

# The Discourse of Ambiguity of Modern Drone Warfare in “Eye in the Sky”

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**Abstract.** Modern warfare is one of popular themes in Hollywood and western films especially after the discourse of “war against terror.” This British-production film, “Eye in the Sky” narrates war against terrorism in a unique and detailed way, instead of in black and white perspective. This paper argues that modern war presents many levels of ambiguity. It is aimed at discussing the discourse of ambiguity of modern drone warfare in the film “Eyes of the Sky.” This study applies Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, covering three levels of analysis, micro, macro, and mezzo. Micro level deals with language devices such as words, specific terms, metaphors. Macro level relates with social, political context, and mezzo level deals with the discourse bridging the language in use and social political context. The discourse of ambiguity can be found in many ways, ambiguity of modernness of the warfare devices and weapon when it counters the simplicity of real life of the people in Kenya that becomes ‘collateral damage.’ Ambiguity is also seen in decision making, in which Colonel Powell, the leader of the mission, changed the “capture” into “kill” terrorists and faces many ambiguities of the officers in charge of making decision for launching the missiles.

**Keywords:** *modern warfare; drone; ambiguity; Kenya; war on terror*

## 1 Introduction

Film is a contemporary cultural product that is consumed by most modern people. The highly consumed movie is mostly because of some reasons such as its popularity, largely accepted by people, and its ability to reflect people’s anxiety and longing. Film as a contemporary cultural text is also able to express the problems that people encountered in history [1]. Miles claimed that film is one voice in a complex social conversation that occurs in a particular time [2]. Under this perspective, film becomes one of important studies in understanding it as a text under social political and cultural context [3].

Film as a social and cultural text also articulates and communicates values that reflect people’s belief and norms, as well as narrates the conflict that the characters encounter [4]. Film as a text under a particular social cultural context in its production and consumption can be used as a medium to understand people’s communicating the Islamic values. Popular movies according to cultural studies expert, Stuart Hall, become the site for negotiating power relation and conflict [5]. In more specific, film can also be used to analyze how people represent muslim people and

Muslim's identity in contemporary social political constellation. These ideas build the connection between film studies and Islamic studies.

The issue of drone warfare is an important problem especially in modern warfare. Human Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School (2012) reported the thousands of civilian casualties as the impact of the US drone especially in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen [6]. Under the banner of "war on terror," a military campaign launched by the United States' President, George W. Bush after the 9/11 bombing, targeted to the terrorist groups or countries supporting the terrorist, which is mostly muslim countries [7].

The movie "Eye in the Sky" which was directed by Gavin Hood and script written by Guy Hibbert, was launched in 2016, in the same week with the US drone which reportedly killed 150 Somalian [8]. As Crane stated, film can be understood in articulating socio-political context of international relation or foreign policy of United states [3]. The title "Eye in the sky" refers to the function of the drone, an aircraft that can be remotely controlled, that is completed with high resolution camera and missiles. With its camera the drone functions as "the eye" that poses in the sky high above the target. It can send the real time picture to the Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. The drone is controlled by USAF pilot, 2d Lt Steve Watt with the USAF sensor specialist A1C Carrie Gershon. The operation is also supported by the image identifier specialists at Joint Intelligence Center Pacific at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, while the decision is made at the office of Cabinet of British Room "A" led by General Benson, Colonel Powell's superior.

Discussing about the war on terror that is represented in popular movies, especially hollywood cinema, Thomas Riegler stated that the portrayal of terrorism in American films have developed in line with the social political context. The terrorism themed movies show people's fear, fantasy and projection on terrorism [9]. In other words, Hollywood movies have built and sometimes distorted the perception on terrorism since 1960s. For example, in Hollywood 1970s movies, terrorists were represented by hijackers with the political background of Palestine or Vietnam, countries constructed as US enemy [10][11].

For that reason, this paper is aimed at discussing the film "Eye in the Sky", which is a British thriller film, focusing on how it represents the issue of modern drone warfare by highlighting the discourse of ambiguity which is dominant in the plot of the film. Roger Ebert, an American site of film critics which has high credibility, gave a praise to this movie, "Eye in the Sky", as a priceless because of its ability to narrate in detail, the roles and personels of military and government, especially in making decision whether or not to launch a drone strike in the hunt of terrorist [12].

