

FRONTLINE IMAGES OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

International Workshop

28.05.2026, HEAD – Genève

(Rue Général-Dufour 2, HEM Building, 1204 Genève, Salle Kramer)

29.05.2026, Geneva Graduate Institute

(Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2A, 1211 Genève, Maison de la Paix, Salle S8)

CIRCULATION, AESTHETICS AND POLITICS



Organisation

Olivier Zuchuat (Dépt. Cinéma, HEAD-Genève)

Elizaveta Gaufman (University of Groningen, NL)

Anna Leander (Geneva Graduate Institute)

28–29 MAY 2026
GENEVA, SWITZERLAND

THURSDAY, 28 MAY, 2026

**HEAD – Genève. 2, rue du Général-Dufour, 1204 Genève,
Bâtiment HEM, Salle Kramer, Level -1.**

Live Streaming: <https://frontlineimages.sciencesconf.org/>

14:00–14:15 **OPENING – INTRODUCTION**
Elizaveta Gaufman, Anna Leander
and Olivier Zuchuat

14:15–14:45 **CONSUMER OFF-THE-SHELF DRONES**
Francis Hunger (Academy
of Visual Arts, Munich, DE)

The video essay *Consumer-off-the-shelf Drones* investigates the use of civilian drones as a means of war and propaganda in the current conflict in Ukraine. It is no longer only very expensive military equipment that is being used, but cheap consumer drones that were originally developed for YouTubers, influencers and documentary filmmakers. The video essay examines how influencer aesthetics and operational images, as described by Harun Farocki, overlap. Two overlapping image layers make it possible to interweave different narratives, synchronize them or create visual contrasts. www.irmielin.org

14:45–15:15 **EXPERIMENTAL FRONTLINES:
NEW DOCUMENTARY FORMS
IN WARTIME UKRAINE**
Masha Shpolberg (Bard College, USA)

This presentation traces the evolution of Ukrainian war documentary from the first days of the full-scale invasion to the present. It examines how filmmakers have experimented with emerging media forms and technologies, from collaboratively authored works produced by anonymous collectives to the growing prominence of drone vision. At the same time, the presentation situates these films within longer histories of Soviet war documentary while highlighting the emergence of innovative nonfiction aesthetics and modes of witnessing.

15:15–15:45 **ROUNDTABLE 1**
Francis Hunger, Mykola Makhortykh,
Masha Shpolberg and
Olivier Zuchuat

15:45–16:00 **COFFEE BREAK**

16:00–16:30 **RE-MEDIATION OF DRONE FOOTAGE:
SPACE AND AESTHETICS IN
DOCUMENTARY FILMS DEPICTING
THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR
SINCE 2022**
Jeremy Hicks (Queen Mary University
of London, UK)

The Russian Ukraine war has been notable for the proliferation of images that it has generated, notably by those of the frontline produced by drones. While these images were produced as part of a military system of targeting (operational images), they have also been reappropriated by a wide variety of media, sometimes raising ethical questions. The most sophisticated repurposing of drone imagery has come in independent documentary films, especially those made by Ukrainian filmmakers. In the hands of filmmakers such as Mstislav Chernov (*2000 Metres to Andriivka*, 2025) and Slava Leontyev & Brendan Bellomo (*Porcelain War*, 2024). These images are extracted from their military purpose to make their depiction of space, especially landscape, central and to collapse the abstract and dehumanising sense of distance present in the original footage. The films are then distributed in the first instance to film festivals and in some cases on the art house theatrical film circuit, inviting audiences to approach the images in the context of the tradition of documentary film. This paper will reflect on the ways in which the repurposing of drone footage in these and other documentary film depictions of the Russian-Ukrainian war permits a multi-layered reflection in which space is central: in the original footage, of landscape, and of the drone operators, filmmakers' and presumed audience's relation to the filmed events and subjects.

16:30–17:00 **MEDIATIZED WAR AND THE LIMITS
OF DOCUMENTARY IN SERGEI
LOZNITSA'S *DONBASS* (2018)**
Yuliya V. Ladygina (The Pennsylvania
State University, USA)

Sergei Loznitsa's *Donbass* (2018) offers a powerful exploration of hybrid warfare as mediated spectacle. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Harun Farocki's concept of "operational images," this paper argues that the film does not simply represent war but exposes how media actively constructs social and political reality. Through thirteen fragmented vignettes inspired by online videos from the Donbas War, *Donbass* blurs documentary and fiction to reveal propaganda, staged events, and digital circulation as central mechanisms of contemporary conflict, positioning cinema itself as part of the infrastructure of war.

