



Film

Armchair Killers

Eye in the Sky

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IN the Middle Ages the crossbow, with a range of up to 400 yards, was considered by many to be a weapon of mass destruction, and in 1096 Pope Urban II banned its use, a prohibition upheld by Innocent II in 1139. Imagine, then, weapons that can be activated by someone sitting at a screen 5,000 miles away. We have them now, and they are carried by unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, after the male bee.

The ethics of drone warfare is addressed in Gavin Hood's new thriller *Eye in the Sky*, about a covert operation in Nairobi by military intelligence to capture a female British national who is a member of the Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab. She and her group are traced to a safe house where a cyborg beetle reveals that they are planning a suicide attack on a target elsewhere in the city. The woman in charge of the operation, steely Colonel Powell (brilliantly played by Helen Mirren), decides that the mission should be changed from capture to kill with a hellfire missile launched from a drone.

Her superior, Lt General Benson, played by the late Alan Rickman in his final role, supports her, but the politicians and their legal advisers dither, especially as there is a young girl selling bread over the wall of the safe house. Is the possible death of the girl worth more than the estimated 80 or more who are likely to be killed by the terrorists' bomb?

You can tell that *Eye in the Sky* is a British, not an American, film because – despite its subject – there is no violence until the end. It is mostly a debate, or rather a series of debates in three locations: the intelligence base in Surrey where Powell oversees the operation; the Cabinet Office in Whitehall where government ministers and Benson tease out the moral, legal and political issues; and the Nevada base where the two drone pilots face a moral quandary. The other setting is the mean streets of Nairobi itself.



Gavin Hood, aided and abetted Guy Hibbert's sharp script, has produced an intelligent and suspenseful film which invites us to ask a number of questions about drone warfare. Apart from the ethical dilemma of whether one life is worth sacrificing to save the many – the so-called trolley problem posed by the philosopher Philippa Foot – there is also the issue of moral responsibility. The movie deftly shows that, despite desperate attempts to pass the buck, there is a 'kill-chain' that embraces at least the politicians, the military, the lawyers, the drone pilots, and even the underlings who calculate the odds of 'collateral damage'.

Eye in the Sky also acts as a stimulus to further inquiry. In defence of drones, it is argued that they are more selective in killing, produce less collateral damage, and impose no physical risk to their 'pilots' who can act calmly without fear. This has been the Obama approach in America as, under his Presidency, their use has greatly increased in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya and Somalia.

On the other hand, opponents maintain that there is evidence of considerable collateral damage: in Pakistan alone it is estimated that about 200 children were killed by drone strikes between 2004 and 2014. In contrast to the movie, for example, the real video feeds are often blurry and indistinct.

Moreover, the people targeted may not be combatants under the laws of war. A study by the New York University and Stanford law

schools in 2012 (*Living Under Drones*) of drone strikes in Pakistan found that only 2% of the victims were senior terrorists and that the policy has not made America any safer and instead has turned the Pakistani public against U.S. policy in the volatile region. Illegal violation of national territory and executive assassination without due legal process inevitably create animosity in the targeted countries.

Does the safety and remoteness of the drone operators not foster a lighthearted attitude to killing in which the value of life is reduced to a video game? *Eye in the Sky* challenges this belief. Here the pilot and his assistant (played by Aaron Paul and Phoebe Fox) closely observe the victim and the girl for hours and are in tears when the order to strike eventually arrives. Research bears this out: the psychological toll on drone pilots is far greater than those who fly traditional bombers. It is surely the very personalised nature of drone warfare that many of us find so repellent. It seems like a summary execution without trial.

There is also a philosophical dimension to the whole issue. A utilitarian ethic, expressed in the film by the military and the Americans, is that the drone strike will produce the greatest benefit at the least cost. A Kantian ethic, expressed by some of the politicians, is that innocent life is inherently valuable and must be protected at all costs. The Kantian categorical imperative, that our principles should be viable as a universal law and that we treat others as ends in themselves, is surely the key here. What if, say, a Somali group were to develop drones and target an American in his own country on the basis that what is right for you is right for us?

Drones may be soulless killing machines, but the people who operate them are not – at least, not yet. □