Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of War & Culture Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ywac20

# Blame the War, Not the Troops: *Good Kill*

Alex Adams

**To cite this article:** Alex Adams (2022) Blame the War, Not the Troops: *Good Kill*, Journal of War & Culture Studies, 15:4, 408-424, DOI: 10.1080/17526272.2022.2116187

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2022.2116187

Published online: 22 Sep 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ywac20

JOURNAL OF WAR & CULTURE STUDIES, Vol. 15 No. 4, November 2022, 408–424

Check for updates

# Blame the War, Not the Troops: *Good Kill*

ALEX ADAMS
*Independent Scholar*

The 2014 feature film *Good Kill* is a case study of how hegemonic popular culture can defang and absorb critiques of military discourse. Although this film articulates a limited critique of drone warfare, its major task is to *normalize* drone warfare in three ways. First, it presents a romanticized view of the 'clean' military capabilities of drone weaponry. Second, the film shows ordinary soldiers as morally good actors who are forced to execute operationally counterproductive orders by inept superiors. Finally, it emphasizes the corrosive effects of drone warfare on the protagonist's mental wellbeing. This synthesis of tropes enables a depoliticized understanding of drone warfare, which is morally exculpatory for drones as a technology at the same time as it represents drone operators sympathetically. *Good Kill* demonstrates how hegemonic popular culture can articulate a limited critique of war in the course of politically legitimizing it.

KEYWORDS Drone warfare, *Good Kill*, UAV, film, weapon fetishism, humanization

Representations of drone operations often function to integrate drone technology and its political and martial implications into the familiar rhetorical patterns that we use to make conflict, war, and global military surveillance emotionally and politically comprehensible (Stahl 2018, Gregory 2011, Adams 2021, Kapadia 2018). By initiating drone operators into the visual and rhetorical identities associated with soldierly valour, military identity, and sympathetic humanity, hegemonic representations humanize and normalize what Derek Gregory, for instance, theorizes as an extraordinary innovation in the conduct of imperial warfighting. This

© 2022 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group DOI 10.1080/17526272.2022.2116187

article examines Andrew Niccol's feature film *Good Kill* (2014), which is a particularly clear example of the process in which hegemonic popular culture absorbs critique and rearticulates it, in defanged form, in the course of legitimizing drone warfare. That is, although this movie emphasizes the novel differences between drone operations and conventional warfare, and articulates an ethical critique of drone warfare that is so explicit that it has been criticized as heavy-handedly didactic (Brady 2015), its major task is in fact to morally launder drone warfare and to welcome drone operators into the military fraternity by telling their story in accordance with the familiar generic coordinates and humanizing representational traditions of military fiction. Though it may gesture towards a critique of drone warfare, the film defuses this critique by incorporating it into a scheme of meaning that is ultimately rehabilitative of drone warfare.

This essay explores three major characteristics of twentieth and twenty-first century military fiction – I draw on literature and film here, but these characteristics are no doubt prevalent throughout formal and informal military culture much more broadly – that can be read in *Good Kill*. First, this essay considers weapon fetishism, in which the technological capacities of military hardware are emphasized with three major effects: it exaggerates its effectiveness, it presents technological sophistication as a form of ethical commitment, and it makes summary execution by remote missile into a narrative inevitability. Secondly, many texts about war show the ordinary soldier as subject to multiple competing battlefield demands, including the pressure exerted by commanding officers. *Good Kill*'s representation of the CIA as an opaque, corrupt and morally dubious organization issuing indefensible orders is part of a longstanding tradition of representing military authorities as out of touch with the lives of ordinary soldiers and problematically remote from the hands-on military conduct of warfighting. Finally, the film's major theme is the psychological suffering of the US soldier. By emphasizing the corrosive effects of drone warfare on the protagonist's home life and the private pain he endures as a result of his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, *Good Kill* shows drone pilots as emotionally sensitive and morally perceptive subjects in order to challenge preconceptions that audiences may have about drone warfare not being legitimately soldierly. That is, though the movie appears to be critical of drone warfare, the effect produced by its synthesis of ideological and representational coordinates is not counter-hegemonic. Rather, this limited and humanizing critique of certain aspects of contemporary warfighting is one of the rhetorical means through which the political legitimacy of military power is reproduced.

## *Good Kill*, narrative, and the comprehensibility of war

Major Thomas Egan is an elite combat pilot and veteran of six overseas tours of duty in the war on terror. It is 2010, however, and the US Air Force are investing more and more in UAVs and flying fewer and fewer manned sorties. Egan's latest deployment is what many of his colleagues consider a plum job: posted at Creech

Air Force Base, Nevada, living in the comfortable domesticity of the Las Vegas suburbs, piloting drones by day and barbequing with his beautiful wife Molly in the long sunny evenings.

But Egan is troubled. Though the work is physically undemanding, it is emotionally draining. During routine overwatch, for example, he repeatedly witnesses an armed man raping a defenceless woman at gunpoint, and he is repeatedly reminded that, although it is within his power to do so, it is not his responsibility to protect this woman or to prevent her victimization. Soon enough, he accidentally kills some children who run, laughing, into his crosshairs after he has released the missile. Worse still, when his unit is called upon to man missions for the CIA – referred to laconically by Egan's boss as the Christians in Action – he and his team are ordered to conduct signature strikes (to kill people without knowing for certain who they are), to double-tap targets (to fire on first responders), and even to attack a funeral.

