DISCOURSES OF LEGITIMATION: REPRESENTATION, RECOGNITION, AND TRUTH
IN POST-9/11 AMERICAN WAR FILMS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role recent feature war films have played in the American cultural consciousness about the War on Terror by interrogating how they formally affirm or challenge dominant narratives about those events. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the relationship between the government, the news media, and the public was complex and unstable. Over fifteen years later, that complexity and instability has only intensified with the proliferation of blogs, podcasts, click bait, and fake news. Chapter One focuses on Zero Dark Thirty (2012) which insisted on its own inclusion in the intricate web of reporting about the events it represents: director Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter/producer Mark Boal call it a “reported film,” and the film’s formal techniques mimic this claim. This chapter uses film studies, journalism studies, comparative media studies, and cultural studies to examine Zero Dark Thirty in this context. Chapter Two examines the formal moves that two feature films about drones—Good Kill (Andrew Niccol, 2014) and Eye in the Sky (Gavin Hood, 2016)—make to affirm and challenge dominant narratives about drone warfare, respectively. Though these two films are ideologically opposed, they use the same symbolic economy of helpless female bodies to comment on the moral and bodily stakes of drone warfare. They also use the same formal techniques to different effects, the first emphasizing the depersonalization of drone warfare, and the second emphasizing the intimacy of drone warfare. Together, these chapters interrogate the ways in which contemporary war films have framed the War on Terror and the ways in which those frames—cinema and the armed drone—shape viewers’ perception of the Muslim subject.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way and to anyone who has struggled to understand the topsy-turvy world we live in since 9/11.

I am especially grateful to

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INTRODUCTION

Released in December of 2012, *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow) represented a crisis in the relationship between reporting and film. Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal had been working on a different film that would have depicted the failed attempt to capture Osama bin Laden in the caves of Tora Bora a few months after 9/11. But when several months into scouting sites in Kazakhstan (which would stand in for Afghanistan) a team of Navy SEALs raided a compound in Abottabad, Pakistan and killed Osama bin Laden, Bigelow and Boal decided to scratch the film they had been preparing to make and began to create a new one (“Bin Laden, The Movie”). Boal, a former journalist, had embedded with troops in Iraq on several occasions earlier in his career, and had written the screenplay for *Hurt Locker*, an Iraq war movie, which came out in 2008. He was already working his CIA and military contacts for the script about bin Laden’s escape; he began pressing them for information about the May 1st raid instead. The duo—whom *Vulture*’s Mark Harris calls “our most prominent and least sentimental cultural custodians of the post-9/11 war era”—was eager to scoop the story before other filmmakers did. In the case of bin Laden’s death, the raw material of history was a delicious morsel for those in the business of narrative entertainment. Later, Bigelow and Boal called *Zero Dark Thirty* a “reported film,” yet defended its inaccuracies by explaining, “it’s not a documentary” (Coll). This contradiction was noted by many reporters, feature writers, and op-ed pontificators. For some, this discrepancy fueled the notion that the filmmakers were either careless or biased in their approach to telling the story of the hunt for bin Laden. Others took this anomaly of a “reported film” that was also “not a documentary” as evidence of a new genre that defied the limits of either category.
But there was another crisis in reporting after 9/11, one that came long before *Zero Dark Thirty* troubled these conventions; one that had destabilized the formerly stable role that reputable news media played in disseminating information to the public. It is extensively documented that the news media failed to judiciously inform the public about the government’s motives and the military’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan for some time after September 11, 2001. Scholar-journalist John Arnaldi writes, “[e]vidence from 9/11 forward suggests that in most cases the mainstream press and media were influenced more often by nationalism (and other interests) than by professionalism: they have provided virtually unlimited coverage of administration views, while alternative views have been rarely featured” (154). Molly Bingham, a journalist who created a documentary about Iraqi “insurgents” (she challenges the government’s fondness for that term), also noted that many of the American journalists she encountered in Iraq during 2003 and 2004 “could not, or would not, check their nationality or their own perspective at the door” (169). Other accounts—such as journalist Kim Barker’s memoir *The Taliban Shuffle: Crazy Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* and its feature film adaptation *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016)—paint journalists as war junkies, addicted to the adrenaline of violence and danger in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ Taken as a whole, journalists’ credibility was, in many cases, compromised. Rather than objectively questioning the war, much news media had rallied to it.²

¹ *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, though not nearly as nuanced as *Hurt Locker*, makes an interesting companion to Bigelow’s and Boal’s 2008 collaboration about bomb squad technicians in Iraq. That film also speaks to the adrenaline of war as an addiction, one that has consequences like any other addiction.

² The media’s complicity with the war effort here contrasts sharply with media during, say, the Vietnam War. Then, it was pictures of “children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see” (Butler 150).
Ten years later, the government’s persistent use of the term “narrative” in reference to their own public account of the raid that killed bin Laden, and the press’s acceptance of that term, evoked the state of affairs between government and press after 9/11. This rhetoric, which I will cover in Chapter One of this thesis, reflects an essential characteristic of this era of America’s political and cultural history: Since 9/11, and especially since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the public’s access to the truth about highly visible and controversial acts committed in the name of the protection of democracy and human dignity is unstable and fraught with tension.

The extreme instability of credible reporting has only intensified since the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016. “Fake news” and “alternative facts” are terms that circulate in the public discourse about the news media, and with the increase of shoddy news sources comes a proliferation of articles with names like, “Fake News or Real? How to Self-Check The News and Get The Facts” (All Tech Considered: NPR). These guides are designed to teach readers how to determine if a news source is credible, and offer advice like, “Pay attention to the domain and URL,” “Check the quotes in the story,” and “Reverse image search” (“Fake News or Real?”). But news articles are not the only news sources in the twenty-first century. Neither are radio and television. As Arnaldi puts it, “the world is in the middle of dramatic changes in the way news is gathered, reported, and published” (161). With the advent of “reported film,” feature film has further complicated the already complex and diffuse media landscape in the twenty-first century. It is now necessary to examine the formal moves films make to affect factual credibility and the subtle biases and ideologies those techniques mask. Therefore, this thesis is not concerned with whether the films’ facts are real, but with how the films cast them as real.
The postmodern relationship between the truth and the image is complicated, Linda Williams explains in her essay “Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary.” “On the one hand,” she writes, “the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth” (10). Films—home movies, smart phone videos, feature films, documentaries—spark both distrust and inspiration, along with the intoxicating appeal of exposed secrets. Their impact is not trifling. Williams writes, “the truth figured by documentary….is a careful construction, an intervention in the politics and the semiotics of representation” (20). *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Good Kill* (2014), the two texts this thesis focuses on, are not documentaries—yet they function in a similar manner to the “new documentary” Williams describes. “Instead of careening between the idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths” (14). The same definition rings true for both of these feature films, which, when studied, produce a “remarkable awareness of the conditions under which it is possible to intervene in the political and cultural construction of truths which…matter as the narratives by which we live” (Williams 14).

This thesis examines the role post-9/11 American war films have played in the American cultural consciousness about the War on Terror by interrogating the formal moves they have made to 1) stake out a role in the making of cultural memory about significant events in the War on Terror and 2) affirm or supplant dominant ideology about those events. Chapter One argues that *Zero Dark Thirty* makes formal decision about lighting, sound effects, set design and more
to create an impression of factual credibility that both masks and produces its ideological project. The film ostensibly honors the work of American military and intelligence personnel in the hunt for Osama bin Laden and offers American viewers a chance to experience this hunt themselves. But it also subtly, yet deftly, works to alter—even erase—historical memory about bin Laden, the man. Where much of the scholarly attention to *Zero Dark Thirty* has taken its cues from public debate and foregrounded the film’s representation of torture, this thesis focuses more intently on its recreation of bin Laden’s compound and the raid that killed him. Methodologically and philosophically, this chapter lies at the intersection of film studies, journalism studies, comparative media studies, and cultural studies. Because *Zero Dark Thirty* insists on its own inclusion in the intricate web of reporting about the events it represents, it is important to analyze its impact in that context. This film is not only a product of reporting, but it has also generated reporting. It is inextricable from the events it represents, and is an historical event in its own right.

Chapter Two examines the formal moves that two feature films about drones—*Good Kill* (Andrew Niccol, 2014) and *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, 2016)—make to affirm and challenge dominant assumptions about drone warfare, respectively. Though the two films are ideologically opposed, they use the same symbolic economy of helpless female bodies to comment on the moral and corporeal stakes of drone warfare. They use the same formal techniques to different effects as well: one uses silence to restrict the humanness of the Other from the viewer, while the other uses silences to convey the asymmetry of drone warfare; one exclusively uses the aerial view to represent drone strikes, while the other cuts back and forth between the aerial view and the grounded view to emphasize the disparate experience of those who wield the drone and those who are terrorized by it. Through an examination of its formal techniques and a comparison with
Eye in the Sky, the chapter paints a portrait of Good Kill as more than simply pro-war propaganda: it is an act of asymmetrical warfare that seeks to emphasize the suffering of American drone pilots and consequently dehumanizes the real victims of drone warfare and downplays their suffering.

These films—Zero Dark Thirty and Good Kill—function as what drone theorist Grégoire Chamayou calls “discourse[s] of legitimation” (17). In his 2010 book, A Theory of the Drone, Chamayou describes the way in which proponents of America’s use of the armed drone recycle “the elements of language provided by arms dealers and spokespeople for the armed forces…through the crude processes of discursive alchemy, into the guiding principles of an ethical philosophy of a new kind” (17). The drone’s supporters call it “the most ethical weapon ever known to humankind” because of its supposed precision; they “declare the drone to be the humanitarian weapon par excellence” for its supposed ability to minimize collateral damage (17). Though Zero Dark Thirty barely mentions drones, it, too, participates in a process of “discursive alchemy” through the construction of its narrative about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, consequently legitimizing that particular narrative about these events. Good Kill is a more overt discourse of legitimation, one that subscribes very nearly to Chamayou’s description: its narrative affirms America’s use of the armed drone through liberal imperialist discourses about the supposed helplessness of brown women at the mercy of immoral and cruel brown men.

Together, these chapters interrogate the ways in which two contemporary American war films have framed the events of the War on Terror and the ways in which those frames—cinema

3 Other narratives which under other circumstances might have been considered credible, such as acclaimed journalist Seymour Hersh’s account “The Killing of Osama bin Laden,” carry much less cultural currency than Zero Dark Thirty, which mostly affirms the official line on the hunt for bin Laden. Hersh is the journalist responsible for exposing the My Lai Massacre in 1969 and American mistreatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in 2004.
and the armed drone—“work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot...[and] not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject,” to quote Judith Butler (*Frames of War*, 3). These films also participate in the production of historical memory about the War on Terror. As historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, “history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives” yet “theories of history rarely examine in detail the concrete production of [these] narratives” (25, 22). Trouillot’s attempt to parse out the challenge historians face to reevaluate the production of historical narratives provides a rich context for this project, as it examines in great detail the “concrete production of specific narratives” about the War on Terror in contemporary film. These films do much more than merely entertain: they participate in a process that Guy Westwell describes as “a constant making, unmaking and remaking” of U.S. national identity, which is predicated on our recognition of the Other—and in the case of the War on Terror, the “Arab” other (*Parallel Lines*, 11).
CHAPTER ONE:

“An Exquisite Filmic Haze”: The Complicated Politics of Reportedness in Zero Dark Thirty

In a 2012 interview with The Washington Post, Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal struggled to define the genre of their new movie, Zero Dark Thirty. After dismissing “interpretative journalism” and “docu-drama,” they settled on “reported film” (Hornaday). Bigelow, who directed the controversial film, and Boal, who wrote and co-produced it, previously collaborated on the Oscar-winning war film Hurt Locker in 2008. That movie was met with universal acclaim. Zero Dark Thirty’s critical acclaim, though significant, was overshadowed by the controversy the film provoked before it had even premiered.

The film documents the decade-long hunt for Osama bin Laden, dramatized through the story of a young female CIA agent named Maya, played by Jessica Chastain. Zero Dark Thirty credits the discovery of bin Laden to Maya’s dogged persistence, while also glorifying the countless other women and men in American intelligence and the Armed Forces who were responsible for finding and killing bin Laden. The film’s most controversial aspect is its depiction of brutal torture inflicted on Middle Eastern detainees by CIA interrogators, and particularly its suggestion that the CIA’s so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” contributed to the discovery of bin Laden. In other words, the film subtly suggests the effectiveness of torture. At least, so say many critics of the film. Others, like Black Hawk Down author Mark Bowden, who has also written a book titled The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden, argue that the film is not pro-torture. The debate the film sparked about torture is an interesting cultural phenomenon on its own, but the conversation the film has provoked reveals
deeper, more crucial symptoms of the post-9/11 era than simply disagreement over the ethics and efficacy of torture.

The discursive tension surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty* has everything to do with the film’s claim to represent the facts about the hunt for bin Laden, which is evident in interviews with the filmmakers, the opening frame claiming “based on firsthand accounts of actual events,” and the film’s many other formal and rhetorical claims to verisimilitude. The film makes an interesting choice to use that particular phrasing for its truth-claim. By including “based on firsthand accounts,” the filmmakers seem to hedge their claim, displacing responsibility for the truthfulness of the film’s narrative onto those people who offered these “firsthand accounts.” This subtle displacement indicates a particular caginess which is reflected in the duo’s conflicting explanations in interviews: *Zero Dark Thirty* is a “reported film,” yet its inaccuracies can be chalked up to the fictionalization of its narrative. There is a long history of movies claiming to be “Based on Real Events,” or on a “True Story,” so it is clear that the drama surrounding this particular film’s truth-claim is driven by something more complex than simply the claim itself. This paper argues that the controversy provoked by *Zero Dark Thirty*’s truth claim has two sources. First, as Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott argue in *The New York Times*, the “eternal conundrums” about the role of art in society are recently “intensified by an acute contemporary anxiety about the truth” (“Confront the Fact of Fiction”). This chapter insists that the dissolution of the government’s and the press’s “monopolies on the truth” can and should be traced in part to the press’s complicity in the government’s willful deception of the public in the aftermath of 9/11.4

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4 Of course, it is much more complicated than this. Emerging media forms, particularly social media, are also responsible for the changing landscape of reported news, as well as the shifting relations of authority between the government, the press, and the public.
Secondly, because of the short production time between the event the film portrays and the release of the film itself, *Zero Dark Thirty* exposed the public to “the myth of history before [they got] the actual history,” in the words of *The Atlantic*’s Peter Maass. *Zero Dark Thirty* stakes out a new position for film in the shaping of history. Beyond the quick production of the film, the filmmakers’ techniques represent a reversal of the typical method of creating an historical film. Rather than dramatizing a series of articles (as Bigelow and Boal did for *Hurt Locker*) or a book for the screen, journalist Ann Hornaday writes, “Boal, a former embedded journalist…did his own reporting for ‘Zero Dark Thirty,’ interviewing military and intelligence officials and operatives with intimate knowledge of the operations that resulted in bin Laden’s death in May 2011.” She adds, “Because of its unconventional provenance, ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ is arriving on the scene earlier than most feature-film accounts of recent history, subverting the usual rituals by which consensus is created, by journalists, politicians and pundits, and eventually by historians and purveyors of popular culture.” It was no accident that *Zero Dark Thirty*’s creators approached their film this way. In an interview with ABC News Boal said, “[The hunt for bin Laden] had to be researched and reported by necessity because when we started the project, there wasn’t a lot of information” (emphasis mine, “‘Zero Dark Thirty’ Controversy”). From the inception of this film, Bigelow and Boal curated facts about the events leading up to the killing of bin Laden into a narrative exhibit with the express intent of entering into the public discourse about these events.

