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Frames of Death: Media Audience Framing of a Lethal Drone Strike

Henrik Füst & Karin Hagren Idevall

Abstract

The rise of drone warfare intersects with the rise of YouTube and has become a natural place for distributing videos of war and death. Audience participation has an important role to play in framing killing and death in the dissemination of war propaganda in the age of drone warfare and participatory media. In this chapter, the way in which audiences are framing the media message of a video clip of a lethal drone strike uploaded to YouTube is analyzed.

The killing is ascribed meaning through two cultural frames, seeing the killing either as legitimate or illegitimate. The first audience framing constructs a moral response where death through drone strike is *justified*, and the uploader's framing is considered legitimate, constituting the killed lives as unlivable. An aesthetic and affectual response to the justified killing is a spectatorial gaze where the death through drone strike killing is enjoyed as *drone porn*. The second audience framing *contests* the uploader's frame as illegitimate and constitutes the lives as livable. The aesthetic and affectual response to the contested kill is a spectatorial gaze where these deaths are responded to through sadness, and disgust, as *drone horror*.

The study of how death (and thus, life) is ascribed meaning through the framing in participatory cultures online shows the characteristics of war propaganda in a time pervaded by highly technologized warfare, by discourses of terrorism and by new digital modes for communication and information.

Keywords: drone porn; frame analysis; Judith Butler; symbolic boundaries, YouTube

BIO

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Karin Hagren Idevall is a Ph.D. in Scandinavian Languages, examined from Uppsala University in 2016. In her research, she explores how discriminating and privileging discourses are reproduced through language in different settings where people communicate, e.g. comments sections online and in social media. The research focuses on the contemporary conditions for interaction and debate, as well as the effects of participating in meaning-making contexts, where participants articulate certain perspectives and certain ways of speaking and try to influence other's language and thinking.

Introduction

A silent shaky black and white YouTube video shows a number of dark silhouettes moving on the ground.¹ The perspective is that of a drone plane, crossing the skies of Iraq, controlled from a military compound in the USA. The drone pilot engages fire and from the ground an explosion emerges. The silhouettes disappear. While we do not know much about the context or the lives killed, the title of the video clip, uploaded April 11, 2008 by an organization associated with the US Armed Forces, frames it as “UAV Kills 6 Heavily Armed Criminals”, which tells us that six suspected enemies to the US Armed Forces have been killed in a drone strike.²

However, this title is only one possible framing of the message from the video clip. The audience commenting the video clip is also framing the meaning of the deaths that the video clip lets us witness. In a media landscape increasingly dominated by participatory media and semi-anonymous audiences like that of YouTube commentators, this construction of death has clear political stakes (see Langa and Creswell, this volume). Nonetheless, the present book chapter is one of the very few studies paying attention to *how* audiences are framing the media message in the context of war propaganda in participatory media. Understanding this framing process sheds light on the construction of killing and death and its legitimacy in the dissemination of war propaganda in the age of drone warfare and participatory media.

The rise of drone warfare³ intersects with the rise of YouTube. YouTube has become a commonplace for distributing videos of war and death. The Iraq war is the first example where both soldiers and the army publish videos on YouTube from an ongoing war (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009).⁴ What perhaps is different from other previously studied types of media outlets, such as war propaganda in news reporting (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Hiebert, 2003; Sontag 2003), is that YouTube allows people to interact and comment in the comment field adjacent to the video clip (see also Heemsbergen & Lindgren, 2014). Seemingly anonymous participants express themselves in their own localized media consumption, which becomes part of a potentially global communication about the content of video clips. Acting as

internet “prosumers” (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), commentators on YouTube not only consume and act as an audience of the media content, but they also produce media content through the affordances offered by the technology. Hence, they are part of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). Their utterances, interaction and media production contribute to the framing of contemporary media events, including that of death and war propaganda as exemplified in the YouTube video clip studied. Like social media in general, YouTube offers extensive possibilities for users to control framing and take a stance in political controversies. The analyzed video clip thus explicitly calls for opinions *for* the war, and not for raising pity for the Iraqi victims of the drone killing. And while war images always require and are embedded in some context that renders them meaning (Sontag, 2003), the antagonistic and aggressive use of visual images of war that we see in this case is markedly different from the conventional use of similar material in established media (Chouliaraki, 2006).

