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## “Boom / [S]he is not”: Drone Wars and the Vanishing Pilot

*“The disintegration of a warrior’s personality is at a very advanced stage. . . . Tied to his machine, imprisoned in the closed circuits of electronics, the war pilot is no more than a motor-handicapped person temporarily suffering from a kind of possession analogous to the hallucinatory states of primitive warfare” (Virilio 84).<sup>1</sup>*

In “A Travelling Shot over Eighty Years,” a chapter of his 1984 book, *War and Cinema*, Paul Virilio offers a brief history of technological extensions of warriors’ natural abilities to see and destroy targets, “the deadly harmony that always establishes itself between the functions of eye and weapon” (69). He explains that the history of these technologies and the history of the camera and motion picture go hand in hand and examines the original technological links between repeating weapons and repeater photography, links which have only grown more pronounced with the technological development of both the camera and weaponry. Of particular interest to Virilio, but offering limited scope for research when the book was first published, is the new technology of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones. Drones have now been online for fifteen years in combat roles for the CIA and the United States military and feature frequently in representations of war in entertainment and the arts.

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1. Paul Virilio, “A Travelling Shot over Eighty Years,” in *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989), 68–95.

In this paper, I revisit Virilio's work to examine dramatic representations of drone warfare as a phenomenon that affirms and even eclipses many of Virilio's ideas of thirty years ago. I am especially interested in questions of the warrior's body. Outpacing Virilio's cautionary account, works about drones portray their advent as a final, psychologically destructive great divorce between the pilot and his or her aircraft. The reason for this sudden break, I argue, is a sense of complete disembodiment that problematizes the importance of the body in the selfhood of the warrior; after all, the drone pilot is not in any physical sense "tied to his machine" as Virilio's above quote describes. I primarily examine George Brant's 2012 play, *Grounded*, alongside *Good Kill*, a 2014 film that highlights similar problems associated with the divergence of aircraft from the pilot's body, formerly idealized as a warrior's body.<sup>2</sup> *Grounded* and *Good Kill* both speak poignantly to the psychological and ethical problems of disembodiment because they choose protagonists whose bodies are on the margins of a "corps" that has always idealized the young, male body out of necessity, a necessity becoming less relevant with the progress of technology. The protagonist of *Grounded* is female and becomes pregnant and thus unable to fly for part of the play, and the protagonist of *Good Kill* is a middle-aged male who is nostalgic for his days as a young fighter pilot. Their struggles to continue envisioning themselves as fully embodied warriors points to the complexity of the advent of drones in terms of their impact on the subjectivity of the warrior.

The Air Force's real-life drone crisis of identity implies that there is a far more abrupt change at hand than the trajectory of Virilio's account seemed to indicate. Though unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) have been in operation for fifteen years, the Air Force is still puzzling over who should fly them and why. The Air Force is now training enlisted personnel to become drone pilots; this is the first time in the Air Force's history that piloting an aircraft is not a job limited to officers. When he was interviewed about this potential change, former Air Force Chief of Staff, General Mark Welsh, said, "I have no doubt they [enlisted personnel] can do the job. The question is, should we go that way?"<sup>3</sup> In other words, while enlisted personnel are entirely physically and mentally capable of piloting UAVs, some felt that the change might result in a culture shift the Air Force was unprepared for, a culture shift that has primarily to do with the transformation of the identity of the pilot. The Air Force has also recently introduced the revolutionary notion of civilians serving as drone pilots, which is the first time civilians have filled a pilot role as well. Though the civilians are ostensibly only going to perform surveillance functions, they will be flying MQ-9 Reapers, which have

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2. George Brant, *Grounded* (London: Oberon Books Limited, 2013).  
*Good Kill*, directed by Andrew Niccol, performed by Ethan Hawke (Voltage Pictures, 2014).

both surveillance and strike capabilities; this certainly leaves room for ambiguity in the interpretation of the civilians' role. And, as the *Washington Times* reports, "some critics, including military lawyers, say there might be legality issues with the civilian contracts. They contend that civilians are now part of what's known as the 'kill chain,' a process that starts with surveillance and ends with a missile launch."<sup>3</sup> Here, it would seem that drones have begun to blur the distinction between "combatant" and "non-combatant." But, overall, they have forced the Air Force, its pilots included, to consider what it means to be a pilot and, by extension, what it means to be a warrior. Though enlisted personnel are subject to the same physical fitness requirements as pilots, those same requirements do not apply to civilian personnel. In other words, the body of the warrior pilot is losing its definition, becoming subject to interpretations based on whatever manpower and funding happens to be available.