As we can see, there are two major strands of the controversy. First, there is controversy over the film’s depiction of torture, which translates to controversy over the use of torture itself. In other words, “‘Zero Dark Thirty’…has become the target, perhaps the scapegoat, in an important debate about the morality of American antiterrorism policies, including ‘enhanced
interrogation’ during the Bush administration and targeted killings and drone strikes under
President Obama” (“Confronting the Fact of Fiction”). That is one way—perhaps the primary
way—in which Zero Dark Thirty has entered into public discourse. The second strand of
controversy has to do with the public’s discomfort with Zero Dark Thirty’s unusual
amalgamation of journalism and narrative feature film; in other words, they sense a discrepancy
between investigative reporting and film as a medium through which to convey that reporting.5
Mark Bowden explains this discrepancy in an article for The Atlantic, simultaneously asserting a
stance on the film he would be asked to repeat in various news interviews:

It was a mistake for those involved in the film to suggest that Zero Dark Thirty is
‘journalistic,’ and to have touted their access to SEAL team members and CIA field
officers. No matter how remarkable their research and access…[n]o movie can tell a story
like this without aggressively condensing characters and events, fictionalizing dialogue,
etc. Boal’s script is just 102 pages: fewer than 10,000 words, the length of a longish
magazine article. (“‘Zero Dark Thirty’ is Not Pro-Torture”)

These two controversies are separate, but alike. The film sparks tension over the representation
of torture, which, in this case, is tension over the United States’ use of torture. And the film

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5 Many officials seem panicked by the cross-pollination of reporting and feature-film
because they perceive the public as unable to watch this film critically and separate objective fact
from narrative fiction (see excerpts from the three senators’ letter further below). Film critics are
to your imagination, it is because, I assume, she knows that the viewers for a movie like this one
have been following the news for the past decade. They have read the articles, books and legal
arguments about the C.I.A.’s use for what was called ‘enhanced interrogation’ and that others
have condemned as torture. Trusting the audience in this fashion is gutsy and all too rare in a
movie released by a major studio. But it is an article of faith in ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ that viewers
are capable of filling in the blanks, managing narrative complexity and confronting their
complicity” (“By Any Means Necessary”).
sparks tension over the filmmakers’ access to information, which, in this case, reflects tension over the public’s limited access to information.

This chapter will discuss each of these controversies, but it is more concerned with the formal and rhetorical moves the film makes to claim authenticity and factual credibility, and the ways in which these moves both mask and facilitate the film’s project. The politics of *Zero Dark Thirty* and its impact on the American cultural consciousness matter, but more important is the issue the film raises about truth, narrative, and public discourse in wartime, and especially wartime in the Information Age. Journalist James Rosen writes, “No landmark event of the 20th century, from World Wars I and II to the Cuban missile crisis, from the moon landing to the fall of the Soviet Union—not even the attacks of September 11, 2001—have been as widely transmitted, reported on, written about, and talked about by as many people, across so many different platforms of communication, as the killing of bin Laden” (“Bin Laden Killing”). Rosen’s article was published on May 6, 2011—only five days after the raid that killed Bin Laden. Within the span of just five days, Rosen concludes, “it has become a singular event of the Information Age” (“Bin Laden Killing”). *Zero Dark Thirty*, then, which grossed $95,720,716 nationwide, and which professes to tell the story of the hunt for bin Laden, is itself a singular event of the Information Age. To document the film and its impact on public discourse is to document the extensive network of op-eds, interviews, film reviews, think pieces, and other types of public rhetoric in which it is embedded (IMDb).

Many news articles and op-eds have attempted to “de-bunk” *Zero Dark Thirty* and destabilize its narrative (and its immense cultural currency as a narrative) by challenging the facts upon which that narrative is built. Many of these accounts are convincing. Still others have “fact-checked” *Zero Dark Thirty* and found it to be, for the most part, accurate. But because
many of the facts about the events which the film’s narrative are built on are unavailable to the public, and the ones that are available are not verifiable by the public, the film’s complete factual veracity is in fact a dead end. This chapter instead examines the film’s efforts to convey truthfulness and factual credibility. Rather than relying on the film’s representation of torture to do this, this chapter devotes considerable attention to the film’s raid sequence. Only after discussing the film’s raid does the chapter turn to the film’s depiction of torture in order to illuminate the subtler ideological project at play in Zero Dark Thirty: to dehumanize Osama bin Laden and define historical memory about his role in the War on Terror. Finally, this chapter argues that the very inaccuracies of this film—as well as the nature of the public discourse those inaccuracies spark—mark it as a significant cultural artifact for the post-9/11 era, one that challenged specific ideas about the War on Terror and cemented the political significance of fiction film.

THE RAID

Zero Dark Thirty’s raid sequence opens with SEAL commandos piling into several stealth Black Hawk helicopters at a base in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. During the flight to Abbottabad, Pakistan, extreme close-ups of tense faces and barely audible but intensely ominous music set a suspenseful tone. The SEALs—beefy, bearded, grizzled men—laugh and joke with one another, as they try to distract themselves from the reality of their mission: it will be dangerous. They might not make it. The last time this team went after bin Laden, a few of their comrades died. The SEALs switch on their night-vision goggles, and the camera switches to night vision as well. For a few moments, the scene is tinted green; we see the way the commandos see. The helicopter wobbles violently. One of the SEALs asks, “Who here has been
in a helo crash before?” All twelve men in the helicopter raise their hands. “Okay. So we’re all
good.”

As the helicopters lifted off, we watched Maya watch them fade into the night sky.
During the flight from Jalalabad to Abbottabad, the film cuts between the interior of one of the
Black Hawks and a room full of analysts, including Maya, monitoring the helicopters’ progress.
But once the Black Hawks land in the compound, we do not see our protagonist again until the
team calls in—about fifteen minutes later—to say, “Geronimo. For God and country.
Geronimo.” During these fifteen minutes, there is no non-diegetic sound—only dogs barking,
SEALs breathing, shuffling movement, gunshots, communication between soldiers, and
screaming—and the film never cuts away from the compound, other than to show people
gathering outside it. We watch the raid unfold in real time, the camera switching between night
vision and dark, muted light. It is difficult to see what is happening in great detail during the
sequence; the action is confusing, not less because we, like the commandos, are encountering the
compound and its inhabitants for the first time. The SEALs work their way through the
compound, while several teams patrol the outside and work to dispel the growing crowds of
Pakistani bystanders, awakened by a helicopter crash-landing, several small explosions as the
SEALs force entry through locked and fortified doors, and a few short firefights. As the
commandos work their way up a staircase to the third floor of the compound—thought to be the
floor where bin Laden resides—the camera looks over the shoulder of the point man. “Osama,
Osama,” he calls. A figure appears in the doorway ahead, and we watch over the soldier’s
shoulder as he shoots bin Laden.

For the approximately fifteen minutes between the Black Hawks’ landing and the report
that “Geronimo” is down, the scene never cuts away from the raid. This serves two primary
purposes: First, no one, other than the commandos, has real-time access to the minute details of the raid. This was true in real life. As we will see, even the Director of the CIA and the President of the United States only received information from the raid second and third hand. Second, Maya is excluded from the raid as well. That is because this film is not primarily concerned with Maya’s story, even though it is her story that gives shape to the film’s narrative. Instead, it is concerned with the American viewer’s access to the events the film represents.

Since the real-life raid that killed Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011, the public has only ever been offered a “narrative” of the facts, one that has changed with every telling from a government official. In an article written shortly after Operation Neptune Spear (the code-name given to the raid), journalist James Rosen meticulously dissects the language used by government officials, including President Obama, in the immediate aftermath of the raid. In particular, Rosen tracks the official use of the term “narrative” to describe the ever-changing version of events offered to the public. He notes that it was “precisely because it emerged in such tangled form, [that] the record of the bin Laden killing is replete with uses, by both officials and reporters alike, of the word ‘narrative’” (“Bin Laden Killing”). Indeed, the title of Rosen’s article is “Bin Laden Killing: How the White House, Pentagon and CIA Botched the Storyline” (emphasis mine). Implicit in that headline is the understanding that a story does not exist separately from its telling.

A story and its telling are mutually constitutive in a narrative film, just as they are in a press release. Drawing on the work of literary critic Gérard Genette, film scholar Tom Gunning has defined the three meanings carried in the term narrative: the story, or “the content conveyed by the narrative”; the narrative discourse, or “the actual language of a text that tells a story”; and narrating, or “the act of telling a story, producing a narrative” (391). Crucially, Gunning notes,
“to describe any one of the three aspects of narrative necessarily involves the other” (391). In other words, there is no story without language and without the act of articulation that conveys that language. Indeed, a story emerges from its telling (just as an event emerges from its representation, as we will see). When government officials inform the press (and through the press, the public) about the raid that killed bin Laden, it is necessary to consider together the story itself, the language used to tell the story, and the act of telling, or the reality of a human representative chosen to stand at a microphone and convey that story to a small crowd of people. This is and always has been what one must do to analyze a feature film: one must consider the story, the script, and the language, which in the cinema is much more than just dialogue.

The process for producing a news story is, in this way, the same as the process for producing the narrative for a feature film (though undoubtedly on a different scale). James Rosen describes this twinning of the two processes when he writes that our “collective vision of the heroism displayed by the U.S. Navy SEALs and intelligence operatives who pulled off this astonishing mission” is “so grandly cinematic…that we have hung on every word of their exploits” (emphasis mine, “Bin Laden Killing”). The official “narrative” was elementally the same as narrative fiction from the beginning. The “revisions” to the narrative in the days following the raid included clarifications about whether bin Laden resisted, whether he participated in the firefight that killed him, whether he was captured before being killed, whether male residents of the compound used women as shields, and whether the firefight lasted the entire forty minutes the SEALs were in the compound (“Bin Laden Killing”). Though much of the misinformation in the early versions of the narrative could be accounted for as haste-induced carelessness, it is also possible that President Obama intentionally implied in his initial address that bin Laden died in a firefight in order to justify his death: this was not an assassination, but
rather a necessary kill in order to eliminate a dangerous individual posing immediate threat to the Americans storming the compound. His carefully vague phrasing (“After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his body”) anticipated the ensuing controversy over whether Operation Neptune Spear was a kill mission or a capture mission (“Osama bin Laden Dead”). It is quite clear that Obama’s address was narratively constructed itself; rather than simply offering the American public an account of the facts, Obama praised the survivors of 9/11, the “intelligence and counterterrorism professionals who have worked tirelessly to achieve this outcome [read: bin Laden’s death],” and himself, all the while emphasizing the evil of bin Laden and Al Qaeda.6

It is useful to the work of this chapter to establish that the Senior Administration Officials announcing the official narrative at the press conference held just twenty minutes after President Obama addressed the nation offered little additional detail to Obama’s frustratingly vague account of the raid, in spite of the press’s persistent questions (“Press Briefing”). It is possible to speculate about their motives for withholding these details, but the likely truth is that these Administration Officials were not in possession of the facts themselves. Indeed, the people who were most intimately acquainted with the facts of the raid by virtue of being there—the commandos who carried out the raid—have conflicting versions of the event, even now. Since May 2, 2011, three different Navy SEALs have either claimed to be, or have been described as,

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6 This is the account Obama gave of the raid: “Today, at my direction, the United States launched a targeted operation against that compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A small team of Americans carried out the operation with extraordinary courage and capability. No Americans were harmed. They took care to avoid civilian casualties. After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his body” (“Osama bin Laden Dead”).
the man who shot Osama bin Laden (Harris, “Exclusive: Bin Laden ‘Shooter’”). But in 2014 when Robert O’Neil revealed himself as “The Shooter,”⁷ the “facts” were, as now, these:

Three and a half years after the mission in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the events in that walled compound remain the object of fascination but also controversy [read: confusion]. It may never be possible to say exactly who fired the fatal shot or shots, with multiple armed men wearing night-vision goggles moving quickly through the Qaeda leader’s hide-out. No autopsy was performed and no video has emerged of the shooting. The military never released a photograph of Bin Laden after he was killed and said that his body had been buried at sea. (“Another Ex-Commando”)

This summary lists the only so-called facts of the case: that there was no autopsy, that there may never be any way to know for sure who fired the fatal shot, that Bin Laden was allegedly buried at sea. These are facts of non-information. That is to say, they are facts that confirm our lack of knowledge and lack of access to knowledge about this significant event in recent American history.

As for President Obama and his cabinet, their experience of the raid was at least third hand and twice mediated. On May 3, 2011, just one day after the raid was announced, the New York Times reported, “[In the situation room,] the president and his advisers watched Leon E. Panetta, the C.I.A. director, on a video screen, narrating from his agency’s headquarters across the Potomac River what was happening in faraway Pakistan” (“Behind the Hunt for Bin Laden”). Though President Obama was kept informed of what was happening, even he was not granted visual or real-time access to what was happening in that compound. His knowledge of the event

⁷ O’Neill did an anonymous interview with Esquire magazine in 2013 as “The Shooter” that garnered a lot of attention. He was derisive toward Zero Dark Thirty because in the raid scene the SEALs talked too much.
was filtered through Panetta’s account of what was happening, and Panetta received his account from Admiral William McRaven in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, who received his account from the team on the ground in Pakistan (“Panetta Recalls ‘Nail-Biting’ Bin Laden Raid”). In an interview with PBS’s Jim Lehrer, Panetta admitted that he—and consequently the President and his advisers—did not have access to video of what was happening in the compound, including bin Laden being shot, even though it had originally been reported that they did: “We— you know, we had some observation of the approach there, but we did not have direct flow of information that we were dealing with. [...] Once those teams went into the compound, I can tell you that there was a time period of almost twenty or twenty-five minutes where we—you know, we really didn’t know just exactly what was going on” (“Bin Laden Killing”). The point is this: in the case of vague, contradictory, or missing details, any account of these events must necessarily fill in the gaps. In other words, any account of the existing facts must be a fictionalized narrative.

It is in light of this factual instability that the criticism of Zero Dark Thirty’s factual instability becomes interesting and revealing. Ordinarily, this lack of transparency about a sensitive military operation would not be surprising or even ultimately concerning. It is commonly understood that making the details of this type of information public runs the risk of jeopardizing other operations of a similar nature or of exposing American military personnel in the field. Yet it becomes important that the so-called facts of the raid that killed bin Laden were from the beginning carefully selected, strung together, and obscured with vague language in order to provide the minimum amount of information to the public, when one considers the enormous controversy over Zero Dark Thirty’s claim to journalistic reporting. In other words, it seems clear that the public’s annoyance at not having access to the facts was displaced onto Zero Dark Thirty, and that the experts were eager to displace criticism of their own lack of
transparency onto _Zero Dark Thirty_ as well. Interestingly, it is in light of the lack of detail in the official narrative that _Zero Dark Thirty_’s overwhelming inclusion of detail is so revealing.

