

Jamming the Simulacrum

On Drones, Virtual Reality, and Real Wars

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One of my earliest memories of war is from when I was six years old. I was in the first grade at Lycée Malalai, a large French-funded state school for girls in Kabul, where my mother, Mina Homayun Osman, was a teacher. During recess I was playing with my classmates when dust clouds rose all around us. Everyone became a blur of uniforms running in and out of dust and smoke. . . . I could tell something was very wrong. I went and stood on the stone wall that enclosed the playground to look for my mother. I don't know how much time passed—it seemed like forever—but she finally came for me.

From the rockets striking the exterior of our apartment complex, to shrapnel shattering our balcony windows, to spending days hiding out in my grandmother's basement, I keep many other memories of war from the multiple coups and battles that led to the full Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. To this day, flaring lights, certain burning smells, and the roaring sound of some airplane engines disturb me.

For a child, it is difficult to make sense of war. For an adult, it is easy to assemble the pieces and see that wars are essentially about base human desires of greed and profiteering. Whether motivated by geopolitical imperial ambitions or to feed the machine of the military industrial complex, war is always first and foremost an immensely profitable business that involves the building and maintaining of everything from bases, to prisons, to weaponry. Yet none of these motives makes sense if you have been on the receiving end of war. If you have seen the adverse domino effect of how a single act of aggression—one battle, one bullet, one missile, one bomb—can throw a peaceful country like Afghanistan into four decades of endless war with atrocious international human rights violations, war never makes sense.

I was the first generation of war. Although the war completely destroyed our lives in many ways, including the imprisonment of my father and the killing of two of my uncles by the Soviet-backed regimes, my immediate family was relatively fortunate in that we managed to escape Afghanistan alive. Between 1979 and 1989, more than half the country's residents became refugees—even more when internal refugees are considered.

During my many subsequent trips to visit my father, who remained in the region, I saw firsthand the atrocities left in the wake of the Soviet Occupation, first with the violence of the civil war and then with the rise of the Taliban regime. During my most recent post-9/11 research trips, I met and interviewed a new generation of war victims: many children and adults who have been impacted by US drone strikes. Although drone victims were not the explicit focus of my research trips, there is no avoiding the war-wounded and disabled in Afghanistan. Drone warfare, or what the US government calls “targeted killings,” has been carried out predominantly in the ethnically Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan, such as Farah, Paktia, and Kunar, and along the Northwest Frontier (NWF), on the border with Pakistan. Drone victims and their families were coming to Kabul, where I was mostly stationed, for medical treatment, surgeries, and amputations. I also visited the above provinces.¹

The vast majority of the drone strikes and resulting civilian casualties of the Af-Pak region are in the Northwest Frontier, where my family and I used to live and where we still have relatives. The NWF has become the ground zero of drone violence because historically, the region was set up by the British as a “buffer zone” to protect then British India. After the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British annexed parts of Afghanistan to India. With the signing of the Durand Line Treaty in 1893, the British split the Pashtun tribes of Afghanistan, whom they deemed to be particularly unruly and rebellious. Since the Partition, although the region is technically a part of Pakistan, to this day, neither government has been able to fully control the contested region, and Afghan people refuse to recognize the border.

Given that the NWF does not have a formal government and therefore lacks civilian protection and oversight, the region's population remains vulnerable to the Faustian collusion that emerged between the Pakistani and US governments. These governments have turned the

NWF into an experimental lab for testing both their surveillance drones, which monitor the region insistently, and their secret assassination program to eliminate people that both governments deem to be politically problematic. These drones terrorize and kill people without any due process of the law. Imran Khan, the popular former cricket champion turned politician, is one of the few regional politicians who has made these connections and has vowed to protect the people. An ethnic Pash-tun himself, he has amassed a huge following in his efforts to reorganize and restructure various government bodies and draconian laws so that there is some semblance of oversight and accountability to the residents of the region.

