



SOCIAL VISUALITIES



Drones in Society New Visual Aesthetics

Edited by
Elisa Serafinelli



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Elisa Serafinelli
Editor

Drones in Society

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*“A picture is a secret about a secret; the more it tells you,
the less you know.”*

—Diane Arbus

PREFACE

Despite the growing interest surrounding drones, there has been a notable lack of focus on their visual impacts from a socio-cultural standpoint. This book intends to bridge this gap by exploring the role of drone-generated visuals in shaping a range of practices, applications, and understandings.

The book is an innovative work resulting from the international collaboration of scholars from diverse fields such as media and communication, film studies, arts and humanities, and human geography. This collection stands out for its focus on the visual outputs of drones and how these new vantage points are influencing our time. Unlike other research in this area, our work examines the unique visual perspectives offered by drones, providing a thorough socio-cultural critique of their uses and practices.

In its entirety, this collection enriches the ongoing conversation about drones by offering insights and critical evaluations on a variety of topics, including innovative cinematic techniques, the use of visuals as data, new creative visual perspectives, and an analysis of current and future drone applications. Through this interdisciplinary approach, this collection sheds light on the multifaceted ways drones are contributing to changing our visual landscape.

The book is one of the main outputs of my ongoing drone research.

Manchester, UK

Elisa Serafinelli

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Competing Interests Drones in Society: New Visual Aesthetics edited collection is one of the main outputs of my AHRC Leadership Fellowship titled “[Drones in Visual Culture Developing a New Theory for Visual Mobile Communication](#)” (grant reference number: AH/T012528/1). I have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this chapter.

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Introduction

Elisa Serafinelli

Abstract This chapter introduces this book as an interdisciplinary edited collection that explores the transformative impact of drones on visual aesthetics and societal perceptions. It delves into their multifaceted applications, ranging from creative industries to surveillance, and their significant socio-cultural impact to guide the reader to critically evaluate the emerging drone culture, focusing on how these technologies alter our visual literacy and understanding of the world. It outlines the chapters of this collection to emphasise the importance of understanding drone-generated visuals and grasp the broader implications of these technologies in our screen-saturated lives. This analysis aims to further academic discourse on drone aesthetics and their profound influence across various contexts and practices.

Keywords Drones • Aesthetics • Visual technologies • Visual communication • Society

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“*Drones Are Here to Stay. Get Used to It*”, this statement titled an article published in 2018 that opened the TIME special report: The Drone Age (Fitzpatrick, 2018). Discussing the top-down views of Puerto Rico hit by Hurricane Maria in 2017, the U.S. military’s procedure to target Al-Qaeda leaders in the wilds of Afghanistan in 2001, Amazon’s intention to boost their delivery services, and Facebook’s envision to use drones to provide internet connection all around the world, the article unveiled a long list of future implementations with related ethical and legal concerns. With their rampant expansion, drones conquered TIME’s front page with an eye-watery drone sky show that resulted in the coordination of thousands of drones forming the frame and title of TIME magazine. As the title suggested, it was just a matter of time until these flying technologies would have been part of our everyday lives in more pervasive ways than we expected (Kapustina et al., 2021).

The first thing I thought when I saw the TIME cover was the exceptional aesthetic impact of composition on my perception of the sky and the horizon. That also made me reflect on the opportunities drones could bring to our society for their built-in abilities to fly to inaccessible places and collect visual data that otherwise would be difficult to reach. At that point, when I started being interested in researching drones, they were less popular among members of the public. Few knew what they were and very few owned one. Some academics were researching engineering developments and issues related to health and safety (e.g., *Drones* academic journal launched in 2017) and some others were exploring the ethical challenges of their (mis)use in conflict areas (Boyle, 2015) and privacy infringements (Finn et al., 2014). Despite the rapid implementation of these flying technologies in various commercial and non-commercial applications, little attention was given to their socio-cultural impact on the visual aesthetics they capture (Ayamga et al., 2021).

The common denominator of most (if not all) drone applications is the ability to capture images from new and different angles or in dangerous situations, providing visual aesthetics never seen before (at least to this scale) (Serafinelli & O’Hagan, 2022). Drones are used in a variety of contexts and with different purposes. For example, they are used to create innovative shots in the creative industries, to provide real-time visual data in rescue operations, for leisure and entertainment in exploring new photographic perspectives, not to mention their implementation in surveillance systems expanding human guards (Bartsch et al., 2018). In this context of constant developments, the growing use of drones opens new