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Geopoetics and Global Warfare in the Twenty-First Century

Abstract: In the age of global terrorism and drone warfare, the materialities and medialities of war become intertwined in new ways – and a new kind of "world literature" emerges in the twisted coordinates of violent connectedness. This article considers three novels dealing with the so-called War on Terror in a specific way: Thomas Lehr's *September* (2010), Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2013), and David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* (2014) all produce different modes of vision and different forms of globality. My reading of these texts is framed by a new understanding of geopoetics: drawing on, among others, the work of Michel Serres and his philosophy of relationality, it argues that fiction's response to simplifying narratives and visual regimes is informed by a topological concept of space that collapses metrical distance.

Keywords: drone warfare, geography, geopoetics, post-9/11 literature, topology, War on Terror, war writing

The first decade of the twenty-first century and its dispersed and complex wars have often been framed by theories of the iconic and the medial. Almost automatically, they have been discussed in similar terms to both the Gulf War of the 1990s (of which, famously, Baudrillard claimed that it "did not take place") and the terrorist spectacle of 9/11; that is, as being orchestrated to generate iconic images, while, at the same time, actually rendering suffering and violence invisible. What has been frequently overlooked in these catchy analyses is the fact that visuality (a term that focuses on practices of seeing rather than the circulation of images) and recent warfare have a much more complex relationship that also calls for a rethinking of spatial theory.

"Visuality [as] techno-culturally mediated vision [plays] a strategic role [...] in linking and de-linking 'sight' and 'site' in late modern war through the spatialities of targeting and the virtualization of violence," writes the visual theorist Derek Gregory (2010, 68). It is precisely this reciprocal entanglement and isolation of visuality and space that, as I will argue, also informs a poetics of late modern warfare. In this article, I will focus on novels set in the last Iraq War.

"We fight them over there so we don't have to fight them here": this was, famously, George W. Bush's retrospective justification for extending the so-called War on Terror to Iraq. After it became clear that the reports about weapons of mass destruction were false, the invasion – which had already happened – had to

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be legitimized again, and what was more convenient than invoking 9/11 and a terrorist threat, even though there was no connection between Al-Qaeda and Iraq? In Bush's dichotomous reasoning, the signifiers "us" and "them" (which are, of course, arbitrary in themselves) are mapped onto a binary opposition of places, while at the same time Islamist terrorism – ("them") – is merged with the nation state of Iraq ("over there"). This is a simple example of a rhetoric of separation that is both spatial and constructs otherness – a situation that is not remotely new.

From the catapult to the crossbow, from the assault rifle to the long-range missile, the history of war instruments is marked by the attempt to increase distance from the enemy while decreasing one's own risk of dying. Carl Schmitt, in *Der Nomos der Erde* (1950), conceives this spatial-technological complex alongside the question of symmetry and the lawfulness of war: aerial war cannot be a *bellum iustum* because it is not "bounded" any more and because its objective is destruction. Ironically, even for Schmitt, who served the National Socialist regime, attempts to legitimate such a war compel us "die Diskriminierung des Gegners ins Abgründige zu treiben" [to push the discrimination of the enemy to new levels]. He adds a historical reference to the prohibition of crossbows by Pope Innocent II in 1134. Killing at a distance was deemed morally objectionable – with a crucial exception: against non-Christian enemies, long-range weapons were still "selbstverständlich benutzt […], weil der Krieg gegen eine solche Art von Feinden von selbst ein gerechter Krieg war" [used as if it were a matter of course, because the war against such enemies was automatically a just war] (Schmitt 299; my translations). This combination of distant killing and excluding narratives is, in a way, still operative in the "War on Terror."

According to Edward Said, the same discursive patterns that he analysed with regard to colonial constructions in *Orientalism* (1978) und *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) continue in the Iraq War and its rhetorical preparation:

> Without a well-organised sense that the people over there were not like "us' and didn't appreciate "our" values – the very core of traditional orientalist dogma – there would have been no war. The American advisers to the Pentagon and the White House use the same clichés, the same demeaning stereotypes, the same justifications for power and violence […] as the scholars enlisted by the Dutch conquerors of Malaysia and Indonesia, the British armies of India, Mesopotamia, Egypt, West Africa, the French armies of Indochina and North Africa. (Said 2003)

Orientalist and colonialist stereotyping typically produces a fiction of, in the terms of Justin Edwards, "full knowability": it is not only us against them, but "we" also know how "they" work: "A colonist discourse […] distances the 'other' and generates stereotypes to suggest that he or she is entirely knowable and therefore subjectable" (2008, 18).