The filmmakers intended to recreate the real-life raid as accurately as possible in the film’s raid scene. As part of their effort to reproduce this event, _Zero Dark Thirty_’s creators built a close approximation of bin Laden’s compound from open source material about the actual compound. (Even a cursory internet search yields diagrams, aerial images, and detailed descriptions of the mansion.) The DVD’s extras include a special feature called “The Compound,” which gives background information about the construction of the compound and the filming of the raid on the compound. The production team’s inspiration was mostly satellite images, which they used to extrapolate dimensions for the structure itself; photographs from ABC News’s archives helped with interior design (“The Compound”). Chris Pratt, who plays SEAL Justin, says in an interview, “It was so eerie because this thing, inch by inch, down to the patina, it looks like it was there, it looks like it was lived in, it looks like it’s a place where Osama bin Laden _was_ killed” (emphasis mine, “The Compound”). Pratt’s linguistic slippage—“it looks like a place where Osama bin Laden _was_ killed”—evokes the Platonic idea of the copy, which is not quite a simulation, nor, as Gilles Deleuze would have it, a simulacrum (256, _The Logic of Sense_). Screenwriter-producer Mark Boal’s linguistic slippage in the film’s special features, however, marks the compound as _the_ place where Bin Laden was killed; in other words, _Zero Dark Thirty_’s compound is a simulacrum of the real compound.

In the special feature, Boal gives a tour of the compound. He guides the camera through the structure, narrating the raid. When he introduces the compound, he says, “This is Osama bin Laden’s compound, as we have recreated it.” Though he introduces the compound as a simulation of the original, his language shifts as he begins narrating the raid. Instead of narrating...
the film’s recreation of the raid, he begins narrating the actual raid which resulted in bin Laden’s death:

When the Navy SEALs made a hard landing in the courtyard, the first door they flowed through was this brown door here. [...] This room right here is the room that the Navy SEALs encountered one of Bin Laden’s couriers. [...] This staircase is what separated Bin Laden from the other families that lived in the compound. [...] We come to the area of the third floor which is where Bin Laden lived, and spent most of his time. He was actually shot [from] midway down that staircase while [he] was standing in the frame of this doorway right here. (Boal, “The Compound” special feature)

But of course Bin Laden was not shot from midway down that staircase; he was shot from a different staircase in a different compound in a different country. Yet Boal’s word choice illustrates the way in which a simulated reality seamlessly morphs into accepted reality in the void which the absence of a factual reality creates. That the simulation ceases to be simulation in the absence of the real thing is precisely true for the film’s narrative as well, which becomes the national, cultural narrative.

The compound, the film’s raid scene, and the film’s overarching narrative are simulacra of Baudrillard’s third order: they “mask the absence of a basic reality,” which designates them to “the order of sorcery” (170). Why might not we consider the compound simply a “reflection of a basic reality”? After all, the production designer and crew went to great lengths to make the compound as exactly like the real compound as possible. Photos of the original compound and the simulated compound are nearly indistinguishable. The structures are effectively the same. Or, they were. The original compound no longer exists; it was demolished in February of 2012. To explain the compound’s masking of the absence of a basic reality as merely masking the fact that
the original compound no longer exists is unsatisfying because the basic reality of the raid is much more than the physical structure of the compound. The real truth of it is the events which have animated it in our collective imagining of the raid. The compound is in the order of “sorcery,” then, because it conjures an aura of truthfulness and factual accuracy to the film’s recreation of the raid.

By making claims to factual accuracy, Zero Dark Thirty invites its viewers to fact check it—yet there is no comprehensive account of the facts against which a viewer can reliably fact check the film’s narrative. In his book Change Mummified, film scholar Philip Rosen describes a phenomenon of historical film spectatorship he calls “Everett’s Game.” The game, Rosen writes, “has to do with knowledge of the detail, and it is an implicit aspect of the experience of mainstream historical films” (156). In this game, a spectator can invoke a basic rule, “namely that every detail of the film be gotten ‘right’ or else he can assert a victory, consisting in a claim of knowledge of the detail superior to that of the film” (156). However, if a spectator is not familiar with a particular detail or set of facts, then “the film would remain superior, inaccuracies and all” (157). In this case, the spectator does not leave empty-handed:

Note, however, that [the film] would still be transmitting the pro-filmic for [the spectator’s] comprehension, thereby treating him as a beneficiary of research and appearing to give him (in his hypothetical ignorance) perception of the past ‘as it was.’ Thus, on the one hand, Everett’s Game can entail a jockeying between spectator and film for superiority; on the other hand, the spectator achieves a knowledge of the detail no matter what. (157)

Though perhaps not a historical film in the common sense, Zero Dark Thirty certainly aims to recount and dramatize an event in recent history, and one that will likely remain essential to the
history of the early twenty-first century. The filmmakers made great efforts to publicize the film as a “reported film,” one that was heavily researched and factually credible. Everett’s Game is certainly in play—but it is a fixed game.

In the case of the film’s compound, the details gleaned from accounts of the real life compound were scrupulously administered in order to reinforce the film’s claim to factual credibility. Not only was the structure based carefully on scaled mock-ups from images of the real compound, but the interior staging was incredibly detailed (“The Compound”). Mark Hughes, reporting in *Forbes*, explains, “[t]here were children inside [Bin Laden’s compound], so there are subtle hints of children’s play or studies here and there in some rooms [of the film’s compound], there are unfinished drinks in cups and plates with crumbs on them forgotten on a table or counter, there are clothes and books and all the things that you would walk right by and never notice in someone’s home” (“Rebuilding Bin Laden’s House”). In the same vein, *Zero Dark Thirty* production designer Jeremy Hindle told *The Los Angeles Times*, “it felt like someone had lived there; six years of never leaving. We knew what his bed looked like from photographs. We knew he had an AK-47 hanging over it. We knew he was a pack rat. The hallway was just jammed full of every newspaper he could get his hands on” (“On Location”). These efforts at verisimilitude pay off in a huge way. Just as the film’s compound and the real-life compound become one and the same in Mark Boal’s commentary, so they become one and the same for spectators. Everett’s Game in the case of the compound is played on equal footing; a spectator could do the same research that the filmmakers did to recreate the compound, as it is all available on the internet: photographs of the interior, satellite images, and small-scaled replicas.
To play the game with the raid, or with the film’s narrative about torture’s role in finding
bin Laden, however, is futile. The only spectators able to play the game—also the only people
objecting to the film’s facts—are government and military officials who claim intimacy with the
actual facts. The public can never assert a victory when playing this game with Zero Dark Thirty;
it cannot “win.” As with other public narratives of the hunt for bin Laden, the filmmakers ask
spectators to take their word for it. In other words, they, too, claim expertise and intimate
knowledge of secret facts. In an interview with Vulture’s Mark Harris, Boal confessed, “We’re
probably not gonna get into the weeds of who we met with or didn’t meet with, ever.” There has
been intense speculation about the CIA’s cooperation with Boal, which has even led to the CIA
releasing 100 pages of documents to VICE News after a Freedom of Information Act request
(Leopold). Despite this forced revelation of Boal’s and Bigelow’s interactions with the CIA, the
majority of the facts surrounding the raid and Boal’s investigation into it remain restricted from
public access.

Yet Philip Rosen suggests that whether the spectator has knowledge of the details or not,
the spectator learns something. This is, of course, what makes expert spectators such as Senator
John McCain, who has publicly weighed in on the film’s narrative, so nervous; the public has no
intimate knowledge of the actual facts of the case, so the public cannot be critical of the movie’s
facts. Rather than offer the actual facts to counter the film’s facts, though, critics—again, in this

8 See, for example, Bowden, The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden (2012); Bergen, Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad (2013); Owen, No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama (2014); O’Neill, The Operator: Firing the Shots that Killed Osama Bin Laden and My Years as a SEAL Team Warrior (forthcoming in 2017). Journalists (Bowden and Bergen) and NAVY SEALs (Owen and O’Neill) alike have exercised their authority about the hunt for Bin Laden. All four of these authors have also been interviewed on television.

9 Conversely, Manohla Dargis and A.O. Scott write in The New York Times, “[T]hinking adults can tell the difference between a fiction film and a nonfiction one, despite the worried warnings from politicians and others who have recently been moonlighting as movie critics.
case military and government officials, or “experts”—ask the public to take their word for it. But if American audiences make an effort to research the actual facts, they will not find a transparent record of them, but rather various competing, if not downright conflicting, narratives of the facts.

If we are tempted to think Zero Dark Thirty’s raid scene is only trying to recount the facts and offer viewers a “boots on the ground experience,” as Bigelow has said, we need to pay closer attention (“Bin Laden, The Movie”). There is ideology at play, and it is the film’s hyperrealism that dazzles our senses—and our sensibilities—and disables our critical attention to the ideological project of the film. As I will show further below, this project has more to do with documenting the horrific and reverberating repercussions of one man’s evil, and assigning that blame to him, than with a principled representation of the facts for the sake of the viewers’ knowledge.

In order to begin to uncover this ideological project, it is necessary to examine the raid scene in more detail. Bigelow has said, “What was most important for me was to put the audience in the center of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden” (“The Compound”). She has also said, “The goal was to be as accurate as we possibly could without, obviously, having been there. I didn’t want it to feel like a movie” (Harris, “Mad Dash”). The raid scene formally strives for verisimilitude in various ways, reinforcing Bigelow’s statements. For instance, the scene is shot in close quarters in an actual structure, not multiple sets. Bigelow wanted contiguous shots following the SEALS “from the helicopters to the outside of the compound and through the doors, then up two flights of stairs” (“Mad Dash”). She never even used the removable wall her

Behind some of the most inflamed concern over works like…’Zero Dark Thirty’ is a thinly veiled distrust of the American public—that, well, moviegoers are just not smart or sophisticated or schooled enough to know the difference between fact and fiction, on-screen lies and off-screen ones. Given some of the stories that politicians themselves have peddled to the public, including the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, such concern is understandable” (“Confronting the Fact of Fiction”).

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production team built for her in the compound, which would have allowed the camera to “take in an entire room.”

Bigelow also chose to shoot the raid two times, once “objectively” and once “through the night-vision goggles the SEALs wore” (“Mad Dash”). Ordinarily, the greenish glow simulating night-vision is added in postproduction, but Bigelow had *Zero Dark Thirty*’s raid scene shot through night-vision lenses.³⁰ Said Bigelow, “When I look through night-vision goggles, I see the way light sparkles on whatever particulate matter is in the air—it creates a kind of exquisite filmic haze” (“Mad Dash”). The “exquisite filmic haze” Bigelow is so drawn to represents a weird paradox between the film’s formal techniques and its claims to verisimilitude. On the one hand, this use of night vision lenses represents a commitment to providing viewers with an authentic “boots on the ground experience”: the night vision offers viewers the chance to see as the SEALs saw that night. Yet Bigelow’s admiration of the light sparkling on particulate matter in the air for the “exquisite filmic” quality it produces reveals her commitment to the cinematic experience in telling this narrative. In an interview with Dexter Filkins of *The New Yorker*, Bigelow underscores this paradox, saying, “I felt we had a responsibility to be faithful to the material…[and] it was an inherently dramatic story.” The question is whether the project was driven by a commitment to the material (the actual events leading up to and culminating in the death of bin Laden) or by an attraction to the “inherently dramatic” nature of the story. This thesis cannot answer that question, but it has shown that the film seems to be more committed to the veneer of truthfulness—perhaps for the exciting techniques that veneer requires—than with strictly objective truthfulness.

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³⁰ Even in the “objective” shoot of the raid, the light conditions were unusual. The production designer created something they called a “soft-light box” in order to simulate the conditions of a moonless night, while providing just enough light to shoot at all (“The Compound”).
The techniques and mechanisms through which the film achieves an effect of verisimilitude are dazzling; but they are not just art for art’s sake, or merely conveniently exciting opportunities to experiment with camera work, as Bigelow is known for doing. “The film doesn’t have an agenda,” Bigelow tells Filkins, but of course that is not true. The film’s veracious techniques also enable Bigelow to mask the subtler project of the film, which is the erasure of Osama bin Laden as a human actor in the War on Terror. We see this erasure most clearly in the film’s raid scene.

During the raid scene, as the SEALs push up the staircase to the third floor, they (we) pause. A point of view shot, as we look over the point man’s shoulder (as if we are the soldier directly behind him) establishes our identification with the SEALs here. The point man calls, “Osama. Osama.” We watch as a shadowy figure appears in the doorway up ahead on the landing. The point man shoots. The figure drops. The team rushes toward the doorway. A man is lying on the floor, assumedly bin Laden. One SEAL asks a woman in the room who the dead man is, seeking confirmation (another SEAL empties a few bullets into the dead man’s chest—“insurance shots”). She replies, “Al-Noori Hassan.” Not bin Laden. But still, the team is relatively sure. One SEAL, played by Joel Edgerton, takes out a digital camera. He stands over the body and takes a series of photos of the corpse’s face. In the next shot—a point of view shot from the perspective of the SEAL taking the digital photos—the movie camera filming the shot is positioned so that we can see both the body and the image of the body on the digital camera’s screen in the filmic frame. The movie camera is close enough to both that it should be possible to make out the features of the body and the image of the body on the digital camera, but both are out of focus. We can see the shape of a face—we see that it is bearded and gory with blood from a head wound—but that is it. The camera has intentionally obscured his face from view.
The film makes a clear decision not to focus on bin Laden’s face. A few diegetic minutes earlier, the SEALs had shot and killed “Abrar” and his wife, who had screamed and appeared to reach for her husband’s gun as the SEALs approached. The camera lingers on the open-eyed faces of the dead couple before cutting to the SEALs once more. A possible explanation for the film’s decision not to clearly picture bin Laden’s face is that his face is highly recognizable; American audiences had been accustomed to seeing photographs of him for over a decade before *Zero Dark Thirty* was released. But the explanation that the film chose not to give bin Laden a face because it would be too difficult to make it recognizable as bin Laden’s seems dubious, given the set designer’s and the production team’s herculean efforts to achieve realism throughout the compound and the recreation of the raid, coupled with the incredible capabilities of makeup, prosthetics, and digital face replacement in the twenty-first century. Why go to such extraordinary lengths to create a set that is as real as possible only to fail even to make an effort to recreate a face recognizable as bin Laden’s?

The answer is simple. *Zero Dark Thirty* intentionally restricts our ability to recognize bin Laden. Yet if the project of the film is, as Bigelow puts it, to “put the audience in the center of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden,” why create a divide between what the SEALs (and Maya) see and what we are allowed to see (‘The Compound’)? The film has just made an effort through a point of view shot to align our perspective with the SEALs, and throughout the rest of the narrative the film has put effort into aligning our perspective with Maya’s. The commandos and CIA analysts who execute and monitor the raid certainly are able to gaze upon bin Laden’s face. Why not us?

The most obvious answer to this question is that the film wants to suggest that these brave soldiers bore the unthinkable trauma of looking into the face of evil precisely so American
viewers (read: citizens) would not have to. But I would like to suggest that the film’s project is a bit more complicated than Bigelow lets on. Finally, and only after discussing the raid scene, it is necessary to turn to the film’s depiction of torture in order to fully comprehend the film’s erasure of historical memory of bin Laden as a human actor in the War on Terror. A comparison of the film’s treatment of Ammar, a detainee who is tortured extensively early in the film, and of bin Laden illustrates this project.

