MAST

The Haunting of the Automated Gaze

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Abstract

This article analyzes the artistic exploration of machine vision in the video installation *Modern Escape* (2018) by Danish artist duo Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen. The artwork recreates a modern Western home pervaded by surveillance technologies and the automated vision of a robotic vacuum cleaner. The main conceptual idea of the work is *the automated gaze*, and with few exceptions, all the scenes in the video are filmed without a human behind the camera. As a result, the installation evokes the haunted atmosphere of a home penetrated by a gaze that drifts incessantly, opening up randomly strange and awkward vantage points of the interior. Specifically, the article offers a reading of *Modern Escape* in the light of Avery Gordon's notion of "haunting" and argues that the modern Western home is saturated with traces of the military industrial complex through its commonplace technologies, which are haunted by a history of war, complicity, and masculine desires for control. Haunting, according to Gordon, is one way in which "abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life" (*Ghostly Matters* xvi). The present article discusses how *Modern Escape* responds to and questions the subtle militarization of the everyday the technologies carry into the estranged home, "that quintessential space of the uncanny, the haunted house" (Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 50).

Keywords

the automated gaze; contemporary art; haunting; machine vision; surveillance

> Only the Lighthouse beam entered the rooms for a
> moment, sent its sudden stare over bed and wall in
> the darkness of winter, looked with equanimity at
> the thistle and the swallow, the rat and the straw.
>
>   Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

Introduction

Darkness. White noise. The gaze moves along a floor; the reflection of a robotic vacuum cleaner

passes by the shiny surface of a mirrored pedestal. It is the vantage point of the robot. The

screen is overwritten by a grid map, the floor plan created by the smart vacuum cleaner as it is

moving. Mapping. Searching. Suddenly, the lamp to my right turns on. Danish Design, just like

the one inside the video living room. A woman is looking through the blinds of a modern home,

glass windows as walls. Now the perspective is higher, slowly circling around. Flickering TV

images and news, a second woman watching TV, a voice reporting on the building of a border

wall. Images of barbed wire.

Shift to mid-height. Everything is tasteful. A woman, an expensive armchair, her knees,

her skin, her upper body, her head cut off by the frame, a cat lounging on a footstool. I recognize

it as a generic Scandinavian upper-middle class home. The automated gaze passes the woman in

the chair; a voice on the news uttering "elsewhere." The TV comes into sight; images from a

refugee tent camp, earth, white tents, greenery, and people. The gaze is making its round. Shiny

surfaces, glass, steel. Those who are kept out.

Drone point of view from above: dark shiny pillars in an empty space. A review of

Lighthouse *comes into view, AI smart surveillance for the home. The steady work of the vacuum*

robot, cleaning. A piling up of white plastic canisters, bags of sand or flour, and large stacks of

tin cans inside the apartment; bright shiny silver-colored cans. What is going on? Who is behind

this? Events and vantage points blend into a distorted, confusing plotline. Now the home is

almost filled up with canisters, cans, bags, and thermal blankets. Barricaded.[1]

Danish artist duo Hanne Nielsen (b. 1959) and Birgit Johnsen's (b. 1958) immersive video

installation *Modern Escape* (2018) recreates a modern Western home pervaded by surveillance

technologies and the automated vision of a robotic vacuum cleaner. The main conceptual idea of

Modern Escape is *the automated gaze*, and with few exceptions, all the scenes in the video are

filmed without a human behind the camera. As a result, the installation evokes the haunted

atmosphere of a home penetrated by an automated gaze, opening strange and awkward vantage

points of the interior. Throughout *Modern Escape,* the automated gaze records the inside of the

home from multiple angles and from four strictly determined levels, simultaneously orienting and

disorienting the viewer. This artistic strategy creates seemingly random images, ranging from the

low floor angle of the robotic vacuum cleaner and a mid-height angle capturing a woman at knee-

height to a drone view from above. As spectators, we do not get the full view nor any sense of a

cohesive narrative, resulting in a sense of discomfort inside the installation space. Whose gaze is

this? What is being seen?

