

US Drone Strike Movie Premieres in Pakistan

CHAPEL HILL, NC-- A controversial new short film about US drone pilots running strikes in Pakistan premiered last weekend at the LUMS International Film Festival, one of the largest film festivals in Pakistan and all of South Asia. American filmmaker, Owen Essen, wrote the script for [Watching](#) after hearing a story on NPR about "drone pilot burnout." "To a lot of people, drone pilots seem like barely soldiers. They don't necessarily have to go to Iraq or Afghanistan, their physical lives aren't in danger. Yet, they have their own unique set of very real psychological challenges including PTSD like symptoms," Essen says.

Indeed, a series of recent Air Force Reports filed by Lt. Col. Anthony P. Tvaryanas says UAV 'drone' pilots "are at least as fatigued as crews deployed in Iraq." Drone pilots at a handful of bases across the United States are routinely expected to work extraordinarily long hours flying crafts thousands of miles away, and face the emotional disconnect of living in middle class American neighborhoods while causing death and destruction on the other side of the planet. Some sources suggest drone pilots have a higher burn-out rate than conventional pilots.

With a production budget less than \$500, filmmaker Owen Essen created a powerful, twenty minute film about the human cost of drone warfare, including the PTSD damage to the drone pilots, themselves. Essen incorporates actual WikiLeaks supplied kill footage and real drone pilot dialogue into a fictional story of US Sensor Op (drone pilot), Addie Riley, who is tasked with watching a suspected Taliban compound in Pakistan. Surreal images of drone warfare and the compound she is watching invade Addie's dreams and roil her family life in an American suburb.

Niel Linden, a senior drone pilot, tells Addie, "When I was flying bombers, we were watching specks miles below, and that messes with your head. Here, you look at their faces, you watch 'em for a month, you watch 'em when you push the button, and they're right there in crystal clear, high definition while they're dying. You know, if we were in a bomber, we'd be miles away by then but no, here, they want you to stay around and watch, count the bodies, make sure you got 'em all."

Using volunteer actors and crew and making extensive use of green screens and Computer Generated Images, Essen weaves a story of young Addie Riley (played by Joanne May), her hardware store husband, Joe (Drew Matthews) and their 8 year old son, Adam (John Demers). Filming primarily in the historic [Parker-Essen House](#) in Graham, North Carolina, Owen Essen created a facsimile of a drone pilot work station, with actors Doug Nydick and Al Julian

playing the roles of senior drone pilots. Doug Nydick's character, Niel Linden, warns Addie Riley to ignore similarities between her own son and the young boy she is watching in the Pakistani compound - Aamirah played by Akin Williams. The actors playing these two boys, Demers and Williams, previously worked together on the TV Show, *The Rusty Bucket Kids*. May and Matthews, the actors playing Addie and Joe Riley, are also friends in real life, which Essen says contributed to their onscreen chemistry.

Unbeknownst to his talented cast and crew, Owen Essen was a 17 year old high school student when he wrote, cast, directed and edited "Watching" even creating some of the music for the sound track. At the time, Essen was teaching filmmaking at Woods Charter School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and the school soccer field serves as a backdrop in one scene.

Essen was previously honored as the first high school artist profiled on the North Carolina Museum of Art's [Tumblr page](#) and, after winning a nationwide Oscar picking competition, he was named by a Los Angeles Times subsidiary newspaper as a young filmmaker to watch. Essen is currently enrolled as a student at the Savannah College of Art & Design. His best known work prior to *Watching* was his fairy themed [Dubstep Ballet](#) .

Civilian casualties from drone attacks have been high including the deaths of many innocent children. Some of those children are listed by name in the credits to the film "Watching." Despite continued protests from international human rights organizations and predictions by some military experts that the strategy is counterproductive in winning hearts and minds in Pakistan, the US military continues to use drones, more officially called Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), for a variety of strategic purposes including strikes in autonomous regions like Pakistan. "This film is an attempt to shed more light on the secretive realities of drone warfare," Essen says. Juxtapositioning the anger and frustration of Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 with the real world consequences of drone warfare, Essen finished editing "Watching" on 9/11/13 the twelve year anniversary of the events which triggered the defining conflicts of his generation.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9fe-SZKhU8>

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3313450/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1a

<http://teens-inspired.org/post/41653509620/maddie-laethem-a-member-of-the-ncma-teen-advisory>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dz3QaE6rTDg>

<http://www.parker-essenhouse.com>

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