



"A ground-breaking analysis
of drone stories"

Susan Flynn

DEATH



TV

Drone warfare in contemporary popular culture

"A cogent, lively, and urgent contribution
to the cultural study of drones"

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Alex Adams

Note: The term 'drone' is used interchangeably with 'Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)' in this report.

Drone Wars UK is a small British NGO established in 2010 to undertake research and advocacy around the use of armed drones. We believe that the growing use of remotely-controlled, armed unmanned systems is encouraging and enabling a lowering of the threshold for the use of lethal force as well as eroding well established human rights norms. While some argue that the technology itself is neutral, we believe that drones are a danger to global peace and security. We have seen over the past decade that once these systems are in the armoury, the temptation to use them becomes great, even beyond the constraints of international law. As more countries develop or acquire this technology, the danger to global peace and security grows.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public knowledge and understanding of drone technologies and operations is developed through movies, novels, TV and other cultural forms as much as, if not sometimes more than, it is through more traditional news media or direct experience. This study looks in depth at the ways in which cultural productions inform public discussions about the ethics, politics, and morality of remote drone operations. Examining a range of popular drone fictions, including movies such as *Eye in the Sky* and *Good Kill*, TV shows such as *Homeland*, *24: Live Another Day* and *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, and novels by authors including Dan Fesperman, Dale Brown, Daniel Suarez, and Mike Maden, this study identifies six areas of interest in which these texts articulate major political ideas that inform and shape the drone debate.

First of all, drone fictions streamline the ethics of killing into stories that perform a straightforward justificatory purpose. Using clear yet problematically oversimplified narrative strategies, such as the idea that the ends justify the means or that drone strikes can avert catastrophe in the nick of time, drone stories repeatedly show drones as an effective military technology that can do good in the world. The first chapter of this study, "Just in Time", deals with these ideas. Second, drone stories very often position civilian deaths as tragic yet inevitable. The second chapter, "Collateral Damage", explores the ways in which drone fictions rhetorically address this sensitive issue. In short, drone fictions very often admit that civilian deaths are terrible, but insist that the good achieved by the drone program outweighs its negative impacts.

In chapter three, "Technophilia", this study shows how drone stories emphasize the technical perfection of drone systems. Their surveillance capabilities are routinely exaggerated, and the accuracy of their weapons is routinely overplayed. There is an interesting complication here, however. How can drones be perfect machines if collateral damage is also an inevitable aspect of their operations? How can a technology that is precise and intelligent continuously accidentally kill innocents? The fourth chapter of this study, "Hijack and Blowback", reconciles this tension by exploring the ways in which drones are represented as vulnerable to hijack. The espionage genre, of which many drone fictions are a part, is known for convoluted conspiracist storytelling which explains geopolitical mysteries through reference to a shadowy world of infiltration, double agents, and intrigue. There is no collateral damage, there are no accidents: drone strikes which cause civilian casualties are explained as the results of manipulations or secret plots that ordinary people can never understand. This chapter examines how drone fictions foreclose more

substantive criticism of drones by incorporating critical narratives about hijack and blowback into their structure of meaning.

Chapter five, "Humanization", shows how drone stories sympathetically portray drone operators. By emphasizing the psychological toll that remote warfare exacts upon its participants, drone fictions aim to dispel preconceptions that many people hold about drone pilots as 'desk warriors' and to show that they are 'real' warfighters with authentic military experience. Finally, and relatedly, chapter six, "Gender and the Drone", explores how drone fictions address widespread anxieties about the ways in which drones trouble conventional conceptions of gender. By showing that drones do not, in fact, minimize the masculinity of the military and by showing UAV operations as a form of warfighting that enables women to be combatants on an equal footing to men, drone fiction reintegrates drones into the heteronormative system of gender norms.

In sum, these six ideas form a potent normalizing discourse, showing drones as 'war as usual' and, importantly, directing audiences away from and downplaying any criticism of the ethics or geopolitics of drone operations.

INTRODUCTION: DRONE STORIES

The major argument of this essay is that there is an observable trend in popular cultural representations that functions to normalize and justify drone warfare. To be precise, by this I mean firstly that enjoyable narrative texts such as films, TV series, novels, and some forms of popular journalism play a role in the process by which drone warfare is made comprehensible to those of us without first-hand experience of it, and, secondly, that they do so in a way which has, however critical any individual story may appear to be, the general effect of making drone warfare seem a legitimate, rational, and moral use of both cutting edge technology and lethal military force.

For a particularly bold example of such normalization, in the first episode of *24: Live Another Day* (2014) fictional US President Heller bluntly responds to criticisms of the drone program by summarily remarking that “the ugly truth is, what we’re doing is working.” Consider, too, an example from Richard A. Clarke’s novel *Sting of the Drone* (2014). Raymond, a national security spokesman, goes onto a talk show in order to discuss drone operations, and claims that Hellfire strikes are an example of “Ethically using force, including lethal force, in self-defense [...] as Presidents have since George Washington.”¹ This framing of drone technology represents it as a natural extension of ordinary military practice, more or less explicitly in order to subdue any concerns that the fictional talk show’s viewers may have about the moral or military legitimacy of drone strikes. They are simply, here, described as a tool that facilitates routine military policy and practice, with such policy and practice positioned as clearly defensible, as ethically sound and martially effective and, as such, as essentially beyond critique.

More vividly perhaps, novelist Mike Maden writes in his debut *Drone* (2013) that “The public understood that it ultimately made no difference if the American targets were killed with bullets fired from manned or unmanned vehicles. Bad guys were bad guys and dead was dead.”² Such a position on drone warfare, which Maden somewhat flippantly presents as a self-evident truth, is by no means obvious, or objective, or neutral. It presupposes a great deal - much of which is unpacked in the pages of this study - and is a bluntly hawkish, imperialist statement of the principle that the US military has the right to kill anybody anywhere at any time with any technology it so chooses. One of the effects of the articulation and repetition of positions like this throughout drone fiction is

The examination of how popular culture stages debates about drone warfare is increasingly important as public understanding of drone technology today is developed through movies, novels, TV and other cultural forms as much as, if not sometimes more than, it is through more traditional news media

1 Richard A. Clarke, *Sting of the Drone* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2014), p. 165.

2 Mike Maden, *Drone* (Penguin, 2013), p. 298.

that drones cease to appear as a novel technological innovation with profound political, legal, and moral implications, and are instead made comprehensible as simply the latest instrument through which war can be waged as usual.

In other words, if drones are a value-neutral weapon like any other, virtuous in the hands of heroes and nefarious in the hands of villains, then it follows that they are, ultimately, not that special. They may be unusual and new, and they may present us with audacious innovations and unexpected challenges, but they are, when all is said and done, just another entry into the arsenal of military technologies that cultural producers can integrate into exciting stories in order to thrill, shock, and otherwise stimulate us. The inclusion of drone technology in the range of action tropes available to writers and filmmakers, that is, makes UAVs available to dramatic exploitation much like any other military technology, and in the process, positions them as – however unconventional – essentially ordinary. Importantly, this aesthetic normalization has the effect of downplaying the many urgent controversies raised by drone warfare, including the many challenges they pose to international law. That is, by presenting drones as legitimate weapons, by presenting drone personnel as relatable figures, and by dehumanizing and demonizing the targets of drone strikes, hegemonic drone fictions not only *normalize* drone operations: they *facilitate* drone operations.

Normalization does not happen by accident. But neither is it a planned, strategic process, and nor does it take place unchallenged. It is an effect, both political and rhetorical, both concretely material and evanescently emotional, of a broader set of ongoing, flexible, and dynamic sociocultural debates, discourses, and dialogues. It is not a case of cultural texts directly and uncritically celebrating military violence; drones are not simply worshipped or valorized. Rather, they are shown as a complex, fully rounded technology with many different faces, some morally virtuous, some merely useful, others politically problematic. That is to say, like any phenomenon, drones become normal by being treated as normal – that is, by being incorporated into the ordinary, regular regimes of meaning that make everyday life intelligible, and, importantly, by being open to criticism as well as being the subject of flattering description.



Drone. *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. Source Entertainment One, 2015.

The examination of how popular culture stages debates about drone warfare is increasingly important today, as public understanding of drone technology is developed through movies, novels, TV and other cultural forms as much as, if not sometimes more than, it is through more traditional news media or direct

experience. And yet, while scholarship on UAVs proliferates with a fecundity that almost matches that of the development of drone technology itself, the role that cultural production plays in mediating popular understanding of drones remains in need of further study.

This is not to say that the area has not been approached at all. Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps, for instance, surveyed the burgeoning crop of drone representations in 2018, concluding that the creation and interpretation of drone stories can help us “to reach a measure of understanding with regard to their social, cultural, political, and economic impact.”³ Elsewhere, in the notes for her final, unfinished book, published posthumously in 2018 by *Race and Class*, Barbara Harlow observes that drones have wide-ranging implications for storytelling, including “challenges to traditions of narration and their consequences for new directions in literary responses to geopolitical crises, ranging from theories of just war to humanitarian advocacy.”⁴ That is, scholars have already acknowledged that a great deal can be learned about drone warfare from the way drones are storied and represented, but more needs to be done. That is the task of this study.

Popular culture representation of drone warfare helps to circulate and amplify political ideas about what drones are, how drones are used, and what is ethically and politically at stake. We should be careful, however, not to reduce cultural production simply to an arm of political discourse, or to understand it as directly, straightforwardly indoctrinatory. Nobody goes to fiction simply to read political tracts; whilst journalism and fiction often share rhetorical methods and representational patterns, they remain distinct. Nonetheless, cultural production cannot be understood as a purely artistic, apolitical activity that occurs in some kind of bubble, without any reference to the material conditions from which it emerges.⁵ Sara Brady writes that drone stories “not only originate from but also perpetuate popular, often misinformed perceptions of what drones are, how they function in the world, who they affect, and how they relate to culture, society, and especially, power.” Because the conduct of drone warfare is beyond the experience of most people, it can feel unreal, Brady writes, but “Popular culture makes it real; mainstream representations of the drone perform its stories, whether on the news or in the movies.”⁶

It is not really meaningful or helpful for scholars to throw around emotive and imprecise terms like ‘propaganda’. It is perhaps more useful to talk of the way that cultural and political discourses are mutually interwoven and mutually constitutive; it is perhaps more productive to analyse the ways that military and political ideas manifest in cultural texts, and to pick apart the ways that they are articulated, reinforced, or contested. That said, scholars do not necessarily need to be cautious when acknowledging the martial character of certain cultural productions. Military writers, for instance, very often explicitly acknowledge it. Introducing their annual short story competition, US military blog *Mad Scientist Laboratory* write that storytelling “is a powerful tool that allows us to envision how innovative technologies could be employed and operationalized in the Future Operational Environment.”⁷ Elsewhere, thriller writer Dan Fesperman

3 Tobi Smethurst and Stef Craps, “Towards an Understanding of Drone Fiction”, *Journal of War & Culture Studies* (2018), p. 16.

4 Barbara Harlow, “The Drone Imprint: Literature in the Age of UAVs”, *Race and Class*, 60: 3 (2018), p. 61.

5 See for instance Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, “Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture World Politics Continuum.” *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155-163.

6 Sara Brady, “God, the Pilot, and the Bugsplat: Performance and the Drone Effect.” *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilisation* 8: 2 (2015), pp. 35, 41.

7 Uncredited editor, “Mad Scientist Science Fiction Writing Contest 2019”. *Mad Scientist Laboratory*. January 23, 2019. <https://madsciblog.tradoc.army.mil/114-mad-scientist-science-fiction-writing-contest-2019/>

explicitly casts his fiction as a form of military service, dedicating his 2014 drone novel *Unmanned* to “all men and women who serve – whether with the pen or the sword.”⁸ These two examples show us that fiction can play a major role in contemporary military life. It is conceptualized as a form of thought experimentation which can help envision the future of military conflict – a sort of speculative blue sky thinking, a form of imaginative planning – and it is also conceptualized as a part of the fight itself.

Quite what part fiction plays in the fight, however, is not immediately clear. It is easy enough, for example, to observe that prestige TV shows like *Homeland* and *Tom Clancy’s Jack Ryan* can very easily be read in sympathy with the public relations aims of Western military and political authorities. The way that journalism, too, circulates drone success stories shows the ways that representations – stories and images – can be directly involved in the assembly and circulation of official political messaging. But the way that such texts execute this task is rarely, however, reducible to the regurgitation of uncritical propaganda. We might expect propaganda to show us celebratory stories of thumping success, for example, where many drone stories in fact explicitly foreground the problems of drone warfare, such as the psychological suffering of drone pilots and the humanitarian problem of unintentional civilian casualties (‘collateral damage’). Military fiction can operate as a form of critique as well as being celebratory or commemorative, and to consider it crassly indoctrinatory is to underestimate its refined and volatile subtlety.

For criticism of drones is a major component of drone fiction. Missiles go astray, innocents die, drone operators suffer paralyzing doubts and regret. However, certain forms of limited criticism may actually function to forestall or defuse broader critique. The widespread observation that ‘war is hell’, for instance, appears to acknowledge the dirtier, sadder, more unpleasant side of armed conflict. However, it does so in a way which often has the effect of dismissing any more substantive critique of individual technologies, weapons, and strategies. As Bruce Cronin observes in his 2018 book *Bugsplat*, the phrase often functions as a rhetorical shrug which claims that, since everything in war is awful, having a moral problem with anything in particular makes no moral sense. The sentiment, he writes, “often serves as an all-purpose justification for both atrocities and collateral damage.”⁹ If war is hell, then what difference does it make if we use phosphorous bombs or cluster munitions, or if we commit torture, or if we massacre civilians? If suffering is everywhere, what is the point of picking through the carnage in order to decide which deaths were legitimate? This position, which sounds like a harmless truism, in fact serves to flatten important differences between forms of force employed on battlefields the world over; it also trivializes legal, moral, and political attempts to set agreed limits on what forms of force are considered acceptable.

And further, even if war is hell, some people *like* hell. Former Marine Anthony Swafford writes in his 2003 memoir *Jarhead* that “war films are all pro-war, no matter what the supposed message,” and that soldiers love graphic anti-war films because “the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills.” No matter whether the filmmakers, actors, critics, and audiences agree that war films are powerful denunciations of war, writes Swafford, “the actual killers who know how to use the weapons are not.”¹⁰ Swafford’s point may be made hyperbolically, but his central insight remains

8 Dan Fesperman, *Unmanned* (Corvus, 2014), unnumbered opening page.

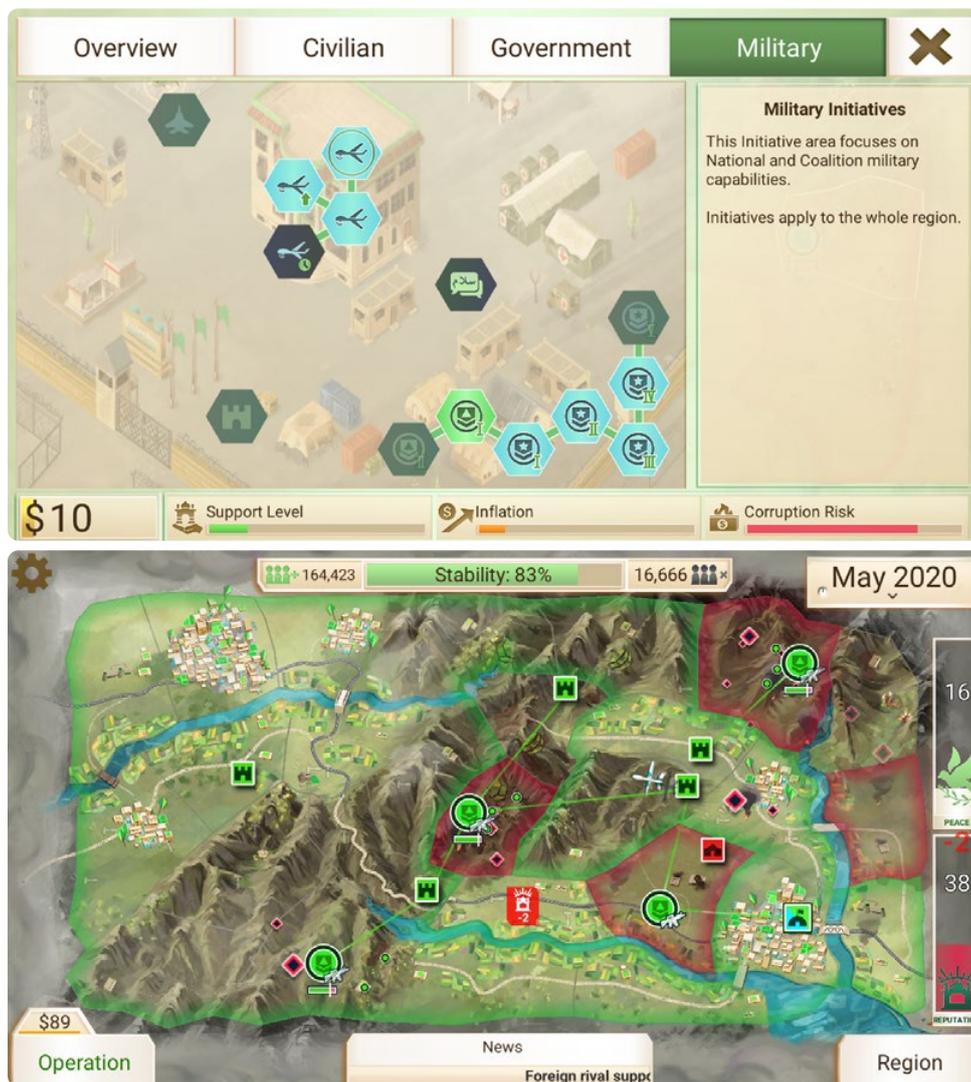
9 Bruce Cronin, *Bugsplat: The Politics of Collateral Damage in Western Armed Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 127.

10 Anthony Swafford, *Jarhead* (London: Scribner, 2004 [2003]), pp. 6-7.

pertinent. There's no such thing, he argues, as an anti-war movie: even those films that show war as awful and cruel can glamorize it. Importantly, Swafford does not argue that soldiers misinterpret anti-war films by enjoying their violence, but that the meaning of screened violence is not fixed by its creators: films 'intended' as anti-war screeds can often be read as joyful advertisements for the military, even for war *per se*. For example, in his drone memoir *Predator* (2010), Matt Martin writes that a military unit he worked with named themselves after Johnny Rico, one of the trigger-happy protagonists of Paul Verhoeven's 1997 anti-war sci-fi satire *Starship Troopers*.¹¹ Verhoeven's movie boldly criticizes the strident dehumanization and smirking fascism of its future intergalactic militarism; Martin's drone unit embraces Rico's gung-ho bloodthirst as a badge of honour.

Parameters of this study

Once a mysterious rumour, a secretive and unexplained glint in the sky, military drones are now a ubiquitous fixture of popular culture. The many novels, films, TV series and other texts I draw on here are only part of the cultural omnipresence of drones, which includes video games, material culture such as toys and action figures, and of course, commercial consumer drones.



Screens from *Rebel Inc.* in which players can select drone support options to complement their military counterinsurgency strategy. **Source** *Rebel Inc.*, Ndemic Creations, 2018.

¹¹ Matt J Martin and Charles W. Sasser, *Predator: The Remote-Control Air War Over Iraq and Afghanistan: A Pilot's Story* (Zenith, 2010), p. 198.

This study uses close readings of cultural texts to get inside drone fiction. Its aim is to examine the ideological and political contours and horizons of drone stories, and to show how these stories engage with and communicate the ethics, politics, and morality of drone warfare. For the purposes of keeping this essay concise and for clarity of terms of reference, the primary area of inquiry has been representations – from narrative journalism, through film, television, and print fiction – that can be broadly described as realist. Realist texts are understood here as any form of cultural production that attempts or claims to ‘show the world as it is’. Naturally, this is not a straightforward matter: the world is not simply ‘out there’ waiting to be directly transcribed, and any attempt to portray the world ‘as it is’ is actively engaged in *creating* an image of what the world is. To be more precise: when conjuring an image of the world that we can recognize as credible or in some way ‘realistic’, writers and filmmakers do not simply reproduce the world in an unbiased way, but conjure an impression of our shared world that must always already adhere to a set of widely accepted political understandings and agreed-upon intellectual coordinates in order to be comprehensible as ‘real’ or ‘realistic’.