This article offers a reading of *Modern Escape* in the light of Avery Gordon's notion of

"haunting," in order to unpack how the artwork addresses the home's saturation with traces of

the military industrial complex. Specifically, I argue that *Modern Escape* foregrounds how the

networked technologies present in the home are haunted by a history of war, complicity, and

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[1] The opening vignette and the following analysis are based on my visits to the solo exhibit *REVISIT: HANNE NIELSEN & BIRGIT JOHNSEN* at Overgaden Institute for Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, Denmark.

masculine desires for control. The entanglement of surveillance, warfare, border control, and the

networked technologies of consumers in the Global North is established through the work's

formal and thematic structure of mapping and tracking practices. As an organizing principle, this

artistic strategy effectively articulates a connection between consumer technologies such as the

GPS-enabled smart vacuum cleaner equipped with intelligent sensors for charting the home, the

facial and object recognition technology of home surveillance systems, and the state and military

mapping and tracking practices of which these technologies simultaneously are heirs and further

inform. In what follows, I first establish the conceptual framework of haunting, before turning to

a reading of how *Modern Escape* responds to and questions the domestication of technologies of

surveillance and machine vision and the subtle militarization of the everyday the technologies

carry into the estranged home, "that quintessential space of the uncanny, the haunted house"

(Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 50).

Haunting

Drawing on the work of sociologist and feminist scholar Avery Gordon, the notion of haunting

can be understood as material social forces that make themselves present affectively (*Ghostly

Matters*; *Some Thoughts on Haunting*). Simply put, haunting is something sensed in our

surroundings. It is a matter of shadowy manifestations of past or present wrongs. To be haunted,

then, is "to be tied to historical and social effects" (Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 190). Haunting

emerges as affective encounters, uncanny experiences where unresolved or repressed social

violence—the traces of "modernity's violence and wounds" (*Ghostly Matters* 25)—are felt in the

present. According to Gordon, "[w]e are haunted by something we have been involved in"

(*Ghostly Matters* 51), such as "all the different facets of the profound and elemental deprivations

of modernity . . . slavery and racism, state authoritarianism, Enlightenment science, gendered

repression" (*Ghostly Matters* 197). Haunting, moreover, draws attention to injustices in which

we are still involved. In this article, I employ the notion of haunting in order to cast new light on

machine vision and surveillance. Generally, surveillance is not equally distributed; rather it

reinforces inequality, racialization, and marginalization (Browne; Lyon; Monahan; Smith). The

lens of haunting, I argue, activates the weight of the past in present surveillance practices, as well

as the complicity and injustices we currently participate in, which are kept out of sight. As Annie

Ring argues, the complicity on the part of consumers of networked technologies in providing

vast amounts of data for capture and analysis can be said to be "at once forgetful and at least

partially unconscious" (88). Likewise, our complicity includes the intimate entanglement and

shared material histories between the military and consumer technologies of the networked era,

and Ring observes that "[w]ar was the context in which the Internet was developed and where

machine vision was first employed . . . War is where artificial intelligence and data analytics are

most brutally applied" (90). Simultaneously, developments in consumer technologies also feed

into the technologies of war. Particularly regarding machine vision and image recognition

software, some of the most advanced systems are developed by private tech companies, which

have access to vast amounts of users' data upon which to train their technologies (Michel). As

my reading of *Modern Escape* will emphasize, the notion of haunting productively addresses the

more or less subtly felt and consciously recognized power relations, violence, and complicity

intrinsic to surveillance practices and technologies. The artwork effectively establishes the

entanglement between privileged consumers and structures of domination and offers the

spectator a bodily recognition of their own implication (Rothberg). Returning to Gordon, she

proposes that haunting is "one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known

and their impacts felt in everyday life" (*Ghostly Matters* xvi). Thus, being attentive to the

haunting dimension of surveillance means listening to the workings of power, to the moments and spaces "when disturbed feelings cannot be put away" (xvi).

Modern Escape

Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen's video installation *Modern Escape* (2018) was created specifically for a solo exhibit at Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art in Copenhagen. The artist duo has collaborated since 1993 and are among the leading exponents of video and media art in Denmark (Davidsen). Their oeuvre includes a long-term interest in the formal qualities of the video medium, politics, power, gender, and surveillance. Artistic explorations of the media, themes, and aesthetics of the automated gaze and surveillance have been present from an early stage of their collaborative practice, which can be seen in works such as *Grenåvej* (1995), *Installations in Urban Space* (2004), and *Replay* (2004). Lately, topics of war, migration, and security have moved to the center of Nielsen and Johnsen's artistic practice with the works *Drifting* (2014), *Defense Against the Unpredictable* (2014), *Camp Kitchen* (2014), *Modern Escape* (2018) and *Ved Hegnet* (2019) (Wolthers).

