HUMAN SCREENS: BODIES, MEDIA AND THE MEANING OF VIOLENCE

Nicola Perugini
University of Edinburgh
Politics and International Relations
nicola.perugini@ed.ac.uk

ESSAY 57/03

HUMAN SCREENS
HUMAN SHIELDS
BODIES
MEDIA
VIOLENCE

From phalanx-fighting, through the use of multiple distance weapons, to the development of airpower and drone warfare in the last century, the history of armed conflicts is one of increasing distance from which people are killed, but also one of increasing weaponization of the human body. Starting from World War I, innocent civilians who were used as human shields to protect military targets in violation of the laws of war were often defined as 'human screens'.

The notion of human screen, I argue in this article, is not merely a synonym for human shield. In fact, the human screen is not only a human weapon. As I show in this archaeological exploration, the process of transformation of the human body into a screen translates also into the development of a new media technology that both allows to modulate the use of lethal force and shape the perception and political meaning of violence in the battlefield.

There is no war, then, without representation,
no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification.
P. Virilio, 1989

The battlespace is a space of struggle where different forms of mediation take place. This is because war is also the art of organising and managing various constitutive components of the battlespace (humans, nature, weapons, optical and sensing devices, etc.) in order to regulate the use of lethal force, and its perception. We could say, then, to paraphrase Paul Virilio, that there is no war and no space of war without mediation. Modulating distance and proximity among the different actors and components that populate the battlefield is one of the crucial acts of mediation in war. It shapes the way in which we see and make sense of violence. Usually human beings are in control of the technologies which configure these processes of modulation and mediation. But there are instances in which humans themselves become those very technologies.

Like when Germany invaded Belgium in 1914, at the beginning of World War I, and perfectioned a series of warfare practices which resulted in the coercive involvement of the Belgian civilians in the hostilities, transforming them into technologies of military mediation.

As the German military conquered new territory and expanded its empire, it forced many Belgian civilians to march in front of its soldiers, sometimes for entire days. The hostages were made clearly visible to the enemy and were told that they "were to have a taste of Belgian machine-gun fire". When "at a distance of 150 or 200 yards" the Germans would fire at the Belgian troops which in turn "opened fire from the flanks only, to avoid hitting their people" (Belgium. Commission d'enquête sur la violation des règles du droit des gens, des lois et des coutumes de la guerre, 1915, p. 54). In other instances, the Belgian troops would completely cease their fire. The use of human shields as a tool of deterrence worked.

A year after the invasion, an ad hoc Belgian governmental commission published one of the first governmental reports in history that used international law to assess the crimes committed in the battlefield. The issue of the systematic use of civilians as a protective buffer to conquer new territory received meticulous attention in the report.

The Belgian government defined the practice of forcing its soldiers to fire on Belgian fellow citizens while these were constrained to "serve as a living screen" by the Germans as the "most painful moral violence" (Belgium, 1915, p. xvii). To be sure, the use of human shields did not start in Belgium during World War I.

The practice was common to other conflicts (Gordon, & Perugini, 2020). However, whereas in previous conflicts –from the Chinese wars against the Mongols, through the Crusades, to the Middle Age and modern era deployment of hostages as buffers– the use of human shields was relatively sporadic, in Belgium it became unprecedentedly systematic, yard after yard.

Even more significantly, Belgium was one of the first instances in which the mobilisation of living human bodies to defend a military target was defined as an act of 'screening'. This idea of screening through the human body in war is not just a metaphor or a synonym for shielding. The notion of screen opens to a better understanding of the relationship between war and media.

Interrogating the human shield as a human screen is in fact crucial to understand how what is usually called human shield functions simultaneously as a weapon and a media technology. It allows to address the central question of this short archaeological essay: namely the question of how the distance of war –from the '150 or 200 yards' from which the Germans shot their targets, to the thousands of kilometres from which contemporary drones can kill– has historically come to be mediated by the figure of the living human screen, and how this peculiar inter-

vention of the human body in the battlespace has transformed the perceptual field of war, opening to multiple interpretations of the meaning of violence in the battlefield.

Indeed, what ultimately this peculiar kind of screening allowed the Germans to do was to mediate and calibrate the distance from which they could target their enemies. And while doing so, the screen of humans behind which they hid reshaped the field of perception in the battlefield.

Fig. 1 George Bellows, T*he barricade*, 1918. Birmingham Museum of Art.

Like optical screens, while they concealed the German troops and allowed them to advance, the bodies of the Belgian citizens used as weapons of protection also projected an image. An image that attributed a clear ethical meaning to the violence of war, like that of *The barricade* (Figure 1), the painting realised by the American realist George Bellows in 1918 to condemn the brutality of German human screening during the invasion of Belgium. This is not surprising if we think that screens have historically emerged as the result of this dialectical relationship between concealment and pro-

jection, invisibility and visibility, occlusion from the gaze and exposure of an image. As Rüdiger Campe has highlighted in his genealogical investigation of the notion of screen, the appearance of optical screens as technologies which allow to project and see can be better understood by tracing their relationship with a multiplicity of social forms of protection and concealment (Campe, 2019). In the early modern world, Campe explains, the term screen entertains an intimate relation with the space of war (screen as a refuge for the warrior from physical danger); with the space of hunting (screen as a protective device allowing hunters to hunt and kill their preys safely); and with the space of socio-legal relations (legal screening as a form of protection negotiated between social parties). A *schirm*, a screen –interchangeably used in German with that of *schild* (shield)– is a device that mediates the distance between the constitutive elements of different spaces: military, ludic, and legal. And while protecting people across these different social spaces, screens also projected and allowed to see something. So, for instance, in the military realm screens provided a refuge while allowing warriors to re-organise their warfare tactics and strategies. In the ludic realm, while protecting hunters, the hunting screening devices used in the early modern era also allowed to see, surveil, and target the preys (Figure 2).