Though some of his colleagues appear content enough to fire wherever they are instructed, no matter the cost, Tommy and his sensor operator Vera Sanchez find the work upsetting, wrong, even traumatic. Most of all, Tommy misses what he considers to be the honesty of combat, the physicality of it, the sense of skill, accomplishment, and danger that comes with piloting a military vehicle in an active theatre of war. The transition from combat flight in an F-15 to UAV piloting in a gloomy cubicle is 'like going from a Ferrari to a Ford Fiesta'. He drinks heavily in order to cope, only avoiding a charge of drunk driving because the officer who catches him, a fellow veteran, takes pity on him. He emotionally withdraws from Molly and his children, becoming distant, brittle, jealous, and unpredictable, until his family life collapses under the strain. Unable to sleep, he sits in his car outside a Vegas mosque, glaring darkly at the Muslims within.

Finally, enough is enough. When ordered to fire on first responders, he 'accidentally' drops the video link, intentionally yet deniably refusing to follow his objectionable orders. Demoted for this insubordination, he returns to the tedious drudgery of overwatch. When he sees the rapist approaching the woman he has been habitually attacking, Egan fires, vaporizing the man in his tracks. Finally, he feels, he has been able to do something right – or at least, something that is not wrong. A good kill.

*

Such is the plot of *Good Kill*, a simple enough story of a soldier driven to his wits' end by the absurdity of his position in the war he is fighting. The tone is muted, the scope modest; its static dramaturgy and dialogue-heavy explanatory sections often resemble stage work. Most of all, though, it is interesting because at the same time as it is a disclosive, critical account of the moral grey areas of drone warfare, *Good Kill* couches its insights into drone controversy in a story which mobilizes some of the most longstanding themes of war fiction. The effect of this synthesis of well-established formal and thematic conventions with novel insights into a form of war that was, at the time of its production, largely unfamiliar to many people, is

twofold: the film both represents drone warfare as a troublingly new innovation in the conduct of warfare and, simultaneously, represents drone operations as a form of warfighting comprehensible through our conventional ways of framing and understanding armed conflict. This tension between newness and tradition, this multivalent engagement with and modification of existing representational patterns, is what gives *Good Kill* its rhetorical impact and its narrative force. It is uniquely interesting in this regard: other comparable pieces – such as *Eye in the Sky* (2015), a thriller which focuses on the moral minutiae of a single strike, or *Drone* (2017), a drama about a drone widower's psychological revenge, or *5000 Feet is the Best* (2011), a short art film that is much more explicitly intellectual in approach – do not feature the specific blend of political disclosure, psychological profile, and genre satisfactions that make *Good Kill* a particularly fine example of this political-aesthetic process.

Like SEAL teams, torture, or surveillance (other controversial 'security' developments associated with the war on terror), UAVs are a fairly prominent feature of popular culture in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Netflix's *Outside the Wire* (2021), for instance, a speculative near-future sci-fi feature in which a drone strike averts the destruction of the world as we know it at the very last second, was one of the most streamed movies of early 2021, apparently reaching 66 million households in the first quarter of the year (Romano 2021). In the years leading up to the release of *Good Kill*, however, which was a highlight of what we might call the first wave of drone films, very little was broadly known or understood about drone warfare, and what little was understood tended to be negative. For as knowledge of the US drone programme became more widespread over the first decades of its existence, a fluidly interacting complex of popular tropes came to cluster around it which most often underscored the *differences* between drone operations and conventional warfare. Most often – and quite apart from more serious questions of international law, military ethics, colonial power, and so on – the implicit accusation was that drone warfare, because of the asymmetry of firepower involved and the pilot's physical distance from the battlespace, was cowardly, insufficiently masculine, a form of unjustifiably comfortable point-and-shoot dilettantism. Drone pilots were sedentary, stay-at-home soldiers – tourists, part-timers – and UAV operations were 'just like video games'. The domesticity of drone operator deployments was frequently a concern, for instance (Stahl 2013), as were the implications that this new way of war had for conventional military masculinity (Moon 2020, Daggett, 2015). The structuring anxiety here concerns the extent to which drone warfare enables 'authentic' soldierly experience (and it remains a major thematic concern of *Outside the Wire*). If, as popularly understood, it is 'unseemly or cowardly for a man to hide behind a machine' (Manjikian 2014: 49) while conducting warfare, then drone warfare is not 'really' soldiering. More: if drone operators are not 'really' serious warfighters, can their activities ever be militarily or morally legitimate?

Soon enough, a representational tradition grew up in response to these stereotypes and commonplaces, a responsive set of texts which sought to add depth to the popular profile of drone operations and to represent drone warfare as a serious and meaningful form of warfighting. Novels by Dale Brown (2012, 2014, 2015), Daniel Saurez (2016 [2012]), Dan Fesperman (2014), and Mike Maden (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016) inserted drones into conventional genre stories, rehabilitating and glamorizing the technology and its users by integrating them into the representational patterns of mainstream, action-driven war fiction. *Good Kill*, as a major intervention in the cultural dialogue around drones and the first drone film to feature a well-known star – multiple Academy Award-nominee Ethan Hawke – engages in this rehabilitative work explicitly, showing drones as part of a mode of combat that has similar affective and experiential contours to those of more conventionally 'respectable' forms of soldiering. The film addresses concerns about drone warfare, but its critical manoeuvre is not to excoriate it from a pacifist, legalist, human rights, or anticolonial position, but rather to humanize it in order for Western audiences to understand it as legitimate soldiering. That is, to put it more polemically, though it offers us a downbeat depiction of drone operations, *Good Kill* is nonetheless a text which makes imperial air power relatable and palatable, and which contributes to the public relations aims of the military by dignifying drone operators and their violent labour.

At the start of the movie, Egan's commanding officer gives a speech to a cohort of new recruits.

> We get a lot of shit from the public. I've heard all the bleeding-heart arguments, read all the fucking bumper stickers, 'not the air force, it's the chair force', 'waging a Wii war'. […] Make no fucking mistake about it. We are killing people. So I'm gonna drill this into your heads every goddamn day. This ain't fucking PlayStation. […] War is now a first-person shooter, but you pull a trigger here, it's for fucking real. It ain't a bunch of pixels you're blowing up, it's flesh and fucking blood.

