



Figure 1. *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015)

# Ethical Whiteness and the Death Drive: White Women as the New War Hero

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April 2016 saw the release of the grim but riveting Helen Mirren film *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015), a production that centers on a US/UK military operation to capture an English woman-turned-terrorist who is meeting with a Somalia-based militant group at a house in Nairobi. Running the operation is “fatigues-wearing badass” Colonel Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren), who decides the capture mission has to be changed to a “kill” operation when a cyborg beetle (a small whirling surveillance device—a mini drone apparently actually in development, but not in use, in the real world) reveals two inhabitants strapping on explosives, presumably for a suicide mission. However, moments before the drone pilots shoot their missile, the drone camera reveals an adorable little brown girl selling bread right in front of the targeted house. Thus begins the journey of *Eye in the Sky* (subsequently referred to as *Eye*) into the heart of what I term “ethical whiteness.” The shifting scenes in the film reveal important actors: a nervous young white drone pilot in

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Nevada, the ready-to-kill but likable Powell in Sussex, the waffling white British politicians who are horrified to see the little brown girl through the eye in the sky, the British foreign secretary at an arms conference in Singapore who gives permission to shoot while on the toilet, and an annoyed US secretary of state at a ping-pong tournament in China. Thus even as the central dilemma in *Eye* pivots on the life (or rather, inevitable death) of the little brown girl, the film moves through geographies of whiteness—a pseudo-global cosmopolitanism that inscribes whiteness onto an expansive yet confabulated color-blind geography.

The *Vancouver Sun* gave *Eye* four stars, saying, “Overhead, invisible and impersonal, is a complex creation aimed at military and political control; on the ground, a little girl sells bread.”<sup>1</sup> James Berardinelli of *Reel Reviews* states: “Difficult choices and consequences—these things lie at the core of *Eye in the Sky*’s drama. Nothing is simple or clean-cut. There’s no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’—only points and counterpoints.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the film’s grim denouement is implicitly juxtaposed to the futurity of an ethical whiteness, an ethos whose death drive is effectively enclosed in a machinic technofuture and new white womanhood. *Eye* opened the same week that US drone strikes reportedly killed 150 civilians in Somalia.<sup>3</sup>

What the *Atlantic* calls a “charming comedy about a terrible war,” *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (dir. Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, US, 2016) stars Tina Fey as Kim Barker, a network news journalist who seizes the opportunity to report from Afghanistan in 2004.<sup>4</sup> This story of one woman’s self-discovery, an *Eat-Pray-Love*-esque war travelogue adapted from Barker’s memoir, is rife with racist comic relief. Clueless about war politics and lacking general cultural competency, Fey’s character angers the locals, loses her money, gets scammed by a kid, calls local women’s clothing “Ikea bags,” and refers to Kabul as “Ka-bubble.” There are white actors in brown-face (Christopher Abbott and Alfred Molina play the film’s two principal Afghan characters), and, in one particularly egregious moment, Harry Nilsson’s “Without You” plays while brown people are being shot to death. The slapstick humor of *Whiskey* allows the

banalizing of death and loss and takes on a necropolitical irony in the context of knowing what soldiers were doing in Afghanistan. In 2010, for example, we came to learn that twelve US soldiers faced charges over a “secret kill team” that shot Afghan civilians at random and collected their fingers as trophies. The concocters of this kill team were twenty-five-year-old and twenty-two-year-old soldiers.<sup>5</sup>

This essay centers on these two films, both of which feature white women as the central protagonists in the racialized domains of war and political machinations. While disparate in tone, style, and priorities, *Eye* and *Whiskey* significantly expose important dilemmas around whiteness, gender, and necropolitics. While the goal of *Whiskey* is to recount everyday journalism through gendered facility, *Eye* stuns its audience into the historical present through shock and awe. Mobilizing what Robyn Wiegman describes as “a vast social geometry of white particularities” even as they deny them,<sup>6</sup> these films appear to be both profoundly antimasculine and inaugurate an antiracist white subject, yet both narratives are driven by—and indeed obsessed with—the violent archive of twenty-first-century racial struggles. I argue that these two technologies of domination—visual culture that entertains its citizens, and political practice that secures its citizenry—are profoundly interlinked public archives in which to read what I call “ethical whiteness,” its relationship to the death drive, and the gendered currency of both.

While George Lipsitz has argued that nearly every Hollywood war film tells the story of war through the perspective of the white male—and indeed, the majority of war films do feature white men—we can follow a new heuristic formulation in the superhuman white women in popular war TV and film.<sup>7</sup> The Academy-Award-winning film *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, US, 2013), which depicts the CIA’s hunt for Osama Bin Laden and his eventual assassination just outside Islamabad, is a perfect example. Using the familiar tropes of the quintessential (white) American liberal feminist woman now determined to find and kill dangerous brown men, *Zero Dark Thirty* glorifies white female determi-

nation and persistence in a world dominated by men. The violence directed at brown bodies is masked in the film (even as it is revealed) by the fierce determination of the white female subject, Maya (Jessica Chastain), and by the fact that the once-masculinist genre of war films now both stars and is directed and produced by a woman. The film was a box office hit: as *Time* magazine puts it, the “get-bin-Laden docudrama water-boards the competition.”<sup>8</sup>