TORTURE: ZERO SUM GAME

Zero Dark Thirty opens to a black screen with the words “The following motion picture is based on firsthand accounts of actual events.” The screen fades to black, and real audio recordings of people inside the Twin Towers begins to surge and fade, tracks of terror and grief overlapping in relentless waves of sound. Now, the screen reads, “September 11, 2001.” The effect is chilling. As the audio fades, a new line of text appears: “2 years later.” The first scene after this opening shows four or five people in black masks clustered around a dirty, weary man with a black eye and swollen, cracked lips. He never speaks while Dan, the lead interrogator played by Jason Clarke—the only other person in the room not wearing a mask—threatens him, his soft, menacing whispers interspersed with explosive yelling. “I own you, Ammar,” says Dan close to Ammar’s face, quietly. So begins the film’s first scene, and its first extended torture scene. There is one other in Zero Dark Thirty, also featuring Ammar, as well as multiple short scenes of torture and countless other photographs, video clips, and short scenes of detainees in stress positions or showing signs of physical trauma, and often in cages or small, dark

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11 Obscuring bin Laden’s (really, the actor’s) gory face enables the SEALs’ valor in another way: focusing on the broken and bloody face of an elderly man—probably nearly unrecognizable because of his head wound—would emphasize the SEALs’ violence. By blurring this gruesome image, the SEALs retain more heroism.
interrogation chambers. The film shows detainees—especially Ammar—being beaten, subjected to simulated drownings (water boarding), walked around in a dog collar, shoved in a small box, starved, subjected to sleep deprivation, sexually humiliated, and more.

Nearly every article, journalistic and scholarly, discussing Zero Dark Thirty and the controversy over its depiction of torture—and there are many—cites the film’s opening claim: “based on firsthand accounts of real events.” In one of the most authoritative take-downs of Zero Dark Thirty, Steve Coll writes in The New York Review of Books, “Boal told a New York Times interviewer before the controversy erupted, ‘I don’t want to play fast and loose with history’” (“‘Disturbing’ & ‘Misleading’”). But the problem, Coll explains, is that “the filmmakers cannot, on the one hand, claim authenticity as journalists while, on the other, citing art as an excuse for shoddy reporting about a subject as important as whether torture had a vital part in the search for bin Laden, and therefore might be, for some, defensible as public policy” (“‘Disturbing’ & ‘Misleading’”). Coll, a decorated journalist and author of the book Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001, thoroughly documents the film’s representations of torture. He builds a strong case that the filmmakers were irresponsible in their approach to making Zero Dark Thirty, and he is not alone. Yet many others with just as much credibility as Coll lauded the film for its “arresting but complicated depictions of political violence” (“‘Disturbing’ & ‘Misleading’”).

For some of the film’s proponents, like film critic David Edelstein, the complexity of Zero Dark Thirty and its unflinching representation of torture are precisely what make it so great. Edelstein, who named it the best film of the year in 2012, called it “an unholy masterwork” (“Edelstein: Zero Dark Thirty”). The movie is “borderline fascistic,” he writes, and in its “narrative arc, barely distinct from a boneheaded right wing revenge picture,” and yet, he
concludes, it is “the best damn unsavory thriller in years.” Another expert who penned his support for Zero Dark Thirty, Jose A. Rodriguez Jr., a thirty-one-year veteran of the CIA, recommends the film while simultaneously explaining its shortcomings. For Rodriguez, the filmmakers were right to include torture in a movie about the search for bin Laden, but they made the torture too sensational. In real life, few detainees were submitted to enhanced interrogation techniques (which, he assures us, are not the same as torture). Rodriguez says that enhanced interrogation techniques were administered much more methodically and bureaucratically in real life. Yes, they water boarded a few detainees, he explains, but they used water bottles, not buckets, and the victims were strapped to gurneys, not pinned to the dirty floor of a makeshift prison like Ammar is in the film (“CIA Veteran”). Nevertheless, Rodriguez says the filmmakers got a lot of things right, too, and overall Zero Dark Thirty is a film “well worth seeing.”

Perhaps the most famous criticism of Zero Dark Thirty was penned by Senators Diane Feinstein, Carl Levin, and John McCain, all members of the Senate Intelligence Committee. After Zero Dark Thirty premiered in December 2012, the three senators wrote a letter to Michael Lynton, Chairman and CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment. “Zero Dark Thirty is factually inaccurate,” they write, “and we believe that you have an obligation to state that the role of torture in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden is not based on the facts, but rather part of the film’s fictional narrative” (“Three Senators”). Torture was a sensitive issue at the time. In a Washington Post op-ed on May 11, 2011, John McCain had written, “Osama bin Laden’s welcome death has ignited debate over whether the so-called enhanced interrogation techniques used on enemy prisoners were instrumental in locating bin Laden, and whether they are a justifiable means for gathering intelligence.” The debate over torture had been rejuvenated well before Zero Dark
Thirty was released, then. A little less than a year after bin Laden’s death, the Senate Intelligence Committee’s Study of the CIA’s Detention and Interrogation program yielded information indicating that “the CIA did not first learn about the existence of the [O]sama Bin Laden courier from CIA detainees subjected to coercive interrogation techniques” (emphasis mine, “Three Senators”). Zero Dark Thirty premiered just months later, its narrative suggesting the exact opposite: that the CIA did first learn of Bin Laden’s courier from a detainee subjected to torture. In the government’s official account of the hunt for Bin Laden, as well as in Zero Dark Thirty, this courier led the CIA to Bin Laden.

The problem, as the three senators see it, is that “people who see Zero Dark Thirty will believe that the events it portrays are facts. The film therefore has the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner” (“Three Senators”). Yet equally misleading is the Senators’ concern that “the use of torture should be banished from serious public discourse,” as most of the serious discourse about torture has pointedly excluded the public. In other words, the public’s ability to seriously discuss the use of torture in Zero Dark Thirty is impeded by their lack of access to facts about the United States’ use of torture. The Senate Intelligence Committee finally released a 525-page excerpt from their 6,000-page report on the CIA’s use of torture (which was based on a review of six million still-classified documents) in December of 2014—two years after Zero Dark Thirty premiered. The rest of the

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12 “The report details actions by CIA officials, including torturing prisoners, providing misleading or false information about classified CIA programs to the media, impeding government oversight and internal criticism, and mismanaging the program. It also revealed the existence of previously unknown detainees, that more detainees were subjected to harsher treatment than was previously disclosed, and that more forms of torture were used than previously disclosed. It concluded that torturing prisoners did not help acquire actionable intelligence or gain cooperation from detainees and that the program damaged the United States’ international standing” (Wikipedia, “Senate Intelligence Committee report on CIA torture”).
report remains highly classified (“Senate Report on CIA Torture”). As with the film’s compound and the raid scene, Everett’s Game is in play. Yet once again, viewers cannot win.

To be sure, there are many valid criticisms of Zero Dark Thirty’s depiction of torture, and both the use of torture and its representation are serious issues. However, many critics have been blinded by their loathing for the film’s tacit approval of torture, and have therefore failed to notice the actual ideological project at work in the film, which is not to justify torture, but, at least in part, to illustrate torture’s pervasive corrosion of bodies, minds, and integrity throughout the War on Terror. Especially in scholarly discussions of the film, Zero Dark Thirty has also been heavily criticized for its mis- and under-representation of “Arabs,” a common and inaccurate blanket term for Middle Eastern and Northern African people. In his 2014 book The ‘War on Terror’ and American Film, Terence McSweeney interprets this criticism thus: “The films that have emerged from the American film industry charting the war on terror, even the self-consciously liberal ones, have continued the trend of dehumanizing individuals who transgress ideas of racial normativity, which arguably makes their fate in the real world easier to ignore” (33). In the case of Zero Dark Thirty, I would argue something slightly different. While it is true that Zero Dark Thirty marginalizes non-Westerners, and it certainly “privilege[s] American subjectivity, humanity and moral authority at the expense of these [missing] Others,” it does not do so in order to “perpetuate the idea that suffering is a First World privilege,” as McSweeney declares (33). Instead, Zero Dark Thirty suggests that suffering is a universal condition; that violence against the Other only breeds more violence; that vengeance does not liberate victors, but instead brings new fetters. In short, torture is a zero-sum game.

This project is evident from the characterization of Ammar (Reda Kateb), the “Arab” character who plays the most central narrative role in Zero Dark Thirty—but only when his
characterization is considered in the context of the film’s complicated representation of the value of various human lives. Ammar is the character whom Dan and Maya torture in the opening sequence of the film.  

And yet, Ammar and other “Arabs” are not the only people who are dehumanized in Zero Dark Thirty. What emerges is a complicated and confusing politics of the human and of the value of different human lives. While there is a distinct delineation in Zero Dark Thirty between the film’s representation of American and non-American lives, which does seem to imply a differentiation in the value of these different human lives, the film does not seem motivated (explicitly or implicitly) by a disregard for the value of non-American (in this case, “Arab”) lives. Rather, it creates the impression that a delineation between non-American and American lives is a false one. The value of a human life is complicated, the film says, and not always determined by the body, or by a valuation of a specific human’s values or usefulness.

That “Arab” characters are dehumanized in this film is indisputable. Dan, who plays the lead interrogator, regularly de-humanizes his detainees by treating them like animals. It is Dan who is primarily responsible for Ammar’s torture, though Maya and others assist. Dan forces him to wear a dog collar, and leads him around the torture chamber by a leash; he offers and rescinds food in accordance with Ammar’s level of compliance; he forces him into a small box. We learn about the value (or rather the lack of value) that Dan, who seems to serve as a stand-in for the parties he represents (other interrogators, the CIA, the American government), assigns to “Arab” lives. After we witness Dan’s manipulation of Ammar through the use of extending and rescinding food, we see another scene that deepens our comprehension of the lack of regard Dan and those he represents possess for the subjects he tortures. At a CIA compound, we see Dan

13 Though Boal has described Ammar as “composite character,” many experts note his striking narrative similarity to the real-life Al-Qaeda detainee Ali Abdul Aziz Ali, whose alias was Ammar al-Baluchi (Coll).
standing next to a small cage eating ice cream. There are monkeys in the cage, and Dan is cooing at them. He licks his ice cream cone and then extends it to the monkeys, gladly sharing his food (and a true luxury food in the desert) with mere animals. In the background, there are human prisoners in orange jumpsuits also in cages. Taken together, these scenes represent a clear contrast between the kindness this character extends to animals and the brutality he inflicts on human detainees. Through this striking imagery, the film invites us to judge Dan. He persistently mistreats other humans, yet he pampers his monkeys. This is the only time we see Dan smile and laugh in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Soon after this scene, Dan confesses to Maya that he is planning to quit his job, or at least go back to the U.S. and work for the CIA behind a desk. He gives her several hollow-sounding reasons for leaving: “I’ve seen too many guys naked. It’s got to be over a fucking hundred now. I need to go and do something normal for a while…Go to Washington. Do the dance, see how that environment works.” But then he gives her what seems to be the real reason for his melancholic burn-out: “They killed my monkeys. Some bullshit about escaping. Can you believe that?” Dan seems more devastated about the loss of his monkeys, with whom he happily and freely shared his own food, than over men he has “seen naked,” or tortured. Perhaps Dan had felt camaraderie with the monkeys; he, too, is trained to perform. And he, too, is arguably broken by torture. The film depicts Dan as both unfeeling and cruel—through his brutality toward Ammar—and pitiable—through his sense of loss over the monkeys.

Dan’s treatment of Ammar, and the contrast between his treatment of human detainees and his monkeys, represents the dehumanization we expect to see in an American film about the CIA and the War on Terror. *Zero Dark Thirty* does not disappoint in that regard. But the theme of dehumanization in this film extends also to depictions of the devaluation of American
soldiers. When Maya and other CIA representatives travel to a military base in the United States to meet with the SEAL team tapped to execute the raid on bin Laden’s compound, Maya tells the skeptical soldiers, “Quite frankly I didn’t even want to use you guys…I wanted to drop a bomb. But people didn’t believe in this lead enough to drop a bomb. So they’re using you guys as canaries, in the theory that if bin Laden isn’t there, you can sneak away, and no one will be the wiser.” Although it is explained that Navy SEALs are sent in for this type of work because they are quick and quiet, and most likely to go undetected or at least unnoticed, Maya’s description of them as canaries complicates this explanation. Canaries are not sent into a mine because they can get in and get out quietly; they are sent in because if they die, their death is a signal that the environment is not safe for a human. This categorization of elite American soldiers’ lives as akin to canaries’ lives is no accident; the film reinforces this logic by naming the raid scene “THE CANARIES.”

The politics and the value of human life in wartime are complicated, and Zero Dark Thirty captures this complexity. For this reason, the film is often disturbing and confusing, and it should be. However, scholarly arguments like McSweeney’s are often so tainted by liberal outrage toward Zero Dark Thirty’s narrative affirmation of torture that they fail to recognize the film’s complex and subtle development of the complicated politics of human value. Despite the shortsightedness of much of McSweeney’s argument, he usefully considers Judith Butler’s work on recognition in her 2004 book Precarious Life and her discussion of the Levinasian face. The Levinasian face, Butler reminds us, is something more than a literal face. It is the philosophical face of the Other, the face which speaks for the Other and yet which “does not speak in the sense

14 A version of my reading of Dan and the monkeys and of Maya and the Navy SEALs first appeared in a term paper for Ricardo Ortiz’s “Critical Theory” seminar in Fall 2015; a later version of that paper was published in gnovis in Fall 2016.
that the mouth does”; instead, it is the face which represents the other “in its precariousness and defenseless” and which is for us “at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the ‘You shall not kill’” (134). In short, the Levinasian face is that which elicits one’s recognition of the mutual humanness of oneself and the Other. Therefore, in McSweeney’s words, “To deny someone of a [Levinasian] face is to deny their right to life; and it is a denial with disturbing implications” (35). McSweeney argues that Ammar is denied a Levinasian face, “as are the vast majority of Arabs in Zero Dark Thirty: they are terrorists and evil-doers who are determined to take the lives of innocent Americans (and others) for no reason the film cares to explain” (38).

Indeed, Ammar is the most fully recognized Arab character in the film, and he is regularly degraded and dehumanized through torture, and, as McSweeney notes, “[he] is denied any sense of motivation for his actions; the purpose of his cause is never mentioned” (38).

It is true that most of the Arabs in Zero Dark Thirty are not given a Levinasian face. But through torture, the film does grant Ammar a Levinasian face. Torture is an explicit affirmation of the Other’s human precariousness and defenselessness, and it employs a forceful and intimidating display of the terrifying liminal space between the temptation to kill and the desire not to kill. It is also essential to notice that Ammar is given a literal face. As are the Pakistani hordes, as are the suicide bombers at Khost outpost, as are many other detainees depicted in the film, as are the CIA agents, as are bin Laden’s children and wives.

Bin Laden alone remains faceless. As mentioned above, we vaguely see an outline of his dead body lying on the floor of the compound, and later, when Maya unzips his body bag to identify the body, we see a grizzled beard—but nothing else. On the contrary, we see Ammar living: he starves, he cries, he bleeds, he drinks, he defecates, he suffers, he resists, he yields. We recognize him as fully human, even if we never hear him explain his motivation for his part in
9/11. In fact, that may be precisely why we are able to recognize him as human. Without a clear understanding of his motives or even the extent of his involvement in 9/11, it is difficult to see past his suffering. We are unable to judge for ourselves whether he “deserves” this treatment or not, at least in context of the CIA and the War on Terror. We do feel some empathy for his suffering, even if it does translate to “empty empathy,” as McSweeney claims (38). But we do not see bin Laden living or dead. And perhaps that is the larger point. He is not a human; he is an idea. Though the events of the film, which spans a full decade, are driven by efforts to locate and neutralize bin Laden (whether by capturing or by killing him), bin Laden himself remains a spectral force of evil in the film.