This little piece of expletive-ridden oratory takes its audience on a brisk tour of the pre-existing clichés about drone warfare that *Good Kill* seeks to directly modify. The film is in explicit dialogue with its audience's preconceptions about drone warfare, engaging clearly and unambiguously with the multiple interacting debates about drone warfare that were current in the years leading up to its production. The film's portrait of a pilot's psychological decline, then, takes up the task not simply of criticizing drone operations but of doing so through an account of the drone programme which aims to refocus and sophisticate its audience's pre-existing understanding of what is at stake. Part of *Good Kill*'s critical task in 'exposing the reality of drone warfare' is representing it in such a way that we are able to take it seriously as a legitimate form of warfighting. The movie is neither simply 'pro-' or 'anti-' war, but a negotiation of themes related to soldiering, masculinity, power, and so on, with the Western soldier as a central

sympathetic figure. War is, simply, a terrible inevitability, a continuous feature of reality which can be blamed and mourned but not substantially critiqued, and the soldier is as much a victim of it as those he kills. Hence my title, *blame the war, not the troops:* in *Good Kill*, the soldiers are not responsible for their own violence, and war is a horror for which nobody can answer. Displacing the responsibility for the horror of drone violence onto war in general obscures the material structures of responsibility which enable systematic imperial violence.

## Weapons, warriors, weeping

Like any genre, military fiction has a set of themes, tropes, and narrative preoccupations that an audience can expect to find in any given text. This is not to say that genre texts (no matter how formulaic any one story may be) can be reduced to the simple recycling or regurgitation of stereotyped representations; only that there are core concerns and characterizations that can be found across military fiction as a varied and striated cultural form. Here, I look at three such constructs that are found across military fictions and examine the ways that *Good Kill* mobilizes them, reinterpreting, renegotiating and reshaping them in order that they fit drone operators as well as they fit other military practitioners.

**1. Weapon fetishism**

In *Good Kill*, weapons always work flawlessly. The movie emphasizes the professionalism and physical talent with which drone killing is conducted and presents the weapons themselves as effective, technologically sophisticated, and therefore ethically defensible. In the process, like much hegemonic drone discourse, it articulates a technophilic exaggeration of the extent to which drone surveillance is reliable, and presents a romanticized view of their capability for 'surgical', 'clean' killing (Cockburn, 2015, Gregory 2012, Cronin 2018). Whilst, that is, *Good Kill* shows the horrifying uses to which drones can be put, it also shows drones as routinely effective masterpieces of engineering. The dreary cubicles in which the drone teams work are stuffed with computer hardware, tightly framed by the cinematography in order to emphasize the dark claustrophobia of the environment, perhaps, but also in order to display its computational plenitude, its technological sophistication; multiple readouts display reams of tactical information, lights flicker, screens glare; the team, too, manipulate these world-class tools with considerable professional skill. The opening sequence is particularly interesting here: it switches between close-ups of Egan's concentration-lined face, his hands deftly moving controls, and the vividly detailed view on his screen. Once the kill is complete, the shots widen, revealing that we are not in the cockpit of a fighter jet but in fact in an air-conditioned office. This visual reveal is aesthetically effective – disorientating, surprising – because the first part of the sequence, with its intercut shots of Tommy's face, hands, and viewpoint, so closely resembles a sequence of conventional combat flight. Even the gesture in which drone warfare is differentiated from piloting a fighter jet relies for its illusion on the ideas both that the drone's eye view

is exactly as clear as an in-person view, and that the psychological intensity and affective texture of killing with drones is directly comparable to killing at first hand.

Elaine Scarry (1985: 13), writing about the literary and political description of torture, writes that discourse surrounding state violence is often preoccupied with the 'verbal sign of the weapon'. The fascination with the implement that is used to inflict violence, the focus on the patient refinements of cruelty involved in its creation and use, she writes, functions to obscure the suffering produced by that same implement. Likewise, writing on drone visuality, Roger Stahl (2018: 3) argues that what he calls the 'weaponized gaze' 'serves a disciplinary function by displacing the civic impulse to deliberate matters of state violence with a presentation of the world through the uncritical, docile circuitry of the weapon, whose purpose is to be fired.' To synthesize Scarry and Stahl: the primacy of the view through the weapon circumscribes what it is possible for us to see through it with the effect that its capacity for killing is at once naturalized as acceptable and, perhaps counterintuitively, obscured by its sheer obviousness. The drone's-eye view may highlight its terrible power, but the distance built into its gaze also both sanitizes the violence it is built to exercise and makes the exercise of this violence inevitable.

The view through the weapon, then, is a complicit gaze with its own politics and teleology. By teleology here I mean that there is a certain inevitability built into the view through the weapon: the act of looking is part of the enabling mechanism for securitizing violence, its end built into its means. Derek Gregory (2012: 146) writes that drone visuality 'not only invites but also requires those using it to transcribe their codes and conventions onto what then becomes a killable body enclosed by the terrible violence of the state.' Seeing – an act of perception mediated not only by technology but by dehumanizing racial logics – is the first stage in the act of killing, indivisible from it. The film ends with the 'good kill' for which it is named. The entire movie has been telescoping towards a structural inevitability: the redemptive moment of justified violence. The clean distance of the kill is also an essential enabling mechanism which distances us from the nature of drone strikes. Perhaps nobody would truly want *Good Kill*'s drone footage to be more gory, to display the true horror of people minced by heavy ordnance; what, after all, would be achieved by an exhibition of death? But when bomb impacts register as clouds of smoke, messy enough, but bloodless, distant, something vital is missing.

