Thomas Ærvold Bjerre

Unmanned? Military Masculinities in Filmic Representations of U.S. Drone Operators

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**Abstract**

*Drones have become the new face of American warfare, challenging institutional and cultural norms about what it means to be a soldier. In the context of military masculinities, I examine the representation of the U.S. drone operators in three films: Drones (dir. Rick Rosenthal, 2013), Good Kill (dir. Andrew Niccol, 2014), and Eye in the Sky (dir. Gavin Hood, 2015). The films feature a male-female team of drone operators and can partly be seen as counter-narratives to the official idealized story of drone warfare by exposing some of the moral dilemmas facing the drone operators. Yet rarely do the films address the larger ethical issues of how drone technology skirts the legal framework of war. Additionally, the films' reconfiguration of the white male drone operator as morally courageous and a potential savior of innocent women and children on the “battlefield” obscures the racialized and imperialist ideologies bound up in the U.S.-led “war on terror”.***

**Keywords**

war, hegemonic masculinity, culture, media, United States, technology

**Introduction**

The recent increase in drone warfare is challenging many of the century-old assumptions about what it means to be a warrior in the U.S. today, especially because of the lack of risk involved (Enemark 2014, Chamayou 2015). Traditional warfare in the U.S. has relied, not just on public support, but on an understanding that to be “an American” was to belong to a nation of warriors. This understanding has been, and still is, highly gendered: military service has served as “an obligation of male citizenship and as a rite of passage to manhood” (Bell 2004, 481). For centuries, the cultural imaginary in the west has defined the soldier based on traditional sex role behaviors, in which the male body has served as a central metaphor for power, strength, and risk-taking. The military and popular culture in the U.S. have hailed “their” soldiers as “warrior-protectors, necessary to shield innocents from the enemy…” (de Volo 2015, 55).
What I am interested in here is how the increased use of U.S. drone operations and the subsequent “crisis in military ethos” (Chamayou 2015, 99) have influenced the cultural depiction of the American military hero. Examining three cinematic representations of U.S. drone pilots, I ask how they construct and represent U.S. drone operators in the context of military masculinities. How do the films engage with what Fuller calls “the civilianization of warfare,” that is, the erosion of the civilian-combatant binary (2018, 222)? What happens when the warrior is not on the actual battlefield but in a padded cockpit chair facing monitors in an air-conditioned facility in the U.S.? How do we understand “ethical categories” such as “virtue or bravery” (Chamayou 2015, 14) and, more specifically, military heroism when war is waged with a joystick by someone thousands of miles out of harm’s way?

As I show in the following analysis, films about drone pilots expose some of the ethical, moral, and gendered quandaries relating to drone warfare. But while the films are encoded with ideological meaning at odds with official narratives about war, they also perpetuate remnants of traditional gendered and racialized narratives that reconfigure the white male drone operator as morally courageous and a potential savior. These tropes obscure crucial issues, such as the ideological and racial typing bound up in both the military masculinity trope and the U.S.-led “war on terror.” My primary focus will be on three recent films that feature U.S. drone operators: Drones (2013), a U.S. independent production written by Matt Witten and directed by Rick Rosenthal, Good Kill (2014), a high-profile U.S. independent film written and directed by New Zealand filmmaker Andrew Niccol, and Eye in the Sky (2015), a British film written by Guy Hibbert and directed by the South African Gavin Hood.¹

Military Masculinities

The cultural construction of military masculinities is fraught with paradoxes relating to intersectional aspects: a result of interdependent “gendered power relations and inequalities of class,
race, and sexual orientation” (Pyke 1996, 531). War in the U.S. has historically been defined as a “white masculine undertaking” with limited opportunities for women and minorities (Bell 2004, 481). Elements of race, class, and sexuality have also been evident in the military’s presentation of itself as a place for a select male elite: “white, middle class, well-built, straight, and cissexual” (Locke 2013, 4). But during the Vietnam War, college students and “young men with connections and the economic means” received deferments and physical exemptions (Phillips 2005, 49), while “poorer, economically depressed communities suffered a disproportionate share of the casualties” (Kriner and Shen 2010, 198). To this day, high schools with a “high proportion of low-income students serve as a magnet” for military recruitment (Kershner and Harding 2015, np.). And despite the history of the military’s self-promotion as a white male elite, hegemonic military masculinity has relied on characteristics long associated with working-class masculinities, such as physical strength and aggression. The more recent rise of women and minorities in the All-Volunteer Force, as well as the introduction of more advanced technology, such as drones, clashes with a military culture (Asoni, A, et al., 2020, 12) steeped in homosocial traditions and a “particular racial, gendered, and sexual conception of self” rooted in “a white, male, heterosexual notion of masculine identity” (Nagel, 2004, 407).

Scholars have referred to the “nexus linking war, militarism, and masculinities” (Higate and Hopton 2005, 432) as “soldierly masculinity” (Adams 2008), “military masculinity” (Belkin 2012) and in the plural, as both “militarized masculinities” (Eichler 2014, 82), and “military masculinities” (Higate 2003; Basham 2016). Hutchings (2008) points to the complex nature of the variable norms of masculinity and the differences between various definitions and categorizations of military masculinity. She noted that “The highly rational, technologically skilled nuclear intellectual (unemotional, rational, calculating)” differs as an archetype from the “‘just warrior’ (chivalrous, protective),” who again differs from “the heroic figure (courageous, strong, death defying).” This flexible “continuum of masculine qualities” exists in tension between different
characteristics such as “risk taking and rationality or discipline.” This creates a hierarchy of types of masculinities, which also includes “the possibility of failed or deviant” types (391-392).