Interrogating the processes in which commentators’ frame killing and death, this chapter is informed by a cultural sociology perspective that conceives symbolic boundaries as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). The boundaries help people define and categorize how to perceive reality, such as drawing the boundary for what lives should be considered livable or not. Definitions and categorizations are made through language, and therefore we analyze how the audience linguistically uses cultural modes for framing the moral status of victims of drone strikes to draw symbolic boundaries between legitimate and non-legitimate death and killing. These boundaries are drawn between persons (livable lives) and non-persons (non-livable lives) through different frames that either oppose or justify the depicted killings. In its consequences, the boundaries tell us about the moral status of the lives being killed. Hence, we understand the framing of these events as a highly moral process, which allows the commentators to position themselves in different ways to the drone strike, and raise questions such as: What lives are considered as valuable and treated as objects of care and grief? What lives are of no worth and thus killable? What lives are enjoyed while killed? Analyzing how

discourses about death and dying intersect with life and living in a domain where death simultaneously triggers disgust and enjoyment, the chapter explores ways in which death is both produced and consumed in contemporary social media discourse.

Frames of drone warfare

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler (2009, p. 1) analyzes the “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence.” We follow this lead in studying how the value of life and death is constructed and justified affectively through cultural frames. More precisely, the selective and differential framing of violence and death can be understood through Erving Goffman’s frame analysis (Butler, 2009, p. 8). Hence, meanings are constructed through layers of frames (Goffman, 1974). In order to analyze how actors ascribe meaning to the clip, we explore the cultural framing of death and killing through the ethical and affective dispositions expressed through the comments.

Butler (2009) argues that if lives are seen as livable (ethical disposition) they are grievable (affective disposition). Non-grievable lives (affective disposition) are simply not lives in the first place (ethical disposition). For normative reasons, Butler talks about grievable and non-grievable lives, which indicates that all lives should be considered precarious, livable and thereby grievable. However, people’s actual ethical and affectual dispositions are not in focus in this conceptual model. In contrast, we argue that Butler overlooks the idea that killing also can be the source of excitement and pleasure (see also Palm, this volume). Death is not only grievable or non-grievable, but also, as our case will show, enjoyable or non-enjoyable, hence our suggestion is that what we here are confronted with can be described in terms of “drone porn”. While porn has connotations to sex, it should here be read as a spectatorial involvement and arousal or enjoyment of something that may be seductive although at times morally banned. The concept of drone porn highlights the responses to distant deaths in the form of arousal from breaking down the frame of a person’s life as livable. The moral status of a person is destroyed.

The breakdown of the frame and the destruction of the moral status is enjoyed as a distant domination of the powerless victim through the perceived omnipotent control of life and death.

Viewing the video clip seems to involve feelings of arousal and enjoyment for some people. On the other hand, however, this excitement also emerges at a distance from the event, that is, from a position of safety. The arousal is therefore produced by combining the obviously violent and dangerous character of the event with the relative safety of consuming such act through YouTube. Following the perspective of Palm (2016) on the dynamics of excitement, drone porn arguably takes place through an oscillation between safety and danger that produces excitement. This oscillation would in this perspective be at the heart of the dynamic of arousal. The excitement comes from the safety of viewing and experiencing the death and killing at a distance, triumphing one's own vulnerability by the perceived control of this very danger and vulnerability (Palm, 2016). Hence, drone porn could be seen as a spectatorial involvement and arousal from viewing and experiencing dangers of death at a safe distance. The link between death and pornography has previously been suggested, such as in the idea that viewing death in media representations distances the viewer emotionally from the acts of death, which parallels the emotional distancing to sex by viewing sexual pornography (Gorer, 1984). To sum up, drone porn is expressed as an aesthetic and affectual response to the killing and becomes possible when the killed life is seen as without moral status and thus non-grievable.

While Butler writes about mourning and grief as a response to the death of livable lives, we also introduce the idea of 'drone horror'. As shall be seen in our analysis, this response is rare but present in our material. Instead of the images evoking pity and compassion for the suffering (cf. Chouliaraki 2006; Sontag 2003), drone horror shows that the spectator's enjoyment is in focus, but in its inversed form of disgust. While the moral response is about the worth of a life, the drone porn and drone horror responses are based on a spectatorial response involving the aesthetic side of death and the affectual response ignited by this aesthetics.