In spatial theory, for example in Michel de Certeau's work, a view from above onto the complex textures of the city is often associated with such a violent, imposing, simplifying form of knowledge and narrative. In Cairo, under French rule, this powerful nexus was in action quite literally: as Derek Gregory points out, the French colonizers' first step was to impose what he calls a scopic regime on the city: raised platforms, optical instruments of control, grids – and a European cartographic representation.

Today, visuality and the "view from above" are linked to physical violence in an even more literal way. In drone warfare, the image *is* the weapon, or a crucial part of it; and "full knowledge" (or, in military lingo, good "intelligence") about the targeted persons is deadly in a very direct sense (and, contrary to what the semantics of the precision weapon suggests, also for civilians who happen to be around them). At the same time, warfare has become truly global: drones targeting a square metre in Yemen or Afghanistan are piloted from Arizona or Nevada. Such a highly technologized war certainly takes a combination of increased distance, visualization, and reductive narratives to its extreme.

For Emmanuel Levinas, ethics is grounded in the direct encounter with the face of the other. What is an ethical response to warfare, then, in the age of the screen and electronic information? To what extent and how do fictional texts question, counter, or feed on its effects? Analyses of war writing often work with the presumption, or come to the conclusion, that "war eludes representation." This seems short-sighted to me on many levels, one being the implication that other things and events do not elude representation. Rather, especially with regard to late modern warfare, we might ask how the martial technologies of representation, both showing and acting, are mimicked or sabotaged in narrative structures. In addition to that, I will argue that the response to simplifying narratives and their cross-relations with visual regimes can be framed by the concept of topology and narrative modes of proximity.

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In Thomas Lehr's *September: Fata Morgana*, a kind of long prose poem on four lives affected by 9/11 and the Iraq War, a techno-military view from above is set against a ground-level vision:

> über eine von den Infrarotkameras in Grün-Grau-Tönen wiedergegebene bewegte Bodenaufnahme huschen [...] niedergeduckte / Objekte / in Moosgrün Jadegrün Schilfgrün plötzlich gesprenkelt von madenähnlichen weißen Schemen (je heller desto wärmer) [...] auf der Erde / endet die Distanz wird / alles wirklich [...] zerreißen Palmstämme Lastwagen die Körper einiger Hundert Soldaten einer Saddam-Elitedivision und auch [...] der alte marineblaue VW und sein Besitzer ein vierzigjähriger Gärtner der alle zwei Wochen von Baghdad

> aus hierher fuhr […] am nächsten Tag muss man / durch das Visier der Panzer / wieder klar sehen was man tötet […] die abgerissenen Beine Arme Köpfe (Lehr 2010, 354)

> [cowering objects / can be seen moss-green jade-green rush-green suddenly sprinkled with maggot-like whitish spectres (the brighter the warmer) (…) on the ground / distance stops (…) everything is torn to pieces the trunks of palm trees trucks tanks the bodies of several hundred soldiers of one of Saddam's elite divisions and also the plantations the toolshed the old navy-blue VW and its owner a 40-year-old gardener who used to drive out here from Baghdad every two weeks (…) on the next day you have to once more see clearly what you're killing / in the sights of the tanks / the torn-off arms legs heads.] (Lehr, trans. Mitchell 2013, 304–305)

The narrative moves from the computerized weapon's vision down to the cataclysmic events on the ground, both contrasting aerial warfare with fighting on the ground and turning the pixellated silhouettes on the screen into complex persons with jobs and relatives. On a macrostructural level, the text works similarly. It links the stories of two father–daughter pairs – Muna and Tarik in Baghdad, Martin and Sabrina in New York – in various ways. The four characters are in symmetric life situations, as both fathers are in their mid-fifties, well respected in their professions and social circles, interested in culture, and open-minded; both daughters are in love for the first time and are about to embark on a career; and, ultimately, both daughters (one definitely, one possibly) lose their lives in the intertwined catastrophes of 9/11 and a suicide attack in Baghdad. They did actually meet at one point: unbeknown to them but not to the reader, they both have a childhood memory of a certain café table in Paris and a girl their age with her father. But, in addition to this one physical encounter, there seems to be a more intangible connection between Muna and Sabrina, who both sometimes address a mysterious sister. When Muna visits the historic excavation sites of Babylon, the famous Ishtar Gate becomes a kind of ghostly point of intersection between the two daughter narratives:

> die einst bemalten Reliefe der Drachen des Marduk und der Stiere des Adad schienen mit den Steinen zu verschwimmen oder auf deren Fugengitter aufzutauchen wie auf einem brüchigen in die Länge gezogenen Koordinatensystem historischer Halluzinationen / ich berühre eines der heiligen Tiere an der Schulter und du / Schwester / gehst in Berlin vom Pergamonaltar her kommend mit einem Engelsschritt nach Babylon durch den Korridor der Jahrhunderte und legst die Hand auf die gleiche Stelle als spiegelten wir uns durch den Stein. (Lehr 2010, 263)

> [the reliefs of the dragons of Marduk and the bulls of Adad that had once been painted seemed to merge with the stones or to appear on the grid of their joins as if on a cracked protracted system of coordinates of historical / hallucinations / I touch one of the sacred animals on the shoulder and you / sister / coming from the Pergamon Altar in Berlin take one angel's step down the corridor of the centuries to Babylon and place your hand on the

> same spot as if we were looking at our reflections through the stone.] (Lehr, trans. Mitchell 2013, 222–223)

The ancient Babylon and its rich culture is an important reference point for the text; in that way, too, it works against dominant media narratives of Iraq as a desolate war zone with a population that, in Judith Butler's terms, is framed as ungrievable and already lost because it does not share a cultural likeness with "ourselves" (see Butler 2010, 36).

Ironically, while what is on display in the Pergamon Museum is the real Ishtar Gate and other parts of the Nineveh palace (others, again, are located at the British Museum in London), there is only a small copy of the former on its original site in Iraq. This chiasmus points to the subtle imperial forms of violence still at work, and it might be one reason why the Ishtar Gate is such a central, albeit easily overlooked (given the text's sheer length and complex web of references) motif in *September*, providing the setting for one of the few ghostly encounters between the characters. Or, more precisely, rather than just providing a setting, the Gate itself seems to become a nodal point outside linear time and metrical space. What, to many reviewers, seemed to be a certain clairvoyance among the characters, could, I think, be read more productively as a topological figure on and referring to the level of the text itself. Significantly, Muna's sensation or imagination of a spatial and temporal instability at Babylon distorts and disrupts a geometric "grid" formed of stones. In the English translation, the emerging spatial form that the latter is then likened to ("einem brüchigen, in die Länge gezogenen Koordinatensystem") becomes a "cracked protracted system of coordinates of historical / hallucinations." I would suggest, though, translating *brüchig* as "fragile" here (if something is *brüchig*, it has not yet cracked, or not necessarily), and *in die Länge gezogen* as "stretched" (and not as the more bureaucratic "protracted"). And what is a "fragile, stretched coordinate system" other than a topological space that collapses stable distance?

I will briefly explain how I understand the term "topology," as many readers will associate it with Heidegger's notion of topology, or topology just as anything relating to space, which is not at all what is meant here. A basic definition of mathematical topology would be that it complicates Euclidean space, space in the common sense, space as a sort of container that we move in – because it does not deal with stable, measurable distances. Rather, it defines closeness as connectivity and relationality. So, what is geographically, topographically distant, can be "close" in terms of topology; the philosopher Michel Serres calls topology "la science de voisinages et déchirures" [the science of nearness and rifts] (1994, 93; trans. Lapidus 1995, 60).

Topologists claim that a doughnut and a coffee cup are, topologically speaking, the same object, because their shapes – in theory – can be stretched into each other without operations of tearing or cutting. Another famous example is the Möbius strip with its turn and twist. As both figures allow no distinction between inside and outside, upside and downside, they point to how topology can be connected to decategorizing logic in other contexts and disciplines. Michel Serres writes:

> Nous ne répondrons plus jamais par oui ou par non aux questions de l'appartenance. Dedans ou dehors? Entre oui et non, zéro et un, une infinité de valeurs apparaissent, et donc une infinité de réponses. Le mathématiciens nomment floue cette rigeur nouvelle: sous-ensembles flous, topologie floue. Qu'ils soient remerciés: nous avions besoin de ce flou depuis de millénaires. (Serres 1980, 87)

