

DR SMASH'S FILM CLUB, EPISODE TWO (FEAT. CHRIS COLE)
DEATH TV: DRONE WARFARE IN CONTEMPORARY
POPULAR CULTURE



BY Alex Adams **BROADCAST** 19 February 2021

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Ladies and Gentlemen, the aircraft you're looking at is not the future of war. It is the here and fuckin' now. Any time of day or night there are dozens of these things in the sky above our theatres of operation, and most are currently working in the Garden of Eden they call Afghanistan, where they're starting to think it's their new national bird.

Good Kill

Some drone pilots aren't even soldiers. They don't come within a thousand kilometres of the battlefield. They work in their secure cubicles essentially playing a video game. The only difference is, in this video game the victims are real. They come home, to their families, after a long day of murder, and put their children to bed.

Drone

This is not who we are.

Homeland

You must act now. You have two men about to embark on a suicide mission, you have number two, four and five on the President's East Africa

kill list in your sights, and you are putting the whole mission at risk because of one collateral damage issue?

Eye in the Sky

This is not who we are.

Homeland

We have a situation here which could result in massive loss of life in the next ten minutes.

Eye in the Sky

This is not who we are.

Homeland

How can saving someone's life be the wrong choice? Nothing good can happen in this fucked up world that we've made for ourselves.

Homeland

No, this is wrong.

What?

It's an old target.

They didn't tell you?

Tell me what?

That target was misidentified.

What – Misidentified? You mean I killed an innocent man.

You just did what you were ordered to do. It's not your fault.

Then whose fault is it?

Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan

This is not who we are.

Homeland

Why do we wear a flight suit, sir?

Good Kill

Hello again everyone, and welcome back to Dr Smash's Film Club. My name is Alex Adams, and in this Repeater Radio show I talk about movies, politics, and representation. My writing more broadly is about securitization, torture, surveillance and other forms of imperial state violence as they are represented in contemporary popular culture. Today I want to talk to you about *Death TV*, which is a new study that I'm publishing this month through the UK-based NGO [Drone Wars UK](#).

The full title is *Death TV: Drone Warfare in Contemporary Popular Culture*, and it is a longform essay which will soon be free to download online from the Drone Wars website. It 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 humanization of UAV operators, *Death TV* shows the ways in which films such as *Eye in the Sky* (2015), *Good Kill* (2014) and *Drone* (2017), TV series such as *24*, *Homeland*, and *Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan*, along with novels by Mike Maden, Richard A.

Clarke, Dan Fesperman, and Jonathan Maberry, articulate many of the most influential and controversial ideas, themes, and justificatory political rhetorics associated with contemporary drone warfare. In this episode of *Dr Smash's Film Club*, I'm going to give you a brief, and hopefully interesting, overview of the themes and arguments of *Death TV*.

Let's get stuck in.

The broad argument that I make in *Death TV* is that pop culture representations of drone warfare 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. Though I don't make the reductive claim that pop culture is simply indoctrinatory propaganda, it is true that pop culture, broadly understood, is one of the ways that consensus is built around sensitive topics and one of the political forces which helps common sense positions crystallize around contentious ideas. A great deal of left-wing thought, from Gramsci onwards, has argued that the term 'common sense' refers to the habits of thought in which ideology resides when it has become so naturalized that its status as ideology is itself invisible. Mark Fisher writes in *Capitalist Realism* (2009) that "an ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact".¹

Part of the reason why hegemonic ideas seem obvious, natural, and 'common sense' is that they are so widespread and conspicuous that their status as political discourses is hidden in their omnipresence, the consistent repetition which makes them seem normal, obvious, and beyond question. Militaristic ideas, which are the focus of my writing, are particularly ingrained into the ordinary habits of perception that structure life in martial societies such as the US and UK.

Death TV looks at a range of drone fictions and unpicks six major ideas that are common to most of them, which I will go into over the course of this episode. The effect of these six ideas, though, when they are taken as a whole, is that drone fictions make drone strikes normal, part of the everyday common sense that we accept as the ordinary, inevitable and objective parameters of our lives.