Or, in the legal realm, in the case of the relationship between lords and clients, it is only through the screening provided by the lords to their clients that the latter appeared, were made politically present, and acquired a legal status in social space. It is in parallel with these processes that the *schirm* emerges also as the optical device that projects and generates a shape, an image.

BECOMING HUMAN SCREENS

Human screens present similar patterns to any screens, but also very important peculiarities which make them the

Fig. 2 Detroit Publishing Co., *Shooting from hunters' blind by shore*, 1900-1920. Library of the Congress. Retrieved from https://www.loc.gov/item/2016816199/.

very specific political technologies at the centre of this brief archaeological exploration. Like any other kind of body or surface that become screens, humans are not intrinsically screens. To put it with Francesco Casetti, they "become screens" as the result of other processes of mediation (Casetti, 2019, pp. 27-50; see also Carbone, 2016).

In order to transform a wall into a screen, a series of spatial and technological arrangements and mediations need to be in place. Similarly, a living person can become and function as a human screen only as a result of certain conditions and spatial arrangements. War needs to happen at a certain distance which can be modulated by the human screen. Certain weapons and technologies of killing need to be used. Crucially, war must take place in the proximity of 'people' who can 'become' screens.

This is the fundamental specificity of human screens which determine their political intensity. It is almost an ontological one: what becomes a screen is living people, living bodies in the midst of a war. Life itself is weaponized (Bargu, 2013; Butler, 2015; Gordon, & Perugini, 2015). It is life –the specific value of the life of vulnerable Belgian civilians– which allowed German soldiers to pit them against the machine guns of Belgian soldiers and modulate the distance from which the invading troops could fire. It is life, the specific value of the life of their innocent co-citizens, which prevented the Belgian soldiers from firing against the German soldiers.

This biopolitical element, in turn, reveals another important peculiarity of the process we could call 'becoming human screens'. Like in the case of other screens, human screens appear as a result of the intertwining of multiple historic-political forces. Human screens are assemblages of multiple historical continuities and ruptures. There would not be human screens without the military rupture which progressively led from close to distant warfare, and, later, to vertical aerial bombing. Human screens would not have emerged without the development of new technologies of seeing and killing resulting from this rupture. In turn, and decisively, humans could not have become screens without the emergence of a certain kind of legal and ethical sensibility whereby certain categories of people in the battlefield came to be conceived as non-combatants to be spared and protected, and whose use as war screens was prohibited. In other words, there would not be accusations of human screening without the development of a distinction between humane and inhumane forms of warfare grounded in the idea of protecting lives that are framed as innocent.

Hence, while protecting, human screens project and reveal these historical forces which have coagulated, due to multiple contingencies, into the figure of the human screen. An archaeology of human screens reveals that humans become screen through a twofold modulation process: while modulating the distance in a contingent battlefield, they

also modulate the flow of these historical forces –military, techno-visual, legal, ethical– which cross the body of the humans who are turned into screens. To say it with Richard Grusin's and Jay David Bolter's theory of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 111), while transforming human bodies into mediation technologies in the midst of armed conflict, human screens 'comment on', reproduce, or refashion these existing military, techno-visual, legal, and ethical forces.

Through this act of remediation, a new layer appears. Certain human lives which are deemed to be spared from the violence of war become sacrificable lives. A sacred and disturbing element emerges in every new human screening configuration. That is why the appearance of human screens is particularly unsettling and has resulted into a complex transformation of the perception of war that we will try to disentangle further in the coming pages.

FROM SCREENS TO HUMAN SCREENS

In Ancient Greece, war was a muscular practice that often took place from a very close distance. In 'phalanx-fighting', men armed with shields (the hoplites) operated together; they "acted as a body, not as individuals or temporary bands. Soldiers in the phalanx fought closely packed together, protecting each others' sides, forming a wall with their shields" (Lendon, 2005, p. 41). They screened each other with the most common defensive weapon utilised across different civilisations: the shield. They moved together, proximate and across small distances, in "mass push" actions (Lendon, 2005, p. 41). Using a shield was an honourable practice and a symbol of heroism. "With your shield or on it", used to intimate the Spartan mother to her warrior son, since abandoning the shield in the battlespace would have constituted an unethical act of cowardice (Lendon, 2005, p. 52).

Aristotle wrote that those who did not "join sides" and "provide the shield" were expelled from the community. In

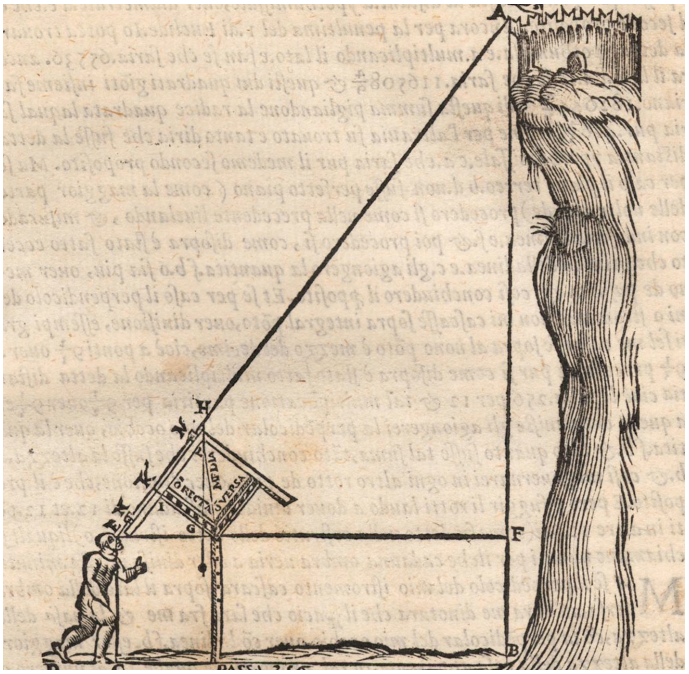
other words, shielding was synonymous with citizenship and, as highlighted by Giorgio Agamben, it sustained the political paradigm of civil war (Agamben, 2015, p. 17).