Further, John R. Emery writes that the obsession with drones as a technological accomplishment functions to present technological sophistication as a form of ethical commitment. There are, of course, innumerable uncertainties, inconvenient practicalities, and moving parts in war. Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz famously referred to these continually proliferating frustrations as 'friction', conceptualizing them as a form of mundane yet insurmountable inertia caused by 'an infinity of petty circumstances' (Clausewitz 1997: 66); Clausewitz's well-known remarks about the 'twilight' or 'fog' (52, 90) which constantly obscures situational

knowledge in war have become a commonplace when referring to the necessary incompleteness of battlefield knowledge. In the context of the war on terror, former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld memorably referred to these inevitable gaps in information as 'unknown unknowns' (Lin 2021). Showing drones as a technology which synthesizes the pinnacles of surveillance technology and firepower hardware has the function of appearing to eliminate all of this messy uncertainty. Conceiving of the irreducibly complex ethical problems of warfare as soluble by the astronomical sophistication and subtlety of modern engineering, machinery, and software, technophilic discourse functions to 'render all ethico-political dilemmas of killing into quantifiable, predictable, and solvable risk-assessment scores' (Emery 2020: 4). The machine, in short, is designed to solve problems by shooting. It should come as no surprise, then, that it is supported by mechanisms – at once technological and moral – which enable it to shoot.

There is also the more straightforward matter of simple exaggeration. As I have written elsewhere (Adams 2021), drone fictions are consistently marked by the overstatement of the technological capabilities of the drone programme. 'From twelve thousand feet above,' writes Richard A. Clarke in his novel *Sting of the Drone*, 'the camera on the Global Reach drone zoomed in on a face' (2014: 154). In *Collateral Damage*, a novel co-written by former airman Dale Brown and journalist Jim DeFelice, drone pilot Turk Mako fires his weapon: 'All three shots were bull's-eyes; the projectiles hit their targets with less than .0003 percent deviation' (Brown and DeFelice 2012: 9). Visual culture, too, reproduces such hyperbole. The drone's-eye-view we share in *Good Kill* is – like the drone visuality in texts such as *Eye in the Sky*, *Homeland* (2011-2020) and *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* (2019-) – of exaggeratedly high-quality. Some critical non-fiction accounts of drone warfare, such as Andrew Cockburn's *Kill Chain* (2015: 1-16) or Grégoire Chamayou's *Drone Theory* (2015: 1-9), reproduce conversations between drone teams looking at grainy low-resolution footage, and the real pilots they quote, working around the time *Good Kill* is set, are often unable to distinguish between animals and people, sometimes even between objects and people. Not so in *Good Kill*. Though there is a little visual distortion visible in the drone footage, it is high-definition, real-time colour footage which enables a high degree of certainty about the identity of the targets. Such visual clarity functions to eliminate doubt. We are encouraged to consider whether or not it is right for Egan to pull the trigger, it is true; we are left in no doubt at all, however, that should he pull the trigger the missile will immediately find its target.

**2. Lions led by donkeys**

When the drone operators conduct signature strikes for the CIA, *Good Kill* gets darker, showing the audience the more sinister aspects of drone operations. In a patient, even tone of voice, using blank, bureaucratic language, the nameless CIA officer on the end of the phone line orders the team to break international law by, among other things, firing into crowds in civilian areas. 'In *Good Kill* civilians are killed, but not out of malice or error', writes Cora Sol Goldstein (2017: 30).

'The drone crew is following explicit orders.' The film is thereby located in the long-standing representational tradition that shows ordinary soldiers as morally good actors who are forced to execute morally wrong and operationally indefensible orders by corrupt or inept superiors.

Though some of the team take these orders in their stride, other members of the drone crew are horrified. In particular, sensor operator Sanchez vocally objects to the practice of follow-up shots, or double-tapping, in which the people who come to the aid of drone strike survivors are hit in a second shot. In a heated exchange with her team, Sanchez observes pointedly that 'that's what terrorists do, you know that, right? Plant a second bomb, blow up soldiers showing up for the first bomb? Since when did we become Hamas?'. Later, she argues forcefully that drone strikes are a particularly morally objectionable form of warfare, and that their unit is 'a regular fucking terrorist factory – best recruitment tool al-Qaeda ever had'. In addition to voicing explicit ethical concerns about targeting civilians and about their asymmetrical tactics generating 'blowback', Sanchez articulates the following critique: the commanding officers are pursuing a course of action that is not only morally wrong, but strategically flawed; their use of weaponry as a one-size-fits-all blunt instrument reflects their failure to understand what is at stake on the ground and thereby risks unnecessarily harming civilians, endangering combatants, radicalizing survivors, and prolonging the war. Because they never have to pull the trigger for themselves, the disembodied CIA agents have a skewed, cold-blooded perspective which can only lead to bad outcomes.

Now, of course, such critiques are by no means new. Literary critics addressing war texts have long identified the representational trend of what James Campbell (1999: 204) calls combat gnosticism, 'a construction that gives us war experience as a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows. [...] Furthermore, mere military status does not signify initiation, but only status as a combatant. It is not the label of "soldier" that is privileged so much as the label of "warrior".' Often traced to the criticism of Paul Fussell, who is sometimes accused of amplifying rather than analysing the ideological characteristics of the First World War writers whose work he addresses, combat gnosticism privileges the experience of the ordinary soldier over anybody else, claiming that only those who know what it is to kill at first hand know the true character of war. Though combat gnosticism has been critiqued by David A Buchanan (2016: 32) as 'parochial', 'limiting' and 'deceptive' because of its narrow and martial focus, it remains extraordinarily common in both war fiction and the critical tradition that comments upon it. Even a conservative critic like Christopher Coker (2014: 127) acknowledges that 'soldiers over the ages have always recognised' the villainous profile of 'over-ambitious generals who do not hesitate to get men killed to advance their own careers'. By representing drone operators as combat gnostics, *Good Kill* shows drone operators as serious, morally engaged warriors, directly confronting or attempting to refute the stereotype of the drone operator as a bored, robotic bureaucrat of murder.