In other words, military drones are shown as a value-neutral weapon like any other, virtuous in the hands of heroes and nefarious in the hands of villains. From this 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.

Importantly, this aesthetic normalization has the effect of downplaying the many urgent controversies raised by drone warfare. By presenting drones as legitimate weapons, by presenting drone personnel as relatable figures, and by dehumanizing and demonizing the human targets of drone strikes, hegemonic drone fictions not only *normalize* drone operations: they actively *facilitate* drone operations.

People are just not comfortable with our using drones for targeted assassinations.

¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009), p. 16.

I'm thinking I don't blame them. I'm uncomfortable with the drones also.
The ugly truth is, what we're doing is working.
24: Live Another Day

First of all, let's look at how drone fictions streamline the complex ethics of killing in war 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. That is, they can be shown to reduce risk and to make warfare not only materially safer but morally better; they are attempts to confirm the optimistic claim, voiced by memoirist Matt Martin, that drones are "truly in the business of saving American lives".²

In terms of the legitimate 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 consistently shown as straightforwardly legitimate against America's enemies, however they are defined, and 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: situations are routinely framed as though a lethal missile strike is a clearly legitimate act.

Counterterrorism fiction very often structures its stories around ticking bombs, urgent split-second decisions, and tragic sacrifices, all of which require the heroes to use violence in order to solve problems. Drone stories modify this formula only slightly. Terrorist attacks, geopolitical catastrophes, and imminent murders are averted in the nick of time by drone technologies rather than by torture, murder, or surveillance.

Novelist Mike Maden is often the boldest when it comes to such defences of drone warfare. In his 2016 novel *Drone Threat*, 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, or thousands killed and wounded by your adversary."³ 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.

I am authorized to kill US citizens on the battlefield you motherfucker.
Don't think I can't do whatever is required, don't think that I won't.
Homeland

Drone stories very often position civilian deaths as tragic yet inevitable. The second chapter of *Death TV*, "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 they also insist that the good achieved by the drone program outweighs any negative impacts.

² Matt J Martin and Charles W. Sasser, *Predator: The Remote-Control Air War Over Iraq and Afghanistan: A Pilot's Story* (Zenith, 2010), p. 310.

³ Mike Maden, *Drone Threat* (Penguin, 2016), p. 114.

Drone operator Matt Martin writes in his memoir *Predator* (2010) that in his experience “the US military went to superhuman lengths to avoid civilian casualties.”⁴ In his sustained examination of collateral damage, *Bugsplat* (2018) however, academic 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ Nonetheless, drone fiction tends to obscure this by dramatizing stories in which morally righteous military actors cause civilian death rarely, accidentally, or against their will.

To speak in broader terms for a moment, one of the most obvious explanations for the acceptability of civilian death by drone is, simply, imperial 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.”⁷ 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.

There is also an important differential in what many scholars, following Judith Butler, refer to as ‘grievability’.⁸ 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. That is, the racist dehumanization of the people that drone operators view through their viewfinders is central to the aesthetic and intellectual economy of drone fiction. By sharing this perspective, we the audience are encouraged to become complicit in this dehumanization.

⁴ Martin and Sasser, *Predator*, p. 11.

⁵ Bruce Cronin, *Bugsplat: The Politics of Collateral Damage in Western Armed Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 14.

⁶ M G E Kelly, *Biopolitical Imperialism* (Zero Books, 2014), p. 108.

⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), p. 71.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009)

Drone texts are replete with the use of dehumanizing language. In his memoir *Predator*, for example, drone operator Matt J. Martin describes his human targets as – uh, here’s a huge list – “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 human targets and to legitimize his killing them. You don’t have to read between the lines or infer this when reading his memoir: “I found it easier and easier”, he writes, “to justify bombing barbarians like these back to the hell that had spawned them”.⁹

The worldview of a great deal of drone fiction is likewise constitutively racist. Mike Maden’s novels provide us with particularly bombastic examples, as sympathetic characters casually remark 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, he writes: “political correctness will never allow us to contain the Islamic threat. Extermination is the only option.”¹⁰ When reading stuff like this, it’s difficult to deny that Western racism is a major factor in enabling us to feel comfortable with destroying people with drone strikes.