Similarly, in the Roman Empire the use of 'human walls' of soldiers protected by multiple forms of shields continued to constitute an important warfare technique.

However, in the following centuries, war underwent important changes and the distance between warriors and their military targets progressively increased. The introduction of both new powerful weapons and military strategies mediated this progressive distancing of war. Arrows, archeries and other weapons contributed to this process, until the epochal ruptures produced by the invention of gunpowder and the subsequent introduction of guns, cannons, and artillery. The art of war became more and more the art of calculating and arranging different elements in the space of the battlefield in order to find the good angles of attack and allow distance weapons to accomplish their lethal mission.

At the age of thirteen, Niccolò Tartàglia was injured at his mouth by a French soldier during the 1512 siege of the Ital-

Fig. 3 Tartaglia N., *Metallurgy, Ballistics and Epistemic Instruments*, 1537. The Nova scientia of Niccolò Tartaglia, Edition Open Access, 2013, p. 8.



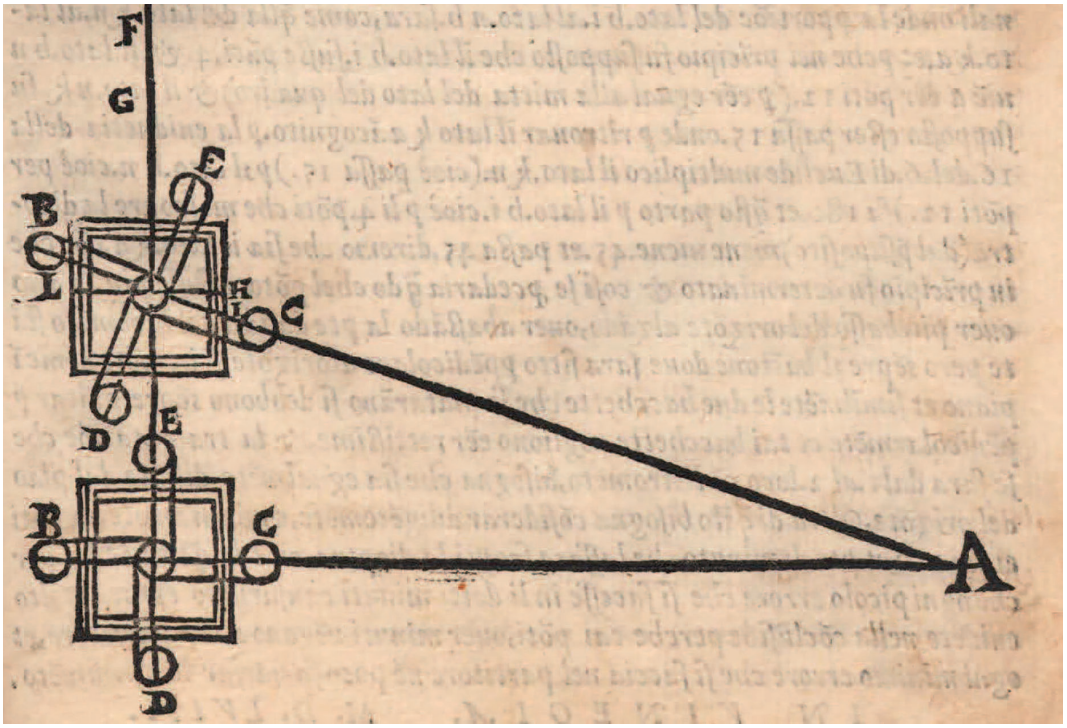


Fig. 4-5 Tartaglia N., *Metallurgy, Ballistics and Epistemic Instruments*, 1537. The Nova scientia of Niccolò Tartaglia, Edition Open Access, 2013, pp. 24, 29.

ian town of Brescia. Two decades later, Tartàglia wrote the *Nova scientia* (the new science), a pioneering ballistic treaty in which this Italian scientist with a strong interest for applied mathematics delineated the basic principles for making the use of artillery projectiles effective, at a certain angle of attack, at "45 degrees over the line of the horizon" (Figure 3). "I would like to manufacture," added Tartàglia in one of his propositions, "an instrument for myself that I can use to level the ground and to analyze it by means of sight and [to calculate] the heights, widths, depths, and diametral and horizontal distances of perceptible objects. This instrument should also be easily usable to investigate the variety of shots of each piece of artillery and, similarly, of each mortar" (in Valleriani, 2013, p. 23) (Figures 4 and 5).

A century after Tartàglia, Europe became a leading international force in the genre of calculations developed by the Italian mathematician and in the art of killing at distance. In highly asymmetrical contexts like colonial wars, distance often translated into the capacity to exterminate the indigenous enemy from a relatively safe position and without face significant losses, and without being seen. "At the end of the 1890s", writes Sven Lindqvist, "the revolution of the rifle was complete. All European infantrymen could now fire lying down without being spotted, in all weathers, fifteen shots in as many seconds at targets up to a distance of a thousand yards" (Lindqvist, 1996, p. 52). Killing at distance meant to be able to see and kill without being seen, a practice that has then become a key paradigm of contemporary warfare (Bräunert, & Malone, 2016; Chamayou, 2015a).

