

‘That’s my tank on fire’ James Meek watches the video war in Ukraine

YEVGENY PRIGOZHIN, boss of the Russian government’s semi-private, arm’s-length alternative army, Wagner, likes to make videos. In one, he stands on the roof of a building a few miles north of the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, which Wagner and the Russian army spent weeks trying to capture. Prigozhin has a particular style for these short, social media-optimised clips. He speaks in clear, simple Russian, the close-up of his heavy, fleshy face, with bags under the eyes, assuring us that nothing he says is scripted or debated or mulled over; this is just the way things are, straightforward common sense. Dressed in military gear too young for him – helmet, camouflaged parka and pouches stuffed with automatic rifle magazines, gun slung over his shoulder, thumbs tucked into the front plate of his flak jacket as he rocks to and fro in the cold – he discusses the war in the tones of a self-consciously patriotic veteran, laconic, fatalistic, deadpan.

His ostensible message is an appeal to Volodymyr Zelensky to withdraw his troops from Bakhmut to prevent further bloodshed. The city, he claims, is almost surrounded. The impact of this small claim (weeks later Ukraine still held the town) is designed to be enhanced by the elaborate staging. Shot in the cinematic golden hour, when the attenuated sun shines horizontally, Prigozhin’s face glows like a Christmas ham. ‘If before we were fighting the professional Ukrainian army,’ he says, ‘today we see ever more old men and children.’ The camera pans left. Alongside Prigozhin and his bodyguard stand three men identified as Ukrainian prisoners, arrayed from shortest to tallest, shivering with cold or terror or both. One is old, with a bare head and a full white beard, looking in this light like a peasant from an Ilya Repin painting. The others are barely out of their teens, with pinched faces and hunched shoulders, their thin green beanies pulled down over their ears. They mutter an appeal – presumably forced – to Zelensky to let them go home, but their words are lost in the wind, obliging the Wagner social media team to add subtitles. The whole video is barely a minute long.

In recent months Prigozhin, former robber, convict, hot-dog seller, entrepreneur, Putin chef, Kremlin caterer, supplier of food to the Russian army, state-sponsored troll farmer, Trump and Brexit booster, who as recently as 2021 avoided attention and denied his involvement with Wagner, has pushed himself into the limelight. This is partly the result of the role Wagner has played in battles with the Ukrainian army in the small towns north-west of Donetsk, where well-equipped, experienced veterans of Russia’s recent interventions in Africa and the Middle East alternate with squads of convicts used as human consumables to absorb Ukrainian fire with their bodies. And it’s also down to Prigozhin’s adept use of the social media platform Telegram to promote his evolving brand: the ruthless patriot, the rueful butcher, the hands-on manager of the people’s dirty work.

We see him at night, red-lit in the navigator's seat of a Sukhoi Su-24, unclipping his oxygen mask to claim he's just bombed Bakhmut, challenging Zelensky to a dogfight for the right to the town, his bravado only compromised by having to gulp down airsickness (the same plane was hit by Ukrainian fire the next day). We see him presenting an engraved sledgehammer to a group of Russian volunteers, in celebration of the murder by his men, with the same weapon, of a Syrian deserter in 2017 and a Russian man, himself a murderer, deemed disloyal this year. We see him pacing up and down a Russian prison yard, one hand in his pocket, carefully framed by the camera in a horseshoe of black-uniformed convicts hundreds strong, offering them redemption or death if they sign up to join the assault on Ukraine. 'The first sin is deserting,' he declares. 'No one falls back. No one retreats. No one surrenders.' In clip after clip, he accuses the Russian defence ministry of starving his forces of shells. He visits a recuperation centre full of maimed Wagner fighters, where he issues a plea to the authorities to be gentle with convicts who have survived six months at the front, cleansed their social debt by killing Ukrainians for the motherland and been put back on the streets without serving their time. He potters about in the morgue, examining the corpses of dead Wagner fighters piled high in filthy black body bags before being slung like sacks of flour into the back of a truck for dispatch to Russia. He half-heartedly crosses himself. He murmurs about respect and heroic deaths. 'Their contract's done,' he says.

Does Prigozhin's recent ubiquity mean he's a big man in the new Russia, one of the more-Putin-than-Putin candidates lining up to succeed the president? Wagner has its own army, artillery and air force, and Prigozhin seems confident of Putin's backing; he displays more contempt for the Russian general staff than for his Ukrainian opponents. Or is his frantic PR activity a symptom of weakness? He may nominally control a few guns and planes, but he depends on the military establishment for munitions. He relies on the Kremlin's continuing desire for a menacing, off-the-books force to carry out deniable ops abroad and to offer its regular army the spur of competition. Wagner could be shut down or Prigozhin arrested at any moment; although he's just opened a smart office in downtown St Petersburg with 'Private Military Company Wagner' in letters a foot high over the door, recruiting mercenaries is a criminal offence in Russia. He flaunts his illegality because Putin lets him. But Putin might change his mind, and Putin isn't for ever.

