6

Target Confirmed

Drone Visuality, Dehumanization and the Weeping Soldier in *Eye in the Sky*

Alex Adams

Gavin Hood's 2015 drone movie *Eye in the Sky* is centrally concerned with the questions of empathy, violence and visuality that are at the heart of the representation of the war face on screen. This movie reveals a great deal about the ways in which the cinematic close-up, and its central capacity to foreground expressions of human emotion, can function as an aesthetic technology (i.e. a visual means that can achieve certain political ends) that unevenly distributes political affects such as compassion, empathy and sympathy in the service of specific political objectives. The film's complex blend of visual registers articulates a powerful faith in the ability of technological visuality to both establish and communicate a sense of not simply *informational veracity* – that is, the ability of military imaging technology to represent the world with a high degree of undistorted, actionable accuracy – but also *moral truth* – understood as the ability of surveillance technology to establish a meaningful way of knowing, recognizing and interpreting the ethical and political values that define human groups and individuals. Multiple drones'-eye views are interleaved into the film's cinematic vocabulary, with the result that the film systematically establishes a range of competing visual registers through which certain characters are made intelligible in dramatically differing ways.

In the key scene I want to focus on here, a Hellfire missile slams into a house where a group of members of the East African militant group al-Shabaab are preparing a suicide mission. This is the second such missile in a short period: the first missile demolished their house but did not kill every member of the prospective suicide squad. Unfortunately, an innocent young girl, Alia, is also caught in both blasts, and the second missile conclusively seals her fate. As the

rubble settles, the drone pilots, both weeping at the tragedy of the violence they have been ordered to inflict, are required to use their drone's camera to identify the remains of their targets. Amongst a flurry of diegetic close-ups of visibly regretful military personnel – the pilot and his sensor operator, a targeteer, several officers, and the military legal adviser – there are two shots of the strike's major victim, the terrorist ringleader. In the first, seen through the lens of the drone, part of a head lies among smouldering rubble; in the next, the victim's identity is confirmed by contrasting this drone's-eye image against surveillance footage of the target when she was still alive. The scene, then, emphasizes the human suffering of the drone operators at the same time as it offers us grisly imagery of their dismembered victim, whose human suffering is obscured by her reduction to gore that can be bureaucratically examined to scientifically assess the military effectiveness of the strike. The use of facial close-ups in this sequence reflects, in microcosm, the power dynamics of a whole host of hegemonic drone fiction and, by extension, drone discourse more generally.

This chapter focuses on two aspects of this scene in depth, examining what it reveals both about drone discourse and about the role of the close-up of the face in the representation of war. First, *Eye in the Sky* is a bold example of what Israeli critic Ilan Pappe has called 'shoot and cry' (2006: 197), a rhetorical strategy in which military murderers emphasize their own pain and regret to downplay the savagery of their own actions and, importantly, to exonerate themselves morally of these actions. The weeping drone operator is emphasized across a range of drone fictions: it is a figure which functions to supplant political and moral questions of the ethics of military violence with private reflections on drone operator trauma. Second, in stark contrast, the movie is a clear example of the ways in which dehumanization is built into drone visuality. This form of militarized machinic opticality synthesizes targeting, cartography, surveillance, and imperial racism, and its representation and reproduction in *Eye in the Sky* both reproduces its dehumanizing gaze and contributes to a technophilic fantasy in which drone visuality achieves total visual and informational transparency. The scene, that is, interleaves two visual registers, one that brings the characters' humanity to the foreground, and another that works to eliminate it altogether.

The plot of *Eye in the Sky* focuses in considerable detail on the moral minutiae of one drone operation, self-consciously staging a debate over the legitimacy of the drone strike at its diegetic centre. Its narrative is, therefore, characterized simultaneously by a sharply focused scope and, within that narrow scope, a baroque complexity; it is, on the one hand, simply concerned with whether

a drone strike should go ahead (the film's answer is, of course, yes), and on the other, it engages with many legal, political and ethical aspects of the attack in depth and with a reasonable degree of nuance.

The central scenario is as follows: a drone pilot has several members of al-Shabaab in his sights, and he is able, with a squeeze of his trigger, to prevent the terrorist attack that they are actively preparing to perpetrate. The decision about whether to fire on them is complicated, however, by two factors. First, the mission is being observed by a British civilian security committee that expects to witness a capture rather than a kill. Even though they recognize the imminent threat, they are hesitant to authorize deadly force; at times, the many legal and political obstacles that stand in the way of this clearly legitimate goal give the film an air of farce, as barrier after barrier is presented by the law of war, by democratic political considerations, and by the squeamishness of the civilian committee. Second, Alia is selling bread within the estimated blast zone and will certainly be killed should the drone operator release his weapon.