From the Greek shield to the revolution of the rifle, what we can notice is a decrease of the 'muscularity' of war –less and less human walls pushing with their shields, shoulder to shoulder, against their enemies– and an increase of distance that produced a whole new set of calculations and modulations. With the decrease of muscularity and the increase of distance, the human body has acquired new postures, new ways of fighting, and, crucially, it has come to occupy new

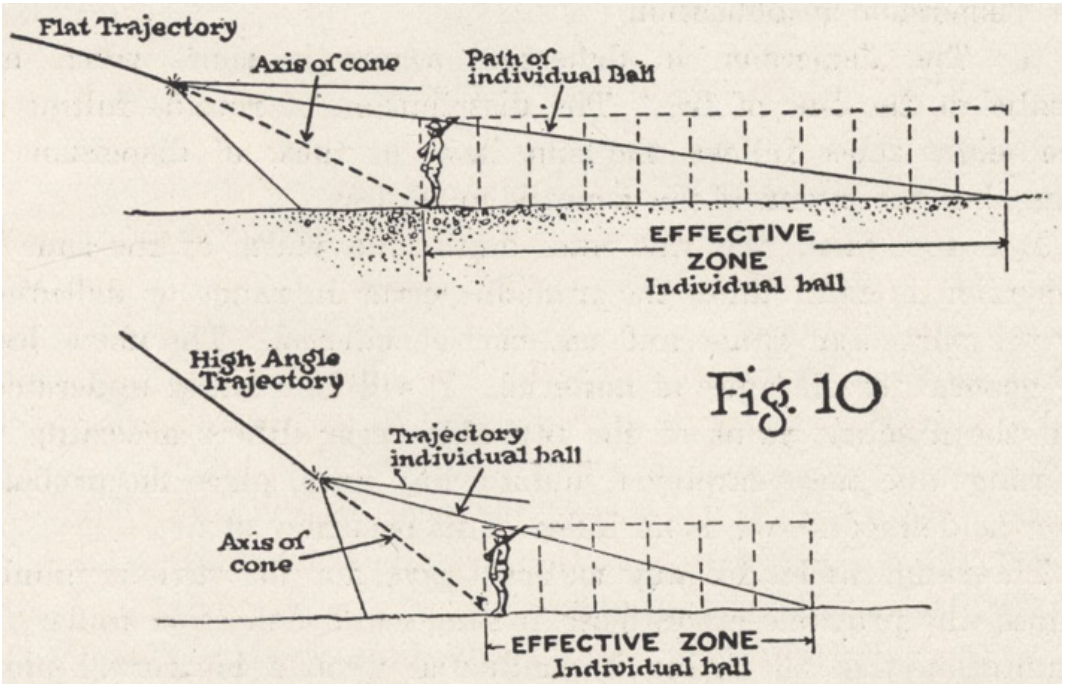


Fig. 6 Beard C., *Fire and Effect in Modern Artillery*, 1919, p. 463. Professional Memoirs, Corps of Engineers, United States Army, and Engineer Department at Large, Vol. 11, No. 58.

positions in the battlefield. This transformation was a fundamental passage in the creation of situations of asymmetric war epitomized by colonial and imperial aggressions, but also in the emergence of a multiplicity of in-between spaces in which human screens would have progressively appeared, remediating in new ways the distance of war.

VERTICAL HUMANITY

The introduction of airpower at the beginning of the Nineteenth century radically increased the capacity to kill at distance. With air bombing, distance became vertical. The aerial view was "enlisted into the practices of war" making the relationship between the art of seeing and the art of killing unprecedentedly complicit. From above, aerial distance translated into a position of rational, scientific, and military control of space (Adey, Whitehead, & Williams, 2013); but

also into a new mode of global government which shaped the international political order (Hippler, 2017).

As a result, aerial bombing exacerbated existing war asymmetries, transforming in particular the colonial and imperial battlefields –in which the inferior human status attributed to the life of the colonized populations allowed the deployment of brutal means of warfare– into huge laboratories of military and visual experimentation.

Every action generates a reaction. The rational dream of making the battlefield completely visible from the air in order to increase the capacity to kill the enemy was met with the enemy's tactic of "making the human body invisible" (Chamayou, 2015, p. 43). This is not surprising if we think that concealment is one of the "weapons of the weak" par excellence, a pillar of the arts of subordinate resistance against the dominants' omnivoyance (Scott, 1990). In colonial and imperial contexts, this struggle between visibility and invisibility at distance develops along racial lines.

During the 1935-1936 colonial invasion, while the Italian military airplanes were carrying out their reconnaissance flights in the Ethiopian skies, Vittorio Mussolini, a soldier-photographer in the colonial army and son of the fascist dictator Benito, took a series of pictures from above. While trying to identify military targets, Vittorio noticed some Ethiopian fighters in the proximity of the medical facilities established by the International Committee of Red Cross to assist the wounded in the battlefield. In his memoir *Voli sulle Ambe* (Flights Over the Amba Mountains), Vittorio tells the story of how the Italian airplanes were met by the fire of Ethiopian rifles coming from behind the white tents hosting medical personnel. The Red Cross facilities, adds Mussolini's son, were bombed and destroyed (Mussolini, 1937).

After the fascist bombing of the Red Cross became a systematic practice, it was brought to the attention of the League of Nations, which discussed the issue and gathered the different version of the fact. On the one hand, in the reports it sent to the League, the Italian government argued

that its military airplanes had been precise and surgical in the choice of their targets, and that it was the treacherous Ethiopian resistance that was to blame for inhumanely screening behind the Red Cross tents and personnel. The fascist press echoed the government and produced a series of images accusing the Ethiopians of abusing and screening behind the Red Cross emblem (Figure 7).