*Zero* is not an isolated case of necropolitics within a racialized colonial narrative starring a white woman. The popular, award-winning series *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011–18) provides us with another example. The series, which also stars a white woman (Claire Danes) dead set on finding and eliminating terrorists, won both an Emmy for Outstanding Drama Series and a Golden Globe for Best Television Series. There is also *The Honourable Woman* (BBC, 2014), a political thriller about a powerful, stylish, Anglo-Israeli arms heiress (Maggie Gyllenhaal) navigating the complexities of doing business in the Middle East while trying to promote peace between Israel and Palestine. *Madam Secretary* (CBS, 2014–2019), which premiered the same year as *The Honourable Woman*, stars Téa Leoni as the newly appointed and extremely ethical secretary of state entering into the midst of political drama and turbulence.

Cinema’s identity is linked to pleasure and entertainment, but it is also deeply marked by its nationalist loyalty not just to state practices but also to the white racial state’s ethos of exceptionalism and supremacy. In this way, all these films’ and series’ “picnicking” on Islamophobia organizes brown bodies as commodities to perform what Saidiya Hartman calls “economies of pleasure and terror.”<sup>9</sup> Dead Muslims—social death writ large—have been very good to Hollywood. This new visual trend in which white women bury Muslims in democracy’s graveyard reveals that while ethical indifference has always been the engine of white supremacy, whiteness now relies on a particular ethical formation that softens the necropolitical through the performance of gendered affect.

## **Injecting Eros into Death: White Women's Ascendancy in Necro-Spaces**

"Those are the terms . . . to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one."

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*

The ethical dilemma that contours *Eye* centers on the dramatization of two crucial contemporary polemics: whether drones should be used to kill US/UK citizens and what/who are "acceptable" forms of collateral damage. The first third of the film takes on the first question, as ready-to-shoot Colonel Powell impatiently waits while her commanders deflect the question up to every high-ranking government official imaginable, from the prime minister to the president to the lieutenants in control rooms on several continents (fig. 1). It is important to note that Powell is characterized as British, not American, and the film's deliberation on the ethics of drone warfare also takes on a nationalistic edge by contrasting British and US approaches. The process of acquiring permission to shoot an Englishwoman and a US passport holder in the Al-Shabab safe house underscores the ethical anxiety and political tenuousness of drone warfare, revealing the number of actors, hierarchies, and bureaucracies as well as emotions, wills, and conflicts involved in each drone released.

But *Eye* is indeed a clever and complex film. Its visual form is multilayered, cosmopolitan, and intricate. The violence represented in the film, too, has a complex context—who inflicts, who suffers, how it is rationalized, who represents it: one who inflicts, one who witnesses. Thus the cinematic shift from one ethical dilemma to another happens rather subtly and ingeniously, at once expected and dreaded. What follows is a close description of the pivotal scene that shapes the remainder of the violence in and of the titular *Eye*.

Once given permission to launch the drone and destroy the house with the Al-Shabab inhabitants, including the radicalized Englishwoman, the young white male pilot (in company with his female copilot on her first day on the job) sets his finger on the



Figure 2. *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015)

trigger. As he begins his countdown from three, the drone camera pans the surface of the target house, capturing an ambiguous red figure moving along the side of the gated home. The drone pilot zooms in, revealing the red figure to be a little Kenyan girl, Alia (Aisha Takow), wearing a red hijab abaya, holding a basket full of loaves of bread, and slowly making her way to a small wooden table outside the house (fig. 2). The pilot's face fills with dread. "Let's wait till she passes," he says to his female copilot. The scene shifts to Sussex, where an anxious, ready-to-shoot Powell is wondering why the drone hasn't been fired. Powell repeats, "Captain, you have permission to shoot." The drone pilot delays Powell, arguing that since no one has left the house, they have some time before they fire, and the girl's death can be avoided. She, conversely, urges him to shoot. As the dialogue swings back and forth, gaining urgency, the camera cuts to a boardroom in London where four dismayed British officials, including the leading lieutenant general of the operation (Alan Rickman), are watching a large flat-screen monitor that displays a close-up of the young girl laying her bread, loaf by loaf, on the table (fig. 3). Their mouths are slightly open, aghast, their eyes filled with bafflement. Again, the scene cuts back to the



Figure 3. *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, UK/South Africa, 2015)

Nevada pilot, who now sees that the little girl has set up shop. Mirren's voice-over persists, saying, "We have this one opportunity, let's not lose it." The pilot gulps, stuttering, "Ma'am, uh . . . she is selling bread."

With each cut, the anxiety builds. The young pilot's hesitancy and Powell's persistence continues in heated banter; the officials in the London boardroom watch their screen, flummoxed and shaken. Throughout this scene, the camera moves closer and closer to the little girl. We see her face, her round cheeks, her smile. We hear her voice. We see her lay out the bread, her patience as she waits for buyers (once the bread is laid out, no one approaches her from the bustling market just a few kilometers away). The scene closes with the angst-ridden pilot heroically refusing to release his weapon. He has, at least for the moment, defied his (woman) boss to save the (brown) girl.