Meanwhile, the pilot community has had ambivalent reactions to the proliferation of drones since their outset. While some pilots are quick to volunteer for drone assignments because fighting the war from home will allow them to be closer to their families, others feel that one cannot properly be a "pilot" flying drones and attempt to vector their careers accordingly. Dos Gringos, an Air Force rock duo who perform satirical songs about air warfare, highlighted this problem in 2003 when they released a song about a Predator that was accidentally shot down by friendly fire in Operation SOUTHERN WATCH. According to Dos Gringos, the good news is that, with one less drone, they are less likely to have to fill a position as drone pilot: "They shot down the predator, that's one less slot for me / They shot down a predator, and it filled my heart with glee."<sup>4</sup> During the bridge, the song cuts to a brief dialogue between the two singers, in which they reflect upon how it might feel to have one's drone shot down:

Singer A: What do you think happens when you get your Predator shot down? Do you say, oh, what the hell, and go get a cup of coffee, you sit there and cry yourself?

Singer B: It's probably depressing, but you move on with your life.

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3 . Kellan Howell, "Air Force hires civilian drone pilots for 'combat air patrols,'" *The Washington Times*, November 27, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com> (accessed December 6, 2015).

4 . Dos Gringos, "Predator Eulogy," *Live at the Sand Trap*, 2003.

Singer A: I guess so.

Singer B: Poor bastard.

The Air Force has made efforts on various fronts to ameliorate the drone pilot identity crisis. In February of 2013, the Department of Defense proposed a new medal that would encompass the work of drone pilots and those who conduct other “offensive” roles that do not require them to be physically present downrange. The medal was to be placed above the Bronze Star in the Order of Precedence for Air Force awards, a move that drew criticism from combat veterans, as the Bronze Star is meant to reward heroic or meritorious actions in actual ground combat, whereas drone pilots are never physically present in combat.<sup>5</sup> The Department of Defense abandoned this plan following this criticism but continues to look for other ways to recognize drone pilots. The Air Force has also tried to improve its personnel’s perception of the drone pilot by adjusting its terminology for drones themselves. Outside the Air Force, drones are still commonly known as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), but within the Air Force, that name has been changed to Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPAs) to affirm that drone pilots are still indeed pilots, albeit from a distance. Ostensibly, with this name change, the Air Force was committing to preserving the identity and ego of its pilots, but recent recasting of the pilot drone role has muddied the waters.

These conflicts have begun to make their way to the screen, the stage, and beyond. In 2012, *Grounded* debuted, earning widespread critical praise and winning the Smith Prize for works regarding American politics. The play is the story of a female pilot, referred to only as “The Pilot” throughout, who transitions from flying F-16s to flying drones. The transition occurs when the pilot becomes pregnant while on leave and thus cannot continue to fly F-16s. She is therefore “grounded” and takes the opportunity to get married and start her family, only to become homesick for “the blue,” as she calls it. She requests to return to flying, only to be offered a job as a drone pilot at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, as F-16s are rapidly becoming defunct. Though the pilot considers the drones “bullshit” and an insult to her training and capabilities as a pilot, she ultimately decides to take the assignment because she can spend more time with her husband and daughter. As the play progresses, however, the pilot becomes increasingly

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5. Oriana Pawlyk, “RPA pilots are getting more respect in the flying world,” *The Air Force Times*, December 1, 2014, <http://www.airforcetimes.com> (accessed December 12, 2015). United States Air Force, Air Force Personnel Center, Bronze Star Fact Sheet, <http://www.afpc.af.mil> (accessed December 12, 2015).

uncomfortable with her new surveillance role and has difficulty “decompressing” after work and prior to returning home to her family. She finally suffers a psychological meltdown when she thinks she sees her daughter on the screen, embracing the man she is supposed to destroy with a bomb.

