

Laina with April Movies
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Laina At the Movies
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Eye in the Sky

This important movie focuses on the dilemma of fighting a kind of war never faced before. In the past, countries (recognized nation-states) fought wars with each other, culminating in World War II, in which two opposing groups (Allies: Britain, America, and Russia vs Axis: Germany, Italy, and Japan), fought to an unconditional surrender of the Axis. This war was so catastrophic that at least in the Western world (along with the defeated and then occupied Axis), political thinkers tried to outlaw war itself. The UN was designed to prevent war by offering a forum where negotiations could replace conflict. Unfortunately, this project failed to prevent conflict, but it is serving other valuable international functions.

The next potential conflict immediately arose: US-led republics against the Russian-dominated USSR, a Communist empire. Both sides were armed with nuclear weapons, a potential for global destruction. By luck, all out conflict never happened. Instead, several wars broke out among client states of both powers: North and South Korea, North and South Vietnam, and a number of Arab-organized wars against Israel. All of these conflicts were endless and, except for Vietnam, did not end with the aggressors winning.

As global nation-state conflicts ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new kind of conflict burgeoned: non-state factions that waged terror warfare against civilians and dissidents in their own countries. This sort of warfare began with a Palestinian terror group (the PLO) which began with hijacking international civilian aircraft and then morphed to more murderous attacks, such as capturing a tourist ship and murdering passengers and violating the Berlin Olympics, murdering the Israeli sports team.

The Palestinian anger, directed at the State of Israel, soon morphed into something more global: Militant Muslim rage against the world. This war is ongoing, with focus on civilians in New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Bali, Spain, Kenya, Nairobi, and Russia. Traditional armed conflict, which the international community led by the US, tried in Afghanistan and Iraq, has not succeeded to bring "unconditional surrender" to the murderers. This is not the sort of war that can be ended with military force; it is a religious-based ideological war, coming out of a culture that has embraced suicide murder. Young men and women are recruited to serve as bombs that will detonate among the most vulnerable civilians, in restaurants, market places, and schools. How does one fight that?

In *Eye in the Sky*, we are introduced to an up-close version of modern warfare: automated armed aircraft (drones) that can pinpoint and destroy individual leaders of terror groups. The alternative to this system would be to send in soldiers to capture terror leaders, a feat not easily carried out in a hostile region where many of our own could be killed.

It is a no-brainer to use this new sort of warfare to remove from the world terror leaders and to stop suicide bombers before they can detonate. But unlike former wars which did not permit instantaneous pictures to blanket the world, pictures that can be used for propaganda, today's terror wars do this. The military fighting this war have become very skittish about adverse publicity that can be used by our enemies. Terrorists do not flinch from targeting women and children in a market, but can use world media to condemn drone warfare when a few civilians are "collateral damage" in taking out a terrorist.

In this film, British colonel (Helen Mirren) requests a drone strike to take out a group of terrorists in Nairobi who are planning a series of suicide bombings. However, the situation grows more complicated when an American drone pilot (Aaron Paul) discovers that a nine-year-old girl has entered the targeted area, forcing a number of military leaders and politicians to debate the best course of action. Alan Rickman plays a British General (his last film before his death) and the remarkable Barhad Abdi (who played a Somali pirate in *Captain Phillips*) is once more memorable as an on-the-ground agent in Kenya who controls a robot the size and shape of a beetle that can see into the terror hideout.

The film focuses on the ridiculous fear of politicians who try to micro-manage the use of drones, to avoid any collateral damage that could make them look bad. I cannot understand the notion that the death of a handful of unfortunate civilians should prevent the destruction of three ruthless terrorists (including a British woman convert) and two young fools being suited up with suicide belts that they will detonate to get hundreds of civilian victims (shopping centers, markets, cinemas, nightclubs). Had we been so skittish, we never would have bombed Nazi Germany and

Fascist Japan, whose civilians were compelled to suffer because their governments were even less concerned about collateral damage. Both these enemies began the new practice of bombing civilians in cities. Remember Coventry and Nanking. See this film, and know that your emotions are being played. The life of a 9-year-old girl living in a Kenya village faces worse risks of nasty deaths than in a drone attack.
Criminal

Had there not been so few movies to see this week, I might have missed Criminal, a film that might pass for just another sci-fi thriller. Because I generally trust such actors as Kevin Costner, Gary Oldman, and Tommy Lee Jones, I gave it a try and found it absolutely fascinating!