In summary, 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 unimportant – most importantly, though, collateral damage is shown as being nobody’s fault.

Rifle rifle rifle, weapon away – time of flight, fifty seconds.
Eye in the Sky

In chapter three, “Technophilia”, *Death TV* 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. 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.

Drone films consistently show drone camera imagery appearing in cinematic, high definition, crystal clear colour. There is no delay, no visual distortion, no ambiguity. The images are incredibly clear and reliable, and are transmitted around the world with no lag, latency, or loss. Crucially, at no point are the ethics of surveillance considered, apart from one startling moment in Mike Maden’s novel *Drone Threat* in which Maden’s hero Troy Pearce dismisses civil liberties objections to total surveillance as liberal PC bullshit.¹¹

⁹ Martin and Sasser, *Predator*, pp. 1, 39, 49, 51, 108, 129, 198, 251; 105, 208; 62, 72.

¹⁰ Maden, *Drone Threat*, pp. 229, 264, 330.

¹¹ Maden, *Drone Threat*, p. 147. See also pp. 148-153.

Weapons, too, are shown as operating with incredible precision. In the novel *Collateral Damage*, drone pilot Turk fires three weapons, and “All three shots were bull’s-eyes; the projectiles hit their targets with less than .0003 percent deviation.”¹² Missiles never miss, in drone stories.

James Dawes, in his account of the psychological and emotional origins of genocide *Evil Men* (2013) discusses the importance of “sanitizing language that allows us to name injury without imagining it”.¹³ The technical, functional vocabulary in which drone weaponry is discussed performs just such a purpose. When we read 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. This technocratic language functions to obscure, sanitize, and justify violence.

What you witnessed today with your coffee and biscuits is terrible. What these men would have done would have been even more terrible. Never tell a soldier that he does not know the cost of war.

Eye in the Sky

Astute listeners will have noticed that 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 unfailingly precise and flawlessly intelligent continuously accidentally kill innocent people? The fourth chapter of *Death TV*, “Hijack and Blowback”, reconciles this tension by exploring the ways in which drones are represented as vulnerable to secret manipulations.

The espionage genre, of which many drone fictions are a part, is known for convoluted 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 truly understand. Drone fictions foreclose more substantive criticism of drones by incorporating critical narratives about hijack and blowback into their structure of meaning.

Many drone texts 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. 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. Drone stories repeatedly 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 conspiracist reframing serves to demonstrate that there are, in fact, no accidents; there are only attacks we don’t fully understand committed by forces beyond our sight.

There is also the question of blowback. This term 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.

¹² Dale Brown and Jim DeFelice, *Collateral Damage* (Harper, 2012), p. 9.

¹³ James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 74.

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 the 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.

What these narratives of blowback and radicalization are 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, Palestine, and 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 representations and narratives claim – rather, it is simply drone strikes that have gone a bit too far.

Was that a war crime, sir?

Shut the fuck up, Suarez.

No wonder they hate us.

They always hated us. We’re always gonna be the great Satan because we got Hustler and Hooters and we let women drive and go to school, and they’re not gonna stop hating us until the savages have sharia law everywhere on the goddamn planet.

Look around you. This is a military base, it’s what we do. We’re fighting a war and we’re winning it. They bomb New York lately? We’re saving American lives.

Good Kill

The fifth chapter of *Death TV*, “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 may hold about drone pilots as ‘desk warriors’ and to show that they are ‘real’ warfighters, rather than the ‘chair force’, who actually have authentic and meaningful military experience.

Humanizing drone operators is not necessarily ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ *per se*. Drone warfare has been shown to have especially traumatizing effects on UAV operators. My ethical concern here, however, 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.