This "nail-biting" cinematic moment captures the defining elements of this essay.<sup>10</sup> Brown girls, we know, have become fixtures of late capitalist neo-imperial obsession, from Malala Yousafzai to the kidnapped Nigerian girls. The disenfranchised brown girl—often by her mere presence—represents both the socially disorganizing effects of war and the potentialities of late capitalism itself.<sup>11</sup> Every time we see the face of the young girl, the



audience is to know that her world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining fantasies. She has to sell loaves of bread to help her family survive (in a bustling market, where armed Kenyan soldiers are walking around). Malala has to survive a shooting in order to receive an education. The Nigerian girls have to be saved. The girl symbolizes a genealogy outside herself and is, thus, the perfect figure.

Marking both objectification and humanity, the point at which the brown girl makes her entry into the techno-machinic world of whiteness is the point at which her cycle of subjectivity begins. To understand this moment of brown-girl subjectivity—literally enveloped by an affective specular intrusion—is to look at the racial and gender terms in which anxiety and ethics transform her racial markers into assimilable elements that erase racial corporealities even as they deploy them. Herein enters what Judith Butler calls her “girl-ing”<sup>12</sup>—the frock, the red hijab, the chubby cheeks, the gendered play (the audience first meets Alia in the beginning of the film, through the eye of the drone, where she is seen hula-hooping in her dirt yard) and work (selling bread). Each visual trope is tied intimately to her likeability and to the broader economy of white compassion. She is, indeed, adorable.

The adorableness through which the little girl is interpellated, however, relies on important racial and racializing markers, including my decision to describe her as brown. Drawing from Hiram Pérez’s definition of brown as a porous, flexible category, I see brownness as a “deliberately slippery” formation, referring to “bodies perceived, or at least described, literally as brown but also to the fantasies about racial and sexual others, their instinctive, earthy, volatile, scatological, savage, and dirty allure.”<sup>13</sup> In describing the adorable hijab-wearing Kenyan girl as brown, I hope to open up a space to analyze ethical whiteness’s relation to the death drive. This is, of course, by no means a clean containment, as Nadera Shalhoub’s work reminds us, where she writes on Zionist settler colonialism and Palestinian children and what she calls with chilling precision “unchilding.”<sup>14</sup> However, in the context of *Eye*, the specific racializing of the little girl as brown (versus black) produces the ethical dilemma of the film, where brown death consti-

tutes, at least to a certain degree, some ethical conflict and political conversation and black death does not (at least by some parties). I am referring here to Jared Sexton's conceptual notion of "Junior Partners"—other groups of people subordinate to whites who have a dialectical and agonistic relation to civil society that leaves room for negotiation no matter how small this room and the chances to have claims admitted might be. It is also worth motioning specifically to the recent and robust work on the "adultification" of black girls (as young as five) and how such ideological entrenchment keeps black death outside of crisis.<sup>15</sup> Saidiya Hartman captures this with provocative accuracy when she states, "The chronicle of black pain doesn't mobilize a response, it doesn't arrest the reader, and it doesn't incite a crisis."<sup>16</sup>

However, I also want to note that even as the girl comes to be associated with geographies of brownness vis-à-vis age, gender, and adorability, I see blackness and brownness as intersubjective and recognize that brownness—and the definition I'm working from—may unnecessarily/necessarily provincialize blackness. Thus I argue that she is mobilized as an adorable brown girl within the logic of the film even as she is also a black Muslim. In that vein, even as I deploy "brown," I want to raise the specter of what is gained politically, if lost in terms of rhetorical clarity, by using a whole host of terms to describe this adorable child.<sup>17</sup>

Returning, then, to the scene by relying on the "archive of the adorable," this scene produces a semiotically infused physical exchange of libidinal energy between the object looked upon and the baffled gaze.<sup>18</sup> The audience is simultaneously drawn into and constrained by disbelief and adoration. The jolt that comes in response to her adorableness depends on an economy of danger that, at any given moment, can shift and reorganize the value of life. All eyes in the sky are baffled.

Bafflement, I argue, is a core affect of ethical whiteness. As a core affective and libidinal dimension of this film, bafflement keeps intact the unthreatening assumption of whiteness and functions as a psychologizing social glue to mobilize ethics and rationalize violence. Here, white bafflement contours the adorable with the vexing. If human rights are the most potent aphrodisiac of liberal-

ism, as Jasbir Puar has argued, then bafflement is the balm after its inevitable failure.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the fact that the polemic of *Eye* is a child is crucial. The figure of the child does important work, occupying simultaneously, as Sara Ahmed notes, “the ‘not-yet subject’” and the hinge through which the death drive’s conflict is both revealed and surfeited.<sup>20</sup>

Lee Edelman has argued that the figure of the child stands in for US futurity. The child, in Edelman’s conception, serves as the “telos of the social order” and “fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention.”<sup>21</sup> Edelman argues that reproductive futurities—futures which rely on the future of our children—conversely position queers (as nonreproductive citizens) in proximity to the death drive. His canonical work on the child and futurity takes on fantastically different meanings when the child is a racialized figure in racialized spatialities—a child who has never stood for the future—and when the death drive is not signaled by the nonreproductive queer self but exacted through violent and racist technologies. In other words, Edelman appears to conveniently forget whiteness’s proximity to the death drive.