On the other hand, the Ethiopian government denounced the practice at the League of Nations and replied that the Italian actions violated the basic laws of war and were a confirmation of the intrinsic inhumanity of the fascist military (Perugini, & Gordon, 2019). In other words, human screening mediated the understanding of colonial war at vertical distance not only by modulating the use of lethal force in the battlefield, but also by modulating the war of perception and representation in the international political arena.

This war was fought through the mobilization of colonial discourses and anti-colonial counter-discourses of humanity that would have become central to the era of decolonization and anti-imperial struggles which followed the Italo-Ethiopian war. In 1950, when the United States joined the United Nations and intervened militarily against North Korea after it invaded South Korea with the support of the Soviet Union, the Korean Red Army faced a similar accusation to that waged by the Italians against the Ethiopian resistance. In an official statement, the US representatives at the United Nations maintained that: "The aggressor in Korea has tried all manner of tricks to divert the attention of the world from his crime. […] Peaceful villages are used to cover the tanks of the invading army. Civilian dress is used to disguise soldiers of aggression. [The Korean Red Army is] using civilians as a *human screen* [Italics added] for ground forces" (Whiteman, 1968, p. 140).

The Korean Red Army was among the first military formations influenced by Mao Tse-tung theory of people's war. According to Mao, a people's war required the support of the entire population, including civilians. This theory shaped the

Fig. 7 *La Tribuna Illustrata*, January 1936.

LA TRIBUNA ILLUSTRATA

Abbonamenti: Interno: Anno L. 18 - Semestre L. 8
Estero: Anno L. 28 - Semestre L. 15
Per gli abbonamenti rivolgersi all'Amministrazione de La Tribuna, via Milano, 20 - Roma

Supplemento illustrato de "La Tribuna„
Proprietà letteraria e artistica riservata secondo le leggi

Per inserzioni rivolgersi esclusivamente alla Ditta G. Manzoni in Roma, Via Francesco Crispi, 13 - Telefono 44-333 e 43-304; in Milano, Via Salvini, 10; in Parigi, Faubourg S. Honoré, 16.

Anno XLIV — N. 3 19 gennaio 1936 — Anno XIV — Cent. 30 il numero.

Uno dei tanti episodi dell'abuso, da parte degli abissini, dell'emblema della Croce Rossa. Nella zona del Quoram, alcuni nostri apparecchi in ricognizione hanno visto e fotografato un enorme telo rosso-crociato, disteso su di un prato alla periferia del paese e sostenuto da arbusti. All'avvicinarsi dei nostri aeroplani, nel timore di essere bombardati, centinaia di soldati armati accorrevano d'ogni parte nascondendosi sotto il telo o raccogliendovisi intorno.

(Disegno di Vittorio Pisani)

imagination and practices of many anti-imperial militaries and armed groups in Asia and elsewhere. Like "fishes in the water", the anti-imperial combatants involved in these wars merged with the civilian populations that joined the war effort (Tse-Tung, 2000).

A couple of decades later, the Vietcong guerrilla systematised the Mao inspired people's war in its fight against the US invasion. In Vietnam, the blending and camouflage tactics initially adopted by conventional armies in World War I –including the "widespread techniques of concealment consisting of the use of screens" to hide military activities– were mimicked by the weak (Bousquet, 2018, p. 162). The jungle was used by the Vietcong as a shelter, leading to the US development of herbicidal warfare. And non-combatants living in the hamlets (administrative units) constituting Vietnamese villages offered their support against the invaders and screened the Vietcong.

The Vietnam war was a turning point in the development of the hide and seek tension that has decisively contributed to the proliferation of the idea of human screening. Faced with the Vietcong tactics of going invisible, the US military developed a series of techniques aimed at seeing, sensing, and targeting better the blending guerrilla forces. The dream was to make the enemy "transparent" (Belcher, 2015, p. 129). Thus, a new "fascination with the minutiae of hamlet activity emerged", and GIS allowed to produce computer-generated maps of the Vietnamese administrative units which were used as counterinsurgency tools in order to surveil and detect the intermingling of civilians and combatants (Belcher, 2015, p. 128). The US military also developed the first bombs equipped with television tracking systems, the so called 'smart bombs' (Correll, 2010). In addition, the use of helicopters became widespread, since they allowed for agile movements and for increasing the capacity to "un-screen", since for the Vietcong shooting an helicopter meant to loose "the advantage of cover and concealment and generally bring a devastating return of machine

gun fire and rockets" (Tolson, 1973, p. 149). Finally, leaflets aimed at civilians were dropped on the hamlets framing the Vietcong guerrilla as a perfidious force that "hide in the midst of the people and refuse to meet the government's forces on the battlefield" (Lewy, 1980, p. 69).

These different techniques of visualization and surveillance of the intermingling between guerrilla and civilians were the symptom of the anxiety generated by the Vietcong people's war and its screening practices.

These developments remediated the distances from which the war was fought. And while altering the way the war was fought and the enemy was visualized, they also helped US officials to frame the perception of battlefield –not unlike the Italians in Ethiopia– in legal and ethical terms, as a space in which a precise white air attacker was facing a 'treacherous Oriental Communist' human screening enemy. This argument was repeated by US officials at the beginning of the 1970s, when their military's 'precision bombing' caused the death of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and the US came under international scrutiny and criticism. Indeed, the tension between on the one hand supposedly ethical smart bombing that can see everything at distance, and on the other hand unethical human screening –a tension about the ethics and politics of visibility– dominated the international legal debates in the years which followed the war in Vietnam, when anti-colonial movements and colonial and imperial powers hold a series of discussions about the reform of the Geneva Conventions which resulted in the promulgation of the 1977 Additional Protocols (Kinsella, 2011).

