11. The Ticking Bomb Drone Strike: Drone Warfare and Emergency Ethics in *Eye in the Sky*

Alex Adams[1] ✉

(1)   Independent Scholar, Jarrow, UK

Keywords Drone strike – Torture – *Eye in the Sky* – Utilitarianism – Human rights – Film – Gavin Hood

Introduction

One of the major reasons that narratives and representations are socially and politically meaningful to their audiences and consumers is that they provide ways of staging political and ethical debates. Although aesthetic and cultural production cannot be reduced to this didactic function, by dramatizing debates and arguments as coherently organized and readily comprehensible stories, texts such as novels, comics, TV shows, video games, and films help us think through, articulate, and debate what is at stake in our ideas, values, and political positions. Military fiction is a particularly charged genre in this respect: a great range of representations, from popular action franchises such as the *Rambo* series (1982, 1985, 1988, 2008, 2019) through TV shows such as *Homeland* (2011–2020) to high culture artefacts such as *Syriana* (2005), engage in moral and ethical debates about the legitimacy and conduct of war, global policing, state violence, and the protection and promotion of human rights. Representations that explore the moral and ethical conundrums of war can be influential ways of framing and contributing to public discussions about one of the most serious uses of state power, so cultural texts that attempt to provide explanations of the complex issues associated with it are of substantial importance.

However, they often provide us with compelling yet misleading explorations of the issues at stake. Like any critique, representation, or understanding of state violence, the examination of drone warfare must consider broader political questions to generate meaningful insights; in the case of unmanned vehicular warfare, attention should be given to matters of geopolitical power, coloniality, sovereignty, racial and economic inequality, and surveillance, for instance. This essay examines Gavin Hood's 2015 film *Eye in the Sky*, in which civilian and military authorities disagree over the ethics of authorizing a

drone strike in a militia-controlled area of Nairobi. I argue here that while contemporary theoretical discourse may now be generating valuable insights into the political, material and philosophical implications of drone warfare, thriller narratives such as this film that rely on an evaluation of emergency ethics—that is, narratives that consider whether any given urgent situation may or may not legitimize a violent act—thus far remain unable to fully account for it and therefore represent ahistorical, depoliticized, and impoverished interventions in the debates of which they are a part. Specifically, this chapter argues that *Eye in Sky*'s ethical debate is structurally analogous to the ticking bomb scenario, a very popular but gravely misleading narrative about torture, and that as a consequence, it frames the moral quandaries of drone warfare in a way that integrates it into the existing rhetorics of military necessity that underpin liberal humanitarian interventionism—that is, it examines it in a way that allows many of the most troubling and controversial aspects of drone warfare to be left unexplored and for its violence to appear morally and politically defensible.

Torture, Drone Warfare, and the Structure of Violence

In an astute re-evaluation of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), Kevin McSorley (2019) notes that the structure of modern drone warfare is analogous to the structure of political torture. Scarry's classic book is a political phenomenology of interpersonal violence, and in it, she writes that torture is a process through which the 'insignia of power' is repeatedly written on the physical body of the victim, amplifying the illegitimate power of the torturing regime and coercing the sufferer into confirming the authority of their torturer (Scarry 1985: 27–59). McSorley draws on Scarry's analysis of the ways that physical violence creates 'a sense of the incontestable reality of the torturing regime's power' and identifies an 'underlying mechanism of the transubstantiation of pain and injury into political power' that he claims can be read across both torture and drone warfare (McSorley 2019: 3, 19). Both forms of state violence are, for McSorley, marked as strategies of violent biopolitical governmentality by their concern with total control over and knowledge of the people and populations against whom they are violently mobilized. That is, both forms of violence are political tools for the imposition of power over people—at the level of the individual body and at the level of the wider population—through the exercise of force, intimidation, and wounding.

There is much to explore here. One of Scarry's major arguments in *The Body in Pain* is that by exercising total control—in the form of the infliction of injury and suffering—over the body of the tortured person, the torturer permanently redefines reality for their subject, annihilating their ability to

feel safe in the world and endeavouring to produce the political effect of obedience or defeat. Likewise, McSorley writes, drone warfare redefines reality in traumatic terms for the populations against whom it is mobilized.

