

ON 22 SEPTEMBER 1929, a group of Italian Futurists published a manifesto exalting the airplane's ability to open new realms of vision. Championing verticality and mobility, and welcoming the obsolescence of Romantic conceptions of nature, these proponents of 'aeropainting' listed how 'all parts of the landscape appear to the painter in flight:'

- A smashed
- B artificial
- C provisional
- D as if they had just fallen out of the sky¹

It is hard, especially now, to share such enthusiasm for land in ruin. To contemporary eyes, the aeropainters propose a world picture of violence, of the degradation and domination of nature, of a glorification of technology that took little heed of the wartime traumas that must have lingered as they wrote. The view from above is sometimes called a 'bird's eye view,' but if any creaturely life can be invoked in relation to the Futurists' paean to the new age of war machines, it must be Julius Neubronner's pigeon cyborg, outfitted with a miniature camera and dispatched on aerial reconnaissance missions during World War One—'the war to end war' that did nothing of the sort.

1. Giacomo Ball, et al., "Manifesto of Aeropainting," *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 284.

It would be easy to say that Jane and Louise Wilson's *Undead Sun* (2014) understands the view from above rather differently. It would be more accurate to say that *Undead Sun* understands the view from above in very much the same terms—but that the Wilsons attach a different value to them. Like the Futurists, the Wilsons identify WW1-era aerial reconnaissance as a site at which image-making, modern visuality, and warfare meet; but unlike the Futurists, the artists find in these developments no cause for excitement. Looking back at the initial forays into aerial combat and camouflage from a twenty-first-century present of surveillance and drone bombs, it is not only landscapes that appear smashed, artificial, and provisional, but human bodies, too. In the Wilsons' media archaeology of warfare, Futurist zeal is displaced by a melancholic retrospection, with any belief in a logic of progress abandoned.

A female voice, marked by a Germanic accent, offers an opening premise: 'On the ground, you can only hide if you are able to imagine the view of yourself as seen from above.' Earthbound life must remake itself to become invisible to new enemies in the sky. Through a multi-faceted engagement with the archive—including reenactments, found photographs and motion-picture footage, and on-location shooting—*Undead Sun* unfolds this double perspective, assembling a constellation of camouflage techniques, decoys, and test patterns, all bound to early aviation research. Notably, the Wilsons refrain from offering the spectacle of the aerial view itself, denying a perspective that might suggest mastery, possession, or the taking of the world as target. Indeed, *Undead Sun* indirectly gestures to the violence latent in such a position, whether in appearance of an aerial camera shaped like a gun (found by the artists in the archives of the Imperial War Museum), or in the recurrent use of the test patterns, which speak to a process of abstraction by which bodies and buildings cease to be apprehended as such, appearing instead only as so many specks, so many coordinates. Rather than flee the ground, the Wilsons stay close to the embodied labour on which war depends: the women who sew camouflage scrimms and the men who build planes and craft decoy horses. In the wind tunnels at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, used to test some of Britain's first aircraft, human figures are dwarfed by the immensity of the propellers. It is a fitting allegory for a world in which the sun is but, as the voiceover puts it, quoting Tom McCarthy's novel *C*, 'a relic of an old order.' The new order will abide instead by the glaring light of machines.

The human cost of this new order is made palpable in the Wilsons' inclusion of photographs of sculptor Francis Derwent Wood fitting facial prosthetics on disfigured soldiers. Between 1917 and 1919, Wood ran a clinic at the Third London General Hospital in Wandsworth called the Masks for Facial Disfigurement Department, devoted to the production of wooden masks to cover facial injuries incurred in combat. Gloved hands hold one of these artefacts to the camera's view, turning it over as the voiceover asks, 'Do you still recognise me?' first in German and then in English. Certainly, aerial warfare made possible a scale of devastation much vaster than wounding a single face; yet the Wilsons' choice to focus on this category of harm in *Undead Sun* is significant. Like no other part of the body, the face is a marker of individual uniqueness, long understood as a privileged site of emotional expressivity. In the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, it is in the face-to-face relation that we surrender to the ethical demand 'thou shalt not kill' and through which we recognise that the other will always overflow our comprehension. To be sure, Levinas's notion of the face is a metaphor, but it is a motivated metaphor. No face is visible, literally or figuratively, when lives are viewed from far aloft, far away, through the control interface of a drone. The militarised view from above, a view inaugurated in the First World War and even more powerfully with us one hundred years later, is a view without faces.