Ultimately, of course, the strike goes ahead, and Alia is killed along with the prospective suicide bombers. The central political task of the film is to emphasize the tragedy of killing her in the course of achieving the militarily legitimate aim of preventing a terror attack. Though it is very sad that she is killed, her death is represented as inevitable because of the intractably unpalatable complexity of contemporary counterinsurgency. The film, then, is a finely calibrated piece of propaganda which articulates the ideas both that imperial violence is committed with the best of intentions and that sometimes grievous sacrifices must be made if innocent people are to be protected from terror attacks. What I would like to emphasize in this essay specifically is that the movie is structured by an economy of compassion that can be read especially clearly in the use of the filmic close-up.

Shoot and Cry

The first war face I want to historically situate and critically read is that of the weeping drone operator. Throughout the movie, pilot Steve (Aaron Paul) and his sensor operator Carrie (Phoebe Fox) are reluctant to execute the strike. Neither of them has released a weapon at a human target before, and they are both visibly troubled by the likelihood of their missile killing Alia along with the al-Shabaab cell. Steve even exercises his right to have the collateral damage estimate

recalculated in light of the new circumstance of Alia's presence in the predicted blast zone; the unstated yet unambiguous implication of this request is that Steve does not want to endanger innocent life by firing his missile. After they have carried out their order to fire twice on the city block, tears stream down both of their faces as they look at the smouldering human wreckage on their screens (Figure 6.1). They are commanded to identify the bodies of the strike targets, and as they use their instruments to do so, they speak quietly to one another in voices audibly thickened by grief. The point is clear: they are prepared to do their duty, but they take absolutely no pleasure in it. They are martyred by their complicity in the drone strike that they themselves have conducted.

Compositionally, these shots are as archetypal an empathic close-up as one could wish to find in any piece of cinema. Their faces, from hairline to jawline, fill the vertical axis of the screen. The light is low key, and the background is a deep black, punctuated only by flickering LEDs that have been reduced to smudges by the shallowness of the depth of field. These compositional choices are diegetically explained by the characters' location in a drone cabin, an enclosed space that admits no natural light, but they also allow these close-ups to pull the faces of Carrie and Steve into an eerie spotlight, illuminated only by the glow of their screens and dragged away from any context other than the darkness that surrounds them. These two disembodied faces, in these powerful close-ups, are canvases of sheer feeling; and as they gaze towards us, their emotion is bombastically displayed. What is more, as both characters weep, they avert their gaze. Looking away from their screens, they also break the eye contact with the audience that has been a fundamental coordinate of the composition of the

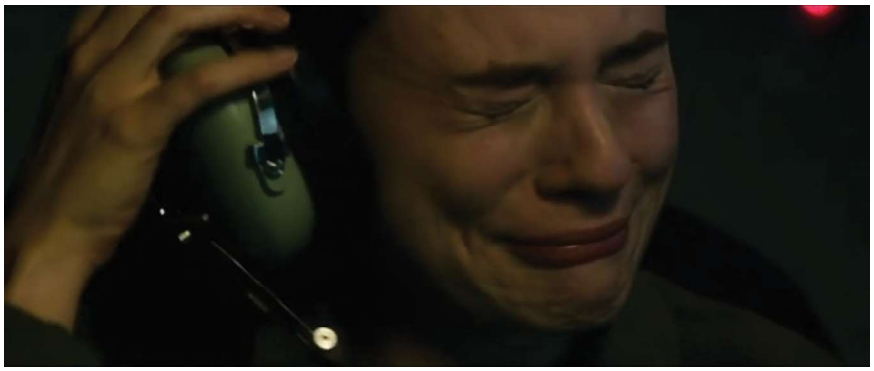

Figure 6.1 The weeping sensor operator. *Eye in the Sky* directed by Gavin Hood © Entertainment One 2015. All rights reserved.

many shots in which these two characters have appeared prior to this pivotal scene. This emphasizes not only their distress but their shame, as they look away from us after executing the actions that break their own hearts.

The term 'shoot and cry' is drawn from the work of Israeli historian Ilan Pappe, who describes a settler colonial mind-set in which prominent public displays of grief and regret have the function of appearing to deal with the moral implications of one's own violent actions. Though Pappe does not *theorize* this ethos in much detail, he describes it in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* as 'a typically righteous Israeli way of seeking self-absolution' (2006: 197). That is, by foregrounding the suffering that is caused by participation in atrocities – emphasizing, that is, the horror, disgust, shame and regret that the participation in settler colonial violence causes people to experience – the weeping soldier is a stock figure in Israeli settler storytelling who casts himself as a victim of his own capacity for violence. This representational tradition has the effect of depoliticizing the violence of imperial war, showing it as something morally inevitable which wounds everybody equally rather than a deliberately enacted form of material relations. The emphasis laid on the tears of the perpetrator of settler violence functions to sympathetically humanize this perpetrator and to sideline much more difficult and important questions of colonial domination.