> [We will no longer answer with a simple yes or no to questions of belonging. Inside or outside? Between yes and no, between zero and one, an infinite number of values appear, and thus an infinity of responses. Mathematicians call this new rigor "fuzzy": fuzzy subsets, fuzzy topology. They should be thanked: we have needed this fuzziness for millennia.] (Serres, trans. Schehr 1982, 57, modified here)

While Serres's own thinking can be described as topological, he, as in this passage, also short-circuits questions of belonging (and thus, exclusion) with the new fuzziness of twentieth-century mathematics, basically proposing the latter as a blueprint for ethical thought. Another form of topology is the Einstein-Rosen bridge, or wormhole, in general relativity theory, which can be thought of as a shortcut between two points in topological space-time that, in a Cartesian stable coordinate space, are located far away from each other.

With regard to *September*, I would argue that the text works towards such shortcuts or foldings in its core narrative structure, essentially projecting a topological poetics for an ethics in the age of long-distance warfare. But a kind of decategorizing "wormhole" also exists on a more micro-logical, lexical level: for example, both George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein are just referred to as the "PRÄSIDENT" in capital letters, almost never by name, and it is not always easy to decide which one is which (e.g. Lehr 2012, 76, 303). In occupied Baghdad, Saddam's dictatorial architecture is still existent, the old epicentre of power still intact, and merely under the control of a different type of war machinery (Lehr 2012, 439).

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A very different novel, one that is quite unlikely to ever be subsumed under the "post-9/11" rubric, also reflects on Baghdad's urban spatiality during the occupation. In David Mitchell's monumental *The Bone Clocks* (2014), one of the many interwoven storylines focuses on a British war reporter. For Ed Brubeck, the Green

Zone in the heart of the city is not only a heterotopia with a complicated entry system, but also a kind of US-American theme park (or, also, to borrow from the English subtitle of Lehr's *September*, a mirage):

> Three more checkpoints [...] and you find yourself inside the Emerald City – as the Green Zone has inevitably come to be known, a ten-kilometre-square fortress maintained by the US army and its contractors to keep out the reality of post-invasion Iraq and preserve the illusion of a kind of Tampa, Florida, in the Middle East. [...] Black GM Suburbans cruise at the 35 m.p.h. speed limit on the smooth roads; electricity and gasoline flow 24/7; ice-cold Bud is served by bartenders from Mumbai who rename themselves Sam, Scooter and Moe for the benefit of their clientele. (Mitchell 2014, 216)

While repeatedly pointing to this war's close ties to neoliberal privatization and its generally globalized character, the text also presents the inner zone as a kind of cyber-colonial, almost phantasmagorical power centre that is not actually in Iraq; the Green Zone topographically borders with the messiness of the "real" Baghdad, but is, topologically speaking, much closer to the US. It could be argued that a similar, but inverted spatial stretching occurs in long-distance warfare in general:

> A drone circled above us. It would be armed. I thought of its operator, picturing a crew-cut nineteen-year-old called Ryan at a base in Dallas, sucking an ice-cold Frappuccino through a straw. He could open fire on the clinic, kill everyone in and near it, and never smell the cooked meat. To Ryan, we'd be pixelated thermal images on a screen, writhing about a bit, turning from yellow to red to blue. (Mitchell 2014, 233)

The ice-cold Frappuccino and other clichéd markers of Americanism in this passage serve as objective extensions of "Dallas", indicating how two distant places are virtually knotted together, in the non-place that is the drone control room, in a one-way, deadly screen vision. The fact that "Ryan" is actually imagined by a journalist on the ground, who is himself being eyed and turned into electronic information by the drone at this very moment, adds another twist to this spatial-visual complex.

