

DRONE SENSE

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*'There is therefore a terrestrial fire, water, air, and earth, but there is also an aerial or celestial earth, water, fire, and air. There is a struggle between the earth and sky, with the imprisonment of all four elements at stake'*¹

This article complements and further contextualises our film *Points of Presence* (2017), an experimental narrative created as part of the ongoing *System Earth Cable* project (Fish, Garrett, Case, 2017, 2016). In the film and on the project, we employ a consumer drone to extend our sense of the digitally networked environment by tracking the Internet infrastructure across the North Atlantic from Iceland to the United Kingdom, via its intermediary nodal connections in the Faroe, Shetland, and Orkney Islands. Reading this data as a materially complex narrative, we reveal an emerging stratigraphy where digital mobility is both freed and compromised between vast open spaces and extreme confinements. Through co-reflective editing of the footage with found online sound

and imagery, we speculate that the Internet-drone assemblage forms an enclosure of communication inside of which the digital and the organic merge. We argue that an evolving symbiosis disrupts sense as both affection and understanding and suggests an opportunity for reframing digitally networked communication in material-organic terms. In this short companion piece, we re-present the movement of the film using untitled still frames to evoke a digital-organic levitative sensibility that resonates with Deleuze's elemental conflict depicted in the opening epigraph.

Connected through networked technologies, we live at the margins of sense and sensibility where our self-image feeds back on itself *ad infinitum* and without reference to material origins. Succeeding an alienating hyper-reality, sense technologies such as the drone may, perhaps ironically, serve to remind us of our entanglement with the elemental by extending the sensory mind-body further into the atmosphere. Whether

¹ Deleuze, G. (1990). *The Logic of Sense*. London: Continuum.

employed to measure water retention on treetops in Burma, aid firefighters in saving lives, or discover and attend to rare plants on inaccessible cliff faces, the drone is an expansion of intention that serves negentropy², the distinctive characteristic of life that resists decay and disorder. As pharmakon, both a cure and poison, the drone may also accelerate the entropic force as a mode of surveillance and destruction. It conjures both a first aid and kill box³, to wield a power that can reconfigure the interface between capital, state, and sense⁴. In the tech industry, 3D Robotics CEO and ex editor-in-chief of *Wired* magazine Chris Anderson claims that the drone will give 'everybody' access to 'tools only satellite owners had just a few years ago'⁵. True to the technoliberal perspective that technological democratisation is both economically and socially beneficial (Fish, 2017), Anderson advises us to seize upon the apparent 'emptiness' of the sky.

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In the domain of artistic research, the drone is a powerful ethnographic tool for exploring the margins of society where an aerial mobility of vision can mediate otherwise hidden perspectives to a global community. A striking example of this can be found in the *Unequal Scenes Project*⁶ which communicates an imbalanced world in original, emphatic terms by making bird's eye flyovers between the

starkest economic divides in modern society. Johnny Miller, the socially subversive pilot behind the project, suggests that the impact of these images may in part arise from the feeling of detachment exerted by drone vision. We also suggest, however, that such detachment is experienced methodologically as a controlled bodily extension and that viewers may experience a distinctive form of contact with the environment through a proxy-sense; a form of detachment beginning with photography and finding potential reciprocity in the digital.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the drone is its capacity to mediate real time sense-data back to the body, and by extension, any networked computer. Using a WiFi connection, the acrobatic camera works in parallel to the evolving subsurface megastructure that is the Internet. It is thus tethered to the earth, not only an extension of body but also a node within a sensorial feedback system at an extremity of a planetary computer network. In navigating these elemental boundaries, the drone is positioned to mediate a looming hybridity of digital and organic information. In the film *Points of Presence*, the posthuman eye observes its own anthropomorphisation as it watches our collective effort to procreate through an emerging body of infrastructural arteries and high security rib cages that surface only fleetingly before burrowing back into private, governmental, and corporate camouflage. As ex-bodies, the Internet and the drone share the same light-encoded information, a circulation of frequencies originating in the control of fire, that promethean gift that transformed humanity's fragility into its power. This light stream burns sub-aquatically, utilising water as a bridge. The drone, a distinctly aerial body, thus inadvertently reflects a multi-elemental origin and the pilot recedes or ascends to the role of spectre and channel, stretching the space between pyro-political and sub-marine technologies.