*Grounded* brings to the fore many of Virilio’s points about surveillance. It illustrates the completion of the lengthy historical process Virilio describes in which

Hand-to-hand fighting and physical confrontation were superseded by long-range butchery, in which the enemy was more or less invisible save for the flash and glow of his own guns. This explains the urgent need that developed for ever more accurate sighting, ever greater magnification, for filming the war and photographically reconstructing the battlefield; above all it explains the newly dominant role of aerial observation in aerial planning. (70)

With drones, the warfighter does not need to “reconstruct” the battlefield at all; its image of the battlefield is real-time. And if, as Virilio says, the observation has been modeled after film, the drone has been modeled after the age of reality television and the constant stream of information that comes with unlimited access to 24-hour ticker-tape cable news. The Predator, for example,

carries the Multi-Spectral Targeting System, which integrates an infrared sensor, color/monochrome daylight TV camera, image-intensified TV camera, laser designator and laser illuminator. The full-motion video from each of the imaging sensors can be viewed as separate video streams or fused. The aircraft can employ two laser-guided missiles, Air-to-Ground Missile-114 Hellfire, that possess highly accurate, low-collateral damage, and anti-armor, anti-personnel engagement capabilities.<sup>6</sup>

The MQ-9 Reaper possesses similar capabilities. In *Grounded*, the Pilot calls the drone’s surveillance technology “The Gorgon stare: / Infrared / Thermal / Radar / Laser / A thousand eyes staring at the ground” (35). Virilio writes, “Aerial photography, cinematic photogrammetry – once again we find a conjunction between the power of the modern war machine, the aeroplane, and the new technical performance of the observation machine” (71). According to the era of drones, the powers of the observation machine and the war machine are both limitless.

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6. United States Air Force, MQ-1B Predator Fact Sheet, <http://www.af.mil> (accessed December 12, 2015).

These powers come with a price, however. In both *Good Kill* and *Grounded*, the pilots' psychological and ethical problems begin and end with their newfound powers of surveillance, a role they never had in the past, as surveillance and strike were previously separate roles. The Pilot of *Grounded* reflects, "I rain them down on the minarets and concrete below me / The structures that break up the sand / I break them back down / Return them to desert / To particles / Sand / At least I think I do / I'm long gone by the time the boom happens" (22). As the play progresses, however, the Pilot spends more time on surveillance than targeting, going entire twelve-hour shifts simply staring at the screen. She becomes increasingly uncomfortable about surveillance, remarking on a trip to the mall that "But there's always a camera right / JC Penney or Afghanistan / Everything is Witnessed" (48). Much of the Pilot's moral squeamishness has to do with the lack of distinction between her world at home and the battlefield, between the cameras of private entertainment and the Multi-Spectral Targeting System of the Reaper. In the climax of the play, when the Pilot thinks she sees her daughter embracing the man she is supposed to target, the worlds of the home and the battlefield have merged, and the Pilot must obliterate them both at once.

Similarly, Major Thomas Egan of *Good Kill* struggles to compartmentalize his job as a drone pilot; against his will, it bleeds into his daily life, a life that includes other forms of surveillance and targeting. His role as a drone pilot has caused him to equate his ability to see with his moral authority to judge. He sees his wife riding in a truck with another man and falsely concludes that she is cheating on him. He becomes both judge and jury, punishing her by becoming violent. This moment becomes a climax for the film, in which the warrior has, at the same time, unified surveillance with physical punishment; like in *Grounded*, the world of the battlespace and the world of the domestic space have become one. Ironically, at the end of the film, Egan acts as a vigilante to target and kill a repeat rapist in the Afghan village he has monitored for weeks. Egan defies orders, as the pilot does in *Grounded*, but he does so with the important difference that, rather than refusing to fire on a target, he fires on a target he was not authorized. Either way, these modes of surveillance have a dramatic impact on the pilot's ability to function normally on and off the battlefield.

Clearly, the pilot's psychological state is the most embattled space of them all. But in these works, *Grounded* especially, the body becomes an embattled space as well, even in defiance of the drone's ostensible purpose to eliminate the warrior's body from the processes of war as much as possible. Virilio's work offers little reflection on how the technological improvements of surveillance and targeting will influence the subjectivity of the warrior, especially his or her embodied subjectivity, aside from "the disintegration of the warrior's personality." His analysis primarily illustrates

how various components of the warrior's body have been extended or supplanted by technology, ultimately preferring comparisons of film with war versus the subject and war. When Virilio refers to "the fusion of the weapon and the eye," he does not seem to suggest that the weapon has become a prosthetic for the human eye—the roles of surveillance and strike have merely been combined. Still, Virilio points to various examples of the military's attempts to augment the warrior's body in order to keep pace with the rapid development of technology, such as the use of tape recorders to replace the pilot's frail memory. "We should not forget that the first stimulants were developed in response to the needs of Luftwaffe pilots," he writes (85). Throughout the rest of this paper, I argue that the disintegration of the warrior's personality, as Virilio calls it, goes hand in hand with the disintegration of the warrior's body.

