

# Drone Strikes in Popular Culture: *Eye in the Sky*



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Examining how popular culture discusses and presents drone warfare is increasingly important today, as public understanding of drone warfare is developed through movies, novels, TV and other cultural forms as much as it is through more traditional news media. Popular culture representation of drone warfare helps to circulate and amplify political ideas about what drones are, how drones are used, and what is ethically and politically at stake.

Take, for example, Gavin Hood's 2015 film *Eye in the Sky*, in which civilian and military authorities disagree over the ethics of authorizing a drone strike against an al-Shabab cell planning an imminent suicide attack. *Eye in the Sky's* ethical debate is structurally analogous to the ticking bomb scenario, a misleading yet very popular narrative which articulates a defence of extreme violence in 'emergency' conditions. As a consequence, the movie frames the moral quandaries of drone warfare in such a way that on the one hand, a Hellfire strike seems to be a simple military necessity and, on the other hand, many of the most important and controversial aspects of drone warfare are left unexplored.



## The Ticking Bomb Scenario

The ticking bomb scenario is a thought experiment which aims to demonstrate that torture can be permitted in certain emergency situations. A concealed bomb is ticking, and a prisoner is tortured until they reveal the information which prevents the bomb going off. It aims to show that if an atrocity of some kind can be prevented in this manner then torture can, in some limited circumstances, be defended; it aims to demonstrate that the absolute ban on torture in mainstream ethics is, theoretically, unsustainable. Its simplistic yet compelling framing makes it almost impossible for us to choose not to torture, and as such, it is a very powerful intervention in

discussions about torture: the question can be dismissed and critiqued, but it cannot, on its own terms, be answered in the negative.



CIA torture scene from *Zero Dark Thirty*

As I wrote in my book [\*How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario\*](#), this scenario is also one of the most prevalent narratives about torture, and can be found throughout a wide range of cultural productions, including some of the most successful novels, films, and TV series of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Torture remains shocking and sad in these narratives, but the point of these stories is that shocking and sad things may sometimes, however unfortunately, be necessary. These stories dramatize one off events, but in practice

their political function is to circulate justifications for torture *systems*.

Similar rhetorical positions can be found in discussions about drone warfare. In a 2013 *Foreign Affairs* article, [‘Why Drones Work’](#), for instance, Daniel Byman writes that “sometimes imminent and intolerable threats do arise and drone strikes are the best way to eliminate them” because they “offer a comparatively low-risk way of targeting these areas while minimizing collateral damage”. Drone violence is positioned here as a lesser evil which will get the job done whilst at the same time minimizing harm, which is the way that the ticking bomb scenario encourages us to understand torture.

“With the right feelings,” write Jeffrey S. Bachman and Jack Holland in [their discussion of Obama’s drone policy](#), “it is easy to justify killing”. Positioning collateral damage as *regrettable but inevitable if the right thing is to be done in the pursuit of justice* is a major tactic found throughout rhetorical justifications of drone violence, just as torture is positioned as regrettable but necessary in certain articulations of the torture debate.

The important point here, however, is that discussions of limited torture and unintentional deaths are misleading ways of framing ethical discussions about contemporary warfare because a critique, however detailed, of any given isolated decision fails to reflect what is at stake in such practices of violence. In order to understand what is at stake in the system of global militarized surveillance one must aim for a comprehensive understanding of the *practice*, rather than any one act of killing; the way to challenge the ticking bomb scenario is not to say that the imaginary terrorist should not be tortured, but rather to reveal the ideological service that the thought experiment performs in relation to a sustained *practice* of torture.

### *Eye in the Sky*

*Eye in the Sky* stages, simply, one decision. Three al-Shabab terrorists occupy a house in Kenya. They are under constant drone surveillance, and an international coalition of American, British, and Kenyan military forces plans to collaborate on a capture operation. However, there is an unexpected development: the targets move to another location, in a district which is inaccessible to the capture team, and begin to prepare two young recruits for imminent suicide attacks. The operation immediately changes drastically, and everybody involved has to reassess whether it is appropriate for the objective of the operation to change from capture to kill.

Soon enough, however, there is an additional complication. The drone operator, noticing that a young girl is selling bread within the projected blast zone, demands that the military reassess the likelihood of killing her along with the terrorists. That is, there is now not simply the *general risk* of harming civilians, but the *specific certainty* of killing one little girl. Ultimately, of course, the strike goes ahead and the girl is killed along with the terrorists. Is an innocent death an acceptable price to pay, the film asks, for the achievement of a justified aim?



Certainty about what is happening on the ground is assured

Ultimately, the film concludes, yes: though it is sad, it is probably right; it is sad that this is the only right thing to do in this situation, that our ethics have forced us to accept something terrible. That is, although the movie ends tragically, with many characters, including the drone operator who fired the missile, weeping, everybody seems able to agree that they did the right thing, and that the reason that the girl's death is sad is that *it had to happen*, that *they could not act otherwise*. If we choose to read it as a condemnation of drone violence, then the film's moral and political horizons only allow us to read it as a condemnation of drone assassinations in which an indisputably innocent victim is killed alongside terrorists.



The framing of this movie fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the moral and philosophical problems that drone warfare poses. The scenario is, of course, exaggeratedly clear-cut: due to the miraculous power of high-definition surveillance, they are able to be certain that these five terrorists are definitely preparing for two suicide operations (and not merely to suspect it, or to

have credible evidence that it may be the case); they know for certain that they have a short window of time in which to act, or as an exasperated general emphasizes, that they “have a situation here which could result in massive loss of life in the next ten minutes”; they know for certain that there is one little girl who will have to die to prevent the al-Shabab attack.

The ticking bomb scenario presents a falsely unambiguous situation. In the case of torture, it seems acceptable because the reality of what torture entails is not visible; concentrationary imprisonment, degradation and corruption of state institutions, and other issues central to the reality of torture must remain invisible for the thought experiment to work. Likewise, the framing of drone warfare in *Eye in the Sky* focuses on whether it is right to kill innocents in the course of operations that have no other associated problems.

In conclusion, *Eye in the Sky*'s sophisticated debate about the legality of the attack is minutely detailed, but its restriction to one clear-cut situation obscures the broader geopolitical questions raised by planetary robotic securitization. The moral and political risk of debating state violence in terms of the ticking bomb scenario is that it positions massive, destructive state power as inevitable and beyond question, and leaves the structures and dynamics of power uninterrogated.

- *Alex Adams is an independent researcher. His report on representations of drone warfare in popular culture will be published by Drone Wars later this year.*