CONCLUSION

It is this pervasive evil that animates the United States’ desire for revenge and that drives the morally reprehensible acts done in the name of revenge, the film suggests. Dan, for instance, is not absolved for his brutality, and yet he is not fully responsible for it, either. Put colloquially: bin Laden started it. The United States finished it, but that was only necessary because 9/11 happened in the first place. The film, which ends with an image of Maya crying alone on a plane with nowhere to go, is melancholic, not celebratory. As Manohla Dargis puts it, “as the movie heads toward its emphatically nontriumphant finish, it is impossible not to realize with anguish all that came before – the pain, the suffering and the compromised ideals – has led to this” (“By Any Means Necessary”). And all of this—compromised morals, violence, loss, death—was motivated by someone who was more an idea than a man, suggests the film. It was because of this idea—the idea bin Laden represents—that all those people died on 9/11; its fault that Maya and Dan and their real-life counterparts and countless others ever tortured to begin with; its fault
that Jennifer Ehle’s character died; its fault for the London bombing. It set a wave of events in motion.

Structuring *Zero Dark Thirty* so that bin Laden’s death is the climax of the narrative does not mean, as Isaac Lloyd Vayo claims, that the film’s primary project is to “treat [bin Laden’s] death as an endpoint to the 9/11 era” (105). Indeed, killing bin Laden does not kill the idea of bin Laden and what he stood for. Largely because the film opens with audio recordings from 9/11 and ends with bin Laden’s death, Vayo argues, “the film suggests that, after bin Laden’s death, 9/11 is a closed book, rather than a finished chapter in a much longer work within the volumes of the War on Terror” (106). But there is a subtle detail in the film that unsettles this oversimplified assessment of *Zero Dark Thirty*’s project. About two thirds of the way through the film, Maya is met at the gates of the American embassy of Pakistan by an angry crowd of protestors. They bang on her car, yelling and gesticulating. Many of them carry signs, almost all written in Arabic. One, though, is in English. It reads: “STOP AMERICAN TERRORISM.” The scene is overlaid with audio of Peter Jennings saying, “The CIA’s top spy in Pakistan has been pulled out of there. He’s been receiving death threats after being named publicly in a lawsuit by the family of a victim of a U.S. drone attack.”

This subtle yet decisive inclusion of the greater political context of the decade spanning the hunt for bin Laden underscores the fragmentary nature of 9/11 and of the hunt for bin Laden. The evil of 9/11—bin Laden’s evil, Al Qaeda’s evil—has only engendered more evil. The violence of that day has only spurred more violence. In this way, *Zero Dark Thirty* goes far beyond its professed ideological project to glorify the persistence of American intelligence personal in pursuing bin Laden and Al Qaeda. And because it captures the pervasive diffusion of
war in the post-9/11 era, *Zero Dark Thirty*—factual instability and all—is an important historical and cultural document.

As this chapter has shown, it is impossible to disentangle *Zero Dark Thirty* from the events it represents. Its narrative is inextricably woven into the public discourse around the CIA’s use of torture, the raid that killed bin Laden, and the limited availability of the facts about these events. In an article called “In Country: Narrating the Iraq War in Contemporary US Cinema,” film scholar Guy Westwell writes, “the production of any representation—be it a journalistic account, a history book, a documentary, or a feature film—requires the myriad competing and contested data and discourses of a historical event to be synthesized and given order” (386). Here, Westwell describes both the process of narrative (though he resists using that term) and the process of historical representation; they are, effectually, the same.

*Zero Dark Thirty*, as a historical cultural document that itself has produced more narratives of the events it documents, is both a representation of a series of events and an event itself. Westwell, who develops an argument for the consideration of films as historical events through a discussion of several Iraq war movies (a fictional feature film and a documentary), argues that film should be considered as “an historical event in its own right” because of “its agency in determining how we understand the past” (386). To take this abstract idea and make it specific, let us say that *Zero Dark Thirty*—or, the telling of the death of bin Laden—is as eventful as the death of bin Laden itself.
CHAPTER TWO:

The War of Terror: Asymmetrical Representations of Humanness and Terror

in Andrew Niccol’s Good Kill

Gathered around a table in a nondescript conference room, tinted an austere blue, Air Force Crew 32 receives the news that for an “unspecified number of missions” they will be taking orders from the C.I.A. Colonel Johns (Bruce Greenwood) tells his team to prepare themselves for the C.I.A’s new approach to drone strikes. “The folks in Virginia…[have] progressed from what they like to call a personality strike, where we know for sure our target is a fucking bad guy…[to] a signature strike. …[I]t’s a hit based not on a suspicion of guilt but on a pattern of behavior. So, you may be called to fire upon a dumb shleb in Waziristan who’s carrying an AK 47, even though we know everyone and their mother in Waziristan carries an AK 47.” The year is 2010; the location is Creech Air Force base in Nevada, where the United States houses most of its Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.

Soon after, Crew 32 receives its first mission from the C.I.A., and the scene is fraught with tension from the first frame. “Langley,” a disembodied voice broadcast through a speaker phone, orders the team to strike a supposedly “high card” target, and they obey; there is nothing out of the ordinary about this. But then a “follow-up” strike is ordered. The team balks. A follow up, or “double tap” as the team calls it, means that all of the first responders to the initial explosion—men with shovels trying to dig out bodies and women looking on—will be struck. As Suarez (Zoe Kravitz), the co-pilot, remarks later, “That’s what terrorists do…Plant a second bomb, blow up soldiers showing up to the first bomb.” This is new territory for the team, and an order that they are uncomfortable with. Despite Suarez’s indignation and tears, Colonel Johns’
protests, and drone pilot Major Egan’s (Ethan Hawke) tight-lipped disgust, the team—of course—obeys. After the second missile explodes, they silently watch the drone feed as a woman approaches the rubble to pick a severed arm out of a tree, regarding the burning ruins in front of her in apparent shock.

Colonel Johns tells Major Egan to leave the bunker, let someone else step in for further “damage assessment.” The Colonel does not want his star pilot burning out, as so many others have done after too-often experiencing the disturbing interplay between the push of a button in an air conditioned trailer and the fiery deaths on a screen. Major Egan exits. Langley signs off.

Suarez: “Was that a war crime, sir?”

Colonel Johns: “Shut the fuck up, Suarez.”

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*Good Kill* (Andrew Niccol, 2014) follows fighter pilot-cum-drone pilot Major Tommy Egan (Ethan Hawke) as his personal and professional life disintegrates. He is desperate to fly a real plane, but everyone else knows what Tommy will not admit to himself: he will likely never fly a plane again. The changing infrastructure of the Air Force and a vaguely defined accident that landed him in a drone bunker in the first place work against Egan’s desire to fly; the Air Force does not need more fighter pilots, but it does need more drone pilots, especially seasoned vets like Egan. Meanwhile, Egan’s self-loathing and drinking intensify proportionately to the increasing number of ethically questionable missions he and his crew receive from the C.I.A. The film offers a simultaneously complicated and oversimplified reading of contemporary warfare. It condemns the C.I.A.’s use of drone strikes but intimates that perhaps in the right hands – the Air Force’s, presumably – drone warfare is useful and justified. Yet the film paints the drone as a mode of disturbing asymmetry in war, even suggesting the illegality of drone warfare
by drawing direct comparisons to the acknowledged illegality of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. *Good Kill* also proposes the drone’s usefulness as a tool to protect helpless people—whether they be American citizens or Muslim women—from bad, powerful terrorists (never mind that *everyone* seen through the crosshairs of an armed drone is necessarily helpless, indicating *the viewer’s* ultimate power), while painstakingly revealing the toll that drone warfare takes on the servicemen and women tasked with sustaining it. The film does an important thing, and a thing that few other films have attempted, by alerting us to the plight of the American drone operator, and by illuminating the asymmetry of contemporary warfare, of which Americans are only and always the purveyors.

But despite its general efforts to be critical of drone warfare, *Good Kill* ends up preserving American supremacy and contributing to the culture of American exceptionalism that birthed the drone strike to begin with. The film takes care to voice nearly every culturally relevant argument against drone warfare (almost all voiced by Egan’s co-pilot Suarez, played by Zoe Kravitz). But ultimately, the power to unilaterally wield a drone strike proves to be Tommy Egan’s salvation, as well as the means of liberating one victimized woman half a world away. In “Drone Form: Word and Image at the End of Empire,” Nathan K. Hensley writes, “If we take seriously the fact that empire is best understood not as a culture or as a discourse but as the monopoly on putatively legitimate violence—the stretching of the state’s power over life and death past the boundaries of its ‘own’ populace—then the power of sovereign decision crystallized in globally operated, remote assassination machines is the very essence of empire: its telos, or end” (3). If the armed drone embodies the essence of American empire, as Hensley suggests, or even if it is simply an instrument of empire, then reinforcing America as sovereign reinforces America as empire—and therefore legitimizes the drone as tool of American empire.
That is precisely what *Good Kill* does: it reinforces Americans as sovereign, which preserves America’s use of the drone. The one kill the film represents as unquestionably good—Egan’s impulsive execution of a serial rapist in Afghanistan—legitimizes all the other questionable ones. It is in this way that this film, though perhaps inadvertently, becomes complicit in the cultural “discourse of legitimation,” as Grégoire Chamayou calls it (17). In so doing, *Good Kill* performs the “culturally imperialist exploitation of feminism” summed up by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as “white men, seeking to save brown women from brown men” (quoted in *Precarious Life*, Butler 41). This idea is forcefully emblematized in the film’s portrayal of a brown woman being beaten and raped repeatedly by a brown man, whom Tommy Egan (a white man) finally blows away with 68,000 tax payer dollars. It is *as if* Egan’s final action absolves him and his team of their previous crime of inaction; whether audiences are granted the same absolution is one concern of this chapter.

This chapter argues that though *Good Kill* seems to probe the moral ambiguities of drone warfare, it in fact definitively marks American drone pilots and their families as its true victims. The film endows only these characters with the “schemas of intelligibility” and “norms of recognition”—terms I borrow from Judith Butler—that make true recognition of human lives possible. *Good Kill*’s insistence on only and always mediating Afghans and Yemenis through drone video footage, on the other hand, inhibits full recognition of those subjects. Our efforts to recognize their lives are hindered by this drone vision, because it inherently restricts our access to various schemas of intelligibility that would enable our recognition of them. In this way, the film renders an audience complicit in asymmetrical warfare. Furthermore, *Good Kill* enters into a liberal imperialist discourse by marshalling American viewers’ sympathies through the symbolic economy of helpless female bodies. The chapter draws on another film, *Eye in the Sky* (2015), to
support its argument by comparison, and will look to real-life accounts of drone strikes to lend strength to it as well.

In *Frames of War* (2009), Judith Butler distinguishes between “apprehension” and the Hegelian term “recognition.” “Recognition,” she writes, “is the stronger term [...]

‘Apprehension’ is less precise, since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. If it is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge” (5). One can be “apprehended as ‘living,’” then, but “not always recognized as a life” (5). “What we are able to apprehend,” Butler continues, “is surely facilitated by norms of recognition, but it would be a mistake to say that we are utterly limited by existing norms of recognition when we apprehend a life” (5). Apprehension, then, is something more instinctual and less regulated than recognition, which requires the existence of certain “general conditions” that “craft a living being into a recognizable subject” (5). For example, one might apprehend a moving white smudge on a drone’s video feed as a human life form because of its patterns of movement: several white smudges exit a mosque together; a white smudge moves rapidly away from an explosion; a white smudge moves from a cluster of cars to a stand of trees, seeking cover. That these smudges are people we can comprehend (read: apprehend) from a YouTube video of American drone strikes, even if the commentary is muted. These patterns of movement are schemas of intelligibility—they pave the way for recognition, but stop short of absolutely enabling recognition: they are not norms of recognition.

There are several components of this discussion key to the argument of this chapter. First, this paper assumes that once one has apprehended another, or an Other, as living, one is already faced with an ethical dilemma: does one try to search out norms of recognition in the living
Other, certain idioms that would render the Other recognizable? Or does one accept the limits of apprehension, choosing not to pursue recognition? (The readily available phenotype of the Other plays into this; is the Other a child? A female? An adult man?) This liminal and ethically fraught space between apprehension and recognition is vulnerable to cultural modes, such as film, which can influence or even withhold that choice from a viewer. This chapter contends that *Good Kill* does the latter. Secondly, this chapter defines child’s play, sexual trauma, language, and extreme close-ups of facial features as among the norms of recognition that, when present, induce viewers’ recognition, and, when absent, restrict viewers’ recognition. These, like helpless female bodies, gesture toward sympathy as an economy of likeness that facilitates recognition of the Other. And third, this chapter is specifically concerned with the drone as one of the “‘frames’ that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot…[which] not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject” (*Frames of War*, 3). In other words, the way one sees a subject through the drone determines how one conceives of the subject.15

This chapter holds, as Butler does, that full recognition of a life is necessary in order to grieve the loss of that life. And grief is important, as Butler argues, because “there is something to be gained in the political domain by maintaining grief as part of the framework in which we think our international ties” (*Precarious Life*, 31). What if rather than allowing our awareness of our own vulnerability to drive our aggression toward the Other, whose very presence threatens our own, we allow our shared vulnerability—“a common human vulnerability [that] emerges with life itself”—to furnish a sense of “our collective responsibility for the physical lives of

15 See Roger Stahl, “What the drone saw: the cultural optics of the unmanned war” in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. Stahl develops an argument about the relationship between mode of seeing and mode of thinking.
others?” (Precarious Life 31). Those are the stakes of recognition and grief, but the drone as mode of seeing, and therefore a movie that exclusively privileges the drone as mode of seeing, renders recognition impossible by obscuring many of the schemas of intelligibility and norms of recognizability that would enable our recognition, therefore making it nearly impossible to grieve lives lost to drone strikes (or at least those deaths we witness through drone footage). This essay is about Western feature films’ representation of drone strikes, but that is to say it is about real life drone strikes. In other words, this essay takes as fact film’s ability to impact audiences’ perception, and therefore sets the stakes of Good Kill’s representation of drone warfare within the realm of the real and the urgent.

THE PURELY OPTICAL SIGNATURE

The more vulnerable a body is the less shocked we are by its death, and the very nature of the U.S.’s preferred targeted populations for drone strikes belies any argument to the contrary. The people most often besieged by American drone strikes belong to certain communities already endowed with a certain kind of precarity. Drone scholar Derek Gregory describes this so-called “everywhere war” that is really a “somewhere war”:

> [W]hen the United States uses armed drones to take its war outside the zones of declared hostilities, it is always to some of the most vulnerable and defenceless [sic] populations on earth whose own governments often turn out to have been complicit in exposing them to death. In these regions there are no air-raid sirens, no anti-aircraft defences [sic] and no air-raid shelters: and often limited emergency services to come to the aid of the innocent. (15)
The communities that have suffered the most from American drone strikes are the very communities that have the fewest resources with which to defend themselves, even from their own governments and local neighbors; they are vulnerable before they are ever framed by a drone’s crosshairs. Fifteen years after invading Afghanistan, we are accustomed to the deaths of the “Arab” subject—in this way we already assume their vulnerability. Yet it is our own vulnerability that compels our use of the drone. *Good Kill* underscores this concept, narrativizing the “pre-emptive self-defense,” as Langley calls it, that characterizes American drone policy, embodied by the “signature strike.”16 Butler reminds us that it is “precisely because each body finds itself potentially threatened by others who are, by definition, precarious as well, [that] forms of domination follow…. [T]he shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of target populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as ‘destructible’ and ‘ungrievable’” (31). As we will see, *Good Kill* manipulates this “shared condition of precariousness” when Tommy Egan’s sympathy for the rape victim justifies his final violent act of avengement.