It's easy to mistake the river of internet footage from Russia's war against Ukraine for information, or news. Often it contains both – look, something happened! – and often it becomes central to more conventional journalism. But Telegram, the main source of the clip flow, and Twitter, the means by which most Telegram videos are disseminated in the West, are messaging, advertising and brand promotional platforms as much as apps for spreading news. The essence of Prigozhin's Telegram hyperactivity is the clip as message, not to Zelensky or his troops or to Russians as a whole, but to a particular group of Russians around Putin. The message is: 'Remember your loyal servant Prigozhin, and protect him from his bureaucratic enemies.'

'If he had a direct line to Putin ... he would not be making a regular spectacle of himself,' the military analyst Michael Kofman, recently returned from Bakhmut, said in a podcast. 'The reason he's doing it is because he's very desperate and he's trying to get Putin's attention by speaking to him this way, the way I would say some years ago I used to see people on Fox News, for example, or other places trying to talk to Trump.'

In the age when TV news was dominant, from the 1960s to the early 2000s, we were used to two strands of news authority, the official and the sceptical. On the official side were stage-managed audio-visual moments, speeches, parades, press conferences, summit meetings;

when there was a war, there was state-sanctioned footage. At the same time, in the less repressed countries, a relatively small number of network news-gatherers worked not only with but against the clips that governments wanted seen. Audiences might watch segments from the same broadcaster, one drawn from government-issued video showing missiles striking distant targets, the other showing what the damage looked like on the ground, and what the people on the ground thought about it.

Smartphones and social media have introduced a third strand of video coverage of dramatic events, the message strand. Though its creators might be focused, like Wagner, on particular ends, for viewers, message news is often curated and contextualised by little more than their own prior assumptions and their idiosyncratic, algorithmically influenced collection of messengers. Official and sceptical news still exist, but message news, more intimate and more substantial than mere propaganda, has become a dominant source both for traditional news-gatherers and, directly, for us.

Message news flourished during the early years of the Syrian war, when a host of ideological entrepreneurs who had formed military units with Gulf Arab sponsorship and US weapons made internet videos showing off the size of their battalions and their military successes, not just to raise their side's morale and demotivate the enemy, but as a message to their patrons, to show their support was being repaid with action. The problem with message news as news, rather than spectacle, is that these videos don't tend to provide an answer to the question 'What is going on in this war?' At one point, quantities of an advanced American anti-tank missile began to flow into Syria. Video after video appeared on social media showing Syrian anti-government fighters knocking out Bashar Assad's armoured vehicles. Did this lull supporters of the Syrian opposition into thinking they were winning when they weren't? Or did the clips reflect a genuine wave of rebel success that forced a panicked Assad into begging Russia for help? Traditional journalists and analysts would have had answers to these questions, no doubt informed by the raw material in the messages, but those spectating on the war by means of social media, inside and outside Syria, were left to the temptations of confirmation bias.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year, years of video footage were generated in days; judging by the material that continues to surface, only a fraction has been uploaded publicly so far. The change in the way the war has been broadcast on social media compared with Syria lies not only in the higher rate of smartphone ownership, not only in the demographic of the audience, which is largest in the West rather than the Arab world, but in the dominance of the small commercial drone. The Ukrainians' use of off-the-shelf hobby drones, first for artillery spotting, then for dropping grenades on the enemy, was a boon in their early victories. Now the Russians have caught up, and on both sides these little drones have spawned a vast and ugly subgenre: videos of killing.

TELEGRAM was created in Russia by two brothers, Pavel and Nikolai Durov, who had previously come up with the more Facebook-like VKontakte ('in touch'). VKontakte was effectively taken over by the Kremlin when Pavel Durov, who ran it, refused to toe the Putin line on Ukraine in 2014. Pavel moved Telegram out of Russia and eventually settled himself, and the firm – as far as such weightless entities as billionaires and social media platforms can ever be settled – in Dubai. Telegram has 700 million active users, fewer than Instagram, Facebook and TikTok but more than Twitter.

If you've never encountered Telegram, it's hard to explain what makes it different from the others: it sounds like just another way for people to exchange messages and broadcast text,

images and video. Of the big platforms, it's the most didactic and top down, encouraging a broadcaster-audience relationship. It enables chat groups, but Telegram's distinctive feature is its 'channels', which push subscribers into a seamless feed of material from the channel administrator. Subscribers can't see who else follows the channel and their comments are relegated to the margins.

