Inaccessible War: Media, Memory, Trauma and the Blueprint

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Abstract

This article identifies in digital media ecologies two means through which war is being made increasingly inaccessible to human perception and intelligibility. The first is the digital volume and flux of images, information and disinformation, that afford the impression of a chaotic battlefield in which all sides are fighting with the new tools of participation seemingly in full view. The second is the comparatively silent revolution in military and militarised data and AI through which aerial surveillance has massively expanded so that civilians are increasingly subject to expanding commercial and military exploitation of technology in airspace. One consequence of this is a shift in the trauma of civilians from a memory of the past to a perpetual anticipation of the threat of the future, subjecting increasing numbers of people to unending physical and psychological incarceration in a traumatising present.

These shifts in the relationship between war, media, trauma and memory are difficult to make visible in the form of much of traditional scholarly writing in war, media and memory studies. Our work responds to this challenge through interdisciplinary artistic intervention in our production of a 'Blueprint series' (following the material architecture blueprints used as working diagrams). In this way we aim to reveal the dynamics of the multiple co-existences, contradictions and human impacts of inaccessible war.

Key words: images of war, surveillance, hyperattention, hypervigilance, memory, trauma, Blueprint, interdisciplinarity.

The image conundrum

[INSERT IMAGE 1 HERE]

Image 1: Blueprint #5 (2018) Shona Illingworth in discussion with Andrew Hoskins

The greatest obfuscation of war in modern times is surely achieved through the unleashing of untrammelled images. Our very perception of the flux of digital images gives the impression that much of contemporary war and its consequences happens in the open, a mere tap, click or swipe away. Images as a way of capturing the impact of war already struggle to fully convey the traumatic experience of and long term consequences for civilians on the ground. At the same time hyperconnected and mobile media images have made war seem increasingly granular, enabling (albeit unevenly) an array of actors (militaries, states, soldiers, citizens, journalists) to continually upload, post, edit, forward, a multitude of perceptions around the unfolding of events perceived as mundane and the spectacular.

One consequence commonly associated with digital volume and flux is that of distraction, overload and stasis. For instance, as Borgmann (2010) puts it, 'Whatever we have summoned to appear before us is crowded by what else is ready to be called up. When everything is easily available, nothing is commandingly present.' Or another way to consider this is that when we speak, to be understood, all other possible utterances need to be supressed.

In this way, we can see oversupply as unmanageable and counterproductive. Yet, the human capacity to make sense of visual depictions of war and its consequences is tied to ideas about access, openness and transparency. This is the photojournalistic imperative. And this, in turn, is tied to the powerful belief in the idea that representing the world to people has effects.

But in the digital era, this notion is compromised through an ideology of sorts that information should be driven out into the open. The resultant image abundance may feel like a transparency and yet facilitates precisely the opposite effect, namely to provide cover for algorithmic curation and for the seeding of disinformation. This short-circuits expectations of long established assumptions and expectations of the function of images of war: to promote understanding, empathy and learning for the future. Furthermore, the acclaimed granularity of representation and seeming unimpeded immersion in digital media ecologies, inhibits the capacity for claims of ignorance to the constant unfolding of war and other atrocities. We seem to know but we cannot, or do not, act.

Debates over the impact of images of war that turn on assumptions around a relationship between representation, attention, and overload, fail to fully realise the emergent field of inaccessible war. We see that the war image continues to fix a westernised mainstream vision of what war should look like through its constant referencing and re-referencing of previous images of war in a journalistic déjà vu. Yet paradoxically, in other ways, past war exerts a presence through a kind of memory that is unfinished, unsettled and mobile (Hoskins 2014). The image in both these senses is intelligible through its representation - human perception and expectations of its effects follow from this.

However, at the same time, there are images that don't fall within the traditional field of war and media, that fall outside its established concepts, theories and methods, and more broadly a news publics' ways of seeing. Here we are referring to images that don't merely inhabit media or war ecologies to be seen, shared, ignored, hidden, or deleted in our conventional understanding of in/visibility, but which instead are made 'operational' so that the ecology itself becomes intelligent, an 'atmosphere of communication' (Gabrys 2010, 57). This ecology is thus increasingly independent of human intervention, beyond the scope of the human eye and existing regimes of representation. From this perspective we are in a critical sense coming to the end of the era of the human eye.[1] By incapacitating our ability to see with the naked eye, given its embeddedness to our understanding of witnessing and to truth, these existing regimes of representation would be fatally undermined.

