the wall**

_Over the Wall_ maps out four specific interface geographies to the north of Belfast city where this type of defensive architecture is currently operating to separate communities, including Manor Street, Cluan Place, the Shankhill Road and Springfield Road. Growing up and living within a few hundred yards of one of these interfaces, Brennan’s recall, and memory of the act of filming, and the reflection on the film outcome, highlight how the particular vocabularies that frame the spatial existence in the divided community reveal themselves in the visual politics of the vertical in the drone film.

With Brennan describing his physical self as situated ‘inside’ the wall as he directs the drone, the film begins with the drone camera rising slowly from the ground, scaling the height of the wall, and rotating to gaze at the other side. With the territory highly politicised in the consciousness of the filmmaker, Brennan positions himself throughout the filming, within a zone of safety on his side of the wall, flying the drone only within a few feet across the divide.

”I felt that this was something that I wasn’t allowed to do…I had to get up early to make sure that no-one was around while I was filming…if people knew I was from the other side…”

When asked if he was “hiding behind the wall”, he replies “…almost”.

Brennan’s explanation of his sense of self when filming, evokes the discourses of victimhood and fear that are common in these communities, and acknowledges how safe and unsafe places influence movement through these areas (Shirlow, 2003). Tethered to the anxiety of the operator, the limited zone of visual displacement of the drone from the operator, frames the point of view of the other from a place of security and familiarity. Only when the camera captures the landscape of _his_ side, does the drone become untethered from this tension, and roam freely.
Although living in proximity on one side of the wall, Brennan has never previously observed what is on the other side of the wall, “I have never been there.” The drone image is thus operating between the double logic of both private and public space, geographically bound by the presence and immediacy of the drone operator on one side of the wall and covertly undertaking domestic surveillance of the other. The politics of space, place and identity mediate the visual regimes of the apparatus and rather than succumbing to the dark technologies of media (Lemos Morais, 2014) that promote invisible processes of technological mediation, the system of surveillance operates through the sightedness of the drone operator and sensory apparatus of the drone working in unison.

Brennan’s drone image therefore does not present a neutral lens for what is observed on the other side. The film is the cinematic vision of a unionist community from the perspective of a nationalist lens. Directing the camera lens is towards the other side, Brennan’s objective is not to present both sides simultaneously, but rather, operates to reveal what can be seen on the other side.

As a sensorial image the drone technology works upon the body in very different ways. To move the drone camera, requires an algorithmic processing layer that resituates the image object relationship outside an embodied experience. The gestures of control required to operate a drone attend to multiple drone actions (speed, altitude, direction, pitch etc.), and point attention along unfamiliar directions. As a cinematographic practice, the velocities, trajectories and viewpoints become relevant to the compositional ambitions of the meanings/representations to be captured within the film assemblages, with the drone operator (essentially the film director) required to make on-the-fly adjustments in line with the cinematographic plan. Studies have identified the experience of flying a drone in space as both cogitatively demanding and disorientating (Daggett, 2015; Christ et al., 2016). Here, standing in the shadow of the wall, this complexity is juxtaposed with the spatial anxiety of the filmmaker, and although experienced in using a drone for filming, Brennan cited many instances of frustration during filming, where the sensory distraction created between production and consumption of the drone image was often overwhelming.

In addition to the mediating his physical surroundings (to mitigate against harm to any passers-by, identification of a safe landing zone, obstacles including traffic that would create harm for himself, and avoiding collision between the wall and the drone) the algorithmically enabled interplay between the drone operator’s position in the physical world and the virtual layer that is mapped back to the control screen from the aerial drone, does not work to create
an embodied point of view for the drone operator, often working to disconnect and
disempower the filmmaker.

“I was getting frustrated with it, I was trying to make it fly forwards, by moving
forward myself!”

However, this image object relationship in the drone apparatus does not work to preclude
human agency as Paglen (2010) states, the drone image/view is only considered as
disembodied, precisely because we are embodied. By filming in location with the drone
camera, the reassignment of the subject object relationship through the algorithmic
processing works to resituate human agency by defining its physical parameters and enabling
its interactions.

This type of sensorial integration of the ethnographic image as promoted by Pink (2007), and
Edwards and Bhaumik (2009) is revealed here in both the consciousness of the filmmaker
and the environment that they move through. These intertwined trajectories of movement and
consciousness in which the image is both produced and consumed in place, creates a visual
event that situates the image in a manner that acknowledges its mobility. The activities
implemented in the production of the image that locate the filmmaker on one side of the wall,
and visually perform a mediated practice of place on the other side of the wall, creates a
system of informational relationships that is yet another example of the changing ontological
function of space in visual representations of reality (Lapenta, 2011).