In First World War fiction, military superiors are often held in a specific kind of contempt by ordinary soldiers. Ignorant of the hellish conditions endured by fighting men at the front, military officers live at what Fussell (2000 [1975]: 82) calls a 'gross physical, moral, and imaginative remove from the world of the troops' which ensures that their murderously inept orders prolong the war by leading to the slaughter of soldiers and the squandering of resources, weapons, and strategic advantage. Perhaps most influentially, Alan Clark's 1962 work *The Donkeys* argued that military commanders' priorities were so skewed by complacency and bullish inability – even refusal – to understand the war from the perspective of those fighting it that 'considerations of personal vanity and prestige led to much bloodshed that might have been avoided by a dispassionate consideration of the military principles involved' (Clark 1962: 87). Literary examples of this skewering of the British Army Staff can be found in some of the most widely-read texts of the Great War, from the trench modernism of war poets such as Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen, through novels by literary figures as historically and geographically remote from one another as Virginia Woolf, Erich Maria Remarque, and Pat Barker, to BBC light entertainment favourite *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989). This last is a British comedy series characterized by playful historical distortions (Sedlmayr 2016: 164) which 'consciously traded on every cliché and misremembered piece of history about the Western Front' (Badsey 2002: 41). General Melchett, played at maximum volume by Stephen Fry, is a bloviating buffoon, clearly an exaggerated caricature of figures such as the 'stubborn, self-righteous, inflexible and intolerant' (Fussell 2000 [1975]: 12) Field Marshall Haig, whose legendary lack of strategic nous led to the unnecessary slaughter of many of his own men. Though this tradition did not originate in the First World War – it underpins representations of the disastrous Charge of the Light Brigade during the Crimean War, for instance – representations of this conflict are particularly rich with it.

This tradition remains very much alive in contemporary war fiction. Action thriller writer and memoirist Andy McNab often refers to his superiors in the British Army as 'Ruperts', for example, a dismissive epithet that indicates, none too subtly, that commanding officers are upper class twits who never have to get their hands dirty (McNab 1993: 413). Elsewhere, ex-military journalist Joe Glenton (2021: 82) calls Ruperts 'the eternal enemy' of the rank-and-file soldier. The canon of major Vietnam war films, too, repeatedly features the stock figure of the floundering senior officer: consider Lieutenant Wolfe in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), whose indecision and ineptitude under fire leads to the ambush of his troops, for instance, or the officers in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) whose insouciant underestimation of Vietnamese forces contributes to the total surprise of the Tet Offensive. One of Colonel Kurtz's concerns in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is that the authorities in Washington do not know how to prosecute jungle warfare effectively – as protagonist Willard summarizes it, 'the war was being run by a bunch of four-star clowns who were gonna

end up giving the whole circus away'. Writing in the context of the Franco-Algerian War, novelist Jean Lartéguy showed his paratroopers dragged into defeat by what military historian Daniel P. Bolger calls 'the ponderous weight of the conventional French military tradition and the deep cleavages in the French political landscape' (1989: 24). In *The Centurions* (2015 [1960]) and *The Praetorians* (2016 [1961]), Lartéguy's paratroopers are fiercely competent warriors hampered by the imbecility of their commanding generals, a command shown as more interested in pandering to civilian pressure from Paris than they are in confronting the strategic reality on the ground in Algeria.

These representations, of course, draw on a huge range of political traditions and operate in very different contexts. It would hardly make sense, for instance, to say that the writers of *Blackadder*, a broadly centre-left group of Oxbridge-educated bourgeois liberals, would agree with right-wingers McNab and Lartéguy or socialist Joe Glenton on the politics of war. One thing that they all share, however, is the idea that the working-class soldier on the front line has a far better understanding of the reality of war than the privileged higher ups who dictate policy. This trope, common to many perspectives on war, enables a range of critiques of it, generally to do with race and class, pacifism, colonialism, and power. However, and perhaps counterintuitively, it also enables a depoliticized understanding of warfare in which the only thing wrong with war is the lack of effective leadership with which it is prosecuted; the soldiers doing the killing know better how to effectively prosecute the war than the fools actually giving the orders. Though on the surface this position may look as though it has the virtues of a rough and ready class analysis, in practice it very often serves both to exonerate soldiers of their own violence and to supplant a broader historical and political structural critique of what imperial war *is* and whose interests it serves. The CIA in *Good Kill* may be cold-blooded fools, but the wider historico-political project of the war on terror never comes into question.

In *Good Kill*, this combat gnosticism is essentially morally exculpatory for drones, positioning UAVs as a morally neutral technology. According to this position, no weapon (not cluster munitions, not a cat'o'nine tails, not napalm) is in itself 'wrong' or 'too ugly'; it is only the use to which it is put, whether cruelly excessive or legitimate and compassionate, that we can ever ethically assess. Drones, therefore, are tools of liberation and virtue when used by the good, and they are instruments of war crime when in the hands of the bad. In one scene, for instance, Egan uses his drone to monitor the surroundings of a team of soldiers while they sleep. The drone, here, and its benevolently surveillant gaze, are protective, a technology which enhances the operational security of service personnel in the field like an attentive parent. Likewise, when Egan summarily executes the rapist at the film's climax, he disobeys his orders in order to do what he considers to be the right thing and save the woman from further harm. These protective and preventative uses of technology sit in stark contrast to the scenes in which Egan and his team follow the gruesome commands of the CIA.