Prigozhin's content appears on a number of Wagner-adjacent channels, most notoriously Grey Zone and Reverse Side of the Medal, both of which have several hundred thousand subscribers. A class of Telegram war correspondents has emerged. Some straddle the divide between new and old media: Alexander Sladkov, a reporter for Russian national TV, whose Sladkov+ Telegram channel is followed by more than a million people; Alexander Kots, military correspondent for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*; and Ukraine's Yuri Butusov, editor of the news website Tsenzor.net (a news website is old media in 2023 terms) whose personal channel on Telegram has many more subscribers than Tsenzor itself. Others have used Telegram to create and build their image from a lower base – Semyon Pegov, for instance, who fronts the WarGonzo channel, has nearly 1.3 million subscribers. These and dozens like them are at the centre of a complex social media ecosystem: unequivocally loyal to their side's cause, they broadcast gossip, commentary, soldiers' grumbles, admiring sketches of front-line troops, patriotic denunciations of foolish commanders, contemptuous vignettes of the enemy and fundraising appeals for equipment. They drive around the front in combat gear, often armed. They shoot their own video reports, but in a departure from past invasions by organised armies – the US and British invasion of Iraq, for instance – they also act as brokers and distributors for video clips taken by the troops themselves, usually promoting some feat of arms.

Alexander Khodakovsky, a former Ukrainian officer who went over to the Donbas separatist side in 2014 and until a recent promotion commanded a battalion fighting alongside the Russians, has a huge following on Telegram. He combines thoughtful descriptions of the practicalities of warfare and agonised calls for Russian spiritual renewal with an unflinching, merciless hatred of Ukraine. In a February post, he welcomed the new social media broadcasters as one sign that the war was turning from a job for specialists into a universal folk crusade. He wrote of 'military correspondents who've come to stand on their own feet, who've become a means of covering the war that doesn't depend on the state', although the only way Sladkov, Pegov and Kots diverge from the Kremlin line on the war is to demand more of it: more shells, more recruits, better equipment, harsher measures against Ukraine until it submits to Putin's will.

On the Ukrainian side, where TikTok, Facebook and YouTube are popular war platforms alongside Telegram, much message news comes straight out of military units. A peculiarity of the Ukrainian army is that it has grown massively in a very short time, but the growth has been horizontal. At the beginning of the war, it had a number of mid-sized units, brigades and battalions, with between five hundred and five thousand men each. As the army mobilised and expanded, you would have expected those units to be organised into the larger formations used by big armies (Ukraine now has the biggest army in Europe after Russia), such as divisions and corps. Despite talk of Ukraine forming three new corps, the army, until recently, just kept on adding brigades. Most have their own social media presence; some, on the basis of their output, have soldiers with sharp production and editing skills. This isn't to say the army is anarchic. It's controlled from the centre. But each brigade follows its own imperative on social media – to reassure families and friends, to show off new equipment, to raise money, to demonstrate that the enemy is being punished, or, equally, to illustrate dire conditions to the country and the general staff. A victory, no matter how small, must be

claimed, and the claim takes the form of a video clip on the internet with the brigade's watermark in every frame. The potential is there for a unit's social media team – or for those of Wagner or WarGonzo, which are explicitly commercial organisations – to seek out 'likes' and followers, to learn what sort of war content engages viewers.

The result of all this is an invasion and a defence portrayed in two intertwining ways, through the traditional forms of official and sceptical news, and through message news, a stream of heterogenous moments broadcast by agents whose agendas fall somewhere between the individual and the governmental. The armies of industrial nations used to exercise tight control over information: this has changed. Since the invasion of Iraq and the War on Terror, which generated the genre of US military drone videos, the technology of video war coverage has diffused around the world and down the chain of command. In *Through the Crosshairs: War, Visual Culture and the Weaponised Gaze* (2018), Roger Stahl writes that

At a certain point, perhaps through sheer force of numbers, the view through the weapon itself earned a primary place in the presentation of war in the post-industrial West. These images, after all, wielded the ultimate strategic advantage in this sceptical age: the ability to bill themselves as unfiltered, unadulterated, unprocessed and unblinking – leftover artefacts of a technical process rather than calculated pieces of propaganda. Instead of staking a position in an adversarial argument, they presented themselves as the eye's most powerful ally, its ultimate prosthesis. Our defences down, they invaded public consciousness to plant their flags with imperial bravado. There it is, each iteration seemed to say, the unfathomable essence of war in its rawest and most immediate form.