> For those populations living under drones, predatory war is experienced primarily as a form of pervasive sensory terrorism, its effects widespread, unpredictable and seemingly arbitrary […]. Feelings of constant fear, incomprehension and becoming prey led to an undermining of the normal routines of everyday living, the sense of a stable interaction order, and community trust. […] Predatory war has been experienced in terms of widespread feelings of ubiquitous surveillance, of enclosure and being held hostage, and the increasing penetration, desecration and inversion of a sense of hospitality and safety everywhere and at all times. (2019: 12–15)

The permanent potential for arbitrary destruction built into the military drone produces the effect of terror in the lives of those it targets: by terror, I mean here permanent knowledge of the annihilatory whims of the regime to which one is subject. The most important aspect of this, however, is the political meaning of the erasure of bodily safety. Much as torture inscribes power on the fabric of the individual body, drone warfare inscribes the power of the US drone regime across the fabric of the zones—Pakistan, Afghanistan, Gaza, and elsewhere—that it subjects to weaponized drone surveillance.

The reason that I draw here on McSorley's observations is, of course, that there are wider parallels to be drawn between torture and drone violence. The similarities do not end with the phenomenology of vulnerability—the world-unmaking sense of one's perpetual availability to the Hellfire missile—to which he refers. Torture and drone warfare need to be understood as parts of an integrated military-political apparatus, a broad and deep system of imperial power that relies on the exercise of extraordinary violence to enforce its hegemony. Drone warfare, that is, is the latest stage of a multifaceted historical process in which imperial space and colonized populations become subject to violent securitization in order to enable capitalist expansion and resource exploitation. In turning sections of the world into open prisons that can be remotely policed, drones are as integral a component of a global carceral system as torture prisons. In addition, drones are the latest iteration of a long historical process in which certain areas of the world are surveilled and bombed by Western powers; therefore, they also need to be understood as what Derek Gregory calls 'a profoundly colonial modality of air power' (2011: 189). The power that drones wield, that is, has deep roots. Drone networks of surveillance and control are, although potentially omnipresent, in practice differentially distributed and disproportionately focused in certain areas. Indeed, since much drone violence is perpetrated by states in the Global North and West against states and populations in the Global South and East, modern drone

technologies, whilst revolutionary and innovative in engineering terms, reinscribe and deepen historically persistent constellations.

Drone warfare is concerned not with the military logic of *invasion* and the strategic logic of a *temporary exercise of force* in the pursuit of *specific and limited objectives* but with the colonial logic of *occupation* and the policing logic of *permanent control* in the pursuit of *generalized and adaptable objectives*. Torture has been described as the colonial political technology that most clearly expresses the nature of the political relationship entailed by colonial occupation; Robert Young (2009) writes that torture, as well as a definite political phenomenon with clear material effects and physical consequences, is also 'an expression of the occupant-occupied relationship'. Drone warfare could well be on the way to displacing it as the ideal mechanism and perfect metaphor for the exercise of imperial power-knowledge. An important caveat should be observed here, however: in describing the revolutionary nature of drone technology and the totalizing ambitions of those who wield it, we critics should not embrace too readily the rhetoric of total control and military omniscience in which such descriptions are too often couched. Embracing this rhetoric uncritically risks inadvertently praising the technology or, worse, suggesting that the coloniality it represents and reproduces cannot be resisted.[1]

While it would be irresponsible to claim that drones are as all-powerful as some of their giddier advocates claim, the range and scope of the power that drones potentially enable is in fact troubling, and more thoroughgoing than may be expected. For instance, Mike Bourne draws on Bruno Latour to argue that

> the relationship between technology and warfare and subjectivity can be argued to be closely entangled, whereby new technologies enter the networks of war through processes of non-linear adaptation, innovation and faltering assimilation, and affect how the humans (soldiers, policy makers, weapons scientists) behave and conceive of themselves. […] For Latour, it is the process of composition in which technology and society are co-emergent that assembles power relations in particular configurations and renders them fixed, invisible and logical. (2012: 158–159)

That is, at stake is not simply the fact that technology is folded into warfare to pursue existing aims but rather the fact that the insertion of ever-developing technology into warfare itself affects not only the everyday conduct of war but also the parameters of possibility. Drone warfare, in integrating surveillance, policing, and assassination, is a radical composition, an incredibly sophisticated and dangerous assemblage of technologies that enables new forms of thought, experience, and conduct on the part of those operating and designing them and that opens up the possibilities of planning and executing new forms of total warfare. Torture, too, is a transformative political technology that

renegotiates and fixes power relations. By making populations aware that they can be made available to torture if they commit certain acts or express certain views, torturing powers in authoritarian or colonial societies use force (and the wider threat of torture) to redefine the parameters of political possibility.