However, most scholars agree that within this hierarchy of masculine traits, one type of military masculinity—what Basham calls “hegemonic military masculinity” (2016, 32)—is clearly dominant: Eichler (2014, 82) points to characteristics such as “toughness, violence, aggression, courage, control, and domination.” Summing up the various scholarly characterizations of military masculinities, Hutchings points to “risk taking and rationality, as well as discipline, endurance, and absence of emotion” as hegemonic ideals (2008, 393). Likewise, Higate (2003) places highly skilled special forces at the top of the hierarchy of military masculinities, and at the bottom are military clerks who are perceived to “occupy a feminized rather than a soldierly role” (31). Especially relevant, Barrett’s (2001) work on the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. Navy has shown how naval officers see pilots as coming “closest to embodying the ideal of hegemonic masculinity” by representing “aggressiveness, technical mastery of complex machinery, courage, and autonomy” (84-85). As I discuss in a bit, the drone operator’s presumed lack of courage and autonomy are exactly what creates an experience of ridicule and emasculation for many men drone operators.

In terms of clarity, in my analysis I will use the term military masculinity to refer to the ideal, which encompasses traits such as “risk taking… discipline, endurance, and absence of emotion” (Hutchings 20008, 393). The films I will be analyzing all represent various forms of military masculinities, and at different points in the films these types move up and down in the hierarchy, depending on elements such as character development, narrative arc, and political or ideological messaging. A central concern of my analysis is how the filmmakers interpret and represent a new and controversial face of U.S. warfare, and the possible ramifications of these representations when it comes to possibly influencing the public and cultural discourse of drone warfare.
Drone Operators and Military Masculinities

Military scholars have pointed out how drone operators do not have ways of achieving the military virtues of courage, honor, and sacrifice because they risk little in not confronting their enemy directly (Enemark 2014, 76-77, 86; Chamayou 2015, 96-105; Sparrow 2013, 88, 97). Judged by “traditional values, killing by drones… is still seen as the highest degree of cowardice and murder” (Chamayou 2015, 98). Similarly, political scientists working from a feminist perspective have connected the changes brought on by drone warfare to the destabilizing of gender expectations (Clark 2019, 2021) and to military masculinities more directly. Their analyses range from assertions of a queered experience of killing (Daggett 2015) defined by the “blurring of… social parameters” that support the “discursive frames of militarized masculinities” (Szitanyi 2020, 184) to arguments that drone technologies clash with heroic warrior ideals of autonomy and agency available to on-the-ground soldiers (Manjikian 2016, 107).

Within the military, this “paradigm shift” (Fuller 2018, 222) of redefined “warrior virtues” (Chamayou 2015, 101) has provoked a “military culture clash between teenaged video gamers and veteran flight jocks for control of the drones” (Benjamin 2013, 87). While some troops see the drone operators as “angels in the sky,” they are often derided as “chair-borne rangers” (Power 2013), “cubicle warriors” (Benjamin 2013, 87), or “desk jockey warriors” (Sparrow 2013, 88). The media descriptions of high-profile, remorseful ex-drone operator Brandon Bryant’s work routines serves as a relevant context: “Mostly the drone crews’ work was an endless loop of watching …. usually time passed in a haze of banal images of rooftops, walled courtyards, or traffic-snarled intersections” (Power 2013). Entrenched in a voyeuristic regime, this is a military profession in which for cis men, the expectations of ‘the male body’ is rendered ineffective and insignificant as a symbol for power, strength, and risk-taking. By the logic of a masculinized military culture that valorizes agency and physical courage, the drone operator has become feminized. Hence the title of
this paper, which points to the dilemma that the films explore, and that Chamayou (2015) states simply: “one of the troubles with unmanned aerial vehicles is literally the peril of becoming ‘un-manned’ in every sense of the term, including ‘emasculated’” (99-100).

The three films I discuss here feed into a cultural understanding of drone operators mostly based on documentaries and journalistic exposes featuring remorseful ex-drone operators highly critical of the ethical implications of their former profession. The often sensationalized media presentations of these personal accounts have resulted in a “fetishisation of trauma” that potentially influences cultural understandings of remote warfare and is carried over into popular representations such as the films discussed below (Bentley 2018, 89). In fact, the producers of Good Kill used Brandon Bryant as a consultant on an early version of the script in 2013 (Pasternack, 2015). Chamayou argues that the “drone trauma” narrative can connect drone operators to traditional soldiers through a shared “psychic vulnerability” (2015, 107) and, as a result, this narrative, sympathetic as it may be, risks losing focus of the actual victims of drone warfare and their traumatization (Graae 2019, 80). This is indeed the case for Drones and Good Kill.