For example, almost every drone novel I have examined here is written from the point of view of the American military, and as a consequence they all broadly presuppose that the American military has essentially legitimate aims – combating ‘terrorism’, achieving ‘peace’, ‘protecting Americans’, ‘saving lives’, and so on. Such a position is not, of course, objective, but nonetheless it is a foundational presupposition which determines the way that the texts orient their representation of what ‘reality’ is. I do not argue, of course, that reality is not out there: simply that representations which purport to provide us unmediated access to it are not to be interpreted as unbiased, apolitical documentation but rather as participants in that reality, as products of it. Mike Maden, in particular, makes extensive use of paratextual materials such as maps and extended lists of technical acronyms, including detailed references to specific real technologies, in order to bolster the feeling of ‘realism’ or ‘authenticity’ that readers may take from his work. Elsewhere, Michael Crichton’s *Prey* (2002), which is prefaced by a non-fiction essay about nanotechnology, “Artificial Evolution in the Twenty-first Century”, is given the feeling of credibility by Crichton’s inclusion of a four-page bibliography full of technical and scientific works. The purpose of such textual strategies is to attempt to convince the reader that the book they are reading accurately and seriously reflects ‘reality’, and to conceal the material reality that the books are texts written from particular positions and which reflect the beliefs, politics, and prejudices of their human authors.

Of course, no survey of cultural texts can be exhaustive. There’s no way I could have found every text featuring drones, and even had I somehow done so, it would not have been possible from that enormous corpus to have made any meaningful generalizations. Although drone strikes were appearing in major cultural productions such as *Syriana* as early as 2005, and swarms of intelligent nano-drones featured in Crichton’s *Prey* three years before that in 2002, the majority of the texts I analyse in these pages were published within the last decade, many of them within the last six or seven years. This is because this period has been marked by an increasingly high-profile and increasingly sophisticated public debate over the use of drones in military contexts, a debate which has played out in large part on screen and in the pages of novels and newspapers.

I have looked at a range of drone fiction, including military action thriller novels such as the series of drone novels by Mike Maden – the aforementioned *Drone*, and its sequels *Blue Warrior* (2014), *Drone Command* (2015), and *Drone Threat* (2016) – and selected entries in Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice’s *Dreamland* series

- *Collateral Damage* (2012), *Drone Strike* (2014), and *Target Utopia* (2015) - not to mention the many standalone drone novels by such authors as Daniel Suarez, Jonathan Maberry, Dan Fesperman, and Richard A. Clarke. Several major films have proven useful, including *Eye in the Sky* (2015), *Good Kill* (2014), *Drone* (2017) and *Drones* (2013). TV series, too, have been useful, including *Homeland*, *House of Cards*, *24: Live Another Day* and *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan* (this last of which, interestingly, is based on novels written by Mike Maden). These texts are unified by their concern with 'real' drone strikes - that is, with drone technologies as they exist and are used today or as they will plausibly exist or be used in the near future. (Interested readers can see the appendix for a more comprehensive, though necessarily incomplete, list of drone texts.)

This preoccupation with realist texts has meant that I have, unfortunately, avoided some very interesting pieces of work. Allegorical science fiction such as the *Transformers*, *Terminator*, or *Robocop* franchises are interesting for a range of reasons, and a study of their parable-like insights into technology would doubtless be valuable, but they have little to say to the debate about the specifically military and political use of drones in real-world theatres of conflict today. There are some interesting points of convergence here: one of the drone software systems used by the US military is called Skynet - the name of the artificial intelligence software that chooses to wipe out mankind in the *Terminator* franchise - and the Predator drone shares a name with the monster in *Predator*, an extraterrestrial creature that sees in infra-red, is invisible to its enemies, and which hunts humans for sport (often using long-range missiles fired from a height).

Elsewhere, Hari Kunzru's suggestive short story "Drone" (2015) engages with themes of surveillance and technology - and it features the fantastic line "Privacy is a quaint word, like 'chivalry' or 'superego'" - but it is not relevant to this study because it is more thematically concerned with economic inequality and cyborgic modifications of the human body than it is with contemporary political and ethical issues relating specifically to military drone operations. Tom Hillenbrand's award-winning and genre-bending science fiction detective novel *Drone State* (2014), too, is a fascinating vision of a future total surveillance state, but it is more thematically preoccupied with its uncanny (and apparently unintentional) anticipation of Brexit than it is with drone operations as they exist today. Likewise, Lex Brown's extraordinary near-future erotic novel *My Wet Hot Drone Summer* (2015) interestingly infuses its themes of surveillance and technology with an emphasis on the voyeuristic gaze and the sexual dimensions of automation, but - apart from the repeated use of a seizure-inducing sex toy - there is little concern with violence. I am also concerned here with mainstream popular fiction, and as such I do not delve into the substantial field of fine art by artists such as Kathryn Brimblecombe, Joseph Delappe, Teju Cole, and Trevor Paglen, all of whom have engaged with the aesthetics of drone warfare in great depth and with substantial sophistication.¹² This essay focuses on realist popular culture in order to analyse the operation of a specific set of ideas that is found throughout it.

Structure of this report

This study has six chapters. The first, "Just in Time", examines the way that cultural texts engage with the imminence justification for the use of lethal force. This justification is found repeatedly throughout drone fiction, and this chapter

¹² See for example Svea Bräunert & Meredith Malone (eds.) *To See Without Being Seen: Contemporary Art and Drone Warfare* (Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2016), or Ronak K. Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* (Duke University Press, 2019).

demonstrates the ways that representations - journalistic as well as literary and filmic - narrativize it. This chapter, the longest of the present work, also engages with several other aspects of the morality of drone strikes as they are represented in drone fiction, arguing that drone fiction shows international law as an inconvenient barrier to the achievement of Western military aims. The second, "Collateral Damage", shows how drone fictions position civilian deaths as inevitable, and how they minimize and trivialize the deaths of non-Western people. Third, the chapter "Technophilia", shows how cultural texts repeatedly glorify and exaggerate the technical perfection of drone systems, in terms of their surveillance capabilities and the accuracy of their weapons. The fourth chapter, "Hijack and Blowback", argues that drone texts foreclose criticism of drones by incorporating critical perspectives about remote warfare into drone stories and neutralizing the ethical challenges they represent. Fifth, the chapter "Humanization" shows how drone texts personify drone operators as complex moral agents who suffer significant trauma in the course of their labour. Chapter six, "Gender and the Drone" argues that unmanned drone operations trouble our conventional conceptions of gender, and that representations of drone warfare resolve this anxiety by explaining drone warfare in terms of familiar heteropatriarchal gender norms. Finally, the Conclusion closes this essay with a brief consideration of cultural texts that challenge the political coordinates central to mainstream drone fiction.

Parenthetically, I should note that many of the texts I have looked at here have remarkably similar titles. A novel by Mike Maden, a short story by Hari Kunzru, a poem by Solmaz Sharif, poetry collections by Kim Garcia and Harry Josephine Giles, a critical volume by Adam Rothstein, and three films - a documentary by Tonje Hessen Schei, a dramatic short by Justin S. Lee, and a feature by Jason Bourque - all share the title *Drone*, not to mention the similarly-named films *Drones* and *The Drone* (2019).¹³ In order to minimize confusion for the reader, I have taken care to distinguish as clearly as possible between these similarly-named texts, none of which are directly related to one another.



Hasbro action figure: Transformers: Prime Soundwave, Drone Mode. **Credit** Matthew Adams, 2020.

¹³ *The Drone* is a sci-fi/horror/comedy in the vein of possession movies like *Jack Frost* (1997), *Shocker* (1989), or *Maximum Overdrive* (1986) about a domestic leisure drone inhabited by the spirit of a deceased serial killer. It falls outside of the parameters of this study, but I mention it here as a further example of how many similarly-named cultural texts exist.

1

JUST IN TIME

Imminence, Legality, Morality

One of the major ways that drones are featured in cultural and political discourse is as a solution to urgent, drastic situations in which imminent harm is about to be inflicted upon innocent civilians or military personnel. Drones are shown, time after time, as a tool that can be used to resolve problems, a representational trend which serves a clearly justificatory purpose: if drones, as a technology, can defuse dilemmas, save civilian lives, and otherwise prevent harm, then they have not only use value but moral value too. That is, they can be shown to reduce risk and to make warfare not only materially safer but morally better; these representations are attempts to confirm the optimistic claim, voiced by memoirist Matt Martin, that drones are “truly in the business of saving American lives”.¹⁴ This chapter analyses how this justificatory rhetorical simplification is manifested in both drone fiction and in drone journalism. First, it addresses imminence, with a specific focus on just-in-time justice; second, the chapter addresses the ways that drone texts uncouple morality from legality; finally, it looks at the ways in which contempt for the law is embedded in drone fiction.

What is imminence?

Jus ad bellum, the law of war, is commonly understood to legitimate proportionate and necessary military force, while *jus in Bello*, known as International Humanitarian Law, or more colloquially, the law of armed conflict, governs the use of military force during an armed conflict. It is set out in international treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, as well as customary international law. Outside of a situation of armed conflict, International Human Rights Law has pre-eminence and lethal force may only be legally justified in extreme situations, as a last resort to prevent death or injury, where no reasonable alternative is available for the resolution of a dangerous situation. Such force may only be used against a threat which is imminent, with imminent defined as “instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation.”¹⁵ The term ‘imminence’, however, is fairly elastic, and many states have sought to make this usefully vague definition explicitly roomier.¹⁶ For instance, in 2011 White House Counterterrorism official John O’Brennan said that, in the view of the Obama administration, “a more flexible understanding of ‘imminence’ may

14 Martin and Sasser, *Predator*, p. 310.

15 Christine Gray, *International Law and the Use of Force*, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 149.

16 Lisa Hajjar, “Lawfare and Armed Conflicts: A Comparative Analysis of Israeli and US Targeted Killing Policies and Legal Challenges Against Them”. In: *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, ed. by Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan (Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 59-88.

be appropriate when dealing with terrorist groups".¹⁷ That is, though imminence is used in a way that seems at first flush to be rigorous and specific, its meaning in practice is considerably more flexible than we may expect.

In short, in terms of the use of lethal force, peacetime and wartime are distinct situations. They have many important practical, legal, and philosophical differences. In representations of drone warfare, however, the contours of such distinctions are frequently flattened in a way that radically oversimplifies the legality, the practicality, and the morality of targeted killing. The use of lethal force is almost always shown as legitimate against America's enemies, however they are defined. Further, this position is found so frequently that it begins to appear an obvious commonplace. Of course, that is, *of course* we should pull the trigger: the situations are routinely framed as though a lethal missile strike is a clearly legitimate act. Richard A. Clarke, for example, has one of his characters in *Sting of the Drone* circumvent a debate about whether or not a vehicle carrying fertilizer qualifies as a valid target by simply declaring it to be involved in an imminent attack:

*"It qualifies," Erik responded from the Global Coordination Center in Las Vegas, "because it is an imminent terrorist attack. They didn't pack that truck full of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil to heat their house or fertilize a field."*¹⁸

The dismissive and insouciant - almost jokey - tone of this remark is significant. Its declaratory, sarcastic finality is quite at odds with the rigour and care with which the US military claims it selects its targets. Memoirist Mark McCurley insists in *Hunter Killer* (2015), for instance, that in his experience drone teams were "professional pilots and planners who scrutinized every target to make sure the shot was legal and just."¹⁹ Elsewhere in this novel, there are extensive deliberations about which targets should go onto the kill list; in the heat of the moment, however, drone teams identify and eliminate any target they choose, and justify doing so by declaring their targets imminent threats. That Clarke spent thirty years in government service, including in roles such as National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism, which allowed him to actually oversee military decisions and policies, adds a great deal of significance here. Even those who present themselves as reasonable, experienced voices of establishment wisdom are capable of flinging out glib justifications for summary execution by drone.

There is, however, considerable variation in the ways that such justifications are framed. Elsewhere, we see a more in-depth consideration of the legal complexities involved in militarily engaging targets. In Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice's *Collateral Damage*, fighter pilot and sometime drone operator Turk Mako is often preoccupied with his rules of engagement, in particular with what he considers their inconsistencies. Seeing an enemy aircraft, he considers whether he is justified, as a fighter pilot, in attacking it.

But was he allowed to shoot them down? His ROEs - rules for [sic] engagement - directed that he not fire until he found himself or other nearby allies 'in imminent danger.'

Did this situation meet that standard?

*If these guys couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, would any situation ever meet that standard?*²⁰

In terms of the use of lethal force, peacetime and wartime are distinct situations. They have many important practical, legal, and philosophical differences. In representations of drone warfare, however, the contours of such distinctions are frequently flattened in a way that radically oversimplifies the legality, the practicality, and the morality of targeted killing

17 John O'Brennan, 'Remarks of John O. Brennan, "Strengthening our Security by Adhering to our Values and Laws"', *White House Website*, 16/09/2011. Online: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/16/remarks-john-o-brennan-strengthening-our-security-adhering-our-values-an> See also William Saletan, "Editors for Predators". *Slate*, 08/02/2013. Online: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2013/02/drones-law-and-imminent-attacks-how-the-u-s-redefines-legal-terms-to-justify-targeted-killing.html>

18 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 123.

19 Mark McCurley and Kevin Maurer, *Hunter Killer: Inside the Lethal World of Drone Warfare* (Penguin, 2015), pp. 6, 339-340.

20 Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice, *Collateral Damage* (Harper, 2012), p. 7. See also p. 286.

Mako's concern here is that the ROEs are unnecessarily restrictive, and that his soldier's instincts and expertise – including his low opinion of his enemies' capabilities – are deliberately precluded from the excessively bureaucratic decision-making process. Throughout this novel, he returns to the question of whether his ROEs permit him to make choices which he considers to be clearly, in the heat of the moment, militarily justified. In the process, the ROEs – which, among other things, determine the legal standard for the use of lethal force – are carefully uncoupled from a consideration of whether or not something is the right thing to do. For Turk, the question of whether something meets his ROEs is not whether something is ethically or militarily *right*, but simply whether it is procedurally *permitted*. In the process, legal caution over whether or not force is justified is consistently shown as an intrusive, nannying, unnecessarily restrictive framework that stops 'real' warriors from doing what they know to be right.

Elsewhere in the *Dreamland* series of which *Collateral Damage* is a part, Ray Rubeo, an engineering genius who designs advanced drone systems, gives several rhetorically potent justifications for breaking the law for the greater good when the stakes are high and time is short. For example, in *Target Utopia*, Rubeo describes hacking government databases as legitimate because his predicament is "too important a problem to worry about formalities", having earlier decided that it is "Better to ask forgiveness than permission."²¹ That is, in drone fiction, imminence justifications are found with surprising frequency and with a great deal of variety, and they frequently emphasize the difference between morality and legality. Importantly, the law is frequently presented as an obstacle to correct procedure: not merely conceptually different from the right thing to do, the legal thing to do is sometimes presented as actively the wrong thing to do.

The ticking bomb drone strike

The ticking bomb scenario is a thought experiment which provides us with a very bold example of the way in which popular culture adapts philosophical debates into compelling narratives. The ticking bomb scenario is most often used to demonstrate that torture can be permitted in certain emergency situations: a concealed bomb is ticking, and a prisoner is tortured until they reveal the information which prevents the bomb going off. The point we are expected to take from this is that if an atrocity of some kind can be prevented in this manner then torture – a crime against humanity – can, in some limited circumstances, be defended. This thought experiment is nothing if not controversial, and it has been widely critiqued by many thinkers, including Ron Hassner, Bob Brecher, Elaine Scarry, and in my own volume *How to Justify Torture*.²² In *Drone Theory* (2015), for example, Grégoire Chamayou criticizes this ethics of violence as "a flatly Jesuitical justification of ends that justify means".²³ This justificatory factor is important here: its simplistic yet compelling framing makes it almost impossible for us to choose not to torture, and as such, it is a very powerful intervention in discussions about torture. The question can be dismissed and critiqued, but it cannot, on its own terms, be answered in the negative.

21 Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice, *Target Utopia* (Harper, 2015), pp. 364, 272.

22 Ron E. Hassner, "The Myth of the Ticking Bomb". *The Washington Quarterly* 41:1 (2018), pp. 83-94; Bob Brecher, *Torture and the Ticking Bomb* (Blackwell, 2007); Elaine Scarry, "Five Errors in the Reasoning of Alan Dershowitz". In: *Torture: A Collection*, ed. by Sanford Levinson, revised edn. (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 281-290; Alex Adams, *How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario* (Repeater Books, 2019).

23 Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Penguin: 2015), p. 102.

This scenario is also one of the most prevalent narratives about torture, and can be found throughout a wide range of cultural productions, including some of the most successful novels, films, and TV series of the twentieth and twenty first centuries.



The ticking bomb scenario. A suspect (bottom left) is tortured as time ticks away. 24, s2e13, dir. Jon Cassar. Source Fox Studios, 2002.

Impossible choices, tragic sacrifice, and urgent races against time are, after all, some of the central thematic preoccupations of many popular genres. "Ticking-bomb stories", writes David Luban, "depict torture as an emergency exception, but use intuitions based on the exceptional case to justify institutionalized practices and procedures of torture".²⁴ These stories dramatize one off events, but in practice their political function is to circulate justifications for torture systems.

The ticking bomb scenario is narrated with striking force in Jonathan Maberry's 2015 drone novel *Predator One*. Towards the start of the book, one of the soldier protagonists, Bunny, finds himself in a gruesome black site prison. Thinking through the ethics of torture, Bunny decides that "if I thought that there was a bomb about to go off and any of these pricks knew where it was or how to de-arm it, then, well... shit. I guess I'd put my conscience on a back shelf and go all Jack Bauer on them." As you may imagine, this scenario does not remain hypothetical for the characters. Narrator Joe Ledger later boasts that he once tortured a white nationalist in order to gain information that prevented a genocide; he later tortures a villain for information that progresses the plot; the novel's climax features as bold a ticking bomb scenario as you will see in any piece of military action fiction, in which the protagonist cruelly tortures the villain of the piece until he relinquishes the technical information that the heroes need to stop an imminent disaster.²⁵

Drone stories modify this formula only slightly. Terrorist attacks, geopolitical catastrophes, and imminent murders are averted in the nick of time by drone

24 David Luban, "Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb", *Virginia Law Review* 91 (2005), p. 1427.

25 Jonathan Maberry, *Predator One* (St Martin's Griffin, 2015), pp. 35-36, 144-147, 433-434, 450-454.

technologies rather than by torture. In *Drone Command*, geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea threaten to escalate into a global war between China and the US; at the last minute this potentially apocalyptic confrontation is averted when the protagonists use the technological infrastructure of their drone system to hack into a missile guidance system and redirect a missile.²⁶ More broadly, Ray from Richard A. Clarke's *Sting of the Drone* explicitly defends the preventative capacity of drones as follows: "We are what stops the next attack. We get them before they get here. That's what people on the Vegas Strip want, that's what most Americans want."²⁷ Drone technology, here, is not only militarily effective and morally right, but it is democratically approved, even when it is in contravention of the law.

Mike Maden is often the boldest when it comes to such defences of drone warfare. In *Drone Threat*, when explaining his course of action, hero Troy Pearce philosophizes about the ethics of violence casually and confidently: "Security Ethics 101, friendo", he says. "A few killed and wounded by your kinetics [i.e. weapons], or thousands killed and wounded by your adversary."²⁸ The question of military ethics is reduced, by Maden, to a coldly, reductively mathematical formulation which functions to portray lethal force as routinely legitimate. The end, simply, justifies the means. Several texts, however, dramatize and explore the ticking bomb ethics of drone strikes in particular depth. It is to these that we now turn.

The girl in the red dress, part one: *Eye in the Sky*

In Gavin Hood's 2015 film *Eye in the Sky*, civilian and military authorities disagree over the ethics of authorizing a drone strike against an al-Shabab cell planning an imminent suicide attack. An international coalition of American, British, and Kenyan military forces plans to collaborate on an operation to capture several high-value terrorists, when there is an unexpected development: the targets move to another location, in a district which is inaccessible to the capture team, and begin to prepare two young recruits for imminent suicide attacks. The operation immediately changes drastically, and everybody involved has to reassess whether it is appropriate for the objective of the operation to change from capture to kill.

The scenario is, of course, exaggeratedly clear-cut: due to the miraculous power of high-definition surveillance, they are able to be certain that these five terrorists are definitely preparing for two suicide operations (and not merely to suspect it, or to have credible evidence that it may be the case). They know for certain that they have a short window of time in which to act, or as an exasperated general emphasizes, that they "have a situation here which could result in massive loss of life in the next ten minutes". They also know for certain, however, that there is one little girl in the projected blast radius who will have to die if the security forces are to achieve their legitimate objective of preventing the al-Shabab attack.