In these debates, anti-colonial groups and states defended the 'right to invisibility' and to operate while concealing themselves among their own populations, since liberation was conceived as a collective popular effort. In contrast, colonial and imperial powers tried to defend the right to strike liberation and self-determination groups in spite of their 'terrorist' screening practice, asserting that

targeting these groups would not have violated the basic principles of humanity in warfare, since the enemy's deliberate human screening tactics were to blame for any civilian losses. A new decolonized order was emerging, one whose traces would have persisted until today and whose vertical humanity was mediated by living human bodies framed as screens.

WAITING FOR THE HUMAN SCREEN

Military and legal experts of global powers continued to discuss the question of civilian involvement in war and the development of precision techniques in the following decades. Until the First Gulf War in Iraq and then the humanitarian wars in the Balkans erupted in the last decade of the last millennium. In Iraq, the kind of war at vertical distance through the use television bombs that had appeared in Vietnam was amplified, also for media consumption. "Warfare and war reporting became one" to put it with Harun Farocki in his film *War at a Distance*. The bombs dropped from the air became also the technology through which distant targeting operations could be made closer to the spectators of war at home. The overlapping between "function of the weapon and function of the eye" (Virilio, 1989, p. 26) was complete. To such an extent that images did not even need to vehiculate any explicit propaganda message.

Images became 'operational images' devoid of people, Farocki adds in his *War at a Distance*. One bomb, one target, that was the 'clean' message of 'surgical' warfare. In operational images, human beings disappear from the pictures. Bridges are empty (Figure 8). The deadly targeting process is presented as smooth, devoid of human life. The images of war at distance are operational in the sense that they are "made to check the missile's functioning".

In the ex-Yugoslavia this cleanness and smoothness was challenged by the appearance of human screens.

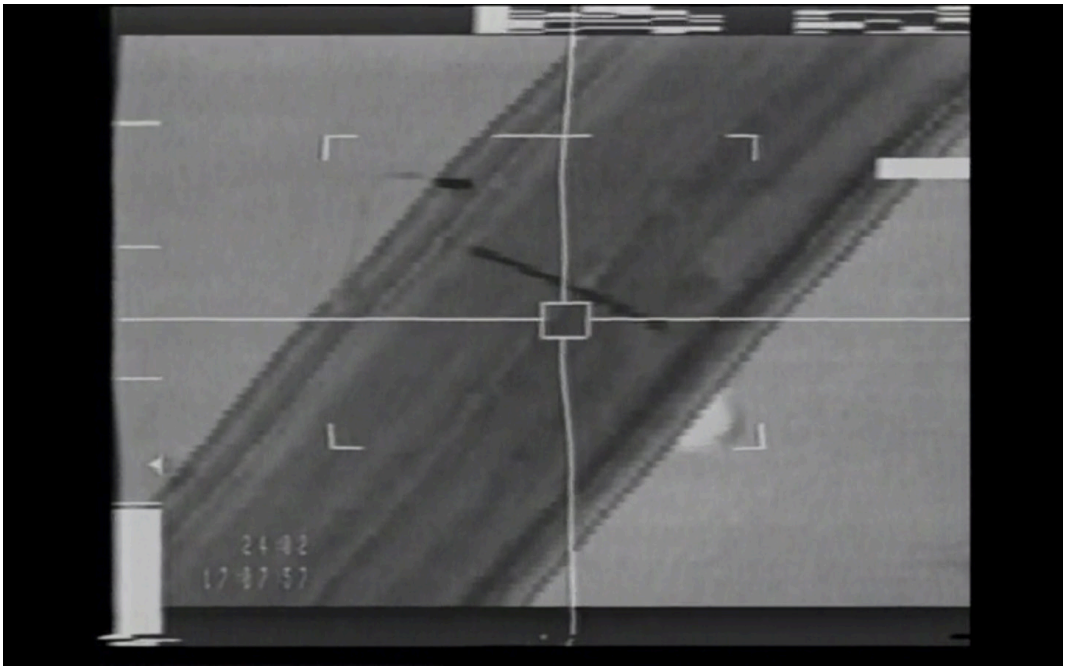


Fig. 8 Farocki H., *War at a Distance*, 2003. Screenshot from the film.

The paradigm of precise warfare according to which Western strikes had become surgical and produced only unintended "collateral" human deaths was defied at its roots. Like when Serbian civilians dressed as targets walked on a bridge in 1999 at the height of the NATO campaign to defend Kosovo, and, to put it with Peter Sloterdijk, they served "as an opposite commentary on the reality of air warfare in the 20th century" (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 53).

These human screens put their bodies in-between –in the vertical axis of bombing, between the eye of NATO pilots and a bridge that had become a potential target– projecting an image that tells us that war at vertical distance cannot but terrorise and target entire civilian populations (Figure 9).

By deliberately becoming human screens who protected a civilian infrastructure, they commented against the normalisation of the idea of 'precision targeting'.

And they commented also on Farocki's operational images, re-inserting the people, the human component, into

Fig. 9 Human shields on bridges in Serbia at anti-Nato protests, 1999. Retrieved Month, Day, Year from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isJvgdLidm8.

the images of war. In this historical struggle for the attribution and reattribution of legal and ethical meaning to war at vertical distance, the development of drone warfare should be conceived as the most recent counter-measure adopted by the international powers which dominate global skies in order to neutralize the kind of critique embodied by the Serbian human screens. After the war in Kosovo, at the beginning of our millennium, millions of people tried to oppose the invasion of Iraq and the so-called War on Terror.

The protesters who took the streets of many Western capitals did not become human screens, but sent a similar message to that of the Serbian human screens: there is no surgical war, all wars ultimately target civilians. In response this radical critique of war, drone warfare has tried to radicalize the discourse of vertical humanity. Let us see how.

Drones are weapons par excellence of the War on Terror, a war against African and Asian enemies who are framed

through a racialised discourse of humanity similar to that of the colonial wars of old.