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17:00–17:30 **EAT, PRAY, WAR: GENDERED ANALYSIS OF RUSSIAN STATE RHETORIC DURING THE FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE**
Elizaveta Gaufman (University of Groningen, NL)

There have been a number of scholarly interventions that focus on Russian state ideology and rhetoric in the context of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, despite the rape jokes and the reliance on militarized masculinity narratives on the state level, there has been considerably less attention to the gendered angle of the governmental rhetoric. This paper explores how gender functions as a core structuring element in Russian state ideology of war, focusing on the intersection of political discourse, popular culture, and affective narratives. It argues that pro-war messaging relies heavily on gendered archetypes to render violence both necessary and morally justified. The paper specifically highlights the role of pro-war poetry as a site where these gendered imaginaries are emotionally intensified and culturally reproduced. Such texts fuse intimacy with militarism, often depicting the homeland as a beloved woman worth dying for, while glorifying male sacrifice and endurance. Through these affective registers, war is aestheticized and normalized, allowing ideological narratives to resonate on a deeply personal level. The paper showcases how these gendered constructions are reinforced through contrasts with a feminized and “degenerate” West, portrayed as morally weak and threatening to Russia’s “traditional values.” By tracing these patterns across political rhetoric and cultural production, the paper demonstrates that gender is not merely symbolic but constitutive of the narratives that sustain and legitimize the Russian state’s war effort.

17:30–18:00 **ROUNDTABLE 2**
Jeremy Hicks, Yuliya V. Ladygina,
Elizaveta Gaufman, Nicolas Bailleul,
Anna Leander

18:00–20:00 **DINNER**
Restaurant Le Carosello
Bd Georges-Favon 25
1204 Genève, Suisse

20:00–20:40 **THE RISE OF RETICULAR IMAGES**
(Video essay, work in progress)
Olivier Zuchuat (HEAD–Genève, CH)

Drawing on the tradition of analytical found-footage films and the legacy of Harun Farocki’s cinema, the video essay *The Rise of Reticular Images* analyses the production, circulation and ‘consumption’ of images captured by surveillance or kamikaze drones attacking moving targets on the front lines of the war in Ukraine. The essay considers the ethical issues surrounding the dissemination of these images, the overlap between films featuring these images and the aesthetic conventions of action films, and the creation of *milsim* video games based on these images of battles. It also explores forums of war watchers who relentlessly scroll through these images.

20:40–21:15 **DISCUSSION**
All

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09:00–09:30 **SPLINTER IN THE EYE OF AN
ALGORITHM? VISUAL ANALYSIS
OF WAR TRAUMA REPRESENTATION
BY WEB SEARCH ENGINES.**
Mykola Makhortykh (University
of Bern, CH)

Today, we face unprecedented amounts of information about the wars. However, the abundance of content about mass violence also poses challenges for individuals who aim to navigate it, raising concerns from re-traumatization to opinion manipulation. Algorithmic curators of war-related content, such as search engines, become thus of paramount importance, but what selection criteria do these curators follow, and what aspects of wars do they make more visible? To understand it, we investigate how two major search engines—Google and Bing—visually represented the war in Ukraine before and after the 2022 invasion, using a combination of longitudinal algorithm audits with visual content analysis.