This humanization is a complex process, and there are two elements that I’d like to emphasize here. Firstly, 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.

Secondly, 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 at work and domestic life at home. “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.”¹⁴ 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 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, or worse, simply to traumatizing stimuli who endanger drone pilots’ mental health through their evisceration. 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.

Well, whatever... whatever it was they were trying to do, the US government does not fire indiscriminately. Perhaps the CIA has a different definition of indiscriminate.
Drone

Finally, 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.

Masculinity is, of course, a key concern in military fiction. As we have seen, many fictional drone operators experience drone warfare as deprofessionalizing or emasculating. “A hegemonic warrior masculinity is secured not just through the difficult act of killing up close,” writes Cara Daggett, in a notorious essay on drone queerness, “but in doing this while making one’s body vulnerable to being killed,” she says.¹⁵ If drone operators do not do this, drone fiction asks, are they soldiers at all? Are they even *men*?

¹⁴ Daniel Suarez, *Kill Decision* (Penguin, 2016 [2012]), p. 4.

¹⁵ Cara Daggett, “Drone Disorientations: How ‘Unmanned’ Weapons Queer the Experience of Killing in War.” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17:3 (2015), p. 365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1075317>

Mike Maden's novels, again, reconcile this tension by showing his central figure, Troy Pierce, as a rugged and brutal killer on the battlefield, who has no problem cruelly killing with his bare hands, as though to remind the reader that he remains a serious warrior despite his use of remote technology. Like other writers in this genre, Maden's emphasis on combat chops 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 warfighters willing and able to prevail in conventional warfare too.

Femininity is also emphasized a great deal in drone fiction. 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 combat. Interestingly, there is often an emphasis laid on how offensive ISIS fighters find the idea of female soldiers. Women here are integrated into military life both for their prowess and for their embodied femininity, which are shown as curiously linked. Female bodies are conceptualized as a kind of 'force multiplier' that adds insult to injury. The femaleness of the drone operator's body is weaponized, pressed into service in order to further humiliate their victims.

This final chapter also addresses the idea that drones are somehow genderqueer bodies. I don't have enough time to go into this claim fully here, but in summary, I reject it: the idea that militaristic masculinity disappears when the means of exerting imperial violence are reconfigured just isn't tenable, for me. It is not by any means clear that drone operations reject the political or representational coordinates of conventional heterosexual masculinity. Ray Acheson writes that "If technology is developed and utilized primarily by men operating within a framework of violent masculinity, their creations will be instilled with that framework of thought, knowledge, language, and interpretation."¹⁶ In this light, quite how drones enable queer hope is difficult to see.

So, in summary, drone fiction articulates a broad complex of interacting ideas and discourses that function to normalize and politically facilitate remote warfare. This does not, of course, take place unchallenged. There are loads of excellent anti-drone artworks out there. What *Death TV* attempts is an anatomy of the justification of drone warfare.

To close out the episode, I'd like to include a short conversation I had with Chris Cole, Director of Drone Wars UK, about *Death TV*.

AA: So yeah, I mean I guess if you're happy to just kick off. I guess just for people who don't know who Drone Wars are, could you give us a little summary of who Drone Wars are and what your mission is, I guess?

CC: Well Drone Wars was set up in 2010, really, to scrutinize, to investigate the then-growing use of drones, and it continues to grow now but it was a lot more obscure back in 2009, 2010 when we started investigating this. So our mission really is to scrutinize the use of drones and highlight really the impact that this technology has. We focus in particular on the British use of drones, but when we started there were only really three nations using drones, the US, Israel and then the UK, but

¹⁶ Ray Acheson, "[Gender and Bias: What Does Gender Have to do with Killer Robots?](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.746429)", *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. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2012.746429>

that's hugely expanded now. But we continue to focus and monitor the British use of drones and talk about the ethical issues associated with drones, the way that they are lowering the threshold for the use of force, the way that they're transferring the cost of warfare from combatants really onto the shoulders of civilians, and the way that they've vastly expanded what's now called targeted killing. So that's our purpose, that's our mission, yeah.