Thus while Edelman contends that the figure of the child can be analytically separated from actual children, Edelman’s child is nonetheless a disavowed white child.<sup>22</sup> All children qua children are not equally subject to regimes of protection and status. Certainly there are a number of examples in which Muslim children appear as “a future of no future.”<sup>23</sup> For one, the October 2001 issue of *Newsweek*, released shortly after the events of September 11, showed a young Muslim boy wearing what appears to be a turban (a garment mistakenly associated with Muslim men and boys, yet a signifier of othered masculinities<sup>24</sup>), holding a large gun against his small body, and looking straight into the camera.<sup>25</sup> His small frame is overpowered by the rifle he holds. But his eyes brazenly confront the camera’s gaze, thus the viewer’s gaze. The text reads, “Why They Hate Us: The Roots of Islamic Rage and What We Can Do about It.” The interplay of image and text is certainly worth noting. The use of this image as a segue to discuss the roots of “Islamic rage” implicates Muslim children in adult political violence. The interaction between words and picture in

this issue of *Newsweek* implies that Muslim children, specifically Muslim boys, are key subjects who absorb the adult emotions of political rage and become future (if not present) actors in political violence against the US.

The image foreshadows the necro-pedophilic future that we now see. From the images of caged immigrant children in border camps to dead Syrian children, we see the persistent flow of visualizing Muslim children as already socially dead or politically dangerous. An even more recent example comes from Nadera Shalhoub, who demonstrates that “children are now one of the main targets of the Israeli state” in large part because they are produced as “always already terrorists” and rendered nonhuman.<sup>26</sup> The figure of the black child or Muslim child certainly doesn’t fit Edelman’s theoretical child icon: innocence incarnate, full of promise, and destined to fulfillment. One might say that the very architecture of Edelman’s argument is racist as it refuses to see the errant, unclaimed necro-pedophilic practice of white supremacy directed toward children of color.

Returning to *Eye*, the film’s use of the little brown girl then appears to enable a Muslim futurity that is kind and earnest—a deeply gendered technology in contrast to the hegemonically accepted perception of Muslim boys. The investment in the child’s innocence is vital to this primal scene, producing at once affect (bafflement) and cognition (the critical desire to stabilize white violence through the assurance of a greater future).<sup>27</sup> But the use of the feminine to signify futurity perverts the terrorists further, following the common line of reasoning that Muslim terrorists are particularly dangerous to women and girls,<sup>28</sup> even though the little girl’s fate is most directly in the hands of another woman, Powell (as well as her bosses, US and British politicians, and the nervous new drone pilot). Bolstering this perversion is the filmic trope of discursively quarantining terrorist violence to the Muslims: we see the Somalian terrorists slowly and ritualistically preparing for a suicide mission, one member slowly dressing the other in a suicide vest. The dramatic contrast between sophisticated, conflicted white people versus the embodied, ritualized brown people offers a visual archive of Achille Mbembe’s contemporary

dialectic of “death as passionate ritual,” that which is in the realm of unreason, versus “death as rational choice,” the accepted paradigm of the political.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the fact that the drone is the immediate threat to the utter and abject unraveling of the little girl’s world, the ritualized terrorists perfectly cast the drone as simultaneous deliverance and destruction. So the choice of the phobic object is racially overdetermined for all—the little girl, the British and American militaries, and the viewer. The visual performance of the death drive as ritual erases the visual reality of the death drive as rational. Tension amasses as the film seesaws from rationalized death making to irrational death ritual, relying precisely on an understanding of racialized Islam as ritualistically murderous. The death drive is locked, as Mirren’s character states, in a “kill chain.”

Michele Aaron’s work on death and the moving image illuminates the ways in which “film and television screens are steeped in death’s dramatics: in spectacles of glorious sacrifice or bloody retribution, in the ecstasy of agony.”<sup>30</sup> And that “brush with danger” is part of the euphoric pleasure gained by cinema, and visual culture, more broadly. Aaron further argues that the death drive secures our understandings of how contemporary culture masks its own political ends.<sup>31</sup> But while Aaron’s work certainly centers the death drive in cinema in provocative ways, I want to put pressure on the whiteness undergirding that death drive.

Sigmund Freud posited that the death drive is a necessary component of the human psyche, shaped by a compulsion to repeat and by self-destructiveness, death wishes, and self-inflicted suffering.<sup>32</sup> As a general constituent of the psyche, the death drive is the interiorization of aggression.<sup>33</sup> By articulating the death drive as primarily internally directed, Freud doesn’t take into account external or exteriorized violence, a key aspect of colonial modernity. While the death drive can be something that stands on its own as an interior pulsion, Freud’s development of this concept is inextricably linked to the violence of modern coloniality and is embedded in racial sociogenic notions, even though his work never acknowledges it. This, then, compels the question on the relation-

ship of the death drive (Freud's least popular and least taken-up idea) and whiteness.

