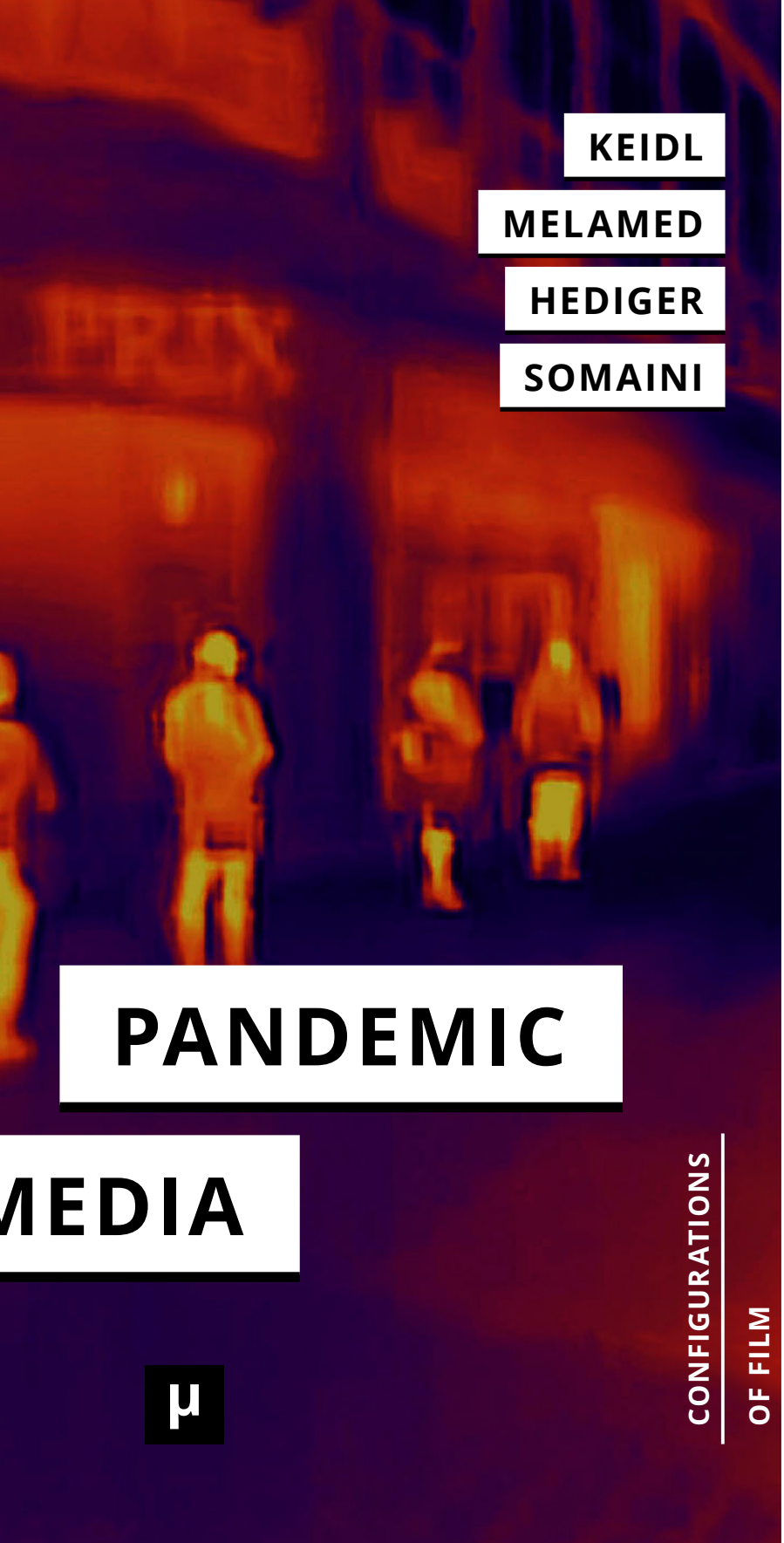

KEIDL

MELAMED

HEDIGER

SOMAINI

PANDEMIC

MEDIA

CONFIGURATIONS OF FILM

μ

Pandemic Media

Configurations of Film Series

Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

edited by
Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini

meson press

KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN

Bibliographical Information of the German National Library
The German National Library lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie (German National Bibliography); detailed bibliographic information is available online at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Published in 2020 by meson press, Lüneburg, Germany
with generous support from the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
www.meson.press

Design concept: Torsten Köchlin, Silke Krieg
Cover design: Mathias Bär
Cover image: © Antoine d'Agata, reprinted with permission from the artist
Editorial assistance: Fabian Wessels

The print edition of this book is printed by Lightning Source,
Milton Keynes, United Kingdom

ISBN (Print): 978-3-95796-008-5
ISBN (PDF): 978-3-95796-009-2
DOI: 10.14619/0085

The PDF edition of this publication can be downloaded freely at www.meson.press.