AA: Yeah, excellent, thank you, yeah. I mean, before I started recording, we were talking about a [new piece of research that you've published today](#). Do you want to give us a little overview of that, because that was really interesting.

CC: Yeah, well, drones are now moving very much from the battlefield, the military space into domestic civilian space. And we've begun to see that over the last two or three years, there are two issues in particular to talk about. One I guess is civil liberties and privacy, and the second is safety, because these systems are still far from mature, and crash an awful lot. But we undertook a Freedom of Investigation [sic] survey of all the regional police forces in the UK, there's 43 of them, asking about their use of drones to monitor political protests. And many of them refused to answer, or said that they weren't using them in that way, but a number of them have responded saying that yes, they have been using them to monitor political protests, including Extinction Rebellion, HS2, marches and protests including animal rights protests, one far right gathering, and about a dozen Black Lives Matter protests.

And we thought that was very significant, the use of drones to monitor political protest, there's been no discussion, there's no option for the public to kind of affirm this, there's no consent, if you like, and it's very unclear what the rules are. The responses that we had from the police forces show very clearly that there was very low understanding of the public's rights to access information, their data really that is being captured in this way. So we're at the start of this really, we're at the beginning of this journey because the UK government is very much wanting now to open UK airspace at the behest of large corporations to these systems, to large drones, drones that fly beyond line of sight. Currently you're only allowed to fly drones here in the UK – small drones which the operator can see, but that's a very big limitation on the use of drones. For safety reasons they're not allowed to fly beyond line of sight, but the government is very much wanting to liberalize the airspace regulations and allow drones – large drones – to fly. And as I say we think there are big concerns about this. And at the same time that we've done this survey of police forces we've also conducted opinion polling, and the polls show that the public are very much concerned both for safety reasons and for privacy reasons about the use of drones – and nuisance reasons, really, as well.

AA: Yeah, yeah, that's really interesting stuff. I think one of the reasons I was interested in working with you guys and trying to put *Death TV* together was because as well as being an organization who's interested in investigating things, you're very much kind of... almost got kind of an activist thrust to your work where you're very kind of concerned about getting things right out there and letting people know exactly what's happening. And, I mean, I think one of my frustrations – I think I've talked to you about this before, about, like, the kind of publishing I've done before with academic publishing, is that it just takes absolutely forever to come out and then there's all the barriers to people reading it. So I was really pleased to be able to have the opportunity to work with you guys and then to get this out relatively quickly and hopefully – hopefully to have a fairly wide audience but also for it to be free and for it to be accessible. I think that's really important at the moment –

CC: Absolutely.

AA: – and particularly with such a – particularly with such an important issue but also with just, I guess, kind of more academic materials generally, it's just –

CC: Well –

AA: Yeah I mean, oh, yeah, sorry.

CC: Well I was gonna say, it's nice of you to say that we're researchers who do activist-y things, because actually we are activists –

AA: Yeah, yeah.

CC: We try to be activists who do research, so it's –

AA: Yeah.

CC: And that's why we reach out to you and other people who are academics or have come from an academic, the academic arena I suppose, because I think it's very important that there is a kind of overlap between –

AA: Absolutely.

CC: – activists and civil society groups and academia. Quite often in my experience that's very hard, it's very hard for us, so we very much welcome people like yourselves who are willing to engage civil society and activists in a kind of rigorous and very well-researched way.

AA: Yeah, thank you, I mean I think one of the things that has always – I mean over the course of my academic career it's been a bit of a frustration, that I'm researching torture in the war on terror, you know, and then publishing through Routledge where the book's ninety pounds. It's just it feels, feels like there's a real contradiction there, certainly ethically speaking, that, like, you know, I've done all this research and I feel like I've tried to say something important, but then the only people who can access it are people with university library clearances and things, you know.

So thank you very much for that. So I guess my next question is – I know that you're very, you've got a very holistic approach to researching drones, but what in particular was your interest in popular culture and popular representations of drones and drone warfare?