Excavating the social architecture of whiteness in *Eye* requires understanding its means and modes of raising and erasing race. Critical race scholars have argued that whiteness exists only through its ability to differentiate between itself and its racial others, where "blackness is the paramount case."<sup>34</sup> Richard Dyer has pointed out that whiteness reproduces itself as whiteness "in all texts at all times," and not just when set against the racialized other or exclusively in texts that are about racial difference or domination.<sup>35</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith argues that whiteness secures its cultural power by seeming to do/be nothing at all, by being invisible.<sup>36</sup> The inherent stability of the white subject, and thus whiteness, lends itself to the distinctive individuality and subjective complexity most closely associated with white bodies and the privileges of the white body politic. Conversely, Ranjana Khanna notes that blackness/brownness is "not understood as being reflective in the manner that whiteness is."<sup>37</sup> Thus, while we know that the content of the category non-Western changes over time—in this case, the brown girl becomes a global subject of ethical concern while the terrorist target is a radicalized Englishwoman—it is almost always used to construct an alter ego or confirm the Western self.

Emmanuel Levinas wrote that when we face the other, that encounter places immediate moral demands on us.<sup>38</sup> And since that moral demand is met with death in *Eye*, perhaps a more complicated formulation can be drawn out between the relationship of ethical whiteness and the death drive. Politics, in its teleological imperative and future-oriented acts, always and already bears within it the pressures of the drive. We know the girl will experience real, racial violence in just minutes. The immutability of her death is felt with the same urgency as her indigenoussness, as a thing on this earth like sand, water, or dirt. We watch her like the Fanonian black child, who knows not that he is watched, and by the time he learns of it, he has already experienced the violence of whiteness.<sup>39</sup>

She is the fetish object central to the story. She opens up

the space for a conversation on the ethics of death versus the possibility of life. As fetish, the little girl has the double function of not representing negativity (she is the consoling distraction from the encounter of violence) and of representing it (by proliferating anxiety and angst around her death). The enchanted rapture of the little girl, itself a deeply gendered and eroticized disposition, alongside the circumstances of decision makers (now increasingly put in the hands of white women) give rise to a range of white emotions. Whites survive by losing her, and this pedagogy enacts death and loss only through the mechanism of what is also kept alive. Melanie Klein argued that the death drive is undergirded by an unconscious fear of annihilation.<sup>40</sup> This anxiety of annihilation is coupled with the workings of biopower, the suggestion (*vis-à-vis* the cinema) that modern white subjects can live only if racialized subjects trapped in primitive and unenlightened cultures pass away. It is important, however, to note that in the Kleinian system, guilt operates along the lines of the death drive, while for Jacques Lacan the death drive and life drive are part of each other's sustaining cycle.

This critical linkage between guilt and the death drive is important and lends itself to my next point. In fetishizing the little girl, the film comes to plead for empathy by asking whites to read their death-driven investment in life as an armored happiness that aggresses against its enemies. Therefore, it is in white terms that we perceive the dilemma of life and death of this little girl who is already socially dead. This means that white spectators read themselves, and thus whiteness, as ontological condition, onto the non-ontological. White audiences seclude themselves in the economies of compassion produced by the display of an adorable girl and the inescapable misfortune of her (race) reality. It is an opportunity to enjoy the brilliance of bold and edgy filmmaking without being asked to take seriously the possibility of brown/black/Muslim suffering, even as they stand witness to it.

Indeed, the little girl's eventual death is not cast as part of a racist order (where black death, is understood through, and articulated, at least by race scholars and activists, by race/racism/racialization). The geopolitical logics that explain her death and

whiteness's relation to the death drive rely not on race but on securitizing other *others*. The death of one brown Muslim girl saves the other citizens (brown, black, and Muslim) from the brutality of terrorist acts.

For example, after a disastrously failed attempt to buy the bread from the little girl, Powell asks again for the legal clear to shoot the drone, saying, "Many children's lives are at risk, this is just one girl." The language of common sense bespeaks an ethical position, leaving its audience speechless before the enormity of the usual. Powell's pathos (or lack thereof) is made available only through an animated superimposition of ethos. The present temporality of the girl selling bread is held up against a futurist temporality in which numerous innocent lives may be targeted by a suicide mission. Here, the unfettered power of human reason, embodied now in a singular white woman, maps out through a presumed mastery of the real (the brown girl in the eye of the camera) and the symbolic (the "many children at risk"). But Powell just as significantly exposes the narrative fetish which attempts to show white struggle with psychic mastery and political control, particularly when confronted with such affective encounters of ontological crisis (who can "be" in the world) and the unruliness of the world (who keeps coming in the way).