The War on Terror, the discourse goes, is fought in theatres of conflicts where inhumane terrorists deliberately intermingle with and screen behind non-combatants in order to induce the Forces of Good, who are driven by a higher sense of humanity, to commit war crimes and kill innocent civilians. The proponents of drone warfare often embrace this racialised worldview and argue that drones, with their sight from the sky, increase unprecedentedly the precision of warfare and make the distinction between inhumane and humane warfare even more evident.

Drones, indeed, operate a radical remediation of war. They re-modulate the distance of war, compress the distance of vertical warfare –the distance between the predatory eye and the target– and transform the temporality of killing. They "compress the kill chain" (Gregory, 2013, p. 50-51).

Drones roam in the skies and surveil the life of the military targets for days, offering, from the thousands of miles from which they are operated, a close visualisation of the movements of these targets and their daily social relations, as if the drone operators "were there" with their targets. What ultimately drone targeting operations try to produce is a "death of distance", to put it with Derek Gregory (Gregory, 2013, p. 67-70). The targets are surveilled and filmed at extremely 'close distance', in their homes, close to their relatives, interacting with the civilian populations among which they live and operate.

In such a way of war, we are told, there is almost no margin of error. The abidance by the legal and ethical standards of humanity required by contemporary precision warfare is almost total. In order to prove this point, sometimes the militaries that rely heavily on drone warfare edit drone footage and share it with the media (Perugini, & Gordon, 2017).

Like in the images from the video distributed in 2017 by the US Department of Defense in relation to its operations against the Islamic State in the Iraqi city of Mosul (Figure 10).

Fig. 10 *Drone video shows ISIS moving civilians into home as human shields*, ABC News, 2017. Retrieved December, 6, 2020 from https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/drone-video-shows-isis-moving-civilians-home-human/story?id=46945876.

Here, the figure of the human screen plays a central role and is mobilized to corroborate the discourse of vertical humanity that drone warfare tries to radicalize.

The aerial surveillance footage shows presumed ISIS operatives establishing firing positions among civilians in West Mosul. Women and children can be seen within the gunsight while they walk in the compound. It is unclear if they were forced to act as screens for the firing positions.

But according to the spokesperson of the US Central Command who was interviewed to comment on the video, there is no doubt. The civilians we see on the screen are human screens illegally deployed by an inhumane enemy, we are told.

And to corroborate the legal and ethical superiority of the US Central Command he added: "The Coalition, through full motion video and real-time surveillance, observed the civilians and therefore did not respond with an airstrike against the position" (Drone video, ABC News, 2017).

But there is a different way to read this sort of military-media configuration. Indeed, similarly to any basic screening configuration in which certain elements are arranged and assembled in order to render a certain surface a screen, in this military-media configuration different technologies

of surveillance and different elements of the battlefield are arranged in order to wait for the appearance of the human screen. The fighters, women, and children, as well as the compound in which they live, have probably been observed for extended periods of times, waiting for that specific moment, that specific configuration then framed as human screening by the US Central Command video.

Ultimately, while being circulated with a justificatory legal and ethical meaning – 'the coalition did not respond since we are more humane than our barbarian enemies'–, these images reveal also a mechanism of embodiment, to say it Lauren Wilcox, through which certain bodies are 'produced' by the US-led coalition as ungrievable (Wilcox, 2015). They expose how through the prism of a racialized enemy observed from the close distance of the drone eye, certain human bodies are framed as human screen in the era of the War on Terror.

Curiously, footage like that of the US Central Command, in which an attack is called off, is rarely shared by drone warfare coalitions. What we are more used to, is the systematic invocation of the figure of the human shield to justify the killing of innocent civilians, blaming the enemy for the crime, not unlike the Italians in Ethiopia or the US in Vietnam.

Indeed, the configuration through which the civilians subjected to the War on Terror are 'produced' as human screens should be conceived as a necropolitical configuration. Being recognized as human screens means becoming killable as human screens. It produces a radical alteration of the meaning of lethal violence in the battlefield.

This passage from a 2010 drone strike communication transcript obtained by the Los Angeles Times in relation to a series of vehicles carrying civilians in Afghanistan, can clarify this provisional conclusion of our archaeology. Not unlike in the US Central Command video, some civilian vehicles are observed from a drone base in Nevada for hours by a sensor operator, a pilot, a "mission intelligence operator" and other actors of this media-military configuration.

1:21 (Sensor): I think they're gonna make it
1:21 (MC:) I hope they get out and dry off, and show us all their weapons
1:21 (Pilot): Yeah, exactly man. So what's the, we passed him potential children and potential shields, and I think those are both pretty accurate now, what's the ROE on that?
1:21 (Sensor): Ground commander assessing proportionality, distinction
1:21 (Pilot): Is that part of CDE, is that part of ground command? I'm not worried from our stand point so much, but that's a (expletive deleted) for them
1:21 (Sensor): I think if that's the case and that's what their confident with then they're gonna have to wait until they start firing, 'cause then it essentially puts any possible civilian casualties on the enemy but if we've got friendlies taking effective fire from that position, then we've gotta do what we gotta do.

Military targets and civilians are intermingling. Their proximity can be seen at a close distance from a drone. Children and other civilians are framed as 'potential shields'. Potential. They are not shields yet. They are not intrinsically human screens. They need to be 'produced' as screens. They will become screens only when one of the armed men will open his fire against US friendlies, the drone communication transcript tells us. And while becoming human screens, they will become subjects who can be killed from a drone without legal and ethical responsibility, 'it essentially puts any possible civilian casualties on the enemy' says the sensor.

Indeed, human screening configurations in the era of the War on Terror are military assemblages in which the forces that arrange the different elements which transform living human beings into screens are the same that pulverize these subjects-screens in impunity. In this contemporary necropolitical configuration, the production and destruction of human screens coincide.

