Through the Crosshairs

[Transcript]

Roger Stahl: There they are, everywhere you look, images of distant wars as seen through the weapons camera-- helicopter gunship, smart bomb, satellite, drone. At first they arrived as novelties like portals into some kind of sci-fi future. Eventually, they settled into the screens of everyday life.

Strangely enough, as our wars have faded from these screens, these images remain. For those of us living in the West, this invitation to look, this weaponized gaze, remains a persistent and dominant mode of witnessing war in the 21st Century. Where do these images come from? Who issues them? And how do we get to this place where our wars appear through the very weapons that prosecute them?

This is the story of the weapon's eye, not just as it appears on the battlefield, but also on the home front. It's a story of perceptions management, public relations, and propaganda. It's also a story of our everyday cultural practices as they appear on the screens of TV news, movies, games, and social media. Let's take a critical trip Through the Crosshairs.

But let's back up a little. We need to understand how these images came to saturate the screen. The first type is the invitation to see like a missile or bomb. You can follow some scattered attempts to cultivate this projectile vision back into the early 20th Century.

For example, in 1921, the father of the modern Air Force, General Billy Mitchell, produced and distributed to theaters nationwide a newsreel called, The Aerial Bombing of Obsolete Battleships. This was essentially an advertisement for investing in air power, but it was much more than an argument, in that it introduced audiences to a new way of seeing. When Disney teamed up with the War Department in 1943, it continued Mitchell's project with an animated propaganda film of its own. Here again, the world appears through the eyes of the Bombardier.

Film clip: Against the weapons of our choosing, of our time, but on his soil.

Stahl: This same projectile vision appeared in the wake of the nuclear bombing of Japan in the War Department's newsreel, "Tale of Two Cities."

Film clip: Carrying an atomic bomb, at 10:58 the morning of August 9th, the bomb was exploded above the city.

Stahl: The tag-along reporters of the Vietnam War brought with them a host of new perspectives. In some ways, the gaze drew much closer to the ground, but it also skimmed the jungle canopy from the Bell UH-1 Huey Helicopter, where reporters frequently lined their cameras with the sights of the door gunner. The military seemed to prefer this aerial view.

In 1968, when public confidence was beginning to break, the army set up a museum exhibit in Chicago where visitors could hop aboard a real Huey and, firing a blast of light, test their targeting

skills against a wall-sized Vietnamese village. The exhibit was such a hit that the Air Force announced its own intentions to replicate it with a B-52 Bomber, but it also drew condemnation from churches, parents, and anti-war protesters, who staged a helicopter sit-in using, what the Chicago Tribune ungenerously called, "Viet Cong infiltration tactics." The museum panicked, shutting the door-gunning exhibit down one day and then opening it back up the next.

Later, war movies made this view iconic. Rambo might rush in alone to save the POWs, but we viewers somehow wind up at his door-gunning sidekick. And here's the view again from Full Metal Jacket.

Film clip: Yo, VC, get some, get some, get some, get some.

Stahl: In the late 1980s, the Pentagon stumbled on a new formula with the success of Top Gun, a film it played a key role in producing.

Film clip: We've got two MIGs dead ahead. I got tone. I got tone-- firing.

Stahl: This clean, high tech version of war was the perfect antidote to the unpopular legacy of Vietnam and the image of American soldiers slogging through the jungle. The new motif distracted from the need to justify violence by organizing public attention instead around the weapon and the spectacular things it could do. Indeed, in the following years, the military experimented with ways of dropping the casual news observer into the cockpit.

News clip: Good evening, we're going to begin tonight by going up to more than 10,000 feet over the Mediterranean in the cockpit of a US Navy F-14, which is just about to go into combat with those Libyan MIG 23s. The Pentagon released some of the audio and video from the cameras and recorders onboard the lead Navy fighter.

Reporter: With the planes just a dozen miles apart, the F-14 fires its first Sparrow missile called Fox One.

Pilot: 13 miles-- Fox One, Fox one.

Reporter: Finally, tone, and a second kill.

Pilot: Good kill, good kill!

Unload, 500 knots, let's get out of here.

Reporter: By freezing one of only three brief flashes of one of the MIGs caught by the F-14's camera, the Pentagon said--

Stahl: This focus on weapons continued into the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In one study of magazine images, soldiers only appeared a quarter as often as they had in Vietnam. War equipment on the other hand more than tripled as a major theme. Another study found that, for every two stories of soldiers on TV during the Gulf War, three more were stories of weapons.