Yet the filmmakers appear dissatisfied with a “mere” trauma narrative: some cannot escape constructing a heroic frame that activates, in different ways, old, gendered narratives of male chivalry and damsels in distress, a dichotomy in which “male warriors save and protect female ‘beautiful souls’” (Manjikian 2016, 105). Sandeau notes the films’ post-9/11 context with their plots focusing on disillusioned drone operators attempting to save civilians, especially women and girls. This focus echoes immediate post-9/11 discourses that framed the pre-invasion debate in the US in which the repression of Afghan women was used as leverage to create justification for attacking Afghanistan (Sandeau 2019, 167). Feminist journalists and scholars have examined the gendered discourses—the “ultimate co-optation of feminist rhetoric” (Randol 28)—used to legitimize the invasion of Afghanistan. Sociologist Saadia Toor uses the term “Imperialist feminism” to refer to “war and occupation in the name of women’s rights” (2012, 147, 148). This analysis frames my
reading of the films in this article and helps to reveal how *Drones* and *Good Kill* in particular rely on gendered and racialized discourses of “[w]hite men… saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1988, 296). It points to drone warfare as an imperial or colonial project in which “[t]he encounter between” drone operators “and the dominated is colonial” (Allinson 2015, 115 n3). Furthermore, the colonial and imperial legacies in the sites of many drone strikes have enabled a process of racialization that constructs the local, brown, and largely Muslim population as “unruly, barbaric” (Nicholas and Agius 2018, 122; see also Cockburn 2015, 1-16), and ultimately “less than human” and therefore “ungrievable” (Butler 2004, 57, 36).

The “drone operator as heroic savior” narrative also supports the “myth of technological precision” (Graae 2019, 178). Both Cockburn (2015) and Chamayou have stressed the “opacity of both the targeting criteria and the real results of the strikes” (Chamayou 2015, 147). Yet this opacity is glossed over by the films’ black-and-white scenarios in which drone operators and viewers alike can make clear distinctions between civilians and “combatants,” which in turn makes it easier for filmmakers to construct heroic narratives.

Notably, all three films I discuss below feature a man-woman drone operator team: a woman sensor operator in training next to an experienced white man drone pilot. This implies an equal man-woman distribution that is rare in traditional war films that often focus on the homosocial bonds between men soldiers (Eberwein 2007). However, this equality belies statistics when it comes to drone operators, and both *Good Kill* and *Eye in the Sky* are more interested in the men drone operators, leaving the women as “supporting or peripheral characters” typical of military women in U.S. films (Tasker 2017, 500). As I will discuss below, the three films represent different approaches to the gender trouble (Butler 1990) brought on by drone warfare, but they all make attempts at constructing the white man drone operator as heroic, ranging from a somewhat tragic approach in *Eye in the Sky* to an outright fantasy of masculine agency on display in *Good Kill*. At times, the films conflate the two extremes.
Moral Courage

As all three films make clear—albeit in different ways—in order to construct the drone operator as a heroic figure, bravery has to take a different form from traditional military courage. It is not enough to do their job, to sit in their chairs, and push the button on their joysticks. In both narrative and cinematic terms, this is potential poison, so what we see is that the films construct men drone pilots as “the moral voice, questioning the legality and morality of decisions made higher up the chain of command” (Nicholas and Agius 2018, 127). Courage, so important to the construction of hegemonic military masculinity, changes from physical courage to moral courage. Miller (2000,) defines moral courage as “the capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation in order to admit one’s mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to denounce injustice, and to defy immoral or imprudent orders” (254). In the three films discussed below, the enemy becomes not only the high-value “targets” on the monitors, but also the military system itself, or other bureaucratic entities, such as the CIA, that the drone operators take on and stand up against. As Chamayou argues, “shifting what is sacrificed from the physical plane to the mental” enables a restoration of the drone operators as heroic (2015, 103).

Yet, eager as the filmmakers seem to provoke the audience into a reflection on the psychological and moral costs of drone war, this forced reflection is framed within the “drone trauma” narrative, which Graae refers to as “a persistent cultural imaginary” (2019, 80). The elevation of the (potentially) traumatized man drone operator to a recognizable heroic warrior comes at the cost of obscuring the ideological typing bound up in military masculinity trope, particularly when it comes to race and imperialism. Furthermore, rarely do the films engage with a larger ethical issue at work: the “necro-ethics” of drone warfare, in which technology is used for “targeted assassination” that skirt the legal framework of warfare (Chamayou 2015, 17). Scholarly critics of the drone program have noted the “inevitably ambiguous” information delivered by the so-
called “miraculous technology” (Cockburn 2015, 15) and shown that the notion of the drone “as an ethical precision device” is based on “conceptual confusions” (Chamayou 2015, 142, 140). In the real world, the moral courage displayed by the cinematic drone operators would be rendered void by the automated command-and-control system of the kill chain.

Method

The underlying premise of analyzing the films is based on a cultural studies approach that sees cultural texts, such as movies, as not merely entertainment but as texts that can “provide information about the ‘psychology’ of an era and its tensions, conflicts, fears, and fantasies” by refracting “social discourses and content into specifically cinematic forms which engage audiences in an active process of constructing meaning” (Kellner 1998, 355). Based on this assumption, I will employ a textual analysis that finds meaning in filmic texts by decoding relevant elements, such as plot, syntax, mise-en-scène, and sound. This is done with an eye to the encoding process as well: the production of the film, including the particular historical and ideological contexts in which it is made. As several film scholars have argued, post-9/11 American cinema has shaped and influenced how the public understood the “war on terror” (e.g., Kellner 2010, Markert 2011, McSweeney 2014). Given the clandestine nature of drone surveillance and warfare, and the power of cultural narratives to “change beliefs, reinforce preexisting views, or even displace knowledge gained from other sources for elites as well as mass audiences” (Daniel and Musgrave 2017, 503), it is crucial that scholars examine popular culture representations of drone warfare, which often focuses on the drone pilot (Kammerer 2012, Hasian 2016) since they can “elucidate the gendered and masculinist impulses contained in drone warfare and subjectivity” (Nicholas and Agius 2018, 117).