Modern Escape consists of a large screen with a one-channel color video with sound running in a loop, foregrounded by a podium with a robotic vacuum cleaner kept inside a grid structure of magnetic tape (see fig. 1). To the right of the screen stands a Verner Panton Panthella floor lamp (a popular classic of Danish Design), and to the left of the screen, an acrylic mobile shaped as the floor plan of the vacuum cleaner is hanging from the ceiling. The filmic installation itself is 21 minutes, organized in an array of fragmented scenes from inside a setting which alternates between resembling a home, an art space, and something in-between a laboratory and a storage space for cans, canisters, and thermal blankets, recalling humanitarian aid.

Fig. 1. Installation view, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape*. Photograph by Anders Sune Berg. All images courtesy of the artists.

Overall, there is little action on the screen. The opening scene starts from a low angle by the floor, accompanied by the loud noise of a robotic vacuum cleaner. Next, the vacuum cleaner moves along on the floor. Soon it is overwritten by a "pacman grid," which is the floor plan created by the AI enabled vacuum cleaner. There is an electric fan. The interior on the screen is hard to place at first: there are large, mirrored pedestals, art, and the reflection of the robot (see fig. 2). We see a woman standing in front of a window looking out, another woman sitting in an armchair in front of the TV, a cat, and a dog. This sums up the cast and mode of action in the work overall. The artists themselves perform the two women in the work, embodying the

passivity of the privileged Western middle class, recorded by the automated gaze of the
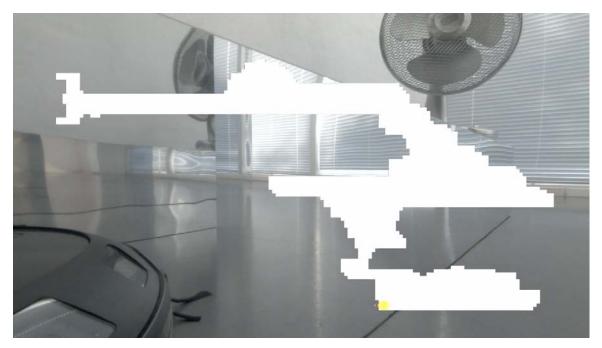
machines.

Fig. 2. Still from film, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape*. All images courtesy of the artists.

Yet the story is not so clear-cut. Fragmented glimpses of uncanny parallel narratives

interrupt the "main" story: a feeling of paranoia materializes in a scene showing a woman

dressed in tin foil peering out across the street with a small circular mirror. Outside, a man in a

white protective suit peers back out from his window. This anxious mood intensifies in a later

glimpse of two figures inside the apartment also wearing protective suits (see fig. 3).[2] Indeed,

Modern Escape evokes a haunted atmosphere, an eerie yet unlocalizable feeling that something

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[2] While the global news audience would at the time be familiar with the white protective anti-virus suits from, for example, the 2014–16 Ebola outbreak in West Africa when the work was first exhibited in 2018, viewers of *Modern Escape* during and after the 2020–present COVID-19 pandemic are bound to bring further associations to the work, as social distancing, home quarantines, hoarding of food, and "prepping" for the worst became a mass activity.

is not quite right within the Western home. This is achieved through strategies which address the bodies and affective involvement of spectators inside the dark installation space. First, a sinister soundscape indicates the affective tone of the work. The cold white noise of the vacuum cleaner hits the ears, together with the steady mechanic rhythm of its expanding floor plan as the robot is mapping its surroundings, and an unnerving electric noise as the camera is rotating. The soundscape is further layered with a polyphony of voices from the constant stream of global news, speaking of migration and the building of border walls, national security, tent camps, surveillance technologies, and gender equality. We hear the TV speaking of "those who have little shelter in these flimsy tents" and "more suffering for those already displaced." The reported news stories ground the work in our contemporary time and its politics.