Underscoring this philosophical discourse about ontological relations of precariousness is the very real vulnerability rendered by drone optics, and specifically those of armed hunter-killer drones. The drone demands apprehension—it almost always has a human target, since its purpose is initially the surveillance of humans—but rejects recognition. When a human life form is apprehended through drone vision, its vulnerability is automatic because it is seen through crosshairs. The drone is simultaneously the instrument that sees and the weapon that destroys. In the drone’s “forcible frame” we simultaneously apprehend subjects as living while

16 A shift from personality strikes to signature strikes did in real life characterize U.S. drone policy beginning around 2008 (“Drone Warfare ‘Signature Strikes’”).
acknowledging our ability to apprehend—or end—their lives. In the case of the drone, viewing equals power (ours) and precarity (theirs) (Butler 8).

Yet drone vision is also imperfect. Notoriously grainy, drone footage yields intense uncertainty. The Prelude to Grégoire Chamayou’s book *A Theory of the Drone* records a real-life exchange among the members of a drone team coordinating between Creech Air Force Base in Nevada and Daikundi, Afghanistan in February of 2010 (the same year in which *Good Kill* is set). The conversation is rife with uncertainty. The team is monitoring three vehicles, and there are numerous unidentified subjects in the convoy. At first, there’s “at least one child near SUV”; soon, that child is “maybe a teenager”; shortly after that, there are “two children…at the rear of the SUV” (italics mine, 3). Then,

**MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR:** Adolescent near the rear of the SUV.

**SENSOR OPERATOR:** Well, teenagers can fight.

**MISSION INTELLIGENCE COORDINATOR:** Pick up a weapon and you’re a combatant, it’s how that works. (4)

In this scenario, any person with a weapon in his or her possession is a “combatant.” Never mind the troubling logic of this coming from people—Americans—for whom owning a weapon is a basic right (and often a quasi-sacred rite), this team is having trouble even identifying weapons. A warm spot might be a rifle, or it might just be “a warm spot from where he was sitting.” The Sensor Operator “[c]an’t really tell right now” (3). The “dudes” they are watching might be men, but maybe they are women; they are wearing burqas and jewelry, after all (8). The fruitless efforts to identify the subjects on the ground as combatants (no matter that they have all already been Positively Identified, or PIDd) are interjected with fantasized explosions that frame the scene as a series of visual spectacles.
SENSOR OPERATOR: That truck would make a beautiful target. OK, that’s a Chevy Suburban. (3)
SENSOR OPERATOR: Oh, sweet target. I’d try to go through the bed, put it right dead center of the bed. (4)
PILOT: It’s a cool-looking shot. (6)

This radical image-ing/imagining underscores the sensational visual spectacle of drone footage. The drone inspires explosions and flashes of light – shock and awe, one might say, which is equally meant to impress those watching from above and from the ground – over smaller, more delicate visual features, like those innate in the human: the shape of a nose, the color of an iris, the cut of a jaw. In fact, the drone is not capable of identifying those features. Instead, it prizes flash over flesh. The drone is a seeing tool (simultaneously a lethal tool) that recognizes bone and blood more readily than the difference between man and child. Necessitous uncertainty justifies the elimination of ethical nuance; a drone pilot’s best guess becomes good enough. Film helps us make sense of this seeing/killing tool, and therefore possesses great power to impact viewers’ perception of this politically complex historical moment.

*Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, 2015), another recent feature film about drone warfare, has been criticized sharply for its depiction of drone capabilities. In contrast to the otherwise mostly positive reception of the South African director’s film, Susan L. Carruthers lambasts it in an essay about recent drone movies in *Cineaste*. “Far from posing difficult questions about drone warfare,” Carruthers alleges, “*Eye in the Sky* resolves them with cheapening ease” (23). It largely does this, she argues, by rendering everything knowable. Indeed, “[n]o scintilla of doubt remains about either the identity or intent of the terrorists” (23). The film imagines drone technology far advanced beyond its current capabilities, its defining features a minute, personified omniscience
united with crisp, clear resolution in the form of a mechanized, remote-controlled beetle.\textsuperscript{17} The supposed Predator drone footage is impressively clear as well—there is no difference in quality and resolution between the film’s footage and the supposed drone footage—and what is more, the United States military is imagined to have facial recognition software that does not even require a face: an ear or a piece of scalp will do. In \textit{Eye in the Sky}, identifying targets and identifying bodies with certainty is easy. In real life, as Chamayou’s Prelude reveals, it is exponentially more difficult.

Though suspenseful, complex and, as I will show later, more egalitarian in its portrayal of the damage done by drone warfare than \textit{Good Kill}, \textit{Eye in the Sky}’s failure to capture the implications of the drone as frame is problematic (more so than Carruthers’ concern with the imagined drones’ omniscience). Part of the violence of the drone is that its particular form of “invasive, irruptive intimacy”—a brutally asymmetric and voyeuristic violation of its target’s private life—“militates against any identity with those whose lives are under surveillance. They remain obdurately other…. [and] this sense of difference is the product of more than cultural estrangement; it also flows from a techno-cultural hermeneutics of suspicion” (Gregory 10). In \textit{Drone Geography}, Derek Gregory offers an explanation for drone operators’ inability to recognize their targets, despite spending (sometimes) hundreds of hours surveilling them:

\textsuperscript{17} This is hardly the first time a film has gotten carried away imagining drone abilities: recollect the incredible drone scene from \textit{The Bourne Legacy} (Tony Gilroy, 2012), for instance. Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner) is in a remote cabin in the snowy Alaska forest with another assassin-in-training when they begin to hear an odd noise (though we do not hear this noise). Cross grabs his backpack and runs out of the cabin, and as he is running away from it, a missile flies past him and hits the cabin, exploding it and killing the other operative still inside. From the ground, Cross looks up and sees the drone swoop overhead, seemingly not more than 100 or so feet above him. The drone continues to fly low, back and forth, over the area. It flies close enough that Cross is able to shoot it down with a rifle.
When drone crews are called upon to provide close air support to ground troops, their sensory geography expands because they become immersed not only in video feeds but also in a stream of radio communications and online messaging with ground troops via MIRC. In this way they establish…a ‘virtual relationship’ with troops on the ground that is impossible for those others who necessarily – and sometimes accidentally – remain purely optical signatures…‘Intimacy’ is thus cultivated within a culturally divided field…in which crews are interpellated to identify so closely with their comrades-in-arms that they are predisposed to interpret every other action [on their video feeds] – which is to say every Other action – as hostile or sinister, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the innocent. (italics mine, 10)

Gregory should add what may be obvious: crews identify so closely with their comrades-in-arms that they are predisposed to interpret every other/Other action that they see through drone footage as hostile or sinister.

The consequences of this framing of perception only emerge when drone operators apprehend lives—or “purely optical signatures”—on their video feeds. Radio and other communications certainly contribute to this virtual relationship between same-side players, but crews’ lethal protectiveness is triggered by the presence of those “optical signatures” on the screen. The myriad communications Gregory describes frame the drone footage, and therefore the crews’ reaction to what they see through it. Butler explains, “This sense that the frame implicitly guides the interpretation [resonates] with the idea of the frame as a false accusation. If one is ‘framed,’ then a ‘frame’ is constructed around one’s deed such that one’s guilty status becomes the viewer’s inevitable conclusion. Some way of organizing and presenting a deed leads to an interpretive conclusion about the deed itself” (Frames of War 8). A person who is
apprehended through a drone’s crosshairs is always already framed as guilty. The consequence is that a person who apprehends someone as guilty is less likely to make an effort to recognize the person who has been framed. This process happens within the plot of *Good Kill*, but it also happens in viewers watching *Good Kill*.

**THE RELENTLESS AERIAL VIEW**

Cinema and the drone distort the reality of war. They draw our eye to a central point in the frame, which, as Jay Winter argues in “Filming War,” is fundamentally incompatible with the actual nature of war. “Part of the reason for the unrepresentability of war in all film,” Winter writes, “is its chaotic character. Battle has no vanishing point, no center of gravity, and the rubble of destruction accompanying industrialized warfare in 2011—just as in 1916—makes it difficult to see what is happening and why” (104). Films, however, “frame action and draw our eyes to some central point of action” (104). This is precisely the framing of drone vision as well. Its crosshairs frame the field of vision in such a way that the eye is drawn to whatever is in the center of the frame, and whatever is in the center of the frame is already framed as a target. In this way, the framing of drone footage parallels the framing of cinematic footage. Nasser Hussain comments extensively on the convergence of film, aviation, and the drone into something he calls the “visual regime of the drone” (“The Sound of Terror”). “Drone strike footage is not a film in any common sense of the term,” Hussain writes, “but it is still video footage, shot from a camera and visible on a screen.” What a drone operator sees on the drone video feed, then, is similar to what we moviegoers see on the cinema screen. Though the

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18 Gregory calls this a “militarized field of view” in “Drone Geography” (11).
technical and qualitative difference between formats is significant, and though the cinema and the drone are different apparatuses, they are both moving pictures.

A drone movie, then, blurs the line between different types of filmic representation. In *Good Kill*, drone footage *is* cinema. At times, the entire frame is filled with drone footage. In these instances, our vision is drone vision, and we enter exclusively into the visual regime of the drone. We are forced to adopt the drone as mode of seeing, yet because drone vision and cinematic vision are so similar, it is difficult to be aware, much less critical, of this convergence.

From the very beginning of *Good Kill*, drone and cinema are conflated. The opening shot of the film is a full-frame video image of rocky, desert-like terrain dotted with square shaped structures clustered on each side of a dirt road. There are crosshairs imposed on the scene, and they remain in fixed proportion to the frame, even as the landscape moves underneath it. There are numbers and letters in each corner of the frame; one set is recognizable as coordinates, latitude and longitude; the rest are meaningless to a civilian. The scene cuts to an extreme close-up of a human eye. The eye darts back and forth, and the brow above it furrows. To make sure we do not confuse this eye for one belonging to someone in the scene the drone monitors, the two shots—aerial footage and close-up of eye—are tinted different colors, ochre and blue-green, respectively. When we see the drone footage, for drone footage it is, we see what the human eye (which belongs to Tommy Egan) sees, except we do not see it *as* Egan sees it. Logic and a zoomed out shot in the next scene tells us that when Egan looks at the drone’s video feed, he also sees a monitor, other screens, a joystick, and the other trappings of a drone cockpit framing his drone feed. But the field of vision the film allows its viewers is precisely and exclusively the drone’s field of vision.
This aerial vision, which is to say aviation vision, has long been a radically normalized way of seeing. By 1914, cameras were frequently mounted to airplanes, and therefore “aviation was ceasing to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records” (Paul Virilio, quoted in Hussain). It was becoming a new way of seeing the world. And since that time, “aviation…has been linked to photographic and cinematographic representation. Shooting a film, or focusing on a target, are not cheap puns, but reminders of a shared genealogical origin. Indeed, this way of looking is so naturalized that we forget that seeing through an aperture produces a particular and partial visual construction” (Hussain). The naturalization of this way of looking is precisely why so many Americans have failed to question, or even to acknowledge, that news media have favored aerial shots of terrain ravaged by American bombs since 9/11. In Precarious Life, Butler describes the news media’s exclusive circulation of aerial footage as part of its complicity with the war effort. Mainstream media supplanted “graphic photos of US soldiers dead and decapitated in Iraq, and then the photos of children maimed and killed by US bombs”—notably, all images from the ground level—with “footage that always took the aerial view, an aerial view whose perspective is established and maintained by state power” (italics mine, 149). This adoption of the aerial view has been part of the visual spectacle of the War on Terror since its very beginning in the 2003 “shock and awe” campaign in Iraq. Writes Butler, “This production takes place not only for the Iraqi population on the ground, whose senses are supposed to be done in by this spectacle, but also for the consumers of war who rely on CNN or Fox….The ‘shock and awe’ strategy seeks not only to produce an aesthetic dimension to war, but to exploit and instrumentalize the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself” (italics mine, 148). These are precisely the stakes of representing drone warfare in popular film: the production of
drone strikes (usually shown through aerial footage) can numb the senses of the American consumers of war, just as the real life strikes have “done in” the population on the ground.

*Good Kill* exclusively adopts the aerial view of Afghanistan and Yemen, the sites targeted most often by American drone strikes in the film’s world. We only ever see Afghans and Yemenis mediated by drone footage, which is to say aerial footage. Of course, aerial footage is all the drone is capable of. The drone’s camera may be able to zoom in “to a sight line just a few hundred feet above the ground”— but even then the camera is looking from a distance of a few hundred feet *above* the ground (Hussain). Hussain references the “startling intimacy” this distance can produce, and *Good Kill* takes care to create this impression. The details we observe from Crew 32’s drone feeds include children playing football, women reading with their children, women pushing wheelbarrows and carrying bundles, women brushing their hair. But we also witness (several times) an instance of startling and grotesque intimacy when a man—but not the target whom the crew has committed 600 hours to surveilling—beats and rapes a woman doing laundry in the courtyard of her compound. The drone footage is not clear enough to show the woman’s facial features or expressions, but it shows clearly enough her personal violation.

On the other hand, though the drone feeds often display men carrying guns, they are never shown doing anything obviously criminal; Egan and his team must, as we must, take the Air Force’s and CIA’s word for it that they are in fact bad guys. The team’s observation of a behavior which the film paints as universally criminal—a violent rape—haunts the C.I.A.’s new stratagem of

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19 It is entirely possible that this footage was indeed shot by a drone of some sort. Shots that might previously have required cranes, helicopters, or airplanes can now be captured more easily and more economically by drones. As a *WIRED* article from 2015 reads, “the cinematic possibilities are vast—and definitely give unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) a better rap than drones used for war or surveillance get” (Watercutter). The politics of using a drone to shoot footage for a movie *about drone warfare*, though, complicates this new and improved reputation of the drone that the cinema facilitates.
“signature strikes.” Langley calls on the team to strike people when it is unclear to them that there are any grounds for doing so—yet they must watch passively as a woman is repeatedly raped on their video feeds. “He’s a bad guy,” Zimmer remarks. “He’s just not our bad guy.” Despite Zimmer’s coolness, the team’s obedience and composure is taxed heavily by Langley’s commands; children, women, first responders, and entire funeral parties die at the push of a button.