Studying the framings of livable and non-livable lives

Comment sections on the Internet are a particular genre of communication, with its' own history of politics and policing (Hagren Idevall, 2016; Reagle, 2015). This so-called “bottom half of the Internet” has been an integral part of YouTube since its inception in 2004. We argue that these comment sections signify the phenomenon of participatory cultures on the Internet. Certain uploaders, some known as ‘YouTubers’, and types of video clips gain a following. While we have selected only one case, the results may be transposed to similar types of video clips on YouTube. The comment section arguably signifies a highly current intersection of drone warfare, participatory media, and constructions of actual deaths.

The YouTube video clip selected for analysis had 1,297 comments and 2,782,851 views in May 2016, meaning that for every ten thousand viewings there were four comments.⁵ The video clip is bound to gender, age, geographical place, and history, which is shown by the statistics linked to the clip. The amount of comments takes the form of an asymmetrical arch spanning from 2008 to 2016, with the highest frequency during the period 2009 to 2012.⁶ Most viewers were located in the USA, second most from the UK, and third most from Australia and Canada. In addition, the typical viewers are males and most commonly in the age between 45-54, secondly in the age 35-44, and thirdly in the age 55-64.

Participatory culture does not mean that everybody will, or can, participate. Just like any culture, online communities develop their own norms and boundaries, which include certain people and exclude others (Dean 2001). As the statistics above indicate, this particular comment section is dominated by middle-aged men from the US. From a geopolitical perspective, we can assume that the fact that a majority of the commentators are Americans has an impact on the framing of the clip. For example, a distinct “we” is articulated in the comments, referring to “us Americans”, most often with Iraqis or Muslims as a contrasting “them”. Thus, the discourses of life and death created by this comment section are not universal, but stem from the gaze of those actively participating in the discussions.

Meaning-making in the comment sections is made through language, in text, and therefore we use linguistic methods of text analysis to explore how comments are positioned within the

frames presented in table 1 below, constructing certain discourses on life and death. We use methods that explore how commentators in text adopt stances toward the phenomena they present in their comments and how they communicate with the video clip to which they respond (cf. Martin & White 2005). This elaborate analysis shows not only the existence of the different kinds of framings, but also how these framings are made on a linguistic level of meaning-making. The frames draw symbolic boundaries between legitimate and non-legitimate death and killing.

On the YouTube webpage for the video clip, the key frame is the uploader's framing of the event through the title, editing of the video clip, and the description. The construction of death in the comments happen in response to the video clip and the key frame. In their comments, commentators accept the uploader's framing to different degrees and react to it by either enforcing or resisting it, by expanding or repeating it (see Goffman, 1974). We identify two cultural frames that are used by audiences to construct the meaning of killing and death in the video clip. One cultural frame legitimates the killing and the breach of the moral status of a person either by justifying the kill or not only justifying but also enjoying the killing as drone porn. Another cultural frame contests kill as justified or not only contests the kill but also mourns the kill as drone horror. This description is summarized in the table below.

Table 1. Two frames in the construction of killing by drone strike (response to original framing)

Frame 1. Legitimate kill and moral status of victims as non-liveable life

Moral response

Justified kill

Aesthetic-affectual response

Enjoyed kill (drone porn)

Frame 2. Non-legitimate kill and moral status of victims as livable life

Moral response

Contested kill

Aesthetic-affectual response

Mourned kill (drone horror)

Source: Authors' own illustration.

In an analysis of how responses are articulated, we explore how the victims of the drone attack and the US military respectively are being spoken of as well as spoken to. Further on, we analyze to what extent different voices and stances are being represented in the comments, for example by articulating the victim's voice through citation and animation, and how the perspectives of others are being confined, for instance by disclaims such as negations. In addition, positive and negative judgments and appreciations are analyzed to explore the commentators' moral and aesthetic stance towards the key frame. Finally, we show how the frames are articulated by the way attitudes are emphasized, in lexical choices as well as interpunction such as the uses of exclamation marks, smileys and capital letters.

In the following, the result is presented based on the two frames according to which commentators respond to the video clip and thus construct life and death in the killing by a drone strike.

Legitimate kills and enjoyable deaths

In this section, the legitimization of the killing and the construction of the victims as non-livable lives, as non-persons, are discussed as two kinds of responses: *justified kill* and *drone porn*.

In the moral response of perceiving the death as a *justified kill*, the killing is legitimized in the comments through moral justifications, claiming that the US had the right to engage fire and that the individuals killed deserved it. These comments respond to the key frame by repeating its understanding of the video clip and adding information to it in order to legitimate the content.