News clip: America is relying on a massive air power to assure victory over Iraq, filling the sky with the greatest air arsenal--

Stahl: Projectile vision shot to fame in this environment. In particular, the US military went full bore with what became known as smart-bomb footage, or the kind of weapon cam footage we are used to seeing today. This was a powerful public relations device. In addition to presenting war as bloodless and riskless, it carefully aligned the public gaze with the projectile and its immediate task. In fact, audiences became so used to these videos that presenters could afford to insert what might pass as a joke or two.

General: I'm now going to show you a picture of the luckiest man in Iraq on this particular day. Keep your eye on the crosshairs. Right there, look at here, right through the crosshairs-- and now, in his rear view mirror--

[LAUGHING]

OK, stop the tape, please.

Stahl: The operating term here was "precision," which was used over and over by General Schwarzkopf and other presenters.

General: --and the precision delivery. And I'll be showing you a film clip of a typical type of precision delivery that we have come to expect.

Stahl: It was a curious term. And not just because it turned out that only 5% of the weapons used in the war were in fact guided. These images were a precision strike on public consciousness as well.

The new press pooling system corralled reporters into viewing rooms, which created rich targets. And the videos themselves precisely trimmed public attention of anything that might resemble context, of any consideration that might interfere with the question of whether the coming strike would fulfill its promised perfection. A better word than precision might have been tunnel vision.

General: And this is my counterpart's headquarters in Baghdad.

[LAUGHING]

This is their headquarters of the Air Force. And keep your eye on all sides of the building.

Stahl: Perhaps the most popular and widely circulated video was a 6-second loop from a standoff land attack missile with a camera embedded in its nose cone. It was the ideal mode of projectile vision. Here, the eye becomes the projectile itself on the way to preprogrammed coordinates, no questions asked. And after the hit, no bodies, no destruction, no muss, no fuss, just a wall of static.

General: That's it. TV goes out as it hits the center of the target.

Stahl: This image persisted beyond the Persian Gulf War. Right away, CNN recycled it for a Gulf War Collector's Set that turned the control room into a kind of war room with reporters appearing to call in the strikes themselves.

Pres. Bush: We will not fail.

Stahl: Here it is again in 2003, as networks excitedly awaited another Iraq invasion. Later that year, in the midst of war fever, the History Channel devoted an entire documentary to the Modern Marvel of the smart bomb.

Video clip: You are the bomb hunting the enemy and hurtling towards him at thousands of feet per second.

Stahl: In 2007, the Discovery Channel did the same.

Video clip: No question, this is a different view of war than we've ever had before.

Stahl: And about this time, the iconic view began to show up in stock image libraries. Occasionally, along the way, Americans entertain nightmares of being on the other end of projectile vision. In the signature shot of Michael Bay's Pearl Harbor, the camera drops alongside a falling Japanese bomb, a frightening view that seems to have been lifted wholesale from Disney's rendition of the event in Victory Through Air Power. And in 2012, Call of Duty Black Ops 2 fretted about terrorists hijacking our weapons and turning them against us. But both of these narratives were ultimately about winning back the right to this way of looking.

Alongside this projectile vision ran a parallel mode of presenting war that we might call orbital vision. The Earth is seen through the reconnaissance satellite. This general's eye view may have reached its pinnacle during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

But it also had a history. If we look to news media back into the 1940s and '50s, even before satellites went into space, this orbital gaze begins to appear in the likes of Time and Life magazines, here, aerial photography mixed with prospective maps of the world from the hand of Illustrator Richard Edes Harrison. For a brief period in the late 1950s, the government occasionally released satellite shots of Earth.

This all changed in 1960 though when the Soviet Union shot down an American U-2 spy plane over its territory, an event that prompted the US government to keep its high-flying capabilities under wraps. For the next couple of decades, the satellite's eye went dormant, making only cameo appearances in films like Fail Safe and Ice Station Zebra. It wasn't until the 1980s that Americans began seeing through the satellite again. This time, news organizations began to buy commercial satellite pictures to illustrate claims made by the White House regarding the supposed nefarious activities of geopolitical enemies.

News clips: --Iran's intention to use--

--chose what officials here say appear to be four--

--contingency plans for striking this facility--

--a satellite photograph obtained by ABC News--

Stahl: And the White House released its own aerial imagery to drum up anxiety about Soviets pouring arms into Central America.

News clip: Our sensors show a shrimp boat, apparently from Nicaragua, loading cargo onto smaller boats and speeding away from El Salvador's coast.

Stahl: The Pentagon shut off satellite access to the Middle East during the 1991 Gulf War, but the satellite's eye began to trickle into view through other channels, especially in films supported by the defense and intelligence agencies themselves. This began with glimpses in the Tom Clancy thriller, The Hunt for Red October. In Patriot Games, Clancy's hero, Jack Ryan, returns to hunt down terrorists, again with the help of satellite imagery.