Fig. 3. Still from film, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape*. All images courtesy of the artists.

Second, the spatial fluidity of the installation creates confusion in terms of where the work starts and ends. The installation is immersive. The lamp in front of the screen switches on and off, recalling domestic smart technologies. The robotic vacuum cleaner on the podium suddenly starts moving. Thus, the living room on the screen pours forth spatially into the gallery. The placement of "twin" objects in the installation space reflects the objects seen on the screen and creates a spatial extension of the surveillance home, which implicates visitors by addressing their embodied experience of the environment. This adds a borderlessness to the spectator's experience. Simultaneously, the flickering news stories from the TV inside the video living room take over the main installation screen, further dissolving the boundaries between the living room on the screen and the gallery space. Finally, the use of light addresses the viewer's sensual perception of the atmosphere inside the installation; the cold light of the video screen suggests a detached and isolated mood, in contrast to the warm light of the floor lamp in the installation (as seen in fig. 1). These artistic strategies effectively address the viewer as a literal presence in space, a participant and an accomplice.

A feeling of paranoia is reinforced in *Modern Escape* through the evolving barricade of the home and short glimpses of figures in protective suits and thermal blankets. Concurrently, the binary opposition between outside world and inside home, them and us, danger and safety, is obscured. This same artistic strategy was employed in Nielsen and Johnsen's closely affiliated work *Camp Kitchen* (2014). By combining war with domestic settings, both works nod to Martha Rosler's series of photo-collages, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), but despite the similarities in Nielsen and Johnsen's two works, an important difference remains. While there is action in *Camp Kitchen*, the living room of *Modern Escape* is characterized by passivity and withdrawal from the world. The many borders and walls emerging globally as seen

on the news are paralleled by the increasing barricading taking place inside the home. But still the world seeps in, suggesting that there is no escape from our complicity in structures of inequality and violence. In this way, *Modern Escape* places the spectator in a position close to what Michael Rothberg has termed "the implicated subject"—i.e., the notion that while we may not be directly responsible for historical and contemporary injustices, we may nevertheless inhabit positions where we benefit from and indirectly contribute to structures and systems of injustice (*The Implicated Subject*).

The Automated Surveillance Gaze

Nielsen and Johnsen work conceptually, and the idea behind the work is usually their starting point. The main conceptual idea of *Modern Escape* is *the automated gaze*, and the self-imposed rule of the work was to film most of the scenes without a human behind the camera. This is achieved by filming the lowest and highest images with a GoPro Hero camera glued either to the robotic vacuum cleaner or to a turntable attached to the ceiling with double-sided tape, while the mid-range angles are filmed by a professional camera placed on turntables (Nielsen and Johnsen, email of May 2019). As such, the work can be inscribed into a range of artistic explorations of how machines "see" the world, in the tradition after Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Canadian visual artist and filmmaker Michael Snow's *Wavelenght* (1967) and *La Région Centrale* (1971), and the contemporary Iranian-German artist Harun Farocki's *Eye/Machine* trilogy (2001–3).

Throughout *Modern Escape,* the automated gaze registers the inside of the home from multiple angles and from four strictly determined levels, ranging from floor level to a "drone view" from above. This artistic strategy creates random and awkward images such as the mid-height angle capturing the woman at knee-height (see fig. 4). Overall, the work exhibits a strong

tension between technologies and logics of mapping, security, borders, and surveillance on the

one hand, and narrative labyrinths, blind spots, distortions, mirrors, and shiny impenetrable

surfaces on the other. Accordingly, the desire to map, to see, to surveil, and to know is turned

inside out and distorted.

Fig. 4. Still from film, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape.* All images courtesy of the artists.