CC: Well, I mean I think it is as you say in the study, Alex, that most people understand drones and get a knowledge and an understanding of what's happening in regard to drones, and particularly in regard to drone warfare, through popular culture, not through academic reports as we talked about or you know military journals, because they're very hard to access and most people don't have the time and the inclination to look at that stuff. But people do watch TV, films, they do engage in games, so it's right that how drones are being portrayed in those ways, in popular culture, as you say, is looked at, investigated, and challenged, I think. And we as an organization very much want to encourage people to think about – and they *do* think about, and they *are* cynical about – how

popular culture, films, et cetera shows drone warfare, but they don't necessarily have the language and understanding of how to challenge that and how to critique that. So that's why this new report *Death TVI* think is very important and will be very helpful in helping people to critique how drone warfare is viewed.

AA: Awesome, yeah. That's how I would frame what I've tried to do, is making those kind of, I guess, critical tools kind of accessible to people.

CC: Yeah.

AA: Cos I did try to, as I was writing it, I tried to avoid – I'm sure there's still some jargon in there – but I tried to avoid a lot of the habits that I'd learned over the course of my academic writing career, of making, you know, really long sentences, lots of footnotes, and –

CC: Yeah.

AA: – a lot of the things that can make academic writing a barrier. So I tried to avoid that and make it direct and accessible. Because there's no reason that quote unquote ordinary people can't engage with these critical tools to see through popular cultural political representations.

CC: But it's also actively used, isn't it, as we know. We know that the military, the Pentagon, the MoD, actively goes and tries to engage with films and TV to get their point of view across because they know that's how they can persuade people, I suppose, to be on their side.

AA: Yeah. There's a great example in relation to torture, which was *Zero Dark Thirty*. I mean, that was the film about the assassination of Osama bin Laden and they had CIA people consulting on the script in order to make sure that that official narrative of EITs or Enhanced Interrogation Techniques – which is obviously torture – that their narrative of that being effective came through in a really compelling, very high cinema, beautiful, accessible, credible cultural artefact. So yeah, I mean, it's –

CC: But it's like the same with *Eye in the Sky*, Alex, isn't it –

AA: Yeah –

CC: where people see, 'well, that's not pro-drone, they're critical about drone strikes', and people said that about *Zero Dark Thirty*, 'well it's, it's critical.' But you have to have the understanding, don't you, and the –

AA: Mm hmm.

CC: - to see through those very light critiques to see that the main narrative thrust is in support of these systems.

AA: No absolutely, cos one of the things that's interesting and that I tried to get across I think in several of the chapters was the idea that a limited kind of critique actually is a route to more, kind of, general support. So it's saying, 'well, y'know, this torture was really terrible, and isn't it sad that we had to kill the little girl, but look what we got in the long term, it achieved these results, it

stopped this attack, it killed Osama bin Laden.’ So there’s this thing of acknowledging that something is terrible, but then using that acknowledgment as one of the steps in a sequence that then provides this ultimate kind of justificatory effect.

CC: Exactly, it’s saying that ‘well really we have no choice, it’s terrible, isn’t it, that we have to torture people or that we have to kill little girls, but what choice do we have?’ You know, and the audience nods along, ‘yeah of course we don’t have any choice’, but the reality of course is we absolutely bloody do have a choice.

AA: Yeah.

CC: Yeah.

AA: No, a hundred per cent, no I think that’s erm, that’s a really good example. I mean that was the first kind of drone text that kind of switched me on to thinking that there were parallels in the representation of drones and the representations of torture that I’d already looked at, and I thought ‘hold on, there’s very similar stuff going on here’. And then I started to think about it more and I saw that there were some things that were unique to drone stories, but then that also overlapped with other kinds of military fiction. And then that kind of gave me the blueprint to start thinking about how to write *Death TV*, I think.

CC: Yes, yeah. But there’s also parallels, you know, IRL as my son tells me to call it, in real life.

AA: Yeah.