It is worth taking a closer look at this (possibly) topological configuration and how it is situated within the structure of the novel and relates to its themes. Like Lehr's *September*, but maybe in a less didactic way, the novel *The Bone Clocks* collapses distance in different forms. Its storyline not only connects Cambridge, a ski resort in Switzerland, Australia, Iraq, and other places scattered globally; the episodes also span fifty-nine years in the frame narrative, and millennia in the stories-within-the-story, from early antiquity to a dystopian 2043. Taking up the theme and structure of atemporal, global interconnectedness that already informed *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas*, Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* is now indeed and unmetaphorically a story of old souls. One of the characters previously lived

as a surgeon-scholar in the eighteenth century, a peasant girl turned wunderkind in nineteenth century Russia, and a male Chinese NHS psychiatrist in Thatcher's England. When a concept of reincarnation, as fanciful as it may be, is played out like this, it necessarily cuts through the categories of ethnicity, class, and gender. Everyone is everything, and no one knows where, as whom, or with what social status they will be born again. Thus, the novel points to arbitrary othering through its own arbitrariness, to simplifying narratives through its inbuilt indefinite biographical complexity – a structure of equality that the logic of drone warfare and a rhetoric of "us against them" inherently ignore.

So, both *September* and *The Bone Clocks* destabilize distance in various ways, but I would argue that there is still a degree of separation at work in both of them. In another novel set in the Iraq War, an even more radical, and quite different, form of topological folding and stretching occurs. In *The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers, an author who actually fought in Iraq, the young private John Bartle returns from his deployment right after the official end of the war. The narrative that then unfolds is not a flashback structure embedded in a stable frame narrative, but switches continuously between Richmond, Virginia, and the province of Nineveh, with those two distant territories increasingly merging in a peculiar way. The most obvious variation of this is the protagonist's post-traumatic stress disorder:

> I found myself making strange adjustments to the landscape. We passed over the World War II Veterans Memorial Bridge, which spanned the James, and I stared out at the broad valley below. The sun coming up and a light the color of unripe oranges fell and broke up the mist that hung in the bottomland. [...] It seemed as if I watched myself patrol through the fields along the river in the yellow light, like I had transposed the happenings of that world onto the contours of this one. I looked for where I might find cover in the field. (Powers 2012, 108)

While the war space colonizes his home space in that way, Iraq cannot be experienced as separate and alien any more; or, better, Bartle is equally alienated from both. This is connected to the big rivers in Virginia and Iraq, respectively. At first, the Tigris reminds him of careless childhood days by the James, but the final loss of a sense of belonging concerns both spaces:

> I moved to the edge of the bridge and began firing at anything moving. I saw one man fall in a heap near the bank of the river among the bulrushes and green fields on its edges. In that moment, I disowned the waters of my youth. My memories of them became a useless luxury, their names as foreign as any that could be found in Nineveh: the Tigris or the Chesapeake, the James or the Shatt al Arab. (Powers 2012, 125)

With the act of killing, those signifiers become geographically unanchored; the categories of the known and the unknown do not matter any longer. PTSD is only

one frame for reading this, and I think that there are much more subtle variations of collapsing geographies on other levels. What is very striking, for example, is the role of vegetation and unruly, "natural" spaces in the text. Even though Richmond and Al Tafar[1] are medium-sized cities with more than two hundred thousand inhabitants each, the text does not evoke urban space at all until the very end. What is more, the vegetation of these spaces is described in an eerily similar way: dense shrubbery, orchards, and meadows mark both of them. This not only counters a stereotypical image of Iraq as a dry desert with brown one-story houses – Derek Gregory (2010) writes about those visual constructions in virtual-reality surroundings that were used in military training – but, I would argue, overwrites difference in such a way that the space of vegetation in *The Yellow Birds* becomes *one* topologically folded space, and finally negates Iraq and the US as separate territories completely. While this effect of collapsing geography is certainly destructive for the protagonist, it is productive on a structural and ethical level: the destabilization of "over here" and "over there" points to the arbitrary logic of the war that is built on this binary opposition.

But do the techno-military drone vision and a topological compression in the texts discussed here not actually share a structural similarity, insofar as space in the sense of distance is collapsed in both? One's initial response would be that the two are fundamentally different; but this difference, after a closer look, can only be grasped with the doubleness of "site and sight" that was mentioned earlier. The double movement that Gregory calls a "linking and de-linking of site and sight," in turn, only makes sense when both "sight" and "site" are unfolded further; two different notions of those words, two different types of vision and place are implied here. Deleuze and Guattari famously differentiate between "smooth" space as the space of "nonmetric, acentered, rhizomatic multiplicities" (1987, 371) and "striated" space as a Euclidean one, bounded and metrical; they are, of course, not thought as a stable, binary opposition, but defined by a constant cross-transformation. Less quoted is their relation to different forms of vision and perception: "It seems to us that the Smooth is both the object of a close vision par excellence and the element of a haptic space (which may be as much visual or auditory as tactile). The Striated, on the contrary, relates to a more distant vision, and a more optical space" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 493). When "sight" and "site" are linked through the techno-military apparatus of the screen and the data feed, the optical connection to a faraway geographical point produces a "distant vision"; in the same movement, a "close vision" and a complex, "smooth"

