

REVIEW: *WAR AND AESTHETICS*: ART, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURES OF WARFARE

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ABSTRACT

War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology, and the Futures of Warfare offers an interdisciplinary exploration of the intersections between art, aesthetics, and military technology. Edited by Jens Bjering, Anders Engberg-Pedersen, Solveig Gade, and Christine Strandmose Toft, the anthology examines how aesthetics critiques, complements, and informs warfare. Divided into three sections—*Art, Aesthetics, and the Everyday*, *Reimagining Technology*, and *The Futures of Warfare*—the book engages topics ranging from the militarization of daily life to the speculative dimensions of algorithmic warfare. While it excels in its diverse perspectives and critical engagement with emerging technologies, the collection occasionally lacks cohesion and underexplores ethical dimensions. Compared with complementary works like *(W)archives: Archival Imaginaries, War, and Contemporary Art*, this volume leans toward speculative futures and technological aesthetics. Despite some limitations, *War and Aesthetics* is a valuable contribution to understanding the evolving nexus of art, technology, and conflict.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Warfare; Interdisciplinarity; Technology.

BJERING J., ENGBERG- PEDERSEN, A., GADE S., TOFT C. S. (2024). WAR AND AESTHETICS: ART, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE FUTURES OF WARFARE. PRISMS: HUMANITIES AND WAR.



INTRODUCTION

War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology, and the Futures of Warfare, edited by Jens Bjerling, Anders Engberg-Pedersen, Solveig Gade, and Christine Strandmose Toft, presents a compelling examination of the interplay between art, aesthetics, and military technology. Published by MIT Press in 2024, the anthology gathers an interdisciplinary array of voices—political scientists, philosophers, artists, and cultural theorists—to investigate how aesthetics both shapes and is shaped by the complex dynamics of warfare. The book situates itself among other contemporary works such as *(W)archives: Archival Imaginaries, War, and Contemporary Art*, edited by Daniela Agostinho, Solveig Gade, Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, and Kristin Veel (2021), continuing an exploration to address contemporary and speculative dimensions of conflict. This review assesses the book's contributions, strengths, and limitations while situating it within the broader field of war studies.

STRUCTURE AND KEY CONTRIBUTIONS

The book is divided into three sections — "Art, Aesthetics, and the Everyday", "Reimagining Technology", and "The Futures of Warfare" — each addressing distinct facets of militarized aesthetics.

The first section explores the everyday manifestations of militarism and its aesthetic dimensions. Phil Klay's *War, Beauty, and the Trouble with Witness* grapples with the ethical dilemmas of representing war, offering a visceral and deeply personal perspective. Caren Kaplan's *The Fabric*

of War: *Lace, Gender, and Everyday Militarism* innovatively examines the gendered aesthetics underpinning militarized daily life, bringing attention to often-overlooked dimensions of war's cultural impact.

The second section, "Reimagining Technology" focuses on the nexus between technology and aesthetics. Elaine Scarry revisits her earlier work in *Philosophy and the Weapons of Nuclear War*, applying her theories to algorithmic and nuclear-age warfare. Ryan Bishop's *Eyes, Ears, Mouths* critiques the militarization of perception technologies, resonating with Paul Virilio's analysis of speed and vision but broadening the scope to include multisensory aesthetics.

The final section, "The Futures of Warfare" turns toward speculative frameworks. Louise Amore's *The War on Futures* critically examines predictive analytics, while Anthony Downey's *The Future of Death* interrogates the algorithmic design of drone warfare. These contributions extend the anthology's focus beyond spatial dimensions of conflict to its temporal and predictive aspects, complementing works like Derek Gregory's *The Everywhere War*, 2001.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS WITH (W)ARCHIVES

When compared with *(W)archives*, a fascinating interplay between these two volumes emerges. While *War and Aesthetics* focuses on the aestheticization of warfare, particularly its speculative and technological dimensions, *(W)archives* centers on the archival practices that document, critique, and transform the materialities of war through contemporary art and digital technologies.

Both books excel in their interdisciplinary approaches, yet they emphasize different facets of the war-art nexus. *War and Aesthetics* delves into how aesthetics actively informs military strategy and technological development, while *(W)archives* conceptualizes the "(w) archive" as a dynamic space where digital data, environments, and sensory experiences intersect. Contributors to *(W)archives* examine how digital archives reshape the memory and documentation of war, focusing on the political and emotional dimensions of living with conflict.

