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Home Drone: How to Militarize the Smart Home with the Ring Always Home Camera

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Abstract

Amazon launched the Ring Always Home Camera with a promotional video featuring the mobile security drone flying into action to stop a home intruder. The addition of the domestic security drone into the housewife's arsenal expands the everyday militarism of security subjectivity, even as it imagines a "better" domestic laborer—one trained not only to be watchful but also to patrol the home and protect property. The Ring Always Home Camera suggests that to be a good securitized citizen is to make the home transparent, not only to the optical eye of the drone's camera but also to its machine vision navigation apparatus. Networked to Ring's home security system, the depiction of the appliance in the video forwards a new corporate vision of domestic security—one that introduces networked aeriality, as well as militarized modes of perceiving and knowing into domestic space.

This essay is a part of the Roundtable called "The Housewife's Secret Arsenal" (henceforth HSA); a collection of eight object-oriented engagements focusing on particular material instantiations of domesticated war. The title of this roundtable is deliberately tongue-in-cheek reminding readers of the many ways that militarisms can be invisible to their users yet persistent in the form of mundane household items that aid in the labor of homemaking. Juxtaposing the deliberately stereotyped "housewife" with the theater of war raises questions

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about the quiet migration of these objects and technologies from battlefield to kitchen, or bathroom, or garden. Gathered together as an "arsenal," their uncanny proximity to one another becomes a key critical tool in asking how war comes to find itself at home in our lives.

Keywords

security, drone, domesticity, Amazon, Ring Always Home Camera

Amazon pre-emptively launched the Ring Always Home Camera at its 2020 fall hardware event by way of a short promotional video featuring the domesticated drone patrolling a suburban middle-class home. While the device is still not on sale at the time of writing in mid-2022 (but with an open waitlist and slated for a \$250 price tag), this video is nonetheless revealing. Sunlight filters through pulled white curtains and into a pristine domestic interior, a subtle gesture to an aesthetically pleasing domestic privacy. This serene scene is interrupted by an intruder breaking into the home through a sliding glass door to the backyard. The breach of the house's perimeter triggers the security camera to launch from its charging station while its owner streams the event live to his phone (Figure 1). For some it might seem curious that no housewife appears in the drone's promotional ad; we see only the man of the house bearing witness to the break in. Even at a distance then, the device easily enables the exercise of paternalistic control over the home and its contents. In this sense, the networked domicile is a site primed for the production of heteronormative masculinity. Indeed, as Lynn Spigel has observed, "the smart home is still a highly gendered place" (2005, 422). Look a little closer and we see the man's wedding band as he holds his smartphone, as if to index a spouse's absent presence in the scene. There and not there, the ad figures the domestic drone as surrogate spouse, domestic servant, and vigilant guard—a compliant automaton that spends its days minding and defending its domain. While the Ring drone might be read as an extension of masculine control of the home and its security, what emerges more strongly here is a nostalgic figure of the housewife: obedient, watchful, and tireless. Although clearly a new agent of Amazon's desire to incorporate practices of corporate techno-surveillance and securitization into existing regimes of domestic management, this is only part of the transformation ushered in by the Ring drone. The addition of the domestic security drone into the housewife's arsenal also exercises the self-disciplining of the imperial subject, expands the territory of militarism, criminalizes poor and racialized populations, all while imagining a "better" domestic laborer—one trained not only to be watchful but also to patrol the home and protect property.



Figure 1. The Ring Always Home Camera captures the breach of the home's perimeter.

