UNDEAD SUN

Jane & Louise Wilson, Text by Erika Balsom

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 sky[1]

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 scrims 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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