Therefore, and perhaps most importantly, whiteness emerges within this moment as that which despairs of its death drive and its inevitable technology of repetition (the film ends with the young drone pilot being soberly congratulated on a job well done and then subsequently ordered to report back in twelve hours). The latent goodness of whites is secured by the political sphere, by the tacit sanction of a particular structural violence that benefits them, reified in the form of the future, institutionalized by its repetition. Powell animates the complexity and fragmentation of psychoanalysis's subject in relation to the death drive, while still working within the cycle of life and the political rationale that the sovereign Global North has the capacity to create anomic spaces that suspend rights in the Global South. Here, we can understand *Eye* as inciting a crisis only to resolve it through an ethical debate that closes regardless with a kill. The girl's relationship to violence appears contingent



but is in actuality gratuitous—it bleeds out beyond the grasp of narration.

Racial presence is necessary to the expansion, development, and implementation of an imperial order. But *Eye* complicates this idea. By making the target a white Englishwoman (now “radicalized”), the film appears to aim for racial destabilization, or at least provides an opportunity for viewers to visualize complex racial and national identifications. But terrorist monitoring is racial monitoring, just as the state machine is a racializing machine. Yet this empirical fact is effaced in the film. The simple addition of an Anglo-English woman grants authority to the filmic empiricism and thus to the filmic imperative to kill, but it does so by writing a new racial romance.

We know that racial formations are variegated by gender and sexual differences. The use of a white Englishwoman cleverly masks the white death instinct with the colorblind democratic order. The audience learns immediately that Ayesha Al-Hady (formerly Susan Helen Danford, played by Lex King) had a troubled childhood, converted at the age of fifteen, was radicalized at a West London mosque where she met and married her Muslim husband—together, they are numbers four and five on the East Africa most-wanted list. While certainly the audience isn’t to feel sorry for her, the framing of her terroristic turn (*vis-à-vis* the “troubling childhood” logic) and the cinematic decision to keep Ayesha literally hidden for the majority of the film reveals something about both white terrorist life and death versus the life and death of the racial other. The cleverness of a white woman as target (who is literally visually unavailable) against and alongside brown death making (that is always visually available) imposes an interesting epistemic frame, but one that is also ontologically presumptuous. Indeed, at the end of the film Ayesha’s death is confirmed through the slightest sighting of her white ear, scanned in the midst of all the rubble and black/brown/Muslim flesh. What *Eye* does in terms of her characterization and in terms of the varying *mise-en-scènes* of life and death is certainly not inconsequential to the geopolitics of race and gender in the globalized world. Why, for example, symbolically preserve the little brown girl if only to bury her? Moreover,

what gender dynamics are revealed in setting up two white women against each other in an antagonism that sanctions the brown girl's death? And finally, what racial formations are relinquished in revealing Powell's crusade against a "radicalized Englishwoman," whose face we see for less than thirty seconds in the film and for whom the young girl must die?

We can turn to Mbembe's argument that necropower operates within a "state of exception"<sup>41</sup>—an extralegal space in which serialized, mechanized, and impersonal murder can be carried out without regard for legality or individual integrity or political or juridical intervention. The drone predicament that contours the plot of *Eye* is certainly commensurate with Mbembe's analysis: the technoscientific forces that create death, the internationalizing of human ethics across and through geopolitical and geographical borders, the circulation and signs of persistent whiteness that then serves as simultaneous map and compass, and the state of exception of a radicalized Englishwoman.

In this way, *Eye* imposes itself on the consciousness as a moment in extended crisis. The girl's dead body and the loss to her parents are tragic, but Powell's ethical ambivalence opens up an epistemic space to see the young girl, instead, as freed from her life. The death drive and whiteness are absorbed into one another just as white supremacy is absorbed into the ethical. The libidinal and visual economy of white supremacy fixes the girl in a visual grid, which then proceeds to destroy her through the dimension of the empathetic. The pity and terror matrix alongside the violent/adorable dialectic that shapes the dramatics of *Eye* derives a perverse enjoyment from this desire-fueled, libidinal circling around the vanishing point of the possible as impossible. And so, the figure of the little Muslim girl injects a little eros into the culture of death. The evocation of both spectacular public violence and the primitive adorable allows the film to succeed at the level of antiviolence, assuring the audience that "we" are all conflicted, even as the audience is left with the final image of the adorable succumbing to death (drive).

**Camera as Character:  
White Women Auditing the Death Drive**

“I’m the motherfucker that found this place.”

—CIA agent Maya (Jessica Chastain), *Zero Dark Thirty*

Gilles Deleuze tells us that the cinematic is not just a particular mode of image making but is a massive conceptual and sensual apparatus that prepares us to see in a certain way.<sup>42</sup> Politics needs persuasion, and cinematic forms hold the power of conviction. Therefore the use of white women as key players is worthy of our attention. Most obviously, the casting of Mirren and Fey reveals the access white women have come to have in the elite world of politics and war. At least momentarily, *Eye* and *Whiskey* appear to have liberal perspectives on gender relations and war realities. Within this cinematic space, white women emerge as Angela McRobbie’s quintessential phallic girl: a woman who has (celebrated) access to masculine power and through whose character a spectacle of aggression and unfeminine behavior occurs without punishment.<sup>43</sup> Whether it is Jessica Chastain starring as “the motherfucker” who finds Osama Bin Laden, Helen Mirren as the ready-to-shoot “fatigues-wearing bad ass,” or Tina Fey’s faux-feminist journalist, they all represent illustrious Americans contemplating shared values (e.g., the American dream—they all made it). The productivity of white American women, when set in the wider racial retrenchment of brown/Muslim men, provides a gender success story.