What is more, the artwork directly addresses the notion of the smart surveillance home

and the link between networked consumer technologies and the military-industrial complex

through appropriated imagery of an actual AI-enabled interactive surveillance system called

Lighthouse. *Lighthouse* existed on the US market for approximately a year and a half, from its

launch on May 11, 2017, to December 2018, and was at the forefront in introducing features

such as computer vision and facial and object recognition technologies into the home

(Lighthouse). The founders of the company came with backgrounds from the field of computer

vision, and the press release launching the surveillance system on the market highlighted the

association between *Lighthouse* and the military industrial complex as a major selling point,

noting how "Lighthouse uses deep learning and 3D sensing technology developed as part of the

DARPA Grand Challenge to introduce an unprecedented level of awareness within the home

while you're away." The DARPA—the U.S. Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency—

Grand Challenge was first initiated in 2004 as a competition to "accelerate the development of

autonomous vehicle technologies that could be applied to military requirements" (DARPA). The

association between a home surveillance system and the U.S. military services' desires for new

strategic opportunities recalls Cynthia Enloe's argument that "[t]hings start to become

militarized when their legitimacy depends on their associations with military goals" (145). The

subtle militarization of the home through computer vision developed for self-driving vehicles

funded by DARPA puts a new perspective on the promise of providing "an unprecedented level

of awareness within the home while you're away." Understood in this way, it attests to the

coming together of the logics of warfare, paranoia, and the intimate sphere. In the artwork, the

Lighthouse smart surveillance assistant enters through the flat screen TV in the living room,

displaying images of an AI enabled camera sending a light out to circle and measure the space—

a glare. The color scheme and sleek design of *Lighthouse* seamlessly integrate with the modern

home of the artwork.

Overall, the image quality of the work is high and crisp, rather than pixelated and

blurry—which sets it apart from the typical CCTV artworks of the 2000s and moves it into the

drone era, thus updating the way we have come to understand surveillance imagery as a cultural

trope. Nonetheless, the cold and faded color scheme of the work contributes to a detached, cold

atmosphere, which is further established by the circumstance that there are no relations and no

eye contact between the women in the work and the spectator. We are looking in from the

outside. The humans in the work are passive and withdrawn, captured by the steady mapping of

the automatic gaze.

Fig. 5. Still from film, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape.* All images courtesy of the artists.

The Machine's Mirror and Militarization

The vague sense of paranoia that *Modern Escape* conveys to the viewer can be ascribed to the

formal exploration of machine vision as decoupled from human agency and the lack of control

regarding what is "seen" and why. Considered as a critical artistic intervention, the work

explores questions related to the automated surveillance gaze and perspective. Who is the creator

of these images? Who is the recipient? The artwork depicts ambivalent and fleeting views, and

the act of watching is an interpretative action. However, this is no longer a privileged human

activity. As Hito Steyerl notes, "contemporary perception is machinic to a large degree. The

spectrum of human vision only covers a tiny part of it. Electric charges, radio waves, light pulses encoded by machines for machines are zipping by at slightly subluminal speed" (*Duty-Free Art* 47). How does this shape what is "seen"? The decoupling from human agency and human vision (Zylinska) contributes to another uncomfortable feeling created by *Modern Escape*, which is a vague sense of a loss of control and agency. Benjamin Bratton has referred to this as the "reverse uncanny valley," a discomfort and disillusion experienced "when we see ourselves through the 'eyes' of a machinic Other who does not and cannot have an affective sense of aesthetics . . . We are just stuff in the world for 'distributed machine cognition' to look at and make sense of." We are seen, recognized, or known by something which does not possess human capacities, such as emotional connection. This lack of emotional connection is emphasized by the overall lack of eye contact in *Modern Escape*. Bratton suggests that the uncomfortable recognition of ourselves in the machine's mirror reverses the "uncanny valley" originally coined by Masahiro Mori, which describe the feeling of revulsion which can arise in us when a robot becomes *too* human-like. In Bratton's reversed version, the uncanny arises when we see ourselves as un-human through the eyes of the creature and become aware of ourselves as "objects of perception from the position of the machines."

The automated gaze is a haunted gaze. Through it, *Modern Escape* suggests a deep entanglement of warfare, national security, surveillance, and the technologies of the Western middle-class home. Indeed, a range of the surveillance technologies embedded in everyday life originates in, or is funded by, the military sphere, as is the case with Global Positioning systems (GPS), close-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, locative media, the Internet, drones, and facial recognition technologies (Morrison). In the artwork, one expression of this entanglement is the deliberately inserted perspective from above, which alludes to the twenty-first century "eye in

the sky," the remote vision of the drone or satellite. On a formal level, this marks a shift from the older filmic trope of mimicking the angles from surveillance cameras mounted in the corner of a room. Nielsen and Johnsen explain that "surveillance cameras used to be installed in the corners of a room, and employing that filmic angle in a video or film will easily associate to surveillance. Today´s satellite perspectives are a direct angle from above, and we very deliberately installed the cameras to achieve these angles" (personal interview).