Film clip: See what we can see.

Stahl: These real-time capabilities were highly exaggerated, however. CIA Director James Woolsey reportedly called them, "funny," even as he threw the agency's full production support behind the film. Regardless of authenticity though, these powerful images helped to establish orbital vision in the public imagination. Perhaps the big official premiere of this way of seeing came in 1995, when Clinton's UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright showed pictures of mass graves in an attempt to make the case that NATO ought to militarily intervene in the Balkan Civil War.

News clips: According to US officials--

US officials released evidence of possible mass killings carried out by Serbian forces last month. The aerial photographs indicate what could be mass graves near the--

The United States also quoted a 63-year-old eyewitness who escaped death hiding among bodies. He said, men and boys were taken from this soccer stadium near the mass grave--

Stahl: This was a selective picture of violence on the ground, though. Rather than account for the full range of atrocities, these images instead served to mobilize public vision according to the geostrategic goals of Western powers. And these practices of aligning the gaze continued even after the bombing began.

General: And that gives us a broad area coverage, which in fact, we were missing to a great extent in Desert Shield and Desert Storm.

Stahl: Hollywood went stratospheric too. The James Bond film Goldeneye elevated the spy satellite to the status of main character, with a terrorist weapon as the enemy that sought to blind it with an electromagnetic pulse.

Film clip: What the bloody hell was that?

Stahl: And The Peacemaker made the sympathies between the satellite's eye and the view through the smart bomb camera explicit.

Film clip: Hey, Alec, you watched CNN during Desert Storm. Remember all those television shots from the nose cone of the GBU missile slamming into those trucks? Remember that picture, how it kept getting closer and bigger on the screen?

You could just about see the faces of those drivers. And then, zap, the picture went dead, we didn't get to see what happened next? Well, guess what, Alec? You will.

Stahl: As the century turned, the orbital gaze became a fixture, with director Tony Scott of Top Gun fame giving it top billing.

Scott: And I thought that was really interesting, making that the third character in the piece.

Stahl: Behind Enemy Lines effectively re-staged Albright's picture of mass graves, but with a twist, allowing us to track one of our own endangered soldiers as he hides among the bodies.

Film clip: What are they doing?

Stahl: Out on its heels was Black Hawk Down, which presented essentially the same visual structure.

Film clip: We've got a black hawk down. We've got a black hawk down.

Stahl: And in another Clancy film, The Sum of All Fears, orbital vision not only roamed the planet hunting terrorists, it punctuated this view with recycled smart bomb footage. By the time the Bush Administration began its massive push to invade Iraq in 2003, orbital vision had been firmly installed in the public eye. Like Albright before him, Colin Powell made his infamous case for military action at the UN with the help of satellite photos.

The presentation was supposed to convince the world that Iraq harbored weapons of mass destruction, but it did much more, in that it also marked the target for the US public. As the invasion got underway, the screen exploded with satellite imagery, mainly from the private remote sensing industry. Aligning with the US military machine, war coverage glided over proposed targets, guessed at troop placement, zoomed down city streets, hunted for bad guys, and performed bomb damage assessments.

News clip: There's a big hole in a roof.

Stahl: Here, target richness became indistinguishable from image richness.

News clip: We can tell you where some of the lucrative targets are as we zoom right in on Baghdad.

Stahl: It's no mistake too that this kind of coverage looked like a video game, as it drew from flight simulator companies like Evans Sutherland. The camera tacked back and forth between orbital and projectile vision. One second, viewers looked through the surveillance satellite. The next, they sped along like a Tomahawk missile on the way to a target.

News clip: And it was over the target--

Stahl: Other companies like Keyhole joined the fray, itself named after the legendary government spy satellite series.

News clip: --we zoom in on Baghdad through the Keyhole machine, if you can put that up for me--

Stahl: It's Earth viewer platform was a real hit, as it allowed news anchors to surf the unfortunate areas under bombardment.

News clip: --but a possible target as well.

Stahl: The war was a great advertisement for the company. It so exhilarated viewers at the time that, when Keyhole opened up access to regular subscribers, it was so popular that it shut the site down. Later, they sold the technology to Google for what became Google Earth.

But the real news was that this orbital vision worked to insinuate the viewer into a war machine already in motion, to see certain parts of the world as natural and legitimate targets. And this way of seeing cleared out all the people in advance for a guilt-free experience. This was, in some ways, a test run for the era of the drone.

News clip: And our pilots are practicing their bombing runs without ever leaving the ground. We'll let you see the high-tech training simulation.