Stahl's point about the way early drone clips seductively presented themselves as the realest of the real still holds, but the 'ultimate strategic advantage' possessed by the US didn't last long. Much of the most intimate, and most hideous, footage from the fighting in Ukraine is broadcast on social media platforms based in China and the Gulf, and shot by low-ranking Russian and Ukrainian soldiers using small civilian drones ordered on the internet from the Chinese firm DJI.

It's not only drones, and it's not always violent. Many scenes are shot on the ground. Genres emerge. Soldiers are regularly filmed with kittens. There have been moving Ukrainian videos of the liberation of small villages, with families standing by their wooden fences, waving and weeping as the army BTR drives by. A video showing soldiers tearing down the enemy flag and hoisting their own over the administrative building of this or that town has become the authorised marker of progress and retreat. A tour of the aftermath of a battle is another standard; soldiers rifle through the burned-out carcass of an armoured vehicle, flipping through passports, pushing aside piles of ration packs, or showing the viewer a captured piece of enemy equipment. There's the field interrogation of captured prisoners – filthy, cold, bruised and often injured, sometimes blindfolded and on their knees, mumbling name, rank and serial number through dry, swollen lips. There's hour after hour of grim, exhausted looking troops bouncing along on the roofs of armoured vehicles, suddenly smiling at the camera and sounding their horns, the streets behind them stumps of concrete where houses used to be. Soldiers hunker down in the windowless shell of an apartment in a ruined city, darting out to shoot at something and running back. Solitary figures, half hidden in the tree line, angle a long black cylinder; with a hiss and a bang, a missile shoots out into the sky; silent seconds pass; a tiny puff of white smoke appears on another tree line in the distance, or there's an orange flash in the sky, and voices erupt in ferocious, pent-up glee, saying that they've fucked them, the paedos, they've completed cunted them over – a tank has been hit, or an enemy plane shot down. A soldier is in a muddy foxhole, shooting at an enemy the

viewer can't see. Bullets from the invisible enemy tear up the parapet as the soldier flinches. Two Russian marines trudge through a trench they claim to have just stormed. The rear marine is filming the other man as they walk. The black earth is quite dry and the walls of the trench bristle with pale, slender tree roots. Much larger roots appear to stretch across the bottom of the trench, until we realise they are the bodies of dead Ukrainians, distinguishable by the green tape around their helmets and arms. Their filthy uniforms are almost the colour and texture of the earth, and only a pink cheek or nose suggests they were alive not that long ago. The filming marine is breathing heavily. He climbs out of the trench into a brown winter wood where every branch has been snapped and torn by bullets and shrapnel. Later, he will upload this to the internet.

There is a terrible, bleak genre of video in which soldiers at the threshold of death film themselves; a kind of farewell message to their loved ones, but with patriotic defiance mixed in, a desperate attempt at reassurance. This is to take the scene at face value, and not as something that has been staged. They seem real, even if it's hard to understand why someone who had just been wounded would film themselves, as in one recent Telegram clip, supposedly from the siege of Bakhmut. 'I'm 300, I'm 300,' the soldier shouts (this is military slang for 'injured'), waving his bloodied hand in front of the camera, as the viewer, sharing his point of view, looks down across his blood-spattered legs, over his kneepads and boots, to the room of a ruined building, the floor covered in debris. The sound of small arms fire rattles the concrete walls. Unable to walk, the soldier hoists his gun onto his lap and shuffles backwards. As he moves, he leaves a trail of blood that stands out clearly against some broken chunks of polystyrene. A second soldier comes into view, too busy firing down the hall to help his comrade.

Another video selfie shows a man with a dirt-splattered face lying in a crater in a snow-covered field. He wears a Russian tankman's headgear, with its distinctive padded strips. 'Hi everybody,' he says to the camera. 'I'm in a shell-hole.' He swings the camera round to introduce his comrade Andryuha from Dzhida, a village in Buryatia, near the border with Mongolia. Andryuha lies in a foetal position, turned away from the camera, a tourniquet round his thigh. We're told he was seriously injured two days ago, then the camera turns to show two more crewmen, one on his back, barely moving, the other trying to raise himself on an elbow to flash a V-sign and shout 'Glory to Russia!' A mortar shell lands nearby and the phone is poked over the lip of the crater to show something burning about two hundred metres away. 'That's my tank on fire,' the video author reports. 'In about thirty minutes, the ammo will start blowing up ... a big hi to everyone, live from the front. This is what's going on, right from the horse's mouth. It's cunt city here but we're pressing them, fuck it. Glory to Russia.'