**Object and event: the view from above**

The view over the wall, although largely devoid of visible human presence, reveals the
mundane and the ordinary in the debris of everyday life. Where the function of the wall
operates to conceal the horizontal condition of living, the vertical makes transparent the
conditions of lived communities through their homes, gardens, parked cars, football pitches,
trampolines, discarded toys, gates, barriers, graffiti, brownfield sites and green open spaces.
For Brennan this is not a paradoxical space, it is explored through its referential context, a
search to find markers and events that frame his identity within this contested landscape.

For Brennan, this oscillation between invisibility and visibility mediated by the technology,
has a haptic quality, “I feel a sense of stillness in the landscape.” Such emphasis points to an
image that is constructed through spatiality, rather than temporality. The dominance of the
aesthetic aerial image operates to hold time, as if sensorially we cannot cope with being
above and mobile simultaneously. Only once a car travels across the observed scene, does the image jar to remind us of the temporality of what is being observed.

Image 2: Still image from *The Walls that Surround Us*, by permission of James Brennan

The visual scale in the drone’s eye view of the landscape captured by Brennan, is synonymous with other creative practices that promote and prompt conversations about drone vision (see for example *Blue Sky Days*, by Tomas Van Houtryve). The legal height limit for flying commercial drone octocopters is 400 feet and whilst this restrictive vertical condition creates a point of view of the landscape that displaces the known vertical spatial relations between objects, as one of the non-human elements in the assemblage, these technologically mediated conditions do not present for the spectator, a vertical viewing position beyond that which can be imagined. Neither does this vertical condition promote a distant or remote gaze; in the aerial image three-dimensional space is flattened and brought close to the picture plane, creating a condition of proximity to what is being observed.

The closeness to the picture plane of the landscape image filmed by the drone challenges our familiarity with the world. As a play of surfaces and patterns (tarmac, grass, tree-tops), it might be presumed that these visual forms might create a withdrawal in the consciousness of the spectator from the recognisable and traditional signs by which the landscape is known. However, Hoy (2019) highlights the significance of how this sense of proximity operates in the spatial imagination of the aerial image created by the drone. In comparison to the global
spatial images constructed by satellites, the drone hovers closer to the ground creating an image that operates to “disrupt and defamiliarize human vision by dint of this closeness, this sudden immediacy and relationality,” (2019: 66).

This sudden immediacy and relationality of the spatial drone image resonates with Brennan. For him, the horizontal condition of the wall exerts an individual force, controlling his movement and requiring negotiation as he transverses the geographies of the area. While there is cognisance that this is a mode of defensive architecture, it nonetheless is “a red brick wall that visually, to a large extent, blends in with its surroundings. To the observer, it looks “like part of the landscape”.

However, while these attempts to camouflage and/or blend the appearance of the wall within its urban environment does work to minimise condition of the defensive mode of the architecture in the observer on the ground, once viewed from above its strategic sensibility becomes immediately apparent. In the vertical condition of the wall, it gains a relationality by which it is understood to strategically operate to intervene in any evolving conditions of the normal evolving society. The wall becomes a border, “I can see this line, and you can tell that it has been thought out, it is meticulous, it has been planned.”

In the view from above, the wall makes legible and defines the material borders that operate to control the spatial practice of place in which these communities co-exist. In the drone view, this becomes a type of cartographic logic, where being in and travelling through these geographies prioritises the human subject as a political entity. These cartographically based sociological configurations are not only political, but operate to illustrate divisions between urban and rural, pedestrian routes versus environmental areas, vacant and lived spaces.

Visually there are ruptures in the stratified environment, with colours, textures and the geometries of composition defining the various visual cues that are operating to make legible and modulate reality. In line with Keenan’s analysis of the geometries of division that are constructed by the wall, the image of the wall from above fractures the landscape with such intensity that it frames Brenan’s visual language as describes the aerial image of the wall as a ‘line of division.”

“A line, geometrically, is violence done to a plane. Extending infinitely without changing direction, it cuts in half what, in its emptiness, was once a complete whole. It creates two, (two planes, two halves, two sides) where before there was nothing.”

Keenan (2010, 5)
The condition of difference that the line generates in the narrow cast views of the top of the wall is so violent that for Brennan, it is audible against the still geometries of the picture plane, “its loud”, and operates exclusively to reinforce the notion of difference “even though we live right beside each other, we are worlds apart.”

Image 3: Still image from The Walls that Surround Us, by permission of James Brennan

The wall as a visual material feature for Brennan, operates at the intersection of space and place. The geometry of the wall is the indicator on which he fits together and reconstructs the spatiality of his lived experience. While the wider oblique views from the drone film that captures the urban sprawl of Belfast, seek to provide a visual image of a city without territorial differences, the narrowcast aerial views that use the wall as a visual cut, operate to articulate a sense of difference more clearly. In these images, the divide between communities is articulated as a contrast between industrial units and vacant concrete lots on one side of the wall, and areas of housing on the other; areas of green open spaces juxtaposed against main arterial roads; dense areas of housing contrasted with homes that have been afforded space in their construction. In those vistas where the living conditions on both sides of the divide appear similar and thus may presume to represent collective life, Brennan visually objectifies the difference and articulates the sense of discrimination and bias that is prevalent in the nationalist community; ‘…their back gardens are bigger’.
However, there is a contradiction: while the aerial image emphasises the delineation between the communities through this line, and objective conditions of difference, the wider oblique views of the wall diminish this strategy of fracture.