There is, of course, nothing uniquely Israeli about shooting and crying, though it is true that it takes on a specific form and resonance in Israel, the particular context that Pappe is writing about. Ben White (2007) writes that it is particularly attractive to liberal Zionists, because by 'combining moral remorse with unhampered support for ethnic cleansing', shoot and cry gives liberal Zionists a way to be critical of the atrocities of colonization without critiquing the broader project of Zionist nationalism which makes these atrocities possible. This or that individual act of violence may be especially distressing, but the overall project of settler colonialism escapes scrutiny. Likewise, *Eye in the Sky* gives American and British audiences a way to shake their heads ruefully about the horrors of war without in any way questioning the many broader political and ethical questions raised by Western drone programmes or, indeed, the war on terror more generally.

Elsewhere, analysing shoot and cry in the context of Iraq War fiction, Jim Holstun writes that the strategy 'denies responsibility for the other's suffering while appropriating it as an authenticating experience' (2019: 5–6). That is, if soldiers are upset by it, they cannot really be responsible for it; what is more, however, the traumatic suffering they experience proves that they have authentic

insight into war and places them beyond the judgement of noncombatants. Shoot and cry discourse is sometimes found alongside the notion of 'flesh witnessing', theorized by Yuval Noah Harari (2009) and drawn upon by Robert Burgoyne in his reading of *Eye in the Sky* (2023: 43, 54, 55). This is an understanding of soldierly experience which emphasizes its tragic dignity and elevates the suffering soldier into a radically privileged position. Because soldiers directly experience the horror of war, Harari claims, they bear a uniquely intense – literally embodied, painfully felt in the physical matter of the soldierly body – insight into warfare and its attendant moral and political considerations. Importantly, Harari concedes to the soldier the authority to tell war stories without being challenged. 'In contrast to eyewitnesses', writes Harari, 'the flesh-witnesses of war must be witnesses *and judges* rolled into one. Nobody else is eligible for the role of judge.' Shortly after this, he writes that a civilian's 'proper response' to soldiers' accounts of war 'should be to listen to the soldier with respect, knowing that he cannot understand the experience and that he must defer to the soldier's authority' (221–2; original emphasis).

That is, Harari seeks to establish flesh-witnessing as a source of epistemological and political authority for those wielding it, a form of narratorial power which should reduce scholars and civilians to uncritical silence. Importantly, he attributes this authority solely to soldiers and not to civilians or noncombatants affected by war, arrogating the sole authority to narrate war to its active participants. Rather breathlessly, he tells us that flesh witnesses 'resemble religious visionaries and prophets who are possessed by some transcendent power and who speak – often against their will – in order to change the world rather than merely to transmit information' (222). Harari may be right that the perspective gained from soldierly experience is distinctive and valuable, and he does emphasize that flesh witnesses often disagree, but his conceptualization of flesh witnessing as a source of transcendent authority encourages his readers to accept soldiers' accounts of warfare over and above the accounts of other participants in, or victims of, military violence. Shoot and cry, too, by emphasizing the moral depth of the perpetrators of military violence, functions to place them beyond critique. *You can't tell us how bad war is*, these tears announce. *We who pulled the trigger know*.

Weeping carries a specific aesthetic density and political value in propaganda, second only perhaps to martyrdom. Moshe Barach's 1987 essay on the religious iconography of tears is particularly illustrative here.

> Tears are shed in repentance, they are thus born from the awareness of one's own sins, and therefore also properly signify self-knowledge. But since they are the expression of repentance, they prepare the soul for salvation, and possess the ability to purify and rejuvenate the soul … tears are not simply the universal reflection of an agonizing condition, but also the indication of the character and status of the figures shedding them … only figures of inherent sanctity are allowed to shed tears; neutral figures, let alone sinners of all kinds, are not granted the *donum lacrimorum* [gift of tears].
>
> (Barach 1987: 33, 36)

To be seen to weep – to have one's weeping sympathetically displayed – is to occupy a privileged moral position. It is not only that one's internal, private feelings are taken seriously, dignified, by being given a platform, although that is surely true. Those who are given the opportunity to display their emotional suffering are those whose suffering is recognized as *existing at all*, and as *existing in a way that matters*. What is more, Barach argues, tears are evidence not only of emotional states – sadness, contrition and so on – but of an elevated spiritual condition, an especial dignity in the sight of God. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes that the act of confession 'exonerates, redeems, and purifies him [the confessor]; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation' (1978: 62). That is, confession is a ritual of discourse which proceeds from the cognizance of guilt towards the acceptance of forgiveness and as such is concerned most of all with the *erasure* of sin. Tears, likewise, are a recognition of one's own wretchedness, which functions – symbolically and politically – to authorize forgiveness and absolution, focusing on responsibility for wrongdoing only insofar as it seeks to absolve it.

