

Good Kill and Eye in the Sky

A REVIEW BY JONATHAN LIGHTER

Bomber pilots—a dwindling breed—don’t usually see their victims. RAF pilot Doug Harvey captured the resultant emotional detachment when he asked sardonically in 1981, “Did I really drop 68,000 pounds of bombs on Berlin? Show me the damage.” All Harvey could see on the ground from twenty thousand feet was smoke and flames: damage and deaths went unobserved at night, and a pilot’s attention was focused principally on survival. But that was the twentieth century. If, instead, Harvey had directed today’s missile-firing drones toward jihadi targets, his explosives might have wreaked less havoc, but he would have watched each one of his victims, including any noncombatants, up close on a TV screen. The “damage” would have been indelibly vivid, along with the apolitical human reality of what was happening.

The first combat mission ever carried out by an “unmanned aerial vehicle” or “UAV” was launched by the CIA on October 7, 2001, when a Predator drone—based physically in Uzbekistan but remotely controlled, almost as in science fiction, from CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia—fired a Hellfire missile at an ascertained Taliban house in Kandahar. Its “high-value target,” the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, escaped. In the sixteen years since, however, American drones have reportedly killed thousands of terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. The precise number of fatalities (not to mention non-fatal injuries) is uncertain—as is the undoubtedly smaller number of “collateral” or noncombatant casualties, estimates of which vary wildly. In the bombed cities of World War II, civilian casualties might well have reached 95% or more; but the high precision and lesser payloads of the UAV-delivered missiles have dramatically reduced the resultant number of noncombatant deaths and injuries. The idea, moreover, that the drone operators actually watch the

people they're killing provides the focus for three Hollywood movies about the effects of drone warfare on victims and killers alike.

Hollywood's first UAV movie was apparently the low-budget *Drones* (2013), a ludicrous, leaden thriller worth mentioning only because it raised controversies about UAV warfare—methods of targeting and the effect of seeing the victims—that two more sophisticated films zero in on with greater cogency.

In writer-director Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill* (2014), for example, drone pilot Major Tom Egan (Ethan Hawke), is a close-up witness to mortality as, from the safety of a computer-crammed steel trailer in Nevada (his "cockpit"), he sees every far-away death he brings.

And not just the deaths. Egan, steadily descending into depression and the vodka bottle because he's seen too much, explains a hard day's work to his long-suffering wife Molly (January Jones):

I watched all morning as these locals cleaned up the mess; got ready for the funeral. They like to bury their dead within 24 hours.... I watched them carry the bodies up the hill to the grave site. I had information that the Taliban commander's brother would attend the funeral. So I waited until they were all there, saying their prayers... and then I blew them up too. That's my job.

And he doesn't enjoy it. A former F-16 pilot who daydreams in widescreen of the lost glamour and freedom of the supersonic warplane—lost to him and soon enough, his CO tells him, to be lost to the world—Egan now feels "like a coward." Besides altering the nature of war-fighting, high-tech, he believes, has subverted his moral character: "I blew away six Taliban in Pakistan today. Now, I'm going home to barbecue," he tells an inquisitive store clerk. In place of slipping the surly bonds of earth, there are eye-straining twelve-hour shifts with his two fellow crew members in his windowless container, and sporadic blurry closeups of unsuspecting foreigners, guilty or otherwise, being obliterated by his hand. That most of the obliterated are known or at least supposed terrorists in the hinterlands of Asia who pose "a grave...threat to the United States" doesn't help Egan or his sensor operator, Airman Suarez (Zoë Kravitz), forget scenes of destruction and desperation watched from a virtual perspective of about a hundred feet in the air; and many of the casualties (including a child who wanders onto the target between firing the missile and seeing it hit) pose no obvious threat to anybody. *Good Kill* is a thoroughly up-to-date deglamorization of aerial warfare.

Egan's depression and resultant marital discord deepen when missions turn from surveillance to air-to-ground attack, directed by the villainously unmodulated telephone voice of a CIA officer known only as "Langley" (Peter Coyote). When armed men are joined by women and children in trying to dig out loved ones in response to a strike on a Taliban target, Langley orders an immediate "follow-up," a "double tap," and a second missile finishes most of them off. Suarez asks drily, "Was that a war crime, sir?" Well, was it? It's an interesting question, but Niccol leaves the issue unresolved.³

The team in the trailer divides into the conflicted and the unconflicted. Lt. Col. Johns, the CO (Bruce Greenwood), is near the middle of the spectrum, asking rhetorically, "Does anybody think ... that if we stop killing them, they'll stop killing us? It's a vicious cycle, and it doesn't matter who made it vicious." No one, on the other hand, could be less conflicted than Zimmer, the Mission Intelligence Coordinator (Jake Abel), who says that "D.C. lawyers" and strict rules of engagement keep them from killing even more of the "savages" who won't "stop hating us until [they] have sharia law everywhere on the goddamn planet." They especially hate Hooters, *Hustler*, and letting women drive and attend school. Fortunately, though, "We can kill 'em faster than they can make 'em." Can we? Another interesting question.