Stahl: The massive spread of the US drone program has been enabled by secrecy, to be sure. But then again, we need to look at the other side of the coin too, how drone representations have proliferated. Indeed, the view through this weapon camera, this drone vision, has found a more or less permanent home on the screen, circulating through viral videos, TV news, and documentaries. Vice magazine captured the growing prevalence of this targeting footage online in one of its exposes.

Video clip: Maybe you've heard of the grim footage under its nom de YouTube, drone porn. How did we arrive at the robo wars?

Stahl: It's a good question. But maybe we should also ask, where did all this drone porn come from? The answer is that most of it came from an official military public relations outfit called DVIDS, Defense Video and Imagery Distribution Service.

DVIDS came into being in 2004 to supply news agencies covering Iraq and Afghanistan with prepackaged stories and B roll. It was the Pentagon's attempt to gain control over the imagery and

narratives coming out of these occupied zones, especially after reporters started to leave its embedding program. The DVIDS' offices are located just outside of Atlanta, but you can find official releases on its site, on the news, and on its own web channels. Its most popular was one called "UAV Kills Six Heavily Armed Criminals." CNN preferred one called "Multinational Division B Soldiers Killed Two Terrorists."

News clip: US military officials say the attacks are necessary.

Stahl: This way of seeing the drone, that is, seeing through it, has an almost magnetic quality. Part of the reason is that other ways of witnessing the drone have been downplayed. Take the machine itself. We see lots of taking off and landing, but very few images of drones actually in action, say, firing a missile.

There was one in circulation, but it later came out that it had been fabricated by a rogue Photoshopper, who told The Atlantic he couldn't find such an image, so he had to make one. Otherwise, official releases were about as dull as doorstops. The White House worked to diminish the act of authorizing drone strikes too.

Pres. Obama: The Jonas Brothers are here. They're out there somewhere. Sasha and Malia are huge fans, but, boys, don't get any ideas. I have two words for you-- predator drones. You will never see it coming.

Stahl: When he wasn't winning Nobel Peace Prizes or making light of his role in actually killing people, the Obama White House was busy deflecting attention away from the selection of assassination targets, and instead, actively portrayed the process as being governed by something called the disposition matrix, a term that conjures a decision made by some inscrutable algorithm. This rhetoric degraded both sides, the flying drone itself and the political decision to use violence, as fundamentally uninteresting. What was left was the view from the cockpit, which absolutely dominates the story of the drone. This is the story mainly of entering the secret world of the pilot and the ultimate man cave of joysticks and blinking lights. Indeed, the drone pilot, unlike other gunners and pilots, has become an object of obsession and our primary site of identification.

What is the message from this vantage point? It's not an argument about the legitimacy of the drone war. It's the story of following orders. It's not the story of why, in other words. It's the story of how, the wizardry of how it's done, and also how hard it is on the pilots.

If there was one overarching narrative of drone warfare in movies and television, it might be of the guilt-ridden assassin. These eyes tell the tale of how we must carry out orders to kill even if we have to kill some civilians. It starts to get fleshed out in CIA- and Pentagon-assisted productions, for example, the character Maya and Zero Dark Thirty and Carrie Mathison in Homeland.

TV clip: --come in left, pick up a heading 270.

Stahl: Drone movies like Drones, Good Kill, Eye in the Sky, and Ender's Game all carried forth some version of the guilt-ridden assassin who appears as the primary victim of the drone war, the

one who sacrifices sanity for what everyone acknowledges needs to be done. The CIA was pleased enough with this storyline that it picked it back up in 2018 in its production support for the series, Jack Ryan.

TV clip: Hey, you OK?

Stahl: This story is not just about the pilot, but about us, insofar as we are invited into an interactive relationship with the pilot and the control screen. Military recruiting ads have been inviting us to take the controls for a while. Now we are all conscripted into the fantasy, to deploy and return in high frequency, to witness the battlefield kill, and then, as we hear over and over, to come home and have dinner with our families.

News clip: The pilot can take them out and still make it home in time for dinner.

It's sort of like being in a movie, that you can-- you know, you wake up at home and have breakfast with the wife, and head to war. It's kind of like a video game, and not like real life.

Stahl: This fantasy is probably best represented in Ender's Game, where the plot entails literally conscripting game players for drone warfare. The book mentions nothing about drones, of course, but the film sold itself as an obvious allegory.

Harrison Ford: The book was written and published 28 years ago. And it predicted the internet and predicted drone warfare.

--fight this threat through drone warfare.

Stahl: And the whole idea here is to play on the fantasy of getting inside the pilot's head and trying our hand at the controls.