On a more granular level, another parallel between torture and drone violence can be found in the rhetoric of bureaucratic dehumanization that both forms of violence have accumulated. As Jeffrey S. Bachman and Jack Holland write, the Obama administration 'employed innovative techniques of dehumanization' in the course of the rhetorical justifications of their drone warfare, 'adopting a sanguine, bureaucratic language to veil the act of killing' (2019: 3). This has its corollary in the bland language used to describe the forms of violence used against prisoners in the post-9/11 torture programme. That is, both torture and drone warfare have attracted a specialized bureaucratic vocabulary: where targeted assassinations are referred to as 'surgical strikes' and innocent people murdered (by mistake or design) are referred to as 'collateral damage', torture is described as 'enhanced interrogation' —with specific torture techniques having their own banal denotations, such as 'dietary manipulation' for starvation or 'close confinement' for shackling in a locked box, for instance. The function of such language is not, of course, to change the character of the violence it describes for the person or people enduring it; the function is to enable its incorporation into a body of bureaucratic and legalistic procedures and to present imperial violence as legitimate, proportionate, and compatible with international law.

It is also important to acknowledge that in some respects, the drone programme has, as a historical process, grown directly out of the torture programme. Jeremy Scahill (2013), in particular, shows how the torture programme and drone programme arose as interlinked forms of covert warfare after 9/11 and that as the torture programme came under pressure to shut down, the drone programme was building up a head of steam. For their part, drone advocates are rarely coy about this. 'It has become more politically palatable,' wrote journalist Daniel Byman, 'for the United States to kill rather than detain suspected terrorists' (2013: 34). Conflict incarceration during the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has proven to be consistently politically problematic and the object of much public controversy because of the extent to which it involved the US in violations of international law and exposed lawmakers and the military to sustained criticism from human rights groups. The drone programme seemed to represent a neat solution to this because killing on the battlefield (as drone strikes were often misdescribed) was more easily described as a legitimate, proportionate, and fair act of conventional warfare than were concentrationary incarceration, indefinite detention, and systematic torture.

Likewise, and perhaps most important for this chapter, cultural narratives about torture and drone strikes sometimes display interesting similarities. In some ways, classic science fiction franchises such

as the *Terminator* or *Robocop* movies remain the most prescient and insightful explorations of robot warfare and policing, due in part to their emphasis on the intimacy of the connection between technological innovation and merciless authoritarianism. They do not, however, capture the planetary ambitions of modern robotic warfare, and neither do such fictions, as Jordan Crandall (2016: 324) notes, capture its specifically vehicular (rather than anthropomorphic) character; the 'rendering of drone warfare on film via the established Hollywood idiom necessarily involves a blindness to, precisely, drone warfare's non-human aspect', writes Yasco Horsman (2020: 306). Nor are such texts the limit of cultural representations of drone warfare. In an article exploring how 'drone warfare is mediated through literature, film, and video games, and what the particular mode of mediation reveals about the effects of drones on those who work with or live around them', Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps have identified the very broad scope and range of contemporary fiction, film, TV and video game cultural productions that engage with drones (2018: 3). I do not, of course, contend that most or even many of them are torture narratives. A range of forms of narrative, however, engage with or stage moral debates about violence, and productive parallels can be drawn here because of the intriguing similarities between the ways in which torture and drone strikes are debated. They are both signature political technologies of state terror; it is perhaps only logical that they are debated and narrated in the same impoverished and abstract terms in hegemonic popular culture.

The Ticking Bomb Scenario

The ticking bomb scenario is a thought experiment that aims to demonstrate that torture can be permitted in certain emergency situations. It is also one of the most culturally prevalent narratives about torture and can be found throughout a wide range of cultural productions, including novels, film, TV, graphic novels, and video games (Adams 2019). It dramatizes a falsely unambiguous decision point—a bomb is ticking, and a prisoner is tortured until they reveal the information that can prevent the bomb from going off—to frame a persuasive narrative that attempts to justify torture. It aims to demonstrate 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. This simplistic framing requires us to answer in the affirmative the misleading question that it poses about torture. Of course, if it were a decision between the right of one criminal not to be tortured and the right to life of many innocent individuals, we are supposed to think, then yes, torture is the lesser of two evils and can be condoned. David Luban writes that the thought experiment is 'a remarkably effective propaganda device' because 'it is simple, easy to grasp, emotionally powerful, and – above all – it seems to have only one right answer, the pro-torture answer' (

2008: 4). Its 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 be answered on its own terms in the negative.

