

This is the accepted version of this essay. The final version is published at:
<https://issuu.com/inmg/docs/thomsoncraighead>

Global vision, ground truth?

A Short Film About War as experimental geopolitics

What is it that we see when we encounter images of war on screens connected to online social networks? Two recent episodes in visual culture provide useful departure points for considering *A Short Film About War*, Thomson & Craighead's narrative documentary artwork scripted together with Steve Rushton, which explores this question.

The first is the now-notorious *Kony 2012* video created by Invisible Children, a group aiming to solicit support for its work with young people drawn into violent conflict by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda and neighbouring states. Launched on Facebook, the video rose rapidly to international prominence, but also generated considerable controversy and criticism, leading to a further video rebuttal and contributing to the subsequent breakdown of one of the group's founders, which, ironically enough, was also caught on camera and disseminated across the internet. The second was related by the artist Adam Broomberg in a published roundtable on photography and protest and will surely resonate with anyone who has researched the visual culture of contemporary war and militarism online. As he describes:

I had a horrific moment when I was recently giving a lecture at Westminster and I displayed four short Youtube clips. One was made by an insurgent showing the results of an IED mine, the second one was made using a camera mounted on the head of a bomb, the third one was taken by a citizen journalist in Tehran, and the final one showed what I thought was footage taken from a Predator, a Drone. I finished the lecture and one of the students told me that it was actually footage from a game, "Call of Duty". I had typed 'predator footage' into Youtube and that's what came up.¹

Viewing these episodes together maybe tells us something about how 'global' sensibilities are being constituted as media techniques, video games, social networking technologies and geopolitics evolve and synergise each other. Unlike *Kony 2012*, which is a blatant attempt to engineer a certain kind of geopolitical sensibility by manipulating the cognitive, perceptual and affective processes of its viewers, and unlike the heightened ludic realism apparently offered by *Call of Duty* and other similar video games, *A Short Film About War* is constructed and presented explicitly as an investigation into the correspondences between vision, knowledge and truth as they form around sites of geopolitical violence and intervention. As the artists describe,

In offering this tautology [between two screens, one showing 'dramatised reportage' and the other a text log], we are attempting to explore and reveal the way in which information changes as it is gathered, edited and then mediated through networked communications technologies or broadcast media, and how that changes and distorts meaning - especially for (the generally wealthy minority of) the world's users of high speed broadband networks, who have become used to the treacherously persuasive panoptic view that google earth (and the worldwide web) appears to give us.

In playing with the means whereby popular experience and knowledge of contemporary crises and conflicts are assembled and mediated; by constructing an alternative sense of the global that does not quite sit with that conventionally made available via social networks and other media, *A Short Film About War* might be regarded, I suggest, as a kind of experimental geopolitics.

¹ Gordon MacDonald et al., "Round Table: Us and Them: The Making and Dissemination of the Photography of Protest," *Photoworks*, 2011, 22.

The term experimental geopolitics echoes and extends the idea of experimental geography formulated by artist and geographer Trevor Paglen² and curator Nato Thompson³. As Paglen (2008, p.31) describes,

Experimental geography means practices that taken on the production of space in a self-reflexive way, practices that recognize that cultural production and the production of space cannot be separated from each another, and that cultural and intellectual production is a spatial practice. Moreover, experimental geography means not only seeing the production of space as an ontological condition, but actively experimenting with the production of space as an integral part of one's own practice. If human activities are inextricably spatial, then new forms of freedom and democracy can only emerge in dialectical relation to the production of new spaces.

Drawing on this sense of space as being actively produced and at least somewhat open to reconfiguration and play rather than determined or given, the term experimental geopolitics directs attention specifically to alternative spatial practices engaging with the formation of political communities and orders. Engaging reflexively with the manner in which space is produced, such experimental practices are less reflections, depictions or representations of geopolitical situations than differential enactments of them. Posing as an innovative 'desktop documentary', *A Short Film About War* refuses to provide the narrative direction or certainty of perspective that might be expected from such a form, instead highlighting how impressions of crisis and war as geographical phenomena are actively constituted through technical infrastructures and editorial practices.

A Short Film About War highlights and problematises the workings of the infrastructures of visibility and affect upon which *Kony 2012* and *Call of Duty* alike rely. Following a forty-second countdown and a brief audio tone, which remind the viewer that they are viewing something that has been edited together, one video channel shows images from a series of crisis zones, sourced from the Flickr platform. An audio track voiced by actors conveys extracts from blogs written by people in those zones, while the other video channel shows the web locations and dates and times of the photos and blog entries.

