

'Lean, Lumet-like thriller'

Drone warfare gets its close up in 'Eye in the Sky'

By Jake Coyle

Omniscient high-definition views from above have done nothing to penetrate the fog of war in Gavin Hood's drone drama "Eye in the Sky."

It's a lean, Lumet-like thriller that puts the moral calculus of drone warfare in its crosshairs. Playing out compellingly in real time, a strike against Somali terrorists in Nairobi is plotted by the hawkish, UK-based Col Katherine Powell (Helen Mirren), whose operation involves pilots, politicians and military command in various digitally linked remote locations, from the boardroom to the toilet. Drones have begun to reshape

the war movie, and will doubtless continue to proliferate on our screens just as they have over Middle Eastern skies. "Eye in the Sky" follows last year's very solid "Good Kill," starring Ethan Hawke as a drone pilot based in Las Vegas. Director Andrew Niccol's aim was principally about the psychological toll such disconnected battles take on its far-removed soldiers.

Hood more thoroughly utilizes the new perspectives drones afford to filmmakers. While much of it is composed of faces in front of computer screens, some of the film's most remarkable images come from the view of a hovering drone or — most im-

pressively — a remote-controlled beetle that flutters right into the suspects' lair, alighting on the rafters to provide a staggering close-up, whether Mr. DeMille is ready or not.

With such supreme powers of surveillance, Powell and her colleagues (including the ever-droll Alan Rickman, in one of his last performances, as a British general) have become accustomed to a previously unmatched level of certainty — or so they would like to think.

Attack

The mission is to apprehend a handful of highly ranked terrorists, but when the trio — two radi-

calized British nationals and an American — are seen preparing vests for a suicide attack, the plan is ratcheted up from "capture" to "kill."

The clash of "Eye in the Sky" isn't on the battlefield but in the chain-of-command debate over the rules of engagement that ping-pongs around politicians and lawyers who are pressured by Powell and Rickman's general to give their OK. The collateral damage calculations and emotional stakes are changed significantly when a young girl sits outside the walls of the target to sell bread.

An American pilot (Aaron Paul), tasked to bring "hellfire" on the target, lays off the trigger, and

numerous levels of nervous government officials "refer up" the decision to their superiors while an agent on the ground (Barkhad Abdi, of "Captain Phillips") attempts to chase the girl away.

The plotting in Guy Hibbert's screenplay, along with the quick cutting of Hood (the South African filmmaker of "Tsotsi" and a "X-Men," who previously dove into the subject of CIA interrogation in 2007's "Rendition"), push the movie's intensity, making "Eye in the Sky" more riveting than preachy.

The film might have hit home more if the tick-tock of its plot allowed us to better know its characters, who sometimes come off

as mere mouthpieces of different philosophies of modern warfare. But "Eye in the Sky" is nevertheless a compelling case of how moral precision doesn't necessarily match technical accuracy.

The debate that rages in "Eye in the Sky" is perhaps more than is always spent over the fate of a single civilian casualty. But it could hardly seem more topical. On Monday, more than 150 Shabab militants were killed in Somali in a strike partially carried out by drones.

"Eye in the Sky," a Bleecker Street release, is rated R by the Motion Picture Association of America for "some violent images and language." Running time: 102 minutes. Three stars out of four. (AP)

Film

Variety



A model presents a creation for Kenzo 2016-2017 fall/winter ready-to-wear collection fashion show on March 8, in Paris. (AFP) — See Page 21

Film

Arab media landscape expanding, but opportunities not changing

'Starless Dreams' heartbreaking docu

By Scott Tobias

At a girls' juvenile detention facility on the outskirts of Tehran, the inmates are hard cases, locked up on charges ranging from car theft and drug possession to premeditated murder. Consider that they've known nothing but poverty and exploitation, often in the form of physical and sexual abuse, and consider, too, that few have ever shown them kindness and comfort, or anything resembling a normal childhood. Roger Ebert once called the movies "a machine that generates empathy," and "Starless Dreams," a heartbreaking documentary by Mehrdad Oskouei, is just such a machine. With the conceptual rigor and emotional directness associated with the best of Iranian cinema, Oskouei simply listens to the stories of those who have never been listened to before. Their shattering testimony, elegantly harmonized in a chorus of stolen childhood, has universal appeal and should significantly boost Oskouei's international profile.

