

Vered Maimon and Roi Boshi

Towards a New Political Imaginary: Drone Images of the 2023 Israeli Pro-Democracy Protests

From January to September 2023 massive demonstrations erupted in Israel against the extremist right-wing government's anti-democratic juridical reforms. Spectacular drone images, mostly created by volunteers belonging to the Democracy Drones Squad, quickly became the preferred form of visualization for the protests enabling their promotion and propagation in the press and online media outlets (see images below). The reason for this preference on the part of the protests' organizers was strictly functional – to index the large number of protestors, against police and mainstream media modest numeric counts, and to challenge the government's argument that it has the support of the “people” and that the majority of the public supports the juridical reform. Quickly, everything in the demonstrations seemed staged for the drone's camera, including large-scale banners created especially for aerial view.

The aesthetics of the images evokes the highly submissive crowds of fascist regimes (for example, the famous aerial views used by Leni Riefenstahl in her 1935 Nazi propaganda film “Triumph of the Will”), rather than spontaneous and chaotic grassroots protests *against* totalitarianism. The images were thus criticized by scholars as intentionally unifying the weekly demonstration at Kaplan Street in Tel Aviv, which is composed of different groups, some protesting against the Zionist nationalist agenda of the organizers by holding Palestinian flags and chanting “No Democracy with the Occupation.” The preference for aerial views was interpreted as means for censorship and control since these “disturbing” signs couldn't be seen from above. Others have argued, that in fact these images with their iconic sublime aesthetics point out that it is impossible in the current moment to create a unified “image of the people,” and that the images convey an aesthetic, affective and conceptual failure to capture national wholeness or a unified image of “the people,” an entity that is inherently un-representable.

Our paper challenges these critical accounts by arguing that these images offer a new political imaginary beyond national sovereignty. While these criticisms address the images at the level of representation (what is seen in them and what they hide), as if they were taken from a human perspective, in our account we emphasize the technologically mediated way they are produced,

operated, and disseminated. Drones are used for a variety of military and civic purposes, including by industries, municipalities, police, and governmental organizations, and are becoming particularly central in the management and surveillance of urban populations and crowds. But they are also used as *counter-surveillance* means against corporate and state control by human rights organizations and environmental activists. These applications and interventions point out that the sky, airspace and atmosphere are not given or divorced from human or political interests but highly regulated geopolitical entities and constitute what Lisa Parks terms a “vertical public space.”

We thus argue that rather than simply “documenting” from aerial perspective public space and the protests as given, drones as human-machinic assemblages produce forms of visualization that *reconfigure* the political, conceptual and perceptual field of the protests. Rather than images of crowds, they function as aerial maps or diagrams of zones of action and inaction, movement and stasis, dispersal and density, thereby emphasizing the *relations* taking place across, through and between subjects, objects, spaces, modes of visibility and perception. They offer what Anthony McCosker calls a “new mode of relational experience” or “new assemblages of perception and action, mobility and sociality.”

Because the images do not represent and cannot be identified with a specific subjective point of view, they displace the centrality of the human agent and its place in public space. They are produced through movements that are disconnected from actual human bodies, while the views offered to protesters do not correspond to anything they can experience directly. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, we argue, that “it is another collective that meets the drone’s camera,” not the inherently nationalistic one “interpellated” by the organizers. In fact, by introducing forms of movement and visualization that are not completely determined by human operators, these images present heterogeneous forms of relationality through which human agency is not eliminated but dispersed through different technological and social apparatuses thereby emphasizing connectivity and dependency.

Finally, our paper connects media-orientated scholarship on drones with the field of political philosophy. In light of recent global protests, Judith Butler and Jacques Rancière reconsider

Hannah Arendt's concept of the "public space of appearance." While Arendt argues that everyone can see and be seen and that appearance is an equally shared resource for political action, Butler and Rancière point out that not everyone can be seen within specific "partitions of the sensible," and that "the other's perspective of myself can never be fully anticipated or controlled." We would like to add that the "other's perspective" is also a technological one, and that the now vertical political space of appearance is mediated by different apparatuses whose operations exceed human control. This condition suggests that "the people" always appear as an inherently split subject: sovereign and subjected, present and absent, actual and virtual.

In conclusion, our paper is interdisciplinary and combines media and communication studies on drones, scholarship on the post-human condition, and studies in political philosophy. It aims to show that it is not protests' organizers with their highly nationalist agenda, who control their operations, meanings, and political efficacy. In fact, the forms of visualization produced by drones offer ways to challenge national as well as other kinds of boundaries that are revealed to be contingent, malleable, inherently fractured, and dynamic. There is no ONE "we" whose fixed identity and political alliances can be "authenticated" by the documentary-like operations of an individual human agent. Rather the image as a form of data configures new set of relations between different civic organizations and ad-hoc coalitions working together but also challenging each other. These dynamic affiliations form relations that are dispersed through and in-between complex assemblages unfolding beyond hegemonic modes of control and containment.

Keywords: drone, protest, relationality, political, agency



Or Adar, Pro-Democracy Demonstration on Kaplan Street, Tel-Aviv, July 15, 2023





Or Adar, Galant's Night, Ayalon Highway, Tel Aviv, March 26, 2023





Tomer Appelbaum, Kaplan Demonstration against the Juridical Reform, March, 2023