The Dominant US Narrative

Back in the United States, the dominant narrative told by government officials and reported in the mainstream media generally applauds drones for their efficacy. John Brennan (2012), the director of the CIA and former chief counterterrorism advisor to President Obama, has stated that the “targeted drone killings” are “wise” and “surgically and astonishingly precise.” Furthermore, Brennan claims they are also “ethical,” “just,” and “humane” in being able to “distinguish more effectively between an al-Qaida terrorist and innocent civilians.” According to Brennan, “It is hard to imagine a tool that can better minimize the risk to civilians than remotely piloted aircraft.” To address the critics, Brennan also stated, “There is absolutely nothing casual about the extraordinary care we take in making the decision to pursue an al-Qaida terrorist, and the lengths to which we go to ensure precision and avoid the loss of innocent lives.”

Since the US government’s multiple drone programs are shrouded in secrecy and lack democratic transparency, it is difficult to ascertain the protocols for marking, targeting, and killing a “terrorist.” However, a number of individuals and institutions have emerged to provide data that dispute the government’s shady zero-to-single-digit “collateral damage” numbers (Friedersdorf 2013). Based on in-depth research, Stanford University, New York University, and Columbia University’s human rights and global justice law clinics, as well as the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, have produced reports that show drone deaths in the Af-Pak region alone to be in the three thousand to four thousand range—more

than the number of people killed on 9/11—with many of the victims having no connections to terrorist networks (Cavallaro, Knuckey, and Sonnenberg 2011; Grut 2013; “Covert Drone War”).

The promotion of drones as effective targeted killing machines is one part of the larger technological fetishization strategy that the US government deploys in conjunction with the entertainment and weapons industries. Their marketing and PR campaigns simultaneously extol robotics, long-distance warfare, and surveillance while dehumanizing the subjected populations by reducing the value of their lives to zero. It is a smoke-and-mirrors spectacle that distracts people with dazzling special effects, while the real blood, flesh, and gore are hidden from view.

Simulacra and Representation

In his analysis of the shift from modernity to late capitalist postmodernity, Jean Baudrillard was one of the first scholars to observe a dramatic change in the way we represent the world. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard hypothesized that the order of symbolic representation has moved into a stage wherein signs and images no longer represent anything real. The abstracted and spectacular televisual representations of the first Iraq War provided the perfect opportunity for him to expand his theories to the confluence of new technologies of war with new media technologies. In his controversial book, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), Baudrillard argues that the danger of simulated and long-distance warfare is that it deliberately blurs the distinction between the real and the virtual, thereby obfuscating accountability. The hazard lies at the moment that the simulation moves beyond imitation or being a mimetic copy and becomes its own truth by surpassing the real and becoming the hyperreal—or as Paul Virilio (1994) puts it, the moment virtual reality overtakes the real thing. For Virilio, the Gulf War was a “world war in miniature.” This simulacrum of war was created in part by the daily live televisual coverage of the Gulf War, which used satellite transmission, night vision cameras, and footage from cameras on board US bombers. The weapons of choice touted at the time for their precision bombing were the F-15, F-16, and F-117 bombers in tandem with AGM-130 missiles. The image that is projected to audiences back home was of a new kind of smart, clean, and bloodless war.

Not surprisingly, the distinction between war and video games is also disappearing. War-themed video games resemble real military operations. For example, the video game *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* (Codemasters 2011), based on the fictional premise of the US invasion of Tajikistan due to the rise of an Islamic regime, is eerily similar to Operation Anaconda, which was the post-9/11 joint US military attack that ousted the Taliban regime from power in Afghanistan. Needless to say, the Tajik public was outraged by the game's premise. "This computer game is a result of sick fantasy by Tajikistan's foes, who dream that our country will remain in the abyss of constant conflicts," said Davlati Davlatzoda, a member of the ruling People's Democratic Party. "It is painful and horrible to watch how our villages and cities are being destroyed as a result of anti-extremist actions by the Chinese and the Americans," he said (quoted in "Tajikistan Tantrum Over 'Red River'" 2011).