In many ways, the ticking bomb scenario echoes another thought experiment, the trolley problem, in which the driver of a train with defective brakes must choose whether to take a track that will result in the train hitting and killing five people or to take another available route that will result in the death of only one person; most people, writes Judith Thompson (1985), would agree that even though we may feel discomfort about causing the death of the solitary innocent, it is difficult not to agree that minimizing harm is the right choice. The ticking bomb scenario is structurally analogous and allows those who deploy it to frame torture as a compassionate form of harm reduction rather than a grotesque human rights abuse. Thought experiments are often ways of exploring ideas to critically examine our habits of thought or our unconscious biases; the ticking bomb scenario flattens the multifaceted and potentially reflective potential of the trolley problem into a misleading justificatory discourse.

Crucially for the present discussion, the most troubling effect of this thought experiment is to naturalize the idea that limited emergency situations require us to forgo our legal and moral commitments to the absolute prohibition of torture. As Luban writes elsewhere, 'ticking-bomb stories depict torture as an emergency exception, but use intuitions based on the exceptional case to justify institutionalized practices and procedures of torture' (2005: 1427). There is a subtle yet definite slippage in the principle that is established by the hypothetical: by agreeing that an exception can be made, we undermine the absolute prohibition on torture.

Similar rhetorical positions can be found in discussions about drone warfare. The discussion about drone warfare most closely resembles the ticking bomb scenario when it concerns collateral damage— that is, when it concerns the unintended yet nonetheless deliberate deaths of noncombatants, such as those that occur when drone strikes are used against populated areas. Both positions share a kernel of utilitarian argumentation: the idea that we may sometimes have to commit an atrocity—commit torture or kill innocent bystanders—to save a large number of innocent lives. Lisa Hajjar (2016: 65) writes, for instance, that Israeli state lawfare has integrated the notion of a ticking bomb into its justification for targeted killing: if individuals are considered to pose an imminent and grave risk, their assassination is considered legally warranted. (Naturally, these assessments of risk are rarely clear-cut and frequently result in the deaths of civilian, noncombatant victims.) In his 2013 *Foreign Affairs* article, 'Why Drones Work', 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' (35, 32).

In his 2005 article 'A Defence of Torture', Sam Harris draws a particularly bold comparison between unintentional killing in smart bomb strikes and ticking bomb torture. He argues that since we are willing to accept the unfortunate necessity of collateral damage, we should be willing to accept the unfortunate necessity of emergency torture.

> There is no escaping the fact that whenever we drop bombs, we drop them with the knowledge that some number of children will be blinded, disemboweled, paralyzed, orphaned, and killed by them. […] If we are willing to drop bombs, or even risk that rifle rounds might go astray, we should be willing to torture a certain class of criminal suspects and military prisoners.

Modern war, he writes, is inconceivable without unintentional harm to the innocent; therefore, because one must sometimes do a thing that is wrong in itself to achieve larger, more just aims, then some limited degree of atrocity is morally permissible. In *Drone Theory* (2015: 102), Grégoire Chamayou criticizes this ethics of violence as 'tautological, and reduced to a flatly Jesuitical justification of ends that justify means'. Chamayou observes that the understanding of military heroism, bravery, and valour that underpins drone operations is that 'bravery consists in doing the dirty work' (a formulation found throughout ticking bomb torture arguments) and that this notion of some people getting their hands dirty to guarantee the security of others is a reflection of a generally impoverished moral debate.

'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' (2019: 8). 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 interrogational torture and unintentional blast zone deaths are misleading ways of framing ethical discussions about contemporary warfare. A critique, however detailed, of the moral rationale for any given decision is effectively meaningless. What, after all, does one limited act of warranted interrogational torture have to do with the seedy murk of a globally institutionalized torture programme? How does an understanding of the moral calculations behind any one missile strike give us any insight into a globally networked robotic security apparatus? 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 *regime* of torture; to understand what is at stake in the system of global militarized surveillance, one must aim for a comprehensive understanding

of the *regime* rather than the moral minutiae of any one act of killing. In what follows, I argue that *Eye in the Sky*, by dramatizing drone warfare as a ticking bomb scenario, reflects the generally politically impoverished condition of debates that utilize such hypotheticals.

The Ticking Bomb Drone Strike

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 that is inaccessible to the capture team (it is controlled by al-Shabab and as such cannot be entered without a firefight) 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. That is, should the drone operator fire upon the house to kill the terrorists and stop their attack, even though their house is in the middle of a densely populated zone?