My methodological approach consists of content analysis of both the films’ scripts and the films themselves. Over several readings and viewings, I coded the scripts and the films based on my particular interest in their representation of drone operators. For the scripts, this allowed me to
ascertain possible patterns and themes. For the films themselves, I paid particular attention to the so-called “language of film” (Monaco 2009, 170-249): signs, mise-en-scène, sound, and other elements that helped highlight themes or patterns relevant to my analysis. I sought to answer how the filmmakers employed the various elements of film to represent the drone operators – and how these representations engaged with relevant contexts, such as military culture and its traditions as well as current issues relating to masculinities.

**Film Analysis**

*Drones*

*Drones* (2013) takes place almost solely on Creech Air Force Base, Nevada, within a trailer that houses a small drone operating crew in charge of Reaper drones: The pilot, Airman Jack Bowles (Matt O’Leary), and sensor operator Lt. Sue Lawson (Eloise Mumford). Of the three films I discuss here, *Drones* stands out, not just because of its small production budget and its limited release, but because it is the only film in which most of the agency lies with the female drone operator. From the outset, Lt. Sue Lawson is framed in culturally masculinized traits: The opening scene of her in a gym at night working out on punching- and speedbags establishes her as physically strong and assertive. We then cut to a shower scene and her wiping steam from the mirror, a towel around her torso. She picks up her necklace, whose locket is inscribed “David 2001.” A roaring sound, which turns out to be fighter jets flying over the base, makes her startle and turn around—suggesting a link to 9/11 that will become important later in the film and adding a touch of vulnerability to her character (01:15-02:20).

Lawson has her first day on the job as a sensor operator in training. The daughter of a four-star general, her dreams of becoming a fighter pilot were crushed by an eye injury from a boxing match. Before that she was “Top Stick” in her class, having demonstrated “the best overall flying skills” (Anonymous 2018), and, as she tells Bowles, when he calls her a wash-out, she once “landed
a fully loaded F-22 at night in the middle of a blizzard with one engine flamed out” (11:36-11:40).
According to the internal hierarchy that defines the status of pilots, Sue Lawson embodied traits correlating to hegemonic military masculinity, a militarized variety of “female masculinity” (Halberstam 2018). According to Halberstam (1998), masculinity must not and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (1). Yet society continues to support “‘heroic masculinities’” that “depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities” (1).

The film sets up the masculinized Lt. Lawson against the other protagonist; the 22-year-old, jock-like Airman Jack Bowles, who is the drone pilot. We first see him in front of the monitors enthusiastically cheering as he fires a missile, techno music pumping away. It turns out he is playing Money $hot, a video game meant to keep their skills sharp. The clear sexual innuendo of the game title fits established tropes linking “the pleasure of (heterosexual) sex” and the firing of weapons to “ejaculation” (Daggett 2015, 368) and serves as a moral critique of how drone warfare blurs the lines between fiction and reality.

Airman Bowles’s swaggering bravado takes up most of the space in the tiny trailer. He wears his drone pilot identity as a badge of pride: while Lawson outranks Bowles, he is the experienced drone pilot and braggingly subverts the perceived feminization of drone pilots in the hierarchy of military masculinities:

“I was such a kick-ass gamer, they gave me a shot. They threw me in the fucking training program with all these hot-shit baggers... dudes who flew two tours in the sandbox .... I blew ’em all out of the water. And since then I’ve had 23 successful target prosecutions in 11 months on that console. Air Force of the future.” (08:24-08:39)

When Lawson pushes back, arguing that being a drone operator is “nothing like being in a real fighter jet” because [t]here’s no danger,” Bowles skirts this issue of bravery and turns to one of the tenets underpinning hegemonic military masculinity: sexual bragging (Basham 2016): “I’m 22. Shit. I don’t wanna die until I’ve had a threesome... with... both women.” (31:32-31:50). While
Bowles embodies the “masculinized character of military culture” (Basham 2016, 30), he comes off as a parody of hypermasculinity, his performance is simply too excessive.

The crew surveils a “high-value” Al-Qaeda “target” in eastern Afghanistan. The nature of their task is much like the one ex-drone operator Brandon Bryant describes, in a *GQ* profile, as “an endless loop of watching” that creates a “voyeuristic intimacy” (Power 2013). Perhaps reacting against the feminized passivity of the task, Bowles treats the surveillance in a sophomoric fashion, zooming in on a couple on the roof as they are having sex, comparing his own mother to the woman on the monitor. While Bowles is depicted as insensitive and racist, eager for another “money shot” and not too concerned about a few more dead “towelheads” or “Hajis,” Lawson is initially positioned as the film’s “moral voice” who begins to question the moral and ethical implications of their mission orders, since twelve civilians, including a baby, will be killed. Notably, she does not have any qualms about the legality of assassinating the “target.” When she confronts their superior on the screen, he tells her that “you’ll have counseling available after the mission” (47:18). He also frames her reaction in gendered terms that outline some of the important traits that make up hegemonic military masculinity—and that omit Lawson from these traits: “There’s nothing wrong with [feeling emotional], but it means you’re not equipped to make cold, calculated, strategic decisions. Fortunately, that’s not your job. That’s for men like your father” (47:36-47:41). Similarly, Bowles warns her not to “think too much.”