Film clip: Now warp through his eyes and listen through his ears. I'll tell you, he's the one.

Stahl: It shouldn't surprise us then that drones have become a staple in war-themed video games.

Video game clip: Freeze! Go, go, go!

Stahl: And a new culture of consumer drones says fully embraced the weaponized gaze, providing the ability to shoot up the neighborhood in augmented reality. Given this persistent way of seeing, it's useful to ask what we don't see. We certainly don't see strikes from the ground from the perspective of those who suffer them. We certainly don't get a sense of the civilian toll. Instead, we get messages from the White House of the supernatural ability of these weapons to leave civilians unscratched.

John Brennan: In fact, I can say that the types of operations that the US has been involved in in the counter-terrorism realm, that nearly for the past year there hasn't been a single collateral death because of the exceptional proficiency, precision of the capabilities that we've been able to develop.

Stahl: Brennan made this astonishing claim despite a widely-reported strike just four months earlier that killed 42 civilians. These happen to be tribal leaders gathering outdoors at a public market for a jirga, a traditional dispute resolution meeting where participants sit in a large circle. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism confirmed that strikes killed at least 76 civilians that year, which included eight children. And this only accounted for 10 strikes. 15 more were yet to be fully investigated.

Later, the human rights group Reprieve released a study that showed that, in an attempt to target just 41 individuals named by the State Department, drones killed more than 1,000. This receiving-end of drone violence remains invisible. If we absolutely must imagine the view outside the frame of the crosshairs, we are presented with hypothetical scenarios involving Western individuals as substitute targets, anyone but the actual people living day to day under aerial occupation.

Video clip: Coming up, to find out what it's like to be tracked by an unseen assassin, I've agreed to play cat and mouse with the predator. It's the hunter. And I'm the prey.

News clip: What you're looking at is Creech Air Force Base. And I'm on the ground. Even though I know there's a predator directly overhead, I still can't hear a thing, pretty much like an insurgent on the ground in Afghanistan or Iran.

Film clip: I'm invisible.

Video clips: I have a nightmare scenario that a hacker breaks into our system. Consider what it would be like to have friendly fire from US weapons overhead?

The efficiency of having a single craft able to find, follow, and eliminate a target like this in real time represents a revolution in warfare.

Stahl: This consistent erasure of civilian victims during the Obama years made way for the quiet but dramatic escalation of drone strikes during the Trump Administration. Civilians are hard to see too, because the view from the ground is already contained in another official perspective which we might call a helmet-cam vision. This habit of putting us in the soldier's boots is the complement to the view from the sky-bound drone.

This aesthetic had a long history, but it began to take off in the late 1990s in the shaky cameras of officially supported Pentagon films, which were then easily adapted for the growing first-person shooter video game market. But the big boost to this way of seeing arrived with the embedded reporting system designed for the Iraq War in 2003. The choice to invite journalists into the ranks was a tremendous PR success, in that it aligned audiences with the perspective of the military machine. It took us along for the ride, so to speak. Perhaps its signature was the view through night vision goggles.

Video clip: Because the night time still belongs to the US Army.

Stahl: To maximize the effect, Pentagon PR summoned the helmet cam to embed the viewer even more deeply into the chain of command. Military officials released video of the rescue of Private

Jessica Lynch from an Iraqi hospital, but turned out in the end to be a highly choreographed and even fabricated episode.

News clip: An Iraqi on the CIA--

Stahl: On top of these video releases, the Pentagon helped to produce a made-for-TV film based on the raid. The film gave the impression that commanders directed soldiers through a live feed, even though no such technology existed. As the Iraq War faded from the news, the embedding spirit continued in a wave of war documentaries. Early on, former embedded reporters produced films like Occupation Dreamland and Gunner Palace. Others cobbled together found footage after the fact.

Film clip: Are you going to send this to Faces of Death?

Stahl: And still other filmmakers, operating under military permission, supplied soldiers with cameras themselves.

Scranton: So I called back the public affairs officer of the New Hampshire National Guard. And he knew me. So I was like, Craig? He was like, yes, Deborah?

Stahl: Director Deborah Scranton made a name by being what she called a virtual embed, never having set foot on the battlefield herself.

News clip: --which involves giving cameras to the soldiers.

Scranton: It's up to you to tell me what's working for you.

News clip: --and establishing a close two-way working relationship while they're in Iraq.

Soldier: Cam control manual, night shot on.

Scranton: Yeah, there we go. See the green?

Stahl: It's no mistake that she begins The War Tapes with soldiers enjoying weapon cam footage. After all, the film itself was a form of the weaponized gaze.

