

Bringing the War Home

Liz Kotz

THE INTERVIEWER: Everything okay?

THE PILOT: Yeah. I'm okay...

This banal but fraught exchange opens the first of the three scripted “interview” segments around which Omer Fast’s film *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011) revolves. We watch two people—an interviewer and a Predator drone pilot—who we know are going to talk past each other. The tone is overwrought and irritated: “Do these guys have to be here?” says the pilot. “I didn’t realize you’d be filming.” The scene is not one of disclosure but of resistance, suspicion, and avoidance—closer to the territory of the analytic session than documentary or journalistic questioning.

Every element situates us within the more-or-less familiar landscapes of narrative cinema or television drama. The stark lighting, distant sirens and claustrophobic hotel hallway could come from a crime show. The ostensible interview subject, the “pilot,” is played by a vaguely recognizable actor whose twitchy grimaces verge on overacting; his interactions with the “interviewer” are pointedly melodramatic. The scene is anything but realistic. Instead, the darkly shadowed, industrially produced hyperrealism immediately announces that we are watching a movie. Walking into *5,000 Feet is the Best* is like walking into a hall of mirrors. Everything is distortion or displacement or substitution. Through these manufactured scenes, a reality that cannot be verbalized directly may gradually manifest itself—as in the Freudian “dreamwork” or psychoanalytic session.

5,000 Feet is the Best reprises aspects of *The Casting* (2007), a four-channel video installation also generated from interviews with an American serviceman. Both projects blur lines between documentary “truth” and reenactment as they retell traumatic experiences of war. In the earlier work, Fast intercut two seemingly linked stories of a young Army soldier into an apparently continuous if fractured narrative; as viewers move from staged tableaux vivants to the highly edited documentary source materials, the “behind the scenes” revelation renders any narrative certainty even more tenuous. While *The Casting* split filmed reenactments and documentary source material onto opposite sides of two suspended screens, in *5,000 Feet is the Best*, these perspectives are collapsed into one. Yet rather than rendering a more intact or unified narrative, any forward trajectory crumbles into desire, fear, and doubt. The thirty-minute film is a single-channel work that plays continuously. Its narrative loops internally, with three nearly identical versions of the interview scene intercut with three dreamlike narrative “digressions” and two longer voice-overs (largely over aerial views) that feature the altered voice of the actual drone pilot who is the work’s source. The film itself loops within the installation so that a viewer might not register the beginning or end but instead perceive the work as an extended stuttering flow. Composed of episodic interludes that cycle and repeat, the work generates tension, excitement, and anxiety through the perpetual suspension of plot, as heightened stretches of nothing much happening hint at indescribable horror. In this version of the compulsion to repeat, acting out will apparently never yield to the more rationalized, narrativized processes of remembering and working-through.¹ Instead the work moves fugally, a series of cinematic strettos that begin and begin and begin again.

A few moments of awkward, vaguely hostile bantering between the two men segue into the short dialogue that provides the emotional and political core of the work:

THE INTERVIEWER: Okay. What is the difference between you and someone who sits in an airplane?

THE PILOT: There's no difference between us. We do the same job.

THE INTERVIEWER: But you're not a real pilot.

THE PILOT: So what? You're not a real journalist.

For more than a decade, Fast has made videos and video installations that probe historical trauma and reenactment, and that often explore the conditions of war and its indirect insinuation into everyday life. The codes and conventions of low-budget documentary filmmaking are rendered as artificial and recognizable as those of big-budget Hollywood cinema or mainstream television.

For viewers of *The Casting*, the opening scene between filmmaker and military subject may feel doubly familiar, since the work features both Fast and his interview subject, US Army Sergeant Ronn Cantu, alongside staged reenactments of them played by actors. This slippage between “real” and “recreation” is a recurring trope in Fast’s work. The concatenation of different genres and expectations inescapably raises the question of how to read these projects. Fast himself is very explicit that he does not consider them works of “media critique,” nor does he claim them as aberrant examples of more conventional journalism or what he terms “ethical documentary.”² Critical analyses nonetheless emphasize Fast’s troubling of the status of the image and its provisional truth-value—in effect assimilating

him into the territory of artists like Harun Farocki.

While it is all too easy to discuss a work like *5,000 Feet is the Best* in terms of “notions of space, and video games and remote distance,” this perspective misses the mark. Visuals in Fast’s work often feel secondary or supplemental. They are almost archetypal “screen memories,” stand-ins for realities that cannot be depicted.³ In *The Casting* and again in *5,000 Feet is the Best*, what is poignant is language: the stories that unfold; the voices, their accents and cadences; all the weird interruptions and pauses and things that go unsaid. Words are what drive his works. For all the attention to the elaborately staged tableaux of bombings and gore in *The Casting*, it is the apparent continuity of language that carries the story and delivers its emotional load—even as we understand that this verbal narrative is itself reconstructed and even manufactured from edited fragments of recorded speech.