CC: You know, Guantanamo was a problem, you know, torture was a problem for the military because you know of the wider critique, so they moved on to drone strikes in order to prevent, you know, incarcerating people, so there are you know multiple and overlapping links to this work.

AA: Yeah, yeah, I mean, one of the things that always fires off in the back of my brain when I think about this is this clip that I saw of, I think it was Glenn Beck, who’s one of those, you know, shock jock types from Fox News. And basically he had a guest on and they were talking about, you know, how torture’s terrible and you shouldn’t put people in dungeons and all this stuff, and he says ‘well, why not just kill everyone on the battlefield then? If we’re not allowed to torture people, why don’t we just kill everyone?’ And you know, that kind of flippant, grotesque expression of it isn’t actually that far from, as you were saying, what really –

CC: Happens.

AA: – is the thinking behind the drone program, you know, it’s a solution to the problems of detention which is just to kill everyone on the ground, like that’s just nightmareish I think.

CC: Yeah. My friend had this conversation with military officials who were talking about an insurgent who – there wasn’t enough evidence to hold him in prison in Afghanistan, and they had the debate about how far away from the prison they would let him get before they killed him in a drone strike. Because they felt there was enough evidence to kill him in a drone strike but not enough to hold him –

AA: Yeah.

CC: – in a court.

AA: It doesn't reach the threshold of a legitimate prosecution, but it reaches a different threshold which is in some ways much more permissive but also much more final.

CC: Yeah.

AA: Yeah. No, that's terrible. Good grief. Yeah. No okay, so erm, I think – Thank you very much for talking about this kind of thing. I think the last thing I wanted to ask just as a, I guess a sort of 'And Finally' –

CC: Yeah.

AA: – would be, do you have a recommendation of a drone text, a novel or a film or something like that you would actually recommend that does, that does get into it in an interesting way? I mean it's okay for you to say no, as well, because I know that there's so many of them that are terrible. But do you have anything that really made you think, I mean it could be like a high art piece, or...

CC: Sure.

AA: Yeah.

CC: Yeah. I mean the play *Grounded*, you will remember the author of it, Alex?

AA: Er, George Brant, I think.

CC: That's it, yeah. I thought that was very interesting. I went into that kind of not sure how it would go, and it opened up lots of thinking, not just for myself as a critique of drones but you could tell the audience all [unclear]. So I felt that was a very good – although all these things can be critiqued, of course, I thought that was an interesting piece.

AA: Okay, cool, yeah, thank you, that's a – that's a great recommendation because I do talk about that a little bit in, in *Death TV* in terms of the drone pilot. That is one of the more interesting more sophisticated representations of what it must be like to be engaged in that kind of stuff, because it does have an acknowledgement that she – that she feels cool and sexy when she gets to pull the trigger, but then that she also feels very kind of lost and confused. And the climax of that is very powerful as well, isn't it, when she becomes confused about whether the target she's looking at is actually her child, or...

CC: Yeah.

AA: Yeah, so it's very... yeah, I remember that being a very powerful... I haven't seen it, did you see it? I've only read it.

CC: Yeah, I've seen it a couple of times.

AA: Wow, okay.

CC: It's very good, yeah.

AA: Okay, excellent. I think that's a really good way to kind of close out this episode on *Death TV*, so thank you, yeah.

CC: Well, you're very welcome, Alex, and thank you for your work. We really do appreciate working with you, and look forward to working together in the future.

AA: Yeah, absolutely, that'd be great.

So this concludes the second episode of Dr Smash's Film Club. Thank you very much for listening, and thanks also to the Repeater Radio crew and indeed to Chris from Drone Wars UK. Thanks should also go to my little dog Roo for scampering around audibly while I was talking to Chris, and for only woofing once during the interview and thereby not giving me too heavy an editing job.

Death TV will be available online soon. Please check it out once it is available. And as ever, please check out my website atadamswriting.com and my music website milkandmedicine.bandcamp.com. I will see you next month for more Dr Smash's Film Club!