Death TV: Drone Warfare in Contemporary Popular Culture

*by **Alex Adams**, published on **Global Research**, March 10, 2021*

For those of us who have no direct experience of drone warfare, popular culture is one of the major ways that we come to understand what is at stake in UAV operations. Movies, novels, TV and other cultural forms can inform our ideas about drone warfare just as much as, if not sometimes more than, traditional news media or academic/NGO reports.

Death TV is a new study that looks in depth at how popular culture informs public understanding of the ethics, politics, and morality of drone operations. It looks at a wide range of popular drone fictions, including Hollywood movies such as *Eye in the Sky* and *Good Kill*, prestige 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. *Death TV* looks at these cultural products and gets inside the way they work. It identifies six main themes that can be found across many of them, and examines the ways that they inform and shape the drone debate.

In broad terms, ***Death TV*** argues that popular cultural representations often have the effect of normalizing and justifying drone warfare. 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. Importantly, they also 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.

In the first episode of *24: Live Another Day* (2014), fictional US President Heller bluntly responds to criticisms of the drone program by remarking that "I'm uncomfortable with the drones also. The ugly truth is, what we're doing is working." Statements like this, when repeated often enough with an appropriate dramatic gravity, can feel true.

Just In Time

First of all, like many forms of military fiction, drone fiction engages repeatedly with the ethics of killing in war. The opening chapter of my study, *"Just in Time",* shows that very often, films like *Eye in the Sky* and novels like Richard A Clarke's *Sting of the Drone* streamline the ethics of killing into clear yet problematically oversimplified stories that show killing by drone strike as a routinely legitimate way of exerting military force. These stories often take familiar forms, articulating ideas like 'the ends justify the means', or showing that drone strikes can 'avert catastrophe in the nick of time'. Though it is sad, these dramas say, and though tragic choices need to be made, drone warfare is an effective way of achieving necessary and legitimate military goals. Drone fictions repeatedly show drones as an effective military technology that can do good in the world.

Collateral Damage

Drone stories very often position civilian deaths as a tragic yet inevitable aspect of drone warfare. The second chapter of *Death TV*, *"Collateral Damage"*, explores how drone fictions address this important and 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. There are many drone novels, for example, in which characters that we are encouraged to admire or agree with dismiss the deaths of innocent people in drone strikes as unfortunate but necessary, or worth it if they can stop the villains. Sometimes these dismissals are

grimly glib and racist, demonstrating the way that people living under the gaze of the drone are dehumanized in order to facilitate military drone operations. If the targets of drone operations are not considered human, it is easier both for the pilots to pull the trigger and for us to consider it justified. This aspect of drone fiction is one of its most contentious.

Technophilia

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.

Drone feed imagery, which in reality is sometimes so unclear that pilots cannot distinguish between objects and people, is routinely shown in drone films as being unimpeachably unambiguous, as crystal-clear, as high-definition, and as broadcast around the world with no lag, latency, or loss.

Drone weapons, too, are shown as being unfailingly accurate — always hitting the bull's eye without deviation — and even, in one extraordinary passage from the 2012 novel *Collateral Damage*, as feeling 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*." Drone weapons are such a technological miracle, in these fictions, that not even their victims suffer.

Hijack and Blowback

But there is, of course, a colossal contradiction between the arguments of chapters two and three. 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 *Death TV*, "*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 — notably Dan Fesperman's novel *Unmanned* and the fourth season of *Homeland*, in which attacks that seem at first glance to be tragic accidents are laboriously explained as the deliberate results of labyrinthine conspiracies — foreclose more substantive criticism of drones by incorporating critical narratives about hijack and blowback into their structure of meaning.

Humanisation

Chapter five of *Death TV*, "*Humanisation*", 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' or the 'chair force' and to show that they are 'real' war-fighters with authentic military experience. Drone operators repeatedly suffer doubt, regret, and reluctance in drone fiction, as they struggle to reconcile the experience of warfighting at work and domestic life at home. This has the effect of foregrounding the inner experience of drone operators and allowing us to sympathetically identify with them, to understand that they are not just playing a video game but engaging in life-or-death decisions. This focus on drone pilots, though, further distances us from the lives and feelings of the people watched and targeted by the drone.

Gender and the Drone

Finally, chapter six, "*Gender and the Drone*", explores how drone fictions address widespread anxieties about how drone warfare troubles conventional conceptions of gender. Many writers and filmmakers address the preconception that drone warfare makes soldiers less manly or less tough – and they show that this is not true, by emphasizing the battle-hardened masculinity of many drone operator characters who remain tough and manly despite their use of UAVs. Drone warfare is also shown as a newly egalitarian form of warfighting, a method of killing that enables women to be combatants on an equal footing to men. In this way, 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. There are, of course, plenty of artworks and pieces of writing that challenge the justification of drone warfare. *Death TV* draws a conceptual anatomy of the way that popular culture justifies military violence.

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