I came across this on Twitter, where it was picked up by a group who glean invasion military video material and work under the loose rubric of 'Open Source Intelligence', or OSInt. It has been watched nearly a million times, in part because it was given English subtitles by a young Estonian who goes by the handle Dmitri. I traced the footage back to a Telegram channel called Supernova+, presumably not its original home, since Supernova+ posts pro-Ukrainian footage and the tank crew are unmistakably Russian. It appealed to Supernova+'s audience because it shows the humiliating setback suffered by Russian armoured columns when they tried to steamroller their way into the Donbas town of Vuhledar. But it was a hit on Russian social media, too, because of its depiction of patriotism and grit, even among injured troops in desperate straits. The Kremlin old media mouthpiece Russia Today later claimed to have tracked down the crew, all of whom, it said, survived, and presented them as everyday heroes. The commander, whom they didn't name, was the one filming: apparently, he ended up in

hospital with an injured back. Neither Dmitri on Twitter, nor Supernova+ on Telegram, nor Russia Today could explain exactly what message the commander meant to send, what mixture of pride, excitement, sense of imminent death, delirium, compulsion to communicate, motivated him to shoot and upload the video. Perhaps he didn't want to die anonymously, unseen, to become a line in a report that said nothing about what actually happened or could answer a child's questions about the day daddy died. Perhaps we are simply being called to witness.

Or perhaps the commander feared surviving, only to be accused of running away, of abandoning his tank out of cowardice. Telegram is full of that kind of story, at least on the Russian side. Whether or not it is true that, as a number of captured Wagner ex-convicts have claimed, some recruits who refuse to advance in suicidal conditions are executed as a warning to the rest, the video appeal by rank-and-file Russian soldiers, decrying the incompetence of their local commanders, has become a mainstay of invasion social media. There are occasional appeals by Ukrainian units, too; they were more common in the early months of the war, when under-equipped, under-prepared territorial defence units found themselves far from home, expected to hold the line against the Russian onslaught. But it is primarily a Russian phenomenon, reflecting the tendency in Russia's rigid armed forces for mid-level officers to treat the lower ranks as expendable.

The appellants are always filmed as a group, for solidarity, with a spokesman addressing the camera; often, but not always, they are masked, although they identify their unit. The same complaints recur: they were given minimal training, they lack the right weapons, they were promised they would only be guarding rear areas, but when they arrived in Ukraine they were told they must storm enemy positions, their officers force them to attack again and again, no matter how hopeless the situation, no matter how many of their comrades are killed. Russians object to being put under the control of separatist units from eastern Ukraine, and vice versa.

In one recent video, a group of men from north-western Russia, huddled together in a small room, describe themselves as an assault company attached to a brigade of the separatist militia, which has, in turn, been absorbed by the Russian army. On paper, the unit has a complement of 161. In the video, only twenty remain. They were shipped from Russia without official documents or military IDs; they describe themselves as homeless, unrecognised. Ordered to attack a Ukrainian village, they lost 56 men in futile assaults, but were prevented from retreating for two weeks by 'blocking units' of their own army. The wounded were discharged from hospital after three days and sent back to the front after, they say, being forced to pay 20,000 roubles. They describe their senior commanders as members of a criminal gang, fear that the officers will have them killed because of what they know and say they are starting to turn for information to the Ukrainian internet. Their message, of course, is to the Russian authorities – and perhaps, though it seems an even more forlorn hope, to the Russian media. But on its way to its intended destination, the message was picked up by Ukrainian and Western social media and became message news. The news is that the Russian army is screwed, even if that isn't necessarily the wider reality.

WHAT UNITES all forms of message news is that the senders want to show they matter. Even when the videos are superficially impersonal, they are not objective; those who record and upload the videos find ways to insist on their identity and on their framing of what is being shown. This new way for non-participants to witness war remotely is a resolution, of sorts, of Susan Sontag's challenge in the essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), where she reprimands a younger intellectual for her 'conservative' view that 'our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images.' The younger intellectual is Sontag's previous self, the writer of her 1977 book, *On Photography*. In the intervening years, Sontag spent time in Sarajevo during the siege by Serbian forces. *Regarding the Pain of Others* describes her change of mind as a result. She came to despise those who framed the imagery of war and disaster as a torrent of generic shocks and sensations, creating an excuse not to engage, even intellectually, with the real suffering of specific people.

To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breath-taking provincialism. It universalises the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment – that mature style of viewing which is a prime acquisition of 'the modern', and a prerequisite for dismantling traditional forms of party-based politics that offer real disagreement and debate. It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. But it is absurd to identify the world with those zones in the well-off countries where people have the dubious privilege of being spectators, or of declining to be spectators, of other people's pain.