This undermining is being driven by artificial intelligence, thus there are images that are made by machines for communication with other machines, produced through a computational system 'that can sense its relevant context and react intelligently to data' (Elliott 2019, 4). AI then completely redefines what is meant by the image and by visibility, but we must see this in the wider historical transformation of the end of the era of the human eye and its role in how we apprehend and make sense of 'reality'.

Does it then follow that all of the attention rightly afforded to the role of images in waging, legitimising, challenging and remembering war, in all of its 21st century flux and chaos, is failing to grasp the silent workings, effects and violence of the image machines of war?

[INSERT IMAGE 2 HERE]

Image 2: Blueprint #5 (2018) Shona Illingworth in discussion with Andrew Hoskins

In this way, we are arguing that there are two key, albeit increasingly entangled, regimes of what we are calling *inaccessible war*.

The first is the digital volume and flux of images, information and disinformation, that afford the impression of a chaotic battlefield in which all sides are fighting with the new tools of participation seemingly in full view. War becomes inaccessible in that the rapid and voluminous circulation, instability and turnover of imagery and information obscures the present, unmooring it from place and time, and ideas of truth. This circulation also unsettles memory and history in that the remaindered glut seems untranslatable into a usable past.

By 'usable' we mean a past that can offer (albeit involving different levels of construction, emphasis and omission) some clarity and guidance for the future, from which 'lessons' are learned, a mantra so often connected with military, state and public reflections on warfare. A usable past requires possessing a critical awareness as to how and why that past has been constructed and by whom, so that it can be given meaning in the present. However, a past

increasingly wrought through with disinformation and being invoked and repressed in ways driven by polarization, division, and exclusion – a radicalisation of memory – diminishes usability (Happer & Hoskins forthcoming). If the very architecture of the past is rendered algorithmically, it is difficult to imagine how a past, including the memory of warfare, can ever be made sufficiently transparent to revisit, contest, work through and learn lessons from.

Relatedly then, the second regime of inaccessible war is the comparatively silent revolution in military and militarised data and AI and the violence it exerts on individuals, societies and structures of governance. This includes a 'drastic expansion of aerial surveillance of all kinds' (Michel, 2019, xv) which constitutes a widening disparity in the global landscape of power, with civilians increasingly subject to expanding commercial and military exploitation of technology in airspace (Grief, Illingworth, Hoskins, Conway 2018, 201; Grief 2020). This disparity, as Downey (2020, 20) observes, also includes the Middle East being used for decades as a testing ground for military image-making systems. Furthermore, there is entanglement, if not convergence, between the two regimes of inaccessible war. The same algorithmic creep, with its embedded biases, that feeds military target identification and recognition, also determines what images and video of war are most likely to be seen and not seen on social media platforms such as YouTube, surely one of the least understood frontline views of warfare today. This is part of the 'military-social media complex' (Merrin & Hoskins 2020) in which the algorithmic processes linked to desire and consumerism elevate some visions of warfare over others, challenging assumptions that clicks are solely made on the basis of actively seeking connections, knowledge or for reasons of empathy or compassion.

This then is the image conundrum. The desire to see and to look in the digital era, is entangled in a whole new infrastructure of consciousness of complexity and scale that actually inhibits access and understanding. The social media-powered digital front-line today affords violence, war and genocide a means to thrive through a post-trust or post-truth fog or storm. For example, the Myanmar security forces' persecution and genocide of the Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority, from the mid 2010s, was shaped through a hate campaign predominately found on Facebook that portrays this large population as an

existential threat[2]. Yet it was not until 2018 that Facebook admitted that they 'weren't doing enough to help prevent our platform from being used to foment division and incite offline violence'[3]. And in 2020 there are reports of the social media platform again inciting violence and genocide, this time in Ethiopia, with mob violence and killings of ethnic and religious groups following the assassination of the country's popular singer Hachalu Hundessa in June[4]. As David Gilbert reports: 'This bloodshed was supercharged by the almost-instant and widespread sharing of hate speech and incitement to violence on Facebook[5]'. The virality and contagion of the weaponisation of social media contrasts starkly with the lack of agility or even will of the platform owners to intervene in inaccessible war in the ecology of their own creation.

[INSERT IMAGE 3 HERE]

Image 3: Blueprint #5 (2018) Shona Illingworth in discussion with Andrew Hoskins

Surveillance

The idea of overload is long associated with inurement in the face of untrammeled images of 'distant suffering', and as a digital multitude tweeting and instagramming 'participative war' grapples with overabundance and distraction amidst a 'crisis' of the media representation of war (Ford and Hoskins, 2021). However, an inability to deal with the continual mediation of threat, is very different to being continually threatened by the weapon of mediation.

