

Ethical Whiteness and the Death Drive: The Visual Failure of American Compassion

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In this paper, I look specifically at two recent and controversial US films: *Eye in the Sky* (Hood, 2015) and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (Ficarra and Racua, 2016), both of which feature white female protagonists as conflicted but central participants in the racialized domains of war and political machinations. While one film takes on a serious ethical polemic (the innocent lives of civilians caught in the visual crosshairs of drone cameras) and the latter is a filmic rom-com following the adventures of a journalist in Afghanistan, they both significantly expose important dilemmas around US gender politics, the logic of white governance and the politics of visual culture. These two films, one can safely argue, regulate the commerce between the visual and the political, between cinematic fantasy and indigenous reality, between the pleasures (of our whiteness) and the pains (of brown war). Fundamentally, these films function as both an arsenal of terror and triumph, from local interstices of white American nationalisms to racialized spatialities of unknown understood affects. My reading of *these films* is not just a matter of coding and analyzing the films within this particular moment of war and global anti-racist and feminist politics. Rather I see this films as colluding and colliding in important ways with real political texts, such as the recent White House promise to reveal death toll of US Drone Strikes and significant geo-cultural moments, where gender, race, nation and violence seek expression through particular mechanisms of whiteness and empire (even as both are largely disavowed). Thus, at the heart of this discussion, is a rather simple question: how is whiteness and freedom produced in the visual and narrative space of real war dramatic films? My interests in these films center on representations of gender and power, but more importantly on the visual capture of important ethical questions around white imperial violence, the disposability of brown lives, and the current political shift/ing of/towards white women in positions of intense power.