Naturally, the attack goes ahead, simply because the strategic mathematics of the situation make the choice, though tragic, the only possible course of action. The drone fires both of its missiles at the house, macerating all of the terrorists before they are capable of perpetrating the attack. It is laboriously highlighted that it is sad that the little girl had to become the collateral damage of a legitimate attack (the next chapter discusses this aspect of *Eye in the Sky* in more depth). Nonetheless, the framing of the situation is engineered specifically to

26 Mike Maden, *Drone Command* (Penguin, 2015), pp. 345-349.

27 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 243.

28 Mike Maden, *Drone Threat* (Penguin, 2016), p. 114.

make us, the audience, conclude that the sacrifice, however harrowing, is worth it. David Swanson, more polemically perhaps, wrote in his brief 2016 essay on *Eye in the Sky* that the film attempts to persuade us that “murdering is wise”.²⁹

The ticking bomb scenario presents a falsely unambiguous situation. In the case of torture, it seems acceptable because the reality of what torture entails is not visible; concentrationary imprisonment, degradation and corruption of state institutions, and other issues central to the reality of torture must remain invisible for the thought experiment to remain persuasive. Likewise, the framing of drone warfare in *Eye in the Sky* focuses on whether it is right to kill innocents in the course of operations that are otherwise entirely morally unproblematic. *Eye in the Sky*'s sophisticated debate about the legality of the attack is minutely detailed – the characters responsible for the strike address legality, proportionality, necessity, and so on – but the restriction of the film's horizons to one clear-cut situation obscures the many broader geopolitical questions raised by the drone program.



Drone strike. *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. Source Entertainment One, 2015.

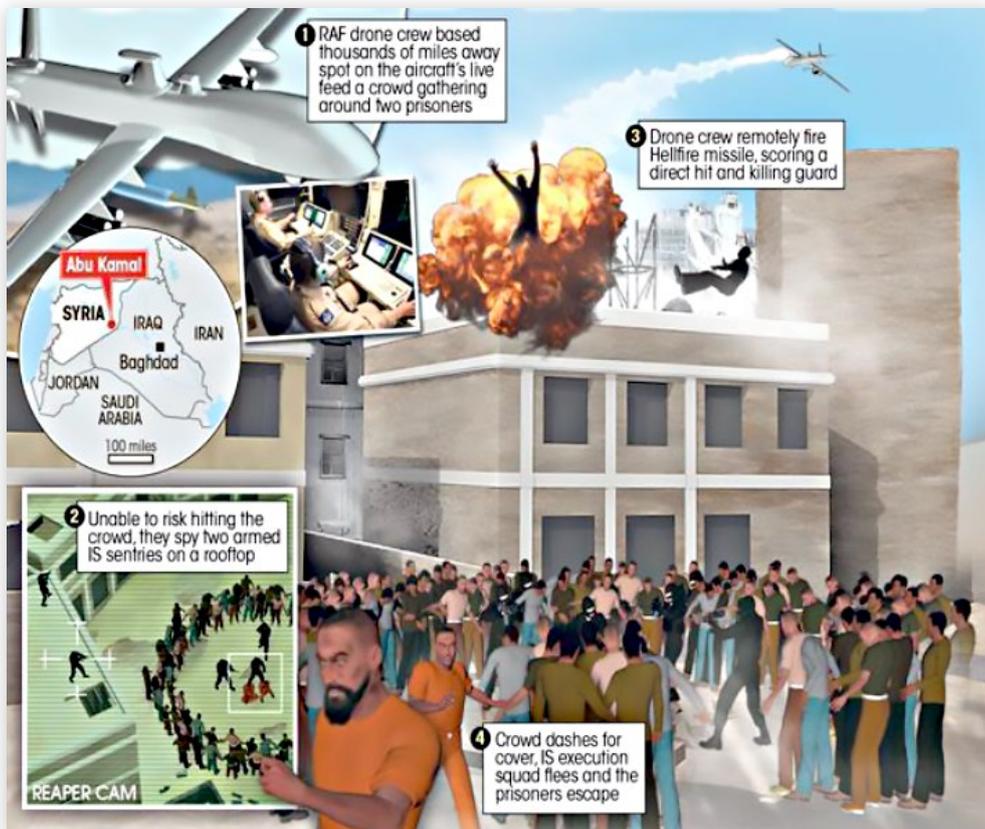
It was like robin hood: the Abu Kamal strike

On the 17th of May 2017, British tabloid *The Sun* reported on an RAF drone strike in Abu Kamal, Syria. Earlier that month, the RAF detected two shackled prisoners moments from public execution by ISIS, and subsequently halted their killing with a surgically precise drone strike which killed a sniper on an adjacent building, scattering the crowd and preventing the executions. The reportage in *The Sun* portrayed this strike as a last-minute, just-in-time rescue, which used clinically accurate lethal force to prevent an atrocity. Military reporter David Willetts quoted an unnamed source, who remarked that “It was like something from Robin Hood. These guys faced certain death but unknown to everyone the RAF were watching and ready to act.” A few lines later, another unnamed source, this time a spokesman (presumably for the RAF, although it is not specified in the report) confirmed that the “‘large number of civilians present’ were not hurt as the strike brought the execution to an ‘immediate halt’”.³⁰

29 David Swanson, “The Killer Drone Lovers Have Their Movie”, 28/03/2016. <https://davidswanson.org/eye/>

30 David Willetts, “Grin Reaper: RAF Reaper drone stops public execution by Isis after crew spots shackled prisoners being led to their deaths”, *The Sun* 17/05/2017. Online: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/3579170/raf-reaper-drone-stops-public-execution-by-isis-after-crew-spots-shackled-prisoners-being-led-to-their-deaths/>

This article, brief at perhaps two hundred words, packs in a great deal of potent drone rhetoric. The execution was imminent. The strike was proportionate and successful – killing one ISIS fighter only, and utterly hygienic with relation to civilian damage – and came at precisely the right moment.



Coverage of the Abu Kamal strike in *The Sun*.

Importantly, this strike is also narrated in the same terms elsewhere, including *The Guardian* (a nominally left-wing UK newspaper), the UK government website, *The Telegraph* (once the newspaper of record, but now a right-leaning broadsheet), and in extraordinary detail in Peter Lee's nonfiction collection of interviews with drone pilots, *Reaper Force* (2018).³¹ Lee's account, in particular, stresses the professionalism of the team, the unanimity of the decision that the strike would safely eliminate an ISIS fighter and prevent a brutal propaganda spectacle, and the courage that it took for the Reaper team to act decisively upon an imminent threat.

These accounts all articulate a highly sanitized and selective account of this strike, based on the limited information released by the MoD. The journalistic and scholarly embellishment of the official account allows it to take on the appearance of a clear-cut victory for justice over the incomprehensible savagery of ISIS. Nowhere here do we find out about any consequences of this strike other than the immediate dispersal of the crowd, for instance; we do not know from this whether there were reprisal attacks, whether the executions went ahead at a later time, or whether there were any broader consequences for the population of Abu Kamal. What we see is fiery justice summarily and satisfyingly served upon evildoers.

31 Ewan MacAskill, "RAF drone strike disrupted public killing staged by Isis, says MoD", *The Guardian*, 16/05/2017. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/raf-drone-strike-disrupted-public-killing-staged-by-isis-says-mod> "Guidance: RAF air strikes in Iraq and Syria: May 2017", no author, no date. Online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/may>, Josie Ensor, "RAF drone footage shows the moment a missile stops Isis carrying out a public execution", *The Telegraph*, 20/09/2017. Online: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/20/raf-drone-footage-shows-moment-missile-stops-public-execution/>. Peter Lee, *Reaper Force* (John Blake, 2018), pp. 229-249.

6. Tuesday 9 May

An RAF Reaper remotely piloted aircraft observed a group of Daesh fighters in Abu Kamal, eastern Syria, mustering a large crowd of civilians in one of the town's main streets. When a van then unloaded 2 shackled prisoners in front of the crowd, it became clear that Daesh were organising a public execution. Given the large number of civilians present, the Reaper's crew could not target directly the Daesh fighters about to carry out the murders. However, 2 armed extremists were stationed as sentries on the roof of a building overlooking the scene. A Hellfire missile was fired immediately, and scored a direct hit which not only killed one of the sentries but also brought the execution to an immediate halt, as the Daesh fighters fled the scene, and the crowd of civilians dispersed.

RAF drone strike disrupted public killing staged by Isis, says MoD

Isis sentry killed by missile in Abu Kamal, eastern Syria, after RAF realised that crowd were gathering for killing of two prisoners



Left Information about the Abu Kamal strike as it appears on the MOD website.

Right Coverage of the Abu Kamal strike in *The Guardian*.

Though this is a description of a real event and not an invented narrative, the journalistic – even, yes, propagandistic – retelling of it is constructed with the same representational coordinates that we see recurring throughout fiction. This is not to say that the strike did not take place. Rather, it is to observe that the way that the British press framed its flattering dramatic explanation is similar to those framings that we find throughout many other fictional drone stories. The rhetoric of fiction is interleaved with political storytelling. To return to Lee's *Reaper Force*, he uses the broad outline of the Abu Kamal attack to pose a thought experiment to his readers: if you knew you could save specific lives with a well-placed missile which only harmed an enemy complicit in potential executions, would you do it? "Choose", he writes, reducing the complexity of a real-world event to a stark, simplistic choice between two polar moral opposites.³²

The moral and political risk of debating state violence in terms of the ticking bomb scenario is that it positions massive, destructive state power as inevitable and virtuous, and leaves the structures and dynamics of power uninterrogated. The important point here, however, is that discussions of limited torture and unintentional deaths are misleading ways of framing ethical discussions about contemporary warfare because a critique, however detailed, of any given isolated decision fails to reflect the structural reality of what is at stake in such systemic practices of violence.

Good strikes: moral illegality

The ticking bomb scenario is often used in order to make a further point. It is not only that drastic action is required in situations of imminent danger: some situations require us to disregard the law altogether. As Darwin Cole, protagonist of Dan Fesperman's *Unmanned*, pithily puts it, sometimes "Legality is no longer the point."³³ Now, of course it is true that sometimes what is ethically right and what is legally permitted may be at odds. But drone fiction often operationalizes this moral truism in order to dismiss International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law – the global legal norms of wartime and peacetime – as inconvenient and irrelevant barriers that should be disregarded when it suits Western military aims.

Drone fiction shows us many examples of drone operators witnessing crimes the punishment of which is outside of their operational remit. In *Good Kill*, for instance, the protagonist Major Thomas Egan repeatedly witnesses a man

³² Lee, *Reaper Force*, p. 173.

³³ Fesperman, *Unmanned*, p. 235.

sexually assaulting a woman at gunpoint in the courtyard of a house that their drone is observing, and he is just as often told that it is not his job to intervene in the matter. At the end of the film, when he finally reaches the end of his tether, Egan defies his orders and kills the rapist, vaporizing him in his tracks and preventing any further sexual harm befalling the woman in the courtyard. "The 'good kill' that stops a rapist is neither authorized nor law-abiding", writes critic Hyunyoung Moon.³⁴ The goodness of the kill refers to a higher moral rectitude, a truer morality that disdains the obvious flaws of procedural human law. Likewise, in an episode of *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, "Black 22" (S01E03), a drone operator with the nickname Tombstone kills a man about to kidnap a woman and her children in defiance of his commanding officer's direct order that he stand down. He pulls the trigger in a defiant gesture that is represented as not what is militarily right, but what is morally right despite its breach of international law.

Maden's *Drone Threat*, too, is bookended by Pearce Systems (a private drone contractor run by the series' protagonist) personnel using drone strikes to extrajudicially and summarily execute ISIS fighters purely out of what is represented as righteous rage.³⁵ In Dan Fesperman's *Unmanned*, protagonist Darwin Cole rescues a young girl by crashing a drone into her potential assailants; since he was convinced that he had wrongfully killed this girl in a previous drone operation, he describes this act, which rescues her from harm at the very last minute, as his "salvation" because it rights the previous wrong.³⁶ Like Turk Mako in *Drone Strike*, these operators consider the distinctions drawn by their ROEs morally insufficient, contradictory, or absurd, and use their initiative to do what is right, regardless of the perversity of the letter of the law. These powerfully drawn scenarios may leave us with a feeling that good has been done despite the impossibility of the situation. Perhaps. But they are justifications for summary execution by remote missile.

Accountability and immunity

To say the least, the war on terror has interacted with international law in many complex and problematic ways. The emergence of the term 'lawfare', indeed, demonstrates that law itself has been weaponized in the course of the many post-9/11 global military engagements that have been undertaken in the name of combating international terrorism. Often enough, as with the work of lawyers such as John Yoo, author of the legal rulings that enabled the US torture program, these machinations have functioned not to enforce the spirit of international law but to construct frameworks through which the US military can essentially do as it pleases whilst appearing to abide by international law. "If you want sketchy," remarks a character in Fesperman's *Unmanned*, "read the PATRIOT Act. Enough loopholes to fly a whole squadron of Predators through".³⁷

One of the more unusual features of some drone fiction is the emergence of a narrative pattern (or trope) in which the extralegality - that is, illegality - of a course of action is studiously established. In Daniel Suarez's *Kill Decision*, for instance, the action hero, codenamed Odin, explains that he and his covert team all have the rank of Sergeant specifically because noncommissioned officers are not accountable to civilian institutions.³⁸ That is, the ways in which military

34 Hyunyoung Moon, "Drone Warfare and Female Warrior: *Good Kill* and *Eye in the Sky*". In: *Cinematic Women, From Objecthood to Heroism: Essays on Female Gender Representation on Western Screens and in TV Productions*, ed. by Lisa Mazey. Vernon Press, 2020, p. 114.

35 Maden, *Drone Threat*, pp. 17, 341.

36 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 310-311.

37 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, p. 59.

38 Daniel Suarez, *Kill Decision* (Penguin, 2016 [2012]), pp. 117-118.

actors avoid legal accountability is laboriously detailed, as though the cleverly calculated avoidance of legal oversight is itself a pleasure that the text can deliver to the audience.

Mike Maden, once more, is exemplary here. He has a PhD in political science, and he flexes his intellectual understanding of international law in order to deliver what appears to be a solid rationale for lethal drone operations. Through a detailed six-page dialogue between his fictional US President and her advisors in his first novel, *Drone*, Maden establishes the legal architecture that permits his characters to conduct lethal drone operations anywhere in the world and to designate anybody an enemy combatant – that is, to establish that anybody they choose is a legitimate target for UAV assassination. Maden refers extensively to the complexities of the US Authorisation for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), the War Powers Resolution (WPR), and the law-of-war principles of necessity, distinction, proportionality, and humanity, in order to show the procedural and legal steps taken by the characters to ensure that what they are doing is above board. Later, when Troy Pearce, Maden’s action protagonist, is invited to create a new clandestine government agency reporting directly to the President, more legal terminology is deftly deployed: “Through a legal fiction, it was made an extension of JSOC, which operated with near impunity from congressional oversight and could invoke either Title 10 or Title 50 protections as needed.”³⁹ The discussion is detailed enough that it even highlights the precise legal differentiation between covert and clandestine operations. In *Drone Threat*, the funding for this agency is described as “black budget”, in order to ensure total operational freedom, which means in practice that there is minimal congressional oversight and a total media blackout.⁴⁰ The explicit aim here is to insulate Pearce’s unified combat command agency entirely from any civilian oversight or accountability.

The minutiae of the legal debate, then, is concretely articulated by Maden with considerable sophistication. The Presidential moral reasoning that underpins it, however, is quite different. In private consultations with Pearce, President Myers makes the moral case for drone warfare in much cruder terms: “I’m not talking about ideology or politics. I’m no moral crusader. I’m talking about putting down a rabid dog before it bites somebody else. My job is to save American lives. I think that’s something you understand quite well.” Later, she tells Pearce to “just think of it as a private contract for taking out the garbage.”⁴¹ This double explanation of their rationale for action is revealing: on the surface, for the advisors and legal team, their reasoning is precise and sophisticated, whereas behind closed doors their reasons are crassly revanchist.

This cynical approach to the law is not restricted to the justificatory architecture for missile strikes. It also manifests in the contempt the characters display for those who would use the law to place restrictions on US military activity. In *Drone Threat*, for instance, the President’s advisors suggest a surveillance program they call Gorgon Sky, which would enable total drone surveillance over the contiguous USA. The attorney general opposes this on civil liberties grounds, and Pearce’s reaction to this is to dismiss the objections as “More PC bullshit from another liberal attorney.”⁴² Elsewhere, in Jason Bourque’s film *Drone* a private contractor who works for the CIA is concerned about a wikileaks-style exposure of their work because it raises the spectre of accountability to “some Geneva Convention bullshit”. One of the pleasures of drone fiction, then, is the explicit denigration of the law.

The ways in which military actors avoid legal accountability is laboriously detailed, as though the cleverly calculated avoidance of legal oversight is itself a pleasure that the text can deliver to the audience

39 Maden, *Drone*, pp. 149-154. See also pp. 265, 292, 308-312, 383, 278.

40 Maden, *Drone Threat*, p. 28.

41 Maden, *Drone*, pp. 118, 120.

42 Maden, *Drone Threat*, p. 147. See also pp. 148-153.

The imminence justification for the use of lethal force is found throughout drone fiction, and it is operationalized in a widely varied but radically oversimplified way that blurs important conceptual and legal distinctions between situations in which lethal force is justified and those in which it is not. Cultural representations narrativize emergency situations which bear little to no resemblance to those that take place in actual theatres of conflict today, showing the stakes as exaggeratedly clear-cut, and thereby normalize lethal drone strikes as a form of militarily valid and morally positive action. The next chapter deals with ways in which these situations are morally, politically, and representationally complicated by unintentional civilian casualties.

2 COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Civilian Death/Bugsplat

The term 'collateral damage', which refers to unintentional harm inflicted upon non-military targets during otherwise legitimate operations – such as civilian deaths or casualties, or damage to or destruction of non-combat-related infrastructure or buildings – is the polite rhetorical package that names one of the most controversial aspects of drone warfare. It is also one of the most commonly addressed concerns in representations of drone operations. Most often, drone fiction shows that collateral damage is, though sad, unintentional and unavoidable if justice is to be done in the course of war.

There's no escaping it: the problem of noncombatant death

Drone operator Matt Martin writes in his memoir *Predator* that in his experience "the US military went to superhuman lengths to avoid civilian casualties."⁴³ In his sustained examination of collateral damage, *Bugsplat*, however, Bruce Cronin contradicts optimistic assessments like Martin's, concluding instead that "the primary explanation for the high rate of collateral damage in conflicts fought by Western states is the reckless war-fighting strategies adopted by their military organizations."⁴⁴ Likewise, writes Neta Crawford, systemic collateral damage is often "produced in part by expansive and permissive conceptions of military necessity." Earlier in her book *Accountability for Killing* (2013), she writes that "noncombatant injury and death at the hands of troops following the 'rules of engagement' has been relatively commonplace in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan," and further, "these thousands of deaths and injuries were considered ordinary and inevitable."⁴⁵ That is, far from a matter of tragic, one-off accidents that occur in the midst of operations designed to painstakingly reduce overall harm, the majority of collateral damage is avoidable, caused by carelessness or disregard for the consequences of civilian death and injury – and is even enabled by the flexibility of the military rules of engagement. "While officially the distinction between combatants and non-combatant civilians in modern war is held sacrosanct," writes M G E Kelly, "this distinction is less tenable in modernity than ever before from a military point of view and is always elided in practice."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, drone fiction tends to obscure this by dramatizing

43 Martin and Sasser, *Predator*, p. 11.

44 Cronin, *Bugsplat*, p. 14.

45 Neta C. Crawford, *Accountability for Killing: Moral Responsibility for Collateral Damage in America's Post-9/11 Wars* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 466, 4.

46 M G E Kelly, *Biopolitical Imperialism* (Zero Books, 2014), p. 108.

stories in which morally righteous military actors cause civilian death rarely, accidentally, or against their will.

In a 2005 *Huffington Post* article defending torture, new atheist Sam Harris positions collateral damage as tragic yet inevitable. "There is no escaping the fact," he writes, "that whenever we drop bombs, we drop them with the knowledge that some number of children will be blinded, disemboweled, paralyzed, orphaned, and killed by them."⁴⁷ Positioning collateral damage as *regrettable but inevitable if the right thing is to be done in the pursuit of justice* is a major tactic found throughout rhetorical justifications of drone violence. In a 2013 *Foreign Affairs* article, 'Why Drones Work', for instance, Daniel Byman writes that "sometimes imminent and intolerable threats do arise and drone strikes are the best way to eliminate them" because they "offer a comparatively low-risk way of targeting these areas while minimizing collateral damage".⁴⁸ Drone violence is positioned here as a lesser evil, as a technology which will get the job done whilst at the same time minimizing harm. Patricia Owen explains succinctly why this reasoning is problematic when she writes that "civilian deaths are made permissible, not impermissible, when constructed as 'accidents'."⁴⁹ That is, by framing collateral damage as accidental – as regrettable, even appalling, but ultimately nobody's fault – drone discourse disavows the structural responsibility that the military bears for civilian death during war.