Justifications are articulated through propositions that take a stance toward the act of killing by positive judgments. Judgments are made on mainly two themes: the killing was morally right because the individuals hit had weapons and therefore were criminals, and because of the value

at risk. The last argument claims that the killing is worth the price in the long run, both in respect to the economic costs of weapons and in the costs of human lives.

In the following example, we see how a positive judgment is made without any further justifications but emphasized with three exclamation marks: “good work!!!” In another comment a positive judgment of the American army is made with a justification claiming the victims deserved it, that they were guilty, implicitly saying they had to pay with their lives: “yeah payback is a bytch huh?... haha... american army is the best... we won so many wars.. think about it dumbazz haters”. In this example, we also see how the victims are addressed in the question at the beginning of the extract. Addressing the victims, who cannot answer, is a way to take a dominant position, ascribing the victims no power at all. This is also common in imperative clauses like the following: “yaa yaa burn bitches burn thats what u get for threatening our freedom”.

The legitimation of killing by claiming guilt is often articulated by adding information to the key frame and thus consolidate its meaning. This is the case in the following quote: “If you look closely, the guy in the front has an RGP over his shoulder and an AK, one of the middle guys appears to have a PK M and on has an Al-Quds/RPK”. The evidence of the victims having weapons proves them guilty and justify the killing as morally right in the situation. Human actor’s decisions are not articulated. Yet, the quality of the video clip is too low to really be able to see if the victims had weapons or not.

In two of the quotes above, “bitch” is used to refer to the victims. The most common words for the victims in these justifying comments are “terrorists”, “insurgents”, “ragheads”, “enemies” and “bitches”. These words for reference articulate a negative judgment of the individuals. Also, the victims are always referred to as “they”, creating a distance between “us Americans” (to which the commentators count themselves) and “the other”, the individuals in the clip and Iraqis and Muslims in general.

Justifications that bring up the discourse of costs and value claim that even though weapons are expensive, it is worth the cost. To make economic calculations of the worth of a valuable

life has been exemplified by the development of life insurances where a valuable life is priced (Zelizer, 1979, 1985). However, our finding suggests the opposite is possible. People become involved in *economic calculations* to assess the economic costs of *destroying* what is perceived as a *worthless life*, or rather, negatively valued life. An example of this is shown in the comment below:

It really is a pain how expensive it is to kill the enemy who are using just a couple hundred dollars worth of weaponry. Then again, considering the lives that can be saved by killing these fanatics it is worth it. It has been the local population that has suffered the most at the hands of these extremists as it is easier to blow up a marketplace than attack a coalition.

The positive judgment of the killing (“it is worth it”) draws on the discourse of cost. The justifications construe the act of killing as legitimate and the victims as either guilty or not worthy of living compared to other values. The lives of the individuals are made non-grievable.

There is, however, one type of comments that justify the killing but at the same time seems to make the lives of the victims grievable. As previously stated, justification is sometimes made by letting the weapons decide the guilt. This is also the case in the following comment, but here, the victims are not referred to by negative judgments but are made into human beings who are loved and thus grievable: “I admit they were armed and dangerous and they had to be stopped but they were loved by someone and now you think about it for a while and tell me the truth is it nice to make fun of someones death?” In this example, it is not the frame of justified kill that is contested, but the ridiculing comments to the clip and the framing of the clip as enjoyment. In the last sentence, this kind of comment is questioned in an interrogative clause, addressing the other commentators.

The audience framing discussed constructs a moral response where death through a drone strike is justified, and the uploaders framing is considered legitimate, constituting the killed lives as unlivable. The legitimation of the death through this cultural frame constructs the symbolic boundary between the livable and non-livable life.

The justifications for the killing are based on moral stances. However, all comments not only deal with the moral aspects but the justification may also be joined by an aesthetic and affectional stance, what here is called *drone porn*. Those who write such comments are primarily spectators. They watch the video clip and then they react to it in an emotional way, expressing feelings and ascribing the clip aesthetic value and thereby adding to the key frame. In the analysis, these expressions are articulated as positive and negative appreciations and positive and negative kinds of affect. In these comments, the stance is more often emphasized through interpunctuation than it is in the comments debating the content.

