

Four Things I Don't like about the Advance Discussion of Eye in the Sky

Written by Martin Coward

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MARTIN COWARD, APR 15 2016

So, as a parent of small kids and full-time academic, I'll confess: I don't get to the cinema much. So, I haven't seen *Eye in the Sky*. With this confession on the table, I want to outline what I don't like about the advance discussion of this film. The film has been promoted and discussed in the media as an insight into drone warfare, demonstrating the complexity of decision making in the aerial war the US, UK and others are currently waging above multiple theaters (AFPAK, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia). It is said to capture the nature of the chain of command (the so-called kill-chain) and the ethical dilemmas attached to remote killing.

There seem to me to be several reasons to challenge this narrative. So, here are 4 reasons why I don't like the advance discussion of *Eye in the Sky*:

1. Films do not capture reality. Let's get one thing out of the way at the start – narrative cinema does not capture reality. Narrative cinema does not reveal the real nature of anything. Film is a way of mediating vision and thus a second line of mediation (at least) of our direct experience of the world. Sometimes a film maker captures a hidden part of the world – something said or done that was thought not to be public (Nick Broomfield's work comes to mind, though it is not strictly narrative cinema). Sometimes films take an historical event and via dramatic licence bring its events to a wider audience, thus affecting the historical record (All the Presidents Men, Frost/Nixon and Zero Dark Thirty, come to mind – readings of events in an attempt to bring them to the awareness of a wider audience). Sometimes films, like art, might suggest or provoke: they might capture a feeling or they might cause the viewer(s) to think of the events portrayed in a different light. But none of this reproduces the 'reality' of a complex social event. So, we really should stop saying that film x reveals the reality of y or z.

2. Don't use 'complexity' to try and elicit empathy. There is, it seems to me, a real danger in saying 'look how difficult this decision is'. What's the purpose of putting an audience in the place of the decision makers in drone warfare? Putting someone in someone else's place is a form of empathy. Are we then being asked to empathise with those that order drone strikes? Of course, I would say – as I hope any good academic would – that understanding how such decisions are made, the manner in which individuals are interpellated by that system and the effects it may have on them are all good subjects for enquiry. But the point about empathy is that it erodes our judgement of the rightness or wrongness of what others have done – I am asked to look at another and not judge them, but think about whether I would have done the same. This erodes legal criteria by asking us to put them to one side and think about what we 'might' have done, not whether what was done was legally (let alone morally) right. If I engage in that game (and it is a game, because my simple response is 'I wouldn't take that job') then I start to think about killing as justifiable under some circumstances. But this makes a mockery of the machinery of law we have evolved to control warfare. We have rules to control the use of armed violence. Drone targeting should be subject to those laws. If the film wants to really provoke, it should ask us to think whether those pulling the trigger should be held accountable in courts (and here command complexity is not an issue – the law is clear, just as it was at Nuremberg, individuals cannot say 'I was only part of the process').

3. Representing the kill-chain does not capture the reality of distributed decision making. Much of the talk about decision making in drone warfare has turned on the idea of the 'kill-chain': the complex set of decisions that go

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into authorising the act of killing by drone. This discussion is a big step forwards as it asks to what extent we should hold the analysts and policy-makers who sit in back rooms and inform the decision to strike particular targets as responsible as the CIA or military personnel actually pulling the trigger. Holding these individuals accountable and understanding the functional separation of tasks that makes such killing possible are vital aspects of scholarship. It shows that the military strike is not just about the tip of the spear – men and women killing the enemy through force of arms – but the various civilian jobs that play a role in such killing. But the kill-chain is much bigger than the individuals who play a role in any decision. And it isn't really a chain – a linear pathway of decision making. It includes cultural factors – such as the way we regard some lives as less valuable than our own – and technological factors – such as the way we capture, sort, visualise and act on data. These are not decisions made in the context of each kill-chain. They were made in the past and affect the wider cultural sense of the legitimacy of killing at a distance.

4. The relationship between war and gender is about more than equal opportunities. Helen Mirren may be fantastic (I will overlook RED2) and it may be a step forward to see women in the role of officers at the epicentre of decision making – a step towards equality of opportunity at least. However, this disturbs none of the deep cultural gender stereotypes that shape our understanding of, and relation to, war. Drone warfare – and warfare in general – remains a largely masculine phenomenon framed in terms of the ability to penetrate territories and populations laid out helpless before our gods-eye view. Here, I think *Unmanned* speaks powerfully of the penetration and emasculation of populations through the use of intrusive surveillance and killing. So while the trope of a woman in the lead in a military drama may cause the audience to think (perhaps to change their view on the role of women in the military) the deeper cultural gendering at play in war is not questioned.

Of course, in a years' time, when I finally see *Eye in the Sky* on DVD, maybe I'll think it's a masterpiece. I doubt it.

About the author:

Martin Coward is Senior Lecturer In International Politics at Newcastle University. He researches war and security, especially in an urban context. His most recent work focuses on the link between network metaphors and the pathological sovereignty behind drone strikes. He wishes he went to the cinema more often.