In the end, Fast occupies a conflicted position, using postmodern techniques of video editing to rediscover the ancient art of storytelling. He acknowledges this “guilty relationship with narrative,” expressed in structures that “act as containers for stories, foils for stories.”⁴ While he emphasizes that “the challenge of making the work is not just about locating the stories but also in trying to articulate them in a way that tells you something about the conditions under which they are being told,”⁵ elsewhere he wonders if he’s “just a frustrated writer working in the wrong medium.”⁶ As I cut together his words from different interviews, I wonder if I am twisting their meaning.

In a 2011 panel discussion in Dublin, Fast described his processes as generated by language:

For me, the work begins really with words, and with stories, so most of what I do for a very large chunk of the process that is involved in making this piece

involves like a word processing program. It's listening to that interview, transcribing it, looking, reading it over and over and over again, highlighting bits, printing it out and highlighting bits, cutting it up together... and taping it together and seeing if it holds up as a narrative, mixing different people, mixing different things that I say, thinking whether I can add to it, weave other stuff into it... The bulk of what I do is really about words and stories.⁷

And indeed, with access to the partial transcript of the interviews that Fast conducted with “Brandon,” the actual drone pilot in *5,000 Feet is the Best*, one can see how he has culled and rearranged certain strands to build his core narrative. As the camera tracks across a desert, we watch a child on a bike ride through the rugged terrain toward a series of the astonishingly empty gridded streets of suburban tract houses—and the voice-over of the drone pilot breaks in:

Five thousand feet is the best. We love it when we're sitting at five thousand feet. You have more description. Plus, at five thousand feet, I could tell you what type of shoes you're wearing. From a mile away!... So there are very clear cameras on-board. We have the “IR,” infrared, which we can switch to automatically. And that will pick up any heat signatures, or cold signatures. I mean, if someone sits down on a cold surface for a while and then gets up, you'll still see the heat from that person. For a long time. It kind of looks like a white blossom. Just shining up into heaven. It's quite beautiful.

As the film cuts to the speaker's deliberately blurred face, we perceive more clearly that the voice has also been mechanically altered. Yet after the melodrama of the “interview” sequences, the flat, straightforward voice

and bright outdoor scene are tremendously seductive. In contrast, the claustrophobic hotel interiors read as a purely psychological space, a series of nightmares. Other elements of the buried backstory emerge only in sidelong ways. Much of what is poignant in the original interview transcript is its banality—the tedium of the job, the long bus rides through the desert to work, the briefings and trainings and odd rituals, and the absurd details like the fact that the drone pilots put on flight suits to go to work in their air conditioned trailers, or the fact that “Brandon” plays flight-simulator video games at home with his fiancée to relax. A lot of the landscapes they’re surveying resemble the Nevada desert outside their doors.

Although *5,000 Feet is the Best* is about the endless war that always occurs somewhere else—Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan—the film takes place entirely within the United States. As the narrator recounts, “The pilot would get all the clearances that are necessary to fire. He’ll release the missile. And I’ll guide it onto its target.” The shot then tilts up across miles and miles of cookie-cutter tile roofs to the Las Vegas skyline nestled by white puffy clouds. Later, as a long aerial shot hovers over an idyllic scene of small-town New England, and gradually homes in on a striking white church, the voice of the drone pilot returns:

Usually after we got done with work and then getting back home, you had about two hours before you had to go to sleep for work the next night... And a lot of people are like, “How can you have PTSD if you weren’t actively in a war zone?” Well, technically speaking, every single day I was active in a war zone. I mean, I may not have been personally at harm, but I was directly affecting people’s lives over there, every single day.

The politics of the film seem twofold. The work constructs a domestic viewer, for whom the war is distant, something that happens only on TV and in the newspaper. With its idealized American landscapes, *5,000 Feet is the Best* is arguably addressed to an American viewer for whom these scenes are deeply familiar and evocative. But since similar scenes are disseminated worldwide through US cinema and TV, their recognition and resonance are nearly universal. These landscapes tug at us, drawing us into the story through their simple and deep familiarity. Quietly, quickly, war and normal life converge.

