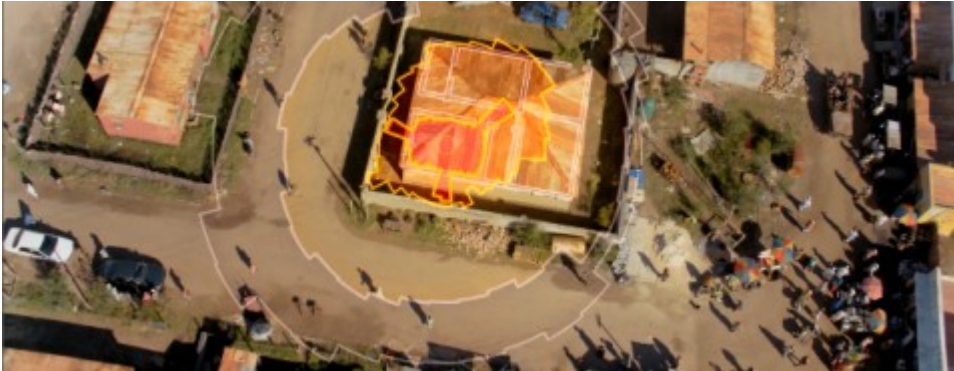


## Remote-controlled warfare

by [Thomas Jay Oord](#) in the [August 17, 2016](#) issue



GODLIKE VIEW? The timely thriller *Eye in the Sky* addresses the complications of drone warfare operations in Nairobi, Kenya.

In July the Obama administration released a two-page report on the number of people who were killed by U.S. “targeted attacks” from 2009 to 2015. The official numbers were between 2,372 and 2,581 combatants, and between 64 and 161 civilians. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism has contested those numbers, putting the actual number closer to 4,500, including 474 civilians. The higher number means that over a six-year period, during U.S. military operations in an undeclared war, U.S. drone or unmanned missiles killed two people a day, and a civilian every four days.

Director Gavin Hood’s film *Eye in the Sky*—released last month for streaming—joins Rick Rosenthal’s film *Drones* and Andrew Niccol’s *Good Kill* in raising questions about this form of warfare.

In *Eye in the Sky*, British colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren) is tracking terrorists in Nairobi. She’s in London, but with the use of remote cameras she locates a known leader in the terrorist organization al-Shabaab. The terrorist is exposed and can be captured, and Powell receives the directive to pick her up. But at the same time, little remote cameras called cyborg beetles reveal that two people are about to unleash a suicide attack in a crowded Nairobi neighborhood. The colonel’s aim shifts to killing the attackers, until suddenly a nine-year-old girl, Alia (Aisha Takow), wanders into the frame. If the terrorist dies, Alia will die too.

Both the British prime minister and the U.S. secretary of defense are alerted to the situation. At various distances from Nairobi, members of the antiterrorist initiative debate the political, moral, and military dilemmas of the situation. Lt. General Frank Benson (Alan Rickman, in his last screen role) grows increasingly frustrated and disdainful at the unwillingness of the decision makers to claim responsibility for their choices. Drone pilot Steve Watts (Aaron Paul) sits in Nevada waiting to pull a trigger. Only Jama Farah (Barkhad Abdi), who is operating the cyborg beetles in Nairobi, is close to the situation on the ground.

Meanwhile the officials debate not only the moral questions, but also the public relations questions. One official points out, "If al-Shabaab kills 80 people, we win the propaganda war. If [Britain] kills one little girl in a drone strike, they do." This numbers game, played back and forth across the globe, seems to have little to do with the value of Alia's life.

Hood presents the complexity of the situation. No one has an easy out, and everyone passes the decision to strike or not strike to the next person in the chain of command. Those involved in this suspense-packed film communicate by phone and text and video stream. In a moment of subtle satire, the pilot Watts walks out of his room onto an airfield dressed for combat as if he's about to take off for Nairobi. He instead enters a small shed and doesn't come out for the rest of the film.

There are a few other dark-humored moments: the U.S. secretary of state has to interrupt a game of Ping-Pong. The British foreign secretary sits on a toilet in Singapore.

With all its cameras and screens, *Eye in the Sky* suggests a Godlike view of the proceedings on the ground far away, even while depicting human failings. The film dismantles an easy ideology of villain and hero and calls all moral clarity into question.

But what if we consider the proceedings from a different theological angle? We could imagine God as someone like Alan Rickman, standing at a distance and expressing disdain for those who can't see what he sees, which raises one set of moral questions. But what if we imagine God as Alia—adding vulnerability to the terror that we have helped create, challenging our certainties and our deadly plans? Does that change what happens next?

Those who condone drone technology, with its talk of precision and targets, may prefer to put aside its morally troubling aspects. *Eye in the Sky* challenges our use of power and moral certainty.