Drone porn is our term for this spectatorial enjoyment of killing and death through drones. This parallels the human fascination and desire for repulsive images, such as images of violence and suffering (Goldstein, 1998). A fascination that at times has been associated with death being a largely hidden facet of life (Gorer, 1984). Drone porn is also similar to war porn. War porn involves the spectacle of creating images depicting the humiliation of people who are being dominated and forced to perform forbidden sexual desires (Baudrillard, 2006). But drone porn is not the same as war porn. In drone porn, the creation of images is not in focus. Rather, drone porn is about the distant yet active consumption of media images of death by a drone strike and the expressed spectatorial enjoyment and arousal of such images.

Comments expressing drone porn are repeating the key frame, legitimating the killing through the articulation of positive appreciation and affect. In a comment like “its AWESOME cool”, a positive appreciation is made of the aesthetics of the clip, emphasized with capital letters (“AWESOME”). In another comment – “nothing gets our dicks harder than dropping an AGM 114 on some sweaty arab ass!!!” – excitement is articulated with reference to sexual arousal, also emphasized, this time with three exclamation marks.

Excitement is articulated in the comments by expressions for laughing and by joking. The short form for laugh out loud (LOL) is commonly used, as well as laughing expressions such as “haha”. The emotional response of mockery, irony, and contempt often appears in comments positioning the victims as Muslims, as in the following example: “We sent them to their virgins,

admittedly in pieces and rather well done, but Allah can work miracles it is said.” Jokes about the victims meeting 72 virgins in heaven draw on islamophobic discourses, where the joke depict exclusion through the images of Muslims dying (cf. Weaver, 2013). In addition, the jokes become a metaphorical expression for the killing, making it into something to laugh about.

The emotional reaction makes the video clip into entertainment, a product to enjoy. Also, laughter and jokes are a means to position the victims as the “others” within a racist discourse (cf. Billig, 2001; Malmqvist, 2015). In this process, death is trivialized and the lives of the victims are made not merely into non-grievable lives but also into enjoyable deaths. The spectatorial gaze makes the scene into fiction, and lives that are fictionalized were not considered livable in the first place (cf. Butler, 2009). However, as pointed out to an earlier version of our paper, the process might be reversed: the simulated becomes extended to the real world (Dorrian 2014, p. 52).

Fictionalization is mainly accomplished in two types of comments: comments that use video game metaphors in the response to the video clip and comments that animates the voices of the actors involved as if they were characters in a film.

The war game metaphors are recurrent in the comments. For example, in the comment “just like call of duty 4”, an explicit reference to the war game Call of duty is made. In another comment – “enemy AC130 ABOVE!!!!!!” – the reference is more implicit by using phrases from the game. Such words (“headshot”, “score”, “powned”, “killstreak”, “points”, “multikill”) invoke the voice of the game and make it an actor with the agency to interfere in the meaning-making of the video clip. Therefore, these types of comments also add information to the key frame by putting forward a new perspective.

In the fictionalization, the drone is also made an actor with a voice of its own. The animation of the weapon is common and is often stressed with semiotic resources. In the following quote, “*KABOOM!!!!*” is an attribution of the weapon/the drone. Here, the victims are also fictionalized by the animation of their voices and a conversion that is made up: “TERRORIST#1: We will strike down all those who will not bow down to islam, the infidels

will perish!! TERRORIST#2: Yes, a great victory will be ours!! We shall... Mustafa, what is that noise? TERRORIST#3: I do not know, it sounds like a missile or... *KABOOM!!!!*” In the comment, the attribution of the victims is a distancing response to the video. The individuals, positioned as Muslims, are mocked and their dying is trivialized. The discourse of drone porn makes the lives killed non-grievable because they were never seen to be livable. The video clip is framed as fiction to be enjoyed and commented on an aesthetic and affective level.

The cultural frame of the comments constructs the killing as legitimate and the moral status of victims as non-livable life. In this frame, drone porn appears as a spectatorial gaze, or an aesthetic and affectual response to the justified killing, where the death through drone strike killing is enjoyed.

Contested kills and drone horror

While the comments above repeat and expand the key frame, there are also comments that contest the frame and content of the video clip. This framing thus involves *contesting* the kill and also expanding the contestation by expressing *horror* and disgust for the killing. These comments construct a moral status of the victims as persons, as livable lives.

In comments that *contest* the video clip, the killing is not legitimized, and the arguments are based on moral judgments. The contesting is articulated through disclaims, questioning response to, and negative judgments about the key frame, as well as propositions expanding it.