Drones are the most revolutionary piece of technology ever employed in war when it comes to eliminating the various human frailties of pilots. The aircraft flies at such a height it is invisible to the naked eye, the pilot invisible in any case by virtue of his or her distance of several thousand miles from the battlefield. The pilot, who has traditionally been required to have 20/20 vision, no longer requires particular clarity of vision and will never be under such duress his vision is at all impaired. The pilot will not be susceptible to hunger or physical discomfort of any other kind, as food and restroom facilities are readily available. The pilot will never suffer fatigue, as crews can be replaced at regular intervals without landing the aircraft, which can operate for more than thirty hours at a time. Most importantly, if a drone is completely destroyed, none of its crew will come to any physical harm. Though Judith Butler, whom I will address later, argues that "there are no invulnerable bodies," the bodies of pilots have approached invulnerability simultaneous with their attachment to (or, more appropriately termed, affiliation with) the most advanced killing machines ever made (34).<sup>7</sup>

The topic of the Pilot's body is paramount in *Grounded*; it is literally as well as figuratively spotlighted throughout the one-woman play. The script's description of the Pilot wryly outlines the physical characteristics she has to possess for her profession:

The pilot: a woman in her mid-to-late 30s. She should have no allergies or asthma after 12 years of age, distant vision of at least 20/200 but corrected to 20/20, and near vision of 20/40 but corrected to 20/20. She should have a sitting height of between 2 foot 9 inches and 3 foot 4 inches, and a vertical standing height of between 5 foot 4 inches and 6 foot 5 inches tall. She should possess normal color vision and meet other physical fitness requirements,

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2010).

with no more than 32% body fat. She should be able to complete a 1.5-mile run in 13 minutes and 56 seconds or less, as well as complete 50 sit-ups and 27 push-ups in a timed test of one minute each. She should have graduated at the top of her class and have a well-rounded education. She should possess heightened situational awareness.

These physical requirements will become irrelevant when The Pilot is assigned to drones. Until then, however, The Pilot is immensely proud of what she's achieved by becoming a pilot, which she considers a physical as much as a mental achievement. She has earned her flight suit "through sweat and brains and guts" (21). The suit becomes a particular point of pride, symbolizing what it means to be a fighter pilot; the suit is "the speed / It's the G-Force pressing you back as you tear the sky" (21). As Charles Isherwood describes her, "She's a woman who is as happy in her skin as she is in that suit."<sup>8</sup> She is more than happy to identify herself completely with the suit; and as her lack of name indicates, she has or requires no identity other than "The Pilot."

The fact that the pilot is female only serves to emphasize those complexities. If the pilot's flight suit represents what it means to be a fighter pilot, it can be read as a symbolic extension of the aircraft itself, an aircraft which critics of science fiction, such as Steffen Hantke, might characterize as male, though the pilot refers to the aircraft as a "she." In many science fiction and war narratives, the weapon functions as a phallic object or to hypermasculinize whoever wields it. In his discussion of prosthetics and the warrior's body in science fiction, Hantke writes that "What is missing [from critical discussions of *Starship Troopers*] is the troopers' prosthetic combat suit, which Heinlein's narrator describes with a good dose of testosterone-driven pride. . . . The image of the 'steel gorilla' defines masculinity as something intensely physical, based on animal power, instinct, and aggression," a "hypermasculinization" (498).<sup>9</sup> The technology of the fighter aircraft falls into this category. In much the same way, The Pilot calls her aircraft "Tiger" and quite possibly relies upon it as a prosthetic to make her feel more masculine—more viable as a warrior—in a male-dominated career field. Referring to the aircraft as female could be read as an attempt to posture femininity alongside masculinity and erase their difference.

As a result, much of The Pilot's "swagger," as Isherwood called it, is a result of her posturing herself as a woman who has managed to thrive in a man's world by attaining and performing the masculine traits of the young, male warrior. When the pilot is not

8. Charles Isherwood, "Grounded, a Fighter Pilot's Story," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed December 6, 2015).

