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2024

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/22819>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Gaeta, Amy: The Sensorium of The Drone and Communities. In: *NECSUS_European Journal of Media Studies*. #Open, Jg. 13 (2024), Nr. 1, S. 323–328. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/22819>.

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The Sensorium of The Drone and Communities



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NECSUS 13 (1), Spring 2024: 323-328

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/the-sensorium-of-the-drone-and-communities/>

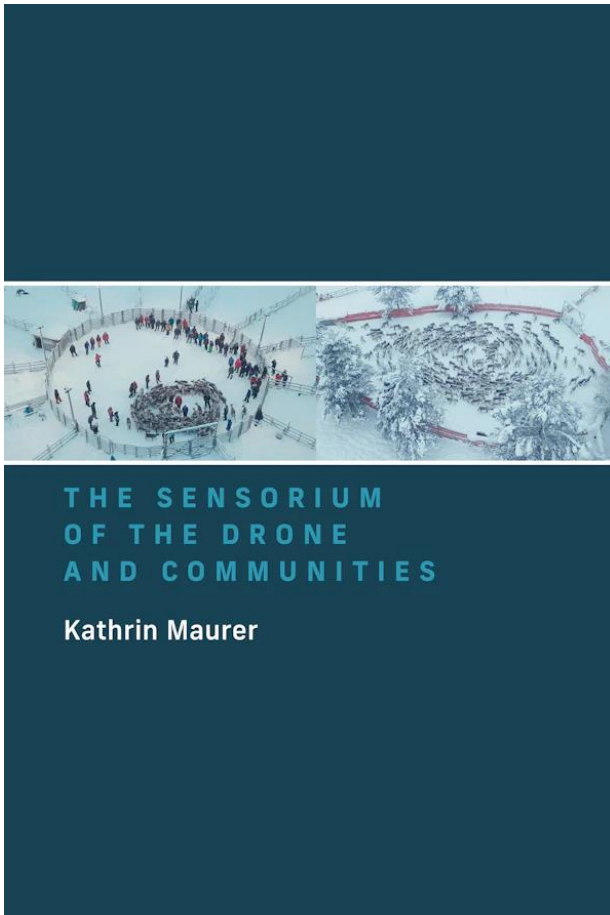
In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performance* (2003), seminal literary critic and queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coins the term 'paranoid reading' to describe the tendency of critics to see their objects of study as having some inherent flaw that the critic must unmask. This paranoid reading, contended Sedgwick, deeply prevents critics' capacity to sense and explore the other sides of an object of study, and most importantly to be open to being surprised by one. In turn, Sedgwick advocates for reparative reading as a mode of reading wherein the critic pushes aside their paranoia and stays open to the internal contradictions and surprises of an object of study. While Katherin Maurer does not explicitly cite Sedgwick as part of her methodology in *The Sensorium of the Drone and Communities* (MIT Press, 2023), Maurer certainly captures the spirit of it by providing a rich, compelling reparative reading of drone technology and the communities they enable.

Alongside, not in place of, the drone's military origins and ongoing applications for violent and exclusionary ends, Maurer contends that drones, particularly drone sensoria, 'have a collective dimension: they are about communities' (p. 3). This is a bold book that positions itself as unique among what we might call paranoid readings of drone technology, readings that tell us what we already know: the drone is a technology of military origin that is often used to reproduce the violent colonial logics of airpower and mastery.

The Sensorium is a clear sign that we are deep within a second wave of drone scholarship. Whereas the first wave can be characterised by a focus on drone warfare, drone vision, and the drone's relationship to mass surveillance and processes of social control, the second wave has turned away (but not fully) from these topics and sought to uncover the other sides of the drone and its sense and world-making capacities, rather than just world-destroying capacities and reinforcement of hegemony. In particular, drone scholarship has started to

look inward and criticise its own reliance on ocular-centrism, or optical drone vision, as well as Paul Virilio's famous formulation of military visibility as violence.[1]

Key to this emerging scholarship has been broadening drone studies to include more varied aesthetics and more-than-human entanglements. Feminist political geographer Anna Jackman, for instance, has recently turned our attention to the drone's relationship to volume[2], asking us to consider not only how the drone occupies three-dimensional space but also how it can sense space in three-dimensional ways that often exceed human sensing capacities. Even within drone warfare scholarship, this scholarly turn has made its impact. Literary scholar Beryl Pong and media studies professor Michael Richardson, among a few others, have turned our attention to the 'art of drone warfare'[3] and 'drone aesthetics'[4], which examines the drone's sense-making and making sense capacities as aesthetics, but also as a zone of politics where the body, self, and environment meet.