In the wider oblique views of Belfast Brennan reflects on the connectivity that is emphasised. The geo-political context is not visible, the urban landscape does not contain signs and signifiers that are pertinent to the meaning and representation of the alternate sides of the community. Consequently, what is seen is a singular landscape, neither both sides nor either side of the sectarian divide. It is within this sameness, that Brennan identifies with a landscape that is time relevant; “here, life in the rest of Belfast goes on”. The oblique view works to unite the landscape, connecting the built environment to a condition in which the lived environment is presumed to be a shared experience.

The oblique angles of visions that situate the immediacy of the other side of the wall within the wider urban sprawl of Belfast, provide a visual image of a city without territorial differences, and force Brennan to question the logic of fracture, “How much protection do we need from each other?”

**Object and subject: between seeing and knowing**

In the planning stages of the project, Brennan had anticipated that two distinct visual phases would dominate the media text: the wall as a dominant material structure and marker for the beginning of the narrative from the perspective of ‘his’ side marking out what is known, and the subsequent view of the ‘other’ side marking out the unknown.

However, for Brennan, the process of cognition in first seeing the unfamiliar, and subsequently how this transitions to becoming established within familiar contexts, becomes the method by which he seeks to resolve the assemblage of subject, object and event.

In the first instance, the flight dynamics are significant. The durational reveal through the performance of the drone as it scales the wall, unfolds a view of the other side that is at first unfamiliar, different, and unknown.
Subsequently, once the horizon establishes itself within the frame, this operates to contextualise the ‘other’ within the wider geographies of the city. A transition to that which is known and familiar is established, and only then does Brennen stop objectifying the difference, and sees only the same.

Critically, there is a fetishization of the moment of relationality of the drone image in this transition,

“I keep searching in these scenes for the moment at which I transition from being unfamiliar with what I see, to recognising the landscape, and I can’t find it.”

This subjectivity and shifting in the dynamic frames of reference in the human-nonhuman assemblage, that pivots on intersecting and resonating elements, resists a singular reading of the simulated image or fixed classification system of practice. The shifting visual tension reveals a sense of relationality that oscillates between the aesthetics of immersion and the politics of detachment. The model of spectatorship of the landscape image framed by cinematic codes of convention, identifies that the goal of the landscape in cinema is to create a sense of immersion through spectator involvement in the screen image, operating to create a ‘visual voyage and a fantasy of penetrating the screen’ (Harper and Rayner 2010:21). This is what Robins refers to as the ‘intoxication of the phantasmagoria’ (120, 1996) in the screen image. This sense of immersion is entwined with the sensory distraction of the technologically mediated aspects of the image. The filmic aesthetic sensibilities of the drone
image allow the gaze to glide frictionless over the defensive structures that by their nature, seek to inhibit freedom of movement. The aesthetics of the technology create a spatial practice of place from a position in which the spectator appears to float above the scene, ‘unhinged from the gravitational forces that push us down’ (Brook and Dunn, 2011:145). The viewer is thus liberated from the visual geometries and physical conditions of lived space and the aerial image manipulates our spatial consciousness creating new conditions of image on which we make assessments and judgements about the environment in which we are living.

Conclusion

There are many statistical and quantitatively generated data sets that reveal the impact of these defensive forms of architecture positioned at interfaces between these communities. Yet, as a study of a young man’s experience of living in this spatially divided community that conjoins creative practice with dialogue that lingers in the moment of recognition and recall, this encounter between self, place and technology affirms the capacity and energy by which things can speak to us.

From his hiding position inside the wall, Brennan’s film both sustains and subverts a mode of lived experience in post conflict Belfast. However, it is the intensity by which these images speak to James is profound: there is at once fear, anxiety, surprise, revelation, recognition, and shame, “I feel 100% ashamed that I felt safe filming on my side of the wall”.

This study does not attempt to unify or make coherent these forms of aerial vison in the posthuman-technology assemblage of the drone’s eye view, but rather emphasises the need for tensions and contradictions that reveal themselves due to the specificity of both human and non-human elements in each text, to become part of the form and analysis of the modes and systems of representation in the drone apparatus. In this study the specificity of the point of view determines the object subject relationship within the assemblage of process, object image and event, and resolves a posthuman condition that is a paradox of invisibility and opacity, simultaneously marking out difference, and the same.

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