Film clip: Get down!

Stahl: These documentaries betrayed the unique quality of helmet cam vision, which is that it's one of the rare windows through which the military will allow images of destroyed bodies.

Film clip: I decided that I needed to film these guys. I had scanned the bodies with the camera. And I had a few choice words for them. They basically said, you know, I'm glad they're dead. That's one less guy that we've got that's going to fire an RPG at a Humvee, you know?

Stahl: It's a testament to the power of this gaze, which neatly contains these horrific images and a drama of, it was either him or me, no further discussion required.

Film clip: Out here, it's us or them, no questions asked. That's just the way it is.

Stahl: Meanwhile, Hollywood continued to carry forth helmet cam vision in films like The Hurt Locker, which enjoyed official Pentagon support for half of its production, and Act of Valor, which literally grew out of a series of military recruiting ads. When SEAL Team Six famously killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011, official public relations saw another opportunity to press the public eye into the helmet cam.

News clip: So video from these Navy SEALs, their headgear, was being fed back to Washington.

Stahl: The technology was still being developed, but this did not stop administration officials from again strongly implying that they commanded the raid through a live helmet cam feed in photos released--

News clip: --all obviously watching this thing play out in real time very closely as Navy SEALs beam back video and audio--

Stahl: --in public statements--

Brennan: But we were able to monitor sort of minute-by-minute developments there. And the intensity, I think, of the stares on the screen--

Stahl: --and in Zero Dark Thirty, a film conceived from the ground up in close collaboration with the White House and Pentagon--

Film clip: We just crossed the border, now entering Pakistan.

Clear.

Stahl: Later, when asked point blank about this view, CIA Director Leon Panetta gave a much different impression of how live the experience really was.

Anchor: Did you have access to video of what was actually happening in the compound, et cetera?

Panetta: We had live-time intelligence information that we were dealing with during the operation itself.

Anchor: Did you actually see Osama bin Laden get shot?

Panetta: No, no, not at all. We had some observation of the approach there, but we did not have direct flow of information as to the actual conduct of the operation itself as they were going through the compound.

Stahl: But this confession hardly registered amidst a mode of seeing that has been pushed again and again, a mode of seeing that presents war is a foregone conclusion, one that decides for us which bodies are worthy of our concern and which are not, and one that contains the story of war in a narrow range of tactical questions. Will we get the job done? Will we remain safe? Other questions seem less natural, and are thus muted in this environment, questions we citizens should be asking about the wisdom of violence, its legality, and especially the welfare of those who stand to suffer under foreign occupation.

We can see the logic of both helmet cam vision and drone vision merging powerfully in the 2014 film American Sniper, the most commercially successful war movie of all time. The entire plot was about seeing through the war machine. What's perhaps odd is that the sniper had previously been kind of vilified character, not a true soldier, but something of the opposite.

This was the case from Day of the Jackal, to Jack Reacher, and nearly everything in between. The Americans in Saving Private Ryan shot the evil Nazi sniper in the clock tower right through his own scope, and made a brief attempt to rehabilitate the character by taking that position themselves. But years later, Nazi snipers were still playing to enthusiastic Nazi audiences in Quentin Tarantino's Inglourious Basterds. American Sniper miraculously turned this image around and made the sniper something of a national hero, a signature of a new kind of patriotism. Those who dared question this hero worship eventually wound up as just another hit job.

News clip: Wow, Michael Moore, I mean, there is no end--

Yeah. There is no end--

Stahl: All this might lead us to think that this is a movie about Chris Kyle, but he is really only a supporting character. The true star is the scope. The film wedges us in front of Kyle so we too can assume the position and enjoy the thrill of the kill.

The scope thus acts as a long-distance helmet cam or a short-distance drone cam, take your pick. Certainly Kyle's character is its own version of a guilt-ridden assassin. And naturally, when drone vision shows up near the end of the film, it comfortably integrates into this established way of seeing.

Film clip: We can't hold them any longer. We've got to move.

Stahl: What's the moral of the story? Well, American Sniper replays the most common theme in war film in the last couple of decades, especially those supported by the Pentagon. This is the theme of the military on a mission to save, not the nation, but itself. We participate in this drama too as the cinema camera fuses with the scope.

News clip: American Sniper bears the intimate details iconic director Clint Eastwood is known for.

Cooper: Clint was right there for that moment.

Interviewer: Next to you?

Cooper: I mean, when I say he was close. I mean, when I was on that gun, he was right there.

Stahl: That is, the film was part of a larger public ritual that visually inserted us into a drama of watchfulness.

Film clip: He decides on our guys.

