OP-ED CULTURE & MEDIA

Pop Culture Portrays Aerial Bombardment of Middle East as "Business as Usual"

A MILITARY DRONE IS SEEN FLYING OVER THE SYRIAN VILLAGE OF NAHLEH ON OCTOBER 31, 2020. ANAS ALKHARBOUTLI / PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES

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President Biden's airstrike on the Syrian border on February 25 was received in some quarters as though it was his first act of presidential warfare. But U.S. military operations in the Middle East, particularly remote drone operations, are a matter of routine, rather than an exceptional rarity. No matter the personality or predispositions of the commander-in-chief — whether they are statesmanlike and grandfatherly like Biden, or vulgarly reactionary like his predecessor — the continuous military violence of the forever wars initiated by George W. Bush's administration is ingrained into the structure of everyday power. Biden's letter to Congress rationalized the strike in terms of the U.S.'s inherent right of self-defense, and in some ways this shows that Biden doesn't even need to think of a new justification for these strikes. Despite his announcement of a review of his drone policy, presidential aerial bombardment of the Middle East is "business as usual."

But how did death from above become business as usual? Part of the answer lies in the popular narratives about drone warfare that circulate in film, fiction and TV. Popular culture is one of the major ways that we civilians encounter drone warfare. Even though we understand that fictional

stories do not show us reality, very often the novels we read, the movies and TV we watch, and the video games we play can be a major resource that we draw on when forming our understanding of what military drones are, who operates them and what they do. For those of us without specialist knowledge, the images and stories we absorb from popular culture can frame the ways that we think about the politics and ethics of what is at stake in drone warfare: in particular, they tell us who drones kill and why.

One of the major preoccupations of drone fiction is distinguishing between "legitimate targets" and "collateral damage" — the latter being innocent civilians killed in the course of otherwise "acceptable" military violence. Legitimate targets are shown as people who, quite simply, deserve to die, and "collateral damage" is shown as unfortunate but, in the long run, acceptable. Perhaps surprisingly, one of the effects of this distinction is not to show some deaths as acceptable and others as unacceptable, but rather to show that every death caused by drones — whether unfortunate or desirable — can and should be acceptable.

Most broadly, the major way that drone stories legitimize drone warfare is by showing drone strikes as a solution to terrible dilemmas. In this respect, it is not so different from the ways that many other forms of military violence are represented throughout popular culture. "Ticking time bomb" stories very often show torture as tragically necessary when nothing else will get the job done, including in some of the most successful novels, films and TV series of the 20th and 21st centuries: "24," *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Dirty Harry*, even the stories of some Marvel heroes such as Daredevil, Captain America and The Punisher. Impossible choices, tragic sacrifice and urgent races against time are, after all, some of the most commonly found features of stories across many popular genres, from sci-fi, through political thrillers, to military action fiction. These stories dramatize one-off events, but their broader effect, when taken as a whole, is the consistent, repetitive circulation of justifications for violent and oppressive systems, from violent counterterrorism practices to police brutality.

Drone stories very often follow a similar pattern. In the film *Good Kill*, for instance, the drone pilot protagonist Major Thomas Egan repeatedly witnesses — via his long-distance surveillance camera — a man raping a woman at gunpoint, and he is just as often told by his superiors that it is not his problem. At the film's climax, when Egan can take it no more, he defies his orders and kills the rapist, vaporizing him in his tracks. This is the "good kill" for which the film is named, and it is explicitly framed as Egan defiantly breaking the law in order to do the right thing.

Likewise, in an episode of the first season of "Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan," a drone operator codenamed Tombstone kills a man about to kidnap a woman and her children in defiance of his commanding officer's direct order that he stand down. Mike Maden's 2016 novel *Drone Threat*, too, is bookended by our heroes summarily executing ISIS fighters with drone missiles purely out of what is represented as righteous rage. In Dan Fesperman's 2014 novel *Unmanned*, protagonist Darwin Cole rescues a young girl by crashing a drone into the brutes who are chasing her; since Cole was convinced that he had wrongfully killed this girl in a previous drone strike, he describes this act, which rescues her from harm at the very last minute, as his "salvation" because it rights the previous wrong. These powerfully drawn scenarios may leave us with a feeling that good has been done despite the impossibility of the situation, but they are justifications for summary execution by remote missile.

These "valiant" kills are very often contrasted with the tragic deaths of innocent civilians who have been involuntarily caught up in drone operations. Many writers, including Sam Harris and Daniel Byman, have made the argument that collateral damage is unfortunate but inevitable if modern warfare is to be conducted as ethically as possible. This argument is essentially a way of licensing the disregard of international law, and a way of legitimating extreme military violence as routine practice. Perhaps the best known example of this is Gavin Hood's 2015 film *Eye in the Sky*, in which an innocent young girl is killed in a drone strike that prevents Al Shabab fighters from committing suicide attacks in Nairobi.