During the film’s two rape scenes, the camera cuts between close-ups of Suarez as she watches the rape and full-frame shots of the rape, mediated through the drone’s feed. Suarez’s un-blinking face is painted with outrage and grief. Her lip trembles, her jaw is clenched, and her eyes fill with tears. It is no accident that Suarez is played by a woman of color. The film draws an equivalency between Suarez’s helplessness and the victim’s—another woman of color—helplessness at preventing this rape. This equivalency suggests that both women are victims, and the economy of likeness the film employs—their shared Otherness as women of color, and their shared helplessness—is meant to manipulate viewers’ sympathies. As if to encourage us to watch closely as the film cuts between the two women, interspersed throughout the first scene are shots of Zimmer (a white man, and the character who voices jingoistic justifications for the War on Terror and for the U.S.’s rampant use of the armed drone) watching Suarez watch the rape. He seems interested in Suarez’s reaction to the rape but not especially shocked or upset by the rape itself. Indeed, his first reaction is not to simply look away like Egan does or, conversely, to stare, like Suarez does; it is to look toward Suarez. *Good Kill* plays on gender to garner

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20 As the co-pilot of the Crew, Suarez really is helpless to stop this rape. It is her job to direct a laser on the target, but it is only the pilot who fires a missile. Even if she was willing to ignore protocol and ignore her orders, she would be unable to execute a strike that would kill this rapist. (And even if she could fire a Hellfire herself in this moment, to do so would be to kill the victim as well as her attacker.) Egan, on the other hand, does have the power to punish this rapist—and he does so, later.
sympathy, but it is to garner sympathy with Egan’s final, punitive act of the film, as I will describe in greater detail later.

*Eye in the Sky* diverges from *Good Kill* in two especially important ways. First, by cutting to the ground view, *Eye in the Sky* rejects the exclusive aerial view that *Good Kill* favors. *Eye in the Sky* opens with ground level scenes of a young, black, Muslim girl named Alia in her family’s home in Nairobi. Her father calls her “darling” as he finishes mending her hula hoop. Her mother watches the two, smiling, while she bakes the bread Alia will sell around the corner—against the outer wall of the compound an American drone will soon target—to earn the family money. The camera watches her as she begins hula hooping, and then slowly zooms out to reveal an armored vehicle driving nearby with several armed men perching on top. As the camera continues to zoom out, crosshairs appear around the shrinking truck and we lose sight of the little girl hula hooping as our eye follows the target. Alia is important, this opening tells us, but she is not the mark.

Later, Alia’s presence just outside a compound filled with terrorists and explosives becomes the central problem of the film. The dilemma confronting the major players in the operation is no longer whether they should target a British national and an American citizen (two of the suspects inside the compound), but whether eliminating those terrorists is worth paying the price of one innocent young girl’s life. Already the film has secured our recognition of her humanness; she is not simply a living human, but one endowed with a recognizable—and

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21 Another way in which *Eye in the Sky* diverges from *Good Kill* is the fire-to-strike time it imagines. *Eye in the Sky* imagines fifty seconds between firing a missile and impact. *Good Kill* imagines ten seconds between firing and impact. Admittedly, technological differences in make and model of the drone, as well as differences in altitude, could account for this difference (though the films do not offer enough information about the drone technology for us to determine whether that is the case). Even so, the effect is unquestionable: the longer fire-to-strike time in *Eye in the Sky* builds drama and suspense in a way that *Good Kill* does not.
grievable—life. We have seen her playing, reading, practicing math, drinking, selling bread, and speaking with her father and mother (they speak in Swahili, but the film ensures we understand them by including subtitles).

These are indisputable norms of recognition, and the film employs them in order to render her indisputably human. Already, *Eye in the Sky* has primed an audience to experience a drone strike quite differently than in *Good Kill*; even if we were only to witness the strike that kills Alia mediated through drone footage, we would grieve for her lost life, because the film enables us to recognize her as fully living and alive. But we do not only see the explosion that kills her through aerial footage. We watch from the ground level—before the camera cross cuts to the same scenes from an aerial view—as Alia, inert on the dusty ground, covered in shrapnel and blood, feebly struggles to move her hands. We watch from the ground level as her parents run to her aid. We watch from the ground level as her parents beg the “fanatics” with guns in a truck mounted with artillery for help. We watch from the ground level as these extremists rush Alia and her parents to a hospital. By contrast, *Good Kill* never cuts to the ground view of a strike site, ever. The problem with the exclusive aerial shot in *Good Kill* is that, as Hussain puts it, “[b]y definition, the overhead shot excludes the shot/reverse shot, the series of frontal angles and edits that make up face-to-face dialogue. With the overhead shot, there is no possibility of returning the gaze. The overhead shot neither invites nor permits participation in its visual economy” (“Sound of Terror”). The overhead shot, writes Hussain, “is the filmic cognate of asymmetric war.” When we participate in the filmic cognate of asymmetric war—in other words, watching a film that only uses the overhead shot to depict the targets of American drones—we are forced to participate in asymmetric war itself.
Of course, it is no coincidence the film chooses a female child as the face of collateral damage; the filmmakers strategically choose her age and her gender to marshal viewers’ sympathy for her. She represents the humans perceived as the most helpless and the most innocent. Not only is she female, but she is also a child; *Eye in the Sky* is intent on marking her vulnerability and therefore securing our sympathy. The film draws a direct comparison between Alia and white, Western little girls, intentionally playing on our sympathies by encouraging us to see little girls we know in Alia. Lieutenant General Frank Benson, played by Alan Rickman, is shown shopping for a doll for his young granddaughter early in the film. After he purchases the doll and reports to work, the film cuts from a close-up of that particular doll to a doll made with brown cloth resting next to Alia, who is reading on her bed in her home in Kenya. Small Muslim girls play with dolls, too, the film says. Recognize your sister, daughter, neighbor, or granddaughter in Alia. You will grieve for her when she dies, demands the film of its audience. And we do. Though *Good Kill* and *Eye in the Sky* are ideologically opposed (one justifies the Western use of the armed drone and the other condemns it), they use the same symbolic economy of helpless female bodies to accomplish their ideological projects.

**THE UNEQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF TERROR**

*Good Kill’s* insistence on exclusively using drone footage to depict drone strikes does more than just distort viewers’ field of vision: it restricts their ability to hear the sounds of bombs and therefore imagine the terror they elicit. In “Filming War,” Jay Winter describes the effectiveness of silence in conveying terror. Terror is difficult to represent in film, he begins, but silence “carries terror within it much more readily than the scariest movie score does. Stop the sound and terror is one of the elements of the story that rushes to the surface” (110). Winter
argues that the silent film is most effective at representing the terror of war, but his argument does not account for the drone film. I would argue instead that silence in drone films can be weaponized against the viewer—and consequently against the real and imagined victims of drones—to restrict the viewer’s recognition of victims and their terror. This is not to say that silence is never used in a constructive manner in drone films. The silences in *Good Kill*, as we will see, serve only to enforce asymmetrical structures of terror, but the silences in *Eye in the Sky* are designed to expose audiences to their own introspection. As Michel Chion puts it, the “reflection” of the “silence of the loudspeakers” is the “attentive silence of the audience” (151). These two drone films thus differ in their use of silence to starkly different effects.

In *Good Kill*, we witness explosion after explosion. Each one is mediated through the crosshairs of a drone’s camera. We only and always see these explosions on a drone’s video feed. The only sounds we hear are those of the “cockpit,” or the bunker in which the drone crew operates. This insistence on representing drone strikes from this one limited, heavily mediated point of view reduces the explosion to a strictly visual spectacle; there are no sound effects. On the ground, however, each explosion assaults every human sense, perhaps vision least of all (until the dust settles, at least). It is relatively unsurprising that *Good Kill*, a film about American drone operators, would privilege the imagined experience of American drone operators. It seems like a valuable project to represent the lives and struggles of American drone operators to the American public, just as war films have illustrated the lives and struggles of American soldiers throughout history—except that in refusing to include the Other experience, *Good Kill* also prevents the audience from accessing or even imagining that Other experience. The film, through silence, restricts our efforts at recognition, as does a relentlessly persistent aerial view. We do not
hear the voices of the figures on the drone feed, nor do we hear the sounds, smell the smells, or feel the heat or pain of a drone strike.

*Eye in the Sky,* however, offers another approach, one in which silence indeed conveys a sense of terror to the audience—precisely because it is crosscut with scenes of intense sound. The last twenty minutes of this film are dedicated to documenting the aftermath of two drone strikes, the initial strike and a follow up, which the entire film up to that point has been dedicated to debating. The film has multiple settings: a boardroom in London, a hotel in Hong Kong, a drone cockpit at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, a facial recognition/damage assessment site in Hawaii, and a heavily guarded compound in Kenya. Once the missile strikes, the camera cuts to the devastation on the ground—loud explosions, dust and rubble flying, people screaming—and then crosscuts to the silence of the drone crew’s trailer in Nevada. The drone pilot’s breathing is the only sound, paired with an extreme close-up of his eyes, as he watches the explosion on the screen in front of him. Then, the drone’s video feed fills the screen. Back and forth, the camera cuts between these locations, the board room, the damage assessment center, and the Hong Kong hotel room. Everywhere but the strike site registers complete diegetic and non-diegetic silence, save for the pilot’s breathing. The juxtaposition between that silence and the sensory overload on the ground at the strike site emphasizes the horror of the scene and the shocking contrast between the experience of the network of people who order and execute the strike and those who experience it on the ground. In this way, silence indeed provides a “visceral punch” (Winter 104).

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22 *Syriana,* a 2005 feature directed by Stephen Gaghan, has a similar scene, though it is much shorter and there are fewer parties involved. The scene cuts between shots of a convoy on a road in the middle of desert, aerial shots of the convoy (seemingly drone footage), and a drone command center. The view of the strike itself is first on the ground level, briefly, then to the aerial view.
Undoubtedly, *Eye in the Sky* showcases the efforts cinematic form can make to combat complicity in asymmetrical structures of terror. However, *Eye in the Sky*, like *Good Kill*, fails to fully represent the terror that “structures the reality” of those populations living under constant threat of drone strikes (Hussain). There is another sound that neither film registers, one that evokes abject terror in those subjected to it day after day: the awful buzz of a drone hovering overhead. “Many people from the tribal areas of Pakistan [FATA, or Federally Administered Tribal Areas] describe the sound as a low-grade, perpetual buzzing, a signal that a strike could occur at any time…. Because the drones can surveil the area for hours at a time, and because each round of surveillance may or may not result in a strike, the fear and anxiety among civilians is diffuse and chronic” (Hussain). This perpetual buzzing has a traumatic effect on the populations drones torment. In *Eye in the Sky*’s world, the location of the drone strikes is Kenya, where the British and Americans do not often direct drone strikes. The lack of precedent for the drone strikes in the film explains the absence of this terrifying buzz. In *Good Kill*, however, the same areas are struck repeatedly over the course of the film’s narrative. The film tells us that the drones spend hundreds of hours overhead, surveilling the same sites for days on end. What is more, the inhabitants of these targeted communities are struck often enough that they learn to expect “double-taps.” Surely, then, these inhabitants would have come to register the constant sound of the drone overhead. Yet in *Good Kill* there is never a time we might hear this sound because there is never a time the film offers grounded footage. This terror is yet another—and a crucial—norm of recognition withheld from viewers.

This terror, which erodes the quality of life in these areas for combatants and non-combatants alike, is completely asymmetrical. The “War on Terror” supposedly describes our terror at the threat *they* pose to us. Yet the threat of terrorist attacks that we in the United States
live under is a vague, hypothetical kind of threat. On the other hand, the threat of attack is much more imminent to those whom we threaten with the drone. *Good Kill* perpetuates this myth that the war we are waging is a War on Terror rather than a War of Terror. Through the drone, we have in fact mastered the weaponization of terror.

This is not to say that Americans are not entitled to their own sense of terror. The terrorists responsible for 9/11 were people who had lived among us, worked among us, studied among us, and we thought they had become like us. Their attack felt like something more than an attack; it felt like a betrayal of trust. Yet the fear that lingers in America after 9/11 does not equate to the constant, urgent fear someone in Waziristan feels as he or she hears the buzz of the drone overhead. Even so, *Good Kill* uses 9/11 to justify the collateral damage of drone warfare, nearly ten years after the fact. After the crew accidentally kills two children who wandered into the drone’s target zone after the strike was ordered, Colonel Johns attempts to soothe Major Egan’s conscious: “Well, you want to know how I think about it? …Just now, we didn’t know those kids were going to show up. But they knew…for a fact there were kids in those 767s they flew into the Twin Towers. They had to walk past those kids to get into the cockpits.” In this logic, the damage done to “us” will always justify the damage we do to “them,” no matter how disproportionate that damage becomes. The asymmetry of fear and terror in this war follows the same logic.

Drone warfare, with its persistent asymmetry of risk, seems unable to capture what Winter calls “the emotional landscape of battle” (104). Winter suggests that “[f]ear can be suggested but never tasted in film” (104). *Good Kill* suggests that this inability to taste fear is true for drone video footage as well, signaling yet another conflation between the two types of filmic representation. This asymmetrical experience of fear is the thorn in Tommy Egan’s side.
Hi s co-
pilot, Suarez, asks him during a crew’s night out at a strip club, “How bad do you miss it? Flying.” Side-stepping her question, Egan responds, “I miss the fear. You’re up in the sky, something can happen. There’s risk, you know…. We’ve got no skin in the game. I feel like a coward, every day. Taking pot shots from half a world away in an air-conditioned cubicle.” The disproportionate distribution of risk is baked into the discussion of the ethics of drone warfare; the disproportionate distribution of fear is another thing altogether. Surely Egan misses the thrill and adrenaline of flying, but his longing to get back into a plane, to see combat again, is about something deeper: it is a desperate need for self-respect. It is possible (if one strains) to glean that Egan is uneasy with the unequal distribution of terror inherent in this new mode of warfare, but the film uses Egan’s unease to garner viewers’ sympathy with him, not with those subjected to this terror. (He feels bad about what he is being made to do; it is even ruining his personal life. He wants to do the right thing, but it is complicated; he has to follow orders.) Good Kill is in this way something more, and something different, than mere pro-war propaganda. It is an act of war itself insofar that it is a mass mediated, cultural artifact that perpetuates the unequal distribution of terror, of recognition, and of grief that are the signatures of modern asymmetrical warfare, and particularly drone warfare.

THE LIE

Just in case viewers do begin to find themselves implicated in drone warfare, Good Kill displaces their own sense of responsibility onto Major Tommy Egan by finally endowing him with agency. Early in the film, a conflict of responsibility emerges. After the mission that leaves two children dead, Colonel Johns attempts to reassure Egan, saying, “We all pull the trigger in that box, Tommy. All of us.” Egan responds, “Thank you for saying that, sir, but we both know I
pulled the trigger.” Even though the film grossly underrepresents the extent of the network behind each American drone strike—in reality, nearly 200 personnel, including lawyers, senior military officers, image analysts, and drone crews—it still makes a clear effort to complicate agency (Gregory 7). Egan takes orders from Colonel Johns, who takes orders from the United States Air Force, until the whole team must take orders from the C.I.A, who takes its orders from the Administration (read: President Obama, who is alluded to but never named)—though the C.I.A. also instructs the team not to record the strikes it orders, so presumably there is no assurance that the Administration actually ordered these strikes at all.23 In other words, as there is no record of them, nothing could ever be proven.

