

The book cover features a vibrant, abstract background of green and yellow brushstrokes radiating from the center. A large, solid black circle is positioned in the middle of the cover. Inside this circle, the text is arranged in a centered, stacked format. The editors' names are in a clean, white, sans-serif font, while the title is in a white, elegant serif font.

EDITED BY  
NICHOLAS BAER  
MAGGIE HENNEFELD  
LAURA HORAK  
GUNNAR IVERSEN

*Unwatchable*

# Unwatchable

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Edited by Nicholas Baer, Maggie  
Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and  
Gunnar Iversen



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## Unwatched/Unmanned



### *Drone Strikes and the Aesthetics of the Unseen*

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POULOMI SAHA

A little over halfway through Season 1 of Showtime's war-on-terror thriller *Homeland* (2011–), returned POW turned Al-Qaeda operative Nicholas Brody reveals the cause of his radicalization: Having been held and tortured, he is asked by cell commander Abu Nazir to teach Nazir's young son Issa how to speak English. The plot to conscript Brody through the child intensifies sharply when Issa is killed by an unmanned drone. We do not see the drone or the moment of explosion; we are apprised of it when Brody is catapulted, in slow motion, out of his chair by its force. Indeed, the entire scene operates by way of unsubtle insinuation. As Brody walks through the rubble, looking for Issa, children stumble by with bloody stumps in lieu of arms and parents cradle corpses like babies. Though the visible damage is largely debris and smoke, the casualties are clear long before we glimpse Issa's tiny unmoving hand. The scene revels in the sight of horror, as if in stark reminder of narrative television's ability to depict aspects of drone strikes that cannot be seen in real life—that remain unwatchable to the everyday eye.

The stage is thus set for a corrupt American official to announce that these captured images of civilian casualties (i.e., photographs of the



Aerial drone footage.

attack's aftermath) are all manufactured propaganda. Yet, otherwise, as the show suggests not inaccurately, the American public would not have seen the drone strike's wreckage. Photographic images of bodies after the strike are figured as fabrications, false narratives (or fake news) that falter in the face of the promised technological precision of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology employed by the American government. Photographs can be manipulated, altered, and decontextualized in their circulation—this is a deceitful medium in the hands of an untrustworthy foe. The development of precision drone technology—with devices such as facial recognition and advanced geospatial imaging capacities—produce a fantasy of irrefutable justification. Thus, aerial drones are imagined to be beyond technological oversight.

In eight years, the Obama administration authorized 563 drone strikes and publicly announced that an estimated 64 to 116 civilians and 2,372 to 2,581 combatants were killed between 2009 and 2015. President Obama carried some public and policy favor for his precipitous spike in the use of drone strikes, because they removed from view the spectacle of collateral damage. If drones can be made to identify individuals, to track their movements, and to drop payloads with digital accuracy, then they can absolve the public of having to see their work. The value of



the drone's unmannedness is also its liability. At the limits of what the public can see, the unaccountable can occur. Rather than quell criticism, the release of strike data heightened a public demand for transparency. Transparency is a condition of making viewable as much as visible the abstracted form of statistics, incommensurate with anecdotal and reported accounts, that neither added up nor truly disclosed the death toll. Perhaps it is the failure of quantification (however contested) to account for the loss of human life by machines that has given rise to what we might call an aesthetics of drone strike data visualization. Many artworks have attempted to problematize the relationship between technological vision and political belief. For example, Pitch Interactive's "Out of Sight/Out of Mind" (2013) digitizes attacks in Pakistan from 2004 to 2013 as individual flare colliding with and then boring through the axis of a timeline—strikes shot through chronospace.<sup>1</sup> Evoking the breathtaking beauty of a meteor shower, the project startles the affective and physiological response to the idea of an unmanned killing out of abstraction into awe.

"Out of Sight/Out of Mind," like Jonathan Fletcher Moore's "Artificial Killing Machine" (2015) installation and the crowd-sourced site Dronestagram (2013), is a prosthesis of sensorial empathy, supplementing and overriding the bureaucratic blinding by which drone strikes are made to vanish.<sup>2</sup> These projects digitally short-circuit the core of the drone program's success. The unmanned aerial drone was designed to be a perfect killing machine—not because of its precision but because, flying high above the heads of its targets and their neighbors, off the radar of public scrutiny, it is beyond oversight. Unmanned, autonomous military drones like the MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper mobilize the designed exactness of their surveillance capabilities: the combination of spectral sensors, radar, and laser designation has removed the human from the pilot's seat, lightening its load to allow for longer flights and heavier weapons, and spatially shifting the responsibility of accuracy to a control room. Various members of the operational crew "see" through the transmitted digital image captured by the drone. However, what they see is not what the public will see, when apprised of the strikes later (if at all). What they see is not what the people on the ground see, when they scan the skies for the unpiloted aircraft or when the bodies

on the ground are counted. Having removed the man from the machine, unmanned drones now rely on an unwatchable promise of their own accuracy. Claims of civilian casualties and of the collateral damage that seeps through the incision site of surgical precision meet the unseeing wall of a surveillance state that will not reveal what the machine has captured.

"Bugspat," the name of the program used by the U.S. government to identify and minimize civilian casualties from drone attacks, comes from the term used by drone operators to describe both what targets look like from the perspective of the machine aloft and the effect of that machinic success. The surveilled human on the ground is ins(p)ected before being exterminated. Bugspat is the satisfaction of witnessing the obliteration of a nuisance, a pest, a minor inconvenience. So the installation #NotABugSplat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, the heavy bombing of which illuminates the screen in "Out of Sight/Out of Mind," of an image of an unnamed child—large enough to be seen by a drone—attempts to expand the scale of the aesthetics of drone strike data visualization as it radically rehumanizes the bug into child. Perhaps it is on the scale of the monumental, the vast, that which can be seen from the elevated eye of the drone, that its casualties become seeable. Perhaps this is for the best. Perhaps what we cannot see of what the drone sees, of what the drone destroys, is unwatchable. Perhaps we could not bear to see the decimation of human life, the evidence of perfect annihilation, the proof of contactless warfare. Perhaps the way in which an American public maintains itself and the fantasy of moral authority is by not watching. By handing over the realm of surveillance to the machine who both sees and destroys, we have liberated ourselves from the responsibility to know, to count, to be held accountable.

In the end on *Homeland*, Brody carries out his promise to kill Vice President Walden. He takes one life in retribution for the one life he counted as lost. Nazir sets off a bomb that demolishes the entire CIA, eradicating the global surveillance apparatus and all of its operators. Unlike the artistic renderings of drone strike casualties that translate death into pixelated images, in *Homeland*, the casualties of drone strikes are translated into direct violence. Life for life. This too is a



calculus of collateral damage and the accounting of what is lost in a drone strike.

### Notes

- 1 Pitch Interactive, "Out of Sight/Out of Mind" (2013), <http://drones.pitchinteractive.com/>.
- 2 Jonathan Fletcher Moore, "Artificial Killing Machine" (2015), <https://vimeo.com/131357384>; Eric Dupin, "Dronestagram" (2013), [www.dronestagr.am/](http://www.dronestagr.am/).