Even in the case of comic overstatement in *Whiskey*, the comic tropes serve to bring a human element to a grave crisis, lest we take ourselves (or those we kill) too seriously. The comic layers of misunderstanding in *Whiskey* pave the way for the film’s sub-narrative of white women’s liberation—a reform so easy it can be told with laughter. For example, donning a hijab for the first time, Barker exclaims, “It’s so pretty, I don’t even *want* to vote!” (fig. 4). Trapped in a racial drama that is both necessary and unavoidable, Barker’s statement perfects the ever-refined humor of witty and precise war reporting. She represents and signifies the boundaries



Figure 4. *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (dir. Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, US, 2016)

of the everyday American, harnessing a patriotic performance that relies on the new American war hero—a complex, intelligent, witty, and observant woman. Barker lives out her scheming American dream with just enough irony, sarcasm, and stupidity (fig. 5). Powell operates through an aggressive individualism and factual go-get-'em attitude. Both demonstrate just enough emotional ambiguity to incite pity and complexity even as their decisions violently affect Muslim lives. Juxtaposed to the white, agentive women in the films, their black and brown counterparts appear to wander the zone of the body politic with no commitment to civil society. All tropes successfully disarm the gag reflex.

The *New York Times* titled an interview with Tina Fey “Live from Kabul: It’s a Feminist Comedy.”<sup>44</sup> The branding of Fey/Barker as feminist certainly underscores the many discussions on how the promotion of a certain brand of white feminism colludes in the subjugation of racial others. Part of the grim success of white liberalism is its ability to produce the white “feminist” hero who then functions as a successful alibi for white supremacy in its most imperialist brutality. But even more so, the branding of *Whiskey* as a “feminist comedy” reveals the pressures of the death drive embedded in white “feminist” practice. Barker’s short-circuited feminism appears to evade patriarchal law (as does Powell’s); this feminism

appears in pathological form as anxious and lonely. Indeed, in *Eye*, we never see Powell even smile. In Barker's case, however, her anxiety gives rise to humor.

In *Whiskey*, the laughs Barker provides for her audience are shaped by the oddities and awkwardness of racist imperialism coupled with the goofiness of (her) whiteness; or perhaps, racist imperialism allows for white stupidity with impunity.<sup>45</sup> Will Leitch of the *New Republic*, for example, blasts the film for being “tone-deaf,” “clueless,” “a slow-motion nightmare,” among other terrible, painful descriptors.<sup>46</sup> Film critic Jimi Famurewa comments that *Whiskey* reminds adults that “the best laughs contain the odd shard of shrapnel.”<sup>47</sup> The epistemic-linguistic violence mobilized by both critic and character is brokered through whiteness, which filters the lens of the spectator's gaze. Barker's bemused awareness continually restocked through her camera doesn't register any particularly deep or complex affect. The terrible things that happen during her time become—or rather, are made—funny. Thus the viewer is not set up to feel pity or even disgust. The blatant contradiction for Barker, instead, is that there is no contradiction because the war is a mere prop for Fey to discover both her “self” and her ambition.

The film opens with Barker as a woman who no longer “recognizes” her (mediocre) self and culminates when she can see herself because she has come to recognize the (comedic) terror of war. Barker's comedy constructs the war as another's wound that fundamentally will heal her. However, the film does give a comedic nod to its US-centrism when Barker is told by a Lebanese journalist that her reason for coming to Afghanistan is “officially the most US white lady story she has ever heard.” But while the texture and temporality of crisis of successful white women comedically names whiteness's precarious relationship to endurance, it also further imbricates whiteness's ambivalent relation to the death drive.

Fey, who also produced the film, says she was drawn to “the crazy things that happen to Barker.” In an interview with *Time*, Fey states:

I think at some point in the movie Kim is even questioning, do I really care enough, or am I just addicted to being this person and getting to

be the voice of it back home? Afghanistan has been a complicated place for a long time, and people keep coming from every direction saying, I'm going to straighten this out, I'm going to get it organized over there. And it remains this elusive, beautiful, harsh place that no one from the outside can quite wrangle.<sup>48</sup>

That Fey had considerable agency in the film's production goes without saying (unlike Mirren, who, while complicit with *Eye in the Sky's* agenda, didn't set it). But regardless of Fey's agentive role in the widely critiqued cinematic choices, critics continued to maintain a special place for her performance in the film. Even an especially critical reviewer of *Whiskey*, Will Leitch, stated that Fey "grounds the movie in something real, something urgent and human. The movie itself isn't particularly serious, but she sure as hell is."<sup>49</sup> Both Fey's and her critics' words solve the contradictions of the film (and in some ways of the white racial states) through an ethical whiteness—a higher good, in Fey's case, as an ambivalent truth teller, and in Leitch's absolution, in the urgent humanity of Fey's acting in the film. Indeed, Fey's likeability is one style of white ethics: white defense.