Although the military officers in charge are immediately certain that a Hellfire missile is warranted, the civilian characters and the drone operator himself are unsure, and their uncertainty constitutes the dramatic focus of the movie. The operation is being observed by COBRA, a British emergency security committee, so that some members of civilian government can witness the operation; reluctant to assume political responsibility for the missile strike, they pass responsibility for the decision to the British Foreign Secretary, who passes it to the US Secretary of Defence, who ultimately (without hesitation, in the middle of a ping pong game) approves it. However, there is an additional complication. The drone operator, noticing that a young girl is within the projected blast radius, demands that the military reassess the likelihood of killing her along with the terrorists. A military intelligence officer is pressured to manipulate the calculation of the estimated blast zone (or CDE—Collateral Damage Estimate) to artificially lower the official estimate of the probability of killing her in the course of the strike and thereby enable the launch of the missile. Ultimately, of course, the strike goes ahead, and the girl is killed along with the terrorists.

The film emphasizes this central question: is it morally right to kill the girl in the course of killing the terrorists? What should be our moral priority? Is an innocent death an acceptable price to pay for the achievement of a justified aim? They calculate that if the attacks are not prevented, at least eighty civilians are likely to die. In a novel riff on the trolley problem, the film asks whether the *chance* of preventing eighty possible deaths is worth the *certainty* of murdering at least one innocent. 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. Nothing can disrupt the teleology of military necessity: it is never in question, truly, that the missile will be launched. The point of the film is, simply, the discomfort caused for all involved by the obvious fact that the girl will be killed along with the al-Shabab cell.

On a purely utilitarian basis, it is represented in the movie as straightforwardly operationally justified to kill enemies in pursuit of a military objective. The British military representatives and the US Secretary of Defence find it frustratingly obvious that the drone operator should pull the trigger and prevent the terrorists from detonating their suicide weapons. However, many of the other characters find the situation upsettingly ambiguous and consider it morally wrong to kill a young girl regardless of the circumstances. The movie ends tragically, with the death of the young girl foregrounded; before the credits roll, we see an elegiac slow motion shot of the girl dancing in the sun. Everybody seems able to agree, however, 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 have acted 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. That is, the film engages the moral problem of collateral damage at the expense of the many broader moral and political questions raised by the regime of drone warfare itself. The goal-oriented nature of the narrative, which telescopes towards an inevitable closure, necessarily misrepresents the messy complexity of drone warfare.

The framing of this movie fundamentally misrepresents 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 which torture 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 systematic state torture as it actually occurs in the world 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 otherwise morally unproblematic operations. This reflects a certain debate around drone warfare in which the issues of extrajudicial assassination, global

surveillance, and planetary enclosure simply do not surface or are assumed to be unproblematic. Incredibly (not to say unrealistically) detailed high-definition real-time global surveillance, for instance, is integral to the narrative perspective of the movie, as everyone shares multiple screen views of the district in which the terrorists are based. Such invasive, panoptic access into the households of Nairobi must be presumed acceptable in order for the movie to make sense. The COBRA committee, epicentre of the moral objection to the missile strike, only develops qualms once the objective changes from capture to kill. Watching the events in intrusive surveillant detail is an uncontroversial prerequisite for the development of the narrative.

Do Not Kill Me: Compassion and the Imperialism of Human Rights

The ticking bomb scenario is, at its core, an argument about the necessity of violent protection. As such, it is an image in miniature of the liberal argument for humanitarian intervention. This may seem to be a provocative claim, as liberal interventionism is consistently positioned as a matter of the promotion of peace and the installation of democratic institutions into political spaces blighted by authoritarianism or anarchy, and not as a fringe argument defending specific atrocities. It is an article of faith for liberal interventionists, for instance, that 'intervention can be right when human rights are being denied, either by repressive state authorities or as a side-effect of internal conflict' (Lipsey 2016: 416), and another of the central pillars of the justification of humanitarianism is that liberal states have the moral duty 'to *rescue* victims of tyranny or anarchy, if we can do so at reasonable cost' (Tesón 2003: 93. Emphasis in original.). Where the ticking bomb scenario claims that violence against prisoners is justified in order to defuse hypothetical bombs and rescue huge amounts of innocent civilians, the rhetoric of liberal interventionism likewise justifies wholesale invasions in order to rescue civilians and to promote, by force, human rights. In both cases, violence is rendered innocent through appeals to its supposedly protective effects. If Radhika Desai's tone is polemical when she writes that the contemporary West 'festoons its imperialism with the rhetoric of human rights and democracy' (2022: 170), her substantive point stands.