To repeat, shoot and cry is by no means a uniquely Israeli phenomenon. Comedian Frankie Boyle's famously caustic witticism, in his 2016 show *Hurt Like You've Never Been Loved*, gestures towards its ubiquity in American popular culture, too: 'Not only will America come to your country and kill all your people, but what's worse, I think, is that they'll come back twenty years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad.' Shoot and cry, Boyle suggests, is a particularly cynical, self-serving rhetorical gesture. Not only is the complexity and seriousness of war oversimplified; it is trivialized and sentimentalized. What is more, it is a narrow manifestation of a far broader trend in which US soldiers are shown as complex and sympathetic moral agents whose suffering is valuable, dignifying and above all, of profound moral and political value. The traumatized soldier

is, after all, a staple feature of American war films and TV productions. One of its earliest appearances is *The Best Years of Our Lives*, a 1946 Hollywood production that focuses on the struggles of three American GIs reintegrating into civilian life after their return from war. Of particular note is Fred (Dana Andrews), a bombardier who suffers from night terrors and whose traumatic symptoms are sympathetically foregrounded. Vietnam movies are especially notable for the proliferation of suffering soldiers who play protagonist: in *First Blood* (1982), elite-veteran-turned-drifter John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) weeps inconsolably at the film's climax; at the conclusion of *The Deer Hunter* (1978), veteran Nick Chevotarevich (Christopher Walken) is revealed as so traumatized by his wartime experience that he has found refuge in a seedy, suicidal career of Russian roulette; *Apocalypse Now* (1979) opens with an extended scene of its protagonist Willard (Martin Sheen) drunkenly sobbing; *Born on the Fourth of July* (1991) focuses in lavish detail on the postwar suffering, contrition, and activism of real-life veteran Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise). The war on terror, too, has been notable for its depictions of soldiers as dignified, sensitive and emotionally harmed by their war experience. Consider *Redacted* (2007), *Restrepo* (2010) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008), for instance, each of which prominently features sympathetic scenes in which soldiers shed tears. *Battle for Haditha* (2007) is particularly notable here, as it dramatizes a 2005 reprisal massacre in Iraq in which US marines killed more than twenty unarmed Iraqi civilians after their convoy struck an IED. As well as showing the viewer the marines' violence with bloodcurdling verisimilitude, the movie also shows us the emotional turmoil of the marines' commanding officer, complicating our impression of him and displacing responsibility for his crimes onto the horror of war in general.

Drone texts have been particularly notable in this regard. *Good Kill* (2014) is a portrait of a drone operator's psychological decline into alcoholism, loneliness and marital breakdown. In *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* (2019), a drone operator is so moved by his accidental killing of an innocent man that he undertakes a journey to Syria to beg forgiveness from the family of his target. The short film *Drone* (2015) emphasizes the horror of conducting one's first kill. In *Drones* (2013), two drone operators come to blows over the ethics of carrying out an unjust order. These characters perform a range of affective states: regret, guilt, and moral outrage, for example, sometimes developing longer-term mental health conditions including depression, substance abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder

and so on. Drone novels, too, often emphasize the emotional toll of drone operations on the personnel conducting them. Dan Fesperman, for instance, writes in his novel *Unmanned* that drone operations gave his protagonist 'a mental case of the bends that had eventually doubled him over in pain' (2014: 153); and Mike Maden – an author not noted for his sentimentality – writes in *Drone Threat* that 'killing the nation's enemies – even for the right reasons – exacted a terrible psychic cost' (2016: 81).

There is no doubt that drone labour can be profoundly distressing for those conducting it. Drone operator Brandon Bryant, for example, has been noted for his frank discussions of his numbness, anger, depression, nightmares and posttraumatic stress disorder diagnosis (Power 2013), and a *New York Times* profile of drone pilot Kevin Larson describes the 'tendrils of distress' that reached into every corner of his life, leading to substance misuse, marital breakdown and, eventually, to his suicide (Philipps 2022). The continuous and disproportionate emphasis on this aspect of the job throughout the genre of drone fiction, however, clearly has an ideological function. Alex Danchev writes that this focus on the drone operator is 'essentially self-regarding, and occasionally self-serving. It may shed light on "others", but it returns, obsessively, to us' (2016: 16). That is, this focus on the weeping soldier – the drone operator who has fired his missile with tears in his eyes – functions to sanitize the violence that he inflicts by prioritizing the moral injury suffered by the pilot over the immolation and death suffered by the people he fires his weapons at. The term shoot and cry, then, refers to a specific form of military sentimentality that is cultivated and articulated with a considerable deal of care and sophistication and that has the specific material function of privileging the pain of soldiers over the deaths of those they slaughter.

In conclusion, then, the cinematic close-up functions here to provide the illusion of ethical directness. Steve and Carrie's tears seem to reach out of the screen and implore us to recognize their sincere emotions; we are encouraged to share their sadness and to arrive at certain conclusions about their moral virtue. In *The Face on Film* (2017), however, Noa Steimatsky cautions us against accepting such appeals at face value, reminding us that the moral potential of the cinematic face is more complex than such appeals suggest. Steimatsky does emphasize that the face is a site of moral force, as it 'is personified by sheer intensity and is thus experienced as breaking through the image surface, reaching out to penetrate the shell of our own

subjectivity' (38); later she continues that 'the facialized image prompts recognition, engagement, and even a sense of liability', emphasizing that filmic images of the face can be 'a conduit for knowledge, recognition, and moral insight' (39).