Following up 2008's "It's Always Late for Freedom" and 2012's "The Last Days of Winter," two roughly hour-long portraits of male juvenile delinquents, Oskouei spent seven years securing access to a female facility, and his persistence has paid off. Over 20 days, culminating in a New Year's that some will and some won't spend with their families, Oskouei and a small crew settled into a one-room lock-up where inmates eat, sleep and live together. With metal bunk beds lining the walls and a large communal space in the middle, the girls bond quickly and deeply, and for many, the surrogate families that form in prison are vastly preferable to the ones that await them on the outside.

Though Oskouei is never on camera, his gently inquisitive presence behind it is a guiding force. The girls are asked about the crimes that landed them in the facility and the domestic circumstances that might account for their actions. The euphemism "bothered" comes up a lot, in reference to sexual abuse from fathers and uncles. Their stories have plenty of common denominators related to poverty, drugs and broken homes, but the particulars are heartbreaking. One girl shows scars across her arm from a mother who burned it with a gas stove. Another calls herself "651," because that's the number of grams the authorities found on her when she was coerced into selling drugs. Still another talks about how she, her mother and her sister resolved to murder a father whose kindness had disappeared with addiction.

Through simple prompts, Oskouei is given a window into homes where, as one subject puts it, "pain drips from the walls," but "Starless Dreams" isn't a cavalcade of misery. With confinement comes safety, and with a roomful of like-aged girls from common backgrounds, the rare opportunity for friendship and fun. After opening the film with the grim ritual of fingerprinting and mugshots, Oskouei cuts to a scene of the girls playing vigorously in the snow, catching the carefree spirit of childhood in an unlikely place. Later, they play "spin the bottle" and "truth or dare," drag the boom mic down for a song, and mimic his question-and-answer sessions by interviewing each other with a cup.

The arrival of New Year's gives "Starless Dreams" a natural endpoint, but it also underlines a disturbing irony: Many of the inmates do not want to celebrate at home. Part of the boilerplate language of

their release is that the facility is absolved of responsibility for their actions once they leave, even if they kill themselves. It's horrifying to imagine the incidents that made such an edict necessary, but it serves Oskouei's larger critique of society at large, which has failed these girls and then refused to take responsibility for that failure. Their parents aren't the only ones guilty of not caring for them.

Curiosity

There are no postscripts to "Starless Dreams." As a condition of access, Oskouei cannot follow his subjects after they leave. The best he can manage are shots of them being collected by their family and driven to fates unknown. But within the parameters of this extraordinary documentary, Oskouei's curiosity and empathy restores some small measure of their innocence and allows them to be seen as children again — bright, playful, enthusiastic and tragically vulnerable. One particularly despondent girl calls herself "Nobody." Oskouei's camera, by peeling back that cloak of invisibility, makes her a somebody.

The media landscape in the Middle East is expanding, with distribution channels proliferating, driven by digital and pay-TV. But content diversification is moving at a much slower pace, and the local film industry is still not feeling much of an impact.

That was one of the key takeaways from a report presented Tuesday in Doha during the Doha Film Institute's Qumra event which is becoming an important incubator and driver for Arab filmmakers. The Arabic word "qumra" is believed to be the origin of the word "camera." The report issued by Northwestern Uni-

versity in Qatar in partnership with the DFI underlined the proliferation of new TV channels — 159 between 2012 and 2014 — and pointed to pay-TV revenues almost doubling over the past five years to an estimated \$975 million in the MENA region. It also opined that the recent entry of international SVOD players such as Starz Play and Netflix will be beneficial to consumers "through more non-linear programming at lower prices."

But the current escalating competition for content in the pay-TV arena — which prompted Al Jazeera spin-off beIN to recently buy Hollywood mini-major Miramax — has yet to generate a significant windfall for the Arab industry, especially for producers making more highbrow content.