9. Steffen Hantke, "Surgical Strikes and Prosthetic Warriors: The Soldier's Body in Contemporary Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 25.3 (1998): 495-509.

flying F-16s, she is at the bar, a “Pilot bar,” drinking with her boys, as she calls them; she has no female colleagues. Even actress Anne Hathaway, who played the pilot in an off-Broadway production of *Grounded*, is not immune to problems of the female body in warfare, among pilots included. In an interview with *Vogue* magazine, she remarked, “I wanted to find a story about a female soldier—I had no idea what life is like for them, and yet these are the women who are ensuring my safety.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, however, she said, “I try to do 50 sit-ups and 27 push-ups in under a minute once a day. I’m looking for my inner testosterone.” Both the pilot and the actress who portray her are conscious of their place on the margins of an idealized warrior’s body that is by definition male. Even meeting physical fitness requirements that are specific to females constitute “testosterone.”

The pilot’s place in this male-dominated world jeopardizes her ability to relate to civilian males and probably civilians in general. When she meets Eric, her future husband, the Pilot reflects, “I tell him straight off who I am what I am / I’ve learned not to wait / Once they find out / They tend to run away / Most guys don’t like what I do / Feel like less of a guy around me” (22). She notes that other men are often reluctant to approach her because “It takes balls / Hard to casually sidle up to a bunch of drunk Air Force on leave / Maneuver yourself through all the boys to get to me / That takes some offensive flying of its own” (22). The pilot’s characterization of a man approaching her as “offensive flying” seems to represent an ambivalent attitude toward her relationships with civilian males. On one hand, “It takes balls” to approach her, but this approach is still “offensive,” which may possibly be off-putting to the pilot. Her eventual love interest, Eric, turns out to be a decent, stable man who adjusts well to the complexities of his wife’s career and becomes a good father. Still, he cannot help but be intrigued by the pilot’s flight suit, which he asks her to put on after their first sexual encounter and after he finds out she is pregnant. The suit, and what it represents, is intimately bound up with The Pilot’s body and, by extension, Eric’s body as well.

With the pilot’s pregnancy, the physical dangers of the aircraft itself become especially pronounced: “I can’t fly with it / With her / I know it’s a her / I can’t / Rules and regulations / It’s the ejection seat / ‘Cause an ejection would be an ejection / A G-force abortion” (24). While an entirely ruthless career woman would willingly abort the pregnancy to ensure her career, the pilot chooses the baby over being a pilot: “I want the sky / I want the blue / But I can’t kill her / I can’t kill her / I can’t” (24). Hantke highlights similar questions—of the dangers of the warrior’s suit—in his reading of *The Forever War*, in which “The powered suit, capable of elevating the soldier’s body

10 . Adam Green, “Anne Hathaway Plays a Fighter Pilot Brought Down to Earth in *Grounded*,” *Vogue*, 7 May 2015, <http://www.vogue.com> (accessed 5 December 2015).

to new heights of masculine integrity, hardly changes these conditions. Since the suit appears simply as a dangerous object whose potential for inflicting damage must be directed carefully against the enemy, the interface between the soldier's body and the machine is an uneasy, uncomfortable, and imperfect one" (501). In this case, The pilot's relationship only becomes uneasy and imperfect because of her pregnancy with a baby she automatically assumes is female. When The Pilot abandons her position as a fighter pilot, she does so with some measure of humiliation, as she is leaving the pilot community simply because the product of her femininity, a pregnancy, has resulted in her being unable to meet physical requirements for flying: "The boys raise a glass / Hope I'll be back soon / Count on it assholes" (26). For this reason, she is "grounded," though we find later in the play that perhaps being "grounded"—and the domesticity it entails—is far better than the alternative.

Later in the play, the pilot oscillates between rejecting and embracing the trappings of femininity. On one hand, she refers to motherhood and family life as "true corn" and despairs that someday her daughter may grow up to be a "hair-tosser / A cheerleader / A needy sack of shit" rather than a pilot like herself, one who has managed to shed the aura of femininity she has come to disdain due to the demands of her profession (25). On the other hand, she tries to reestablish her bond with her daughter by performing a female-to-female relationship, like taking her shopping at the mall. It seems that the pilot has adopted a routine in which she performs femininity (in a limited sense, at least) at home and masculinity at the workplace. And masculinity, as the Pilot has come to understand it, is hard and unyielding; when her husband suggests she get counseling, the Pilot has nothing but disdain for her counselor, a young woman whom she calls "Blondie" (56).