Perhaps this potential for moral force is what Robert Burgoyne refers to when he writes that in *Eye in the Sky* 'the existential meaning of remote combat is brought into relief' and that 'the pathos of war and sacrifice now shifts from the victims of war to its agents' (2023: 55). For the emotional intensity of the actors' performances does indeed communicate an affective charge to the audience, inviting us to suffer alongside (to experience compassion for) both pilot Steve and sensor operator Carrie, whose tears, for Burgoyne, represent evidence of a virtuous sacrifice of some kind. Importantly, however, for Steimatsky the almost alchemical ethical potential of the filmic face is matched with a fundamental ambiguity and ambivalence. For Steimatsky, the face is 'the one element consistently charged and overdetermined in film' (57); it is 'where we encounter time and again, *in the visual*, what we cannot really know' (63; original emphasis); despite its apparent transparency, the filmic face 'remains essentially ungraspable, strangely unstable and fugitive' (100). In sum, Steimatsky argues that 'it is a condition of the great cinematic face to signal subjectivity in epiphanic terms that defy the legible signs of expression' (146). That is, Steimatsky cautions against attributing transparent moral valences to the filmic face, perhaps especially those which seek to seduce us with strong affects. Propaganda, after all, is notable for the ways in which it attempts to eliminate ambiguity, insisting on the direct, literal referentiality of its bombastically distorted metaphors. The reason that I quote Steimatsky at some length here is that her reflections on the illusory transparency of the filmic face point directly to the clearest ethical limitation of *Eye in the Sky*. Its visual register is built expressly to *eliminate* the uncertainty of the filmic face that Steimatsky identifies as one of its greatest potentials. The performances of Paul and Fox are all too transparently legible and unambiguous in the distance they place between those who pull the trigger and their responsibility for the lethal violence that this launches into the world. There is no doubting their sincerity. Their self-loathing and shame function as a kind of cleansing prophylactic; their tears appear to wash them of their own sins.

Dehumanization, Gore and the Anthropometric Gaze

Eye in the Sky's illusion of ethical transparency is matched by a second, perhaps more insidious illusion: that of the capacity of drone visuality to provide us with the technological miracle of anthropometric transparency. Steimatsky (once again) defines anthropometric practice as 'the tradition of measuring and regulating apparatuses meant to contain the evasive qualities of contingency and singularity in the human form and to subjugate it to systemic scrutiny and institutional organization and control' (163). That is to say, the visual capture of the human form has often been central to violent carceral practices of policing, incarceration and control, such as cataloguing, categorization, even eugenics. The filmic close-up is a descendant of the criminal mugshot as much as it is an offspring of the religious iconography of the weeping martyr. The anthropometric gaze of the drone is one of *Eye in the Sky*'s major visual registers: when viewing the Western military coalition, we get lavish cinematic close-ups; when viewing the film's villains, we do so through various anthropometric apparatuses, none of which are designed to humanize or build sympathy.

The drone vision on display in *Eye in the Sky* is characterized as flawless, high-definition, real-time surveillance imagery, a far cry from the material reality of the low-resolution drone imagery in use in 2015 when the film was made (Asaro 2016). As well as the pristine footage from the conventional Reaper UAV, the military's situational awareness of the al-Shabaab cell is supplemented by several biomimicry microdrones capable of surveilling domestic interiors whilst avoiding detection. This technophilic exaggeration of the visual and informational capabilities of drone systems functions to establish an epistemological fantasy in which drone technologies harvest detailed perfect knowledge and present it, unsullied by mediation or interpretation, ready for practical military use. Early in the film, the drone follows vehicles in high definition, producing unambiguous full-colour footage that clearly identifies specific individuals. A bug drone no bigger than a largish beetle examines the ordnance that the cell is strapping to young volunteers, allowing military personnel to make precise estimates as to the probable force of any detonation. Later, as we will see, facial recognition software is powerful enough to conclusively confirm the social identity of a scorched lump of human matter.

This fantasy of visual omniscience is the lens through which the film makes intelligible the intended target of the drone strike. The drone operation is conducted to apprehend Ayesha al-Hadi, birth name Susan Helen Danford, a white woman who is a very high military priority. Though the strike is complicated by Alia's presence within the meticulously identified blast zone, the factor that legitimizes it – and overrides the child's right to life – is the possibility of Danford's death. Importantly, Danford does not feature in the diegetic fabric of the film as a character in the same way as the military personnel: she arrives on our screen indirectly, through surveillance photography and drone footage. In other words, we only ever see Danford through the act of targeting. This weapon's-eye view is necessarily dehumanizing and is teleologically predetermined to lead to her violent death (the lens is not simply an optical device: it is a targeting apparatus, a gunsight).