The work begins with a blog by an American soldier at an airport in Atlanta, waiting to return to Iraq for another tour and struggling with his hatred of the army and feelings of estrangement from his wife, while images of waiting and air travel play. The scene then shifts rapidly via the Pacific across to images of Ramallah in Palestine and a blogger's account of the experience of a 104 year old woman who had survived successive episodes of violence and dispossession, to see her village in the hills above Ramallah annexed by Jordan. After this, the focus shifts to a female aid worker in Sudan, recounting stories shared by "the girls" about their boyfriends' excuses for never calling and then to a fourteen year old Israeli resident of a kibbutz close to Gaza, who describes his refusal to give in to the rockets and to Hamas. The scene then switches back to Gaza and the narration into Arabic, with a female blogger describing how to distinguish between Israeli and Palestinian gunfire, while images of destroyed buildings play. There is then a slower zoom out from Gaza, Israel and the region before a compressed section of images and sounds plays, along with a meditation on the data systems that support global vision, communication and networking. The text is taken from an article by Rushton that critically deconstructs the illusion of global vision and, (as Thomson and Craighead describe), "the treacherously persuasive panoptic view that google earth (and the worldwide web) *appears* [emphasis added] to give us".⁴ This didactic interlude is narrated by a male voice that might have

² "Experimental Geography: From Cultural Production to the Production of Space," in *Experimental Geography*, ed. Nato Thompson (Brooklyn, N.Y. : New York: Melville House ; Independent Curators International, 2008), 27–34.

³ Nato Thompson et al., *Experimental Geography* (Brooklyn, N.Y. : New York: Melville House ; Independent Curators International, 2008).

⁴ Thomson and Craighead, "A Short Film About War", <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/slide/docs/warfilm.html>.

come from a classic British public service documentary, with a forceful sense of authority.

The film then touches down in Baghdad with an American soldier who states that “This place really sucks”, before switching to an Iraqi resident of the same city, who describes the struggle just to live in a battleground, while images of domestic confinement as well as urban violence appear on the left video channel. Next we are shown images of Disneyland and hear an American blog describing symptoms of post-traumatic stress, where the sufferer constantly experiences everyday situations in civilian life as if in a battle zone. We then switch to a British soldier who describes undergoing ‘outprocessing’ after a year in Kandahar. He relates a mental health assessment in which he was asked whether he had seen dead bodies, Afghan, allied or British and replied ‘all’. The viewer is then taken to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the narration describes encountering young soldiers carrying weapons and wearing ill-fitting uniforms, before a description of a view of a volcano in the landscape and the location of a United Nations peacekeepers’ camp beside a lake. Finally, the film returns to the American soldier in Atlanta and a credit reel, before the whole thing starts again.

A Short Film... moves between and contrasts a view from above with an embodied view presented not by politicians, experts or journalists, but by soldiers, children, aid workers and other people. While they are all relatively privileged in that they have access to the internet and are in some cases empowered outsiders, they do not seem to be particularly powerful in relation to political structures or bureaucracies – rather they are people who work and live pretty close to ground level. While showing us the effects of war on the landscape, the work also dwells on people’s experiences and narratives, of how they try to live through and with the experience of war and crisis. Drawing on the artists’ own conversations and research, *A Short Film...* also highlights the effects war has on soldiers; here they are presented as victims as much as agents of geopolitical events. In this way, *A Short Film...* seems to offer an empathic account of war and to deconstruct the acts of observing and mapping from above. In providing contrasting perspectives on related events and situations and in its reflexivity, it is far more honest than *Kony 2012* about the fact that all forms of knowledge are in some way situated and the dangers of ‘god tricks’.⁵

At the same time, the apparent humanism of the work is deceptive: it is only ‘ostensibly documentary’.⁶ The text and images do not always quite add up. Close scrutiny of the text channel reveals that not all of the images are of the places mentioned in the blogs. The original blog describing the elderly woman who lives in the hills outside Ramallah is written in English, but here is narrated in French. Images and text have been artfully stitched together with the conscious intention of creating narrative and affective effects, but in including the text channel it is clear that the artists want us to be aware of this and of how all media representations of war are in some sense fabrications. The idea that experiences of war can be represented on screen is further dislocated and called into question.

Once we start to explore the representational and affective techniques employed in *A Short Film...*, then, its coherence becomes much more provisional and we begin to gain a sense of the genealogies of the tactics it employs. The technique of zooming in and out from location to location was also used in *Kony 2012*, interspersed with sections related at ground-level that fleshed out the details of the story that Invisible Children wanted to tell (a story which in practice seems to have been intertwined with growing US military involvement in a range of African countries). This kind of geo-visualisation can be traced back through antecedents that include the narrated animation *Powers of Ten* (created in 1977 for IBM by the office of Charles and Ray Eames), a key reference point for Thomson and Craighead’s work that speaks to the close links between the development of innovative means of visualisation,

⁵ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599.