Fig. 6. Still from film, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape*. All images courtesy of the artists.

Historically, the aerial perspective's association to warfare traces back to the prominent nineteenth-century photographer Nadar, who, when he took the first aerial photograph from a hot air balloon in Paris in 1855, "immediately grasped the future benefit of photography to warmakers" (Sontag 176). Practices of aerial photography and aerial surveillance greatly

advanced during World War I, and Jeanne Haffner notes how "views from above . . . allowed military officers to locate troop movements, camouflaged artillery, and the trenches at a glance" (8). Thus, aerial photography provided a new way of seeing, "a distanced, holistic outsider's perspective," which laid the ground for new techniques of observation (14). With the view from above, then, a synthesis between the surveillant and the military gaze takes place, or perhaps rather a militarization of the surveillance gaze.

In the current era, yet another new way of seeing is conditioned. It is the disembodied and remote-controlled gaze from above. Returning to Steyerl, she observes that this reorientation of the surveillance gaze is enabled by new technologies such as the satellite or drone and Google map views. Today, Steyerl argues, the linear perspective as we know it from traditional art history is increasingly replaced by the aerial perspective, as new technologies of surveillance, tracking, and targeting emphasize and normalize the god's-eye view from above ("In Free Fall"). This gaze is intimately linked to warfare. The shift in perspective noted by Steyerl replaces the stable and single point of view of the linear perspective, which was tied to a body, with a dehumanized "perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior spectator safely floating up in the air . . . which establishes a new visual normality—a new subjectivity safely folded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction" ("In Free Fall" 8). Moreover, this emergent subjectivity should be seen in conjunction with the strong link between vision and domination, and with the argument that modern surveillance technologies operate on "the masculine and controlling end of the gender spectrum," primarily through disembodied control from a distance (Monahan 113). The subjectivity under construct, then, is the subjectivity of the age of remote warfare: a detached, observant gaze enabled by new technologies which is inherently militaristic.

Mapping, Searching, Recognizing

Returning to *Modern Escape,* the entanglement of warfare, surveillance, and the technologies of

the Western middle-class home is further established through the work's formal and thematic

structure of mapping and tracking practices. In fact, the association between the ordinary

everyday object of the robotic vacuum cleaner and the military industrial complex is established

right away, in the opening scene where the shape of the vacuum cleaner's path planner

overlaying the image resembles a helicopter, a well-known trope of war in visual culture (see fig.

2). The path planner overwrites the video in three places, "eating" itself into the image, as the

robot is searching, charting, and mapping the home, effectively blurring the boundaries between

the commonplace vacuum cleaner and the technologies of reconnaissance, tracking, and tracing.

Another blurring of boundaries appears when the TV shows a geomap image of a city, a satellite

view which is soon overlaid by the grid of the vacuum cleaner. The scene alludes to aerial

reconnaissance and computer vision technologies, and the green square further overlaying the

geomap is familiar from object and facial recognition applications from, e.g., smart phones and

social media apps (see fig. 7).

The mutually informative relationship between the military industrial complex and the

private tech companies of Silicon Valley, and, by extension, the consumers of everyday

technologies, evoked here leaves a sticky sense of complicity lingering in the networked

environment. A recent example of this entanglement is Project Maven, a U.S. military initiative

to integrate artificial intelligence into battlefield technology. In March 2018, it became known

that Google was collaborating with the U.S. Department of Defense on the project with the

objective of building an AI surveillance imagery analysis system (Fang, "Google is Quietly"). A

key objective was to develop AI enabled image-recognition software for analyzing video feeds

captured by drones to improve drone strikes on the battlefield. While strong protest from employees at Google for staying out of the "business of war" led the company to—at least officially—withdraw from renewing the contract, Google's collaboration with DoD arguably casts a shadow on its AI image recognition products for the commercial market (D'Onfro).[3]

Fig. 7. Installation view, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape*. Photograph by Anders Sune Berg. All images courtesy of the artists.