Earlier in the film we get a short biography of Danford, accompanied by surveillance imagery of her. This potted backstory emphasizes her radicalization in a West London Mosque, most likely an allusion to Finsbury Park Mosque, a mosque that has been placed at the heart of multiple counterterrorism panics because of the supposedly extreme nature of the teachings that were to be found there (Ragazzi 2016). In addition, Danford has assumed a Muslim name and has married a member of al-Shabaab. This is a clear reference to Samantha Lewthwaite, a real white British woman with links to al-Shabaab who became notorious due to the British press labelling her the 'white widow' (Auer et al. 2019). This means that her characterization takes place offscreen, literally using the audience's presumed familiarity with contemporaneous counterterrorism mythology to populate the absence at the heart of this sketched outline.

The imagery through which we come to know Danford does often feature close-ups, but what is most important about them – and indeed, what most clearly distinguishes them from the close-ups of Steve and Carrie previously discussed – is the multiple layers of *distance* built into them. Figure 6.2 is a representative example. Instead of a moving and breathing person, her visage is presented to us with the act of mediation foregrounded, as we see a still image placed into an informational matrix, cross-referenced with other intelligence resources; prominent visual elements such as the red pins and red string bisecting her face emphasize the use to which this photograph is being put, its place within a system of incriminating evidence. That is, this image of a human face is not intended to reveal any sacred human weight. It is an investigative

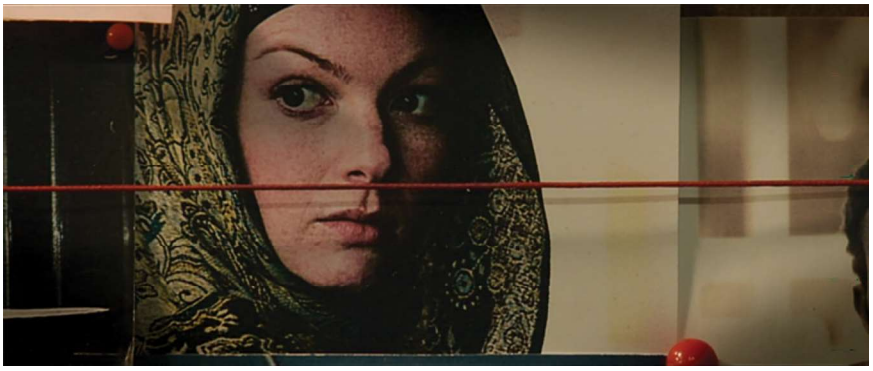

Figure 6.2 Surveillance image of Danford. Author screenshot. *Eye in the Sky* directed by Gavin Hood © Entertainment One 2015. All rights reserved.

object, part of a case against her, an anthropometric sample which establishes her availability to lethal state force.

At all times, then, Danford is intelligible only through a predigested account generated by a heuristic of suspicion. Her biography is not, after all, simply an account of her life: it is a rationale for her murder. It is also notable that the other members of al-Shabaab – Black African men – are given no such preamble. It is Danford's whiteness that necessitates the explanation of her presence in the house. That is, the political violence of Black African men can be taken for granted, whereas the involvement of a white woman in political violence needs to be accounted for, pathologized and prominently punished.

The anthropometric (criminalizing, suspicious, analytical, predictive) gaze does not retreat from Danford even upon her death. Steve and Carrie identify her by focusing on a beige lump of matter, scattered amongst shattered stone and broken beams, which turns out to be her head, blown away from her body and blasted into near-unrecognizability by their second missile (Figure 6.3). Several things are significant about this visual gesture. Perhaps the most significant of all is the misleading implicit claim that two direct hits by Hellfire missiles would leave any intelligible human remains at all, let alone a head that can be so clearly recognized. The drone footage is also characterized by a fluidity, mobility, resolution and clarity which far outstrips that of the drone technologies in use at the time the film was made; Figure 6.3 is the final composition after a very long zoom which features no distortion, latency or other visual uncertainty. The white scale markers and columns of numbers on the frame signify that we are looking through the drone's camera, giving us the illusion of total access to

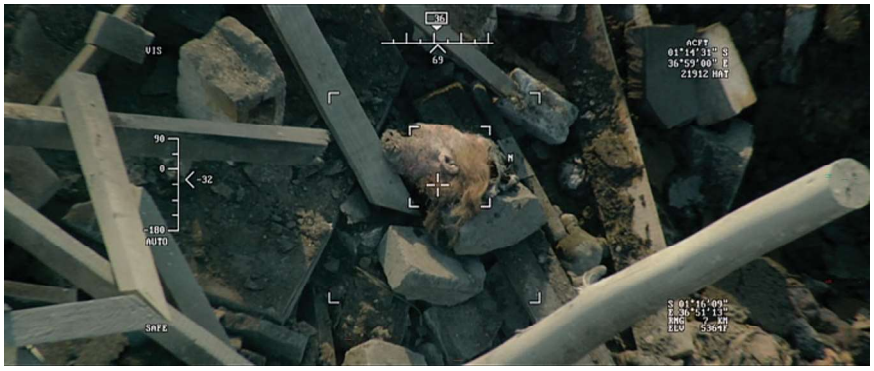

Figure 6.3 Danford's head amongst rubble. *Eye in the Sky* directed by Gavin Hood

the bomb site and the impression of slickly automated computational capability. The camera itself locates Danford's head without direct labour on either Steve or Carrie's part, gripping it with its central cursors and bringing it into focus. This shot, that is to say, represents a multilayered epistemological claim about the capacity of drone imaging to swiftly provide unambiguous intelligence information in a digestible, intelligible format.