The most common comment is a questioning response to the title of the clip (“UAV Kills 6 Heavily Armed Criminals”). The proposition that the victims were armed is questioned in interrogative clauses asking for evidence, as in the following comment: “‘Heavily armed criminals?’ They were walking on the road, in a town, with other civilians nearby, and you fire a Hellfire at them. Awesome job...”

In contrast to the comments that justify the killing, these comments use the positive judgment “civilians” to refer to the victims. By construing them as persons, they are told to be innocent, and the killing was wrong. These individuals are made grievable. This is particularly clear in

the quote above, where the victims are said to presumably be some one's father or son. What these comments also indicate, though, is that it might be morally right to kill someone that actually is a criminal, or that actually carries weapons. But these particular individuals are not legitimate to kill, because they might as well have been civilians. The difference between guilt and innocence is thus present here as well.

In some comments, this difference is clear, where only the individuals understood as civilians are made grievable through the negative judgments of the drone strike. The judgment is shown in the comment "What about those people walking by just before the explosion? I mean, was one of those guys going to visit his girlfriend? A mailman?", and also in the comment: "You can see 2 people passing before the rocket hits the ground so they died 4 nothing great".

In the first example, an interrogative clause questions the justification of the drone attack by claiming the two by-walkers were civilians. They could have been a mailman or a boyfriend going to visit his girlfriend. In the latter example, a proposition adds information to the key frame; not only the six "terrorists" were killed, but also the two civilians. The contesting constitutes the civilians as grievable.

The analysis of this section shows how the audience linguistically uses cultural modes for framing the moral status of the victims as livable and the kill as non-legitimate. The audience attempt to construct the symbolic boundary to include the victims as livable is accomplished by contesting the original framing.

A few comments react to the video clip aesthetically and affectively by expressing horror and disgust for the killing shown, in what here is called *drone horror*. This affective reaction is common in war reporting in media, a reporting that also evokes pity and compassion through images of suffering (Chouliaraki, 2006).

The affective response is expressed through comments that take a stance and states an opinion by referring to emotions. The comment "I hate this fucked up world", makes a negative evaluation of the world, it is fucked up, and a subjective stance to the world; the commentator

hates it. The comment expresses not only hate, but also hopelessness. Another commentator states that the war is “pointless”. The killing in the video clip could be understood as an illustration of the war, and the drone horror as a response to this specific case of violence as well as a response to the situation in “the world”.

Drone horror is also expressed in comments that evaluate the content of the video clip negatively. One commentator writes “demential and inhumane”, another address soldiers as a group, writing “what you’re doing is evil”, and yet another one writes “killing is wrong, isn’t it?” In the example below, emotions of reluctance are expressed, “Its creepy”, together with a negative appreciation of the posting of video clips like the current one, “not a good thing”: “Its creepy watching these video’s - They take away the whole essence of human life and the guilt of conscience for taking away another life. It’s literally like a Call of Duty game to control one of these things - Not a good thing.” In this comment, a different kind of fictionalization is made than in the drone porn discourse. Instead of associating the content of the video to a war game, the commentator associates the person controlling the drone to someone playing a war game and makes a negative judgment of this type of warfare. The horror is thus a reaction to the violent content of the clip as well as the act of making the clip public, as a product to consume.

In the few comments expressing drone horror, the lives of the victims are made grievable. The spectatorial and critical gaze adds to the key frame by reacting to it as a product not to enjoy because of the non-legitimate killing it shows. The aesthetic-affectual response is part of a cultural re-framing constructing a symbolic boundary that includes the lives killed as livable in the first place.

Conclusion – enjoyment, superiority, and inferiority

The drone strike presented in the video clip, the framing by the uploader, and the audience response in a social media channel are part of a new amalgam of war propaganda and participatory cultures online. The comments section is not merely a mishmash of individual’s private opinions, but a site of joint meaning-making where contemporary norms and discourses

of morality are constituted. As part of a participatory culture, the video clip not only initiates opinion for or against the war, but also moral and affective stances, expressed by the audience responding to the content. In this context, meaning appears in the reactions. In accordance with Butler's theories of grievable and non-grievable lives, the comments express stances on what lives are considered as valuable and treated as objects of care and grief, as *persons*, and what lives are of no worth and thus killable, as *non-persons*. However, our analysis adds to this dimension an aesthetic-affectual response, where the spectatorial enjoyment of death and killing is identified as *drone porn*. We argue that this shift from grieving a life to the enjoyment of taking a life correlates with the blurred line between fiction and reality that is jointly created in the participatory culture. The reaction to the video clip as an aesthetic product to consume justifies the moral framing of the killing as righteous.