DRONES

LOCKDOWN

UNMANNEDNESS

TELEPRESENCE

[1 6]

“Covid-dronism”: Pandemic Visions from Above

Ada Ackerman

The numerous drone flyovers of deserted cities have become one of the highest-circulating media productions during the COVID-19 crisis and objects of sheer fascination. In this paper, I explore the troubling and unprecedented conjunction they articulate between an unmanned device and the policy of emptying places from human presence that they record.

As the COVID-19 virus was propagating and countries were fighting to stop its progression, drones would be endowed with new functions, which were regularly broadcasted on news and vehemently discussed: disinfection actions, surveillance patrols during lockdowns, identification of new cases thanks to thermal cameras… This proliferation of drones’ practices in a pandemic context once again confirms our time to be a “Drone Age” (Anderson 2012). If initially developed as surveillance and military devices raising ethical, moral, and epistemological issues (Chamayou 2015), drones have been provided with an expanding array of new applications in several areas (entertainment, science, delivery…), which rely upon an increasing blurring and overlapping of civilian-consumer and military-industrial applications and networks (McNeil and Burrington 2014, 58–59 ; Stubblefield 2020, 2–4; 159–63).

From a media perspective, however, one is not so much struck by the proliferating images of drones in action—no matter how chilling and dystopic they might look—than by the images produced *by* drones during these specific pandemic times. As a matter of fact, drone-made images and films of emptied capital cities and touristic places became one of the most prominent and circulating visual objects born out of the pandemic period, especially in news broadcasting, and to such an extent that they became, so to speak, a visual *topos* of the COVID-19 situation. As surveillance apparatuses able to cover vast areas in a panoramic fashion, drones have proved paramount in turning the notion of lockdown into efficient and spectacular visual representations, in which extreme freedom of flight contrasted sharply with the movement restrictions imposed upon citizens. Benefitting from exceptional shooting conditions, impossible in normal times, drones recorded the unprecedented situation of stopped cities, stirring feelings of wonder, of melancholia as well as of uncanniness—features shared by "ruin porn" (Lyons 2018). Since redistribution of human presence in cities is at stake in the lockdown situation, it is not by chance that these drone videos mainly revolve around urban structures such as churches, roads, stadiums, city halls, squares, and so on, that is, places that have historically contributed to politically and economically organizing the human occupation of urban space. Among the numerous circulating drone videos of lockdown cities, one can quote the representative film *La France en absence* [*Absent France*], made by HOsiHO Drone Network, a grand tour of twenty-one French cities during the COVID-19 lockdown in March and April 2020[1].

I suggest that one of the peculiarities of those images lies in their troubling conjunction of two levels of unmanned-ness: made by drones—"unmanned aerial vehicles" according to their military designation—which are equipped with a mechanical eye disentangled from a human body, these images unravel usually crowded spaces as almost devoid of people and with significantly reduced human activity. To be more accurate, these images show places that *should* be empty according to the lockdown agenda, but that are still populated by a few individuals walking, running, or cycling in deserted streets and that display scarce urban traffic. This persistence of rare manifestations of human presence can be ontologically construed as a kind of humanist resistance to the radicality of the lockdown cleansing policy—a symptom of mankind's vitality that cannot be so easily contained. Besides, many of the few remaining moving elements in these images—and most of all vehicles—reveal supply and labor circulations that *cannot be stopped,* even in and especially during a pandemic outbreak.[2] If not totally void of people, those urban

1 https://www.hosiho.net/en/blog/hosiho-drone-network-s-news/66-covid-19-cities-lockdown-france-view-by-drone-network-hosiho.html. Accessed June 10, 2020.

2 This articulation is made clear in *Paris confiné 2020,* shot by Skydrone and Futuria Production. After having focused on an emptied Paris thanks to drone cameras, the video

landscapes shot by drones nevertheless convey a strong sense of human absence on a scale not hitherto experienced. These images appear thus as the result of a puzzling correlation between the expelling of human presence and an increasing non-human agency in the production of visibility. What better device than a drone, which is a medium whose high maniability provides the viewer with a supra-human gaze, to register and account for drastic sanitizing policies consisting of emptying places of human activities and manifestations?

While the emphatic and spectacular quality conveyed by the totalizing and sweeping eye of the drone invites one to marvel at the beauty of the sites viewed, at the "purity" of their design and architecture, since almost no human presence is obstructing the view anymore and thanks to a significant decrease in pollution, it is precisely this beauty that appears not only as paradoxical but also as problematic. It is conditioned by a radical removal of human elements, a beauty fostering a feeling of a terrifying sublime among the viewer, according to Kant's definition of a feeling of amazement mingled with dread (Kant 1794, 25).