In this way, the construction of the two characters, and their interactions, follow predictable gender norms, also when it comes to depicting men and women in war narratives. However, this structure is challenged when their superior orders Bowles to “employ any means necessary” to stop Lawson from interfering with the mission. Here their disagreement changes from discussion to a physical brawl—and Lawson’s moral courage morphs into a show of physical strength when she knocks out Bowles, reminding us of her boxing background.
In an erratic plot twist, Lawson’s father, General Lawson, appears on the monitor to explain their “high value target” was responsible for recruiting the 9/11 terrorists that killed Lawson’s mother and brother David in the World Trade Center attack. Furthermore, the general claims that Khalil is planning another attack in the U.S. Suddenly, Lt. Lawson is keen to fire the missiles, spurned by the personal and emotional link between the target and her own family tragedy—hinted at in the shot of her necklace in the film’s beginning. Bowles, on the other hand, is convinced that General Lawson lies about their target’s connection to 9/11 and the death of Lt. Lawson’s brother. Bowles becomes the hesitant one who asserts, “I’m not killing these kids” (1:12:00-1:12:02). In other words, his bravado is subdued, and he begins to embody moral courage in the face of Lawson’s emotionally unbalanced behavior.

Lawson tries to negotiate the situation by framing the meaning of their job in seemingly neutral terms. When it comes to the heroism vs. cowardice narrative, for example, she states: “Let’s do our duty. I mean, maybe there’s no heroism in that, but... There’s no shame either” (1.10.34-1.10.47). But as several scholars studying the politics of drones have shown, simply doing one’s “duty” as a drone operator involves a host of ethical, moral, and psychological dilemmas, including questions of bravery, targeted assassinations, and the legality of their actions. In fact, as Allinson asks: “might not the atrociousness of drones arise from their ‘correct’ and quotidian use—especially in the context of the counterinsurgent battlefield in which they are most likely to be used?” (2015, 117).

When Bowles tries to send the drone away from the target, Lawson points his own gun at him and orders him to “step away from the console.” Bowles’ laconic reply, “Go ahead and shoot,” can be read both as resignation or as a throwback to the hypermasculinity he performed in the beginning of the film. Lawson knocks out Bowles with the gun and recodes the weapon back to the target. A red light starts blinking in the box, the music reaches a loud cacophonic climax, and the monitor image of their “high-value” Al-Qaeda “target” pushing two children on a swing changes to
a close-up of the man smiling in slow motion before an explosion engulfs them. The last frame of the film shows a close-up of Lawson’s face illuminated in red, her expression one of shock and regret.

This concludes the film’s shifting representations of military masculinities. Sue Lawson is initially presented as both physically and morally competent, embodying exceptional skills as a fighter pilot. In contrast Jack Bowles, though skilled, is a parody of hypermasculinity. But the film chips away at Lawson’s competence and professionalism when her father is introduced. Not only does he outrank her, but his presence highlights the patriarchal tradition of women being defined by men – and the issues of control and obedience related to it. After the general is introduced, Lt. Bowles is reduced as an unstable woman whom higher-ups/fathers can manipulate emotionally into following orders. Bowles’ flashy façade of hypermasculinity deteriorates when he is knocked out—twice—but the film suggests that he ends up performing a more mature, meaningful—and thereby more heroic role—by embodying the full spectrum of moral courage: “the capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation in order to admit one’s mistakes, to confess a wrong, to reject evil conformity, to denounce injustice, and to defy immoral or imprudent orders” (Miller 2000, 54). Bowles’ racism is forgiven or simply forgotten, and Lawson ends up as the morally culpable one of the two. Despite Bowles’ attempts to stop the strike, Lawson ends up pulling the trigger that killed both their “target” and innocent civilians, who are, not inconsequentially, children. In this way, the film’s apparent critique of the drone program remains superficial: while it hints at a larger power critique, its gendered narrative ends up placing the blame on the woman drone operator rather than the larger, masculinized political and military-technological complex that make up the drone program.

Good Kill
Compared to the tight, claustrophobic environment of *Drones*, *Good Kill* broadens the scope to include the family sphere of the drone pilot. The film takes place in 2010, when the number of U.S. drone strikes rose dramatically. The opening scene shows protagonist, Major Tom Egan, now on his third UAV tour, conducting a “surgical strike” with professional and clinical “precision,” thereby displaying exceptional skills and martial virtues that align more with what Hutchings calls “the highly rational, technologically skilled nuclear intellectual” than with the “just warrior” (Hutchings 2008, 391).

Egan hails from the USAF’s “Top Gun” breed: he has logged “3,000 hours in F-16s, six tours, 200 combat sorties” (11:12), before ending up in an air-conditioned container on the outskirts of Las Vegas. In other words, within the hierarchy of military masculinities, he has embodied the ideal of hegemonic masculinity as someone who represents “aggressiveness, technical mastery of machinery, courage, and autonomy (Barrett 2001, 84-85). He is shown as what Hutchings (2008) refers to as the ideal of “the heroic figure (courageous, strong, death defying)” (392). Visually, this image is reinforced in the film’s opening in a shot where Egan emerges from the container in aviator sunglasses and walks in the Nevada sunset to his 1967 Pontiac Firebird, an iconic muscle car associated with a “working-class tough guy image” (Katz 2011, 268).