⁶ “A Short Film About War.”

information technology industries and the state.⁷ It is also familiar from action movies from James Bond to Jason Bourne and is used in *Call of Duty*-type video games to enhance a sense of geopolitical *verité*.

Thomson and Craighead's work thus touches on questions raised by a number of theorists of geopolitics. For James Der Derian⁸, Western audiences' apprehension of global political affairs is shaped by the workings of the 'Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network' (or MIME-Net), which marshals a range of technologies, subjectivities and ways of seeing around a liberal idea of war as a virtuous, humanitarian exercise. For Stephen Graham,⁹ the technologies with which *A Short Film About War* plays are essential to the constitution of what he identifies as a 'new military urbanism', in which the military and the culture industries collaborate in forging a sense of other people and other places as always in need of intervention, whether this be development, rescue, reform, protection or elimination.

While suggestive, such accounts, which tend to emphasise the power of conventional geopolitical actors, can often seem totalizing and dystopian, leaving little space for alternative narratives or perspectives. But as Graham observes, drawing on Michel Foucault's idea of 'counter-conducts', there are openings to construct 'counter-geographies'. While satellite imagery, global positioning systems and the internet have all emerged from and are still reliant upon military and state infrastructures as well as corporate interests, such technologies are not always, inevitably or entirely controlled and controlling. What *A Short Film About War* invites us to consider are the kinds of spacings they might enable, spaces for alternative narratives and a diversity of viewpoints that might diverge from those of virtuous war or a militarised, interventionist way of seeing other people and other places. Though the images and texts in the work are sourced from relatively-privileged individuals who are able to be online and to narrate their experiences, it suggests that such technologies are not entirely determined or dehumanising. Rather than being extensions or tools of existing power structures, they might enable new fields of perception, connection and action.

A Short Film About War's approach to mapping bears further consideration in this regard. Rather than the kinds of geopolitical dramatizations familiar from television news channels, featuring graphical representations of crisis zones, clashes and military forces, the presentation here lacks geopolitical designations such as borders or country names, or any kinds of symbols at all. Rather we see the earth as topographic, but still very much shaped by human inhabitation and action. In the slow zoom out from Gaza, the densely populated Palestinian zone contrasts with the territory of Israel, more sparsely settled and more marked by irrigation and agriculture in a wider zone surrounded by deserts, mountains, valleys and seas. While we see destroyed houses and urban fortifications, *A Short Film...* perhaps also reminds us of the *earthly* character of geo-politics, of shared connections with land as much as the divisive political technologies of territory.¹⁰

At the same time, Thomson and Craighead are clearly sanguine about the extent to which access to online technologies can facilitate progressive imaginaries and projects beyond violent forms of territoriality. As the commentator and critic Evgeny Morozov¹¹ has argued, breathless claims about the transformative potential of 'the internet' must be treated with caution. To see 'the internet' as necessarily a vehicle for social progress and emancipation is both technologically determinist and ahistorical. Political authorities have fought hard to control communications technology and to

⁷ Author's interview with the artists.

⁸ *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-industrial-media-entertainment Network*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁹ *Cities Under Siege: the New Military Urbanism* (London; New York: Verso, 2010).

¹⁰ Stuart Elden, "Land, Terrain, Territory," *Progress in Human Geography* 34: 6, 799-817.

¹¹ *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London: Penguin, 2012).

dominate 'information space' at least since the invention of the printing press and many governments welcome increased internet access as offering enhanced possibilities for surveillance of their populations. As the Israeli Defence Forces' embrace of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter shows, states and militaries are rushing to occupy online spaces just as they have physical territory.¹²

If *A Short Film About War* is an experiment, then, it is a curious and somewhat risky one. In calling attention to some of the ways in which a sense of global simultaneity can be fabricated, it also to some extent needs to evoke the things it sets out to question. In focusing on the wiring of satellites and servers, it appeals to a broader fascination with - and perhaps fetishization of - infrastructure and technology, as much as placing it in question. Though it hints at a systemic critique of militarism and the liberal way of war, it doesn't insist on one. Though it seems to appeal to ground truth and an appreciation of situated knowledge, it does not necessarily effect a 'redistribution of the sensible', to borrow the terms of Jacques Rancière,¹³ so much as heighten awareness of the ways in which the distribution of the sensible is fabricated. It raises more questions than it answers and stops short of telling us that 'another world is possible'. Rather it asks whether we quite understand how our sense of the present one is put together.

Alan Ingram, UCL Department of Geography, May 2013

¹² See the Official Blog of the Israel Defense Forces, <http://www.idfblog.com/category/idf-news/idf-social-media/>.

¹³ *The Politics of Aesthetics : the Distribution of the Sensible* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006); *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2010).