1 A fictionalized and inverted version of the city of Tal Afar, in which the author was deployed as a machine-gunner.

space are de-linked from each other. In a topological operation, this configuration is inverted: the topological closeness of Iraq and the US is produced by the texts and connects two "close visions" in a complex narrative, folding one distant "site" into the other. In the military view from above, as in an orientalist othering, both sites stay radically separate, striated to deadly effect, and linked in a distant vision.

Modes of proximity are not only used on a metaphorical level, but also in the literal sense of focusing on gruesome and abject details. The narrative close-ups on injuries and body parts in *The Yellow Birds* are striking, especially against the backdrop of an – apparently – almost virtualized war. It is only in the age of suicide bombing and the drone strike that such an extreme "close vision" of small fragments of bodies and human tissue, "appearing infinite, [...] a piece of skin and muscle, entrails" (Powers 2012, 126) becomes thinkable. This focus on messiness certainly works against the narrative of "surgical precision," the notion of a "clean war" bound up with late modern warfare.

But the idea that the novel sets close-up human vision against long-distance warfare is perhaps too simple, because there *are* also forms of scopic regime that act in the text. Again and again, the first-person narrator looks through his weapon's scope; what he sees is, naturally, magnified, but also weirdly flattened, greenish (like in Lehr's screen vision), and refracted; and, most importantly, the close-up does not make the objects of his gaze get closer to him in an empathetic way. When he witnesses the killing of an old Iraqi couple in a car by his fellow soldiers hidden on a rooftop (again, the view from above), he can even see details, but he stays completely detached and seems unable to act:

> A car drove toward us along the road between the orchard and the field of dead. Two large white sheets billowed from its rear windows. [...] I looked through my scope and saw an old man behind the wheel and an elderly woman in the passenger seat. Sterling laughed. "Come on, motherfuckers." He couldn't see them. I'll yell, I thought. I'll tell them they are old, let them pass. But bullets bit at the crumbling road around the car. [...] I said nothing. I followed the car with my scope. The woman ran her fingers along a string of pale beads. Her eyes were closed. I couldn't breathe. The car stopped in the middle of the road, but Sterling did not stop the shooting. The bullets ripped through the car and out the other side. (Powers 2012, 22)

The scope may be a simple optical apparatus, but it is nevertheless part of the scopic regime of war, producing a mediated gaze from a distance as well as an optical proximity; in this way, it reifies the soldiers' situation between approaching, sometimes even getting to know, the civilians (they are frequently invited for tea and chat about everyday life) and staying at an unbridgeable distance from them. In this passage and others, the scope captures the Iraqis in the double sense that Butler assigns to all "frames of war" – in its function as a medium that

actually frames and zooms in, and as an epistemic and discursive framing of their lives as "ungrievable." Butler understands this ungrievability, in turn, as a product of spatial distance, legitimizing narratives of "security" and constructions of cultural difference (like the neo-orientalisms identified by Said), and as a prerequisite to underwriting the whole "War on Terror": "[Targeted] populations are 'lose-able', or can be forfeited, precisely because they are framed as already being lost [...]. When such lives are lost, they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logics that rationalizes their death, the loss is deemed necessary to protect the lives of 'the living'" (Butler 2007, 31). Again, also in Butler's work, distance is thought both as metrical, spatial distance and in terms of reductive narratives.

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To sum up, I would argue that the fictional texts copy, affirm, and expose the apparatuses and tactics of late modern warfare, both technological and discursive. I do not claim that they resist the (now, metaphorically conceived) "view from above" in simplifying media narratives per se; Lehr's *September*, for example, does fall back into orientalist stereotypes at times. While I do think that the texts systematically collapse distance in a double sense, they are not only "counter-narratives" in that way; rather, they also perform a moment of shifting between a complex narrative that moves on the ground and a reductive, optical view from above.

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