This view of warfare, in which technology is only harmful because of the deliberate and indefensible orders of corrupt and questionable commanders, exonerates drones as a technology and initiates drone operators into the ranks of grunts on the ground who get the dirty end of the stick from corrupt or stupid superiors. It is not the soldier's fault – the ones in charge, who with obvious, reptilian insincerity claim to mourn the loss of innocent life involved in their actions, are the ones who are to blame for the foulness of what could otherwise be an effectively and morally prosecuted conflict. This critique, whilst rhetorically powerful, is ahistorical and depoliticizing; it fails to account for the most significant political and ethical problems of drone warfare and the war on terror more broadly, such as its threats to sovereignty, its violent coloniality, and its flagrant disregard for the human rights and humanity of the people killed in its course.

**3. The weeping warrior**

Trauma is one of the major scholarly lenses through which a great deal of twentieth-century war fiction is critically appreciated. Whether it is survivor literature that deals with the civilian experience of war – Holocaust literature, for instance, or human rights writing that focuses on other wartime atrocity – or textual production that focuses on the combat trauma experienced by soldiers, trauma as a scholarly lens often focuses on the ways in which such texts help audiences and readers gain an appreciation of the human dignity that is degraded and assaulted by war.

Trauma theory emerged as a school of literary-critical thought not long after PTSD was formally recognized by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (Whitehead 2004: 4) and has remained a major concern in a range of subdisciplinary incarnations of literary criticism. The recognition of PTSD as a psychological pathology emerged from a long period of advocacy by American Vietnam veterans, and is intimately connected both to war storytelling and to the humanization of combatants. Critics such as Sophia McClennen and Joseph Slaughter (2009) and Lynn Hunt (2007), for example, have influentially argued that compassion is enabled by literary experience. This perspective is broadly convincing, and has much to recommend it, but must also be accompanied by the insight that compassion is a thorny and complex social and political process, subject in many cases to an entire apparatus of conditions (Berlant 2004). That is, engaging with literary, filmic or other cultural texts may allow us to develop our compassion for others, but it does not do so outside of a context of material entanglement which can have multiple unpredictable or counterintuitive effects. Put differently, this rehumanizing tradition may enable forms of compassion to emerge, but they can often do so by privileging certain kinds of subjectivity and marginalizing others. The soldier's enemies or victims, for instance, can often be dehumanized, demonized, or reified into traumatizing stimuli – their humanity, as precious and meaningful as the soldier's, reduced to the source of a wound in the soldier's psyche. Vietnam films, in particular, from the aforementioned *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* to action genre pieces like *Rambo II* (1985) or *Tunnel Rats* (2008), are

notable for the extent to which they focus on the horror experienced by American soldiers entirely at the expense of any consideration of the humanity of Vietnamese combatants (or indeed, Vietnamese civilians).

Like fetishized technology and flawed commanders, traumatized soldiers are a mainstay of military fiction. Once more, First World War fiction and Vietnam films provide us with context and antecedent, as do many films of the war on terror, such as *Redacted* (2007), *Battle for Haditha* (2007), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), and *The Hurt Locker* (2008), for instance. First World War texts often focus on the conscript experience of what was then called shell shock or neurasthenia, explicitly challenging unsympathetic attitudes about weakness or cowardice that accompanied the development of awareness of combat trauma. Vietnam films, too, are once again an interesting point of reference, due to the frequent focus in them on the conscript experience of horrifying conditions. From *First Blood* (1982), in which macho hero John Rambo weeps inconsolably, to *American Sniper* (2014), which focuses on the traumatic War on Terror experiences of real-life sniper Chris Kyle, soldiers are revealed as complex individuals with profound personal depth and powerful emotional reactions to the business of killing in combat.

*Good Kill* focuses on the emotional and moral reactions that regular people experience in extraordinary wartime conditions. Tommy is, after all, a family man, with kids struggling through maths class, a predilection for upbeat rock music, and the same name as the white Western World War everyman, Rudyard Kipling's Tommy Atkins. The film thereby integrates drone pilots into the community of soldiers who can be sympathetically represented as suffering as a result of their own capacity for murder. Drone pilots may not be able to place their bodies in the line of fire, or to lay down their lives for their brothers in arms, but they are certainly able to have a meaningful and authentic martial experience by endangering their mental health. Drone pilots, in *Good Kill*, are not just Wii warriors or the chair force: in another gesture that engages with audience preconceptions about drone operators, *Good Kill*'s protagonists experience war every bit as viscerally as those with their boots on foreign soil. This deployment of trauma has a cynical political effect. In the context of Israeli settler conquest, Ilan Pappe writes that soldiers and politicians alike share an 'ethos that can best be described as "shoot and cry"', (2006: 110). That is, settlers have often framed themselves as compassionate, as morally virtuous, even reluctant, traumatized by the violence they themselves commit, in order to justify or minimize the violence of their expropriative actions. There is certainly an element of this at play in *Good Kill*.

A great deal of scholarship and commentary has focused on the emotional challenges of drone piloting, including a sub-genre of confessional stories which centre the psychic toll of committing remote executions (Power 2013; Phillips 2022). *Good Kill* is exemplary of this form, and in particular it concentrates in some depth on the relationship between martial experience and domestic life that is unique to drone operators. This juxtaposition is emphasized throughout many kinds of drone fiction. In *Kill Decision* (2016 [2012]: 4), for example, novelist Daniel Suarez writes: 'It made it hard to keep up

a battle rhythm when you found yourself in a convenience store buying a Slurpee an hour after ordering the deaths of five insurgents half a world away'. Dan Fesperman, more seriously perhaps, writes in his novel *Unmanned* (2014: 153) that the rhythm feels like 'Entry and reentry, with never enough time for proper decompression. A mental case of the bends that had eventually doubled him over in pain'. Likewise, when a grocery teller comments on Egan's flight jacket, Tommy says (to the cashier's obvious disbelief) that he 'blew away six Taliban in Pakistan just today, and now I'm going home to barbecue'. In addition to this comparatively lighthearted moment, we also see Tommy's 'mental case of the bends'. Hard alcohols are his constant companion, with Tommy often drinking spirits while driving, sometimes even on the way to work. He and Molly have sex, but he lays motionless, blank, passively anhedoniac, as she makes love to him. He seems to have no friends and only barely to tolerate the other members of his team, laddish, smirking airmen who remain unmoved by the experiences that psychologically wound Tommy. When he accidentally kills the children, he shares a whiskey with his boss and becomes tearfully morose, clearly consumed with self-loathing and regret. After weeks of festering paranoia and resentment, his marriage finally falls to pieces after he lashes out at Molly, missing her face by inches and smashing (with unsubtle visual symbolism) the bedroom mirror.