This iconography of conquest is found throughout the discussions surrounding twenty-first century wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Ukraine, Iran, and elsewhere. Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise that it was not long before drones were integrated into the humanitarian rhetoric of contemporary imperialism. In 2014, Kristin Bergtora Sandvik and Kjersti Lohne warned that 'drone strikes may, over time, be appropriated as a specific technological expression of humanitarian reason' (164); their concern was proven warranted a year later, as in 2015, the same year that *Eye in the Sky* was released, Caroline Kennedy & James I. Rogers argued in *The International Journal of Human Rights* that drones are,

because of the reduction of potential harm to peacekeeping personnel, a virtuous and ethical peacekeeping technology. Although *Eye in the Sky* is perhaps not this bold in overtly claiming that drones are virtuous, it certainly makes the case that their violence can be warranted and that their surveillant gaze can enable protective humanitarian activity.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of *Eye in Sky*'s engagement with the humanitarianism of liberal interventionism is the girl in red dress. This young African girl, the innocent victim who complicates what would otherwise be a straightforward matter of the remote elimination of an imminent terror threat, is learning mathematics, reads a picture book about London, and enjoys playing with a hula hoop, and is as such one of the people who liberal interventionism positions itself as defending (one of the victims, in Tesón's terms, who 'we' are morally obligated to rescue): a young girl who wants, despite the prevailing political authoritarianism and misogynist patriarchy of 'her culture', to be educated, to travel, and to express her bodily autonomy. These aesthetic and political coordinates establish her death as particularly tragic, as the drone strike is shown as destroying that which it is designed to protect. Although she is a vibrant example of a prominent paternalistic cliché in human rights discourse—the innocent, tragic native—she also contributes to the film's engagement with the moral legitimacy of the drone strike by underscoring the material costs of imperial violence.

Her red headscarf is visually significant too, as it echoes the young girl in Steven Spielberg's Holocaust drama *Schindler's List*, described by film scholars as representing the 'universal victim— childlike and female, thus innocent, passive, and powerless' (Rapaport 2002: 59), a fragile innocent whose death is 'terribly more wrenching than any other single image might have been' (Eley and Grossmann 1997: 56). Witnessing the death of the girl in the red coat—a little girl whose clothing is rendered in striking red against the monochrome of everything else in the film—is a key moment in Schindler's moral development, and it forces Spielberg's protagonist to become more resolute in his desire to rescue Jews from Nazi extermination camps. *Eye in Sky*'s red-garmented innocent is important in similar terms: she is a vivid reminder of our responsibility to protect the vulnerable. More specifically, however, she underscores the tragedy and waste of the sacrifice that the drone operators have had to make, as they have had to annihilate the very virtue and vulnerability that they were seeking to protect. She is the essence of human innocence that is enshrined and valued by the very concept of human rights. In killing her, they grievously offend against the principle of humanity itself.

Matthew Robson (2020) writes that the film's emphasis on this young innocent girl is an attempt to engage a Levinasian ethics of responsibility. Levinas's philosophy, committed to nonviolence and interpersonal compassion, foregrounds our mutual responsibility for one another's suffering: by recognizing our ethical obligations towards one another, we are enjoined by what Levinas (1969) calls

simply 'the face' of the Other to reject violence and the exercise of power over our fellow humans. Levinas's work—rendered intuitively attractive by its reference to love and compassion and yet stylistically opaque enough to admit a range of interpretations—has been hitched to many political projects, but Robson's article, which claims that *Eye in the Sky* is a counterhegemonic cultural artefact and which positions Levinas as a possible candidate for the future of counterterrorism ethics, must be the most preposterous yet. 'With the drone strike imminent and the risk that she too will be blown up in the attack, the radically interdependent nature of Being comes to the fore along with the undeniable obligation to the Other felt as a responsibility without limits', Robson writes, continuing: 'her face calls out "do not kill me"' (2020: 109). It is true enough that the young girl is lavishly humanized in a way that makes violence against her appear obscene. However, this invocation of Levinas—who was always explicitly critical of visuality, sentimentality, and representation and who expressly denied that any form of plastic art could capture the essence of his ethics (Crignon 2004)—as a philosophical legitimation of this fetishization of an 'innocent African girl' both misunderstands Levinas and misses the far simpler point that the girl exists as a pretext for the characters to display remorse over their actions, actions that are never seriously in doubt.