The film sets in Nairobi Kenya, in which the Al-Shabaab, a radical terrorist group made their home. The mission for capturing the Al-Shabaab leaders in Nairobi commanded by Colonel Katherine Powell (British Army) is triggered by the murder of a British/Kenyan agent by this radical group and some bombings done by the group. The film begins with the situation in a village in Nairobi, Kenya, where the safehouse of the terrorist group locates. This is not an isolated area, instead, a densed suburb in which a young girl Alia Mo'Allim lives with her family. The family's simple home is closed to the safehouse of the Al Shabaab. It is shown in the beginning, the girl Alia plays a hula hoop made by her father.

From the other side of the world, at Northwood Headquarters, London, Colonel Katherine Powell takes command a multinational team, heading the mission of capturing the Al Shabaab. The team work is equipped with video and voice systems, and aerial surveillance. In Kenya, the field agents named Jama Farah use short-range ornithopter and insectothopter cameras. His

cameras link in ground intelligence. The Kenyan special forces are also involved in the operation, by positioning nearby the place, ready to make the arrest. The mission of capturing the three Al Shabaab target has been started, and the facial recognition is done at Joint Intelligence Center Pacific at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The method of facial recognition is to identify the target person precisely.

The Kenyan agent, Farah reports that the targets, three high-level Al Shabaab leaders are preparing two suicide bombers. It is assumed that they are going to be an attack to a civilian target. Knowing this, Colonel Powell decides to change the mission from “capture” to “kill” the targets. Therefore, the Colonel who lead the mission instruct the drone pilot Lieutenant Watts to do procedure for preparing Hellfire missile attack on the safehouse. However the decision is not easy to get approval from the superior both from the UK and US sides.

Meanwhile, Alia the little girl selling bread near the building becomes important collateral damage that has to be considered. The question of bombing or not is much more complicated. So, this paper intends to scrutinize the discourse of ambiguity in drone warfare represented in the film “Eye in the Sky.”

## 2 Methods

In discussing the discourse of ambiguity in modern drone warfare in film “Eye in the Sky”, the writer use Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis [13]. The Critical Discourse Analysis analyze the discourse of a text by comparing, interpreting, and synthesising textual data. The Critical Discourse Analysis is based on three levels of analysis, the first is called micro level analysis, in which the analysis is related to language devices used in the text, such as wording and rewording, diction, metaphor, and specific terms used in the text.

Second, mezzo level analysis which is related to the text producer’s production and consumption, mainly the references consumed by those producing the text. In this analysis, there emerges interrelationship between one text to the others, or the more commonly called intertextuality. The macro level analysis examines the text’s socio-political context that needs to be explored to get the whole comprehension of the discourse [14]. The macro analysis will support the idea of social political context of the “drone warfare” in international relation [15].

In discussing the movie “Eye in the Sky,” the focus will be upon the discourse of ambiguity on the drone warfare and the way it is represented in this film. The term ambiguity refers a word, a phrase or a sentence with a multiple meanings. There are two types of ambiguity syntactic and semantic ambiguities. Syntactic ambiguity is the phenomenon in which the same sequence of words has two or more meanings due to different phrase structure analysis. Semantic ambiguity is a word that has more than one meaning. Ambiguity is one of linguistic expressions so, in many occasion, people use it intentionally because it functions such as for humor and advertising.

In this analysis, the ambiguity can be seen from the term used at the conflict, “to kill mission.” The ambiguity is the actors involved in the making decision of launching hellfire missile, including the officers and the minister of UK Foreign Affairs and the US Department of State. The ambiguity also can be seen from the pilot, Lieutenant Watt and his partner, Carrie

Gerson who feel ambiguous in executing the job, the launching the hellfire missile, by considering the victims of the operation.

### 3 The Discourse Of Ambiguity In Modern Drone Warfare

This film begins with a Kenyan little girl named Alia, who lives near the target building that will be bombed by the drone controlled by the western joint military team led by Colonel Katherine Powell, playing hula-hoop. Alia and hula- hoop represents simplicity and innocence of the little girl, Alia. The simple housing compound also shows simple life of people in Kenya. Alia with the best hula-hoop she has ever had, which is made by her father's hand gives a paradoxical situation compared with British General Benson who lead the Cobra (British Cabinet team) meeting. Before having the very important meeting to make decision of launching the missile, Benson is busy and confused of buying an expensive doll in a store for his daughter, who asks for moving doll instead of sleeping doll.