But this focus on the interior experience of the UAV pilot, though it may present the audience with a powerfully humanizing perspective, is simultaneously a profoundly narrow, etiolated framing of drone warfare. As Alex Danchev (2016: 16) rightly remarks with regard to the phenomenon of drone talk, 'the focus on the operator is essentially self-regarding, and occasionally self-serving. It may shed light on "others", but it returns, obsessively, to us'. To recall my earlier remarks about compassion: the sympathy that we have for Tommy comes at the expense of any sympathy for his victims, who remain, to us, distant and depthless figures on a screen within a screen. There is no consideration of the humanity of Egan's victims apart from the satisfaction or sadness that killing them causes him. Roger Stahl (2018: 81), in his reading of *Good Kill*, writes that 'as critical as the film is, it carefully quarantines its outrage in Tommy and his patient wife (January Jones), who appear as the principal casualties of the drone war'. Tommy's turmoil is front and centre; little else matters.

## Conclusion: the good kill

At the film's climax, Tommy pulls the trigger, preventing an imminent rape. This act synthesizes all three elements I have discussed here. It is the fulfilment of the teleology of the weapon: the missile that has been waiting to be launched is finally and inevitably deployed. It is a combat gnostic's defiance of the indefensible order not to help the woman: he has killed so many innocents, he feels, that it is time to defiantly kill somebody who actually deserves it. It is also a curative act: Tommy gets his vengeance, solves his problems, in the act which simultaneously redeems his valour, restores his self-belief, and ends his career. The entire film

and all of its agonizing over the ethics of drone warfare telescopes towards this decisive event. Tommy has only ever wanted to get back to what he considers 'real' combat, to feel as though he is able to make his own decisions about who to fire upon. By making the unilateral decision to kill, he has regained his self-control and soldierly autonomy, and the film ends with what Egan considers a triumph.

What this shows is that each of the intellectual and political coordinates I have examined in this article is a cog or pinion in the rhetorical process which serves to make us comfortable with Tommy pulling the trigger. That is, to be clear: the praise of military hardware, the critique of the establishment, and the humanization of the soldier all militate, in chorus, to dehumanize the targets of drone strikes and to rhetorically enable – and not to oppose – bloodshed in war.

For the drone victims are completely dehumanized, presented to us only as interchangeable figures on the UAV operators' screens. Their suffering is reported through the smug dialogue of the drone team – 'I count six [dead], sir, but good luck figuring out which bits go in what casket' – and remains invisible to the audience. They disappear cleanly in front of us when we view their deaths through Egan's viewfinder, and we know that their deaths are sad only through the affective cues telegraphed by Egan's remorse at his own actions and Sanchez's outspoken moral outrage at the CIA's indefensible orders. Diegetically these people are little more than prompts for the moral qualms of the American protagonists, or, indeed, when Egan kills the 'right' brown man, an opportunity for moral redemption. Ronak K. Kapadia (2018: 202) is particularly emphatic on why this is a problem: 'criticism of drone wars is impoverished', he writes, 'without sufficient account for the livelihoods and experiences of those rendered most precarious by this mode of violence'. If we fail – or refuse – to engage with the experience of people who live under the surveillant and lethal gaze of the drone, we cannot meaningfully understand what is at stake in drone warfare. This 'under', the experience of living within the drone programme's reach, is explored in many extraordinary texts, such as Atef Abu Saif's memoir *The Drone Eats with Me* (2015) or Solmaz Sherif's collection *Look* (2016). It is, however, largely absent from Western drone movies.

*Good Kill* is a particularly clear example of the ways in which hegemonic popular culture defangs, reincorporates, and rearticulates critique of military hardware, personnel, and geopolitical activity. Pop culture artefacts can articulate a limited critique of war whilst also remaining sympathetic to the military personnel who conduct it and, indeed, to broader foreign policy aims. It shows drone operations as continuous with other forms of martial identity in terms of both the conduct of violence and the experience of participants, and it does so in order not to critique drones as a historical continuation of a tradition of violent colonial airpower but rather to *defuse* and *absorb* such a critique by showing that drones represent, simply, war as usual.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

***Alex Adams*** is an independent scholar based in North East England. He has published many essays and three monographs on the subject of the representation of political violence in the war on terror, most recently Death TV: Drone Warfare in Contemporary Popular Culture (Drone Wars UK, 2021). For more information, see atadamswriting.com

## ORCID

*Alex Adams* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0010-9829

## References

Abu Saif, A. 2015. *The Drone Eats with Me: Diaries From a City Under Fire*. London: Comma Press.

Adams, A. 2021. *Death TV: Drone Warfare in Contemporary Popular Culture*. Oxford: Drone Wars UK. https://dronewars.net/2021/03/10/death-tv-drone-warfare-in-contemporary-popular-culture/ [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Badsey, S. 2002. The Great War since *The Great War. Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 22 (1):37–45. doi:10.1080/01439680220120273

Berlant, L. 2004. Introduction: Compassion (and Withholding). In: Lauren Berlant, ed. *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*. Oxford: Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 1–13.

Bolger, D.P. (1989) Two Armies. *Parameters* 19: 1, pp. 24-34, https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol19/iss1/5. [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Brady, S. 2015. God, the Pilot, and the Bugsplat: Performance and the Drone Effect. *BEHEMOTH: A Journal on Civilisation*, 8(2):34–54.

