Bringing the War Home: Omer Fast's "5,000 Feet Is the Best"

By Stephanie Cardon

September 25, 2013

Omer Fast's 30 minute video work *5,000 Feet Is the Best* takes its title from one of the lines in its dialogue. It is spoken by a jumpy former U.S. Air Force Predator Drone operator, reclining on a bed in a Las Vegas hotel room. He is being interviewed by a journalist, but not a real journalist. And he isn't really a retired drone pilot either. He's an actor.

We know this. We know we are watching fiction because we are sophisticated viewers, accustomed to recognizing the tell-tale signs of a slippage between the document and diegesis. We are compelled to stay and understand why the artist is using these narrative devices. One reason must lie in Fast's ongoing interest in the creation of history—who gets to tell the story, and how reliable are they? Another reason stems from the piece's attempt to represent a traumatized mind. The pilot's actions may have been mediated by a screen, but his troubled dreams and loss of sleep, he says, and the waking hallucinations we perceive, are tell-tale signs of post-traumatic stress. Surveillance equipment is so advanced, that from 5,000 feet he can tell which brand of shoes someone is wearing. When he
guides the missile onto its target, he sees faces, hair color, blood.

Using traumatized memories to guide the plot doesn’t just result in a Lynchian film in which strange characters appear, noises echo differently, space and time warp. It enables Fast to present us with an entirely new place. His interviews with the actual drone operator provide a narrative backbone onto which are hooked fictions that unfold in familiar territory. The narrator describes scenes and anecdotes. He tries to find analogies to help us understand what he has witnessed. The landscapes we are shown are not from Afghanistan or Iraq, but from the suburban and rural outskirts of Vegas. The family that is cast is a typical middle-class family. These characters are recognizable. But the place is eerily different. Checkpoints bar a residential street. Identity screenings are conducted. People are surveilled by drones flying 5,000 feet above. And occasionally, hellfire missiles are dropped. Fast has brought the war home to us, just as it is brought into the inner sanctum of a drone pilot’s mind through a screen.