Like the Pilot in *Grounded*, Major Thomas Egan of *Good Kill* has spent the majority of his career as an F-16 pilot and transitioned to flying drones out of Creech Air Force Base. Also like *Grounded's* Pilot, he also took this as an opportunity to be closer to his family but is cowed by the identity struggles of becoming a drone pilot. He is now on his third tour with UAVs and beginning to show signs of stress. He confesses, "I am a pilot and I'm not flying. I don't know what else I am doing, but it's not flying." Later, he explains to one of his young crewmembers, "I feel like a coward every day, taking pot shots half a world away in an air conditioned cubicle. If they get lucky they shoot my plane down I'm not even in it. All you gotta do is pull another one out of a box. Worst thing that can happen to me is carpal tunnel or I spill coffee on my lap. The most interesting thing I do is drive home on the freeway." Egan's other vehicle is a classic Mustang which he, like a more troubled version of Tom Cruise, drives at breakneck speeds (often while buzzed on vodka). Whenever he has the opportunity,

he petitions his commander to send him back to an assignment with “real” aircraft, pleading desperately, “Can you get me in a plane, sir?” His commander attempts to temper Egan’s psychological problems by encouraging him to return to his body: “You could use a little I&I: intoxication and intercourse.”

Egan does not quite suffer the same gender issues, but he seems troubled by his status as an aging man witnessing young, first-time pilots enter the fray. At the beginning of the movie, he watches his commanding officer brief a group of incoming pilots, remarking that he has food in his refrigerator older than them. Egan looks down upon the other pilots because when he was a young man himself, he was actually fighting wars as a pilot of an F-16. In a way, *Good Kill* is a movie about the nostalgia of an aging warrior for the battlefield. As Anthony Lane writes, “If *Good Kill* is to be believed, that’s like a cavalry officer requesting a thoroughbred in the fall of 1914. Fighter planes stand idle in a row beside the runway, as if they were riderless horses.”<sup>11</sup> Egan becomes increasingly anxious that his aging body is no longer relevant. Though his body can remain relevant if he fills the position of drone pilot, the role ensures once and for all that Egan is no longer a fully embodied, young male warrior, for he is unable to prove otherwise. Lane also remarked in his review, “Might we not enjoy his presence more if he were part of a pack, just as we relished every minute of Sam Shepard, as Chuck Yeager, when he fought for dramatic space in the jockish throng of *The Right Stuff*?” It seems that even war movies featuring drones have resulted in nostalgia for a more masculine era of war. Lane describes the other characters, including Egan’s female laser operator, as “barely a blip on Tommy’s mental radar.” His laser operator, a young female who “looks like a fucking child,” according to Egan’s commander, acts as the primary voice of moral reason throughout the film, and in the process, she has to combat various classic modes of military machismo like the ones Lane cites.

In the same way, Egan witnesses every aspect of daily Afghan life from the comfort of his air-conditioned trailer; he watches mother and child embrace through his crosshairs, boys playing with a ball, and what may or may not be an insurgent planting an improvised explosive device. The lines between war and domesticity become blurred in this type of war; noncombatants such as women and children often run into the frame just before or just after Egan has fired a missile he is now powerless to stop. In the spirit of Virilio’s analysis, seeing and targeting can become one and the same with the push of a button. And, troublingly, as the camera and the capability to strike become synonymous, the body and the camera begin to intersect, further blurring the lines between war and domesticity, between combatant and noncombatant. The

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11. Anthony Lane, “Distant Emotions,” *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.thenewyorker.com> (accessed December 6, 2015).

Pilot's maternity, in which she has to abandon her identity as a pilot because her body contains the body of another, begins to interfere with her conceptualization of the enemy. When she first sees her daughter in the ultrasound, she describes the gray of the doctor's screen, a screen that will be echoed in the screen she monitors for twelve hours each day once she becomes a drone pilot. The unborn child, part of her own body, becomes superimposed on the grey screens: "I stare at grey / At a world carved out of putty / Like someone took the time to carve a putty world for me / to stare at twelve hours a day / High-definition putty" (38). The drone's camera seems to echo the photographic capabilities and ambiguities of an ultrasound in other ways. The Pilot notes that "The cameras are that good you can tell / You can tell how old if they're women men children / You can't see faces / Not really / But you don't need to your mind fills them in" (41).