When not in use, the Ring Always Home Camera fits seamlessly into the curved white cube of a small charging station where the camera and rotor blades remain neatly out of sight. Sleek and discrete, its minimalist aesthetic blends easily into the contemporary smart home: at first glance it could be mistaken for a speaker, a router, or a kitchen appliance (Figure 2). Equally well integrated with the networked home, the device is also equipped with Amazon's Alexa, the digital assistant cum racialized domestic servant (Phan 2017). If it takes off while people are home, its persistent buzz makes its presence obvious. As CEO Jamie Siminoff claimed in a blog post stretching credulity, "we even designed Always Home Cam to hum at a certain volume, so it's clear the camera is in motion and is recording." This, we are told, is "privacy you can hear" (2020). Unlike a static camera, you know when it's watching because it is in the air, making the intimate circuits of domestic life its own. But while the design of Amazon's first home security drone seems to insist on the product's banality, its innocuous physical appearance belies the system's multipronged domestication of technoscientific militarism through a surveillant, networked aeriality that maps the home to make it transparent and introduces militarized modes of perceiving and knowing to the domestic interior.



Figure 2. The Always Home Cam at rest.

Writing of the architectural features that constituted the mid-century “see-through house,” Beatriz Colomina observes that “glass...enables an internal policing of the suburban home” (2007, 153). “It permits the surveying eye of the mother,” Colomina continues, “already mobile through the open plan, to extend itself into the yard to monitor the movements of children playing outside and of approaching visitors and deliverymen” (153). The drone as the technological surrogate for the stay-at-home mother also accords with what critics have called the smart home’s “Big Mother regime that seeks to marketise and colonise the home by delivering feminised technologies and by promising to take up feminised labours” (Sadowski, Strengers, and Kennedy 2021, 3). Writing of residential drones, Anna Jackman and Katherine Brickell observe that “the drone patrols as techno-security-agent in and above domestic perimeters, rendering visible perceived transgressions while cohabiting and dwelling therein” (2021, 2). But in summoning the specters of both the patrolling security agent and the dwelling’s cohabitant, this description maintains a distinction between soldier and spouse. In fact, the drone’s update to the Cold War–fantasy of the vigilant mother and her domain of domestic transparency performs a decidedly militarized maternalism by reconciling these figures. While Colomina’s mother was watchful and mobile, the Always Home Camera stalks the halls of the home on its pre-mapped routes, taking care to pause at potential sites of infiltration to check for signs of a breach to the perimeter: open windows, unlocked doors, and would-be-intruders.

Activated by a perimeter breach, a predefined patrol time, or the intervention of its owner via the Ring app, the drone only becomes a deliberately visible and

active surveillant by invitation. This is what Chris Gilliard calls *luxury surveillance*: “expensive, voluntary, and sleek (yet often meant to be noticed)” (2020). Domestic drone security is for middle-class homeowners who can afford to be surveilled, who want surveillance for the anxious comfort it brings, and for whom digital capitalism is either not yet a yoke or an unrecognized one. As Jathan Sadowski, Yolande Strengers, and Jenny Kennedy write, “the smart home is an ingenious way of installing the infrastructure of digital capitalism in the private places that are hardest to reach and getting us to pay for the privilege” (2021, 9). In other words, securitized US consumer culture accepts the invasive tracking of personal habits in exchange for the elected luxuries of domestic surveillance. But more than this, the technology solicits consumers to practice imperial citizenship through dutiful acts of self-regulation and self-governance. In the context of post-9/11 security culture more broadly, Rachel Hall identifies a “feminine heterosexual acquiescence to the new surveillance technologies” (2015, 137). This feminized “voluntary’ transparency” that both submits to and welcomes the surveilling gaze is one technique through which good securitized citizenship gets enacted (138).



Figure 3. The Always Home Cam in flight.

Crucially, this surveilling gaze is not static, but motile (Figure 3). If external CCTV refigures the walls of the home as a perimeter and fixed internal cameras transform living rooms into zones of watchfulness, then the airborne camera's aerial motility remakes the lived circuits of an anxious feminized domesticity into patrol routes and points of inspection. According to promotional materials, the drone moves through the home by way of a sensor module that incorporates time-of-flight and LiDAR to help it navigate autonomously. Mapping, that vital practice of military epistemology and logistics, is a necessary prerequisite to