Maurer evidently shares Pong, Richardson, and Jackman's ambitions to explore the drone along the lines of 'antiscopic and multisensorial sensing' (p. 1). In the artists and communities surveyed by Maurer, such as Agi Haines' *Drones with Desire* sculpture, the 'drone is amorphous, fleshy, and alive' (p. 1), we gain a refreshing outlook on what drones might be and do and how humans may relate to drones beyond a binary position of operator or target. As such, it is fitting to position *The Sensorium* within newer projects that argue for the need to move away from a focus on military drone operations and their imbrication in the technopolitical visualising and sensing systems mediated by drones. Rather, like Jackman's attention to volume, Maurer destabilises the air-ground or top-bottom dichotomy that dominates conversations about the human relations created by drones. In *The Sensorium*, the people of focus include hobbyists, artists, activists, and social movements, what Maurer understands to be 'real-world communities where the drone plays a constitutive role' (p. 3). Maurer positions the drone as not figuratively 'above' these communities in the sense of pure mastery or social control, but more so alongside them, or even integrated with them, such as when Maurer refers to drone selfie videos and drone racing as processes of fusing the body of the drone with the body of the user.

The other key difference between first and second-wave scholarship is firmly announced by Maurer's project: civilian and aesthetic drones can mobilise senses and communities in ways that counter, or at least disrupt, the 'power relations of drone violence' (p. 4). This marks, arguably, the most contentious and exciting claim of the book and firmly positions its novel place in drone scholarship and the growing strand on drone art and aesthetics. Divided across four themes – the sensorium, the body, the earth, and the nonhuman – each chapter describes a different kind of community that emerges in response to human and more-than-human convergences with drones.

Maurer explains that drone sensoria is distinct from drone sensing as the latter is about a machinic capability – drone technology has sensors and can sense; whereas the former is about the sensorial assemblage enabled by drones and the communities that use and engage with drones. When charting this distinction in the first chapter, Maurer clarifies the relationship between aesthetics, drone sensoria, and communities via Jacques Ranciere's aesthetic theory on the prospective role of aesthetics in disrupting normative regimes of what is sensible. Ranciere's theory is put in conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of communities as 'relational social manifestations, in negotiation with and openness to each other' that exceed identitarian boundaries (p. 32). In this, building on Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanism, Maurer sees a posthuman potential for a form of subjectivity where human and more-than-human communities can emerge.

Building on the tethers of this more-than-human possibility, Maurer explores the drone's role as a prosthetic in her analysis of cyborg communities. Unlike say a medical prosthetic or a generic reference to all media technologies as prosthetics, drones are treated as a telepresence technology, or 'a medium of embodied sensing and telepresence, and by their suggestion of a community dimension through the projection of aesthetic imaginaries of human-machine convergences' (p. 51). In addition to guiding the analysis in the second chapter, this telepresence comparison opens up a new technology lineage for drones, putting them alongside telephones, Zoom calls, and VR headsets instead of just aerial military technologies.

The book further examines what new types of presence are possible via drones. This leads the author to overturn the common association of drones with facelessness – where drone vision does not allow for accurate identification of people and functions in a vertical scopic manner – by examining artists who engage with drones equipped with facial recognition software, creating a 'technosensorial mix' toward new 'community visions' (p. 75) and thinking about drone sensing operating in a 'networked, datafied, and multidirectional fashion' (p. 69). This part of the book can be doubly read as a critique of accounts of machine vision that treat it as a tool for capturing and representing reality. In Maurer's readings of a varied set of creative pieces, she demonstrates the generative power: 'it constructs our lifeworlds and communities' (p. 89).