As he drives out of the base, a hard rock song kicks in, cementing the “Top Gun” image of Egan but also suggesting, as Sandeau (2020) notes, that only behind the wheel does Egan find “the freedom and virility” that is unattainable as a drone pilot (162). Indeed, the initial tough guy image clashes with the ordinary suburban existence he steps into, when he opens the door to a fight between his wife and their son – and to a kitchen that looks like “a bomb hit it” (06:28). The visual and vocal blurring of the battlefront/home front dichotomy is introduced when Egan tells a cashier: “Blew away six Taliban in Pakistan just today. Now I’m going home to barbecue” (5:33). That the cashier is unimpressed is yet another sign of the lack of heroic valorization surrounding Egan.
Egan is paired with a new co-pilot recruit, Airman First Class Vera Suarez (Zoë Kravitz), the only drone operator of color in the three films. Like Bowles in Drones, she has exceptional credentials as a drone operator: even though she looks like a “a fucking child… she’s got 500 hours in Reapers, 100 in Predators” and is a “Top recruit from Holloman” (11:41-11:48). One of the team’s missions is a “high-value target” they have spent 600 Reaper hours monitoring. We see the team in front of the screens, observing an Afghan compound believed to be the home of “the new Number Two.” Unlike Bowles’ immature surveillance behavior in Drones, Good Kill suggests the possibility of “empathic bridging… a kind of knowledge of the opponent that confirms rather than denies his humanity, personality, embodiment, and vulnerability” (Coeckelberg 2013, 97). While Coeckelberg (2013) argues that this “empathic bridging” can make it “less… easy to kill” because the “moral-epistemic distancing effects of the teletechnologies” are obstructed (97), Chamayou (2015) strongly disagrees with this view, listing the “filtered nature of perception, the figurative reduction of the enemy, the nonreprocity of the fields of perception, and the dislocation of the phenomenological unity of the action” as factors that make it easier, not harder, for the drone operator to “administer violence” (119).

Yet to create an increasing appearance of helplessness in Egan, the film insists on a correlation between the drone surveillance and Egan’s intimacy with the woman and child being surveilled. He watches as a local man beats and rapes the woman in the compound—an example of the sexualization of the brown, ethnic other enemy as a “sexual demon” (Nagel 2004, 406) common in the construction and maintenance of hegemonic military masculinity, which, as Nagel notes, is rooted in a “particular racial, gendered, and sexual conception of self—a white, male, heterosexual notion of masculine identity (407). Egan’s feeling of helplessness is compounded when he kills two children who show up on the monitor just as he has fired off two missiles at an IED-factory. As much as he wants to, the role of protector for Afghan women (a variant of the chivalrous and protective “just warrior” [Hutchings 2008, 391-92]) is not possible for Egan. This creates another
crack in his “Top Gun” armor. To make matters worse, the team begins taking increasingly questionable orders directly from the CIA who “operate under a different set of ROEs,” using a “signature strike… based not on a suspicion of guilt, but on a pattern of behavior” (31:28-31:46). These missions present ethical and moral issues for Egan. But rather than focusing on these dilemmas, the film shows how an important part of Egan’s objection increasingly focuses on the lack of risk involved in his job. “I am a pilot and I’m not flying” (23.35), he complains to his wife Molly. And he elaborates to Suarez, in words that bear a resemblance to those of Lawson in *Drones*:

> “I miss the fear. You’re up in the sky, something can happen. There’s a risk… try landing on a carrier at night or in rough seas …. We’ve got no skin in the game. I feel like a coward every day.” (45.40-46.20)

Increasingly, Egan’s professional and personal life is presented as dull routine. Visually, the film shows us voyeuristic aerial shots of the Las Vegas suburbs that suggest a mind-numbing, “zombie mode” conformity at odds with Egan’s yearning for risk. The aerial shots, reminiscent of Egan’s surveillance feed, also serve to erode the already unstable battlefront/home front binary further. Egan’s marriage is failing, and the toll of his accumulated killings weighs him down. As Sandeau (2019) notes, Egan’s “helplessness as a soldier is redoubled” by his sexual impotence (162), another obvious threat to his virility. To cope, Egan drinks vodka straight from the bottle on his off-duty hours. Unlike traditional soldiers, Egan cannot escape from the dull civilian world into an adventurous military profession since that does not extend to beyond the cubicle he is locked in to. Egan’s battlefield is his cubicle.

Unable to be a provider at home and incapable of living up to the military masculinity ideal that as a soldier he should be strong and courageous, Egan’s last resort is to go up against the increasingly cynical strikes ordered by the CIA. To protect non-combatants, he deliberately drops the link to the drone just as he is about to fire. While the Lt. Col. argues that Egan is guilty of
“failure to comply with a lawful order” (1:24:00), Egan’s action falls squarely within the definition of moral courage, and we are clearly meant to see it as such: a defiance of “immoral of imprudent orders” that also carries with it “the capacity to overcome the fear of shame and humiliation” (Miller 2000, 254), since the Lt. Col. punishes Egan by rescinding his planned promotion, downgrading Egan to surveillance and effectively ending any dreams he has of ever flying again.

The filmmakers push Egan completely against the wall by having his wife and kids leave him. Suarez informs him that she has turned in her wings in protest. However, as Adelman (2108) notes, the significance of Suarez’s act of protest is undermined by her immediate coming on to Egan (36). Emasculated and humiliated both privately and professionally, but perhaps bolstered by Suarez’s sexual interest, Egan attempts to regain control by embarking on a personal, highly illegal, mission that apparently merges moral courage with a technological version of physical courage. This is also where the film veers into an all-out fantasy of masculine agency: driven by a chivalrous savior complex and a need to assert dominance, Egan locks himself in the trailer, tracks down the male Afghan rapist and fires off a Hellfire missile that obliterates the man just as he is about to enter his victim’s compound. As the smoke clears, the woman gets up, unharmed, and her child runs to her.