The promise of the home surveillance system *Google Nest*, for example, which features "familiar face alerts" to notify users' smart phones whether a camera detects a family member or a stranger, might gain a troubling undertone: "Your home, safe and sound. Google helps you look out for your family, day and night" (Google). Similarly, in the case of drones for civilian

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[3] However, *The Intercept* reports that Google never fully renounced work with the DoD. Rather the collaboration continues through a venture capital arm, Gradient Ventures, which provides access to Google's AI training data (Fang, "Google Continues").

versus military use, Daniela Agostinho et al. makes it clear that "any differentiation between military and nonmilitary drones is contentious, if not impossible, insofar as the development and logic of each technology informs the other" (253–4).

As my reading of *Modern Escape* suggests, the artwork foregrounds how the violence of war haunts the surveillance technologies of everyday life. It is a matter of what sticks to technologies and systems of surveillance—to its haunting historical continuities and present complicity—no matter how smoothly and seemingly innocent they integrate into the home and our everyday lives. What mediates and co-creates the haunting in *Modern Escape*, I argue, is the automated vision of the surveillance gaze and the robotic vacuum cleaner's mapping and surveying technologies, both embedded in an inheritance of militarism, imperatives for control, and oppressive power relations.

The Haunted House

"We are haunted by something we have been involved in," Avery Gordon writes (*Ghostly Matters* 51), and as my reading of *Modern Escape* has shown, we are haunted by something we are still involved in. To be haunted is, as noted in the introduction, "to be tied to historical and social effects" (190). In *Modern Escape* the entanglements between everyday technologies and practices of surveillance and the military-industrial complex, national security, and the recast colonial binarism of post-9/11 politics (Hall) comes to the fore through the estranged home, "that quintessential space of the uncanny, the haunted house" (Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 50). Sigmund Freud proposed that the category of sensations or feelings of the fearful and frightening belonging to the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is a matter of "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (124). Along the same lines, the etymological connection between haunting and home can be traced back to one origin

of the English word *haunt* which is likely to derive from the Old Norse *heimta*: "to bring home,"

or "to lead home" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*; *Merriam-Webster*; Heggstad, Hødnebø, and

Simensen).[4]

Fig. 8. Still from film, Nielsen and Johnsen, *Modern Escape.* All images courtesy of the artists.

In *Modern Escape,* the warfare and suffering "elsewhere" are brought back to the affluent

Western home as a troubling reminder of modernity's inheritance of "violence and wounds" as

well as current politics of exploitation. In a critique of Freud, Gordon maintains that the

unconscious is collective, rather than individual, and she argues that the uncanny is

fundamentally a social matter—uncanny experiences are hauntings of worldly contacts, "in the

world of common reality" (*Ghostly Matters* 54). Returning to the old Norse *heimta*, there is a

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[4] This connection comes about via the Old French *hanter*. However, the etymological derivation from old Norse is a subject of ongoing academic discussion (*Merriam-Webster*; *Online Etymology Dictionary*).

second meaning of the word, which is "a claim" or "what one has to demand" (Heggstad, Hødnebø, and Simensen). This second meaning opens up a sense of inescapability that someone might come to collect their due share, and I suggest that this repressed knowledge, our lingering complicity in past and present social wrongs, contribute to the paranoia and sense of haunting in *Modern Escape*. As an affective experience, the artwork induces an atmosphere of surveillance haunted by the violence and power relations in which we are implicated, yet which are often kept out of sight. As Gordon further observes, haunting describes "those singular and yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind field comes into view" (*Ghostly Matters* 2). My closing argument in this reading is that *Modern Escape* achieves exactly this. The work calls forth the connection between the Western middle class and what is kept out—out of the home, out of the privileged Global North, and out of the collective Western consciousness. It displays the close entanglements between our everyday networked technologies and those of war and the increasing efforts needed to barricade the home as well as the Western world. In the work, a layer of suggested complicity is added as the spectator suddenly becomes aware of her own watching presence when the lamp turns on and the automatic vacuum cleaner starts moving close by. In this way, the work questions the notion of the technologically-connected surveillance home and the spatial tensions between inside and outside, home and world, work and spectator.

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