These images of ghost cities awaken numerous memories of apocalyptic films with which they share their sensationalism and dazzling perspectives (*Twenty-eight days later,* 2002, *Contagion,* 2011...). These images thus turn visual tropes usually associated with fiction into testimonies of real times, in a puzzling interlacing of dystopia and reality. These images not only register how emptied cities look because of the lockdown; they also inevitably convey the threatening potential scenario of humanity wiped out, that is, an extension and a radicalization of this human-presence clearing principle. This would not be possible without their attracting and spectacular quality. As a matter of fact, in order to shoot urban desolated landscapes, TV channels hired drone companies specialized in advertising and in the film industry such as HOsiHO, a worldwide network created in 2014, for which a fleet of 200 pilots captures "the world seen from the sky." Its database provides 4,852 videos related to COVID-19 (HOsiHO 2020). In the case of France, most lockdown videos broadcast on channels were provided by the company Skydrone created in 2010, whose motto is to "bring wings to images" while ensuring stable and high-resolution aerial shootings (Skydrone 2020).

Like much thrilling and exciting imagery produced by civilian and commercial drones, these emptied-city films derive their power from a "technogene sensuality," a "virtual-somatic feeling of presence in spaces where human

begins at 01:06 to insert actions of different workers whose labor proved paramount for the capital city's organization. As stated by Christophe Lyard, one of the filmmakers: "we were aware that behind these images of emptied monuments, life was going on; people were of course working in order to maintain the city's activity: caregivers, postmen, garbage collectors, delivery persons..." (my translation) https://vimeo.com/415263660. Accessed June 10, 2020.

bodies cannot (or almost cannot) be and move" (Jablonowski 2020, 4). As Maximilian Jablonowski suggests, one can connect the pleasure and the intensity of experience provided by drone vision to a form of "telepresence," a term with which Martin Minsky labels the ability for a body to remotely and safely experience a dangerous or an unreachable environment thanks to a media apparatus (Minsky 1980). In the case of drone views of locked-down cities, this telepresence acquires a singular quality as the drone brings the perceptive subject not so much to risky and barely accessible sites than to locations of *forbidden* access. These videos provide the viewer with an exploration of locations in which he is, due to his very human condition, *persona non grata.* Hence a paradoxical experience of telepresence, which demands nothing more from the perceptive subject than his absence as well as the absence of his human congeners. A good illustration of this can be found in *La France en absence* for instance at 02 :42, when the drone camera climbs a flight of deserted stairs in Lyon's old district. These images appear as a doubling of the official lockdown instructions, being caught within a feedback loop in which images enhance the requirements to remove human presence from public space.

Therefore, by documenting the lockdown state, the drone's unmannedness finds the ultimate development of its original goal, which was to be able to watch and strike a target from afar without being exposed: not only is the human object henceforth *already* removed from its gaze, but by the same token the viewer is also reminded of the necessity for himself to vanish from the public scene. Never has the label "phantom shot," coined for films "taken from a position that a human cannot normally occupy" (Farocki 2004, 13), sounded so literal than today.

References

Anderson, Chris. 2012. "How I Accidentally Kickstarted the Domestic Drone Boom." *Wired Magazine* June 22. Accessed June 10, 2020. https://www.wired.com/2012/06/ff-drones/.
Chamayou, Grégoire. 2015. *A Theory of the Drone.* Translated by Janet Lloyd. New York: The New Press.
Farocki, Harun. 2004. "Phantom Images." *Public* 29: 12-24.
HOsiHO. 2020. Accessed June 10, 2020. https://www.hosiho.com/en/search?q=Covid-19&ob=date&ow=DESC.
Jablonowski, Maximilian. 2020. "Beyond Drone Vision: The Embodied Telepresence of First-Person-View Drone Flight." *Senses & Society*, forthcoming.
Kant, Immanuel. 1794. "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime." In *Anthropology, History and Education*, edited by Günter Zöller and Robert B. Louden, 23–62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lyons, Siobhan. 2018. *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay.* New York: Springer.
McNeil, Joanne, and Ingrid Burrington. 2014. "Droneism." *Dissent* 61 (2): 57–60. Accessed June 10, 2020. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/droneism/.
Minsky, Martin. 1980. "Telepresence." *Omni*, June 1980. Accessed June 10, 2020. https://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/papers/Telepresence.html.

Skydrone. 2020. Accessed June 10, 2020. https://www.skydrone.fr/reportage-drone-documentaire-drone-tv/.
Stubblefield, Thomas. 2020. *Drone Art: The Everywhere War as Medium*. Oakland: University of California Press.

Philipp Dominik Keidl, Laliv Melamed, Vinzenz Hediger, and Antonio Somaini (eds.)
Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory

With its unprecedented scale and consequences the COVID-19 pandemic has generated a variety of new configurations of media. Responding to demands for information, synchronization, regulation, and containment, these "pandemic media" reorder social interactions, spaces, and temporalities, thus contributing to a reconfiguration of media technologies and the cultures and polities with which they are entangled. Highlighting media's adaptability, malleability, and scalability under the conditions of a pandemic, the contributions to this volume track and analyze how media emerge, operate, and change in response to the global crisis and provide elements toward an understanding of the post-pandemic world to come.

konfigurationen-des-films.de

KONFIGURATIONEN DES FILMS

DFG Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

GOETHE UNIVERSITÄT FRANKFURT AM MAIN

ISBN 978-3-95796-008-5

meson press

www.meson-press.com