5,000 Feet is the Best also articulates a deeply sympathetic portrait of the drone pilot. These are, after all, *his* nightmares and dreams. Fast himself clearly feels a strong responsibility to—and even a kind of identification with—these pilots whose stories he has endeavored to tell, to the extent that their position, of being both here and elsewhere, becomes paradigmatic of our present. In a public discussion, Fast responded testily to a question about the “missing relationship” between the combatant and the enemy, offering a surprisingly direct reading of the drone as itself symbolizing an underlying condition of misrecognition:

I would resist the sort of fallacy of thinking that by shipping off the soldiers and putting them out there that they have more of an understanding of what they do. They might be able to see more, they certainly can feel more danger physically, but I think what obviously defines war is a misunderstanding, or else there won't be war. There is a great misunderstanding between nations, between people and... they are in conflict. And I think what...the drone in that sense, in this work, as a symbol, is again, is something that kind of amplifies that disconnection,

that misunderstanding, while promising the exact opposite—the ability to see in the greatest detail possible.⁸

Rather than producing detachment and disengagement, the distance technologies employed by the drone pilots create a heightened reality and identification. He continued:

What I know from the conversations that I've had is that when they show up for work and they check in and they go into their trailer, the first thing that they're always told is that, "Okay, you're in Afghanistan today," and that might sound...like a slogan to us, but...keep in mind that they're able to see quite a bit, and a lot of what they do is...support missions, so if you have troops on the ground, and they're involved in...some kind of mission, the drone will fly overhead in order to survey, in order to see, in order to record, but also in order to give support. And...a lot of the stress that the sensor operator with whom I talked mentioned, stems from the responsibility for those troops on the ground, and keep in mind that he sees them, and he's also in radio contact with them throughout their missions and the fact that he might be half a world away, unable to help them, and removed from it.

Fast concluded:

So...in that sense, you do understand that it's not just a video game, and it's not just...an office job and it's not just a flight simulator. There are...very comparable sort of ramifications for what he does... He doesn't necessarily know the people on the ground in person but he works with them very often on extended missions, so he probably gets to know them and

in that sense he invests the situation with a lot of emotion even if that emotion is from a removed place or kind of symbolic or even fetishistic.

I hesitate to make too much of a series of remarks made more or less off the cuff in the context of a public Q and A. These comments come toward the end of a nearly ninety-minute program, and are colored by fatigue and perhaps frustration. Yet I feel that it is through them that the larger stakes of the film becomes clear. We are asked not only to identify with, but also in a sense to defend, this person who is both agent and victim of this vastly overpowering system of—what shall we call it—state-sponsored terror? Mechanized death? Among the more poignant details of the interview transcript is that the drone pilot, whose contract was up, had then left the Air Force and found himself unemployed, applying for jobs in hotel casino security.

In researching Fast's project, I came across a small article in *Wired* about the withdrawal of press access to military operations, which discussed *5,000 Feet is the Best* producer Daniel Desure's largely thwarted efforts to find drone operators willing to appear on camera. As the authors note,

Drones are the signature weapon in America's wars, from Afghanistan to Yemen to Pakistan. Their employment has become one of the world's most sensitive political issues. But, thanks to the near-blackout of the media, the public knows less and less about the drones—and the people who operate them.⁹

Thus the repression of this material is primarily political and strategic, and only secondarily personal or psychological. It represents a significant shift from a few years previously,

when major news outlets were given “unprecedented access” to new military capacities. For instance, the celebrated 2009 Frontline segment on pilots who fly unmanned Predator and Reaper drones over Iraq and Afghanistan, allowed viewers to enter the “ground control stations” and look on and listen as operators isolated targets on infrared screens and pilots talked about the paradoxes their jobs entail, including leaving the battlefield to go home to the family dinner table. In the online segment, an Air Force colonel remarks, “This is a complete cultural change for the Air Force. Pretty soon we’ll have more unmanned than manned aircraft. It’s almost surreal.”¹⁰ In a considerably more vexing *60 Minutes* segment from the same year, the correspondent Lara Logan breathlessly recounts how “they had just seen a group of men ambush US troops. The pilot can take them out and still return home in time for dinner.”¹¹

Tracing this shift in policy, *Wired* provides a backstory to *5,000 Feet is the Best* that clarifies the evident omissions and obstacles registered in Fast’s narrative:

After spending a month being tossed from one military spokesman to another, film producer Daniel Desure put up a Craigslist ad in desperation. Were there any drone operators who would talk to a group of artists about non-classified parts of their job? Dozens of responses came in. Desure filtered out the obvious fakes, found eight people who sounded legitimate, and set up interviews with four people. But then, a call from the FBI spooked the team. Desure was warned that “there are a lot of people who don’t want this to happen.” Shortly after that, two drone operators who already agreed to talk to him went dark.... Desure’s team eventually found one airman who agreed to speak, but wouldn’t allow himself to be identified. In the final product, *5,000 Feet is the Best*,

a former drone pilot addresses the camera, his voice digitally distorted, his face cast in a blurry halo. We have to take the word of the filmmakers that he is who he says he is. He describes the heat patterns of the landscape that stretches out before him, and spots something that looks like a “white blossom.” He must be in his twenties. As he tries to make out the images on the screen, we, too, try—and fail—to meet his eyes.¹²