Stahl: When Kyle fails, he grieves. When we fail and Kyle dies, we grieve. This military-saves-itself narrative allowed for some, like director Clint Eastwood, to make the strange claim that the film was apolitical, or even anti-war.

News clips: Coming up, Clint Eastwood has said his movie, American Sniper, is an anti-war film.

He called it an anti-war statement.

Pro-war movie, an anti-war movie, what is the message?

Is it pro-war or anti-war? Well, it's a Rorschach test.

Stahl: But this false debate masked the function of this film and others like it, which is to halt any debate about our ongoing occupations by presenting a war completely enclosed within the immediate drama of the endangered soldier. Under these conditions, it's hard to zoom out and ask broader questions, such as whether we should authorize the use of our military to devastate a tiny nation in a corporate resource grab. The new equation, the more we see war through this scope, the more inevitable our wars appear.

Film clip: Fuck this. I'm going to go clear housing with Marines.

Stahl: Again, who gets left out of this frame?

Film clip: You coming?

Stahl: This is an important question. Consider the invisibility of civilian suffering. Let's take the Iraq War as it really was compared to how it appeared through the crosshairs of American Sniper.

Epidemiological studies consistently suggested that at least 500,000, and perhaps more than a million Iraqis were killed as a result of the US occupation. Average Americans had no trouble estimating the number of US soldier deaths, but when they were asked for an estimate of Iraqi civilians, the answer was only 10,000. Clearly we have a limited picture.

The question is, how can we reframe war? What might resistance to the weaponized gaze look like? One place to start is arguably the most famous clip of gun camera footage in recent years, an Apache helicopter strafing released by the Wikileaks organization in 2010 entitled, "Collateral Murder." In some ways, this looked a lot like any other gun camera footage, but there were key

differences. Gone were the anonymous glowing humanoids replaced by high-definition people, positively identified as reporters, children, and passersby there to attend to the wounded.

Video clip: Come on, let us shoot.

Stahl: The Pentagon's response to this video was ironic--

News clip: What is Secretary Gates saying now about the release of this video?

Emanuel: Well Megyn, he says that this video is essentially looking at the battlefield, looking at combat, through a soda straw. You don't get the full picture.

Stahl: --ironic in the fact that we were used to seeing through the soda straw, which was the common critique of the embedded reporting system. "Collateral Murder" blew it up to the full picture, giving a rare glimpse into the realities of day-to-day occupation that made way for a frank conversation about it.

News clip: Inside the van when I looked in was a little girl, about four years old. She had a severe belly wound and glass in her eyes, and in her hair, and all over. Next to her was a boy about seven years old. He had a very severe wound to the right side of his head. You know, there were no weapons or anything inside the van. It looked like a father driving his kids.

Stahl: Most attempts to challenge the weaponized gaze however have dealt with drone vision. In particular, certain portrayals began exceeding the frame, where bits of unauthorized material would enter the gun camera's field of view. We saw how this worked with "Collateral Murder," but the intense focus on the psychology of the drone pilot also inevitably led to confrontations with facts beyond the official screen. Many drone operators spoke out, but Brandon Bryant, who had been credited with over 1,600 kills by the military, was the most prominent.

Bryant: These were people enjoying themselves. These were people celebrating, like, a wedding.

When the smoke clears, there's a crater there. And I watch this guy bleed out. I can almost see the agony on this guy's face.

Anchor: Essentially, one of the attacks killed a child. This is something that you thought you saw on the video monitor.

Stahl: The second mode of resistant vision is what we might call objectifying the weapon, that is, critically looking at the drone rather than seeing through its camera. This strategy might include Trevor Paglen's photography, which sought out drone testing grounds from afar and took pictures of drones high in the sky. More traditional activists, like the No Drones Project, found it re-frames the discussion just to have a model drone hovering overhead.

News clip: A month-long nationwide anti-drone campaign has--

Stahl: Some even had home-brewed cameras to contemplate.

News clip: It's got a special camera on it. Those against the United States' use of drones say they never want to imagine their family right here in the crosshairs.

Stahl: Veteran and activist Nick Mottern explained why simply making this object visible is so powerful.

Mottern: But that's what we're being treated to, pictures of drones taking off, images of people who are killed with a description of them as evil. We're dealing with a systematic policy to deprive people of any empathy.

Stahl: Artist James Bridle from the UK saw a similar problem.

Bridle: But we're really aware of how we had no visual idea of what these things were like. We couldn't imagine what it would be like to stand next to one.

Stahl: To give the weapon presence, he drew outlines on the ground, even across from the White House, which prompted a conversation about what it means to live in its shadow.