Again, examples abound in drone fiction. In *Sting of the Drone*, Herr Schroeder – a blameless European – is killed along with four terrorists holding a meeting in the city centre hotel where he works. Addressing this, spokesman Ray gives a brief disquisition on collateral damage. "We fuck up. We learn. We try to fuck up less. The bad guys are definitely bad, in this struggle. Our motives are good and we try real hard not to become bad in the process. It's not always easy."⁵⁰ At the same time as this is an admission that mistakes can be made, it is also a rationalization of such mistakes as inevitable and unintentional, and, since the intentions of the drone operators are good, essentially a way of dismissing civilian deaths as unfortunate but, in the long run, necessary.

Many other authors are considerably less sophisticated, however, particularly when discussing the killing of non-Europeans and non-Americans. Jonathan Maberry's characters describe collateral damage as "Unfortunate but unavoidable."⁵¹ Dan Fesperman's characters consider it "Worth it if we stopped him [the villain]".⁵² Once again, Mike Maden's work is notable here. When, in *Drone Threat*, an antagonist is killed alongside his girlfriend our hero thinks: "Too bad about the girl, he thought to himself. But as his nana told him years ago, *You sleep with the devil in a bed of your own ashes*."⁵³ *Blue Warrior*, however, sees repeated – and colourfully expressed – instances of the deaths of unknown people flippantly and callously disregarded: "Fuck 'em. If they don't want to get blistered, they shouldn't put their dicks in the toaster." Another: "Worst-case scenario? It's a signature strike. You take out a few bad guys, even if it's not the right bad guy." Yet again: "After all, if it walked like a duck and quacked like a duck, it must be a duck."⁵⁴ There is considerable slippage here between

Positioning collateral damage as regrettable but inevitable if the right thing is to be done in the pursuit of justice is a major tactic found throughout rhetorical justifications of drone violence

47 Sam Harris, "In Defense of Torture". *The Huffington Post*, 10/17/2005. Online: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/in-defense-of-torture_b_8993.html

48 Daniel Byman, 'Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice'. *Foreign Affairs*, July 2013, pp. 35, 32.

49 Patricia Owens, "Accidents Don't Just Happen: The Liberal Politics of High-Technology 'Humanitarian' War." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 32 (2003), p. 597.

50 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, pp. 31-34, 48, 74, 205.

51 Maberry, *Predator One*, p. 51.

52 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, p. 293.

53 Maden, *Drone Threat*, p. 341. Emphasis in original.

54 Maden, *Blue Warrior* (Penguin, 2014), pp. 388, 385, 386.

noncombatant deaths and the deaths of those who are simply assumed, due to the drone program's analysis of their behaviour, to be targetable; this blurring has the effect of (perhaps intentionally) confusing the important distinction between combatants and noncombatants, leading Maden to basically declare that whoever is killed in a drone strike deserves it, whether we know who they are or not.

Cockroaches, vermin, cancer: racism and dehumanization

To speak in broader terms for a moment, one of the most obvious explanations for the acceptability of civilian death by drone is, simply, racism. Drone operations are an integral part of the post-9/11 war on terror, which has in part been characterized by an imperial racism which casts 'our' non-Western antagonists as legitimate objects of securitizing violence. Achille Mbembe's term 'necropolitics' describes the way that racism structures this modern imperial imaginary. Racism, he writes, "has been the ever-present shadow hovering over Western political thought and practice, especially when the point was to contrive the inhumanity of foreign peoples and the sort of domination to be exercised over them."⁵⁵ Racism also saturates the US drone program, which is, of course, one of the military means through which Western power is projected over certain areas of the globe. By routinely understanding the populations over whom drones watch through the knowledge practices of counterterrorism, these communities and people are constituted as 'other', and as somehow not human - and as a consequence they are always at risk of being designated 'terrorists' and thereby deserving of summary execution by remote missile. Marina Espinoza explicitly extends Mbembe's analysis of racism to her reading of the US drone program, focusing in particular on the way that the necropolitical imaginary distinguishes between populations that are deserving of protection and those that deserve surveillance and violent intervention. "The consequence of this necropolitical logic of distinction is the assimilation of those living under the drone's gaze to a population that can be put to death, leading the drone programme to operate as a form of state terrorism."⁵⁶

There is also an important differential in what many scholars, following Judith Butler, refer to as 'grievability'.⁵⁷ That is, people who are designated 'terrorists' by the military-political apparatus of the war on terror, often arbitrarily or with little certainty, are available to a great deal of securitizing violence - torture, detention, death by drone - and are often described to us as people who do not deserve sympathy, compassion, or the protections of international law. Once somebody is designated a 'military age male', a 'terrorist', or an 'insurgent', their life is treated as forfeit, and their death is somehow not a human death, simply the bureaucratic elimination of a threat. In *Evil Men* (2013), James Dawes writes that killing is "facilitated by the collective reconceptualization of the enemy group as less than fully human, and the consequent determination that any individual member of that group of 'inimical identities' is a suitable target of lethal violence."⁵⁸ This logic is certainly at play in drone fiction.

Drone texts are replete with the use of dehumanizing language to describe the targets of drone operations in order for their killing to appear legitimate and necessary. In his memoir *Predator*, for example, drone operator Matt J. Martin

55 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 71.

56 Marina Espinoza, "State Terrorism: Orientalism and the Drone Programme." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11:2 (2018), p. 377.

57 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Verso, 2009.

58 James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 63.

describes his human targets as “cockroaches”, “vermin”, “cancer”, “like a rat”, “this savage”, “some dirtbag”, “rats”, “bugs”, and “silly rabbits”; he repeatedly uses the slur “skinnies” to refer to Somalians; Afghanistan is characterized by “primitive squalor not far removed from the Stone Age”. The purpose of this barrage of racism is, of course, to dehumanize his targets and to legitimize his killing them. One does not have to read between the lines or infer this: “I found it easier and easier”, he writes, “to justify bombing barbarians like these back to the hell that had spawned them”.⁵⁹

The worldview of a great deal of drone fiction is likewise constitutively racist. Daniel Suarez, for instance, describes a woman in a burka as “a walking bag” and describes the niqab as “like armor”, and a “constricting black bag”, and makes a throwaway reference to “Pakistan’s population of Taliban sympathizers and Islamic fundamentalists”; Kinshasa and Brazzaville “teemed with young men and guns”.⁶⁰ David Ignatius writes that “the devil lived in Pakistan”.⁶¹ For Dan Fesperman, Baluchistan is “the dark side of a lost planet”.⁶² In Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice’s *Collateral Damage*, a pilot refers to Libyan mosques as “nests” that harbour terrorists, and the narrator earlier refers to the leader of the Libyan resistance, with whom the US forces are reluctantly cooperating (and the only named Muslim character in the novel), as “a despicable creature, ignorant and wilful” whose bodyguards “smelled of fish and Moroccan hashish” and “growled in an indecipherable language”.⁶³ Author of *Drone Games* (2014) Joel Narlock inserts passages from the Qur’an directly alongside passages detailing the terrorists’ plot, drawing a direct connection between Muslim religiosity and the preparation for atrocity.⁶⁴ Mike Maden, as ever, is particularly bombastic, with sympathetic characters casually remarking that there are ISIS sympathizers “in every mosque and madrassa from Mecca to Detroit” and that Germany is at the mercy of “mass rapes and beatings that had been taking place since the tidal wave of migration began in 2015.” Perhaps worst of all: “political correctness will never allow us to contain the Islamic threat. Extermination is the only option.”⁶⁵ It is difficult to deny that Western racism is a major factor in enabling us to feel comfortable with destroying people with drone strikes.

It is difficult to deny that Western racism is a major factor in enabling us to feel comfortable with destroying people with drone strikes

The girl in the red dress, part two

We saw in the previous chapter that *Eye in the Sky* stages a situation of urgent ticking bomb justice. The film is also, however, notable for its consideration of collateral damage. The drone operator, noticing that a young Kenyan girl is selling bread within the projected blast zone, demands that the military reassess the likelihood of killing her along with the terrorists. That is, he is troubled by the fact that there is now not simply the *general risk* of harming civilians by firing into a populated area, but the *specific certainty* of killing one innocent little girl. Ultimately, of course, the strike goes ahead and the girl is killed along with the terrorists. Is an innocent death an acceptable price to pay, the film asks, for the achievement of a justified aim?

Ultimately, the film concludes, yes: though it is sad, it is probably right; it is sad that this is the only right thing to do in this situation, that our ethics have forced

59 Martin and Sasser, *Predator*, pp. 1, 39, 49, 51, 108, 129, 198, 251; 105, 208; 62, 72.

60 Suarez, *Kill Decision*, pp. 27, 385, 392, 93, 123.

61 David Ignatius, *Bloodmoney* (Quercus, 2011), p. 104.

62 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, p. 48.

63 Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, pp. 300, 54-55.

64 Joel Narlock, *Drone Games* (Sweetwater Books, 2014), pp. 1, 14, 21, 80, 106, 183.

65 Maden, *Drone Threat*, pp. 229, 264, 330.

us to accept something terrible. That is, although the movie ends tragically, with many characters, including the drone operator who fired the missile, weeping, everybody seems able to agree that they did the right thing, and that the reason that the girl's death is sad is that *it had to happen*, that *they could not act otherwise*. If we choose to read it as a condemnation of drone violence, then the film's moral and political horizons only allow us to read it as a condemnation of drone assassinations in which an indisputably innocent victim is killed alongside indisputably villainous terrorists.

It is worth considering here precisely why the girl's death is tragic. She is learning mathematics, she reads about London, and she enjoys playing with a hula hoop. As such, she is one of the people that liberal interventionism positions itself as defending: a young girl who wants, despite the prevailing political authoritarianism and misogynist patriarchy of her culture, to be educated, to travel, and to express her bodily autonomy. These aesthetic and political coordinates establish her death as particularly sad, as the drone strike is shown as destroying the precious seeds of a hopeful future – precisely that which it is designed to protect.

Because she is an angelic young figure, bursting with promise, the young girl in *Eye in the Sky* is a particularly grievous loss to the world, and her death is mourned in the film with powerfully foregrounded sentimentality. As the credits roll, she dances in slow motion, her hoop forming a halo, lens flare and melancholy music heightening the syrupy way in which her innocence is glorified.



The grievable girl. *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. Source Entertainment One, 2015.

The intended victims of the drone strike, however, do not register as human in the same way. They are incontrovertibly guilty terrorists, sketched in hurried outline, comprehensible to us only as shady figures of superhuman malice who deserve their annihilation.

In addition, the amount of collateral damage caused by Western drone programs is a matter of some dispute, in part because of the difficulties involved in clearly identifying who is killed by any given strike with a high degree of certainty.⁶⁶ The miraculously perceptive technology in *Eye in the Sky*, however, allows the military to identify with total certainty that they have killed precisely the right people. This dehumanization of the intended victims –

⁶⁶ Crawford, *Accountability for Killing*, pp. 120-130.

who get the comeuppance they deserve, like all movie villains - is also what gives the deaths of unintended victims their force. The villains require us to murder them, and it is tragic only that we must also kill innocents.



An analyst confirms the identity of a drone strike victim by inspecting human remains with facial recognition software. *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. Source Entertainment One, 2015.

The attack killed them: *Drone Strike*

Often, however, drone fiction does not even admit that drone operators are responsible for collateral damage at all. *Sting of the Drone* once more provides us with a particularly clear expression of this position. Whilst attempting to destroy a terrorist hideout, drone operators annihilate a house full of sleeping children who were kidnapped and held hostage there by terrorists, ruthless villains who knew that the house was a potential target for a drone strike. Sandra Vitonelli, a senior figure in the drone program, stridently refuses to accept culpability in this case. "All of us involved in the program deeply regret the deaths of those innocent kids, but while it may have been our missiles that killed them, it was the terrorists who were the murderers, not us."⁶⁷ The drone operator Bruce is upset, berating himself as a "baby-killer", and his supervisor Erik says that it is sad that Bruce "thinks it's his fault those kids got killed".⁶⁸ Though it is true that the children were placed in the house as human shields by terrorists who knew the house was a drone target, Erik's incredulity here is interesting. Surely it makes sense that Bruce, the operator, feels bad about killing children, however unintentionally; surely it is more surprising that Erik, his supervisor, does not think that the drone operator who pulled the trigger bears any responsibility. This self-serving double standard, in which the outcome of the strike simultaneously both is and is not the responsibility of the drone operators, is very frequently found in drone fiction.

In *Drone Strike*, nuclear war between the US and Iran is prevented by a series of remotely operated drone swarm attacks on secret underground Iranian nuclear installations.⁶⁹ A great deal of the book is dedicated not only to the conduct of the strikes but to clarifying the legitimacy of their moral and military rationale. In particular, the personnel involved repeatedly explicitly rationalize the fact that their strike necessarily involves killing thousands of Iranians.

67 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 117.

68 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, pp. 219, 133.

69 Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice, *Drone Strike* (Harper, 2014), pp. 137-140, 357-364, 371-378.

Turk Mako, the drone operator who goes to Iran to execute the pre-emptive strike, is untroubled by moral reasoning at the start of the novel. "You were always going to do something somewhere sometime that *might* be wrong", he reflects, before concluding that "you did your best to keep those numbers down, but you didn't obsess. Otherwise you did nothing." Later, after the first nuclear installation is destroyed, Turk explains it to himself in very simple, clear terms, and with a high degree of certainty. "Several hundred workers had died along with it [the nuclear warhead]. Regrettable, but necessary."⁷⁰

Later again, he elaborates:

*How many people had died in the nuclear explosion, or been buried by the resulting tremors? It was the Iranian leaders' fault, he told himself, not theirs, and certainly not his. If anything, he had saved thousands, millions. Destroying the weapon meant it couldn't be used, and even the crudest math would easily show that the damage here was far less than if the weapon had been.*⁷¹

Though he is increasingly concerned about the casualty rate of his mission, this abstract reasoning reassures him not only that the attack was morally legitimate but that he is not responsible for a nuclear detonation caused by his own actions. This rhetorical contortion may seem extraordinary, but it in fact is central to justifications for atrocity. Through their evil plotting, your adversary – whether Iran, as here, or the imaginary 'terrorist' posited by framers of the ticking bomb scenario – has obliged, *required*, you to destroy them.

The novel's President personally authorizes the strikes, and she also explicitly and repeatedly justifies them. Towards the start of the novel, she describes her reasoning simply and abstractly: "Short-term risks that could pay big dividends were better than no risk that offered none." Later, in a televised address to the US, she adds depth to this position. "We have no argument or dispute with the Iranian people themselves, as I hope they will realize from the pinpoint precision and limits of our action. But we will not allow nations to violate international law or go against the wishes for peace by the world at large." Among her staff, her position is finessed once more, but is ultimately only marginally different. "'We had to make the strike,' continued the President. 'It's too bad that so many Iranians had to die, but they were all involved in the program – the vast majority were involved in the program,' she added, correcting herself."⁷²

The following novel *Target Utopia* contains further retrospective justifications of the actions of *Drone Strike*. The characters discuss the destruction of Iranian warheads in terms of a probability calculus: "if we hadn't destroyed the bombs, don't you think Iran would have used them at some point?" Earlier, Turk admits that he is "mad at the Iranians for cheating on their nuclear agreement and making the attack that had killed so many lives necessary."⁷³ Note the use of the passive voice, and the amount of conditional language here. *The attack did the killing, and the Iranians made it necessary because they might have used a bomb which they may have developed.* You might not know from the grammar of Turk's formulations that it was Turk himself who infiltrated Iran and used American drones to detonate Iranian nuclear ordnance.

70 Brown and DeFelice, *Drone Strike*, pp. 47, 162. Emphasis in original.

71 Brown and DeFelice, *Drone Strike*, p. 205.

72 Brown and DeFelice, *Drone Strike*, pp. 36, 413, 513.

73 Brown and DeFelice, *Target Utopia*, pp. 177, 140.

These moral reflections on targeted killing, taken in sum, repeatedly emphasize that the pre-emptive strike, with all of its deliberate carnage, is sad but it is necessary, and the imaginary US administration acted not only lawfully but honourably despite the colossal casualty rate. To critique this position is not, of course, necessarily to defend *Drone Strike's* fictional Iranians. Surely they should not have been developing nuclear weapons in defiance of a non-proliferation treaty. But Brown and DeFelice blame the Iranians for their own deaths, as though the drone strike were an inevitable act that the Americans were duty bound to conduct. Indeed, it is shown as inevitable to the extent that the drone operators and their superiors are not responsible for their own actions, the very actions that constitute the content of the novel and for which the heroes are celebrated. This contradictory, selective approach to responsibility, in which the positive aspects are embraced and the negative ones displaced onto one's enemy or victim, is a blatantly racist double standard; a responsibility at once claimed and disavowed, at once honourable and despicable. Although the attack would not have been possible without Turk's technical skill, he is keen not to bear responsibility for exercising this skill. Responsibility for Turk's actions lies with the Iranians, who forced the US to annihilate them. There is no discussion at all of the role of the UN, NATO, or the international community in taking such action, and the role of the US as global police force is taken for granted. Such reasoning is not only flawed: it is perverse, racist and unethical.

Man's better nature: *Collateral Damage*

In the earlier *Dreamland* novel *Collateral Damage*, the antagonist hijacks a UAV and uses it to attack a civilian settlement in order to politically embarrass a drone manufacturer.⁷⁴ The characters react with horror at this misuse of technology, which initially looks like an unexplained accident but which becomes increasingly hard to explain as anything other than a sinister manipulation of a technology that was developed in order to do good. Chapter four deals in more depth with the trope of hijack that recurs throughout a great deal of drone fiction, but here it is worth noting that this specific hijack raises the issue of collateral damage for the characters in the novel. Ray Rubeo, the drone developer, has a progressive if simplistic view of the relationship between technology and war, in which science is a benign "product of man's better nature" which can be used to combat "evil"; he is appalled when he sees the devastation created by the hijacked UAV, not so much because of the destruction itself but because it is the result of violence conducted by one of his machines which were designed to make warfare, and the world, better (the reduction in collateral damage that drones enable, he thinks, is a considerable moral benefit of remote warfare). Later, he wonders whether he, as the designer and manufacturer of the drone, was responsible for its misuse. "*My inventions make war more precise, so that innocent people aren't killed. But there is always some chance of error, however small that chance is.*"⁷⁵

In contrast, Turk, the pilot of the UAV which was hijacked, is increasingly troubled by the hijacking. To begin with, he is in denial, choosing to focus on the other aspects of the mission, which resulted in worthwhile objectives competently achieved, and although he recognizes that the accident was a problem, he "didn't cry or get sick or anything like that. Was that what was supposed to happen?" Later, he tries to console himself with the thought that he has, overall, done more good than harm. He acknowledges, however, that guilt and responsibility "were concepts that went beyond addition and subtraction." As the

⁷⁴ Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, pp. 17-18.

⁷⁵ Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, pp. 27-28, 231, 106. Emphasis in original.

novel progresses, he is increasingly haunted by the accident. "Killing an enemy wasn't a problem. Killing someone who was just there, in their own house..." Later he describes it as "A terrible, terrible mistake."⁷⁶ Again, as this attack was the result of a cyberhijack, Turk, though troubled into reflection, allows himself to sidestep responsibility for the use of his weapons. Because he is not personally at fault, he can condemn this killing.

