

Eye in the Sky (2015)

Karen A. Ritzenhoff

dir. Gavin Hood; prod. Ged Doherty, Colin Firth, Genevieve Hofmeyr, David Lancaster; screenplay Guy Hibbert; photography Haris Zambarloukos. 35mm, color, 102 mins. Raindog Films et al., distrib. Entertainment One.

Eye in the Sky is a British-Canadian co-production and war film about international terrorism, released in 2015, whose title refers to drone warfare and surveillance from



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

above. The «eye in the sky» is a metaphor for drones that can produce images of moving war zones from their vantage point that are being transmitted into war rooms and different military control centers across the world (Kaplan; Parks; Parks and Kaplan). The film stars Helen Mirren as Katherine Powell, an iron-willed British Colonel, and Alan Rickman as Lieutenant General Frank Benson. Both have to maneuver and negotiate their military strategies to execute a controversial kill mission in East Africa while being based in the United Kingdom and conferring with elusive U.S. American diplomats and military officials. Powell is guiding a drone mission to eradicate a group of hunted and wanted terrorists of the al-Shabaab group, who plan a suicide bomb attack in a shopping mall in Nairobi, Kenya. This scenario is loosely based on an actual terrorist attack that took place in Kenya. The precision drone, launched from a great distance by two pilots in a trailer in the Nebraska desert, will land in the middle of a suburban settlement that also houses civilians, among them Alia (played by Aisha Takow), an eight-year-old girl. At the core of the film's narrative is an ethical conflict: Are children justifiable as collateral damage if it is in the larger interest to fight international terrorism? The melodramatic elements revolve around Alia, whose presence frames the entire movie in the first and last scenes. She is the main point of identification for the audience because she is placed outside the military chain of events while being directly affected by its doings. Her parents eventually survive; they are seen at the end of the movie—mourning the loss of their child. The sentimental ending of the movie blames modern warfare for the

suffering and death of civilians while still suggesting that it is an adequate measure to keep peace in Western countries and protect democratic ideals in the First World (Ritzenhoff). Despite the sympathy that Alia's plight may evoke, the actual decisions necessary to launch the military strike are executed with cold precision that connects the players in this bilateral collaboration.

Eye in the Sky features drone warfare technology that is currently still under development in research laboratories (Chamayou; Burgoyne). Even though Helen Mirren was not initially cast as Colonel Powell, her role as military figurehead represents a shift in international war films where women are also included as protagonists in the military theater, not just as peace-seeking nurses, mothers, and support personnel but as driving forces of the violent plot. Katherine Powell is seen at first in her private space where she wakes in the middle of the night to walk from the bedroom through the kitchen into her office, besides the garage. There, she has access to classified material from her laptop and traces the terrorists' movements on a large world map where different sites are connected by a thread. Even though Colonel Powell has access to top notch technology, she relies on her own system of reconnaissance. Once she enters the actual war room, she appears exclusively in camouflage attire and in blue, cold lights, monitoring the evolving crisis on large screens while commanding her obedient staff. Powell wants to alter the capture into a kill mission, once a fly-sized drone has entered the house where the terrorists are hiding and has beamed a signal of the suicide bomber readying his arsenal of lethal weaponry and ammunition. In order for her to get the green light from the British government, a task force led by General Benson, she has to convince several military officials about the necessity of her strike. Part of this strategy is to prove that Alia has a chance to survive once the drone is launched when, in fact, she is sacrificed for what Powell perceives as the greater good of her mission: The female terrorist, a main suspect, is still alive after the first strike and so a second bomb is being launched that ends up fatally injuring the child. The fact that the chief culprit is indeed a woman as well as a British citizen complicates the mission because she does not belong to a designated enemy country but to the United Kingdom. This is an additional indication that the representation of global terrorism in *Eye in the Sky* does not solely rely on clichés of heavily bearded males who are fought by Western male heroes but in the logic of the film requires more complex strategies of warfare that are well executed by quite anti-maternal women (as far as melodramas go) in charge.

The audience members are privy to sensory information that the onlookers from the different military groups are not. The drone footage does not communicate sound. Instead, everybody can watch the transmitted imagery and zoom in with the tip of a finger, but the auditory trauma is missing. The audience by contrast has access to actual footage on the ground and gets to know Alia and her loving parents who are not involved in any extremist organization. Alia sells the bread loaves her mother bakes at home. She sets up her table with the goods right in front of the dwelling that houses the terrorists. There is one intelligence officer incognito on the ground who not only launches various drones but also transmits the footage of the drone recordings that he facilitates from a fully equipped van. He tries to save Alia by luring her away from her bread. The attempt fails.

This modern drone warfare is different from traditional war scenarios because the battle takes place on computer screens, not in person. Interconnected TV monitors broadcast different video sources to military cells in Britain but also Nebraska, Hawaii, and Kenya. The multiple views from above distance the soldiers from their cause. War

decisions also depend on mass media and those in charge are aware of potentially negative news coverage. One of the other women involved is a British diplomat, a Lieutenant (played by Kate Liquorish) who argues that killing an innocent child as well as a UK citizen, even if she is involved in a terrorist plot, would provide bad press. She suggests that having African terrorists killing people in a remote shopping mall in Kenya might be causing less of a media stir. Her cynical view of the situation is contrasted with the calculating strategies of the military personnel in charge.

In *Eye in the Sky* only body parts remain after the drone has hit the house with great precision. The victims of the attack can be identified by their earlobes that are decoded in a high-tech lab in Hawaii. Among the assassinated terrorists is the British female national, Susan Danford (played by Lex King), who had been on Powell's most wanted list for several years. She had converted to Islam and is seen wearing a niqab in the movie. While the drone transmits the footage from inside the terrorist's house, her face can be detected and positively identified. The film does not provide any visual doubt that the terrorists were planning a bombing. There is little ambiguity. This is made even more obvious when the drone fly detects a second room and provides close-ups of the suicide bomb vest and a camera with tripod where the suicide recording was supposed to be taped. This war is fought with hugely different techniques on both sides. While the terrorists are unaware that soldiers across the globe follow their movements, they still seem to be unstoppable with conventional means of intervention. This is why the drone needs to be launched under British control from American territory. The film insinuates that there is a strong military alliance between the United Kingdom and the USA; no other western nation is seemingly involved in the negotiations. The high level of intelligence and technology in the mission is contrasted with the clumsy and neglectful responses by politicians such as the U.S. secretary of state and even the American president. They always seem distracted for mundane reasons and detached from the gravity of the situation. However, the rationale of fighting global terrorism ultimately convinces everyone involved that the drone strikes are unavoidable: The global melodrama of fighting terrorism replaces the maternal melodrama of saving the child. Furthermore, it is framed as a military necessity.

References

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