Parallel to gender is the mediating technology of the camera. In both films, the camera is a central (and paranoid) actor, and specific expectations of seeing are at stake for both Barker and Powell. The two historically distinct functions of the camera that both Susan Sontag and John Berger define as an instrument of state surveillance and as a means of private pleasure and spectacle for the masses fatally and unprecedentedly collide in Mirren's drone drama and Fey's photojournalistic adventure.<sup>50</sup> In *Eye*, the camera is not just mediating the audience and the plot but is literally a central character. The highly mediated performance of emotional immediacy and violent urgency feels like a real thing happening in real time. The audience apprehends the war as unedited—as though the camera is absent. The war is domesticated into the space of the living room or the cinema, in shifting temporalities of realness. Time is an unruly force that can circumvent action so that the future is managed. The mechanisms of intrusion suggest there is no gap between the spectacle of military occupation

disguised through advanced and impressive technology and the agency of white women.

In *Whiskey*, with New Mexico filling in for Afghanistan, Barker and her camera stumble clumsily through harrowing war zones made funny. The necropolitical irony of the camera as a democratic information technology alongside the amnesty of satire as claimed by Fey in producing *Whiskey* exposes the way that glibness, like the camera itself, erases the violence it seeks to reveal. As a discourse machinery, whiteness has to rely on an ethical voice. While in *Eye* that voice is contoured by bafflement, in the case of *Whiskey*, it is accompanied by glibness—a form of war humor so familiar it is nearly imperceptible. Indeed, glibness becomes the condition of possibility for the ethical coherence of whiteness.

This split between Mirren and Barker—between seriousness and comedy, self-confidence and self-loathing, deference and flippancy, caution and hastiness, slow death and fast humor—secures a diverse field of whiteness beholden to the ethics of being good and doing good. The disaffiliation of both white women from white supremacist practices, their disavowal of the ongoing reformation of white power, and their benefit from it are constitutive of ethical whiteness. By exalting and celebrating white female embodiment as agents of the state and policing, these films’ “brilliance” is enhanced by their understanding of gender as the site of liberation par excellence—a biopolitical move that transcends whiteness through gender. The biopolitics of the superhuman white woman collides with the geographies of brownness, maintaining or extending imaginaries of rightful, if unfortunate, death, but in ways that cohere the ethical, the tactile, the sensorial. Whether we are considering the grammar of slow death in *Eye* or the awkward war sociality in *Whiskey*, I want to ask what would happen if we took seriously the fact that white liberalism is a death space dependent on a relation of violence to black and brown bodies.

### **Ethical Whiteness:**

#### **The Sensorial, the Tactile, the Unseeing/Seeing**

In order to understand ethical whiteness, we have to make room for the death drive. What Frank Wilderson calls the contingency

of violence, or what we might think of as civil death in civil society, threads the death drive with practices of ethical whiteness, now enacted by elite and powerful white women.<sup>51</sup> I propose ethical whiteness as an alternative mode of understanding the proliferation of white violence transnationally even as I locate my analysis in the specificities of the global war and visual culture's absorption of that war. I offer ethical whiteness as a theoretical intervention that generates an account of white violence against black and brown people globally as reliant on both a persistent biopolitical unseeing and a form of white empathy. I further develop this by linking the death drive to ethical whiteness and propose that the crisis of consciousness that may theoretically shape the deliberate killing, or letting die, of Muslim populations is smoothed out by an ethics involved in not seeing below the surface, thinking here of Steve Martinot's point that for white people, "their ethics of not seeing becomes part of the ethics of the [social] machine."<sup>52</sup>

Sight, the ocular, is the sine qua non of witness violence, yet in *Eye* and *Whiskey*, the witnesses are all mediated by an ethics rooted in demanding to see certain aspects (through the camera) and refusing to see others. Indeed, white bafflement in *Eye* relies on a hyperbolic ability to both see and not see. This triage of ethics, whiteness, and bio-necropolitics converges at white unseeing (even as it sees literally everything) and black/brown death (even as it is willed/wished alive). If whiteness perverts the other, and the death drive destroys the other, then amalgamated, the white death drive (or the whiteness of the death drive) both produces and destroys life.

Ethical whiteness, then, is a key racial formation in which whites (as racially marked people) and whiteness (as floating signifier) are produced through simultaneous ethos and pathos, logics and affects, agency and vulnerability, enacting the terms of the human through vectors of emotion, rationality, insecurity/security, and civil society. As a conduit of violence, ethical whiteness surfaces in those moments in which whites take a long look at themselves and return their own gaze in self-possession, triumph, and repetition. Ethical whiteness, in this way, is a racial fantasy of whiteness but one impervious to itself, a fatal way of being alive. Animated in the solemnness of *Eye* and the humor of *Whiskey*, the violence



of ethical whiteness demonstrates that people of color are always objects to whom the world happens and never subjects *worlding the world*; we are thought about and not with—disposable, fungible, refuse. To think with us means the dissolution of whiteness.

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Figure 5. *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (dir. Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, US, 2016)