The acceleration towards militarised and aerial media of surveillance and targeting of individuals is intensifying with artificial intelligence advances in directed intelligibility and layers of air now 'thick' with data. Rather than a single technology or information source, 'layered sensing' of a larger surveillance apparatus (by the rapidly merging military and commercial domains) combines data: 'This diversity of eyes in the sky enables a truly

unblinking view of the ground' (Michel 2019, 157). But the psychological impact of the very real fear of this kind of surveillance and of attack from above, across whole populations, is not yet adequately understood (Grief et al. 2018; Grief 2020). Whilst then, much has been written on the possible effects of the overload of images of war on the attention and action of remote news publics, the overload of attention by way of hypervigilance experienced by those surveilled on the ground, is a very different dispersion of war. Just as audiences in the modern era are said to be caught in a mediated experience of 'perpetual' warfare, that messes with the resolutions and temporal horizons (beginnings and endings) associated with much of a western history of conflict, surveilled populations experience perpetual trauma with the future already foreclosed.

The use of surveillance from above and predictive technologies create an environment of perpetual hypervigilance to potential attack for those on the ground - further compounding this traumatic incarceration in the 'survival space' of a locked off present into an escalating state of vulnerability to long term psychological and physiological harm. Furthermore, these surveilled populations (the majority currently with a median age of between 18 and 25) include a high proportion of children and young people, who are particularly vulnerable given their predisposition to encode trauma rapidly and permanently. Here a sense of a foreclosed future endlessly occupied by hostile forces (perpetrated by AI) is particularly damaging, especially when the threat is unseen, unpredictable and perpetual. Thus generations of children are encoding traumatic memory of the experience of perpetual threat before being able to create any narrative of the past.

This condition of inaccessible war, of an overburdened and impenetrable present, does not allow time for the working through of traumatic memory in the sense of looking back at a threat which has ended, for there is no ending and also no way of knowing when this time might arrive anyway. In this way, the future is also being made inaccessible – foreclosed – through the blockage of the present and the past and occupied by the predictive targeting of AI.

If then we accept that 'human memory evolved not only to allow us to remember but also to allow us to imagine what might happen in the future' (Schacter and Welker 2016, 242)

then the inaccessibility of or inability to construct memory denies the capacity to imagine what a future could be. Thus Conway, Loveday and Cole (2016) argue that our individual memories shape what we consider to be plausible to happen in the future as part of a 'remembering-imagining' system. As Conway states:

> We all exist in an epoch of remembering and imagining which forms a system that moves through time in a window of consciousness, with the past fading and the imagined future manifesting. Within this remembering imagining system it is not possible to imagine the future without in some way remembering the past[6].

Inhibiting the dynamic of an accessible and usable memory in the now, has significant negative impact for individual and social agency in imagining or planning for a future. If we cannot access memory, we cannot imagine the future. Furthermore, enduring never ending occupation of the future and the associated traumatic imaginings affords a continual state of preparedness with profound physiological and psychological consequences. Catherine Loveday (2018) for example, in her evidence to the London Airspace Tribunal stated:

> if you're living with threat, it's not that you are simply thinking about something that might happen to you. The way that our memory system works means that we're kind of almost experiencing that… the ability to imagine forward and think forward uses the same systems in the brain as thinking backwards. And we can very powerfully recall to mind something that's happened to us in the past, and we can do the same thing with the future. So traumatic memories are very powerful, but also traumatic imaginings are very powerful… People who are anticipating a fearful event or trauma of some kind, or violence of any kind, or any kind of threat, are not just idly picturing it, they are to some extent living that experience[7].

The trauma of war is often conceived of in relation to the memory of war, that is as a past experience, that needs to be confronted and worked through or, alternatively, forgotten (Rieff 2016). Remembering and forgetting war are thus seen in the context of learning lessons, preventing repetition, honouring the victims, assuaging trauma, and in feeding the sometimes incompatible pursuits of reconciliation, justice and reparation. War as a form of

hunting defined by pursuit, rather than as a form of combat (Chamayou 2015,52) shifts trauma from the memory of the past to the anticipation of the threat of the future.

In sum, we have suggested that there are two dominant, distinct yet connected, regimes in the technological overloading of perceptions and experience of war. The first is the new mainstream of war and media in which participation in the digital volume and flux of the media content of war, paradoxically obscures intelligibility. The second is the algorithmic creep of war through a massive accumulation of data and metadata, that serves to encourage and legitimise pushing humans out of the loop of decision making, introducing a further layer of abstraction in identifying targets. This feeds an intensifying militarised and aerial media of hostile surveillance over perpetually traumatised populations. This loss of human connectedness between the invisible and invasive processes of perpetual violence and the threat, fear, and anxiety borne by humans on the ground diminishes the prospects of the understanding required for the formation of accessible and useable memories of war.