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WE PUT THE WORLD BEFORE YOU
Jane & Louise Wilson, Text by Erika Balsom

ACCORDING TO FILM THEORIST JACQUES AUMONT, 'To film a face is to confront all the problems of film, all of its aesthetic problems and therefore all of its ethical problems.'¹ It would be easy to dismiss such a proclamation as overstatement, but returning to the first decades of the twentieth century provides support for Aumont's wager. In the 1920s, while the Futurists looked to the aerial view as a distinctly modern form of vision, writers such as Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein looked to a different emerging technology, the cinema, and attempted to articulate its power. They found in it a transformative way of seeing that could make possible a revelatory encounter with the world. In particular, they were entranced by faces rendered gigantic through projection, amplified to a scale that dwarfs the viewer. The close-up, with its capacity for magnification and the making-visible of micro-movements, emblematised for these writers the specificity of this new medium—and the face, of course, is the close-up *par excellence*. In the wake of the horrors of World War One, the physiognomic vocation of cinema held a utopian promise of human understanding, a promise that would be often betrayed but never entirely vanquished in the century to come.

The face captured on camera occupies a central position in Jane and Louise Wilson's *We Put the World Before You* (2016), a work in which disparate signifiers of historicity collide to produce an evocation of the mass entertainments and mass horrors of the World War One years infused with hints of the 1970s and the digital present. A group of women enter into a state of collective hypnosis led by a blonde man. 'There's a face there—a face that means something to you,' he tells them, 'Stare at the face. Imagine that you could go into that image. Become part of the face.' As they relinquish conscious will and give themselves over to the incantatory voice of their leader, they are not unlike a cinema audience, entering the virtual world of the screen.

1. Jacques Aumont, "The Face in Close-Up," *The Visual Turn: Classical Film Theory and Art History*, ed. Angela Dalle Vacche (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 133.

Although they are clad in attire reminiscent of the 1910s, certain sartorial details, along with the lurid pink and green light cast on their bodies, summon filmic associations of a much later time, of Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lola* (1981), both films that sought to picture a past era with purposeful inauthenticity by marshalling the artifice of colour. The women make hand gestures that belong decidedly to the contemporary moment, holding imaginary smartphones and manipulating their imaginary touchscreens, as if to zoom in on an absent image—a very different form of magnification than the ungraspable grandeur of the cinematic close-up.

If, for Balázs, the face in close-up was a possibility of communion, today faces are just as likely to be scanned as they are to be filmed, stripped of their ineffable qualities and subject to algorithmic calculation for purposes of management and control. Extending the bricolage of temporalities already suggested in the production design of the hypnosis sequences, the Wilsons periodically insert digital renderings of their own faces—mask-like surfaces without depth, able to be rotated 360 degrees, detached from fleshy life. To close the film, recalling *Undead Sun*, the Wilsons offer a series of archival photographs of WWI veterans with facial injuries that morph together to form the image of the 'average' soldier. Individual particularity gives way to typicality, and the archival photographs begin to resemble the composite portraiture undertaken by Francis Galton in the 1880s, a technique widely understood as a precursor to today's mechanisms of biometric governance.

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2. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 265.

As in *Undead Sun*, in *We Put the World Before You*, a passage opens between past and present that allows one to trace the longer histories of technologies and techniques so often and yet so spuriously deemed in our time to be new. But this is not to suggest that the passage from 1918 to 2018 is one of simple continuity. The film's title is borrowed from a slogan coined by Charles Urban, an early cinema pioneer who exploited scientific films as popular entertainment, gaining special fame for those relying on the spectacle of extreme magnification. These were films that would, in the words of Walter Benjamin, burst open the 'prison-world' of habitual vision with 'the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris.'² The debris of mediated vision is still with us, but now it has been securitised, its emancipatory potential sapped. If the close-up was the apotheosis of the face, then in the biometric scan, quality gives way to quantity, and the face meets its end.