These problems of embodiment reach a critical point when they force the pilots to consider more carefully the body of the adversary. This seems to be the first time the Pilot of *Grounded* has seen an enemy's body, and she witnesses the entire course of its destruction: "The adversary's body: / Are those? / I didn't notice that last time / Flying through the air / Body parts / Those must be body parts / Huh / Guilty body parts" (44). The Pilot's description of dead body parts as "guilty" speaks to her impression that the body and soul of the warrior are wedded; at least, they still are for those whom she refers to as the "military age males" on the ground in Afghanistan. And yet, the Pilot's firepower makes it possible for her to destroy one of these military-age males at a moment's notice: "boom / He is not" (42). As Egan's commanding officer has to warn his crew, it "ain't a bunch of pixels you're blowing up. It's flesh and fucking blood." Simulation and the question of the real becomes a prominent theme in *Good Kill*, which takes place only a few miles from the Las Vegas strip. Egan drives through the strip occasionally while traveling to or from work, the Eiffel tower and pyramids acting as further reminders of his war, which may or may not be just a simulation. When Egan stops at a local convenience store on the way home from his shift to buy milk, the young clerk gestures at his flight suit and asks, "Is that real?" In response, Egan is forced to question the reality of his identity as pilot. The flight suit becomes a shell that barely hides his disintegrating subjectivity and body. But, as both works continue to emphasize, the bodies of the men on the ground are entirely real.

Flight suits in *Grounded* also take on the ever more ambiguous role of representing the pilot, even though doing so becomes nearly impossible or increasingly unnecessary. As the Pilot's identity crisis continues, she begins to use her flight suit to symbolize killing someone during her work day. At the beginning of the play, she "never wanted to take it off. Staring at myself in the mirror / Myself in this / I had earned this / This

was me now” (21). As the play continues, she becomes ambivalent over her right to wear the suit, as it symbolizes the intangibles of being a “real” pilot that somehow do not apply to drones. The flight suit is designed for flight; because it consists of only one piece, it is less likely to snag on the aircraft’s components if the pilot must eject. Its material is also flame-retardant. Over time, however, use of the flight suit expanded to other “operational” career fields within the Air Force, such as space and missiles, and has become a contentious garment for pilots who hope to preserve it as a symbol for pilots only.<sup>12</sup> She eventually decides to wear the suit home on the days that she actually destroys a target in order to signal to her husband that the day has been a killing day. However, as she witnesses her own destruction and cannot flee her own empathy, she wears or does not wear her suit at random. Her confusion extends to her final target in the play, which she cannot destroy herself because she is certain the little girl who has entered the frame to embrace the target of the strike is her daughter. Torn between her hypermasculine identity as warrior and feminine identity as mother, she chooses to spare her target in favor of the little girl, only to see it destroyed by another pilot. Here, Brant seems to imply that the maternal instinct is inescapable and the façade of masculinity the female warrior must adopt is an illusion, only to be dominated by biology in the end. Similarly, Hantke argues that technology cannot suppress gender, writing that “the individual’s biological destiny will accomplish what culture—in the form of technological augmentation or collective development—is unable to accomplish,” concluding that death is the only situation in which gender can be entirely erased (503). Until then, The Pilot must continue to battle her gender roles through the process of court martial and therapy she will ultimately face as a result of her breakdown and refusal to follow orders.

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler offers insight into questions of embodiment and how they play out in the selfhood of the warrior. For Butler, guilt is impossible without some measure of vulnerability because, as her theory indicates, the inherent interconnectedness of mankind means that one person cannot be destroyed without affecting another. She argues that “If the ontology of the body serves as a point of departure for such a rethinking of responsibility, it is precisely because, in its surface and its depth, the body is a social phenomenon: it is exposed to others, vulnerable by definition” (33). These vulnerabilities, as played out in *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, become less protracted as the pilots become more absorbed into their role as drone pilot; one might conclude that the crisis of the drone pilot’s identity has to do with the body’s withdrawal from its social context; the pilot no longer has a normal or stable

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12 . Jeff Schogol, “Letter prompts base to change flight suit rules,” *The Air Force Times*, June 18, 2012, <http://www.airforcetimes.com> (accessed December 6, 2015).

social context among its fellow warriors or his or her family at home. Butler's theories become especially poignant when applied to the social structure of the family. The Pilot's confusion over the suit and her identity extends to the home, as does the war itself. In both *Grounded* and *Good Kill*, pilots at first consider themselves lucky to be assigned to drones because they will be physically present for their families, whereas, assigned to fighter aircraft, they would be deployed for months at a time. Their families learn the hard way that the warrior's body and soul are not so easily separated; the mind cannot conduct war for twelve hours, only to return bodily to his or her family, minus the traces of war.