Later, this imagery of Danford's remains is fed through facial recognition software which positively authenticates the identity of the burned lump of gore (Figure 6.4). This close-up on the side of a charred head, when fed into the film's speculative imaging technology, serves two functions. The first is, once again, to exaggerate the technological capabilities of drone visuality. This point is worth labouring, because the film's moral calculations rest firmly on a ground of epistemological certainty about the necessity of the strike. Without this laser-sharp visual clarity, the characters in the film would simply not be able to know whether the strike is necessary, and the ethical dilemma of the film would be utterly changed; without this panoptic visuality, they would not know for sure that they are targeting the right person, they would have no insight into the activity inside the house (which is what informs them that a devastating terror attack is imminent) and they would not be able to confirm the identity of the victims. This fabricated certainty about the machine's ability to conclusively identify charred meat as a legitimate human target, then, is central to the military necessity and political legitimacy of the film's drone strike. Second, built into this scene is the necessary dehumanization that enables drone violence: the physical wreckage of her body is the inevitable result of Danford's involvement in terrorist activity.

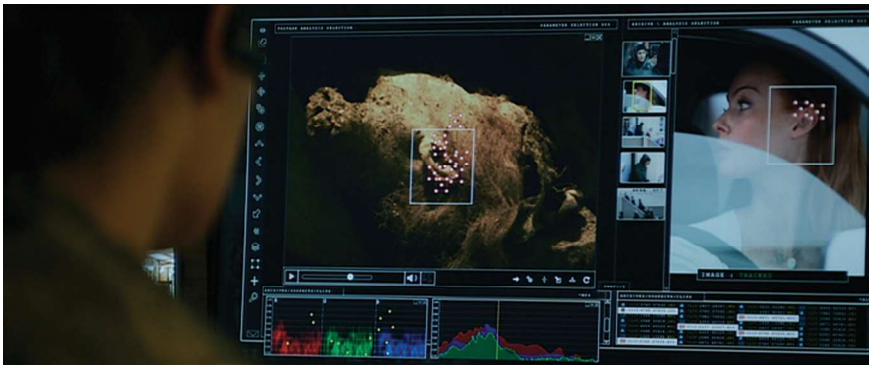

Figure 6.4 Visual identification of Danford. *Eye in the Sky* directed by Gavin Hood

Where the other characters in this scene all display their spiritual credentials by shedding tears or displaying concern, Danford is quite literally faceless, identifiable only by the miraculous ability of the analytical technology to recognize the scorched curve of her blackened ear. In *The Face on the Screen* (2004), Therese Davis shows how certain representations of disfigured or unrecognizable faces can break through 'the anaesthetizing fog of the mediasphere' (2) and forcefully stage an ethical revelation of death's power to shatter human vulnerability. Here, however, the fog is at its most anaesthetizing: in the shot which shows the military computer conclusively identifying Danford's remains, both Danfords – the living Danford, with her white beauty emphasized and yet concealed behind the visual barrier of a partially raised car window, and the dead Danford, a dirty pall settled over her blasted skin and severed neck – face away from the camera, withholding the eye contact that is so lavishly granted us with the Western military coalition.

What is more, Danford's reduction to body parts and surveillance imagery stands in sharp contrast to the emphatic humanization lavished upon almost every other character in the movie. We hear Colonel Powell's husband muttering in his sleep, and we meet her dog, Rocco. General Benson has to buy a doll for his granddaughter before he attends the meeting in which the drone strike is debated, and he is amusingly confused about which one to buy (at first, he purchases a Time to Sleep doll, but as he enters the meeting he is informed that he should have bought Baby Moves). We learn that Steve is, like many servicepeople, working off his student debt by taking on a limited stint of guaranteed employment in the air force, which means that he is a regular

guy with an ordinary background and is not an ideologically driven fanatic or bloodthirsty warrior.

The British foreign secretary who approves the strike is caught in the middle of a bout of food poisoning, which is played for laughs: his young aides mutter about him, knowing that they warned him against the local seafood, and he is forced by his diarrhoea to take the urgent life-or-death phone call on the lavatory. The American secretary of defense is interrupted in the middle of a ping-pong game, peremptorily authorizing the strike that the other civilians have all dithered over and rolling his eyes impatiently at their indecision. Star power, too, plays its part here as it does in the Vietnam movies previously mentioned. Powell and Benson are played by beloved British thespians Helen Mirren and Alan Rickman; Steve is played by Aaron Paul in one of his first major film roles since his breakout role as tragicomic methamphetamine dealer Jesse in *Breaking Bad* (2008–13); the British foreign secretary is played by Iain Glen, known for his role as the tragic-heroic Jorah Mormont in *Game of Thrones* (2011–19); the ground operative who tries to rescue Alia by buying her bread is played by Barkhad Abdi, a rising star known for his breakthrough role as a Somali pirate in *Captain Phillips* (2013). It is perhaps striking, then, that Danford, the film's major antagonist, is played by the far lower-profile Lex King, has no dialogue, and has absolutely zero characterization beyond the cliché-ridden and demonizing schematic mentioned above.