Even more troubling than blurring the line between the real and the virtual for the general public playing war games on their consoles or watching the spectacle of war on their screens at home is when war effectively becomes a video game for active military personnel. Drone operators stationed thousands of miles away in over sixty drone bases around the world have even less connection to their targets than do conventional military pilots.² Despite the government's claims that "high-value terrorist" targets are vetted and confirmed by multiple sources, the human rights and global justice clinics of Columbia, New York, and Stanford Universities, as well as the Bureau of Investigative Reporting, paint a different picture, one in which target selections are often based on flawed intelligence and little understanding of the region, its people, and its geography.

For drone operators carrying out orders from above, remote killing has become a stationary sport that costs lives in the Af-Pak region, but reaps profit for defense contractors. US expenditures for its various drone programs comprise an ever-increasing share of the already obscenely large, multi-trillion dollar defense budget. When you take into account that each Predator or Reaper aircraft (the drones used in Afghanistan and Iraq) costs \$13 million, each Hellfire missile costs \$1 million, and the cost of each flight is an additional \$1 million, the "mission" then seems to be primarily about feeding the military-industrial

complex beast. (Needless to say, the cost of a “foreign”/other human life is insignificant in this multi-trillion-dollar accounting equation.)

Journalistic reports have also surfaced that drone operators, sitting in their arcade video game-style drone consoles based in secret locations from Kandahar to Las Vegas, have only a vague idea of their supposed targets, and sometimes boast about their killing exploits as if they were part of a virtual game (Rose 2012). In his in-depth *Rolling Stone* exposé of drone culture, journalist Michael Hastings (2012) describes how for “a new generation of young guns” raised on videogames, killing has become too “easy and desensitized.” Hasting reports that the military lingo for people killed by drone strikes is “bug splat,” “since viewing the body through a grainy-green video image gives the sense of an insect being crushed” (n.p.). He goes on to recount drone operators’ “electrified” and “adrenalized” experiences of killing, noting how they compare the experience to various video games and science fiction films from their childhoods. In fact, as the International Security Armed Forces (ISAF) has revealed, operators rarely see the actual dead or injured bodies at the sites they target.

#NotABugSplat

Many relatives of drone victims, together with activists and human rights lawyers, want the operators to see the people they are killing. Despite extreme opposition and attempts at suppression by the Pakistani and the US governments, they have spoken out about countless people who have been targeted and killed were innocent civilians with no history of terrorist activity. They want to honor their deceased loved ones by restoring their humanity and communicate their outrage at the injustices of dronewarfare.

Culture jamming tactics have emerged as guerrilla tools for activists on the ground to bring visibility to the victims of drone strikes. One group, the Foundation for Fundamental Rights (FFR), using the hashtag and website #NotABugSplat, is literally putting a human face on the ground by installing on the landscape massive portraits of children who have been killed or whose families have been killed in the NWF. The international artist collective hopes to create “empathy and introspection amongst drone operators” and “create dialogue amongst policy mak-



Figure 15.1. #NotABugSplat, Foundation for Fundamental Rights.

ers” (par. 3). Viewed through the lens of the drone cameras from 15,000 feet, actual people are barely recognizable: age, gender, and race become indistinguishable. Since the simulacrum makes the lives of people on the ground seem inconsequential, FFR hopes that seeing faces of real people, especially those of innocent children, will make drone operators at least think twice before pressing the kill button.

The Logic and History of Racism and Sexism

Whereas the latest manifestation of war technophilia in the form of drones is new, the patterns of racism and othering operating here have a long history. The logic of this embedded racism is based on colonial iconographies and tropes that have gained new currency since 9/11. In the US mainstream media, whereas African Americans were long subjected to overt racism, now people from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and Central and South Asia are being overtly stereotyped and represented in very problematic ways. For example, while blackface and other caricatures of African Americans were permissible in the history of early broadcast and cinema, they are no longer acceptable. Media scholars have noted this trajectory of othering in terms of

a shift from traditional to modern types of racism (Entman 1992; Hall 2000, 2003). Modern types of racism are more subtle and complex but equally problematic because they often go unnoticed. Given the blatant racist imagery of Arabs, Persians, and Central and South Asians that permeate today's "war on terror" media (Jhally 2006, Salloum 2006, Shaheen 2003, 2008), I would argue that these minorities groups are in the first phase of representation, the traditional racist one.