Zen, a US senator, has yet another view. He visits the bomb site, and he considers it "horrific", concluding that "there was no question the bombs sent by the Sabre had inflicted a terrible toll." Speaking about it to the press, however, he rationalizes it by insisting that "UAVs have helped reduce casualties" and that "back in the very old days, collateral damage was a serious problem. World War Two saw horrendous civilian deaths. We've come a long way."⁷⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, this position is echoed in other drone texts, notably Fesperman's *Unmanned*, in which an engineer muses that "Compared to the so-called surgical bombings of the past, drone combat was far more efficient, and despite the occasional mistake, it killed far fewer civilians, largely because it allowed you to be more deliberate and precise in your targeting."⁷⁸

Zen and the engineer may be right here; that is, UAV bombing may be more precise than the aerial campaigns of WW2. But that is hardly the point. The aerial campaigns of the Second World War were often deliberately indiscriminate, and arguing that UAVs are not used to intentionally inflict mass civilian casualties or to carpet bomb cities with incendiary weapons is hardly making a persuasive case for their morality. After all, the fact that something is not a deliberate war crime does not mean that it does not remain wrong. There is an interesting wrinkle here, too: Turk, he of the moral conscience, also reflects that "It was easier in the old days, when you just decided everyone was bad and rolled over the place."⁷⁹

Early in *Bugsplat*, Bruce Cronin observes that the problem of collateral damage "is political, not technical."⁸⁰ That is, civilian death by drone is not a matter that can be managerially, technocratically resolved through the deployment of ever more sophisticated weaponry, but rather must be understood through the lens of the political decisions, standards and horizons that make collateral damage appear acceptable. Drone fiction is one avenue through which civilian deaths are normalized as simultaneously unavoidable, tragic, and nobody's fault.

Drone fiction is one avenue through which civilian deaths are normalized as simultaneously unavoidable, tragic, and nobody's fault

TECHNOPHILIA

The Glory of the Weapon

Any military technology, tactic, or technique can only ever be justified if it is a reliable means of accomplishing objectives. That is, in the plainest terms, you can only justify using any technology if it works. Since much drone fiction is invested in justifications of drone technology, then, it is no surprise that the drone technology found throughout it very often operates with extraordinary accuracy. Importantly, the exaggeration of the technological capabilities of drones enables storytellers and journalists to oversimplify any related moral questions.

In a recent article on martial algorithms and automated assassination, John Emery writes: "From the 1990s to today, US militarism has employed algorithmic technologies to erroneously tick the box of ethical due care in war; a blind faith in the computational outputs, no matter how unscientifically generated. Ultimately," he adds, "these probabilities towards death have further entrenched a discourse of scientism, objectivity, and techno-rationality that purports to make warfare inherently more ethical by virtue of its utilization of technologically advanced modes of killing."⁸¹ We have seen in the previous chapter that collateral damage is systematically underplayed and justified in cultural discourse. The specific role of technophilia in such discourses is to present technological sophistication as a form of ethical commitment, or, as Emery summarizes, to "render all ethico-political dilemmas of killing into quantifiable, predictable, and solvable risk-assessment scores."⁸² Emery is concerned here specifically with the ways in which the use of advanced software algorithms makes military destruction seem inevitable, a natural result of objective machine decisions. Here I make a similar argument about the ways that cultural discourses represent drone technology. Showing drones as flawless machines, masterpieces of engineering, has the effect of amplifying the idea that drones are selective, proportionate, and moral deliverers of effective martial justice.

Technological omnipotence

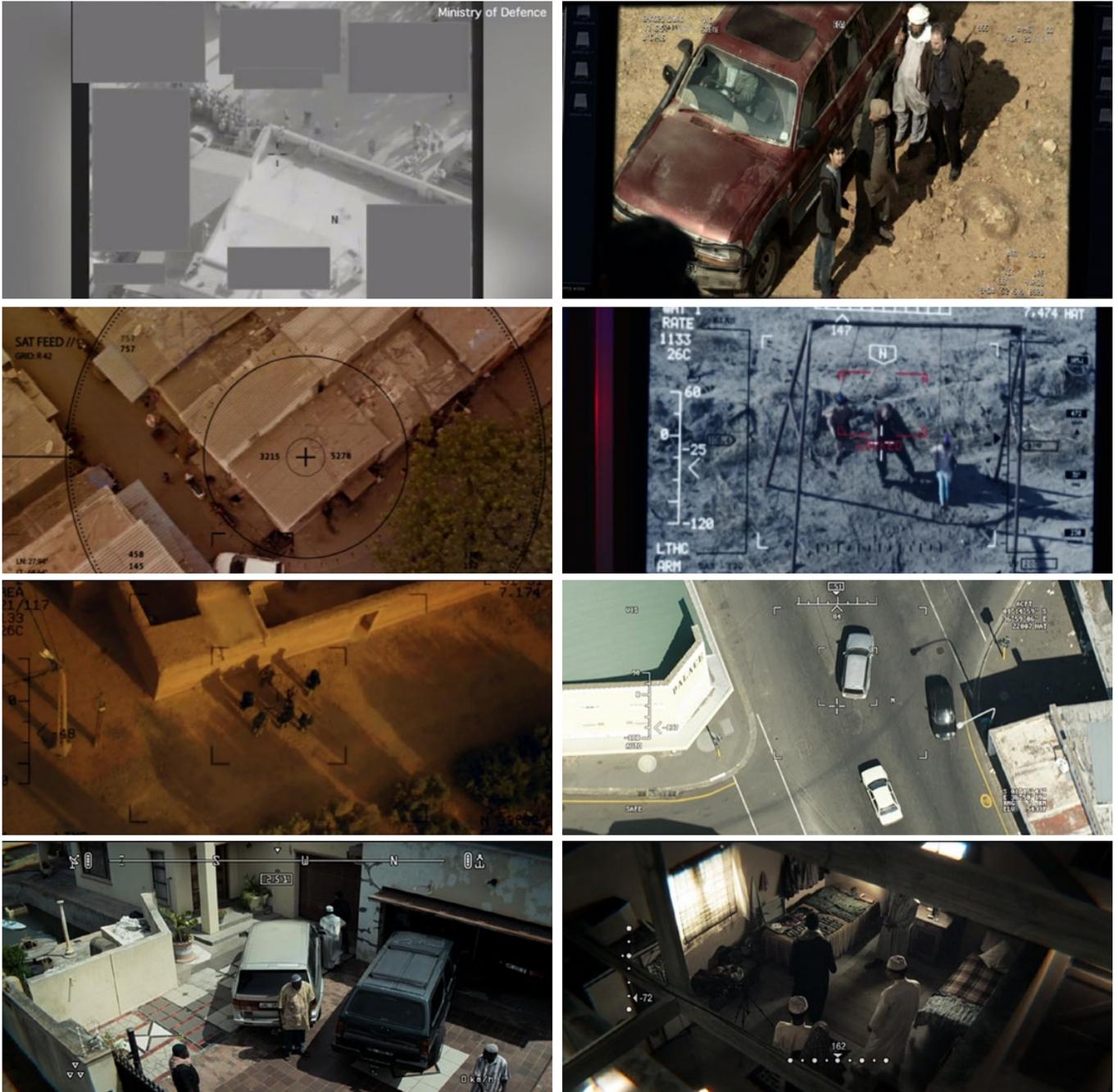
To begin with surveillance, drone visuality is repeatedly shown as producing crystal-clear, reliable, high definition imagery which can guide military decisions with an unimpeachable accuracy. Roger Stahl writes that "the view through the weapon itself" has "earned a primary place in the presentation of war in the postindustrial West."⁸³ Perhaps. It certainly has a central, primary role in visual drone fiction.

81 John R. Emery, "Probabilities Towards Death: Bugsplat, Algorithmic Assassinations, and Ethical Due Care." *Critical Military Studies* (2020), p. 2.

82 Emery, "Probabilities Towards Death", p. 4.

83 Roger Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs: War, Visual Culture and the Weaponized Gaze* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), p. 2.

Consider these screenshots:



From top left MOD footage of the Abu Kamal strike, May 9th 2017 **Source** UK MoD Crown Copyright, 2017; High-definition drone visuality in: *Homeland*, S4E6, "From A to B and Back Again", dir. Lesli Linka Glatter. **Source** Showtime, 2014; *Drone*, dir. Jason Bourque. **Source** Incursion Productions, 2017; *Drones*, dir. Rick Rosenthal. **Source** Jinga Films, 2013; *Good Kill*, dir. Andrew Niccol. **Source** Arrow Films, 2014; *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. **Source** Entertainment One, 2015; Hummingbird drone view of a house exterior, *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. **Source** Entertainment One, 2015; Microdrone view of a house interior, *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. **Source** Entertainment One, 2015.

The first is MoD footage of the Abu Kamal attack discussed in chapter one; figures, buildings and vehicles can be distinguished, but the image overall is fairly hazy. The images that follow are from *Homeland*, *Drone*, *Drones*, *Good Kill*, and *Eye in the Sky*. Each of them shows drone camera imagery that appears in cinematic, high definition, crystal clear colour. There is no delay, no visual distortion; only in one film, *Drone*, does the satellite uplink momentarily fail. The later images from *Eye in the Sky* are particularly interesting, as they show the drone's-eye view of two speculative technologies, a hummingbird drone and a microdrone. These images are incredibly clear and reliable, and are transmitted around the world with no lag, latency, or loss.

Novelists participate in this exaggeration of drone visuality too. "From twelve thousand feet above," writes Richard A. Clarke, "the camera on the Global Reach drone zoomed in on a face."⁸⁴ In Fesperman's *Unmanned*, characters watch a drone feed on "an HD display as good as an NFL broadcast"; earlier, protagonist Darwin Cole reflects that "Nothing was protected anymore. Nothing was unseen, even out here."⁸⁵ In Suarez's *Kill Decision*, drone surveillance network Gorgon Stare is a "persistent unblinking eye creating a digital, three-dimensional model of reality as it happened", which is also capable of "remembering it over time. Seeing everything. Forgetting nothing."⁸⁶ In *Collateral Damage*, pilot Turk "could see every detail - leaves on low bushes starting to droop from the lack of water as the season turned dry, tumbled rocks that had been placed thousands of millennia ago by tectonic displacement, the parched side of an irrigation ditch abandoned to nature."⁸⁷ At no point are the ethics of surveillance considered - apart from the moment, quoted at the end of chapter one above, in which Maden's Troy Pearce dismisses civil liberties objections to surveillance as liberal bullshit.

I would like here to sidestep into a short discussion of the technophilia found in some of the critical discourse that deals with drones. Ian G R Shaw's *Predator Empire* (2016) has a compelling vocabulary for coloniality, and Shaw's argument about drones' part in a "wider project to surveil and enclose the human species" has some interesting elements. Rhetorically, the book repeatedly emphasizes the omniscience and power of drone systems.⁸⁸ His integration of evocative phrases drawn from military parlance, such as "full spectrum dominance", has the effect of praising the drone in the process of critiquing it. Some critical non-fiction accounts of drone warfare, such as Andrew Cockburn's *Kill Chain* (2015) or Chamayou's *Drone Theory*, challenge this image of drone omniscience by rigorously transcribing and closely analysing conversations between drone teams who are looking at grainy low-res footage and who are often unable to distinguish between animals and people, sometimes even between objects and people.⁸⁹ The use of transcripts as a sort of dramaturgy effectively undoes the myths of total visual clarity that surround drone feeds. But in many accounts as in much drone cinema and fiction, drones are equipped with an all-seeing, omniscient visual perception.

Weapons systems too are described as operating reliably with tremendous precision. Turk fires his weapons at the start of *Collateral Damage*, and "All three shots were bull's-eyes; the projectiles hit their targets with less than .0003 percent deviation."⁹⁰ In the following novel *Drone Strike*, Turk pilots a swarm of microdrones into an Iranian nuclear installation, and their programming allows them to strike "within two millimeters of the programmed crosshair".⁹¹ In *Drone*, Mike Maden displays a rare moment of tenderness when describing the infallibility of weapons systems. "It almost didn't seem fair to Pearce, despite the fact that they were cartel scumbags. Even the best human snipers he'd ever worked with missed their shots sometimes. But not the machines. They never missed."⁹²

84 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 154.

85 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 167, 20.

86 Suarez, *Kill Decision*, pp. 127, 130.

87 Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, p. 3.

88 Ian G. R. Shaw, *Predator Empire: Drone Warfare and Full Spectrum Dominance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 6.

89 Andrew Cockburn, *Kill Chain: Drones and the Rise of High-Tech Assassins* (Verso, 2015), pp. 1-16; Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, pp. 1-9.

90 Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, p. 9.

91 Brown and DeFelice, *Drone Strike*, p. 137.

92 Maden, *Drone*, p. 177.

There is an interesting consequence for morality here: drone strikes are so effective, so clean, that not even their victims suffer.

There would have been no warning until the first missile was nearly at the ground. A person nearby would hear a high whistle – Rubeo had heard it himself on the test range – and then what would seem like a rush of air.

Then nothing. If you were within the fatal range of the explosion, the warhead would kill you before the sound got to you.

*That would be merciful. If you could consider any death merciful.*⁹³

It is extraordinary – even obscene – that drone fiction shows targeted assassination as not only surgically precise but as merciful, benevolent towards those that are targeted. Presumably the people killed by Hellfire missiles should be grateful for the intensity and instantaneity of their immolation.

James Dawes, in his account of the psychological and emotional origins of genocide, discusses the importance of “sanitizing language that allows us to name injury without imagining it”.⁹⁴ The technical, functional vocabulary in which drone weaponry is discussed performs just such a purpose. When we read these passages describing the militarily effective deployment of strategic assets, we do not think of bodies eviscerated, flesh scorched, living beings vaporized, complex people incinerated, families shattered, communities traumatized. We think of a kinetic asset placed, a potential threat neutralized, an asset deployed, an operation prosecuted. In much the same way that euphemisms such as ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ and ‘extraordinary rendition’ are deployed to mask the realities of torture and kidnapping, the vocabulary in which it is possible to describe drone killing as a merciful whoosh of air functions to obscure, sanitize, and justify violence.

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Weapon fetishism

One of the most consistent characteristics of drone fiction in print is that almost every novel features extended, lavish descriptions of technology. These descriptions are often written in specification-laden jargonese, with the effect that they read almost like advertising copy or an instructional manual.

Mike Maden is a master of such passages.

*Ashley needed to keep them under constant surveillance. For that she’d need to deploy the ‘persistent stare’ technology of ARGUS-IS married to MQ-9 Reaper drones. The Autonomous Real-time Ground Ubiquitous Surveillance Imaging System provided live wide-area video images by employing a 1.8-gigapixel digital camera, itself a construct of 368 5-megapixel smartphone-camera CCD sensors. At high altitude, the ARGUS-IS could track all of the movement within an entire city simultaneously, resolving objects as small as license plates. By storing almost three days of video imagery, analysts could replay suspicious movements and establish potentially threatening patterns of behaviour.*⁹⁵

Better yet, consider this passage by Richard A. Clarke, in which a drone detects a mobile phone signal and tidily and seamlessly initiates effective surveillance of its target. The technical excellence of the drone (and the surveillance network of which it is a component) is explicitly linked to a worthwhile job effectively done:

⁹³ Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, p. 104.

⁹⁴ Dawes, *Evil Men*, p. 74.

⁹⁵ Maden, *Drone*, p. 280.

*Eight kilometers west and five kilometers up, the mobile's signal triggered a response in an unarmed black object flying quietly in the night. The caller's number was known. He was a man directly associated with Rashid Qazzani [an antagonist]. The small drone dove, sped up, and activated its night vision camera. The onboard computer calculated that the mobile was moving at eighty kilometers an hour off to the east. Just before the mobile shut down, the computer targeted the camera to look at all vehicles heading north within a hundred-meter strip on the highway. There was only one. Its image was recorded. Its license plate imaged. Its route tracked.*⁹⁶

This one almost reads like a technical manual:

*At Creech [Air Force Base, Nevada], the Reaper pilot's control panel showed all systems nominal. On the Reaper's underside, toward the front of the thirty-six-foot fuselage, inside a protective dome, the multispectral camera moved slowly, always pointing at the target below. The camera could zoom in close and provide High Definition images in daylight or zoom back and show the entire valley. At night, the Low Lite camera would flip into place, providing green or gray images as clearly as in midday. Toward the back of the aircraft, inside a four-foot blister, a synthetic aperture radar scanned the ground below, feeding data to an onboard computer that generated photographic quality images from the radar's return, day or night. Below each of the thirty-six-foot wings, hanging from the weapons racks were two laser-guided 250-pound bombs and two Hellfire missiles.*⁹⁷

Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice, in *Drone Strike*, lovingly detail the activity of a swarm of drones over the course of a seven-page scene:

*The wedge - aka "swarm" was a flight of twenty nano-UAVs, officially known as XP-38UVNs. Barely the size of a cheap desk calculator, the small aircraft looked like a cross between lawn darts and studies for a video game. [...] their electric brains were triumphs of nanotechnology and engineering [...] the Hydras were so small and could fly so low, they were dismissed by the radar as clutter. Once past the calculated danger zone, the individual members of the swarm suddenly bolted together, becoming a literal fist in the sky [...] it looked like an animation straight out of an updated version of Star Wars.*⁹⁸

The point of such lavish, loving descriptions is not only to give readers insight into the real-world technological capabilities of drone systems as they exist today; neither is it simply to thrill us with a speculative vision of the weapons systems of the near future. The point of this repeated and fetishistically detailed description of drone weaponry and surveillance is, rather, simply to create a generalized effect: they function to conjure a vague, flexible, yet very concrete sense that drones represent an omnipotent, indestructible, and irresistible force. Upon reading novel after novel about the extraordinary computational intelligence, speed, lethality, responsiveness and endurance of drone systems readers could, after all, be forgiven for coming away from such texts with the impression that drones really are all-powerful.

The broader strategic and political efficacy of the drone program is also explicitly emphasized at points. For example, we could consider Richard A. Clarke's insistence in *Sting of the Drone* that the drone program has:

⁹⁶ Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 44.

⁹⁷ Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 96.

⁹⁸ Brown and DeFelice, *Drone Strike*, pp. 7-14. Emphasis in original.

*almost completely eliminated al-Qaeda central in AfPak, it has been a huge force multiplier against the Taliban, it has kept AQAP in Yemen on the ropes, it has shattered al Shabab in Somalia, it helped to defeat Qadhafi in Libya. It has probably saved thousands of American lives. We need it.*⁹⁹

In addition, Clarke was National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counter-terrorism between 1998 and 2001, and in his author's note at the end of this novel he argues that had Predators been authorized for use in 2001, as he himself recommended, then 9/11 may never have happened (he also makes this point in his 2004 memoir *Against All Enemies*).¹⁰⁰ Of course, this self-serving counterfactual must be taken with a pinch of salt, but it demonstrates the extent to which government officials solidly rely on thought experiments in order to make their state violence seem militarily necessary and morally justified.

The narrative of these last two chapters has given rise to an interesting contradiction. It is odd, given that drone fiction so often emphasizes the inevitability of tragic accidents, that it should also represent drone technology as infallible. Drones are at once flawlessly capable machines and uniquely prone to unavoidable catastrophic technological and human error. This tension is the subject of the next chapter.

⁹⁹ Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 49.

¹⁰⁰ Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, pp. 293-294. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (Simon and Schuster, 2004), pp. 220-222.

4 HIJACK AND BLOWBACK

Drones and/as Resistance

Many drone texts feature the unintended or negative consequences of drone warfare, using them as a means of articulating critique. The two most commonly found critiques of drone warfare are, firstly, that the Obama administration's expansion of the US drone program encouraged "a new arms race for drones that will empower current and future rivals and lay the foundations for an international system that is increasingly violent, destabilized and polarized"; secondly, it is fairly widely argued that "drone strikes corrode the stability and legitimacy of local governments, deepen anti-American sentiment and create new recruits for Islamist networks aiming to overthrow these governments."¹⁰¹ This twofold criticism of drones argues firstly that the introduction of a new technology into world affairs has a radically, revolutionarily destabilizing potential, such that the inevitable proliferation of drones will ultimately serve to make the world less safe for everybody. Secondly, it argues that the extension of military power into previously inaccessible geographical and political arenas carries the substantial risk of creating more enemies than it will eliminate. The risk is not that drone technology exists: the risk is that it will be shared, and Western dominance will be diminished by this technological democratization.

These critiques of drone warfare and technology are found throughout drone fiction. Many drone texts, however, explain and dramatize drone controversies in ways that serve to morally redeem both drones as a technology and the system of militaristic imperialism more broadly. That is, to address firstly the criticism that drones make the world less safe for everyone: drones (as we have seen) always work, but they are such a valuable and perfect weapon that they threaten to blow up in our faces when sinister forces appropriate them or when our enemies' capacities match or exceed our own. Likewise, when things that cannot be morally or militarily justified occur, it is not the fault of drones as a form of weaponry. It is the fault of the users: bad things are done with drones not through military incompetence or technological imperfection but through the deliberate malice of our enemies or of sinister forces within government. This allows the reconciliation of the apparent tension between the representation of drones as a technology which functions perfectly and simultaneously as the latest iteration of a form of warfighting which unavoidably causes the tragedy of collateral damage. That is, collateral damage is an effect of the system's success.