[INSERT IMAGE 4 HERE]

Image 4: Blueprint #5 (2018) Shona Illingworth in discussion with Andrew Hoskins

The Blueprint

Both of the regimes of inaccessible war thus raise significant challenges for how to fully apprehend the impacts of war on increasing numbers of civilians as well as news publics. How can we begin to materialise and see the multiple and simultaneous features and consequences of war that are so obscured through the media ecologies that we ourselves are participant in and constitutive of? As part of Illingworth's 'Topologies of Air' project, our work conceives of these challenges through the development of a 'Blueprint', some of which is reproduced above and below. Our strategy of seeking to see war and media anew follows the material architecture blueprints used as working diagrams for building and technical design, before digital means transformed their representation. We use these as a

process for thought and discussion, to navigate and hold these dynamics in view. Rather than being constrained by the linear progression of written language, the Blueprint enables a plan of interactions between simultaneous elements brought into a field of vision, and for new conversations to emerge.

Our aim is to ground a layered materiality into the subject of the immateriality characteristic of much of warfare today, in terms of remote targeting and killing, and how citizens are threatened in new ways in relation to new physical and psychological threats from above. Our blueprint layers how war today needs to be navigated and anchored in time and space, so its human and environmental consequences are not overlooked and forgotten amidst the ephemeral, invisible, but also the overload and continuousness of information about war flowing through social and mainstream medias. To this end we layer over part of a map of Aleppo, Syria – surely one of the most mediatized and datafied – yet repeatedly forgotten battlefields of the twenty-first century (Hoskins 2020) – some of the co-existing exposures and erasures of war.

The long battle or siege of Aleppo from 2012-16 between the Syrian government supported by Russia, Hezbollah and Shia militias and a loose coalition of Syrian opposition forces (including Sunni groups) has already killed over 30,000 with over 20,000 civilians dead. The protracted slaughtering of civilians over several years was consistently predicted by humanitarian organisations, and widely reported, and yet was still met with a persistent expression of disbelief by many western commentators (Hoskins 2020). Some searched for anchorage of meaning through media templates, using images of past catastrophes to try to render the siege of Aleppo intelligible through historic comparison. Our blueprint (Image 1, above) employs an example from the *New York Times* from late 2016, a headline simply reading: 'Berlin, 1945; Grozny, 2000; Aleppo, 2016'[8]. Drone video of the devastation of Aleppo, embedded in the online *New York Times'* article, is compared with the state of Berlin at the end of the Second World War, and also the Chechen capital after its siege and assault by Russian forces at the turn of this century. In this reporting is the idea both that lessons continue to be unlearned about the killing of civilians in war but also that the 'industrial nature of murder' once 'seen', no longer has the same impact (Hoskins 2020).

For us, this points to a new form of short term forgetting of inaccessible war. This is not just a matter of rapid informational displacement in accelerated news feeds, but rather more a kind of déjà vu, where the images and the reporting of civilian suffering is familiar and the same familiarity feeds a stasis of response. The idea of numbing familiarity of a given media representation of the human cost of war is not new, as Susan Sontag has argued: 'The ultra-familiar, ultra-celebrated image—of an agony, of ruin—is an unavoidable feature of our camera-mediated knowledge of war' (2013). Here though, the images of traumatised, wounded and dead civilians, in this century's Syrian civil war, enter into and disappear from western mainstream media frames in a series of short loops. And whereas repetition and rehearsal are said to be key in reinforcing individual remembering, amongst digitally connected news publics, the forewarning of catastrophe and its repeated occurrence seem to have the opposite effects. Namely, as wars and their human consequences increasingly appear in plain sight, they become diminished rather than foregrounded in social or collective memory.

The growing paradox of the media presence yet absence of war is also conveyed in our Blueprint in the dispersal of Internet video stills (some shot by the Syrian army). Video sharing services and platforms such as YouTube may offer William Merrin's (2018) 'participative war' in which pervasive digital connectivity enables a wide range of actors to have their say and participate in warfare in an immediate and ongoing fashion. At the same time what is seen and what is not seen of the acclaimed front-line digital democracy, of a culture of connectivity and participation, is determined through the opacity of algorithms as much as any wisdom of the crowd.

Representation has been ultimately reduced to ranking. Furthermore, as the NGO Syrian Archive which preserves open source evidence of war crimes claims, Google is removing hundreds of thousands of online videos, using machine learning to identify extremist content (that which does not conform to YouTube's community guidelines) (O'Flaherty 2018). Participative war may then appear eminently available yet it is rendered inaccessible both through the opacity of algorithmic ranking and also of erasure.