The social phenomenon of the body also has to do with the question of the body of the adversary. Butler goes on to explain that my existence is not mine alone, but is to be found outside myself, in this set of relations that precede and exceed the boundaries of who I am. If I have a boundary at all, or a boundary can be said to belong to me, it is only because I have become separated from others, and it is only on condition of this separation that I can relate to them at all (44). These are the conceptual boundaries that have become troubled with the advent of drone warfare. Over time, the development of technology in warfare allowed for greater separation between the warrior and his or her adversary, a separation that is made complete with the invention of the drone. Yet, as some critics have suggested, drones also return the pilot to the adversary; pilots now see their adversary with more clarity and continuity than they have since the invention of aircraft themselves.<sup>13</sup> This sudden encounter with the adversary takes place at a political moment in which nationalism has distanced the warrior and adversary like never before. As Butler explains,

The notion of the subject produced by the recent wars conducted by the US, including its torture operations, is one in which the US subject seeks to produce itself as impermeable, to define itself as radically invulnerable to attack. Nationalism works in part by producing and sustaining a certain version of the subject. We can call it imaginary, if we wish, but we have to remember that it is produced and sustained through powerful forms of media, and that what gives power to their version of the subject is precisely the way in which they are able to render the subject's own destructiveness righteous and its own destructibility unthinkable. (47)

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13. Elise Morrison: "Ambushed by Empathy: George Brant's *Grounded*," *The Drama Review* 58.4 (2014): 163-169.

What Butler calls for, in light of her analysis, is a “political dependency” that encourages all people, warfighters included, to see themselves as interconnected. Otherwise, the possibility of guilt will never become a factor in strategic, operational, or tactical planning. How the subject can go about imagining his or her interconnectedness with the other is anyone’s guess when these wars are conducted from thousands of miles away. And yet, the ending of *Good Kill* implies that human cannot shake their sense of interconnectedness, even from such a vast distance. Contrary to popular criticisms of digital technology that attempt to paint it as destroying humanity’s true connectivity, the digital realm of the drone’s camera reestablishes connectivity. If the Pilot’s unborn baby belongs to her body, and that baby becomes superimposed on the screen, we can only conclude that drones have forged a connection far more powerful than humanity perhaps gave the digital realm credit for. Was war necessary to forge that unique connection? One of the Pilot’s reflections suggests that such is not the case:

What if all these Indians [outsourced changing room monitors] watching us eventually come here for a vacation but find themselves drawn to JC Penney they don’t know why but they are and when they get here they go right past the sale racks right past the shoes and they head straight to the changing room they don’t know why they have nothing to change they walk in they close the door and they suddenly know why they’ve come and they wave they wave to all of their friends back home and then they don’t know why but they start to cry” (49).

In this moment, the Pilot imagines the changing room monitor weeping as she reestablishes a digital connection to her friends far away. The moment establishes a strong nostalgia for place and presence, the presence of the human body in the same place it envisions day after day, but it also argues that the camera can transcend space to ensure these unlikely connections.

The Pilot’s early memories of flying an F-16 similarly describe a transcendent sense of a place, “the blue,” in which she is entirely alone. As Judith Butler might note, the Pilot’s sense of place and the way it establishes the boundaries of what makes her self, is what makes it possible for her to relate to others; Eric explains that he can sense “the blue” in *The Pilot* and explains to their daughter that “the blue” is where mommy lives. When the Pilot’s relationship with Eric continues to deteriorate, she remarks, “No sex for a while / Sex takes me to another place and I don’t need another / place right now I have about all I can handle” (58). Temporarily, during a respite in her psychological unrest, the Pilot is under the illusion that “Home / I’m Home / Home,” only to lose

her grasp of home shortly after: "I pull back / I see our home / Back / Our block / Back / Our city / Back / Our / All of it / I see it all" (63). Until becoming a drone pilot, the Pilot attempted to maintain her connection to Eric and home via Skype, a method that made for a stronger connection than the connection she has with Eric following her new job and disappearing identity. The problem is, the drone forces the mediation of identity through so many filters, it leaves barely anything behind to transfer to others, digitally or otherwise.

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