Perhaps the technical network, this technical body, is not extending itself as famously hypothesised by Marshall McLuhan⁷, but stretching or expanding so that the space between elements widens and becomes porous to other flows of information. Theory meets science through the mobilised image as we speculate on a digital and organic interdependence, perhaps an eternal return, or Deleuzian *superfold*⁸, towards a collective understanding of consciousness. For now, a technological expansion of sense

² See: Schrödinger, E. (1943, 1992). *What is Life?*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³ A kill box is 'a temporary autonomous zone of slaughter', coined by the US military. See, e.g. Chamayou, G. (2015). *A Theory of the Drone*. New York: The New Press.

⁴ Shaw, I. (2017). 'The Great War of Enclosure: Securing the Skies'. *Antipode*. 1-24.

⁵ Anderson, C. (31 March, 2017). *The Revolution of Drone-carried Sensors*. Web Interview. Geomatics International Magazine.

⁶ Miller, J. (2017). *Unequal Scenes*. Online project. www.unequalscenes.com.

⁷ McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press..

⁸ Deleuze's enigmatic term which arguably signifies an epochal transition where silicon chips and the organic fuse. See: Deleuze, G. (2008). *Foucault*. London: Bloomsbury. 109.

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necessarily exists within the confines of an atmosphere, a limit of bodily expansion in spherical layers. Crucially, it is here and now that thought and matter exist on such a scale as to render a collective experience of time and insecurity of space. According to the eminent philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, this life itself is 'ecotechnical' and bodies are created 'to make the sense that we vainly seek in the remains of the sky or the spirit'⁹. As if bridging dreams, the connectivity and precision of the digitally networked drone suggests that we are in the process of making a revolutionary step in the human quest to explore the universe.

The Internet itself may be the vehicle – where 'vehicle', from the latin *vehere* [*to carry*], is also a channel, medium, and agent. If the body exposes a breakthrough of sense, the drone may serve to repeat this process of exteriorisation. However, when connected to the Internet, a circuit completes between the earth and the sky giving rise to an enclosure of commons that may undermine or annihilate any potential for aerial freedom. To make sense of this, consider the margins of digitally networked communication. An elemental circuit closes within the confines of a climate and, on a far larger scale than alluded to in the epigraph, a war of elements stirs between the movement, space and energy of information. Here, it is useful to turn to Bernard Stiegler's ongoing project¹⁰ which identifies and responds to an automatic, algorithmic society that functions according to the laws of thermodynamics. From this position, Stiegler proposes that we consider life and information

in the same breath and as an essential struggle between entropy and negentropy. In this way, man-made technology therefore disrupts the balance to the extent of exerting an 'Anthropocene', a deep-time epoch where human-technical mechanisation is the dominant factor in accelerating planetary entropy. Inseparable from capitalism, Stiegler asserts that the Anthropocene is an age from which we must urgently escape by consciously creating 'neganthropic' systems that relay knowledge and time freed by technical automation for contributory social and economic action – that is, the Internet revolution must now trigger a *neganthropocene*. We are currently in a tempestuous transition from the individual to planetary ego becoming visible in geopolitical transformations and in the recalibrations of media truth (both crises of sense). Perhaps humanity itself is in its awkward mirror stage, politics becoming clumsy as it understands itself anew? Or perhaps the drone is just an image, the introjection of a larger, macro-subjective communication? Speculation aside, the Anthropocene must first become conscious of itself so that it may continue to evolve beyond itself¹¹.

With an alternative understanding of digitally networked communication as evolving with the elements¹², we may reconsider a global Internet as bound to a hybrid materiality of organic life and movement of information. The availability of advanced digital technology suggests that we, as political bodies, may soon stand together at the margins of our networked communication equipped with a pyrotechnical sense infusing with the earth, sea, and sky. As an attempt to conclude a perpetual automation, we now rotate the expanded view to glimpse a reflection of both body and biosphere. What comes into focus is a society in an age of elemental struggle and integration, and with a responsibility to fulfil 'the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods'¹³. ■

Watch Points of Presence in full at
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTg0KNAHdRM



⁹ Nancy, J. (2008). *Corpus*. New York: Fordham University Press. 89.

¹⁰ Stiegler, B. (2016). *Automatic Society 1: The Future of Work*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Peters, J. D. (2015). *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹³ Bergson, H. (2007). *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion in Henri Bergson: Key Writings*. London: Bloomsbury.