Nachrichten aus der Forschung

Katherine Barbara Aaslestad

»War, Violence and Technology«

Panel Series at the Forty-Third Annual Conference. Organized by the German Studies Interdisciplinary Network, »War and Violence Network«, Portland, OR, USA, 3 to 6 October 2019

https://doi.org/10.1515/mgzs-2020-0010

The GSA network »War and Violence« unites scholars concerned with any aspect in the field of war and violence studies. The interdisciplinary nature of the network combines the fields of history, literary, and visual studies. The network also supports methodological diversity that includes theories of warfare, historiography of war, poetic and narrative theory, and political philosophy.

In 2019, the network supported two panels addressing »War, Violence and Technology,« a broad area of research, breaching disciplines and historical eras. It comprised many areas of inquiry: a critical history of war and technology, an understanding of war technology as a cultural representation and mode of perception, and a theoretical discourse of war and technology in relation to individuals and society. The network embraced a wide understanding of technology, which includes the military hardware of warfare as well as the consequences of war technology on the course of conflicts, society, the environment and political power. The panels included representations of war technology in aesthetics – film, literature, and visual art – and its practices across history from the early nineteenth century to the Cold War.

The first panel, »War Technology, Nature, and Landscape«, moderated by *Kathrin Maurer* (University of Southern Denmark), addressed different perspectives of the intersection of twentieth and twenty-first century war technology, nature, and landscape. *Jörg Echternkamp* (Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, Potsdam/Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg) a founding organizer of the network, opened the panel presenting his research in »Technik vs. Natur? Rüstung und die Rekonstruktion des Raumes im Dritten Reich und in der Nachkriegszeit.« Echternkamp's presentation focused on the spatial micro-history of Langeoog, an East Frisian island that

Correspondence address: Katherine Barbara Aaslestad, West Virginia University, Morgantown, USA, E-Mail: Katherine.Aaslestad@mail.wvu.edu

became transformed due to the imposition of military hardware during the Third Reich. He outlined the impact of military technology to the natural and social space of the island, beginning with the modernization of rail traffic, the building of an air force base, as well as school and training regiments prior to the war. The island became a colossal construction site by 1937 as modern technology was employed to construct airfields and a fortified port. Between 1939 and 1941 the state built new barracks and bunkers along with ground-based air defense and radar equipment, the core of the early-warning system. Finally, a mock airport with dummy planes, runways and buildings was constructed to deceive the enemy air reconnaissance. The militarization of the island brought employment and prosperity to its inhabitants. The wartime demographics of the island also changed. To meet the labor demanded for military development in the port and air base, prisoners of war were used as forced laborers. Echternkamp concluded his presentation on Langeoog addressing how the process of demilitarizing the island by the British after 1945 also transformed it. Remaining military equipment, for example, was destroyed or disabled. British troops blew deep holes in the airfields. Part of the military infrastructure was repurposed for civilian and post-war tourist use, in particular the formerly fortified port which became central to ferry traffic and a marina. The island appeared to reclaim abandoned bunkers and airfields with heather and forests. War technology had transformed the island's topography, and there was no re-naturalization of its previous state of nature. Instead, Echternkamp argued, the island's landscape continued to be constructed by social pressures as the historical wartime origins of its earlier transformation faded away.

In the second paper, »Documentary, Ecology, Cold War: On the Films of Ferdinand Khittl (1924–1976)« by *Megan Ewing* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), the films of Ferdinand Khittl were addressed with an emphasis on technology and destruction. Ewing argued that Khittl probed the limits of documentary literature and film to establish what truths a society can accept about itself in the midst of growing environmental degradation and inhumanity. Ewing presented Khittl's 1962 *Die Parallelstraße,* a pioneer film of New German Cinema, as offering singular insights on the perpetuation of fascism in Europe to American-style capitalism's global proliferation of war-like conditions and effects in the pursuit of power and profit. She referenced documentary footage of oil derricks, slaughterhouses, and rubber plantations as sites of capitalist extraction. Khittl's film, therefore, engages the fascist past through an interrogation of new forms of war in the Cold War presenting the planet as the battlefield for malevolent forces of environmental destruction, capitalist extraction, and colonial violence. Ewing argued that Khittl's film reflects on the reconceptualization of war in the age of the atomic bomb.