Is the drone team a combat crew in the risk-taking twentieth-century tradition (their flight suits say they are), or are they ultra-long-distance, futuristic assassins? In either case, isn't the assassin, who carefully identifies his individual victims, ethically above the bomber pilot, who can't and doesn't? (It may be remembered that, as far back as 1516, Thomas More's Utopians advocated assassination as the most civilized and humane form of warfare.)

George Brant's earlier, similarly themed monologue play *Grounded* (2012) concerns a female fighter pilot who breaks down after being transferred to drone operations, and the more dramatic, ironically titled *Good Kill* treats similar issues of disorientation, disillusionment, and guilt from a mainly male perspective. Despite showcasing more concentrated *angst* than one might expect to find in a real drone crew, *Good Kill*, unlike *Grounded* (and unlike *Drones*), is in a naturalistic mode, and except for trivial howlers (like Air Force jets based on aircraft carriers and a first date taken for a merry jaunt in an F-16) has a generally realistic, if emotionally flat, feel; a secondary theme—the destruction of a marriage by a spouse's military service—occupied a similar position in more hawkish movies like *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *Heartbreak Ridge* (1986).

Egan eventually regains some of his sense of honor by singlehandedly (another howler) blasting an undeniable evil-doer who never knows what's hit him. His assertiveness, however, will probably result in severe disciplinary action, especially since he immediately goes AWOL to reconcile with his now-estranged wife. Like the

sere deserts of Nevada and South Asia (actually Morocco), the atmosphere of *Good Kill* is nonetheless uniformly bleak. Technology has reduced Egan and his crew almost to the level of equipment, and his final assertion of moral agency, while certainly satisfying, will do him no good.

Drone warfare gets a broader examination in the precision-guided thriller *Eye in the Sky* (2015), directed by South African Gavin (*Rendition*) Hood from a script by Englishman Guy Hibbert. Stylized but riveting, it effectively raises some of the knotty questions presented by the confluence of international terrorism and UAVs, even if it begins lamely with the familiar observation (here misattributed to Aeschylus) that war's first casualty is truth: lamely because *Eye in the Sky* isn't about truth in wartime, it's about attitudes toward the value of human life.

In a well-known thought experiment, a runaway trolley hurtles down a track to which several innocent strangers—let's say medical researchers—have been tied by a dastard. You're at the switch and can save them by shunting the trolley to another track—to which your own child is similarly tied. Whom will you save, the child of your own or a number of innocent people you don't even know? The trolley problem critiques utilitarianism: in an extreme case it may not be humanly possible to “do the greatest good for the greatest number.”

Eye in the Sky casts a Reaper drone in the role of the trolley. Unlike the trolley, though, its every movement is managed from the start by operators ten thousand miles away, and the doomed innocent strangers remain, strictly speaking, hypothetical.

In the film's not-too-distant future, British Colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren) has spent six years tracking a pair of high-value English jihadists, who are now up to no good in Nairobi. The gimbal-mounted TV camera of the Reaper provides the British (and its American pilots) with rock-steady, ultra-high definition Technicolor images from a single camera angle—magically, one suspects, since the Reaper flies overhead in circles. The British require a capture rather than a kill because their targets are British subjects, and in Nairobi Special Forces of the Kenyan Army are ready to make their move. But before the jihadists can be absolutely ID'd—by a futuristic ornithopter the size and shape of a hummingbird—they drive to another location in a slum controlled by al-Shabaab, the terrorists behind the Westgate Mall massacre of 2013. Should troops and vehicles enter this crowded area, patrolled as it is by youthful Islamists with itchy trigger fingers, there will be another mass bloodletting, this time at the expense of the British and Kenyan governments.

What to do? The only way to prevent the jihadists' escape is to kill them with a strike on their safehouse by the remotely piloted Reaper, a strike that becomes urgent when a micro-drone that's a dead ringer for a big beetle flies in the window and shows

the terrorists making farewell videos and laying out suicide belts for an imminent attack. (While the little bird and bug drones might easily be confused with James Bond fantasies, they're already under development: a prototype Nano Hummingbird UAV was unveiled by AeroVironment in 2011, and insect-sized Micro Air Vehicles are said to be on the drawing boards—with swarming potential; and the movie's facial recognition technology may be even closer to becoming a reality.³)

Things really get complicated when a little girl (Aisha Takow) from a put-upon non-jihadist family wanders into view and sets up a table to sell bread just outside the terrorist compound. It takes her forever. The high-value targets get ever closer to blowing themselves up and taking with them scores of innocent people. The rookie American drone pilots cannot bring themselves to fire with the child in the picture, partly out of simple humanity and partly because Colonel Powell's order might be illegal—particularly since a third terrorist, not originally expected on the scene, is known to be an American.