The paradox presented at the beginning of the film, between Alia's father-made hula-hop and sleeping-moving doll describes the situation of two encountering parties, the target and the actor of the missile bombing. Hula-hop is a simple tool made of bambo or rattan, for playing happily with all of the body moving, while doll is a factory-made, much more expensive compared to hula-hop, and playing doll does not need the whole body of a child to move. The happiness presented from these two 'games' is different, playing hula-hop coveys cheerfulness while playing a doll does not seem as cheerful as hula hop. Mr Benson looks so stressed to choose which doll that the daughter wants to and it seems that he wrongly choose the doll.



Fig. 1. The drone camera shows Alia playing hulla-hop happily in front of her home.

The drone camera presents Alia playing hulla-hop in the backyard of her home. The camera also gives in details the situation of people in their daily life. Alia's father job is repairing bicycle, Alia's mother makes bread which Alia sell everyday. Alia and the hulla hop made by her own father's hand, and the situation of the home, and the larger landscape of Alia's home which is close to the safe house – where the terrorist Al Shabaab takes home, which becomes the target of the multi-nation mission. a paradoxical picture of sophisticated modern warfare, drone. The drone camera with Alia and her family functions to introduce the problems and ambiguity that will be encountered by the multi-national team led by Colonel Powell.

The picture 1 shows that the drone camera takes the picture of Alia playing hula-hoop in front of her house. The camera shows in “real-time” the girl playing the hulla-hop, and this photo-video is seen by drone pilot, 2nd Lieutenant Watts and his enlisted sensor operator, A1C Carrie Gershon. Carrie Gerson smiles when she sees the little girl. Those two people who is responsible to launch the Hellfire missile catch the figure of little Alia, and feel empathy to the girl.

Simplicity and innocent is symbolized by Alia and her hulla-hop. Alia, wearing white dress and pink head-dress, with her hulla-hop in the drone’s camera shows a unique combination compared with the drone that shows its sophisticatedness, its ability that can not be done directly by human being. It gives realtime picture which is important information that determine any action in war and the winner of the war. The drone technology is the latest progress in the warfare technology, in which it can do many important things, getting information, photos, from any places without any risk or harmful risk for the owner or controller of the drone.

Presenting Alia in the picture shows the potential of ambiguity, innocent little girl in the middle of complicated modern warfare. This also conveys meaning that a war is never a simple matter. It affects not only the life of the soldiers – as many described by films of World War I or II, or any other war, but it also affects the life of people at large, including innocent women and children. By presenting Alia at the beginning and the rest of the film, this articulate a discourse of the ambiguity of the war, who or what is the war against? The bombing of the safe house in which the target of the three terrorist leaders locate will also bring the collateral damage to the life of the innocent people surrounding the place. Presenting Alia through the drone camera successfully catches the pilot attention and empathy. The pilot, Lieutenant Watt can see the more direct risk of little Alia selling bread outside the targeted building, and they seek to delay firing the missile until she moves.

The use of drone in warfare is very efficient. The drone can do many things such as bombing, spying, giving the information on coordinate or reporting the exact position of the target, and any other information needed. It can also be used to launch missiles. In launching missiles, the modern warfare machine also gives small possibilities of risks or damage for the controller, because the drone does not need a pilot or person in it. It is controlled by pilot stationed at the office hundreds miles away from the target.

As described in the film, by using many cameras, any information about the safe house that becomes the target of Powell team’s operation, can be reported in exact manner, including the two people that Colonell Powell has hunted for long time and they are suspected as the main actor of some suicide bombings. Powell feels enthusiastic when she gets confirmation that the people coming to the safe house are the people she has looked for for six years.

The two people that make Powell excited are a husband-wife British couple, Susan Helen Danford or Ayesha Al-Hady and her husband Muhammad Al Hady – a Somalian-born. It is seen from the camera that the three people in the safe house are preparing two suicide bombers, one of which is an American citizen named Muhammad Abdisalam. Finding this important and urgent information, Colonel Powell changes her mind.

