



BEHIND THE SCENES BEWARE BLUE SKIES

Dr Beryl Pong

‘I no longer love blue skies...
In fact, I now prefer grey
skies. The drones do not fly
when the skies are grey.’

Over a decade ago, Zubair, then 13 years old, spoke to a group of lawmakers in Washington about the psychological impact of living under drones in Pakistan; he lost his 67-year-old grandmother to a drone strike while she was picking okra outside her house. Although the exact number of casualties from drone strikes is difficult to confirm, a report from Airwars in September 2021 found that the US conducted at least 91,340 strikes across seven conflict zones (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen), which have killed somewhere between 22,679 and 48,308 civilians, the majority in the name of counterterrorism, over a 20-year period.

Numbers and statistics are important to evidence the scale of drone warfare, whose operations are often couched in government secrecy. There are important sociological and psychological impacts too. For instance, in *Living Under Drones*, Stanford University and New York University's Law Schools documented a host of psychological and

physiological symptoms from civilians living with prolonged drone surveillance in Pakistan, including sleeplessness and nightmares, noise sensitivity – especially to the drone's constant buzz – and feelings of dread and anxiety. In interviews with victims and witnesses of drone violence, Alex Edney-Browne has highlighted disrupted social routines and habits, and 'self-objectification', as key effects of drone violence – the compulsion to see oneself as if from the perspective of a drone operator, and changing one's behaviours accordingly. These psychosocial harms at both individual and communal levels are not easily captured by conceptions of 'harm' covered by international humanitarian law.

Drawing from this research, as part of the *War and the Mind* exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, the Centre for Drones and Culture has partnered with Human Studio to create an immersive experience about the psychology of drone warfare. Taking on the form of a looped short film, *Beware Blue Skies* features two scenes, one ostensibly from above and the other from below, but the two are intertwined. The viewer is propelled forward in both as if from the perspective of a drone; who are 'we' in these scenes? Are we the drone operator, looking at private scenes of domesticity through our screens? Or are we those who live with drones as a part of our everyday life of endurance, dreaming of a time when blue skies are safe?

Beware Blue Skies takes as inspiration comparable creative projects addressing the politics of drone warfare, including Biome Collective's game *Killbox*. Because drone pilots and operators control their machines from a distance, even thousands of miles away from those they surveil, they have been called 'cubicle warriors' and 'console warriors'. While some have criticized drone warfare for creating a 'playstation mentality', others have noted that remote warfare is anything but a video game. On one hand, much of drone surveillance involves boredom and waiting. On the other hand, drone operators see violence in graphic detail, and prolonged surveillance of suspects can cultivate an unsettling sense of quasi-intimacy and voyeurism, and lead to ethical dilemmas.

Rendered through Unreal Engine, a gaming engine used for building complex 3D environments, *Beware Blue Skies* asks viewers to confront the way emerging technologies mediate the way wars are fought, experienced, known, and understood. 'When a technological artifact is used, it facilitates people's involvement with reality, and in doing so it coshapes how humans can be present in their world,' including 'their perceptions and actions, experience and existence,' Peter-Paul Verbeek writes. The theory of technological mediation emphasizes technology's role in shaping our ways of perceiving, knowing, and understanding the world around us. This is the 'aesthetic' dimension of drone warfare – aesthetics as the domain connecting the mind, the body, and the material environment – which the creative arts helps us to understand and see.

When the Biden administration withdrew American armed forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, twenty years after



the United States first entered the country, he declared that the 'longest war in American history' was over. At the same time, President Biden and senior officials stated that the United States would continue to conduct 'over the horizon' operations to target terrorists in Afghanistan and elsewhere, noting in effect that drones will replace the work of ground troops – and that the Global War on Terror was not and may never be truly over.

Less than three weeks after Biden's speech, an erroneous drone strike killed aid worker Zemari Ahmadi along with nine members of his family, including seven children, in Kabul. Investigations into that incident sparked wide concern about the regulations and accuracy of drone use, in addition to prominent visual media coverage of what drone-inflicted damage looks like; *Beware Blue Skies* draws upon some of those images. Drone operators interpreted Ahmadi as an ISIS-K terrorist carrying explosives, when he was in fact carrying water canisters. Just how cutting-edge surveillance, imaging, and algorithmic technologies led to what the US military called a 'tragic mistake' – of following the wrong car for eight hours, before targeting and killing the wrong man and his family – remains unclear. What is clear from the incident, however, is that life-and-death decisions were made through technologies that enabled confirmation bias – and that the power of drone warfare, and the fears that surround it, are inextricably tied to technological mediation.

This article was first published by *The Centre for Drones and Culture* (centrefordronesandculture.com) and has been reproduced with kind permission from Dr Beryl Pong.

Beware Blue Skies: The Psychology of Drone Warfare, is an immersive film installation at IWM London 7 November 2024–16 March 2025, showing as part of the *War and the Mind* exhibition. *Beware Blue Skies* has been made in collaboration with: University of York, Sheffield Hallam University, UK Research and Innovation, University of Cambridge, Human Studio and Centre for Drones and Culture.