Notably, shared contributors such as Solveig Gade and Anders Engberg-Pedersen highlight thematic resonances between the volumes, including the role of aesthetics and archival practices in shaping perceptions of war. However, while *War and Aesthetics* leans toward speculative futures, *(W)archives* grounds its analysis in the present, interrogating the extended materiality of war through artistic practices. *(W)archives* cuts above in disrupting traditional epistemologies, urging readers to confront their complicity in the narratives of war. In contrast, *War and Aesthetics* provides a more structured exploration of how aesthetics critiques and complements military systems.

One of the most striking qualities of *War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology, and the Futures of Warfare* is its rich interdisciplinary approach, which brings together a wide array of scholars from fields such as philosophy, political science, cultural theory, and the arts. This diversity of perspectives enriches the analysis, allowing the book to tackle the complex and multifaceted nature of warfare from a variety of subjective perspectives. These diverse contributions ensure that the book's exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and warfare is nuanced and multifaceted. Arkadi Zaides' *Blurry Manifestos*, for example, expands on this by examining how artistic movements can be militarized, illustrating the power of aesthetic frameworks in shaping warfare's cultural and social dimensions.

Another key strength is the book's timely engagement with emerging technologies and their implications for future warfare. Contributions like James Der Derian's *Theorizing War: From Classical to Quantum* introduces a philosophical perspective that traverses time, offering a deep examination of how new technologies alter the fundamental nature of warfare and its representation.

The contributions within each section, ranging from Kate McLoughlin's *War's Deep Time* to Mark B. N. Hansen's *When Timing Is Decisive*, build on each other in meaningful ways, weaving together theoretical discussions with empirical observations.

However, the book's strengths also give rise to some weaknesses. Despite its interdisciplinary richness, the volume at times suffers from a lack of cohesion. The diverse array of approaches and theoretical frameworks can leave individual essays feeling disconnected, preventing the development of a coherent argument throughout the book. For instance, while McLoughlin's *War's Deep Time* offers a compelling literary analysis of war's historical and temporal dimensions, its connections to other contributions—particularly those dealing with technology and aesthetics—are somewhat tenuous. This sense of fragmentation may leave readers seeking a clearer, more integrated theoretical perspective.

Another limitation lies in the book's treatment of ethics. Although the ethical dimensions of warfare are certainly present, they are often underexplored. For example, Caroline Holmqvist's *The End of Reciprocity?* raises important concerns about the erosion of mutual accountability in modern warfare, yet it stops short of providing a comprehensive ethical analysis of these issues. This tendency to emphasize aesthetic concerns over ethical considerations creates an imbalance in the discussion, leaving some critical ethical questions inadequately addressed.

The accessibility of the book is also a concern. Several chapters, particularly those like Der Derian's *Theorizing War: From Classical to Quantum*, employ dense theoretical language and specialized references that may alienate readers without a background in these fields. While this scholarly rigor is valuable, it limits the book's accessibility to a broader

audience, particularly those outside academia or those unfamiliar with the specific theories and concepts explored.

Finally, while the book's forward-looking approach to future warfare is a notable strength, the relative neglect of historical contexts represents a missed opportunity. A more in-depth comparison between past and present aesthetic practices in warfare could have provided greater insight into the evolution of these concepts over time. Elaine Scarry's *Philosophy and the Weapons of Nuclear War* offers some historical perspective, yet it remains surface-level, failing to spark a meaningful dialogue between the past and the future. A deeper exploration of how aesthetic strategies have shaped and been shaped by warfare across different historical periods could have enhanced the book's overall argument.

In conclusion, *War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology, and the Futures of Warfare* is a thought-provoking contribution to the study of war's cultural and technological dimensions. Its interdisciplinary approach, engagement with emerging technologies, and critical analysis of aesthetic practices make it essential reading for scholars and practitioners interested in the intersections of art, technology, and conflict.

When considered alongside *(W)archives*, *War and Aesthetics* provides a complementary perspective, with the former emphasizing speculative futures and technological aesthetics and the latter interrogating the archival and evidentiary practices of contemporary conflict. Together, these volumes offer a multifaceted exploration of how aesthetics and archival practices shape, and are shaped by, the machinery and memory of war. For those willing to navigate their complexities, they provide invaluable insights into the evolving nexus of art, technology, and warfare.

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Article received on 02/06/2025 and accepted on 12/06/2025.

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