The second critique - that drones create more enemies than they eliminate - is interesting, because it seems to allow for the understanding of the agency of

Many drone texts, however, explain and dramatize drone controversies in ways that serve to morally redeem both drones as a technology and the system of militaristic imperialism more broadly

101 Michael J. Boyle, "The Costs and Consequences of Drone Warfare." *International Affairs* 89: 1 (2013), p. 3.

resistance organizations. However, by blaming drones for resistance, it actually deflects culpability for resistance away from the systemic nature of the regime of military and political violence of which drones are only one visible node.

Conspiracy and hijack

Military thriller and espionage fiction, very often set in the opaque world of clandestine operations, is generally preoccupied with the machinations of double agents, the hidden motivations of superior officers who are not always to be trusted, and the complex backroom manoeuvres which lead to betrayals and reverses in fortune. It should come as little surprise then to find that drone fiction is also marked by labyrinthine conspiracies and malicious drone hijacks.

In *Unmanned*, for instance, the opening drone strike of the novel appears at first to be a tragic mistake. A young boy is killed and a young girl is horribly maimed in what seems to be an unjustifiable attack on a civilian home. Over the course of the novel, however, this attack is laboriously explained as not a case of bad intelligence or operator incompetence but as in fact an elaborate espionage-style conspiracy.¹⁰² What seems at first to be a horrific accident, and which causes our hero Darwin Cole to leave the service and become estranged from his family, is, over the course of the book, brought into focus as a deliberate attack and not an error at all. We may question whether Cole's superiors were right to target the house – that is, the morality of the attack is open to question – but there was no incompetence or malfunction involved. Drones here are, like any other weapon, a great asset to the good, yet a tool which is open to abuse by the bad. It's not the drone's fault, after all, that the orders were questionable. The technology worked perfectly.

In *Homeland*, too, drones are shown as a technology which is vulnerable to elaborate manipulations. In the first episode of season four, "The Drone Queen," protagonist Carrie orders an air strike on a building in Waziristan that she is informed is a terrorist safe house. It turns out, however, to be a civilian home in which a wedding is being celebrated, and over forty noncombatants are killed. It is revealed later in the season that this attack was not a mistake based on bad information, but that Carrie's human intelligence source was in fact deliberately manipulating the CIA into believing that they killed a Taliban leader who turns out to be the major antagonist of the season. Air strikes are, thereby, exonerated of any wrongdoing: although it was US missiles that incinerated the wedding and killed a blameless family, the destruction is actually the fault of the villain who manipulated Carrie into giving the order so that he could fake his own death. Much as *Drone Strike*'s Iranians invited their deaths and bear responsibility for their own killing, *Homeland*'s villains bear sole responsibility for the destruction of the wedding party. Both *Unmanned* and the fourth season of *Homeland* foreground the patient, elaborate reframing of what seems at first to be collateral damage into a deliberate act of killing by a malicious third force for which the drone program and its personnel bear no responsibility. This reframing serves to demonstrate that there are, in fact, no accidents. There is no collateral damage; there are only attacks we don't fully understand committed by forces beyond our sight. (This tallies interestingly with Obama's decision to recategorize all collateral damage as combatant death.)¹⁰³

102 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 261, 292.

103 "In the complex world of remote killing in remote locations, labelling the dead as 'enemies' until proven otherwise is commonplace," writes Ryan Devereaux in "Manhunting in the Hindu Kush: Civilian Casualties and Strategic Failures in America's Longest War." *The Intercept*, 15/10/2015. Online: <https://theintercept.com/drone-papers/manhunting-in-the-hindu-kush/>

The fundamental anxiety exploited by this narrative is that the enormous power of drones will be used against 'us', either for propaganda, through oblique machinations, or directly as missile attacks. In *Unmanned*, drone hobbyists are compared to al-Qaeda hijackers when they are described as "like those quiet young men who had enrolled in flight schools in the months before 9/11". But it is not simply amateurs who are imagined as the risk. "If they thought their new technology was devastating in their own hands," reflects a character elsewhere in *Unmanned*, "just wait until they started sharing it on the outside, with people who in some ways were far better equipped to exploit it."¹⁰⁴ Naturally, we don't have to wait: drone fiction has imagined this for us. In Maden's *Drone*, Iranians hijack a US Reaper drone to attack a US oil installation.¹⁰⁵ In his *Blue Warrior*, the Chinese antagonist lives by the principle that she should always "steal everything the Americans made", and goes on to steal the hardware and software of US drone systems.¹⁰⁶ In *Drone Threat*, anarchist hobbyists flood a train carriage with ipecac and tear gas.¹⁰⁷ In Brown and DeFelice's *Collateral Damage* the antagonist hijacks a UAV and uses it to attack civilians in order to embarrass a drone manufacturer, as discussed above.¹⁰⁸ In the later *Dreamland* novel *Target Utopia*, an anarchist collective hijacks US military technology in an attempt to "change the entire order of world politics."¹⁰⁹ In the opening scene of *Kill Decision*, terrorists digitally hijack a drone and make it open fire upon a stream of Shi'ite pilgrims.¹¹⁰

In each of these varied scenarios, whether the attack is small-scale and symbolic or large-scale and potentially world-ending, the narrative power of these stories is drawn from both the incredible power with which drones are credited and the unstable, fragile nature of 'our' control over it. Drone technology is a volatile tool, pregnant with an uncontainable potency, as liable to hurt those who wield it as it is to destroy those at whom it is directed. This has a number of rhetorical effects. Drones are glorified as omnipotent; the uncontainability of their power shows them, once again, as a good tool in the hands of heroes, but as a terrorist weapon in the hands of villains; their vulnerability to hijack shows them as a technology that can be used *against* the West as much as it can be used *by* the West. This fundamentally misrepresents the power imbalance that structures drone operations, making the US seem vulnerable simultaneously to terrorism and to the consequences of their own power.

This vulnerability is strikingly dramatized in *Sting of the Drone*. Terrorists hijack drone technology and commit terror attacks against the US, specifically targeting drone operators living in suburban Las Vegas. A drone pilot's house is struck, killing him with his family, and his neighbour Erik (another member of the team) looks on powerlessly.

*Erik felt powerless, ridiculous, as he stood there shirtless, in his bathing suit and bare feet, holding the little extinguisher. He heard sirens over the open-throated roar of the fire. He thought of the people whom he had seen on the Big Board, the ones who were always standing by the flaming houses that he had blown up. So this was what it felt like to be so close to the flames and not be able to do anything but watch.*¹¹¹

104 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 164-168, 167, 124.

105 Maden, *Drone*, pp. 320-322. See also p. 364.

106 Maden, *Blue Warrior*, p. 70. See also *Drone Threat*, p. 306.

107 Maden, *Drone Threat*, pp. 33-34, 39.

108 Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, pp. 17-18.

109 Brown and DeFelice, *Target Utopia*, p. 408.

110 Suarez, *Kill Decision*, pp. 1-10.

111 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 193.

This representation of drones functions as a way to articulate a limited sort of critique. Imagine, it says, how it would feel for the power that we wield to be used against us. The differential in grievability is again starkly visible here. Death by drone can only seem terrible – and not a merciful gust of heat – if it happens to one of ‘us’.

The differential in grievability is starkly visible here. Death by drone can only seem terrible – and not a merciful gust of heat – if it happens to one of ‘us’

Swarms of mass destruction

The drone swarm is a particular object of anxiety. Defined broadly, drone swarms “consist of multiple unmanned platforms and/or weapons deployed to accomplish a shared objective, the platforms and/or weapons autonomously altering their behaviour based on communication with one another.”¹¹² In simpler terms, they are self-organized groups of dozens, even hundreds, of small, coordinated drones, guided by independent algorithmic AI, which work together intelligently to achieve specific aims. Small drones armed with tear gas and less lethal projectiles have been used for crowd-dispersal purposes, notably by Israeli border patrols and by private companies seeking to break union demonstrations, and, of course, they have been used by conventional police forces for surveillance purposes in many nations, including the US, UK, and France.¹¹³ The swarm is a target of particular concern, because their AI may not be able to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and as such, their use could enable war crimes.¹¹⁴ In addition, much drone violence has been assisted and enabled by algorithms with data sets that reflect the in-built prejudices of their users.

Swarming systems may not yet be in widespread use, but they have long been imagined, most often in texts such as Crichton’s *Prey* which are explicitly positioned by their authors as warnings about the uncontrollable nature of the power that swarms could unleash. Tools only do what they are told; as the swarm obeys only the algorithm, there is no way to ensure that the enormous potential power of such drones cannot be appropriated and used for terrorist purposes.

In *Drone Games*, al-Qaeda terrorists use prototype drones – ‘entomopters’ designed for NASA missions to Mars – to attack commercial aircraft and wage economic warfare on the US.¹¹⁵ *Kill Decision* features swarming drone technology using a behavioural algorithm modelled on the instincts of aggressive ants, and Crichton’s *Prey* features malevolently coordinated nanodrones. *Drone Command* also makes mention of swarming algorithms.¹¹⁶ In *Predator One*, a nefarious organization hijack military AI and GPS software in order to control military vehicles as though they are drones. Early in the novel, they attack a baseball game with swarming ‘pigeon’ drones, for example, and in the novel’s climax, they turn Air Force One, the Presidential jet, into a guided missile in order to fly it into the rebuilt World Trade Centre.¹¹⁷

112 Zachary Kallenborn & Philipp C. Bleek, “Swarming Destruction: Drone Swarms and Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear Weapons.” *The Nonproliferation Review* 25:5-6 (2018), p. 526. See also Kallenborn & Bleek, “Drones of Mass Destruction: Drone Swarms and the Future of Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological Weapons.” *War on the Rocks* 14/2/2019. Online: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/02/drones-of-mass-destruction-drone-swarms-and-the-future-of-nuclear-chemical-and-biological-weapons/>

113 Peter Asaro, “Algorithms of Violence: Critical Social Perspectives on Autonomous Weapons.” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 86:2 (2019), p. 551.

114 David Hambling, “U.S. Army’s New Drone Swarm May Be A Weapon Of Mass Destruction.” *Forbes*, 1/6/2020. Online: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidhambling/2020/06/01/why-new-us-armys-tank-killing-drone-swarm-may-be-a-weapon-of-mass-destruction/>

115 Narlock, *Drone Games*, pp. 53-59.

116 Maden, *Drone Command*, pp. 54, 60.

117 Maberry, *Predator One*, pp. 119, 396-459.

Their lack of human intelligence or values – their lack of human prejudice, their inability to swear allegiance – is what is represented as making the swarm particularly dangerous. Artificial intelligence systems decisions are based on logic and pattern detection rather than context, situational intelligence, or human emotion, and in drone swarm fiction they never change their minds. Their total and inhuman obedience to the destructive order, which could just as well be directed *at us as by us*, renders them an object of acute horror. In some ways this is simply a dystopian horror trope, familiar to viewers of apocalyptic fiction about exterminatory robotics in the tradition of the *Terminator* franchise, but it also, more importantly, poses questions about the ethics of lethal AI and whether it can ever be defensible to enable machines to decide to kill humans. The question is not about killer drones – only about those that we cannot control.

Blowback and terrorist recruitment

The other major disadvantage of drone operations that is addressed by hegemonic drone fiction is the idea of ‘blowback’. Military ethicist Patrick Lin writes, in rather anodyne terms, that the term blowback refers to “unintended and largely unanticipated effects that radical or innovative new technologies originally designed for military purposes might come to exert on civilian life”.¹¹⁸ Lin is here concerned with the ways in which Western states may fall prey to the consequences of their own military technologies, not with the ways in which technologies could have unintended consequences on the battlefield. More often, blowback has a broader meaning, and is used to describe the ways in which military actions (including drone operations) radicalize the populations who survive them. In short, drones are shown as a recruiting resource for terrorist organizations.

This idea often circulates when atrocities committed by Western military forces come to light. For instance, when photographs of American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners emerged from Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2004, the photographic evidence was widely seen as “recruiting posters for al-Qaida”.¹¹⁹ However, by crediting drones with direct responsibility for retaliatory terrorism, this narrative of blowback in fact drastically oversimplifies the multiple, dynamic and complex ways in which imperial violence generates resistance. By claiming that it is only forms of violence that are marked out as excesses (the forms of violence, that is, that trouble ‘us’) which engender resistance, this narrative of blowback deflects attention away from the organized and systemic nature of the regime of imperial military and political violence of which drones are only one of the more visible nodes.

David Ignatius’ *Bloodmoney* opens with a drone strike on a village in Waziristan, and the majority of the novel thereafter details the vengeance, in the form of assassinations of undercover CIA personnel, of its sole survivor.¹²⁰ In *Eye in the Sky*, the father of the murdered girl relies upon al-Shabab soldiers to transport his daughter to hospital, and as such he gains first-hand experience that they are, in his predicament, more trustworthy and helpful than the Western powers who launched the attack. In *Sting of the Drone*, a character from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remarks that the drones are “working” because “they are recruiting for us.”¹²¹ *Kill Decision* makes the point repeatedly and explicitly: in

118 Patrick Lin, “Ethical Blowback from Emerging Technologies”. *Journal of Military Ethics* 9:4 (2010), p. 314.

119 Geoffrey Robertson, *Crimes Against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice*. Third Edition (Penguin, 2006), p. 590.

120 Ignatius, *Bloodmoney*, pp. 1-6.

121 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 153.

an early scene, a colonel and a sergeant discuss this downside of drone strikes, noting both that “the more firepower we use, the more enemies we create” and that missile strikes have “been a recruiting bonanza for our enemies.” Later, a civilian scientist makes the same point more forcefully, asking the same sergeant: “Did you really think we could just fire missiles into other countries, assassinating people from the air, without it coming back to haunt us?” Later still, she reflects that “Our drones might be the root cause of these bombings.”¹²²

24: Live Another Day, the ninth season of Fox’s long-running televisual counterterrorism thriller, is also instructive in this regard. In the major plot of the first three quarters of the show, a small terror cell hijacks 10 US drones and threatens to use them to inflict mass casualties in London. Each season of *24* is structured around the resolution of an imminent terror threat; in *Live Another Day*, these drones become the show’s ticking bomb which must be stopped. Importantly here, the motivation of this terror cell – a mother and her two children – is revenge for a US drone attack that killed the father figure in the insurgent family. In episode one, a drone is hijacked and used against US and UK soldiers near Kandahar; in episode seven, the terrorists commit a drone strike against a London hospital, and there is an extraordinary – not to say ludicrous – sequence in which the heroes are engaged in a car chase with a drone; in episode eight, the fictional President appears to be killed by a drone (although this turns out to be a clever misdirection, and the President was never in danger). Not only is this hijack narrative an example of the story in which terrorists appropriate Western weapons in order to wreak indiscriminate revenge, but it is also an example of the convoluted conspiracist storytelling at which the writers of *24* have consistently been particularly adept. Like *Homeland*, *24* shows us in thrilling, lurid detail that there are no accidents, no stray missiles or miscalculations: if something happens that ‘we’ don’t like, it is because of the activities of shady, nefarious, vengeful forces beyond our control, not because of military incompetence, political malice, or mechanical failure.



Drone car chase. *24: Live Another Day*, S1E7, dir. Jon Cassar. Source Fox Studios, 2014.

122 Suarez, *Kill Decision*, pp. 19, 91, 118, 179. Emphasis in original.

There is another consequence of this that is worthy of note. Protests by anti-drone groups are also shown by these elaborate explanations to be particularly futile. Military fictions often caricature anti-war positions by making protesters seem like ignorant, militant hippies, motivated by bizarre conspiracy theories and half-baked geopolitical understandings. If drone fiction attributes disasters to sinister, unknowable figures, and explains drone hijacks in terms of unpredictably labyrinthine machinations, then how much sillier does it seem for protesters to simply blame the government? If the military are scrambling to do the right thing in the face of a perilous world, then protesting against this protectivity seems doubly illegitimate.



Anti-drone protesters. 24: *Live Another Day*, S1E1, dir. Jon Cassar. Source Fox Studios, 2014.

What if it were you? *Drone*

A more sophisticated version of the blowback narrative is found in the 2017 film *Drone*, in which a bereaved father travels to the US to wreak psychological revenge on the drone operator who killed his family. At the beginning of the movie, Imir Shaw's wife and daughter are killed by the blast - executed by private contractor Neil Wistin - which eliminates a terror suspect. Heartbroken, Shaw travels to the US, gains Wistin's trust, and, in the film's climactic scene, confronts Wistin in front of his family. After a heated debate about the ethics of counterterrorism, Shaw exposes Wistin's role - which he had hidden from his family - as a private contractor in the drone program, and then claims to have a bomb in his briefcase. In the film's last moments, the bomb is revealed as a bluff, and his objective is revealed as simply to confront Wistin with his own crimes and to make him see how it feels to have his entire life endangered. Rather than meeting violence with violence, Shaw confronts Wistin with an ethical challenge.

Drone is a complex thriller, executed with subtlety and nuance. The main confrontation is a tense, textured affair, structured around a compellingly brittle central performance by Sean Bean. Through its focus on the ways in which Shaw is racially profiled - both by racist civilians and by the security surveillance teams who follow him to Wistin's house - it clearly prompts the audience to reconsider their habits of perception. After all, we are encouraged to suspect that Shaw is a terrorist by the film's employment of generic conventions that it simultaneously attempts to subvert.

Ultimately, however, *Drone's* message is simply that the infliction of collateral damage - the killing of Shaw's family - radicalizes otherwise peaceful members of foreign populations. It riffs on this theme in a novel way, but it remains tethered to its limited, narrow ideological underpinnings. What these narratives of blowback and radicalization are all unable to articulate is that the root causes of resistance to the global hegemonic aspirations of US power is not reducible to the use of any one technology or tactic. It is not simply the drone that people hate: it is the entire colonial and imperialist regime of military domination. That is, people resisted US hegemony in Iraq, Pakistan, Waziristan, Afghanistan and elsewhere well before the drone program became what it is today. To reduce the narrative of resistance and radicalization to a discussion of any one controversial technology risks normalizing every other aspect of imperial violence - economic exploitation, corruption, antidemocratic interventions in foreign politics - that we in the West fail to consider sufficiently 'controversial'. It is not the imperialist regime at fault, these narratives claim - rather, it is simply drone strikes that have gone too far.

HUMANIZATION

Sympathetic Representations of Drone Operators

Drone operations have long been stigmatized as insufficiently physically demanding to be taken seriously as a form of legitimate soldierly conduct. "Because drone operators are protected from death," writes Cara Daggett, there exists a prejudice against them that "they are disqualified from performing as 'real' warriors because their bodies are not sited in combat."¹²³ Drone fiction challenges this prejudice by taking drone operators seriously as skilled military practitioners who face substantial risks. Drone fiction integrates UAV operators into the legitimate military fraternity by showing them as real soldiers with real expertise, struggles, and concerns.

In a 2020 interview with *The Psychologist*, Peter Lee discusses another of the popular presumptions regarding the experience of drone operators.

*In those first few years the common assumption from onlookers - myself included - was that the operators had to be morally disengaged from the act of killing. [...] What has not been widely understood is that the close-up views of the people they observe, and sometimes kill, place military drone operators in a distance paradox. They are physically far away but visually, emotionally and psychologically intimate.*¹²⁴

Drone operators are, of course, human, and the job comes with considerable psychological and emotional risks. Drone operator Brandon Bryant writes, for example, that the job is "dark, mostly boring, quiet, while suffocating the soul, body, and mind", and that it left his life "filled with depression and loneliness."¹²⁵ One of the most important tasks of drone fiction is to take this distress seriously. It humanizes drone operators as sympathetic, as competent, and as intellectually reflective and morally aware.

Humanizing drone operators is not necessarily 'bad' or 'wrong' *per se*. My ethical concern here is that these soldiers are humanized at length, in depth, and repeatedly, whilst the humanity of their victims - visible only as 'military age males', or as figures exhibiting suspicious 'patterns of life' - remains deliberately unintelligible.

123 Cara Dagget, "Drone Disorientations: How 'Unmanned' Weapons Queer the Experience of Killing in War." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17:3 (2015), p. 363.

124 Annie Brookman-Byrne, "'There is a spectrum of responses to killing far-off enemies': Peter Lee talks to Annie Brookman-Byrne". *The Psychologist*, February 2020, p. 41. <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-33/february-2020/there-spectrum-responses-killing-far-enemies>. See also Lee, *Reaper Force*, pp. 159-168, 223, 299.

125 Brandon Bryant, "A Letter From a Sensor Operator". In: *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*, ed. by Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan (Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 315-317. Bryant also appears as a regular commentator on drone-related matters, including in the 2015 documentary *Drone*. He was a consultant on the 2015 short film *Drone*.