09:30–10:00 **MEDIATING OPERATIONAL IMAGES.
TRACING, TRAVERSING AND TEXTURING
THE BATTLEFIELD BOUNDARIES
OF THE UKRAINE WAR**
Anna Leander (Geneva Graduate
Institute, CH)

This talk tells the story of how operational images make battlefield boundaries. Working with Lilie Chouliaraki's distinction between re-, inter- and trans-mediation, it tells the story of how mediation shapes the tracing, traversability, and texture of battlefield boundaries. The consequences are militarising. They deepen, extend, and diffuse the place of the military in politics and society. The story about the three boundary-drawing processes and their militarising consequences opens a discussion about the visual politics of 'invisual culture' in the context of war and beyond

10:00–10:30 **ROUNDTABLE 3**
Mykola Makhortykh, Anna Leander,
Francis Hunger, Yuliya V. Ladygina

10:30–10:45 **COFFEE BREAK**

10:45–11:15 **PRICE PER SLOT. A PERFORMATIVE
LECTURE EXPLORING THE VIDEO GAME
ESCAPE FROM TARKOV**
Nicolas Bailleul (University of Paris 8, F)

My presentation takes the form of a performative lecture exploring the video game *Escape from Tarkov*, developed by the Russian studio BattleState Games. My analysis approaches the game both as a fictional world of war, shaped by a strong military atmosphere that resonates with contemporary geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe, and as a community space structured by players economic and logistical practices around loot mechanics (the act of collecting, managing, and storing resources). From the game's fictional hideouts to the gamers and streamers bedrooms, the presentation explores how spaces of play become extensions of contemporary imaginaries of war, survivalism, and extractivism.

11:15–11:35 **FROM MILITAINMENT TO WARTAINMENT**
Olivier Zuchuat (HEAD–Genève, CH)

In light of the war in Ukraine, we propose the term *wartainment* to describe the intensification and acceleration, in times of war, of the permeability and reciprocal cross-media interactions between (1) the reality on the battlefields and the operational images associated with them, (2) the field of numerical simulation (video games, military training systems), (3) Airsoft-style field combat simulations and (4) action films. This concept of *wartainment* thus complements the concept of *militainment* proposed notably by Burston (2003) and subsequently by Stahl (2009). What are the aesthetic, political, technological and strategic aspects of the 'wartainment', for which we shall propose some initial definitions regarding the situation of the frontlines in Ukraine?

11:35–12:05 **ROUNDTABLE 4**
Nicolas Bailleul, Olivier Zuchuat,
Jeremy Hicks, Masha Spolberg

12:05–13:30 **LUNCH**

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13:45–15:15 **WAR IN 60 SECONDS: *TIKTOK* AND *TELEGRAM*, VISUAL MANIPULATION, AND FRONTLINE NARRATIVES IN THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE**
Artur Koldomasov and
Andrii Pylypenko
(Detector Media, Ukraine)

15:20–16:10 **CONCLUSION**
Elizaveta Gaufman, Anna Leander,
and Olivier Zuchuat

This conference presentation examines the role of visual disinformation on *TikTok* and *Telegram* in shaping public perceptions of frontline developments during Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. Drawing on research conducted by Detector Media, the presentation explores how manipulated videos, recycled footage, AI-generated imagery, misleading captions, and emotionally charged visual narratives circulate within *TikTok*'s algorithmic ecosystem during key moments of the war.

Particular attention is devoted to the ways pro-Russian actors and anonymous networks exploit short-form video formats to distort battlefield realities, spread panic, and amplify conspiratorial interpretations of military events. The presentation analyses several case studies connected to frontline developments, including misinformation surrounding territorial advances, mobilization, civilian casualties, and military losses. Using qualitative content analysis and digital media monitoring data from Detector Media, the presentation highlights broader trends in contemporary information warfare and demonstrates how TikTok has become a significant battleground for influence operations targeting both domestic and international audiences.

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Organisation Committee:

Olivier Zuchuat (Dept. Cinéma, HEAD–Genève)
Elizaveta Gaufman (University of Groningen)
Anna Leander (Geneva Graduate Institute)

Administration and coordination:

Christelle Granite-Noble (IRAD, HEAD–Genève)
Elena Iruarizaga Ballesteros (Dépt. Cinéma,
HEAD–Genève)
Sylvia Nissim (Global Governance Centre,
Geneva Graduate Institute)

Collaborators to the research project:

Mykyta Kryvosheiev (Editor, Switerland-Ukraine)
Ulrich Fischer (Memoways, CH)

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Anita Hugi (Dépt. Cinéma, HEAD),
Claudia Lanz et Virginie Dhaze
(Communication, HEAD),
Faust Perillaud (Pool numérique, HEAD)

Contact mail:

frontlineimages@sciencesconf.org

Website:

<https://frontlineimages.sciencesconf.org>