Sontag looks backwards in other ways too. The essay was published in the year of the Iraq invasion, when TV news still calibrated the global public perception of events, before Iraqi insurgents began posting YouTube videos of their attacks in one of the earliest manifestations of message news. But Sontag writes as if, in 2003, photographs printed in newspapers and magazines still had the same power to shake publics and define a war that they did in the mid-20th century. In a way, she looks back even further, to images that offer an intense depiction of a real moment and a manifestation of the current of history – the photograph, but also the historical painting. She hints at the relationship Geoff Dyer makes explicit in his essay about Gary Knight's photograph of US marines outside Baghdad, where he writes of 'a kind of double stillness: the stunned stillness that comes after a battle and the stillness of oil painting, a stillness that does not stop time ... but contains it'.

Social media spurns stillness even more vigorously than TV news. The post-Sarajevo Sontag criticises the blasé Western intellectual's rejection of specific meaning in images of particular wars, the convenient assumption that all such images merge into a blur of spectacular infotainment, the suspicion that the photographers whose pictures dominate news coverage are prurient, opportunistic ghouls. Well, now we have smartphones. What better way, in principle, to counter cynicism than to have a camera and a global distribution network in the hand of every citizen and soldier?

There are similarities between the actions of post-Yugoslav Serbs against Bosnians in the 1990s and the actions of post-Soviet Russians against Ukraine from 2014 onwards. The journalistic film and photographic portrayal of Bosnian civilians in Sarajevo under fire from Serbs has its hugely expanded counterpart today both in the work of traditional journalists covering Russian atrocities against Ukrainian civilians and in the social media video of these events, much of which would otherwise go unrecorded. But even if Sontag and others had known the technological change that was coming, could they have imagined that the

combatants themselves would become broadcasters in a way their top commanders only loosely controlled?

Most of the videos posted by or from military units in Ukraine are framed not only by the accompanying text and watermark but by a musical soundtrack. When the clip moves from platform to platform – from Telegram to Twitter, for example – the music tends to stay with it. On the Ukrainian side, in the early days of the war, it would often be a track by the band Probass i Hardi. A reedy, warbling introduction accompanied by a hand-drum was followed by a sample of the singer of another band, the ‘ethno-chaos’ ensemble DakhaBrakha, saying ‘Good evening, we’re from Ukraine,’ before pounding synth bass lines took over. The clips were edited so that a Russian tank would explode at exactly the moment the phrase was spoken. Also popular was Skofka’s hip-hop dirge ‘We Will Not Forget or Forgive’: ‘We will not forget or forgive/The sun is shining but the sky is weeping/We will not forget or forgive/Glad to see your little tank is burning.’ Another favourite accompaniment to footage of shells landing among Russian columns was Masha Kondratenko’s morbidly jaunty Euro-pop number ‘Vanka Vstanka’, or ‘Get-Up Vanka’, the Russian name for the toy that wobbles when pushed but won’t fall down: ‘Vanka Vstanka, why so sad?/Get yourself a plastic bag/Vanka Vstanka, don’t run, though/Now you’ve got nowhere to go.’ The word for ‘plastic bag’, *paket*, was used, but it’s clear ‘body bag’ was what Kondratenko had in mind.

I was intrigued by a song that kept being used as the backing to Ukrainian military videos last year, an English language track with a bloodthirsty, over-hearty Viking theme, filled with fjords and ravens and references to Norse deities. It turned out to be ‘Valhalla Calling’ by the Irish musician Gavin Dunne, known to gamers as ‘Miracle of Sound’, produced for the video game *Assassin’s Creed*. That young Russian and Ukrainian men in uniform should be influenced by video games isn’t surprising. Near Fallujah in Iraq in 2004 I watched US marines in the school they had appropriated for their base, just back from patrolling the extremely hostile neighbourhood, laying down their real weapons and picking up their game controllers to shoot virtual ones. What’s changed since then is the depth and breadth of the internet and the spread of GoPro-style miniature cameras, or simply clips for mobiles, enabling soldiers to attach a lens to their rifle, film themselves in combat and upload the results, enacting in real life the popular genre of ‘first-person shooter’, in which a player will storm through an area, scanning the perimeter over the barrel of their weapon and killing virtual opponents, or get killed and have to start again – an aspect of the games that doesn’t transfer to real life.

Two of the most powerful short videos from the early stages of the invasion, which brought home to the world just how badly the Russian attack was going and helped change the popular view that Ukraine was doomed, were the shooting down by Ukraine of a Russian helicopter and the turning back of a large Russian armoured column east of Kyiv. There have been dozens of clips of Russian helicopters being hit, but there was something inevitable and punitive about this one: the viewer barely has time to register the aircraft speeding over dun-coloured fields before a crooked line of smoke unfurls from the bottom corner of the picture and the helicopter turns into a fireball. Burning fiercely, it arcs into the tree line, turns a somersault, crashes and explodes. The video of the column shows an entire regiment of Russian tanks, dozens of vehicles, crowded together on a four-lane highway through a Ukrainian village. Through a light scrim of snowflakes you can see shells exploding, tanks trying to manoeuvre away from danger, panicked soldiers running and, eventually, the column moving back the way it came.