The plot is improbable, as are most sci-fi thrillers, more often than not variations on the age-old notion of science gone amok. We have loved mad scientists ever since Frankenstein was written in the early 19th century.

However, the plot idea and its unfolding provides a thoughtful dilemma about memory: is it an electronic sort of impulse that can be downloaded, or is it much more complicated than that? I heard one futuristic scientist on NPR recently speculating that in the not too distant future, human beings could actually be nearly eternal, having their brains downloaded into younger bodies, or actually having eternal youth by not having their bodies deteriorate with age.

This brings up the issue: what is it that makes a human being unique? What makes up memories? Are they the sum total of all of our senses, not just our intellect?

In this film, an essential CIA agent in England is engaged in an operation to keep a computer hacker from selling his program endangering most urgent US security either in ransom to us, or to the Russians. He is murdered by Russian agents before he can complete his delivery of the money to the hacker. The CIA convinces a scientist (Tommy Lee Jones) who has been doing animal research on transplanting memory to do his first human trial, using a very dangerous imprisoned criminal (Kevin Costner in quite a role!).

Costner plays this brute, a psychopath who feels no emotions at all, just takes what he wants, and kills without batting an eye. When asked about his medical history, he notes that when his momma told his daddy that he wasn't his baby, the father threw him out of the window of a moving car. Yes, that certainly can affect the brain.

The fascination and sophistication of this film is in the unfolding and uneven changes to this criminal after the downloading. How much of the CIA agent's memories and connections are being felt by this monster?

This is really fun to watch! It is both a good thriller and a good think-piece.

A Hologram for the King

Because Tom Hanks starred in this film, I went to see it. It looked particularly interesting because the action was taking place in Saudi Arabia, a country that is, to say the least, difficult for its own people and nearly impossible for strangers.

First of all, what is a "hologram?" We learn that it is a technology that can create three-dimensional images. I understand its use in maps, but I really do not understand its use in entertainment---which seems more like a magic show than anything else.

Hanks plays the part of a company marketing executive sent to Saudi Arabia to land a very important contract: to sell their hologram technology to the King of Saudi Arabia. This backward country with its medieval religion has been awash with oil money since the 1950s, thus attracting all sorts of people wanting to sell them things; and why not? Saudis with money want to buy everything except participatory governance, religious tolerance, and recognition that women are more than just property. A recent big step forward was the outcome of a conference in which Saudi clerics upgraded women from "furniture" to "mammals," of course lesser mammals than men, but at least human.

This film was charming and entertaining, but was a disquieting mixture of the kind of irony and satire merited by Saudi Arabian culture and a love story that could not possibly happen in such a place and in such a way.

There was the panorama of brand new cities, ugly in their sterile modernity, juxtaposed with camels. (They did not show camels being trucked around in pickup trucks, which I find particularly funny.)

What they did show (without commentary) was that almost all work being done in that country is done by a foreign and usually desperately poor work force. They showed the luxury of a first class hotel, but did not show that during the fasting month of Ramadan, the swimming pool is drained lest people try to swim during this severe religious period. The worst thing about the hotel was that one could not order a cold beer (no alcohol in the Kingdom, except for the bottles labeled "olive oil" that had booze).

They also showed how little schedules and appointments matter in Saudi Arabia. Hanks has to learn from reading the newspaper where the decision-makers he needs to meet are, despite appointments.

Through a friendship with a wise-cracking Saudi driver who had spent a year in college in Birmingham, Alabama, he learns that some of the underemployed subjects of the Kingdom are not happy with their rulers and there are hints that some remote areas are beginning to acquire weapons.

We are also shown that the Chinese are also in the Kingdom, scarfing up all the business and technologies introduced by Americans or Europeans. Hanks, once an executive of Schwinn Bicycles, had brought a manufacturing plant to China and within a year, the Chinese put him out of business.

This could all be wonderful stuff. However, the film offers a love story between a Saudi woman doctor and Hanks, which never could have happened. A Saudi woman doctor could only work in a women-only hospital. She could never invite a western man to her home, particularly because there is no privacy in the country. Servants and religious police watch everybody, and not even Saudi princes (or princesses) can violate religious rules without punishment. In this film, there was liquor and sex, neither getting our protagonist into trouble. And most unbelievable of all, he elects to remain in the kingdom with a new job!

Utter folly. Despite this, you will have a couple of pleasant hours. Just know that the filmmaker couldn't decide what to do with his material.