Moving onto the planetary dimensions of drone sensoria and communities, the book further focuses on the drone's dual capacity for both flattened and volumetric sensing and questions what each means for evoking 'interconnectedness instead of control and mastery' wherein 'the drone can become a medium for planetarity' (p. 93) and thus planetary communities. Such communities, or rather imaginaries of communities, which include artists-activists, envisioned via drone art treat the planet as a commonplace instead of a territory to occupy. On the other side of flatness, the three-dimensional movement and sensing capacities of earth-sensing drones may allow for critical reflection 'on environmental damage and our exploitation of the earth', while we cannot forget that this 'Janus-faced technology also exploits the earth' (pp. 121, 123).

The final section – on the nonhuman – offers the most compelling analysis of the drone's potential for disrupting the anthropocentrism often asserted by the militarised and colonial logics behind drone usage. One chapter attends to civilian drone swarms, such as drone light shows or drone swarms used in policing, and the kinds of visions of communities they can suggest. Refusing the neat assumption that nonhuman visions may be anti-human or even inhumane, Maurer asks about the potential for non-sociocentric-defined communities and multitudes in works featuring civilian drone swarms, namely modernist fiction,

contemporary science fiction, and protest communities. The final chapter brings us to pandemic drones, examining the role of drones in 'viral sensing' and even as 'companions' and 'empathy machines' (pp. 172-173). Then, like the other chapters, Maurer asks what we can learn from the drone about more-than-human ourselves and our futures if we are willing to see the drone beyond its military origins as determining its potential. Most impressive about this chapter is the novel nonhuman turn in which Maurer takes drone vision. Counter to the tired, repeated tropes of drone vision as dehumanising, cold, and detached, Maurer uses case studies to show when and how the drone may afford a decentering of the human view in a way that can generate empathy. For instance, the author offers the example of photographer George Steinmetz's drone footage of a large-scale burial site for COVID-19 victims in Hart Island, New York City. The graves were dug by people incarcerated at Rikers Island Prison. This footage revealed the extent of the tragedy of the pandemic while also displaying the New York City government's downplaying of COVID-19 deaths and disrespect for the dead. The drone's aerial view can thus stimulate 'affective experiences of empathy' that encourage the humanity of those dehumanised (p. 180).

Amid developments in the production and use of autonomous weapon systems and the global debates over their ethics of use, the primary challenge of any analysis of the non-military sides of the drone is adequately and respectfully accounting for the material harms enabled by drone technology and the ways that the drone is an object of fear for millions. This book's attempt to defamiliarise the drone from its military origins challenges readers to ask larger questions about which narrative framings limit our capacity to sense differently and imagine what relations we may forge, or perhaps already but do not necessarily acknowledge.

For all the valuable work it does in enriching drone scholarship, at times the book's varied archive demands more messiness, exploring the both/and of drone technology and its simultaneous multiplicity and moral ambivalence, as the text sometimes seems to fall back on more morally-dualistic readings of the drone. This, however, is the work needed from the second wave of drone scholarship, not a single monograph. By confronting the both/and, the field can offer insights to pressing questions about what determines a technology's potential and how we can account for the means of production and material conditions underlying new technologies while also acknowledging how the technologies themselves and their engagements with the human and nonhuman worlds can exceed the ambitions and ideologies of their makers. Along with this, Maurer's text, as representative of second-wave drone scholarship, could prompt more analysis of how to approach the ontological question of a new technology with old origins such as the drone, AI, or gene editing. That is, when a technology as ominous as the drone comes to take on forms, uses, and capacities completely disparate from those intended, can we still call it a drone? How can a drone be both a killing

machine and an empathy machine? Are these systems even comparable? And what imaginaries and community visions, to use Maurer's terms, are lost if we presume them not to be?

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Notes

[1] 1989.

[2] 2023.

[3] Pong 2022.

[4] Pong & Richardson 2024