After 9/11, Afghan people were increasingly stereotyped in the main-stream Western media and popular culture. In order to justify the American military assault on the Taliban, all Afghan women became powerless victims of their backward, misogynist, and villainous brethren. Afghan culture is interpellated as static, unchanging, and bound by problematic archaic traditions. The US military intervention was thus not merely retribution for the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon; it was also framed by the US government as a liberatory project to save the helpless natives from their own barbarism.

This double-edged white savior sword creates what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1995) have termed "the rape and rescue" fantasy and what Gayatri Spivak (1988) has called the "white men saving brown women from brown men" complex. As part of America's self-appointed "white man's burden" or civilizing missions, the saving of racialized women from the global South and East is used as a moral veneer to cover over the zealous calls for the annihilation of savage and barbaric racialized men, most notoriously Osama and Saddam.

Critics of the popular discourse about the saving of third-world women have demonstrated the implicit and explicit colonial agenda of American media pundits, political analysts, and key political figures. Lila Abu-Lughod (2003) stresses the importance of making broader political connections when analyzing the media: "We need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives, so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British-ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women" (785). That said, one does not have to be white to adopt the white savior rhetoric: the torch of saving Muslim women has been passed down from the Bushes to the Clintons to the Obamas.

#BringBackOurGirls, Malala, and Nabila

Michelle Obama's #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign, meant to support the 276 Nigerian female students and teachers kidnapped in April 2014 by the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram, backfired terribly when drone jammers reappropriated it. Twitter users from around the world turned the First Lady's #BringBackOurGirls picture into various mutations of "Nothing will #BringBackOurGirls killed by your husband" and "BringBackYourDrones" (Elder 2014). These remakes pointed out the sad irony that many more girls have been killed and displaced by Obama's drone strikes than by the Islamic extremists. This social media jam brought attention to the fact that during Obama's tenure in the Oval Office, our "Hope" and "Change" president has not only continued many of the warmongering practices of the Bush/Cheney regime, but has actually ramped up the drone program, with its deadly consequences, to new levels.

In a similar vein to the jamming of Michelle Obama, activists appropriated the image of another prominent figure with considerable global cultural capital, circulation, and recognition—namely, Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai. The culture jamming of her image is another exemplary use of social media to draw attention to the shady policies of the US government abroad. Although Malala herself is a Pashtun and an outspoken critic of drone warfare, she has become a poster child for the



Figure 15.2. Michelle Obama #BringBackOurGirls jam.



Figure 15.3. Malala Yousafzai drone jam.

trope of rescuing Muslim women and girls from their savage brethren. For several months, Googling Malala's name would bring up countless images of her with the caption "How many of you would know my name if I was murdered by a US drone strike?" (Muslim Public Affairs Committee). This simple and now ubiquitous jam issues an uncomfortable reminder to the American public that we frame children and people from the MENA region in ways that serve our own agendas.

In fact, on October 29, 2013, only five out of 430 US congressional representatives attended the testimony of another little girl, Nabila Rehman, whose family members were injured and killed in the NWF by a Predator drone strike (Hussain 2013). Her lawyer and translator, Shahzad Akbar, was denied a visa to accompany Nabila from Pakistan to Capitol Hill. Ever since Mr. Akbar, a human rights lawyer, began representing more than 150 family members of those killed by drones, as well as survivors of drone attacks, he has encountered problems gaining entry into the United States (Devereaux 2013). Mr. Akbar was also denied a visa to attend the Drones and Aerial Robotics Conference (DARC) held at New York University in 2013; he was to be a fellow speaker with me on one of the few panels that addressed the impact of

military drones, titled “Life under Drones.” Malalai Joya, a prominent Afghan women’s rights activist and former parliamentarian, also began having visa problems when she started critiquing US foreign policy, particularly drone strikes in her home province of Farah in Afghanistan.³ Pakistani parliamentarian and staunch anti-drone critic Imran Khan was also removed from a plane and detained by US immigration officials. As Glenn Greenwald (2012) has documented, this is part of the US government’s ongoing strategy not only to serially harass anti-drone activists and even journalists writing unfavorable accounts, but also to equate them with terrorists, as in the case of a senior US counterterrorism official smearing the good reputation and sources of the Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

So while Malala Yousofzai and a few other handpicked activists are internationally celebrated and paraded for public consumption, many progressive voices from the global South and East are silenced when they speak against the global ruling elite and deviate from the prescribed script. It is acceptable, and even encouraged, to critique local warlords and Islamists, but critiquing US warlords is strictly off limits.