For those of us who are not in the military, who have never lived in a war zone or occupied territory, and for whom such perils seem distant, it is the final “dream sequence” in *5,000 Feet is the Best*, portraying a suburban family on an ill-fated weekend outing, that haunts us. After the third interview, the pilot character starts to spin his final yarn. Like the others, it is a mix of television melodrama and paranoid fantasy, overlaid by a series of historical anxieties:

Mom, Dad, Johnny, and little Zoe are taking a little trip. They are packing a station wagon. Let’s say it’s the weekend and the family loves the outdoors. Or maybe they need to get away for a while because of problems Dad’s having with the provisional authority. Either way, on a bright Friday morning, they pack up the station wagon with food and blankets and good stuff for the long drive.

When I first watched this sequence, the references to checkpoints and provisional authorities made me think the story was supposed to be set somewhere in the Middle East, perhaps Israel or the West Bank—and I found it confounding that everything looked so much like Southern California, where I live. The pleasant family home could almost be in my neighborhood, and the backcountry roads look like those in the San Gabriel Mountains or the high

desert (I even drive a silver VW wagon like the one in the film). Yet as we watch more carefully, a progression of discordant details stand out, continually opening strange spaces between the narration and the visuals. The “occupying forces” manning the checkpoint look are recognizably Asian. The men burying a roadside bomb are described as wearing “a traditional headdress” and “clothes more typical to tribes from further south.” Yet what we see in the film are three redneck-looking “white or Latino-American” guys attired in jeans and baseball caps. And, in the black-and-white viewfinder screen of the missile targeting system that surveys the scene from overhead, the telemetry reads out in Chinese characters. Whose nightmare is this? Is this a pilot’s troubled flashback that tangles comfortable domesticity with unspeakable horror? Or a fantasy of later twenty-first-century America, in which blond suburbanites find themselves occupied by technologically superior Chinese forces? Fast’s work has sometimes mounted such games of role-reversal, inviting us to imagine ourselves not as predator but prey. As the family walks into the distance, a sharp ringtone breaks in: “Sorry, I’ve gotta to take this. Be back in a minute.” And we find ourselves back in the hotel, pacing the dark cramped hallways, from which we will apparently never escape. Over sumptuous roaming aerial footage of the Las Vegas strip and its surrounds, the drone pilot’s voice begins to recount the long withheld story of death: “And we fired off a Hellfire missile and got the target. I mean, it didn’t quite stand in to me, ‘Hey! I just killed someone!’ My first time. It was within my first year there. It didn’t quite impact. You know, it was later on through a couple of more missions that the dreams started.”

Apparently, they will never end, as the pilot character disappears down the darkened hallway, only to reappear as the video loops and begin again.

- 1** James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911–1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1958), 150. In the 1914 text “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” Freud remarks, “We may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten, but *acts* it out. He *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.” Treatment entails using the analytic situation to create “an intermediate region between illness and real life” which is accessible to intervention—unlike the original repressed memory, which remains buried, accessed only through symptoms.
- 2** Fast asserts this in multiple interviews, including Joanna Fiduccia, “Omer Fast: A Multiple ‘I,’” *Uovo* 17 (2008): 159; and Omer Fast talk and interview with Seamus Kealy, September 3, 2011, audio recording available at <http://themodel.ie/exhibitions/omer-fast-the-tunnel>.
- 3** In the 1899 essay “Screen Memories,” Freud outlines the concept of a childhood memory operating as a screen for an earlier, repressed event—thus revealing and concealing it at the same time.
- 4** Claudia Löffelholz, “Omer Fast: A Nice Breaded Schnitzel: On Narrative and Conceptualism, Truth and Construction,” *Arte e Critica* 58 (March–May 2009): 52.
- 5** Petra Heck, “Omer Fast Interview,” Netherlands Media Art Institute, January 18, 2011, <http://nimk.nl/eng/omer-fast-interview>.
- 6** Löffelholz, “Omer Fast: A Nice Bread on Schnitzel,” 52.
- 7** Omer Fast talk and interview with Seamus Kealy, September 3, 2011.
- 8** *Ibid.*
- 9** Dawn Lim and Noah Shachtman, “Air Force Tells Reporters: You’re Not Welcome at Our Drone Base Anymore,” *Wired*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/11/press-kept-out-of-drone-base/3/>.
- 10** “War by remote: What do you think?,” *Frontline*, PBS, October 15, 2009, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/blog/2009/10/new-video-fighting-from-afar.html>
- 11** “Drones: America’s New Air Force,” *60 Minutes*, CBS News, May 10, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/05/08/60minutes/main5001439.shtml>
- 12** Lim and Shachtman, “Air Force Tells Reporters.”