Egan then exits the box, where the rest of the crew, his superior, and a military police officer are waiting. He walks past them and drives off base in his muscle car, heading west. Having saved a woman 7,000 miles away, he effectively goes AWOL in a final, defiant display of moral courage that serves as the film’s condemnation of current U.S. drone war policy. This “happy ending” does not seem bothered by the fact that Egan has just committed a racially motivated war crime by resorting to the same medieval eye-for-an-eye logic of which U.S. enemies are often accused. His rogue missile strike fuels a fantasy of the drone pilot as a chivalrous and protective “just warrior” (Hutchings 2008, 391) that might explain why Brandon Bryant, who gave the film’s
producers notes on an early version of the script, has derided the film as being “too ‘Top Gun’” (Pasternack 2015).

_Eye in the Sky_

_Eye in the Sky_ spreads out its cast of characters even more than _Good Kill_ by depicting much of the complex, multinational “kill chain” that makes up a military mission to capture HVTs (“high value targets”) in Kenya. Once again, the ethical and moral quandary hinges on a civilian, this time the young Kenyan girl Alia, who sells bread close to a building where the HVTs have gathered. Unlike the other films, here we are introduced to Alia and her family doing every-day chores like cooking, playing, and homework, making them more than pixels on a screen. An important plot element also includes the undercover Kenyan field agent Jama (Barkhad Abdi), who plays a crucial—and tense, action-packed—role in trying to remove Alia from her position outside the target house. He is the only one risking his life in the operation by performing what amounts to a sort of traditional physical courage.

The drone operator couple is made up of USAF pilot, Lt. Steve Watts (Aaron Paul), and a woman sensor operator, Airman Gershon (Phoebe Fox). Like Lawson in _Drones_ and Suarez in _Good Kill_, Gershon has her first day on the job: another woman, and peripheral character, to be trained by a man. We first see Watts as he wakes up alone in his Las Vegas home at night, ready to go to work. He lies staring at the ceiling for several seconds, suggesting a reluctance to set about doing his duty, or the “zombie mode” referred to above. Watts has been at Creech Air Force Base for “about six months” and has been qualified for “about two years.” His motivation for joining the Air Force was “college debt. Air Force was a guaranteed four years of work” (10.25-10.49). Unlike Lawson in _Drones_ and Egan in _Good Kill_, Watts is constructed as non-heroic; a middle-class, debt-ridden graduate without any noble, ideological cause.
The objective of the joint operation depicted is to capture key members of Al-Shabaab, including British and U.S. citizens. The head of the mission, and the film’s main protagonist, is the British Colonel Powell (Helen Mirren in a role that challenges the gendered norms of military leadership). The job of the drone operators is to be the mission’s “eye in the sky” (09:36). However, as the targets relocate and drone surveillance reveals suicide vests, Colonel Powell urges that the mission be changed from “capture” to “shoot-to-kill” and orders Watts and Gershon to “prepare to launch a single AGM-114 Hellfire on the target house” (38:33-38:38). This is when Watts, serving as the film’s “moral voice,” performs his first act of defiance against the system by asking Colonel Powell if the U.S. government is aware that they are targeting a U.S. citizen. When she affirms, he keeps pressing her. But she puts him in place, insisting that, “You are covered. This is going to happen fast, so be ready to shoot,” to which Watts can only reply “Yes, ma’am” (39:00-39:05). While Watts’s reaction can be viewed as him taking a moral stand, the ensuing dialogue suggests that it may be fear or insecurity that drove him to question the Colonel’s orders. He admits to Gershon that he has never fired a Hellfire or any other missile before: “I’ve only ever been the eye” (39:24).

Watts’s countdown is interrupted when Alia, the girl selling bread, appears on the monitor. Watts informs Col. Powell that he will not fire until she is “out of the frag radius” and insists that Powell runs “the collateral damage estimate again” (50:59-51:10). In a close-up of Gershon (out of focus) and Watts in profile, Watts seems at a loss, his eyes misty. As he shakes his head and closes his eyes, Gershon whispers, “What do we do?” An extreme close-up shows his hand on the joystick, his finger close to the button. We hear Col. Powell’s voice over drone images of the house: “I repeat, you are cleared to engage.” We then see Watts in a frontal close-up, shaking his head, looking more determined. A drone shot of Alia setting up her bread stand leads to Watts’ defiant expression of moral courage in the face of cynical military authority, as he tells Col. Powell, “Ma’am, I’m the pilot in command responsible for releasing the weapon. I have the right to ask for
the [collateral damage estimate] to be run again. I will not release my weapon until that happens” (51:16-51:43). A frustrated Powell acquiesces, and at the base an incredulous Lt. Col. tells Watts: “What the fuck are you doing? You just threw the rule book at a Colonel.” Gershon looks at Watts admiringly and commends him with a “well done” (52:09-52:24).