Meanwhile General Benson (Alan Rickman) has been overseeing the operation from a briefing room in Whitehall with the British Defense Secretary, the Home Secretary, and the Attorney-General. The briefing room is the story's ethical ground-zero, as Benson and the bureaucrats argue the legal, political, and moral aspects of the situation: risk killing the child or let the terrorists kill many others. To strike or not to strike? The arguments in the briefing room may look like the half-comical, self-protective buck-passing of middle managers; but vexing problems of policy are being weighed as the decision-makers wade reluctantly into a minefield of political and military philosophy.

According to just-war theory and NATO policy alike, any strike must be justified by necessity, proportionality, and the absence of an alternative. In *Eye in the Sky*, since British nationals are involved, special authorization for a missile strike must be sought from above cabinet level; with an American citizen involved, authorization must also come from Washington. (The U.S. officials are a lot less interested in ethical nuance than are the British.) Authorizations at the highest level are required, moreover, for a missile launch against a friendly nation, Kenya, that is not at war with anyone. The strike will almost certainly kill the terrorists but can't be launched as long as a "collateral damage estimate" puts the likelihood of civilian deaths at more than 50%; but this estimate, which inconveniently may have an error margin of fifteen or more points either way, depends on how precisely the missile can be targeted. And there are colder calculations as well. If terrorists kill eighty people, the Defense Secretary observes with cinematic hyperbole, "we win the propaganda war. If we kill one child, they do." Benson then asks, "Are the deaths of eighty people, including children, worth the price of winning

the propaganda war?” The utilitarian answer seems obvious, but how do you “win” a propaganda war anyway, except by converting the enemy’s audience; in other words, by killing an idea—proverbially impossible. The Foreign Secretary muses on the phone from Singapore that, nowadays, “Revolutions are fueled by postings on YouTube.”

The action takes place over a few hours, mostly in Nairobi, Nevada, and London, but there are crucial side trips to Pearl Harbor, Washington, Beijing, and Singapore as well, that suggest the complexity of drone operations, each of which in fact requires scores of specialists and technicians and, in this case, coordination between the governments and armed forces of three nations at more than a half dozen locations across the globe. The variety of locales is in the best tradition of international thrillers and helps keep the pace going briskly. *Eye in the Sky* also features some of the most agonizingly suspenseful war movie sequences since the B-58s headed for Moscow in Sidney Lumet’s *Fail Safe* (1964).

“Between two evils,” goes an idealist apothegm, “choose neither.” But to decline the choice makes possible one or both of the evils one is repelled by. That moral complexity at the heart of *Eye in the Sky* is inherent in warfare, which always demands a choice between evils; and it is not necessarily obvious which of the evils is really worse. The camera aboard the Reaper—as ghostly-looking an airplane as has ever flown—meanwhile looks almost straight down, as the pilots and decision-makers stare into an abyss of bad choices. There was a time when such a view was naively hoped for as simplifying rather than complicating things: in the stage version of the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* by Jean-Claude Carrière, the sage Vyasa tells the king’s charioteer, “You will be the king’s eye.... Without moving, you will see every detail of the battlefield.” Sounds wonderful.

Neither movie—and they’re distinctive otherwise—is very optimistic about definitive victory in a global war against militant jihadist terrorism. Egan, the former fighter pilot, is expected to be a robotic executioner by day but a gregarious family man by night; Kendall, the British colonel, does her best to retain her humanity while ordering executions. In a throwaway line in *Good Kill*, a friendly policeman asks, “How’s the war on terror going?” Egan replies, “Kind of like your war on drugs.”

Notes

1. Douglas Harvey, *Boys, Bombs, and Brussels Sprouts*. (1981; rpt. Halifax, N.S.: Goodread, 1982), p. 10.
2. Under U.S. rules of engagement, “double taps” may be appropriate to insure that a structural target has been destroyed. But a “double tap” of the kind portrayed in *Good Kill* would seem to violate those and contradict President Obama’s 2013 assurance that “Before any strike is taken, there must be near certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured—the highest standard we can set” (Tara McKelvey, “Drones kill rescuers in ‘double tap,’ say activists” Oct. 22, 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-24557333>). Follow-up strikes specifically aimed at noncombatants have been reported by local people from tribal areas of Pakistan, but the strict accuracy of their reports is impossible to ascertain. The U.N. holds that drone strikes intended, like the air raids of World War II, to target civilians are unlawful, but that other strikes may be legitimate; see Christof Heyns, *Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions* (N.Y.: United Nations General Assembly, 2013), 15 <https://www.justsecurity.org/.../UN-Special-Rapporteur-Extrajudicial-Christof-Heyns>. Witness testimony appears in Amnesty International, *Will I Be Next?* (London: Amnesty International, 2013), 28-30, <https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/asa330132013en.pdf>; and in International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic (Stanford Law School) and Global Justice Clinic (NYU School of Law), *Living under Drones* (2012), 73-76. chrgj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Living-Under-Drones.pdf]. (All accessed July 5, 2017.)
3. Dan Gettinger, “Drones in Eye in the Sky”: <http://dronecenter.bard.edu/eye-in-the-sky/> . (Accessed July 10, 2017.)