Most significantly, the effect of the film's relentless attention on the girl in red is to attenuate the extent to which the targeted assassination of five terrorists is seen as problematic. In comparison to the innocent girl, who is emphatically humanized and whose murder represents so pronounced an obstacle to the moral righteousness of the attack, the terrorists register in the film's narrative only as objects of surveillance whose deaths are so clearly warranted that they barely register as murders at all. In fact, the terrorists' deaths are the reason that the attack is righteous in the first place: the drone strike is a sanctionable act *because* the terrorists will die, and this righteous status is put into question by the fact that the girl will die too. The film does not have a problem with killing, but only with situations in which it cannot be done *cleanly*.

In the movie's closing moments, the girl's father relies upon al-Shabab soldiers to rush his daughter to the hospital in which she finally dies. It seems that the murder of the girl may force her father to embrace al-Shabab, and perhaps himself therefore come to constitute a future terrorist threat. This echoes a fairly common critique of what is often considered the strategic shortsightedness of done assassinations; drone warfare 'kills today's enemies but creates tomorrow's in the process' (Byman 2013 : 39). We might call this a blowback critique because it focuses on the danger of the possible resistance that drones might cause, rather than the substantive reasons that drone violence engenders resistance. It

may admit that this one man has a personal reason to resent drones—the tragic loss of his daughter—but it fails to provide any structural reasons more broadly for resistance to drone warfare and the contemporary colonial politics of which it is the essence.

From the Sky: Concluding Remarks

Roger Stahl writes that drone culture 'promotes an exquisite understanding of how this technology functions but a stillbirth debate about whether its deployment aligns with the rule of law' (2013: 672). That is, by understanding how drone optics have been integrated into contemporary popular culture, we are able to empathize with drone operators and gain insight into the domestication of warfare. However, many of the texts that undertake this task, because of their focus on the private effects of warfare, also make it difficult for audiences to consider broader political and moral questions that drones raise. *Eye in the Sky* is a perfect example here, as it gives its audience an insight into the political decision making behind unmanned assassinations but fails to fully engage many of the most pressing questions raised by such assassinations. Its debate about the legality of the attack is restricted to one clear-cut situation and does not engage the broader geopolitical questions raised by planetary securitization. 'Postcolonial politics', writes Inderpal Grewal, 'concerns more than that which can be seen, since it is the scale of the widespread and dispersed violence of empire, capital, and postcolony that cannot be captured by the visual' (2016: 362). Narratives of limited emergency cannot show us the dispersed, rhizomatic nature of the global military-economic-political apparatus of which drones are the new enforcers.

Eye in the Sky may show us the networked nature of military violence as its narrative shuttles between many interiors dispersed across the globe (Nevada, Whitehall, Nairobi), and it may well foreground the way that drones put national sovereignty into question; one of the British characters foregrounds the novelty of the military situation, embarrassing everybody present, by asking whether there has 'ever been a British-led drone attack on a city in a friendly country that is not at war?' Likewise, elements of the legalistic debate about the proportionality of a drone strike in an imminent crisis are articulated with considerable sophistication. However, what the film cannot show us is the psychopathology of postcolonial capitalism to which Grewal refers, which has established the globally integrated securitizing violence the abstract ethics of which the film takes as its direct focus at the expense of its material and political realities. To return to McSorley's analysis of Scarry, what is simultaneously most fundamental to an understanding of drone warfare and most glaringly missing from *Eye in the Sky* is the insight that drone warfare is a form of authoritarian colonial state terror. Its horizons are narrowed to the consequences of one decision, with the structural violence of the drone programme hinted at but ultimately unexplored.

Zubairu Wai (2014: 494) writes that contemporary liberal interventionism is a form of power that 'adjudicates its own legality which in turn provides the basis for reproducing and maintaining its power and authority.' The persuasive structure of *Eye in the Sky*—which, although it may appear to morally problematize drone warfare, in fact convinces us that the drone strike is tragically necessary—is an example of how cultural production participates in this broader process of adjudication. The primary moral and political question with regard to torture and drone warfare should not be a managerial inquiry into when they can be used most effectively or how they can be used in a way that is compatible with a principle of harm reduction, but rather should perform analysis of the relations of power that they enable. The moral and political risk of debating state violence in terms of the trolley problem or the ticking bomb scenario is that it positions massive, destructive state power as inevitable and beyond question, which leaves us with a critical inquiry—which people should we kill with our unquestionable power?—so impoverished as to be meaningless. *Eye in the Sky* is an interesting artefact in this specific regard: it shows us the radical narrowing of critical horizons that is necessary for certain major framings of the debate over drone ethics to be politically and philosophically comprehensible.