But Col. Powell soon clears the strike and, with a steely look, authorizes Watts to “prosecute the target …. Engage now. Am I clear?” (1:12:28-1:12:36), effectively taking back control of the situation and placing Watts back at the low end of the kill chain. Holding back tears, Watts hesitantly goes through the protocol of checking the various systems before firing. He announces the Hellfire shot with a tearful voice: “Rifle, rifle, rifle. Weapon away” (1:15:40), and in the next 40 seconds before the missile hits, the film cross cuts between Alia packing up her empty stand and the increasingly tense members of the mission, from ministers on down to the drone crew. Alia has only begun to move away from the front of the target house when the missile strikes. When the dust settles, Alia is moving. However, so is one of the “HVTs.” Col. Powell orders Watts to engage again. With quivering lips, Watts obeys, his moral courage squashed. After the second strike, Gershon breaks down crying and takes off her headset.

A montage of images switch between the various stages of the operation closing down, and Alia and her parents in a Nairobi hospital. We see the Reaper drone flying off into a dark, gloomy sunset, and we see Alia’s blood-smeared face as her grieving parents cling to her. The next scene shows Watts and Gershon stepping out of their trailer, blinded by the harsh morning light, stone-faced with their eyes to the ground. Their Lt. Col. tells them: “You did well. Both of you …. You should go home. Get some rest. I need you both back here in 12 hours” (1:28:06-1:28:21). Watts and Gershon walk off, unsurely, heads bowed, defeated. The film ends with a slow-motion sequence of Alia dancing in her hula-hoop: a vivid embodiment of a grievable life that was extinguished, and perhaps also a reminder of the innocent play (and childhood) that Al-Shabaab does not allow.
Conclusion

The drone operator represents a new type of “American warrior”; one removed from the risks of direct battlefield action and the associated virtues of bravery and manhood. This change has taken on a cinematic form that engages with the drone era’s “tensions, conflicts, fears, and fantasies” (Kellner 1998, 355). The three films discussed here offer a critique of U.S. drone warfare similar to that found in journalism and documentary films. They highlight the moral and ethical dilemmas drone operators face. And they refract societal concerns over the ways in which drone warfare potentially disrupts gendered and racialized narratives of war that champion and valorize the myth of the white, physically courageous U.S. man. In their own ways, each film narrativizes notions of military masculinities as both morally courageous and paternalistically chivalrous, which, respectively, both challenge and uphold existing ideas of U.S. soldiers prevalent in popular culture.

The films lean on the drone trauma narrative in the construction of drone operators as disillusioned warriors fighting a cynical and bureaucratic system, and by employing a gendered and racialized heroic savior narrative that constructs the white men as brave, chivalrous individuals set on protecting civilian woman and children on the battlefield by standing up to immoral bureaucratized killing. The cumulative effect of these narratives is a strict focus on the male drone operator and a resistance to face some of the darker undercurrents of both military masculinity and the drone program: how both perpetuate a racist, imperialist narrative that conflates Arab and Muslim men as ungrievable. As such, viewers are presented with cultural representations of drone warfare that, rather than challenge the status quo, to varying degrees enact the “disrememberment and mythologisation” characteristic of post-9/11 American films (McSweeney 2014, 27).

Given the power of fictional narratives to influence our understanding of the world, including politics and international relations (Daniel and Musgrave 2017), the work done by the films I have examined raises questions relating to the traditional depiction of soldiers in U.S. films.
While *Drones*, *Good Kill*, and *Eye in the Sky* ask relevant and necessary questions that might help viewers develop a (more) critical stance towards U.S. foreign policy and drone warfare, their tendency to fall back on regressive narratives of can offset or even roll back the more progressive work done by the films. One central question remains: given the political economy of the film industry, to what extent is it possible even for independent war films to shake off the century-long tradition of nationalist and masculinist tendencies embedded in the genre. This question requires more analysis, and given the central role of the U.S. in global affairs, critical intervention will remain relevant.

**References**


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1 Since *Drones* (dir. Jason Bourque, 2017) focuses on a civilian contractor hired as a drone operator for the CIA, and not a military drone operator, I have not included the film here. However, the film plays into the same overall gendered narratives as the films in focus.

2 While it has not been possible to gain official statistics, a systematic review by Armour and Ross of fifteen studies on the health and well-being of U.S. Air Force military drone operators and intelligence analysts, shows that the average percentage of “females” (including pilots, sensor operators, and mission intelligence coordinators) was 16.97 (2017, 86-89).

3 For an analysis of women drone operators in *Good Kill* and *Eye in the Sky*, see Adelman 2018. An important cultural touchstone in this regard is George Grant’s play *Grounded* (2013), a one-woman monologue about a woman U.S. drone operator who used to be a highly skilled F-16 pilot. The play anticipates many of the themes discussed here.

4 As Barker has shown, Iraq war films were considered toxic or box office poison due to their commercial failures (Barker 2011). However, the resurgence of a traditional heroic narrative in later war films meant box office success for films like *American Sniper* (2014).

5 *Drones* had a meager $300,000 budget (Miller 2013). *Good Kill*’s budget is not public information, but both director Niccol and actor Ethan Hawke have hinted in interviews that the film was made on a small budget (Thompson 2014). *Eye in the Sky* had a budget of $13 million (“Eye in the Sky” 2016).

**Author Biography**

Thomas Ærvold Bjerre is Associate Professor in American Studies at the University of Southern Denmark. His research focuses on U.S. popular culture with a particular interest in representations of masculinities in film, photography, and literature about war. He has published on these topics in *Mediating War and Identity, Visualizing War*, and *Journal of War & Culture Studies*. 