At the beginning of the mission she instructs the capture of the three terrorists, not to kill. But then she changes the mission into “to kill” the suspects. There is ambiguity in the changing of mission. When Colonell Powell gives the instruction to the team of drone pilots, she said, “This is an operation to capture, not to kill. Your job is to be their eye in the sky.” Then the comander, Lieutenant Ed Walsh replied, “Thank you mam. Kill it.” It is clear that Powell instructs to capture

not to kill the terrorist. This instruction is well understood by Steve Watts and other team. When Walsh says, “Kill it” it is ambiguous, in one side it might mean synonym as “do it” (do the mission), but this also can mean ‘kill it’ (kill the target). In this case, kill the target means launching the bomb or missile to the target they have discussed. This ambiguity then turns out to be problematic.

The change mission that Colonel Powell strongly proposes, from “capture” to “kill” is caused by her finding that the three terrorists that she has tracked for six years are now found out together in the safe house. So, she does not want to waste the time, or let the three suspects flee. However, it is not easy to get approval from many parties, the UK team (Cobra) who are in the situation room and watch and supervise the mission, and the US team.

At first, Powell has to get approval from the Cobra team consists of two ministers and parliamentary member for Africa affairs, Angela Northman MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Africa. The situation room is led by Lieutenant General Frank Benson, deputy of Defense staff. The ministers do not agree to change the mission into “kill” the targets. Colonel Powell force them to agree on the “kill mission” when she found out that the terrorist group is preparing two suicide bombers by putting on the vest of bomb at the body of two young male perpetrators. While the preparation of the suicide bombers make the Colonel depressed because it is about 10 minutes left to prevent them blow the bomb. Every second counts. She knows that it is a preparation for suicide bomber that will explode somewhere, which will take many lives of civilian as victims. On the other office, the Cobra, especially Angela Northman strongly opposes the “killing” mission, the launching of hellfire missiles. It is understood by the five officers in situation room that killing mission means launching the missiles to the target, that will cost a lot of lives too.



**Fig. 2.** The Cobra (Cabinet of British) at the situation room, watching the screen displaying the situation at many places seriously.

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The ambiguity of the decision makers in the situation room makes highly tensed situation. One of the factors complicating the decision is that the suspects are British citizen, and the suicide bomber is US citizen. They do not want to kill their own citizens abroad because it is very risky of being accused by mass-media of not protecting their citizen. Then, the Cobra has to refer up to get the approval of the UK foreign minister, and the US minister of state for foreign affairs. The UK foreign minister is in Malaysia, and US minister of state in Beijing. Finally when the US minister of state said that the US will not protect their citizen when s/he is involved in terrorism,

The ambiguity in making decision in the operation because of the collateral damage that involves civilians especially children is marked at beginning of the film. There is a scene in which Musa (Alia’s father) teaches Alia reading and counting. Then there are some local terrorists who want their bike repaired. Musa hurriedly hides Alia’s books, because he does not want the people knows the books and Alia learning. Then Alia goes with playing hula hoop. But this is also responded negatively by the men so that the father asks the daughter to stop playing. This constructs the idea that the radical group or fanatic people are dominating the local civilians, and the group determines the right thing to do for anybody.

The collateral damage related with the action that Colonel Katherine Powell wants to execute needs to be legally and politically approved. That is why she seeks approval of the decision to launch the missiles. She asked for the approval from the COBRA team, but then she has to get the legal opinion from British Army legal counsel, which then asked her to seek approval from superiors because of the complexity of the case. The complexity is due to the conflicting legal and political views of the killing, especially when exposed with negative news of killing civilians and one of the targets is American citizen. The ambiguity is shown again when the General who asks approval to UK foreign secretary who does not give a definite answer. Instead, he refers to the US secretary of State who is in Beijing for a cultural exchange. After long way to track, the Secretary of State finally states that he denies protect the American suicide bomber.