The concept of drone porn highlights the responses to distant deaths in the form of arousal from breaking down the frame of a person's life as livable and where the moral status of persons is destroyed. The breakdown of the frame and the destruction of the moral status is enjoyed as a distant domination of the powerless victim through the perceived omnipotent control of life and death. Thus, the enjoyment of death creates a distancing division between the superior and the inferior. Comparing the video clip to a war game is one way to create a distance to the killing and the persons being killed. But the distance is also a physical fact since drone operators are controlling the weapons from a great geographical distance, never having to meet or see the victims other than on a screen. The lack of a physical appearance reinforces the distance and is, perhaps, a pre-requisite for the enjoyment of death.

The symbolic distance created through discourse is shown in the perceived anonymous comments making symbolic boundaries between "us" and "them". This particular participatory culture also needs to be studied through a geopolitical lens, since those participating in the comment section mostly is habited in the USA or other western countries, while the victims in the video clip are defined as Muslims and Iraqis. The superior position the commentator's take over the victims in the video clip is a situated version of the superior position the USA takes in

the propaganda for the war in Iraq. Both the symbolic and physical distancing are creating distant enjoyment in the form of drone porn. The combined effect is not only that lives are being killed but also that they are not even seen as livable and precarious (cf. Butler, 2009).

Drone warfare and participatory cultures in social media suggest that we live in an *age of technologized anonymity* creating *physical distance* to death but also a discursive and *symbolic distance* to others. Due to the development, high tech weaponry and distance warfare create a situation where the armed forces' own troops are not at lethal risk in combat situations (Shaw, 2013). While the casualties and bad memories of previous wars may have stopped militaries from military engagements, these new forms of highly technologized distance wars may circumvent this blockage, making it possible for future wars to more easily be initiated (Mann, 2012). Joined by the powerful force of global interconnectedness, online mobilization and the discursive universes created online, it is possible that the findings of the cultural framing of death and killing in participatory media may have further implications in such a future.

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² The uploader of the video clip is DVIDS (Defense Video & Imagery Distribution System). DVIDS is owned by Defense Media Activity, which is a United States Department of Defense (DoD) field activity. DVIDS describes itself as providing "a timely, accurate and reliable connection between the media around the world and the military serving at home and abroad" (<https://www.dvidshub.net/about>, 2016-11-29).

³ The phenomenon of drone strikes has been around for decades. However, between 2009 and 2016 the Obama administration intensified their drone warfare. Statistics about these drone strikes are both unreliable and hard to come by. Nonetheless, the Obama administration estimated that during this time period 473 drone strikes killed between 2,372 and 2,581 persons outside USA's conventional wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria (Shane, 2016). Figures and numbers for the drone strikes in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria have not been released. But these conventional wars have regularly been reported to involve covert drone operations. The increased use of armed drones can partly be explained by technological developments, but also as a military and political strategy to minimize US military casualties in war and to more effectively kill insurgents by targeted killings. The use of drones for sky-led covert operations and killings has led to ethical conundrums (see Calhoun, 2015). In contrast to being seen as effective for targeted killings, drone operations have been claimed to kill civilians (Shane, 2016). These claims not only lead the Obama administration to reveal statistics about the number of drone strikes outside the conventional wars, but also the number of civilians killed in these drone strikes. The debate about drone warfare has also been about the stress and trauma experienced by drone operators effectuating the distant killing (Calhoun, 2015).

⁴ Officially, the Iraq war was a military engagement authorized by the United States Congress, as the USA has not declared any wars since the Second World War.

⁵ The number of times the comments have been read is unknown. Moreover, some comments have disappeared because someone has removed the comment or the account associated with the comment has been deleted. Even though it has been regularly reported that robots make comments (Reagle, 2015), we argue that these comments also become parts of the framing process and the construction of death.

⁶ The ending of the US involvement in the Iraq war 2011 may explain the fading in terms of the amount of comments during the last four years. Moreover, the high amounts of comments from 2009-2010 to 2012-2013 may also be explained by the highly-debated WikiLeaks release of the leaked video clip "Collateral Murder" in April 2010. The video clip shows a helicopter air strike and includes radio chatter about the attack. It was later reported that two civilian journalists were killed in this attack. The large media coverage following upon this release and viewings of this video clip may not only have generated an increase in viewings and comments but may also have set the tone in some of the comments during this period.