

**The Ticking Bomb Drone Strike:  
Drone Warfare and Emergency Ethics in *Eye in the Sky***

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In a recent re-evaluation of Elaine Scarry's *The Body of Pain* (1985), Kevin McSorley (2019) has noted that the structure of modern drone warfare is analogous to the structure of political torture. Both forms of violence share the imposition of total power over populations and bodies, which McSorley calls 'a sense of the incontestable reality of the torturing regime's power' (3); torture and drone warfare are marked as strategies of violent biopolitical governmentality by their concern with total control and knowledge of the people and populations against whom they are violently mobilized.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, narratives about torture and drone strikes often display interesting similarities. The ticking bomb scenario, for example, dramatizes a falsely unambiguous decision point – a bomb is ticking, and a prisoner is tortured until they reveal the information which can prevent the bomb going off – in order to frame a misleadingly persuasive narrative which attempts to justify torture. This chapter examines Gavin Hood's 2015 film *Eye in the Sky*, which frames a situation strikingly similar to the ticking bomb scenario, with the key difference that the political technology which is framed as the solution to an imminent terror attack is a drone strike. This film, which is explicitly staged as a debate about the morality, ethics and legality of drone warfare (including a foregrounded consideration of collateral damage), reveals the limitations of any critique or understanding of drone warfare which relies on the granular basis of emergency ethics. Like any critique of torture, a critique of drone warfare must consider broader questions of geopolitical power, sovereignty, inequality, and surveillance, not simply whether any given situation may or may not legitimise a violent act. This chapter argues that whilst theoretical discourse may be beginning to comprehend the political and philosophical implications of drone warfare, cinematic narratives which rely on an evaluation of emergency ethics so far remain unable to fully account for it.

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin McSorley, 'Predatory War, Drones and Torture: Remapping the Body in Pain', *Body & Society* (2019), pp. 1-27.