Brown, D. & DeFelice, J. 2012. *Collateral Damage*. New York: Harper.

Brown, D. & DeFelice, J. 2014. *Drone Strike*. New York: Harper.

Brown, D. & DeFelice, J. 2015. *Target Utopia*. New York: Harper.

Buchanan, D.A. 2016. *Going Scapegoat: Post-9/11 War Literature, Language and Culture*. Jefferson: McFarland and Co.

Campbell, J. 1999. Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism. *New Literary History*, 30(1):203–215. doi:10.1353/nlh.1999.0002

Chamayou, G. 2015. *Drone Theory.* Translated by Janet Lloyd. London: Penguin.

Clark, A. 1962. *The Donkeys*. New York: William Morrow and Company.

Clarke, R. 2014. *Sting of the Drone*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books.

Clausewitz, C. 1997. *On War.* Translated by J J Graham. Ware: Wordsworth Editions.

Cockburn, A. 2015. *Kill Chain: Drones and the Rise of High-Tech Assassins*. London: Verso.

Coker, C. 2014. *Men at War: What Fiction Tells Us About Conflict, from The Iliad to Catch-22*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cronin, B. 2018. *Bugsplat: The Politics of Collateral Damage in Western Armed Conflicts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Daggett, C. 2015. Drone Disorientations: How 'Unmanned' Weapons Queer the Experience of Killing in War. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17(3):361–379. doi:10.1080/14616742.2015.1075317

Danchev, A. 2016. Bug Splat: The Art of the Drone. *International Affairs*, 92(3):1–20. doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12609

Emery, J.R. 2020. Probabilities Towards Death: Bugsplat, Algorithmic Assassinations, and Ethical Due Care. *Critical Military Studies*, 8:179–197. doi:10.1080/23337486.2020.1809251

Fesperman, D. 2014. *Unmanned*. London: Corvus.

Fussell, P. 2000 [1975]. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Glenton, J. 2021. *Veteranhood: Rage and Hope in British Ex-Military Life*. London: Repeater Books.

Goldstein, C.S. 2017. Good Kill? US Soldiers and the Killing of Civilians in American Film. In: Christina Hellmich & Lisa Purse, eds. *Disappearing War: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post-9/11 World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 16–33.

*Good Kill*. 2014. Dir. A. Niccol.

Gregory, D. 2011. From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(7-8):188–215. doi: 10.1177/0263276411423027

Gregory, D. 2012. The Territory of the Screen. *Media Tropes eJournal*, 6(2):126–147. https://geographicalimaginations.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/gregory-the-territory-of-the-screen-mediatropes.pdf [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Hunt, L. 2007. *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

Kapadia, R.K. 2018. Death by Double-Tap: (Undoing) Racial Logics in the Age of Drone Warfare. In: Sohail Daulatzai & Junaid Rana, eds. *With Stones in Our Hands: Writings on Muslims, Racism, and Empire*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 201–218.

Lartéguy, J. 2015 [1960]. *The Centurions*. Translated by Xan Fielding. London: Penguin.

Lartéguy, J. 2016 [1961]. *The Praetorians*. Translated by Xan. London: Penguin.

Lin, H. (2021) The Fourth Quadrant – the Unknown Knowns. *Lawfare*, 9/7/2021. https://www.lawfareblog.com/fourth-quadrant-unknown-knowns. [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Maden, M. 2013. *Drone*. London: Penguin.

Maden, M. 2014. *Blue Warrior*. London: Penguin.

Maden, M. 2015. *Drone Command*. London: Penguin.

Maden, M. 2016. *Drone Threat*. London: Penguin.

Manjikian, M. 2014. Becoming Unmanned. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16(1):48–65. doi:10.1080/14616742.2012.746429

McClennen, S. & Slaughter, J. 2009. Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; or, the Vehicles and Vocabularies of Human Rights. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 46(1):1–19. doi:10.2307/complitstudies.46.1.0001

McNab, A. 1993. *Bravo Two Zero*. London: Corgi.

Moon, H. 2020. Drone Warfare and Female Warrior: Good Kill and Eye in the Sky. In: Cinematic Women, From Objecthood to Heroism: Essays on Female Gender Representation on Western Screens and. In: TV Productions & Lisa V. Mazey. London: Vernon Press, pp. 109–122.

Pappe, I. 2006. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. London: Oneworld Publications Limited.

Philipps, D. (2022) The Unseen Scars of Those Who Kill via Remote Control. *New York Times*. 15/04/2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/us/drones-airstrikes-ptsd.html [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Power, M. (2013) Confessions of a Drone Warrior. *GQ*. 22/10/2013. https://www.gq.com/story/drone-uav-pilot-assassination [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Romano, N. (2021) *Outside the Wire* and *Fate: The Winx Saga* top most-watched Netflix movies and TV shows of the year. *Entertainment Weekly*. 21/04/2021. https://ew.com/movies/outside-the-wire-fate-the-winx-saga-most-watched-netflix-movies-tv-shows/ [last accessed: 12/06/2022].

Scarry, E. 1985. *The Body In Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sedlmayr, G. 2016. The Uses of History in Blackadder. In: Jürgen Kamm & Birgit Neumann, eds. *British TV Comedies: Cultural Concepts, Contexts and Controversies*. London: Palgrave, pp. 153–166.

Sharif, S. 2016. *Look: Poems*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.

Stahl, R. 2013. What the Drone Saw: The Cultural Optics of the Unmanned War. *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 67(5):659–674. doi:10.1080/10357718.2013.817526

Stahl, R. 2018. *Through the Crosshairs: War, Visual Culture and the Weaponized Gaze*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Suarez, D. 2016 [2012]. *Kill Decision*. London: Penguin.

Whitehead, A. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.