References

Adams, A. 2019. *How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario*. London: Repeater Books.

Bachman, J. S., and J. Holland. 2019. Lethal Sterility: Innovative Dehumanisation in Legal Justifications of Obama's Drone Policy. *The International Journal of Human Rights* 23 (6): 1028–1047. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2019.1592159.
[Crossref]

Bourne, M. 2012. Guns Don't Kill People, Cyborgs Do: A Latourian Provocation for Transformatory Arms Control and Disarmament. *Global Change, Peace & Security* 24 (1): 141–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2012.641279.
[Crossref]

Byman, Daniel. 2013. Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice. *Foreign Affairs*, July.

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

Crandall, Jordan. 2016. Materialities of the Robotic. In *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, ed. Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan, 324–342. Durham: Duke University Press.

Crignon, Philippe. 2004. Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image. *Yale French Studies* 104:100–125.
[Crossref]

Desai, R. 2022. The Imperialism of Democracy and Human Rights vs the Democracy and Human Rights of Imperialism. *International Critical Thought* 12 (2): 169–178. https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2022.2065719.

[Crossref]

Eley, Geoff, and Atina Grossmann. 1997. Watching *Schindler's List*: Not the Last Word. *New German Critique* 71: 41–62.

[Crossref]

Eye in the Sky. 2015. Directed by Gavin Hood.

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

[Crossref]

Grewal, Inderpal. 2016. Drone Imaginaries: The Technopolitics of Visuality in Postcolony and Empire. In *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, ed. Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan, 343–365. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hajjar, Lisa. 2016. Lawfare and Armed Conflicts: A Comparative Analysis of Israeli and US Targeted Killing Policies and Legal Challenges Against Them. In *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, ed. Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan, 59–88. Durham: Duke University Press.

Harris, Sam. 2005. In Defense of Torture. *The Huffington Post*, October 17.

Horsman, Y. 2020. Drone Bomb Me: Cinema & Warfare in *The Good Kill* and *Eye in the Sky*. *The Senses and Society* 15 (3): 299–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2020.1820192.

[Crossref]

Kennedy, C., and J. I. Rogers. 2015. Virtuous Drones? *The International Journal of Human Rights* 19 (2): 211–227. https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2014.991217.

[Crossref]

Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Lipsey, David. 2016. Liberal Interventionism. *The Political Quarterly* 87 (3): 415–423.

[Crossref]

Luban, David. 2005. Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb. *Virginia Law Review* 91:1425–1461.

Luban, David. 2008. *Unthinking the Ticking Bomb*. Georgetown Law Working Papers. http://ssrn.com/abstract=1154202. Accessed 3 June 2023.

McSorley, K. 2019. Predatory War, Drones and Torture: Remapping the Body in Pain. *Body & Society*. https://doi.

org/10.1177/1357034X18822085.

Rapaport, Lynn. 2002. Hollywood's Holocaust: *Schindler's List* and the Construction of Memory. *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 32 (1): 55–65.

[Crossref]

Robson, Matthew. 2020. Re-visioning the "Eye in the Sky": Targeted Drone Strikes and an Ethics of the Encounter. *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 13 (1): 100–117. https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2019.1658414.

[Crossref]

Scahill, Jeremy. 2013. *Dirty Wars: The World is a Battlefield*. London: Serpent's Tail.

Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smethurst, T., and S. Craps. 2018. Towards an Understanding of Drone Fiction. *Journal of War & Culture Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2018.1514759.

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

[Crossref]

Tesón, Fernando. 2003. The Liberal Case for Humanitarian Intervention. In *Humanitarian Intervention: Ethical, Legal and Political Dilemmas*, ed. J. Holzgrefe and R. Keohane, 93–129. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[Crossref]

Thompson, Judith Jarvis. 1985. The Trolley Problem. *The Yale Law Journal* 94 (6): 1395–1415.

[Crossref]

Wai, Z. 2014. The Empire's New Clothes: Africa, Liberal Interventionism and Contemporary World Order. *Review of African Political Economy* 41 (142): 483–499. https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2014.928278.

[Crossref]

Young, Robert. 2009. The Violent State. *Naked Punch*. http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/38. Accessed 4 July 2022.

Footnotes

1 For this point, I am indebted to an exchange with Derek Gregory at Beryl Pong's *Aesthetics of Drone Warfare* conference at the University of Sheffield in 2019.