Local perspectives will be buried if they fail to serve the dominant narrative. When critics speak truth to power by pointing out that drone strikes and similar US foreign policies have fueled Islamic extremism and terrorism, and when they demand accountability and justice, they stop being the ideal native and need to be managed, controlled, or disposed of altogether. Indeed, one of the biggest grievances of progressive and secular activists from the affected regions is that the actions of the US military and its foreign policy more broadly are largely responsible for the rise of Islamism and terrorism there. As Timothy Mitchell (2002) explains in his article “McJihad: Islam in the US Global Order,” American financial and military support for the ultra-religious Afghan and Pakistani groups was neither random nor coincidental. “When other governments moved closer to the United States—Egypt under Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, Pakistan under Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s—their political rhetoric and modes of legitimation became avowedly more Islamic” (1).

So when strong, popularly supported local activists like Akbar, Joya, Khan, and countless others—who bravely fight for human rights, equality, and justice—also question and challenge US imperialism, they become dangerous. They challenge the false binaries between relig-

iosity and secularism, as well as the simplistic discourses of progress, development, and humanitarian/human rights intervention (Asad 1986, 2003; Chatterjee 1997; Gole 2006; Mahmood 2005). Their stories can no longer be easily subsumed into narratives of victimhood or terrorism.

Disposable Journalists and the Robo-Reporter

The US military has also targeted journalists in war zones. US missile strikes during the 2003 Iraq invasion killed a reporter from Al Jazeera and cameramen from Reuters, Spanish TV, and several local TV stations in Baghdad (Noujaim 2004). In Afghanistan during the post-9/11 launch of Operation Anaconda and Operation Enduring Freedom, the US military also bombed the Al Jazeera Kabul office along with at least three local news agencies.

As seasoned antiwar activists know, showing the realities of war and war-related violence is a very effective means of influencing public opinion and shifting the tide against war. If we are to truly understand “life under drones,” then having journalists on the ground documenting the impact of military drones, including war crimes, is essential. Reporters play a key role in bringing the realities of war home, thereby countering the simulated, distant, and sanitized versions that hegemonic institutions present. The US government learned all too well with the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, and the more recent Black Lives Matter movement, that televising violence mobilizes people to act and demand change. As a result, news-based televisual violence has been censored by the overlapping interests of the advertising industry, media executives, and the government. For example, since the Vietnam War, the US government has banned the news media from showing the flag-draped coffins of America’s war dead.

While the censoring of war imagery is clearly meant to hide the real cost of war from the American public, showing realistic images of violence is productive in stirring people to wake up from their consumerist stupors to see the true impact of war. Therefore, local journalists play an especially vital role in the international news production chain. They have the access and cultural understanding, including language skills and local ties, which enable them to report in many regions that foreign correspondents could not traverse alone. Their

cultural access also frees them from embedded journalism and reliance on prepackaged news. Often without ties to agenda-setting institutions, local reporters can uncover international-local connections and cover-ups. They are also more likely to get to the frontlines to show the realities and atrocities of war at its most gruesome.

During my fieldwork in Afghanistan, I witnessed the power dynamics and hierarchies that favor international correspondents and embedded journalists while placing local fixers, translators, camera people, and journalists in grave danger. Reporters on the frontlines face an onslaught from international military forces, insurgents, and mercenaries. They are targeted in their hotels, studios, and in the field. When danger strikes, including kidnappings and attacks, the international correspondents are usually negotiated for or rescued, while the locals are left behind, deemed disposable. The larger structures of racism and sexism are also embedded in the disparities that exist in the international news production chain. There are many Afghan journalists, like Ajmal Naqshbandi and Sultan Munadi, who were killed in the line of duty when working for international correspondents and media organizations while their international counterparts were rescued.