Danford is not only contrasted to the drone team, Steve and Carrie, whose humble backstories and prominent emotions layer such humanizing depth into their characters. The movie lays a great deal of sentimental emphasis on the tragedy of Alia's death. Importantly, she is not simply shown as a smiling innocent: through the inclusion of many small but cleverly chosen details, she is shown as a complex human being with a vibrant inner life. She is learning maths, she loves to read, she has a loving relationship with her parents, and she enjoys hula hooping. These characterizing coordinates establish her as an intelligent and respectful young person with a desire to learn, to travel, and to enjoy her bodily autonomy, all things that the Western military personnel seek to protect and encourage and which al-Shabaab's violence is determined to eliminate.

Her role has attracted a reasonable degree of critical commentary: Burgoyne observes that she has 'a substantial human presence, an existential weight', which makes her 'a kind of lever for maximizing emotion' (53, 55), and Matthew Robson argues that the film's emphasis on Alia's vulnerable and precious humanity

engages a Levinasian ethics of responsibility: 'her face calls out "do not kill me"' (2020: 109). Missing in both accounts, however, is the way in which the calculated withdrawal of such attention to Danford's humanity authorizes the opposite sentiment. Her *lack* of a human face – that is to say, her lack of this existential weight or Levinasian dignity – calls out, 'kill me.' The characterizing attention loaded onto Alia is just as emphatically denied to Danford and her accomplices, whose role is simply to be an evil, motiveless, threatening presence.

Indeed, one of the major motors of the film's narrative momentum is the notion that these characters definitely and very obviously deserve to be incinerated. The strong emphasis on the suffering of the innocent girl Alia who is fatally wounded is yet another instantiation of the hierarchy of suffering on which the film's internal logic relies. The three war faces in *Eye in the Sky* – the weeping soldier, the inhuman terrorist, and the sentimentalized innocent victim – are as bold an example as one could imagine of the simplistic hierarchy of humanity built into both drone visuality and the genre of contemporary war fiction.

War on terror violence, of which drone operations are a key contemporary iteration, has been facilitated by the legal and political classification of antagonists as 'enemy combatants', a legal classification expressly created to circumvent human rights protections that are designed to shield everybody from the worst forms of state violence, such as summary execution and torture (Kaplan 2005; Holloway 2008). This movie is a clear example of the ways in which this bureaucratic manoeuvre facilitates military violence by transferring the targets of such violence from the framework of the sympathetic human subject to a reified, subordinate status of the killable body. Visible only through the mechanisms of surveillance (the lens which is also a weapon) and the logics of suspicion (their confirmation as legitimate targets), the 'terrorist' figures in *Eye in the Sky* are a clear demonstration of the strategic dehumanization built into drone visuality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, *Eye in the Sky* self-consciously stages the debate over the legitimacy of the drone strike at its diegetic centre, accounting for considerable nuance and specificity in its representation of a democratic nation struggling to reconcile its principles with its actions. In the course of this task, the film reconfirms the hierarchy of humanity built into both drone visuality, which

is a way of seeing that combines 'seeing, power, and racial hierarchy for the digital age' (Mirzoeff 2023: 29), and the genre of war fiction, in which Western combatants are morally complex, reluctant warriors and terrorists, simply, deserve their immolation. The close-up of the war face is central to this. The differential distribution of affect, in which drone operators are powerfully shown as sensitive human subjects with deeply felt emotional responses to their own actions, and their targets are shown as hastily sketched villains and burning gore, is achieved through the filmmakers' attention to the close-up and its ability to deliver the details of human emotion. This representational strategy is effective because it hammers home the film's central propaganda message that even though we may not like it, there are times when civilians killed in the course of military violence represent a tragic yet necessary sacrifice (Swanson 2016). The characters are sad, after all, not only because they killed the girl but because their ethical principles showed them that this killing was the only morally acceptable outcome in the situation. In this way, *Eye in the Sky* shows us the shallow sentimentality at the heart of liberal defences of imperial violence. What is more, however, *Eye in the Sky* is a deliberate misdescription of drone warfare's central problems. Drone scholarship notes this fairly frequently. Thomas Gregory, for instance, writes that 'Despite all the ink that has been spilt about the legality of targeted killings, we seem to have forgotten the simple fact that drones destroy human beings' (2015: 210); and Ronak K. Kapadia writes that 'Our criticism of drone wars is impoverished without sufficient account for the livelihoods and experiences of those rendered most precarious by this mode of violence' (2018: 202). By emphasizing the tears of the drone operator over these questions, *Eye in the Sky* uses the close-up of the war face to depoliticize the very warfare it takes as its central focus.

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