The final paper in this series, »The Wounds of War: Representing the Impact of Military Technology in the Aftermath of the First Gulf War,« by *Emma Crott* (University of New South Wales) examined the photographic practice of French artist Sophie Ristelhueber (born 1949) directed at the debris and traces of the Gulf War (1990/91). She underscored that in this conflict, technological advancements in weaponry played a key role in directing media representations of the war. Portrayed as »high-tech,« »clean,« and »surgical,« Crott pointed out that the war, in particular the »precision of aerial attacks,« redefined how contemporary warfare was waged as well as communicated to the public. Her paper explored Ristelhueber's 1992 series of seventy-one numbered landscape photographs titled *Fait* that document debris of war on the Kuwaiti landscape, from bomb craters to armoured tanks tracks. These images represent metaphors of wounds and scars of war. She referenced the work of Judith Butler on the vulnerability of human corporality to link Ristelhueber's work as an exposure of the human body to wartime violence through the material ruptures and incisions upon the desert landscape.

Stephan Jaeger (University of Manitoba), another founding organizer of the network, provided the commentary and sought to tie the papers together so that they spoke to each other. In his comments he emphasized the dichotomy of war technology and nature. On the one hand, this relationship can be seen as antagonistic in that war technology interrupts the state and representation of nature. On the other hand, nature remains present to be unearthed by the photographer or the historian, in a natural-cultural landscape. Jaeger also noted that after technology changed natural space, there would be no return to the pre-technology landscape. For Echternkamp he queried whether there is any way for a nature island like Langeoog to embrace the ambiguities of memory between technology and nature in the present instead of hiding and forgetting them. To Ewing, Jaeger noted that Khittl's work presents primarily a metaphor on violence and nature, and wondered if he traced a »real war« or did war immediately reference his critique of American-style capitalism as the perpetuation of fascism? Finally, Jaeger asked Crott if her interpretation of war and technology was specific to the Gulf War? Or did its techno-narrative link into a narrative chain in wars through the 20th and 21st century. He raised a final question for everyone: Is the dichotomy of human vulnerability and violent technology evident in all wars?

The second panel, **»**Wars, Technology, and the Aerial«, moderated by *Douglas Morris* (Federal Defenders of New York, Inc.), explored the roles of aerial technology and perceptions as decisive in the configuration of modern warfare. *Kathrin Maurer* (University of Southern Denmark) presented »Aerial Technology and War in the 19th Century« featuring war balloons as a technology of seeing and strategy. She argued that war balloons expanded the modern narrative of the scopic gaze though another mode of aerial vision – that of flattening. In her

analysis of fictional and poetic imaginaries of the nineteenth-century balloon perspective, Mauer presented an aesthetic discourse to highlight a specific mode of non-scopic vision overlooked in research on air war and technology. The flattened aerial vision of war balloons suggested operative imagery recognizable today from airplanes, satellites, and drones. She argued that the flattening presented the world in clusters, grids, and patterns and that war balloons thus supported a technology of visual abstraction that disassociated the human within modern warfare by flattening the individual into grids, statistics, and clusters.

Svea Braeunert's (University of Cincinnati) presentation on »New Visions: Drone Warfare and the Avant Garde« continued an examination of the aerial vision from the perspective of drones and a new ontology of the image. He juxtaposed drone vision with the ideas of the historical advent-garde, in particular the writings of László Moholy-Nagy, Paul Klee, Walter Benjamin, and El Lissitzky in combination with select works from the Prinzhorn collection that included artwork made in mental hospitals between 1840 and 1945. Braeunert employed the historical avant-garde as a foil to get a methodological handle on the aesthetics of drone vision by looking at 1920s new vision. His paper focused on technology, art and new media to describe the relationship between realism and abstraction as well as the constellation of figure and ground in the view from above.