To shed light on the vital work of frontline journalists and the dangers they face, Chris Csikszentmihalyi, an engineer and media professor, used his MIT Media Lab's Computing Culture Group credentials and resources to create the first nonmilitary, nonhuman roving war correspondent. His Afghan Explorer, dubbed the "first robo-journalist," hit the mainstream press and was picked up by news outlets around the world (Burkeman 2002; Maney 2002; Wieners 2002; Wakefield 2002). What the press did not realize, though, was that they were being jammed. The Afghan Explorer was not actually functional. Csikszentmihalyi's goal was to highlight the US government's troubling policy of limiting access for combat-zone journalists and endangering their lives in order to generate public discussion about this gross violation of the freedom of press. As he explained, "It's terrifying that unmanned Predator drones are killing innocent Afghan civilians and that the news coverage is pre-censored. It will always be better if human journalists are able to move freely but since they're not, I thought, if the military can have drones, why can't we?"⁴



Figure 15.4. Chris Csikszentmihalyi's solar-powered Afghan Explorer Robo-Reporter.

Jamming the Simulacra of War

The technophiliacs have built an imaginary techno-utopia, with words, images, and computer graphics superimposed over the dystopic reality they have created. Unlike your parents' rudimentary wars, the latest version of the iWar is sleek, sanitized, and sexy, right out of a James Bond movie. Innocent adults and children don't get indiscriminately killed; only fully identified, dark, and barbaric terrorists—who hate our freedoms, deny their own women freedom, and want to kill us (and therefore deserve to die)—are preemptively killed.

Simultaneously, real images that show the true cost of war from the ground are censored. Victims are silenced or effaced by various means, including being racialized, abstracted, and othered in such a way that they are already labeled “terrorists” and thereby never given due process or the protection of any international laws. They are targeted, persecuted, tried, condemned, and imprisoned or killed by extrajudicial means and in extrajudicial places and zones, far away from the public eye.

The drone victims do not have multibillion dollar lobbies to support them, as does the drone industry. That is why scholars, activists, and artists have risen to the challenge, shattering the myth of the new glossy aseptic war by showing the realities of drone warfare, demanding accountability, and putting people back into the equation and the picture, quite literally. Chris Csikszentmihalyi’s robo-journalist, the Afghan Explorer, successfully shed light on the vital work done by journalists and the shameful and illegal ways they have been targeted by the US military. The Foundation for Fundamental Rights (FFR) is resisting the “bug splat” by rendering visible actual and potential victims by literally placing images of their faces in the fields of the Northwest Frontier. And the viral visual culture jams of Michelle Obama and Malala Yousafzai challenge the premise of centuries-old colonial tropes of othering, stereotyping, and racializing of people from the global South and East. These memes remind people that the white savior rhetoric that underlies many US foreign interventions is only a ruse to cover up complicated and messy geopolitical agendas and the hypocrisy of US foreign policy. Through rehumanizing drone victims and jamming the multimillion dollar PR campaigns of the military-industrial complex, drone jammers are fighting to dismantle the simulacra of war.

Notes

- 1 Due to the presence of the international aid community, Kabul has more of an infrastructure of medical facilities to treat and rehabilitate the war injured and disabled. According to the United Nations, with over 10 million landmines, Afghanistan is one of the most heavily land-mined countries in the world. As such, the victims of both one of the oldest and the newest war weapons come to Kabul. Yet many also have severe emotional and psychological problems as a result of regular exposure to drones, something that often goes entirely unaddressed and untreated due to a lack of resources.

- 2 From Las Vegas and Nevada in the United States, to locations in Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates and Africa, journalists are uncovering more details about the extent and locations of drone operating facilities: see Turse (n.d.).
- 3 In 2012, Malalai Joya was sponsored by two New York City– based organizations, the War Resisters League and the South Asia Solidarity Initiative, to promote the launch of her US book tour for her new book *A Woman amongst Warlords* but she was denied visas multiple times.
- 4 In conversation, New York City, fall 2013.

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