There’s nothing grainy, shaky or indistinct in these videos; neither is shot, as most combat footage was in previous wars, from a restricted vantage point on the ground, with the event a

confusing blur in the distance, or at night. This is high-definition, widescreen, panoramic, daytime drone footage. All the established news outlets picked up these videos. To civilians of my generation, they look cinematic, like aerial shots from a high-budget epic. But they also share a characteristic of video games, the god-like perspective, the ability to see what is right in front of you but also to view the arena of conflict from above, a possibility that commanders, let alone ordinary soldiers, didn't have in the past. Now, thanks to off-the-shelf drones, they do.

The use of cheap Chinese-made hobby drones took off in the Ukrainian army after 2014, when it reformed following Russia's first, limited and clandestine invasion to prop up its failing separatist proxies in Donbas. By the time of the full invasion in 2022, Ukrainian troops were skilled in their use, and the more conservative Russian military, sceptical of their value and complacent about its own small number of tactical drones, made in its own factories, struggled to keep up. The little machines don't fly far, and are vulnerable to being taken down or jammed, but they are cheap to replace; Ukrainian small businesses are starting to produce their own. Ukrainian units send them up to locate enemy positions, then call up artillery fire using Elon Musk's Starlink terminals and a domestic software platform called Krapiva, 'nettle', which tasks the job on the Uber principle – whichever big gun or rocket system is nearest and available is offered the target. ('Nettle' is an ironic reference to the floral names of Russian artillery systems: Peony, Hyacinth and Acacia.) From the point of view of the units involved, a good outcome is not just the elimination of the enemy, but a piece of footage they can upload, attribute, describe and put to music, for their glory, to raise the morale of their side and lower the morale of their opponent, to impress the world with Ukraine's valour and reliability as a recipient of foreign arms, and to receive validation through online popularity.

I'M NOT IMPARTIAL in this war: I want Ukraine to repel Russia to its invasion borders, at a bare minimum. In my horror and despair, in those first weeks, particularly when the systemic cruelty of the Russian military showed itself – not just towards civilians and the Ukrainian military, but towards its own troops – I was glad to see video of Russian hardware being destroyed. If it was not, it would kill more Ukrainians. I gradually remembered that inside the destroyed war machines were people. It's hard to reconcile gladness at Ukrainian success with fellow feeling for humans burned to death inside an armoured steel box or a helicopter. Among the people who might well see these videos are the families of the dead. I wasn't sure how to reconcile this, except by refraining from watching the videos, but I wanted at least to have the illusion of knowing what was going on by seeing fleeting moving pictures of it. Besides, I knew I was going to write about it. The music doesn't help, nor do the jokes. Most of the Soviet tanks in the conflict have a design where the turret sits on top of a carousel of ammunition, and when they blow up, the results can be, in both the viral video and the Guy Debord sense, spectacular. It doesn't help when English-speaking OSInt geeks outside Ukraine, reposting clips lifted from Telegram of Russian tanks being blown up, snigger about 'turret-throwing competitions'.

These are not the most difficult drone clips to watch. Ukraine has pioneered, and Russia is now following, the practice of using small hobbyist FPV drones as direct weapons. FPV stands for First Person Video; the drones are designed to be flown by somebody on the ground wearing a pair of goggles that allow them to see exactly what the drone sees. The drones flown by Ukrainian and Russian FPV pilots have an explosive device rigged to their noses. The pilots roam virtually over the battlefield, seek out a target and then fly into it. As in a video game, they get another life, but if they are successful their human target does not.

Early on, the Ukrainians, outgunned by Russian artillery and looking for a means of response, worked out a way to turn small commercial drones into a different kind of weapon. They use 3D printers to make mechanisms that can carry a grenade beneath a drone, then release it over a target. It sounds primitive, like First World War pilots dropping grenades out of their cockpits, but because the drone can hover precisely over a single spot, skilled pilots can be extremely accurate. It's quite hard to knock out a tank with a grenade, even with a direct hit, but it's easy to kill people. I feel no desire to watch the videos that result, but there are lots of them out there, and I've made myself watch a few. They are intimate. You see, from the drone point of view, a group of soldiers, as far below as if you were looking down from the roof of a ten-storey building, sometimes closer. They might be aware of the drone, and running for cover; often they aren't. You see the grenade fall in their midst; the blast is barely visible but you can read its circumference in the shape of the soldiers' outwards fall. Some are killed immediately, some are wounded, crawling away, some running, some stooping to help their comrades. Often the videos come with mocking text commentary and comedy soundtracks. I made a note of one, intending to describe it for this article, but now that I've watched it, I feel shaken up. A lone figure, black against the snow (he could be Russian or Ukrainian), already hurt, crawling along, has two grenades dropped on him. He catches fire, but is not dead. Posted by an anonymous Twitter user, it is accompanied by a heavy metal track with the chorus 'Bang, bang!'