REFERENCES

Adey, P., Whitehead, M., & Williams, A. J. (2013). Introduction: Visual Culture and Verticality. In P. Adey, M. Whitehead & A. Williams (Eds.), *From above: War, violence, and verticality* (pp. 1-17). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2015). *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Asad, T. (2007). *On Suicide Bombing*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. doi:10.7312/asad14152.

Bargu, B. (2013). Human shields. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 12(4), 277-295. doi:10.1057/cpt.2013.1.

Belcher, O. (2015). Data anxieties: Objectivity and difference in early Vietnam War computing. In L. Amoore & V. Piotukh (Eds.), *Algorithmic Life: Calculative Devices in the Age of Big Data* (pp. 127-142); London, UK: Routledge.

Belgium. Commission d'enquête sur la violation des règles du droit des gens, des lois et des coutumes de la guerre, (1915). *Reports on the violation of the rights of nations and of the laws and customs of war in Belgium*. (Published on behalf of the Belgian legation.). London, UK: Printed under the authority of H.M. Stationery Off. by Harrison.

Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. A. (1999). *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bousquet, A. (2018). *The Eye of War: Military Perception from the Telescope to the Drone*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. doi:10.5749/j.ctv6hp332.

Bräunert, S., & Malone, M. (2016). *To See Without Being Seen: Contemporary Art and Drone Warfare*. St. Louis, MO: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum.

Buckley, C., Campe, R., & Casetti, F. (Eds.). (2019). *Screen Genealogies*. Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press. doi:10.5117/9789463729000.

Butler, J. (2015). Human shields. *London Review of International Law*, *3*(2), 223–243. doi:10.1093/lril/lrv011.

Campe, R. (2019). 'Schutz und Schirm': Screening in German During Early Modern Times, In F. Casetti, C. Buckley & R. Campe (Eds.), *Screen Genealogies* (pp. 51-72). Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctvs32t6s.4.

Carbone, M. (2016). *Philosophie-écrans: Du cinéma à la révolution numérique*. Paris, FR: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin.

Casetti, F. (2019). Primal Screens. In F. Casetti, C. Buckley & R. Campe (Eds.), *Screen Genealogies* (pp. 27-50). Amsterdam, NL: Amsterdam University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctvs32t6s.4.

Chamayou, G. (2015a). *A theory of the drone*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Chamayou G. (2015b). The World as a Hunting Ground. In D. Henneberg & C. Dosogne (Eds.). *Heaven and Hell: From Magic Carpets to Drones*. Bruxelles, BE: Boghossian Foundation.

Correll. J. T. (2010). The Emergence of Smart Bombs. *Air Force Magazine*. Retrieved 23 September 2020, from https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0310bombs/.

Gordon, N., & Perugini, N. (2015). The politics of human shielding: On the resignification of space and the constitution of civilians as shields in liberal wars. *Environment and Planning*. D, Society & Space, 34(1), 168–187. doi:10.1177/0263775815607478.

Gordon, N., & Perugini, N. (2020). *Human Shields: A History of People in the Line of Fire*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctv1503gnd.

Gregory, D. (2013). Lines of Descent. In P. Adey, M. Whitehead, & A. Williams, *From above: War, violence, and verticality* (pp- 41-70). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Hippler, T. (2017). *Governing from the Skies: A Global History of Aerial Bombing*. London, UK: Verso Books.

Kinsella, H. M. (2011). *The Image before the Weapon: A Critical History of the Distinction between Combatant and Civilian*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.7591/j.ctt7zhx8.

Lendon, J. E. (2005). *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity.* London, UK: Yale University Press.

Lewy, G. (1980). *America in Vietnam*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Lindqvist, S. (1996). *Exterminate All the Brutes*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Mussolini, V. (1937). *Voli sulle ambe*. Firenze, IT: Sansoni.

Perugini, N., & Gordon, N. (2017). Distinction and the Ethics of Violence: On the Legal Construction of Liminal Subjects and Spaces: Distinction and the Ethics of Violence. *Antipode*, *49*(5), 1385-1405. doi:1111/anti.12343.

Perugini, N., & Gordon, N. (2019). Between Sovereignty and Race: The Bombardment of Hospitals in the Italo-Ethiopian War and the Colonial Imprint of International Law. *State Crime Journal*, *8*(1), 104-125. doi:10.13169/statecrime.8.1.0104.

Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. London, UK: Yale University Press.

Sloterdijk, P. (2009). *Terror from the air*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotexte.

Tolson, J. J. (1973), *Airmobility 1961-1971*, US Department of the Army, Vietnam Studies.

Tse-Tung, M., & Mao, Z. (2000). *On Guerrilla Warfare*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Valleriani, M. (2013). *Metallurgy, Ballistics and Epistemic Instruments: The Nova scientia of Niccolò Tartaglia*. Berlin, DE: Edition Open Access.

Virilio, P. (1989). *War and cinema: The logistics of perception*. London, UK: Verso.

Whiteman, M. M. (1968). *Digest of International Law* (vol. 10). Washington: Department of Defense.

Wilcox, L. B. (2015). *Bodies of violence: Theorizing embodied subjects in international relations*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Article available at

DOI: 10.6092/issn.2724-2463/12261

How to cite

as article

Perugini, N. (2020). Human Screens: Bodies, Media, and the Meaning of Violence. *img journal*, *3*, 306-333.

as contribution in book

Perugini, N. (2020). Human Screens: Bodies, Media, and the Meaning of Violence. In M. Treleani, F. Zucconi (Eds.), *img journal 03/2020 Remediating distances* (pp. 306-333). Alghero, IT: Publica. ISBN 9788899586164