Another artist, Joseph DeLappe, initiated a number of interesting projects to jam drone vision. He stamped drones on thrift store artwork and money. He built a full-scale model and invited people to write names of victims on its surface. He devised a wearable ever-present drone head mount called Me and My Predator. Maybe most interestingly, he designed a conceptual game called Kill Box, where player one sees through the drone camera and player two experiences a blast that comes out of nowhere.

More controversial is the street artist, Essam, who in 2012, erected a number of signs in Manhattan suggesting drones could strike at any time.

News clip: What he did is, he put up these advertisements all throughout New York.

Essam: I don't think the conversation has reached a mainstream level where we are talking about this at dinner table and whether we want this to take place.

Stahl: Even a year later when he gave his first undisguised interview, he was still under active investigation by the NYPD. Interestingly, Essam had a military history. He served in Iraq as an aerial image analyst himself.

Essam: But when I got to Iraq, I realized that there was really no defending America taking place. It was very much a financial game.

Stahl: When he came home, he was struck by our civilian ways of seeing and decided to do something to shake it up.

Essam: That's how the drone street sign project came about. And in response to that, the NYPD sent the counter-terrorism division of their office after me, because they were-- you know, they got a lot of phone calls.

Stahl: The city eventually dropped all charges, but not before people started to see differently.

Essam: The New Yorker wrote about it, and a lot of other media outlets, like, called Ray Kelly's office and asked, what is going on? And the city all of a sudden-- there was all of a sudden this conversation in the city about drones and whether drones domestically were OK. And you can't really have that conversation without having a conversation about what's happening with them overseas. So it started that conversation as well.

Stahl: The final mode of re-framing the weaponized gaze is perhaps the most powerful, what we might call inversion. This strategy seeks to fully upend this way of seeing. These attempts begin by just giving the target a sense of place.

Josh Begley devised an iPhone app called Drones+ that used data from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism to alert users of a strike on a Google map when it happened. James Bridle did a similar project with his Dronestagram. Just the controversy these apps stirred up provoked questions about how completely invisible these real places have become, even under the ever-present stare of the weapon's eye.

Bridle: All right, they said that it was excessively crude or objectionable content. And it did not appeal to a broad enough audience. They loved it so much that they rejected it three times just to make sure more people would hear about it.

Stahl: Most rare are glimpses from the perspective of those who actually live in the crosshairs. Stirred by the power of this view, some headed into the target zone itself. Here, a group of artists unrolled a 90-foot poster of a little girl whose entire family had been killed in a strike. It took a photo of the poster from the sky and called it, Not A Bug Splat, a reference to a military term often used to describe a hit.

This image went viral. It was not so much for the drone pilots to see as for us who have become used to the absence of civilians on the ground. Researchers from Stanford and Columbia Law Schools also went in to collect stories, not just about death counts, but what it's like to live under drones. They released both an influential report and a short documentary.

Video clip: The result is symptoms of psychological disorder, of trauma, of severe anxiety.

Stahl: After this study broke the ice, other stories began to flicker under the screen that called for us to imagine life under aerial occupation.

Rehman: I no longer love blue skies. In fact, I now prefer gray skies. The drones do not fly when the skies are gray. And for a short period of time, the mental tension and fear eases.

Stahl: A wave of documentaries followed suit that continued to invert the gaze. Typically, these began with the familiar view through the crosshairs before descending to the ground to tell a heart-wrenching tale.

Film clips: We can see something as simple as people playing soccer games. We can see individual players. And we can even see the ball.

Stahl: The lesson from all of these interventions is that the weaponized screen is fragile and can be shattered with even the smallest gesture. Even science fiction can play a part. One of the most interesting treatments of this in recent years was an episode of the series Black Mirror entitled "Men Against Fire," a reference to a postwar book about how to train soldiers to kill, something that doesn't come naturally, thank goodness.

The episode follows soldiers whose job it is to hunt down these ugly monstrous humanoid creatures they call "roaches." The story plays out through the crosshairs like American Sniper on steroids. A special chip installed in the soldiers' heads lets them patch directly into the weapon camera.

It turns out though that this same chip is what makes the roaches look monstrous and easy to kill in the first place. They're in fact regular human beings whom the state has tagged for extermination. The story flips as a roach invents a flashing device that disables the chip in one of the soldiers. He gets glitches and second thoughts.

TV clip: Whoa, whoa, whoa, it's OK, hey, hey, hey.

Stahl: Indeed, the show is not so much about future soldiers as it is about us. And it suggests there's hope. Sometimes all it takes is the right code cracker to turn us all into human beings again.

TV clip: Christ knows.

[END]