»Masters or Subjects of the Chemical World? Gas Masks, Personal Armoring, and Vestiary Complicity in the Third Reich« by *Peter Thompson* (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) shifted the focus of the panel from the aerial vision to the aerial threat in an overview of the *Reichsluftschutzbund* (RLB or Reich Civil Defense League) for national air and gas protection. Established by the Nazi state in 1933, the league launched a broad campaign to teach air-readiness to all Germans. Pressure to participate in civic air-warden duties combined with scare tactics drawing on pre-existing concerns regarding aero-chemical attacks motivated millions of German civilians to join the league which numbered 8.2 million members by 1936. Thompson emphasized that millions of Germans joined this community predicated on modern aerial warfare as the RLB continually sensationalized reminders that enemy planes lay just beyond German borders. To this end the league also promoted the sale of the *Volksgasmaske,* but the shoddily-made flimsy rubber masks were neither produced in numbers to meet popular demand nor did they provide aid in the eventual bombing campaigns. In the end, Thompson argued, despite the ongoing mobilization of the RLB, the *Volksgasmaske* represented the regime's shallow efforts in civilian gas protection and served as a reminder of its disregard for public welfare.

The last paper in the panel, »›The One who is Courted by All‹. German Rocket Scientists behind the Iron Curtain« by *Brian Crim* (University of Lynchburg), turned to matters of power over technology and the perception of rocket scientists

during the Cold War. Drawing from recently declassified files from the US Army's Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), Crim explored the legacy of German rocket scientists working in the Soviet Union in the immediate post-war years. He traced how the Soviets recruited German scientists, in particular the V-2 specialists, as the Soviet Union sought to exploit Germany's rocket-research for their own expanding military-industrial complex. After a few years of apparent engineering collaboration between German and Soviet scientists, however, the Soviet state isolated, segregated and downgraded their German specialists, leaving many to ultimately flee to the West. Once there, these scientists attempted to prove their relevance by denouncing the Russians as backward savages, as they simultaneously revealed Soviet success in building highly developed menacing technology threatening the West. As the Soviet Union rapidly produced rockets and weapons in the 1950s, the US sought to acquire accurate reporting on Soviet use of foreign experts in missile research to gain information on Soviet scientific and technical achievements.

Roger Chickering (Georgetown University) commented on the rich panel of papers by two Germanists and two historians. Beginning with the first two papers by the Germanists, he noted they shared an emphasis on the impact of military technology shaping the ways of seeing things – optical attitudes – and of broader cultural modes of perception. Images from air balloons and aerial reconnaissance photography flattened topographical images that became operative and they also generated a process of ethical flattening as individuals became abstract clusters. Chickering noted that both panelists began their stories of »aerial vision« in two quite different eras separated by over 100 years, yet appeared to wind up in the same place, the contemporary digital age featuring the drone gaze, yet emphasizing different outcomes. He asked the presenters to comment on each other's paper as they responded to his comments.

Chickering noted that Thompson's paper aligned well with the Germanists' papers on the aerial gaze, though his paper highlighted popular reactions to aerial instruments of warfare and their perceptual consequences. He observed the paper was part of a broader story on how the German state sought to protect, insulate, or disguise their citizens from an »aerial gaze« that was designed to rain destruction on them. Chickering also emphasized the instrumental character of the state's efforts to unite Germans behind the regime as one vast air-raid community and once equipped with the *Volksgasmaske* Germans could face the skies and withstand the aerial gaze and warfare. Yet, like the previous papers, perceptions were central in this paper as the air-raid community and the protective *Volksgasmaske* lacked the substance to actually protect civilians from air war.

Though Chickering noted Crim's paper relates only tangentially to air war of missiles, it again emphasized the significance of perceptions of the Russian

German rocket scientists, who were recruited, enticed, or forced into the Soviet Union after the Second World War. After working around five years with the Russians on the Soviet rocket program, they departed. Crim's paper investigated the American military intelligence services that questioned the German scientists for what they could reveal of the Soviet rocket program. He noted that their perceptions of their life in the Soviet Union reflected the expectations of the American analysts of the Soviet state as simultaneously backward and technology ready to overrun Europe. Chickering applauded all four papers for their provocation to push us to consider how the technologies of aerial war raise fascinating questions about social, cultural, and political matters. These papers also reinforced the proposition that the lines between war and peace became increasingly blurred during the modern era. The audience of both well-attended panels generated lively questions and discussions.