operation and prompts an immediate intimacy with the device. Unpackaged and charged, the new owner walks the drone through the home, turning it this way and that to identify windows and doors so that its LiDAR sensor, like that of an autonomous car, can build a three-dimensional model for the drone to navigate. In this way, the Ring drone folds the home into the militarized operation of what Paul Virilio (1989) calls the logistics of perception. Pre-mapped routes make it an unreliable domestic presence, even with obstacle avoidance sensors and software. Close the wrong door, place something large on the kitchen counter, or move furniture unexpectedly and the drone risks crashing. But such concerns are secondary. To be a good securitized citizen is to make the home transparent, not only to the optical eye of the drone's camera but also to its machine vision navigation apparatus. Mapping remodels the material home as a computational array of nodes and edges in which windows and doors become high intensity vectors to make the home knowable, actionable, and operable as a space of drone mobility.

While the drone's mobility is confined to a predetermined path, its data connects with and flows through a larger surveillance apparatus. "Amazon Ring is an assemblage of surveillance fixtures and apparatuses, social media networks, crime reporting partnerships, and internet-connected cloud servers," writes Lauren Bridges (2021, 835). Armed with video from their drone, doorbell cam, CCTV, and the proprietary Neighbors by Ring app, Ring users are recruited to perform the work of securitizing the neighborhood should a local police department ask them to "assist an investigation by voluntarily sharing videos" (Heller 2021). In such partnerships domestic subjects are called to engage in what Inderpal Grewal has called the logic of vigilantism. "Enjoined by the ubiquity of the phrase 'if you see something, say something' that governmentalized the war on terror," Grewal points out that the logic of vigilantism "has securitized the domestic sphere of home and nation" (2017, 121). Good citizenship not only entails active participation in policing, but also in the militarized securitization of domestic perimeters, interiors, and atmospheres. For this good liberal subject, families are diverse, and anyone can be a threat. Such securitization promises to relieve anxiety and fear, but can in fact only sustain and even amplify it.

The Ring drone extends the logic of carcerality and its attendant racializing technologies into the present. Here we might recall that the interest in home security came about alongside "post-war domestic material cultures" and "racialized material inequality" (Caluya 2014, 808). For Gilbert Caluya, the move to privatize systems of domestic security among postwar white American suburban homeowners mitigated the "unwanted effects of desegregation" (817). By the 1980s and 1990s, policy discourse and mass media portrayed "an urban underclass of working-class blacks and Latinos" as a threat to national security (Macek 2006, xiv). Advertisers, in turn, "mobilized fears of a perilous urban realm to sell a variety of products"—including "home security systems" (Macek 2006,

xvi). In the twenty-first century, the Ring drone can be understood through the corporate desire to mobilize white fear and to extend policing, effectively producing crime by opening up new spaces and contexts to surveillance technologies (Scannell 2019, 108). The prevailing whiteness of the launch video's interiors is no coincidence, nor are the numerous cases of Ring systems being used to target innocent Black and brown people. As Simone Browne insists, we need to "factor in how racism and anti-blackness undergird and sustain the intersecting surveillances of our present order" (2015, 9). But if we pursue the logics, affects, and modes of knowledge production through the lens of everyday militarism, then the Ring drone's anti-blackness converges with martial imperatives to distinguish friends from foes.

While the technology of the Ring consumer drone is far from the large-scale Reapers of remote warfare and thus seemingly only marginally differentiated from a networked security milieu of doorbell and nanny cams, the securitized technics of autonomous patrol and threat identification are nonetheless intimately linked to what Jeremy Packer and Joshua Reeves call "enemy epistemology," which is " beholden to a specific media logic—that is, a logic of sensation, perception, reason, and comprehension specific to a given mediological environment" (2020, 5). While the Ring drone could be easily batted from the air (why the intruder in the launch video panics and runs is unclear), it nonetheless advances an epistemological architecture that dehumanizes by design. This epistemology doesn't simply identify an intruder but produces an enemy. Playing out and investing in the technological capture of racialized populations at home, the turn to home security by drone unveils contemporary militarized domesticity's necropolitical imagination.

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