Egan, however, clearly feels that he is responsible each time he pulls the trigger. Near the end of the film, Egan tells his wife about his job, something that he has refused to do on previous occasions (either to spare himself or to spare her):

Well, yesterday, I was flying over a house in South Waziristan….It was the house of a Taliban commander….When he [came] back around dawn, the family was still [sleeping] inside, but I wasn’t sure when I’d get this chance again, so I blew the house up anyway. And I watched as the neighbors started pulling the bodies out…. I watched all morning as these locals clean up the mess, got ready for the funeral. They like to bury their dead within 24 hours, which is a happy coincidence for me because that’s how long I can stay in the air. I watched them carry the bodies up the hill to the grave site. I had information that the Taliban commander’s brother would attend the funeral. So I waited until they were all there, saying their prayers, and then I blew them up too. That’s my job.

23 After their first mission with the CIA in which they are ordered to do a double-tap, killing a group of first-responders with shovels, Suarez is furious: “What the fuck was that? They give Nobel Peace Prizes for this shit now?” President Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.
Egan’s repeated use of “I” clearly indicates the responsibility he feels for the drone strikes he is ordered to make. Yet we, as an audience, understand that Egan is required to follow orders; he may pull the trigger, but he does not choose targets nor make the decision they should die. The chain of command is complicated, and we surely do not hold Egan fully responsible for the damage he does with the drone he flies—at least, up until this point in the film. Up to now, Egan’s disgust with his job has been written clearly on his face during each mission (except for the night when he is charged with providing cover to a team of soldiers sleeping in the mountains of Afghanistan). His face is taut and strained, his jaw continually clenched. He tells Suarez in the club that he “feels like a coward every single day.” Ethan Hawke’s finely tuned acting and the film’s script let us know Egan is not to blame.

Yet soon the film invites us to agree with Egan: he is responsible for his actions in the drone bunker. We first begin to recognize Egan’s agency in the strikes he is ordered to execute when he intentionally “drops the link,” or disrupts visual contact with the target, during a mission with the C.I.A. After an initial strike, the team prepares for a double tap to eliminate first responders to the explosion site. But no responders come; they hide in their homes, by now having learned to expect a follow-up strike. Colonel Johns asks, “What is it you’d like us to do, Langley?” Langley is silent for a moment, and then: “If they can wait, so can we. What’s our loiter time?” Egan responds, “Eight hours.” Langley: “Then we wait.” So they wait. An indefinite amount of time passes until, finally, Egan cues them to a white truck approaching the scene. But this time, after Egan and Suarez have prepped the strike, Egan counts down, “Three, two, one” —and then with a flick of a joystick, disrupts the drone’s camera feed. It takes less than a minute to get the link back, but by that time the truck they were targeting is lost in a sea of
others just like it. Colonel Johns is angry, but Suarez is thrilled. She admires Egan for what he has done.24

Egan’s actions are not without consequences. He is downgraded to “surveillance” and, finally, he realizes that he will “never fly again.” Even so, Egan seems hopeful. He calls his wife, saying, “I’m sorry. Look, this morning, how I left [drunk] today…Please, Molly. Listen to me. Give me a chance, I want to make this right.” But Molly has news, too: she is taking her kids to stay with her sister in Reno, and she does not know when they will be back. Egan’s valiant act of resistance is too little, too late.

A couple of short scenes later, we see Egan back at work. Soon, he sees a familiar figure on the screen, and he decides to act. Frustrated with his job as a glorified assassin and with the devastation of his marriage, Egan encourages the rest of his team to take a break, locks himself in the trailer once they leave, and rains Hellfire on the rapist he has observed over the drone feed from time to time. The escalation of Egan’s agency serves two purposes: first, it slowly marshals our sympathy for Egan by drawing us into his personal narrative, and second, it displaces responsibility from American viewers: Egan has agency; we do not. We are helpless, like Suarez. What can we possibly do about drone warfare? Good Kill wants us to feel good about Egan’s action. After he performs unofficial “damage assessment” to verify that his target is dead and the woman is safe, the score becomes calm, restful, and subtly upbeat. The musical theme is the

24 Egan saves not one, but two brown women in this film. Later in the film, Suarez credits her decision to “turn in her wings” with “what happens” with Egan in this scene. The earlier equivalency between Suarez and the rape victim is upheld: both need a white man, Egan, to preserve their innocence and their safety. The rape victim needed saving from physical violation, while Suarez needed saving from a job which compromised her morals and self-respect. She, seemingly more than any other member of Crew 32, chafes against Langley’s orders. She is so grateful to Egan for intervening in one of these orders that after “[ing]” in [her] wings,” Suarez concludes her sustained flirtation with Egan by implicitly offering him sex. “Make no mistake,” she says after slipping him her number, “I am first class.”
same that plays when Egan and Suarez provide cover to a team of American soldiers sleeping in the mountains of Afghanistan earlier in the film. Egan exits the bunker—presumably for the last time—into the harsh Nevada sunlight and takes off down the road in his vintage Mustang toward Reno, where his estranged wife and children reside. Finally, he has done something he is proud of, the film tells us. Finally, his priorities are straight.

Egan’s decision to kill the Afghani rapist is hugely problematic for many reasons, not least of which is that it performs the “culturally imperialist exploitation of feminism” that Spivak describes.\(^25\) It creates the impression that Egan is a hero, a white savior watching over this vulnerable woman in order to protect her.\(^26\) But it does do one important thing: it helps dispel the myth that drone warfare is not deeply intimate warfare. Much has been said about the detachment that the drone engenders, but Katherine Chandler and others have disputed the idea that drone aircraft should primarily be evaluated in terms of detachment and dehumanization. In her article, “A Drone Manifesto,” Chandler writes, “Rather than critiquing unmanned aircraft as dehumanizing, I argue that responses to drones must address the interconnections they produce and call for a politics that puts together the dissociation on which unmanned systems rely” (1). Other scholars follow suit, and this thesis enters into that work. Though I criticize Good Kill for restricting viewers’ ability to recognize the imagined victims of American drone strikes, and therefore doing the work of dehumanization, I would argue that this refusal to allow recognition

\(^{25}\) Given the extensive network of people involved in a single drone strike, it is unclear whether Egan’s unilateral execution here would even be possible; this kill is definitively extrajudicial; it is quite clearly a personally motivated murder; this strike, carried out with absolutely no official oversight, cost taxpayers nearly 70,000 dollars. The list goes on.

\(^{26}\) The gender politics of this film are complex and fascinating, and deserve separate consideration. The casting of Mad Men’s January Jones as Molly, Egan’s whiny-yet-wise wife, and her opposition to an overtly sentimental and hypersexualized Suarez is fertile ground for analysis. Separately from Molly, Zoe Kravitz’s Suarez, as a women of color who plays Egan’s professional subordinate and who engages in a sustained flirtation with the white male protagonist, warrants greater critical attention as well.
is deeply grounded in the intimate. Rejecting intimacy is very much bound up in the consideration of intimacy itself, and intimacy, the “we” that is the result of recognition, increases a person’s vulnerability by rendering her susceptible to grief if the other dies.

In his review of *Good Kill* in *The New Yorker*, Anthony Lane writes, “Thanks to this movie, you can meet with friends for dinner and talk passionately about depersonalized conflict, collateral damage, and modes of modern imperialism, until everyone just leaves” (1-2). Lane echoes Carruthers’ complaint of *Eye in the Sky*, charging *Good Kill* with producing a kind of self-congratulatory outrage at the asymmetry of drone warfare. The film produces a shallow affect, one that lasts only long enough for a cathartic conversation with friends. To this I would add that rather than developing a more nuanced treatise of drone warfare and its damage—though of very different sorts—to all parties involved, *Good Kill* isolates the American experience *at the expense* of all Others’. Critics’ unease with these two very different efforts to depict truths about drone warfare troubles the notion that drone films are capable of producing any more than a one-off table-talk consciousness in viewers.

*Good Kill*’s representation of drone warfare is not without consequence. In his review, Lane alleges that “Niccol is roused less by the moral quandaries of drone deployment…than by the sheer sensory oddity of this new ritual, with its compound of monkishness and mayhem” (2). That indeed seems to be the case. Rather than tease out the higher stakes of drone warfare, Niccol focuses in on one American man’s experience and consequently ignores the wider implications of it while still capitalizing on the drone as an “almost too convenient emblem of alienation” (Lane). What is more, Niccol takes responsibility out of the CIA’s hands, and out of the viewers’ hands, and puts it into the hands of a virtuous, if troubled, man. But the fact is that by entering into the cultural discourse around drone warfare *while drone warfare is eminent*,
*Good Kill* puts at stake American viewers’ opportunity for a deeper understanding of the consequences of the global War on Terror. Jay Winter describes the powerful effect one British film had on the public in WWI:

> In 1916, the British government produced a film entitled *The Battle of the Somme*, which was distributed and shown while soldiers were still engaged in this staggering six-month operation…. At the center of the film was an entirely false reconstruction of what it meant to ‘go over the top.’ A line of soldiers in a trench crawl up to its lip, then stand and proceed through smoke and fire to engage the enemy One man is ‘hit’ and slides down the trench. Entirely silent, without any musical accompaniment, the scene had a staggering effect on the audience, many of whom had relatives serving in the war at that very moment. (104)

While watching the film, “women fainted; others had to be escorted from the cinema” (Winter 104). The circumstances are different, of course, and Winter is primarily making an argument about the power of the silent film in (mis)representing war. But it is also clear that that film’s impact on the public was so great because Britain was currently engaged in the war the film depicted. Its depiction of war in the trenches—though “entirely false”—shocked and horrified the audience, largely because the men in the film “could have been the husband, brother, or son of someone in the audience” (104). “The power of film to lie about war,” as Winter puts it, has long been established.

The lie *Good Kill* tells is that American drone pilots are the true victims of drone warfare. It is they who must wrestle with the moral consequences of their actions, and therefore it is they who are most affected by drone warfare. Yet it also tells the lie that the drone is a weapon of valorization, a way for the men burdened with the responsibility of the drone to redeem
themselves. *Good Kill* frames drone warfare through the experience of the drone pilot, and what is excluded—what lies outside the frame—is in fact the wider truth of drone warfare. Though *Good Kill* is set in 2010, seven years later drone warfare is thriving. We are not witnessing with the objective perspective of the future either. Instead, we witness under the conditions of the urgency of the present.
CONCLUSION

*Good Kill*, like *Zero Dark Thirty*, makes a truth claim. Three frames at the beginning of the film flash three messages in succession: “After September 11, 2001, the U.S. military began using weaponized unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the war on terror”; “This story is set in 2010, during the greatest escalation of targeted killings”; “Based on actual events.” *Good Kill* may not hold itself to the same standard of what we might call “reportedness” that *Zero Dark Thirty* claims for itself, and its connection to real people and real events may be much more tenuous, but there are certain elements of the film that are recognizably based on true events. The funeral party Egan blows up near the end, for instance, the one he describes to his wife, draws to mind a real life funeral party in Waziristan that was struck by a United States drone. That strike killed at least sixty people, and was reported on in *The New York Times* and other mainstream news outlets (“U.S. Drone Strike Said to Kill 60”). “Signature strikes” did indeed begin to overtake “personality strikes” in 2008, and most American drones are operated from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada (“Drone Warfare ‘Signature Strikes’”). Even though its truth claim is much less insistent than *Zero Dark Thirty*’s, *Good Kill* affects credibility, too, by including these true-to-life details.

*Eye on the Sky*, on the other hand, is purely fictional. The characters are completely imaginary, many of them approaching caricature; the technology is too advanced; the suspense of the plot is exaggerated. It is also distinctly not an American film. American drone pilots are painted as mere pawns, unlucky young men and women who join the military to pay for college and then find themselves ordered to do morally reprehensible things; American politicians are
painted as ruthless and utterly unsentimental. The film makes no effort to endow American
characters—nor any others—with back stories.

But *Eye in the Sky*, too, opens with a truth claim, if of a very different kind. White letters
on a black screen read, “In war, truth is the first casualty.” This quote by the ancient Greek
playwright Aeschylus lingers for a few moments before the word “truth” fades and disappears,
while the rest of the quote momentarily lingers on the screen. It is unclear which truth the word
references. It could refer to the lie Colonel Powell (Helen Mirren) tells when she manipulates the
strike zone to generate a forty-five percent likelihood that Alia will be struck by the drone, when
in reality it is at least sixty percent, in order to soothe the conscience of the British government
officials. The opening frame could also be a meta-comment about the impossibility of
representing war. If no film or story can truly represent the reality of war, then perhaps fiction
can better capture the essence of it, *Eye in the Sky* suggests.

This film, like Tim O’Brien’s book about the Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*,
advocates for the “story-truth” over the “happening-truth” because stories, like O’Brien’s
narrator says, “can make things present” in a way the happening-truth cannot (172). What
O’Brien means is that the story-truth conveys an essential truth, one that captures something
more than the bare facts (or the happening-truth) of the event. To tell the happening-truth is
inherently troubled in the same way that to tell a historical narrative is inherently troubled.
Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes:

[T]he historical narrative bypasses the issue of truth by virtue of its form. Narratives are
necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus they necessarily distort life whether
or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct. Within that
viewpoint, history becomes one among many types of narratives with no particular
distinction except for its *pretense* of truth. (emphasis added, 6)
The form of a story, too, is at odds with the idea of “the truth” as an objective, absolute value.
War stories have long (perhaps always) struggled to represent the truth of war.

*Zero Dark Thirty* is hardly the first film that critics have charged with “play[ing] fast and
loose with history” (Cieply). This thesis would be challenged, complicated, expanded, and likely
strengthened by considering it in the context of the long history of American war cinema. For
instance, *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), a feature film about President Kennedy’s assassination,
raised many of the same questions *Zero Dark Thirty* did: “What obligation does Hollywood owe
facts, accuracy, the truth? When popular history like Oliver Stone’s *JFK* gets hold of a subject,
what kind of damage can be done?” (“Hollywood & History”). And though *JFK* “was hailed as a
cinematic tour de force,” it too “ignited a firestorm of controversy for the way it mixed fact with
conjecture, truth with fiction” (“Hollywood & History”). Furthermore, *Good Kill* is not the first
film to represent a disturbing kind of warfare while that warfare is happening, as we have seen
with *The Battle of the Somme* (though that was a British film, and not an American feature). And
it would therefore be useful to consider it in a greater historical context.

Lastly, any deeper study of war cinema’s efforts to claim factual credibility since 9/11
should consider the ways in which contemporary American war films have used emerging media
forms to establish truthfulness. *In the Valley of Elah*, for example, a 2007 film directed by Paul
Haggis (and with a story by Mark Boal), manufactures cell phone video footage which is used
within the film in the place of flashbacks. *Redacted*, another 2007 film, directed by Brian De
Palma, features fictionalized versions of supposedly real events: a rape and several murders in
Iraq. But De Palma “presents them in a way suggesting how he found them; the movie looks
cobbled together largely from found Web footage. It’s better photographed than much similar material on the Web, and edited to create a relentless momentum, but he wants us to feel as if we’re discovering this material for ourselves” (Ebert, “Redacted”). That feeling of discovering this material for oneself is part of the truth DePalma wants to convey. When films appropriate other forms of video footage in order to project an impression of factual stability, the line between fact and fiction is increasingly blurred—yet this very fact reflects a truth no less emblematic of our time. In a world of first-person shooter video games and cell-phone videos of police brutality, the implications of moving images and of representation are increasingly complex, and the scholar who tries to make sense of the role of the moving image in the production of history would do well to lean into that complexity.
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