Our Blueprint is also layered with a photograph of shattered glass (Image 5, below) from the Regional Psychiatric Hospital in Semenivka, in the Sloviansk district of Ukraine, destroyed by Russian shelling in May 2014. It was then used for several weeks by Russian supported DPR (Donetsk People's Republic) separatist military groups who shelled Ukrainian army positions from this area. The undeclared Russian-Ukrainian war that began in February of 2014 is a kind of overt/covert conflict, characterized by Metahaven (2015) as a kind of 'black transparency', an inaccessible war.

Finally, the drone targeting interface (Images 1-3, above) highlights a human disconnectedness to the consequences of warfare which while appearing to be increasingly fought remotely and invisibly, instead intervenes in and scrutinises the most intimate human and social interactions on the ground. The hostile AI predictive targeting technologies demand conformity to an imposed set of cultural and social registers. This combined with the shift to hypervigilant surveillance technologies oriented to identifying 'potential' threats, subjects people on the ground to an unending anxiety of inadvertent exposure as targets and the anticipatory trauma of a future over which they have little direct agency or pre-warning, a future already occupied and foreclosed.

[INSERT IMAGE 5 HERE]

Image 5: Blueprint #5 (2018) Shona Illingworth in discussion with Andrew Hoskins

Conclusion: The new archives of war

In sum, our Blueprint series aims to capture and connect the multiple co-existences and contradictions of inaccessible war. Layered, stacked, connected, simultaneously mainstream and periphery, old and new mainstreams, co-existing and colliding, visceral yet hidden, remembered yet forgotten, embodied and remote. Ultimately we are asking, for all the

attention afforded to the traumatic memory of war, how can we shift perspective to represent the multiple and simultaneous features of contemporary conflict? And how can we challenge assumptions that appear to place the very real human consequences of contemporary war in our view whilst simultaneously obscuring them?

The overabundance or overpresence of warfare of very different kinds, shape the conditions of hyperattention and hypervigilance. Military advances in surveillance, 'pattern-of-life' models of targeting individuals on the basis of aggregating available data about them and pre-empting their potential as a threat, accumulate an archive without limits, that is in waging a 'metadata war.[9]' At the same time, without critical new approaches the optimistic promise of the digital values of openness and 'participative war' (Merrin 2018) do not translate into any kind of usable future memory.

The two regimes in the technological overloading of perceptions and experience of war both create a kind of futureless archive. In the first regime, immersion in the digital volume and flux of the media content of war affords the impression of individual participation and influence of a kind, and yet the digital multitude provide chaotic cover for the trolls of war to thrive. The resulting connective glut of images, information and disinformation is wrought through with the contradictory digital vulnerabilities of contagion and of erasure. What then are the prospects of a usable memory of war ever being discerned or disentangled amidst this disorientating chaos, in which legitimacy, truth, facts, and trust, are all rapidly undone?

Meanwhile, in the second regime – the algorithmic creep of the vast accumulation and aggregation of data used as surveillance and targeting – hints at a state of betawar – war in a rapid and permanent state of evolution, especially from the air with increasingly dire consequences for civilians on the ground. The intensifying militarised and aerial media of surveillance over perpetually traumatised populations is accumulating the most powerful archives in history. And yet, as Pomerantsev (2019, 179) suggests of all of the digital content of atrocities being collected by NGOs and an array of organisations pursuing justice and accountability, 'It is as much archive as we have ever had relating to torture, mass murder and war crimes. And it sits there, waiting for facts to be given meaning'. The

astonishing volume of availability of digital content then prohibits a meaningful memory of warfare from coming into being.

For us then, inaccessible war, is the digital's foreclosing of the future, overrun by the weaponised archive. This weaponization of the archive contrasts with the sheer volume of images and information contained within archives that accumulate evidence of war crimes yet to be made sense of or prosecuted but which are rendered unintelligible due to lack of resources, technology or political will in the new regimes of inaccessible war.

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Notes

[1] In developing the idea of the end of the era of the eye, we are grateful to Ilias Fernini for his observation that as the universe is expanding so all the bodies in the universe will in time become so far away that when we look up at the sky it will be black. The only way of locating ourselves in these circumstances will be through technological interfaces.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Martin A. Conway speaking in Time Present (2016), a video installation by Shona Illingworth.

[7] Catherine Loveday giving evidence to the Airspace Tribunal London Hearing, Doughty Street Chambers, 21 September 2018, http://airspacetribunal.org/about/london-hearing/.

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