Why are you still wearing your flight suit?

Throughout drone fiction, characters wrestle with the novel military experience of remotely piloting very sophisticated weaponry. Often, it is described with a mixture of admiration and resentment. In Clarke's *Sting of the Drone*, for instance, characters express amazement that drones, with their advanced manoeuvrability, can do "what no human pilot with a joystick could do."¹²⁶ The military advantages of drones, such as the reduction in risk faced by Western soldiers, the access they give to remote and otherwise inaccessible areas, and their ability to exert extraordinary force, cannot be easily dismissed by these figures; nonetheless, the soldierly resentment of those who joined the Air Force to fly elite aircraft but who now find themselves piloting drones from a dark trailer is often palpable.

Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice are exemplary in this respect. "Stinking robot planes were the curse of the world," reflects Turk in *Collateral Damage*. He is not, however, motivated by any ethical or political concerns beyond his own impending professional obsolescence. "UAVs were taking over military aviation. The Predator, Reaper, Global Hawk, Flighthawks, now the Sabres - in four or five years there wouldn't be a manned combat plane in the sky."¹²⁷ The *Dreamland* thrillers acknowledge the power of drones and admit - however grudgingly - that they are a fixture of modern military operations that is unlikely to disappear any time soon; however, the novels resist the hegemony of the drone, preferring to emphasize the extent to which piloted aircraft and human ground teams can get the job done where drones are shown to be either a hindrance or, if a useful tool, one that is restricted to a supporting role that requires extensive human guidance. In short, they argue that "there's a real need for people in the loop," or, as the closing passage of *Drone Strike* has it, that "true courage would never go out of style."¹²⁸

The flight suit is a particularly potent signifier of military identity that has an ambivalent meaning in drone fiction, and which comes to symbolize the pilots' resentment at the profound change in military flight. Sandra Vitonelli in *Sting of the Drone* flippantly asks "why the pilots felt the need to wear jumpsuits when their airplanes were thousands of miles away."¹²⁹ This question is here posed rhetorically, as a kind of 'gotcha' question indicating the clear contradiction of a specialized flight uniform being worn by somebody who by definition does not need it. In *Good Kill*, too, Major Egan asks his boss why they wear flight suits as a non-sequitur at the end of a scene. Though it is a simple question, it resonates with a great deal of Egan's frustration. Memoirist Mark McCurley downplays the flight suit question, writing plainly that drone pilots wear flight jackets to stave off the chill caused by their processing units' cooling systems.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, in drone fiction, the drone operator's flight suit is an open yet unacknowledged absurdity, a symbol of the many confusions that drone operators may feel about their martial identity.

The Pilot, sole character in George Brant's 2013 one-woman play *Grounded*, is reassigned to drone work despite her substantial experience in elite combat flight. She considers her flight suit a hard-won privilege, an integral part of her martial identity which affords her respect and dignity. The suit is linked to her sense of professional selfhood not simply through her sense of technical

126 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 186.

127 Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, p. 33.

128 Brown and DeFelice, *Collateral Damage*, p. 280; *Drone Strike*, p. 517.

129 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 5.

130 McCurley and Maurer, *Hunter Killer*, p. 23.

accomplishment and skill but also bodily, as a fundamental component of the viscerally thrilling experience of combat flight and as the source of her “rock star” confidence that she feels makes her sexually attractive to her husband.¹³¹ Later, when she is a drone pilot, she keeps her flight suit on until she gets home as an unspoken code, subtly informing her husband that she has killed some “military age males”; she feels comfortable in her suit when she is able to discharge her military duty, but ridiculous, unsoldierly, in it at other times.¹³² When she is detailed to drone flights, which she dismisses as the “Chair Force”, she considers it a punishment for her pregnancy.¹³³ She also dismisses her Distinguished Warfare Award as a “lame ass lightning bolt piece of shit”.¹³⁴ *Grounded* explores the tension between domesticity and martial identity in great detail; the Pilot’s major concern in the play is what she perceives as her deprofessionalization.

Sting of the Drone also emphasizes this deprofessionalization, as a drone operator laments the fact that Air Force pilots jokingly refer to his Distinguished Warfare Award as a Desk Warfare Award.¹³⁵ In *Unmanned*, Cole is a skilled pilot and an intelligent, thoughtful person who feels “as wingless as a plucked housefly” now that he can no longer fly conventional aircraft. Later he admits that shiftwork at Creech lacks the fraternity of overseas deployment, and that he misses “the feeling you got when you were up there alone, soaring above everything.” Another character reflects that “Switching to drones must have been like going from a Maserati on the Autostrada to a stationary bike in a mildewed basement.” Cole, describing his transition from live flight to drone work, bitterly labels drone operations “Xbox shit”.¹³⁶ (Indeed, it is rare to find a drone text that does not make reference in one way or another to the idea that drone warfare is ‘like a video game’.) One of the major preoccupations of fictional drone pilots is their worry that their military experience is not ‘authentic’, that they are not ‘really’ soldiers engaged in ‘real’ violence.

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A life at once martial and domestic

As a part of this concern with authentic military experience, drone texts very often emphasize the domesticity of the lives of drone operators, laying stress on their distance from the battlefield and the jarring contrast between warfighting and domestic life. There is a surprising amount of poetry that deals with this theme. For example, Kim Garcia’s 2016 collection *Drone* features a range of poetic explorations of drone-related themes, most prominently the ordinary humanity of drone operators that punctuates their military lives: domestic disputes, the sadness of the drone pilot, and the spirituality of military wives. In her poem “Twelve-Hour Shifts”, poet Jill McDonough contrasts her stanzas about the grim business of drone operations with stanzas about Cheerios, muzak, and domestic chores; the poem begins: “A drone pilot works a twelve-hour shift, then goes home / to real life. Showers, eats supper, plays video games.”¹³⁷

131 George Brant, *Grounded* (Oberon Modern Plays, 2017 [2013], pp. 13, 15.

132 Brant, *Grounded*, pp. 28, 39, 43.

133 Brant, *Grounded*, pp. 24, 27.

134 Brant, *Grounded*, p. 32.

135 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, p. 77.

136 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 27, 3, 152, 120, 15, 30.

137 Jill McDonough, “Twelve-Hour Shifts”, in *Reaper* (Alice James Books, 2017), p. 30. McDonough’s collection features a range of engagements with the relationship between technology and contemporary life, only some of which are directly relevant to the military use of UAVs. As such, it integrates concerns about the military ethics of UAVs into broader concerns about everyday consumer technology. This link is interesting, as it explores their mutual interconnectedness and, consequently, the implication of our daily practices in a broader imperial use of technology. For McDonough, drones are uncomfortably normal, drone pilots uncomfortably relatable: she interrogates what it might mean for drones to be normal to us. Interestingly, four of her poems are based on Martin’s memoir *Predator* (“Rocket Man Had It Coming”, “Calling Predator ‘I’”, “Armed”, and “Still Death”).

The protagonist of Harry Josephine Giles' poem cycle "Drone" is similar, as she "not only fires missiles at suspected terrorists in remote parts of the world, but also has to suffer the familiar indignities of modern working life."¹³⁸

Novels, memoirs, and movies also place this theme front and centre. "It made it hard to keep up a battle rhythm", writes Daniel Suarez in *Kill Decision*, "when you found yourself in a convenience store buying a Slurpee an hour after ordering the deaths of five insurgents half a world away."¹³⁹ *Good Kill* features scenes of Major Egan shopping for domestic items on the way home from Creech Air Base and barbecuing with friends and family between shifts. In *Sting of the Drone*, drone operator Erik Parsons executes a "righteous kill", gets in the car at the end of his shift, and drives home listening to 90's Pop Hits to drink Heineken in his hot tub with his wife.¹⁴⁰ Matt Martin's drone memoir *Predator* describes this aspect of drone operations as a "schizophrenic existence between two worlds"; Mark McCurley describes his "daily metamorphosis on Interstate 215 from combat aviator to normal civilian"; a drone pilot quoted by Peter Lee in *Reaper Force* is more blunt, calling it simply a "mind-fuck".¹⁴¹ In perhaps the most polemic terms, Imir Shaw in the 2017 movie *Drone* says that drone operators "come home to their families after a long day of murder and put their children to bed."



Major Egan grocery shopping after a drone shift, and barbecuing with friends and family. *Good Kill*, dir. Andrew Niccol. Source Arrow Films, 2014.

Roger Stahl observes that this "trope of the pilot-as-domestic-technocrat" has three major functions.

*First, it precludes other points of identification that might lead to contemplating 'what it's like' to live under the constant hum of drones in the sky, and 'what it's like' to dig a six-year-old girl out of the rubble. Second, it plays out the logic of the security state by applying the contours of the battlefield to everyday existence. Finally, by fostering identification with the drone operator, this discourse channels identification towards the point where those decisions simply await execution, and away from the civic sphere where society deliberates questions of state violence.*¹⁴²

That is, to summarize, the focus on the drone operator's private life functions to flesh out our view of their internal life, allowing us imaginative access to their experience and establishing them as an object of sympathetic identification. Crucially, it does this at the expense of any other possible position of

138 Colin Waters, "'What Words Point to But Cannot Be' - An Introduction". In: *Our Real Red Selves* (Vagabond Voices, 2015), p. 11.

139 Suarez, *Kill Decision*, p. 4.

140 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, pp. 8-10.

141 Martin and Sasser, *Predator*, pp. 2, 40, 44-45, 85, 275, 278; McCurley and Maurer, *Hunter Killer*, p. 133; Lee, *Reaper Force*, pp. 1, 38-39, 49-51, 107-108, 116, 195, 224, 228, 252, 276.

142 Roger Stahl, "What the Drone Saw: The Cultural Optics of the Unmanned War", *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67: 5 (2013), p. 671.

identification, amplifying the perspective of the drone operator at the same time as it sidelines questions about the politics or ethics of drone operations and reduces the victims of drone attacks to inevitabilities. Not simply a novel peculiarity of contemporary warfare, this tension between professional and personal identity is a point of entry for considerations of the drone operator's inner turmoil, and as such, it is another way in which the moral and affective experience of the Western soldier is privileged in mainstream representations of warfare.

Those images would never disappear, or even fade: psychological damage

Drone fiction integrates drone operators into the ranks of military personnel who can be represented as noble and worthy warriors by showing their psychological wounds, such as PTSD, burnout, depression, alcoholism, and marital breakdown. The drone operator's body is precluded from the possibility of acquiring physical wounds in the line of duty, and thereby precluded from participating in the martial sacrifice of placing oneself in the line of fire for their compatriots. They are more than capable, however, of sustaining psychological wounds, and as such they are able to participate in the acquisition of combat trauma, albeit differently from those who serve on the battlefield. The embrace of risk is a mark of belonging in certain military communities; by making themselves available to psychological damage, drone operators are able to cement their status as a part of an authentic military community.

For example, episode five of the first season of *Jack Ryan*, "End of Honor", sees drone operator Tombstone shocked to discover that somebody he was ordered to kill was misidentified, and that, as a consequence, he has killed an innocent man. In the next episode, "Sources and Methods", he travels to Syria to apologize to the man's family and to attempt to make amends for his murder of an innocent.



Left Tombstone learns he has killed an innocent man. *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, S1E5, "End of Honor", dir. Patricia Riggen. **Source** Amazon Studios, 2019. **Right** Tombstone attempts to make amends with the family of his misidentified target. *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, S1E6, "Sources and Methods", dir. Carlton Cuse. **Source** Amazon Studios, 2019.

This clear sense of right and wrong and his desire to atone for his unintentional participation in injustice marks him out as a moral agent who is only content to kill the right people for the right reasons, admitting no possibility for mistakes. Crucially, the episodes lay a great deal of emphasis on the emotional distress he experiences because of his killing of an innocent; he weeps, he drinks, he seems unable to sleep, he has a haunted, troubled expression. Richard A. Clarke's *Sting of the Drone* is also exemplary in this regard, as the distress of drone operator Bruce is explored in some detail. The routine "upset his body clock" and his Ambien usage "put him into a strange, waking, trance-like state while he

tossed and turned, twisting the sheets and blankets.” Later, Bruce’s supervisor Parsons discusses his team with his wife, a psychologist, lamenting that there is so high an incidence of stress amongst his pilots. “Out of seventy-five pilots, eleven have asked for early transfer, I dismissed three for DUIs, and eight have filed for divorce since they got here. Those are not normal numbers, Jennie.” Her reply explains that there is a psychologically jarring effect on drone pilots caused by their physical distance from and yet psychological proximity with their screen-based work. “Let’s face it, they kill people fairly often and then they walk out of their dark game-boy room and they’re in the blazing Las Vegas sun, where it’s perfectly safe, fun is all around. It’s hard to live in those two worlds simultaneously.”¹⁴³ The cognitive dissonance caused by the contrast between the two worlds they simultaneously inhabit is shown as producing profound and serious psychological wounds in the hearts and minds of drone operators.

Likewise, *Good Kill*’s protagonist Major Egan exhibits a great deal of symptoms associated with PTSD, such as marital breakdown, self-harm, alcoholism (he narrowly avoids a conviction for drunk driving), angry outbursts, exhaustion, depression, and so on. Further, the Pilot in *Grounded* explains her distress as she is required to watch over a pile of her dying comrades, to “Linger as their bodies cool”, and in the play’s final moments she becomes confused and distressed when she can no longer differentiate between the children in her crosshairs and her own daughter.¹⁴⁴ Even Mike Maden, usually so brusque and immune to emotional introspection, acknowledges that “killing was an unnatural thing for a well-adjusted person to do, and killing the nation’s enemies – even for the right reasons – exacted a terrible psychic cost.” His hero Pearce suffers from alcoholism throughout the series, and in *Drone Threat* the reader is given more insight into his ongoing trauma symptoms, which include harrowing nightmares.¹⁴⁵



Major Egan drink driving on the way to his shift. *Good Kill*, dir. Andrew Niccol. Source Arrow Films, 2014.

A foundational principle of this narrative of traumatization is that drone operators are repeatedly shown to be sensitive and moral people, with a keen awareness of the quandaries that drone operations represent, and with moral consciences receptive to the shocks of repeatedly killing in war. Tombstone could not be so hurt by his own actions, after all, were he not an essentially good person with fine feelings capable of sustaining harsh damage. Drone operators often display

143 Clarke, *Sting of the Drone*, pp. 74, 86.

144 Brant, *Grounded*, pp. 47, 66-70.

145 Maden, *Drone Threat*, pp. 81, 86-87.

uncertainty, doubt, and caution when it comes to killing. In the 2015 short film *Drone* by director Justin S. Lee, rookie sensor operator Matt Collier develops an obsession of sorts with the person he and his much more experienced pilot are surveilling; he is haunted by the uncertain intimacy he feels with his target, and refuses to participate in the kill until he knows his victim's name. This tightly constructed short is centrally concerned with the profound moral misgivings that Collier experiences during the run-up to his first kill.



Left Rookie sensor operator Matt Collier emotionally responding to his first kill. *Drone*, dir. Justin S. Lee. **Source** University of Southern California, 2015. **Right** Sensor operator Sue Lawson arguing fiercely with her pilot about the morality of following what appears to be an unjust order. *Drones*, dir. Rick Rosenthal. **Source** Jinga Films, 2013.

Drones, another feature movie from 2013, features two pilots arguing over whether or not it is right to prosecute a particular kill. The pair argue in great detail, and ironically, convince one another: the more experienced pilot is convinced that it is wrong to take the shot, but the rookie sensor operator, who initially raised the doubt, is convinced that they must complete the kill. Though it is in some senses unsophisticated – the pair have a fist fight in the course of the sensor operator's very first operation, which is, frankly, a little silly – *Drones* stages the debate over the military duty to challenge an unjust order fairly effectively. In *Eye in the Sky*, too, the drone operator is very concerned not to kill the little girl in red, to the extent that he insists on his right to have the Collateral Damage Estimate recalculated. It is suggested that he does this in order, he hopes, to avoid having to pull the trigger. In each of these examples, drone personnel wrestle profoundly with the ethics of killing.

Depleted, wrung out: *Unmanned*

Dan Fesperman's *Unmanned* examines both the contrast between martial and domestic identity and the suffering of the drone operator with particular sensitivity. Drone operator Darwin Cole's professional voice, in which he relays orders to his team mates, is also his "bedtime story voice" in which he comforts his children. At the end of his shift, Cole knows, "He will click the remote to open the garage and enter the kitchen with a smile for his wife. Then, while cartoons blare and the neighbor starts his mower, he will eat Saturday pancakes with his children." Later in the novel, Fesperman highlights the vertigo and disorientation that this rapid oscillation between war-life and domesticity causes Cole: "Entry and reentry, with never enough time for proper decompression. A mental case of the bends that had eventually doubled him over in pain."¹⁴⁶

146 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 9, 10, 153.

Cole suffers from alcoholism, and his character trajectory – redemption – is in part developed by his gradual recovery from his dependence on alcohol. More vividly in this instance, he has recurring dreams about a drone strike – a strike that on the opening page of the book he describes as “His kill” – in which two children were killed and another is maimed. Unlike some drone operators we have encountered so far, Cole claims the kill as his own, accepting responsibility, and the maimed girl haunts him throughout the book. “Those images would never disappear,” he reflects, thinking about his view of the innocents that his missile harmed, “or even fade.”

It is not only the worst aspects of the job that get to Cole. Even its most mundane dimensions exact a heavy price. “Anxiety and edginess, the pressure to not fuck up, the long and lonely aftermath when you couldn’t tell anyone what you’d seen, what you’d done, what it felt like.” He feels “depleted, wrung out”; he is exhausted by “that Predator rota that seemed especially designed to deprive you of sleep and sanity”. He also describes his isolation: “It was like he was locked inside a cockpit, with Carol [his wife] banging on the glass. Strapped in for the duration, mute and unreachable, while telling himself the isolation was for security reasons.”¹⁴⁷ *Unmanned* is exemplary of many of the representational trends discussed in this chapter.

In an article on the art of the drone, Alex Danchev writes:

*The drone is pitiless. The operator is not. Drone art has already taught us important lessons. And yet in the final analysis, the focus on the operator is essentially self-regarding, and occasionally self-serving. It may shed light on ‘others’, but it returns, obsessively, to us.*¹⁴⁸

Drone fiction integrates drone operators into the fraternity of military personnel who can be represented as noble warriors by showing their psychological wounds, their distress, their heroism, and their resilience. By making themselves available to psychological damage, drone operators are able to become a part of this authentic military community.

In the process, those targeted by drones are further dehumanized, reduced merely to either targets on a screen or to traumatizing stimuli which put the drone operator’s mental health at risk by dying or being maimed. I will leave the final words in this chapter to Thomas Gregory, who emphasizes the crucial perspective of the drone victim, the targeted person whose suffering is overshadowed by this relentless focus on drone operators:

*Unless we are prepared to confront the embodied experiences of those killed and injured by drones, we will never quite grasp the pain and suffering the victims were forced to endure. Despite all the ink that has been spilt about the legality of targeted killings, we seem to have forgotten the simple fact that drones destroy human beings.*¹⁴⁹

147 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, pp. 3-4; 177, 193-195, 207; 160; 177, 265, 19; 33.

148 Alex Danchev, “Bug Splat: The Art of the Drone.” *International Affairs* 92: 3 (2016), p. 16.

149 Thomas Gregory, “Drones, Targeted Killings, and the Limitations of International Law.” *International Political Sociology* 9: 3 (2015), p. 210.

GENDER AND THE DRONE

Unmanned Operations, Drone Queens, Genderqueer Machines

Part of the anxiety that we see over the 'authenticity' of drone experience is related to gender. A rugged, stoic, and hard masculinity, defined in part by a willingness to expose the physical body to mortal danger, has conventionally been a major part of military identity. For example, the bearded and muscular King Leonidas, Spartan commander during the Battle of Thermopylae, remains a masculine exemplar among Navy SEALs; compared to his physical ferocity, the sedentary and safe nature of drone operations - derided as the 'chair force' or 'desk warfare', as we saw in the previous chapter - inevitably appears inferior.¹⁵⁰ As a consequence, drone fiction very often engages explicitly with matters of gender, aiming in particular to redress the accusation that drone operators are insufficiently masculine.



King Leonidas as portrayed by Gerard Butler in *300*. *300*, dir. Zack Snyder. Source: Legendary Pictures, 2006.

Drone texts also feature a lot more women than is the norm for military fiction, and they are often in more active roles than is the norm. This reflects the gender anxiety that accompanies both drone operations and a modernizing military. Drone pilots - both men and women - are central to the renegotiation of the relationship between military masculinity, bodily experience, and martial identity. This chapter addresses the representation of masculinity and femininity in drone texts, and closes with a discussion of what could be called drone queerness.