"Unfortunately the growth of TV channels doesn't mean I'm making more money," said prominent Egyptian producer Mohamed Hefzy, whose Film Clinic shingle strives to make quality movies that can play in multiplexes. "Generalist TV is a significant component of how I recoup my budget. But when I sell to free-TV they usually want all rights to fight the competition, so I don't get to monetize on pay or SVOD," he lamented.

Interestingly between 2012-2015 in two of the biggest MENA movie markets, Lebanon and Egypt, Arabic-language films performed better on average at the box office per title than non-Arabic films, despite the market being dominated by non Arabic, mostly Hollywood, fare.

Since 2012 Egyptian pics have accounted for almost the entire box office take generated from Arabic-language films in Egypt and the UAE. Meanwhile Lebanese films have pulled nearly two-thirds of box office revenues in their home market. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: "Ted 2" actress Amanda Seyfried is set to star opposite Clive Owen in Andrew Niccol's sci-fi thriller "Anon." The film is set to shoot this summer.

Seyfried and Niccol ("The Truman Show") previously worked together on the director's 2011 dystopian thriller "In Time," in which she starred opposite Justin Timberlake. She most recently starred in "Ted 2," alongside director 2star Seth MacFarlane and Mark Wahlberg, and Noah Baumbach's "While We're Young," alongside Adam Driver, Ben Stiller and Naomi Watts. Seyfried is in production on Mark Pellington's "The Last Word" opposite Shirley MacLaine. Seyfried's other credits include "Les Misérables," "Dear John" and "Mamma Mia."

In "Anon," Owen plays a detective in a psychological thriller set in a world with no privacy, ignorance or anonymity. All lives are transparent, traceable and recorded by the authorities. It's the end of crime, it seems. However, when Owen's character stumbles on a young woman (Seyfried) with no digital footprint and invisible to the police, he discovers it may not be the end of crime but the beginning. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Nicolas Cage will direct and star in the independent thriller "Vengeance: A Love Story."

Variety reported last month that Cage was on board to play a detective in the film. Michael Mendelsohn, CEO of Patriot Pictures and Union Patriot Capital Management, is producing. Shooting is set to begin in April in Atlanta. Cage is directing from a John Mankiewicz screenplay, based on Joyce Carol Oates' 2003 novel "Rape: A Love Story."

Oates' novel centers on the aftermath a gang rape, with the victim left for dead in a park boathouse. The woman is a single mother in her 30s, and the attack is witnessed by her daughter — whose credibility is attacked at the subsequent trial. A policeman who is a Gulf War veteran becomes her

unexpected champion. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: After fighting off dinosaurs for Universal in last year's "Jurassic World," Jake Johnson is looking to return to the studio to fight a new kind of monster, this time with Tom Cruise by his side. Sources confirmed to Variety



Sayfried



Cage

that the "New Girl" actor is in talks to join the cast of Universal's reboot of "The Mummy."

Annabelle Wallis and Sofia Boutella are also on board. Johnson will play a member of the military in the pic. The film is set to bow on June 9, 2017.

The studio tapped Alex Kurtzman and Chris Morgan last summer to help develop a mon-

ster universe for Universal with rebooted versions of the studio's classic monster movies. Kurtzman is also on board to direct, and will produce alongside Morgan and Sean Daniel. (RTRS)

LOS ANGELES: Sony Pictures Animation may have just found the helmer to direct its upcoming

animated "Ghostbusters" movie.

Sources tell Variety that Fletcher Moules, the director behind the hugely popular animated "Clash of Clans" commercial spots, has signed on to direct the movie.

Ivan Reitman, co-creator of Ghostbusters and one of the stewards of the franchise, would act as one of the producers.

Sony, a studio with fewer franchises than some of its rivals, is betting big with Ghostbusters. Along with the live-action movie, which opens in July, the studio created the Ghost Corps, a collective with Reitman and Dan Aykroyd, to head up the expansion of the franchise and to create a Ghostbusters cinematic universe. (RTRS)

Features

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