The calculation of the damage, which is a legal procedural problem is also encountered by Colonel Powell that she needs to justify the action to launch the bomb, by the calculation of less than 50% collateral damage estimation. She asks her risk-assessment officer who does the calculation to lower the estimation, of which the CDE is 65% at the beginning. She did not care who and how many people will be died or harmed by the bombing, she only focuses on the less than 50% collateral damage estimation. At the end, after the missiles are launched twice, she emphasizes her instruction to the assessment staff in making report that the collateral damage estimation has to be 45%, which legally justifies her action.

The ambiguity experienced by Colonel Katherine Powell also shows the ambiguity of the high rank of government officers. This shows the other field of the war itself. The decision of the war is made by the officers in the situation room or the military office in London or in US, not in the field of war, and not even any of the people of decision makers are at the field of war. They are at military headquarters, office, or US Secretary of State at the ping-pong (table tennis) table somewhere in Beijing, and the other UK foreign minister is at the hotel toilet and room wearing pajama at the other side of the planet. They are all making decision in which the lifes of people in other part of the planet at stake. The ambiguity is also seen from the victims, not only the terrorists but also the innocent children and civilian people who have nothing to do with the war.



**Fig 3.** The field spy, Jama Farah does his job by disguising as a bucket seller.

On the other side, the agent at field, Jama Farah is the person who has a high risk in his job. He operates a camera in the form of a bird that can be remotely controlled. Through the camera bird, the situation in the rooms of the safehouse can be seen and reported to the commander of the mission in London and Nevada, US. Then, Farah gets instruction to save Alia by approaching her and buying the bread so that she can avoid the missiles. Unfortunately, before he finished his business he is discovered by militant people who guard surrounding the area, so that he is forced to flee saving himself. When all the procedure and the legal and political issue is overcome by Cobra and Colonel Powell, the drone pilot in Nevada, Steve Watts, has to execute the launching of hellfire missiles although he feels so sorry to Alia who can not be saved from the spot where she sells the bread. Right after the missile is dropped, the devastating damage of safe house of the radical group and surrounding, can not be avoided. Colonel Powell instructs the launching of missiles once again when she sees the terrorist is moving her body under the debris of the ruined building. Alia is badly injured, and rushed to hospital by her father, but her life is not secured. She dies.

The death of Alia shows that humanist people at the drone-controller room or situation room can not influence the decision when it has been authorized by the officer in charge. The commander in chief instructed the staff to do the calculation of collateral damage estimation to be less than 50%. This is also supported by the General Frank Benson's statement toward the politician who criticize him as "disgraceful." Benson says, "I have attended the immediate

aftermath of five suicide bombings on the ground with the bodies... Never tell a soldier that he does not know the cost of a war.” What Benson says shows the military power over civilian politician in making decision.

### 3 CONCLUSION

“Eye in the Sky” was launched in 2016, in the same week with the US drone killed 150 Somalian. The fact is that Somalia is not in the status of war against US, of which means that it is against the authority of US congress, stating that there must not any military action there [16]. This film is a form of critics for American foreign policy, dealing with the casualties resulted from the drone, in which Human Rights Clinic at Columbia Law School (2012) stated thousands of civilian death tolls as the impact of the US drone especially in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen [6].

Compared with the other films under the theme “war against terrorism” like *Zero Dark Thirty*, which clearly portrays the war in one perspective so that it can be called as a propaganda, *Eye in the Sky* takes ambiguous position [17]. There are many aspects and layers of ambiguity, from the way decision is made by the government officers; US Secretary of State, UK Foreign minister, and Cobra members got difficulties in deciding to do or not to do the bombing. The ambiguity of war against terrorism is more obvious when we find out that it is not only the terrorists but mostly civilians who always become collateral damage. In this film, it is stated through the appearance of Alia in the very close spot of the target and becomes the real victim [18].

The discourse of ambiguity in this film shows that the contemporary war field is not only at real war field, instead the war field is located more at the office, hotel, sport area, as the battling place for the officers to discuss, argue and make decision on the war, in front of screens displaying photos and “real-time” information from drone camera and other devices. The ambiguity in making decision, in which they have to get approval from one to the other officers, from one rank officer to get the higher rank officer, who are far away at the other part of the planet, also implies that the officers do not necessarily know what or who is at stake. Like Colonel Powell, she is only focused on the target of killing terrorists whatever the cost.

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