150 Mitchell Zuckoff, *13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened in Benghazi* (London: Ebury Press, 2015), p. 71.

Masculine embodiment

Masculinity is a key concern in military fiction, and so it is in drone fiction too. As we have seen, many fictional drone operators experience drone warfare as deprofessionalizing and emasculating. The greater distance from the battlefield that is so central a characteristic of drone operations carries, for many people, pejorative connotations of cowardice and risk aversion. "A hegemonic warrior masculinity is secured not just through the difficult act of killing up close," writes Cara Daggett, "but in doing this while making one's body vulnerable to being killed."¹⁵¹ If drone operators do not do this, drone fiction asks, are they soldiers at all? Are they even *men*?

The closing pages of David Ignatius' *Bloodmoney* articulate this idea very clearly.

*That was the corrosive part: If you killed someone at close range with a knife, at least you knew what it felt like to have blood on your hands. But if you did it from ten thousand feet, looking at a picture on a television screen, you forgot that there were real people down below. It wasn't that the cause was wrong, but that it wasn't an honest fight.*¹⁵²

In *Unmanned*, a character reflects on his disappointment in relation to fighter pilots becoming UAV operators, remarking that "it felt like each of them was a lesser man for it."¹⁵³ Drone killing here, though effective, is safe and clean for the perpetrators, and according to the precepts of military masculinity, this makes drone warfare dishonest and cowardly.

Mike Maden's novels in particular address this concern through their sustained preoccupation with tough, battle-hardened masculinity. Troy Pearce – CEO of a drone company – repeatedly deploys on the ground, often behind enemy lines, demonstrating his masculine credentials such as physical fitness and strength, the willingness to fight and to kill, and the ability to continue fighting whilst enduring terrible pain. Such a representation of masculinity is in keeping with the general tone and character of the genre of military action fiction; it is also interesting that a character who deploys drone systems has his masculinity repeatedly emphasized, as though to remind the reader that he remains a serious warrior despite his use of remote technology. Maden's emphasis on combat chops – in particular on the willingness to coldly and deliberately kill at close quarters – functions to rehabilitate the image of drone technology explicitly in terms of masculinity. The fact that the US uses UAVs, he seems to claim, does not mean that the US military is no longer composed of rough and rugged warfighters willing and able to prevail in conventional warfare too. This can also be seen in the drone novels of Daniel Suarez and Jonathan Maberry, which focus on elite units of hardened warriors fighting off hijacked drone swarms. It is fairly clearly part of the rationale for the title of Fesperman's *Unmanned*, which focuses on hero Cole's military, moral, and masculine redemption – that is, he is psychologically damaged by his role in UAV warfare, and his active physical confrontation of the sinister forces behind his failed mission represents the rehabilitation of his masculinity. In this way, drone warfare is reconciled to conventional notions of military masculinity.

151 Dagget, "Drone Disorientations", p. 365.

152 Ignatius, *Bloodmoney*, pp. 481-482.

153 Fesperman, *Unmanned*, p. 80.

The girlboss military

The military has long been considered an exclusively, constitutively masculine organization. "The military is a highly gendered," writes Moon, "as well as gender-defining, institution. The linkage between masculinity and the military is as old as the institution itself."¹⁵⁴ Drone fiction is not only about men, however. Remote warfare is often represented as a manifestation of a new, utopian, military egalitarianism, which allows women to be full participants in the traditionally masculine world of warfare. In *Eye in the Sky*, *Jack Ryan*, *Drones* and *Good Kill*, drone operators work together in mixed-gender partnerships, and other drone texts feature representations of strong military women and other forms of strong female protagonist. Sometimes they are sexualized, like Sandra Vitonelli in *Sting of the Drone*, Mike Maden's President Myers (who becomes the love interest of protagonist Troy Pearce), or Vera Suarez in *Good Kill*, all of whom are glamorous and conventionally beautiful as well as competent combatants. At other times they are represented as desexualized, such as Colonel Powell in *Eye in the Sky* (played with authoritative gravity by veteran thesp Helen Mirren). At all times, however, their military competence is made comprehensible in relation to a heteronormative beauty ideal. Either they can 'have it all' - be competent *and* sexy - or they are so competent that they require no sexual identity whatever. Gender norms are thereby shored up in the gesture that disrupts them - women can be combatants as long as conventional gender dynamics are maintained.



Colonel Katherine Powell insisting that she needs to strike the house before the terrorists leave. *Eye in the Sky*, dir. Gavin Hood. Source Entertainment One, 2015.

Peter Lee's *Reaper Force* develops the theme of femininity in battle in an interesting direction. Lee dedicates an entire chapter to a pregnant drone operator, pointing out not only that she remains militarily capable despite the physiological demands of pregnancy but that the ISIS fighters she kills would be especially dismayed to know that they had been killed by a woman because of the misogyny of their theology.¹⁵⁵ ISIS fighters believe, he writes, that an honourable death will earn them the eternal company and sexual servitude of seventy two virgins after death, but that if they are killed by a woman then they can expect "no Paradise, no virgins, no priapic eternity", no "frisky afterlife".¹⁵⁶ Comparing an RAF drone operator to the Kurdish YPJ, a Kurdish battalion composed of women who put up some very staunch

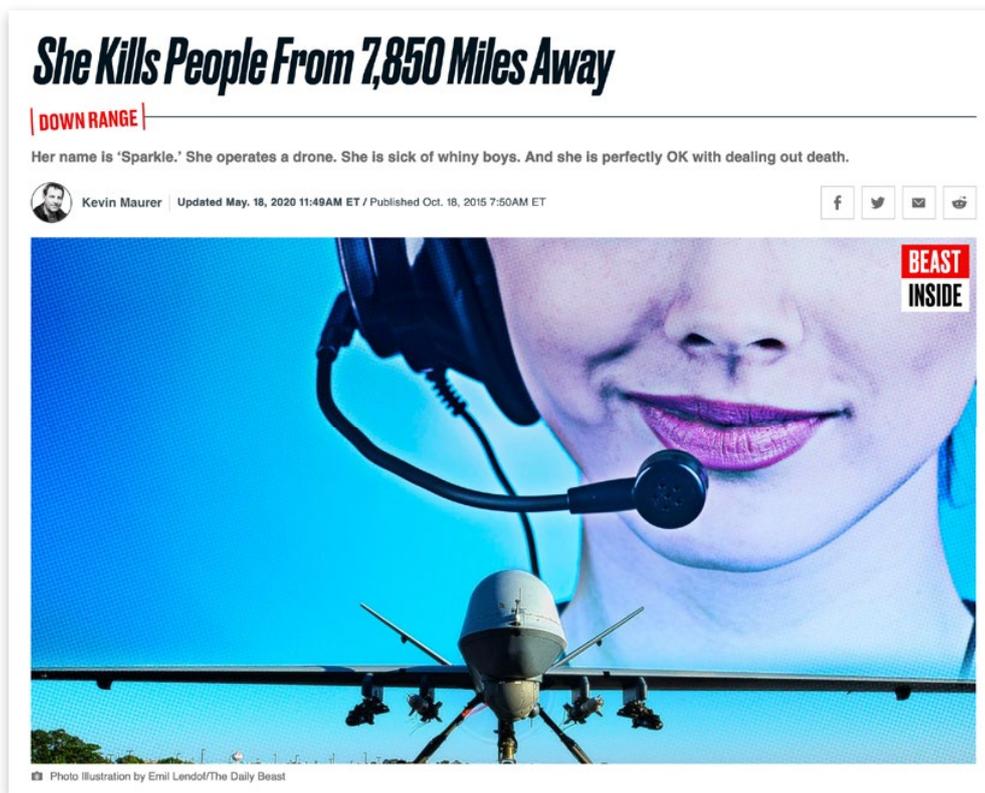
154 Moon, "Drone Warfare and Female Warrior", p. 110.

155 See also McCurley and Maurer, *Hunter Killer*, p. 157.

156 Lee, *Reaper Force*, p. 130.

resistance to ISIS, Lee positions British Reaper pilots as feminist combatants explicitly because of how offensive ISIS are purported to consider the pilot's biological sexual characteristics. Likewise, Kevin Maurer emphasizes this in his journalistic profile of "Sparkle", a female drone operator who earned her call sign by bejewelling her headset.

"I use it to emasculate the enemy in the afterlife," Sparkle said. "Many radical jihadists believe that being killed by a woman means they will not enter heaven. Considering how they treat their women, I'm OK with rubbing salt in the wound."¹⁵⁷



Women here are integrated into military life both for their prowess and their embodied femininity, which are shown as curiously linked. Much as the presence (and laughter) of female guards in war on terror prisons was used expressly to maximize suffering for the prisoners during their abuse and torture, as a 'force multiplier' that would add insult to injury, the femaleness of the drone operator's body is weaponized, pressed into service in order to further humiliate their victims.¹⁵⁸

Drone queerness

Several critics have written that drone operations, by removing male bodies from the battlespace, render such operations 'genderless' or 'queered'. In a notorious (and award-winning) article, Cara Daggett writes that drone technology "cannot be located along traditional gendered maps that orient killing in war."¹⁵⁹ As such, she claims, they disrupt the gendered norms and orientations of conventional military constellations and open up a potential space of queer hope.

157 Kevin Maurer, "She Kills People From 7,850 Miles Away". *The Daily Beast*, 18/10/2015, updated 18/05/2020. Online: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/she-kills-people-from-7850-miles-away>

158 Philip Gourevitch and Errol Morris, *Standard Operating Procedure* (Penguin, 2008), p. 113.

159 Dagget, "Drone Disorientations", p. 364.

Quite what these claims mean is not clear. For one thing, the designation of “military age males” as de facto legitimate targets is a form of gender-based violence: masculinity does not somehow disappear when the means of exerting imperial force are reconfigured, particularly not if gendered characteristics are what mark somebody out as available to lethal force.¹⁶⁰ And even were it true that drones disrupt traditional codes of masculinity, what precisely is gained – analytically or politically – by describing drones as genderqueer bodies? Daggett is right that there is often considerable gender anxiety in drone texts, but to position drones as queer is ridiculous and offensive.¹⁶¹ The fact that any given weapon does not conform to the hypermasculine standards of traditional military gender norms does not render it ‘genderqueer’. For one thing, there are many more ways to be masculine than to be a bearded, muscled Spartan warrior, and for another, genderqueerness is a fundamentally radical political concept, concerned with a rejection of heteronormative, patriarchal gender categories – which includes a rejection of militarism.

In addition, it is not by any means clear that drone operations reject the political or representational coordinates of conventional heterosexual masculinity. “If technology is developed and utilized primarily by men operating within a framework of violent masculinity,” writes Ray Acheson, “their creations will be instilled with that framework of thought, knowledge, language, and interpretation.”¹⁶² “Today the wolf pack hunted,” writes Mark McCurley on the opening page of his memoir – which is named, with a macho flourish, *Hunter Killer* – firmly embedding his writing in the machismo-fuelled tradition of military writing.¹⁶³ Elsewhere, and perhaps more vividly, Erin Corbett notes that some drone operators nickname the Sky Raider the Sky Raper.¹⁶⁴

In *Reaper Force*, Peter Lee dismisses as “Hilarious” the idea that killing with drones is in any way morally or militarily different from other forms of weaponry that maximize the distance between combatants; this includes, presumably, a rejection of the idea that it is less ‘manly’ to use drones than, for example, artillery, crossbows, missile launchers, or, indeed, guns.¹⁶⁵ Later, he is embedded with a British Reaper drone team, and he analyses the emotional responses of the participants in the military action. When the team kill two IS fighters, he praises the stoicism of their response as “the best of British: self-controlled and emotionally repressed”. At the same time, he repeatedly describes himself as “pathetic” because he has an involuntary emotional reaction to watching a drone strike kill two people.¹⁶⁶ The way that Lee loads praise onto emotionlessness and condemns his own affective reactions as contemptible clearly reinscribes values associated with conventional militaristic masculinity, such as emotional continence and the ability to kill without a second thought. In this light, quite how drones enable queer hope is difficult to see.

160 Ray Acheson, Richard Moyes and Thomas Nash, “Sex and Drone Strikes: Gender and Identity in Targeting and Casualty Analysis” (Article 36 and Reaching Critical Will, 2014). Online: <https://www.reachingcriticalwill.org/images/documents/Publications/sex-and-drone-strikes.pdf>

161 Josie Sparrow, “Drones Are Not Queer Bodies: Cara Daggett, Queer Necropolitics, and ‘the Imperialism of Theory.’” *Peach-Tree, Pear-Tree*. 27/03/2018. Online: <https://www.peachtreepartree.com/blog/2018/3/11/drones-are-not-queer-bodies-and-other-sentences-i-cant-believe-i-have-to-write>

162 Ray Acheson, “Gender and Bias: What Does Gender Have to do with Killer Robots?,” *Campaign to Stop Killer Robots: Campaigner’s Kit* (Campaign to Stop Killer Robots, 2019), pp. 19-20. See also Mary Manjikian, “Becoming Unmanned.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16: 1 (2014), p. 52.

163 McCurley and Maurer, *Hunter Killer*, pp. 1, 326.

164 Erin Corbett, “On Nicknaming Predators.” *The Feminist Wire*, 22/06/2015. Online: <https://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/06/on-nicknaming-predators>

165 Lee, *Reaper Force*, p. 36.

166 Lee, *Reaper Force*, pp. 64-66.

CONCLUSION

Death From Above

This study has argued that drone fictions normalize and legitimize drone operations in six major ways. First, they streamline the ethics of killing into an oversimplified justificatory pattern. Second, they position civilian deaths as inevitable and minimize them through the rhetoric of 'collateral damage'. Third, they glorify the technical perfection of drone systems. Fourth, they foreclose criticism of drones by incorporating critical narratives about hijack and blowback into the normalizing system of meaning that structures drone stories. Fifth, they humanize drone operators. Finally, they calm anxieties about the ways in which drones trouble conventional conceptions of gender and reintegrate drones into the heteropatriarchal system of gender norms.

But this normalization does not go unchallenged. There is a range of fiction which explicitly aims to redress the racist dehumanization inherent in the drone system by telling richly humanizing stories from the perspective of the populations targeted by drones. Notable here are novels such as Sinan Antoon's *The Book of Collateral Damage* (2019 [2016]) and Bilal Tanweer's *The Scatter Here is Too Great* (2014 [2013]). Though they do not address drone warfare specifically, both of these novels spend considerable time building up vibrant and beautiful portraits of the worlds and people destroyed by Western bombing, in the process resisting the ways in which Western discourses frequently portray such destruction as inevitable, acceptable, or desirable. Such texts which specifically address drone warfare include Solmaz Sherif's poetry collection *Look* (2016), which articulates a range of complex ideas related to the experience of living in the West while one's homeland is bombed by the Western military; Atef Abu Saif's memoir *The Drone Eats With Me: Diaries From a City Under Fire* (2015), which vividly describes Gazan life under Israeli siege; Omer Fast's art film *5000 Feet is the Best* (2011), which, among other tasks, stages a drone strike from the perspective of an innocent family caught in the blast zone; and Usma Aslam Kahn's novel *Thinner Than Skin* (2018 [2012]), which engages powerfully with Pakistan's history of colonization and the many stereotypes that the country has, unfortunately, attracted. Each of these texts gives a perspective unseen in the majority of the texts I have analysed so far.

Mainstream popular culture does articulate critique of drones, too, though it is much more limited. Satirical American website *The Onion*, for instance, has published a range of articles emphasizing President Obama's close affection for drones. The point of these articles is to remind readers that Obama was,

despite the folksy warmth with which he is remembered in some circles, deeply invested in imperial US violence. Also, as we have seen, many of the texts I have analysed do admit that drones are capable of inflicting horror on the world; most often, however, they do so in the course of a rhetorical pattern which ends at a point of justification, in which the horror is admitted but portrayed as sadly necessary.



President Frank Underwood apologizes to Mr Mahmoud, a survivor of a drone strike; Mahmoud refuses to forgive him. *House of Cards*, S3E4, dir. Tucker Gates. Source Netflix, 2015.

Netflix drama *House of Cards* is interesting and important here, because it shows this rhetorical pattern failing. Defending a drone strike in which an innocent US citizen lost his family and the use of his legs, the repellent President Frank Underwood makes the argument (in season three, episode two) that “Yes, a man was maimed, his family members were killed. But hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives were saved as a result.” In episode four, the Supreme Court accept this position, which Underwood describes as “the emotional argument”, after they are reassured by a spirited defence of the limited role of executive power and the principle of the separation of powers. This argument does not, however, fly with Mr Mahmoud, the sole survivor of the strike. Underwood takes this man’s injury seriously, and invites him to the White House for a personal audience. Mahmoud, however, refuses to accept his apology, and in the face of this man’s suffering and dignity, Frank’s words about ethico-military duty and the saving of life through the exercise of force seem trivial. This is a significant moment. There is, however, the role of grievability to be taken into account here. Underwood meets with Mahmoud and apologizes because he is an innocent US citizen harmed by accident. If *House of Cards* countenances the suffering of non-US citizens at all, it is only indirectly, obliquely, by suggestion.

I will leave the final words to Mark McCurley, a drone memoirist, and poet Solmaz Sharif.

*There was no humanity in it at all. I took no joy in it, neither could I mourn the loss.*¹⁶⁷ Mark McCurley, *Hunter Killer*

*We have learned to sing a child calm in a bomb shelter*¹⁶⁸
Solmaz Sharif, “Drone”

167 McCurley and Maurer, *Hunter Killer*, p. 179.

168 Solmaz Sharif, “Drone”. In: *Look: Poems* (Graywolf Press, 2016), p. 93.

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APPENDIX: LIST OF DRONE TEXTS

Feature film/shorts

- 5000 Feet is the Best*. 2011. Directed by Omer Fast.
- The Drone*. 2019. Directed by Jordan Rubin.
- Drone*. 2015. Directed by Tonje Hessen Schei.
- Drone*. 2015. Directed by Justin S. Lee. <https://vimeo.com/185265101>
- Drone*. 2017. Directed by Jason Bourque.
- Drones*. 2015. Directed by Rick Rosenthal.
- Eye in the Sky*. 2015. Directed by Gavin Hood.
- Good Kill*. 2014. Directed by Andrew Niccol.
- Syriana*. 2005. Directed by Stephen Gaghan.
- Zero Dark Thirty*. 2012. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow.

TV

- 24: Live Another Day*. 2014. DVD. Twentieth Century Fox.
- Homeland: Season Four*. 2014. DVD. Twentieth Century Fox.
- House of Cards: Season Three*. 2015. Netflix.
- Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan: Season One*. 2019. DVD. Amazon Studios.

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Theatre

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DEATH TV

Drone warfare in contemporary popular culture

How does our consumption of popular media affect how we see and understand drone warfare? In this compelling new study, critic Alex Adams examines the ways that drone warfare is represented across popular film, literature, and TV in depth, and argues that popular culture is a central political force that predetermines many of our understandings of what drone warfare is and why it is conducted. From 'just-in-time' justice and the politics of 'collateral damage' to the sympathetic portrayal of UAV operators, *Death TV* shows the ways in which the popular culture we consume accessibly articulates many of the most influential and controversial ideas, themes, and political rhetoric associated with contemporary drone warfare.

Alex Adams is a critical writer living and working in North East England. He writes widely on securitization, torture, and popular culture. He has published two books, *Political Torture in Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2016) and *How to Justify Torture* (Repeater, 2019).

"*Death TV* offers a cogent, lively, and urgent contribution to the cultural study of drones and their centrality to twenty-first-century war-making. Adams skilfully weaves together accessible readings of realist cultural texts including films, novels, and television with an analysis of the far-ranging and deadly consequences of "drone fictions" in an era of permanent war."

Ronak K. Kapadia, author of *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War* (Duke University Press, 2019)

"This radical critique of the popular imagery of drones unpacks a unique variety of cultural products and popular media narratives which articulate the contemporary experience of being watched. A ground-breaking analysis of drone stories, this work offers an expansive critique on drone technologies in popular culture, showing how our consumption of drone narratives makes us part of the surveillance society."

Susan Flynn, co-editor of *Spaces of Surveillance* (2017), *Surveillance, Race, Culture* (2018), and *Surveillance, Architecture and Control* (2019)

"Alex Adams must be one of the most interesting writers/thinkers out there. *Death TV* is a wonderfully clear and well-argued take on the ideology of drone fiction and imperialist tropes."

Repeater Books



Shining a spotlight
on military drones