Even without the music and the mockery of the dead, these videos are something entirely new for armies and their mass audiences. It is related but does not correspond to Sontag's plea for non-combatants to expose themselves to images of atrocities:

It seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others. Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.

Sontag is thinking of our need to bear witness to the kind of suffering the Serbs visited on Sarajevo, and there is no shortage of that sort of video and verbal testimony in Ukraine. But how should we respond when the suffering we witness is inflicted in defence, to repel the cruel invader? Even the music, the textual abuse of the dying and the appeals for money that so often accompany Ukrainian drone grenade videos could, if one were generous, be seen as efforts by the soldiers to reconcile their pride in the defence of their country with their horror at the sight of fellow human beings dragging their shattered limbs across a shell-pocked field. On the audience side, there is something of the attraction that the criminologist Simon Cottee writes about in his part-investigative, part-confessional *Watching Murder: ISIS, Death Videos and Radicalisation*. As a young man, hearing that a video existed online of the beheading by Islamic radicals of the American journalist Daniel Pearl, he sought it out and watched it:

I was in my mid-twenties at the time and doing a PhD on the intellectual history of British criminology, an arcane and pedestrian subject that had nothing to do with political atrocity. I had no business watching it, in other words, and afterwards I felt a mixture of disgust and anger and no small measure of self-disgust. Perhaps I am drawn to disgust and indignation and self-loathing. I was certainly curious to know what a beheading looked and sounded like.

I have journalist friends who have watched videos like that as part of their work. I never have, and hope I never will. Although the Russian army – and its occupying ethos – have shown an IS-like aspect at times, the Ukrainian army hasn't, and so far only Wagner boasts of its public executions. Once I've finished this piece I hope not to watch another drone grenade video. But knowing that they exist on the Ukrainian side is difficult. It's easier to support a cause when nothing is done in its name that you find too sickening to watch.

I watched one drone video that posed the dilemma more finely. It's an extended clip, posted in parts by the slick social media operation of the K2 battalion of Ukraine's 54th mechanised brigade, fighting in the east of the country. There's no music or snark, and an 18+ logo hovers in the top-right corner, though the video does come with extensive details on how to donate funds. A group of about thirty Russians are shown moving on foot across flat, frosty fields towards a tiny, isolated trench, nicknamed 'T-shape' (presumably because it lies at the intersection of two tree lines), held by eight Ukrainian defenders. The drone is close enough to see the breath coming from the mouths of the soldiers. Although the Ukrainians are able to call down some fire on the Russians, they're heavily outnumbered, and it seems inevitable they will be overwhelmed. A group of Russians outflank the trench, and, standing on the very lip of the Ukrainian earthwork, are on the verge of killing or capturing their enemy. But the sequence turns. A Ukrainian soldier emerges from a dugout and, at point blank range, shoots one of the Russians, who topples over. After a further exchange of grenades and bullets, the flanking group of Russians is beaten off. Two Ukrainian tanks appear and begin shooting at the rest of the Russians. On the far side of the trees, the slowly retreating attackers seem to think they're safe, but one of the tanks bursts through the trees and mows them down. The Russians have the same identity as before: they're still accomplices in the continuing crime of invasion, intercepted, held off and punished by the Ukrainians in justified self-defence. But they have also acquired a second, parallel identity: they are human beings, some of them injured and in pain, frightened, alone and lost. There is no comfortable resolution to this contradiction, a contradiction, it must be said, that most of Ukrainian society would not lose any sleep over. It is not as if I, or any of the millions outside Ukraine who hope it wins the wider war, want Ukrainian soldiers to be victims. But the space for ignorance of what that actually means, what it actually looks like, has never been smaller.

After the tanks have finished their work the drone moves over the T-shape battlefield to number the dead. Here there is a little music, ambient and elegiac, in a minor key. The camera zooms in on one Russian lying in a crater in the frosty sun, hands folded across his chest, a tourniquet round each of his shot-up legs, a sheet of some camouflage cloth covering his head. He lifts his hand, moves the sheet away from his face and squints, frightened, into the eye of the drone. After a moment he pulls the cover back over his face and lies still and the drone flies on.