The film foregrounds the difficulty and the ethical complexity of the decision to take the shot in the full knowledge that an innocent girl will die. Naturally, the attack goes ahead, simply because the strategic mathematics of the situation make the choice, though horrible, the only possible course of action. It is laboriously highlighted that it is sad that the little girl had to become the collateral damage of a legitimate attack. Nonetheless, the framing of the situation is engineered specifically to make us, the audience, conclude that the sacrifice, however harrowing, is worth it, and that the reason that it is a terrible choice is that the characters appear to have no alternative, that *killing the girl was the only ethical way to act*. David Swanson, more polemically perhaps, wrote in his brief 2016 essay on *Eye in the Sky* that the film attempts to persuade us that "murdering is wise."

Lots of drone fiction explicitly makes the same argument. Jonathan Maberry's characters in *Predator One* (2015) describe collateral damage as "Unfortunate but unavoidable." Dan Fesperman's characters in *Unmanned* consider it "Worth it if we stopped [the villain]." Novelist Mike Maden is notable here for his flamboyant, bombastic style. When, in *Drone Threat*, an antagonist is killed alongside his girlfriend, our hero thinks: "*Too bad about the girl*, he thought to himself. But as his nana told him years ago, *You sleep with the devil in a bed of your own ashes*." In Maden's earlier novel *Blue Warrior* (2014), however, the deaths of unknown people are repeatedly, flippantly and callously disregarded: "Fuck 'em. If they don't want to get blistered, they shouldn't put their dicks in the toaster." Another: "Worst-case scenario? It's a signature strike. You take out a few bad guys, even if it's not the right bad guy." Yet again: "After all, if it walked like a duck and quacked like a duck, it must be a duck."

Importantly, Maden's writing here — which has the arrogant, nasty and racist tone of a Trumpian joke — blurs the line between noncombatant deaths and the deaths of those who are simply assumed, due to the drone program's analysis of their behavior, to be legitimately targetable. This blurring confuses the important distinction between combatants and noncombatants, leading Maden to basically declare that whoever is killed in a drone strike deserves it, whether we know who they are or not.

And this is, in some ways, not so far from the racism on which the drone program actually relies. That is, people who are designated "terrorists" by the military-political apparatus of the "war on terror," often arbitrarily or with little certainty, are available to a great deal of securitizing violence — torture, detention, death by drone — and are often described to us as people who do not deserve sympathy, compassion or the protections of international law. Once somebody is designated a "military-age male," a "terrorist" or an "insurgent" (terms which echo the way that colonial regimes describe the populations they oppress as "savages"), their life is treated as forfeit, and their death is somehow not a human death, simply the bureaucratic elimination of a threat.

In his well-received 2010 memoir *Predator*, for example, drone operator Matt J. Martin describes his human targets as "cockroaches," "vermin," "cancer," "like a rat," "this savage," "some dirtbag," "rats," "bugs" and "silly rabbits"; he repeatedly uses the slur "skinnies" to refer to Somalians; Afghanistan is characterized by "primitive squalor not far removed from the Stone Age." The purpose of this barrage of racism is, of course, to dehumanize his human targets and to legitimize his killing them. You don't have to read between the lines or infer this when reading his memoir: "I found it easier and easier," he writes, "to justify bombing barbarians like these back to the hell that had spawned them."

The racist dehumanization of the people that drone operators observe through their viewfinders is central to the aesthetic and intellectual economy of drone fiction. Daniel Suarez, for instance, in his 2014 novel, *Kill Decision*, describes a woman in a burqa as "a walking bag" and makes a throwaway reference to "Pakistan's population of Taliban sympathizers and Islamic fundamentalists." In *Bloodmoney* (2011), David Ignatius writes that, "the devil lived in Pakistan." In Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice's *Collateral Damage* (2014), a pilot refers to Libyan mosques as "nests" that harbor terrorists, and the narrator earlier refers to the leader of the Libyan resistance, with whom the U.S. forces are reluctantly cooperating (and the only named Muslim character in the novel), as "a despicable creature, ignorant and wilful," whose bodyguards "smelled of fish and Moroccan hashish" and "growled in an indecipherable language." Author of *Drone Games* (2014) Joel Narlock inserts passages from the Quran directly alongside passages detailing the terrorists' plot, drawing a direct connection between Muslim religiosity and the preparation for atrocity. Mike Maden, as ever, is particularly colorful, with a sympathetic character in *Drone Threat* casually remarking that there are ISIS sympathizers "in every mosque and madrassa from Mecca to Detroit."

Very often, the people who are killed by drones in these stories are either "terrorists" who clearly "deserve" to be immolated from 10,000 feet, or they are innocent victims whose destruction is unfortunate, but necessary. Collateral damage is shown as one of the inevitable aspects of contemporary warfare, and, as a consequence, these deaths are often shown as being somehow nobody's fault: Drone fiction often does not admit that drone operators are responsible for collateral damage, even when these drone operators are simultaneously shown as being heroic for conducting the very drone strikes that at once save the day and kill innocent people by accident.

In some ways, then, drone fiction is simply another iteration of military thriller fiction that provides fairly transparent ideological support for imperial counterterrorism. It does, however, have its own unique contributions, most notably the way in which civilian and combatant deaths are blurred into one as "unfortunate but necessary," and the way in which this means that drone victims are, somehow, nobody's responsibility.

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