Ryan Bishop, John Phillips. *Modernist Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Contemporary Military Technology: Technicities of Perception.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011. 288 pp. $32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7486-4319-6.

Reviewed by Sean Seyer

In their well-crafted and thought-provoking study, *Modernist Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Contemporary Military Technology*, Ryan Bishop (professor of global arts and politics at Winchester School of Art) and John Phillips (associate professor of English language and literature at the National University of Singapore) connect these two seemingly disparate subjects through their shared fascination with sense extension to allow "perceptive powers to be harnessed and enhanced in other ways" (p. 4). Undermining the common tendency to "relegate visual technology to the domain of the state/private sector and visual aesthetics to the individual," they argue that the tools of both the modernist aesthetic and military technologies--"the delays, the experimental distortions, the disjunctions and the consistent destruction of expectations of continuity and coherence"--illustrate a shared desire to manipulate, enhance, breakdown, and control space-time (pp. 5, 26). While sharing the same tools, Bishop and Phillips stress that the subjects differ in two key ways. First, while military technology attempts to achieve the impossible task of making the invisible visible, modernist aesthetics elevate the invisible to a place of prominence, insisting on its existence and recognition "at all costs" (p. 65). Second, and perhaps most important, the desire of military technology to remove the gap between sight and action--targeting and destruction--ultimately results in the removal of the very sense such technologies were designed to augment as illustrated in the examples of Honeywell's IHADSS (integrated helmet and display sight system) in the Apache attack helicopter, attack drones, and pixelated imagery. Whereas military technology seeks to ultimately eliminate the "gap of apprehension," the modernist aesthetic "tries to highlight its unbridgeable nature" (p. 27).

Various examples provide vivid illustrations of the link between the aesthetic and military technology. By analyzing the works of Pablo Picasso, H. G. Wells, James Joyce, Mina Loy, Stéphane Mallarme, and F. T. Marinetti, alongside the telephone, broadcast technologies, military targeting systems, global positioning system (GPS), Trans-

formers, and the air raid siren, Bishop and Phillips succeed in breaking down the distinction between technologies of beauty and technologies of destruction, forcing the reader to question a fundamental dichotomy within modern society. As one who grew up playing with Hasbro's Transformers toys, the author's connection between them and the concept of the hinge stands out as a prime example of their uncanny ability to connect abstract concepts to tangible objects. Bishop and Phillips argue that the definitive element of the military lies in its ability to attach and detach, unite and divide, assemble and disassemble; without such flexibility it would be "an inert mass, incapable of mobilization, rigid, and static" (p. 117). Transformers, designed to easily switch between soldier, weapons platform, and vehicle via multiple articulated joints, serve as a physical representation of the desire for military flexibility. While existing within one configuration the toy contains within it the potential of the others and thus the possibility of flexibility, the prerequisite to its achievement. It is this potential for articulated transformation in the face of any possible threat that defines both the toy and the military. "The transformer is the quintessential synecdoche for the military body because not only does each part stand for the whole, it *is* the whole hidden in parts" (p. 126).

Residing as it does at the intersection of literary, philosophical, and technological studies, the book asks a lot of readers as it rapidly transitions between various disciplines. While the authors recognize the many definitions of "modern," a clear definition of "technology"--beyond the discussion of *techne*, *poiesis*, and *praxis*--would assist the reader a great deal, especially since the authors apply the term to a wide array of subjects, such as military hardware, artistic creation, ventriloquism, narrative, and even a "technology of dreams" (p. 113). In addition, works in the history of technology, though not cited, address many of the fundamental questions raised by Bishop and Phillips (one immediately thinks of Jennifer Daryl

Slack and J. Macgregor Wise's discussion of articulation and assemblage in *Culture + Technology: A Primer* (2005) and Donald Mackenzie's analysis of missile guidance in *Inventing Accuracy: A Historical Sociology of Nuclear Missile Guidance* [1993]) in a more accessible manner. These minor qualms do not detract from the overall work, and *Modernist Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Contemporary Military Technology* deserves the attention of anyone interested in the intricate relationship between philosophy, modern art, and technology.

: Technicities of Perception

P
G
A
P
A
P
L
L
.
[1]
.
[2]
up
.
[3]
.
[4]
stood
.
[5]
.
[6]
mention
.

[7]

: Technicities of Perception

Notes

[1]. Ryan Bishop and John Phillips, *Modernist Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Contemporary Military Technology: Technicities of Perception* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 4.

[2]. Ibid., 5, 26.

[3]. Ibid., 65.

[4]. Ibid., 27.

[5]. Ibid., 117.

[6]. Ibid., 126.

[7]. Ibid., 113.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Sean Seyer. Review of Bishop, Ryan; Phillips, John. *Modernist Avant-Garde Aesthetics and Contemporary Military Technology: Technicities of Perception.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37870