

# Technological Terror, Killer Robots, and Black Mirror's 'Metalhead'

Written by Raluca Csernatonî

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RALUCA CSERNATONI, APR 13 2018

The spectre of sentient 'killer robots' has long haunted the imaginaries of dystopic popular culture, from famous cinematic renderings such as the 'Terminator' series killer robots, Isaac Asimov's 'I, Robot', the artificial humans in the Swedish drama adaptation '*Äkta Människor*', to the cybernetic world of Cylons in 'Battlestar Galactica'. Such fictional renderings have in common fundamental questions about what it means to be human and what destructive consequences arise out of the unchecked scientific progress of advanced technologies, the near extinction of humanity being one of them.

Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems (LAWS) or Lethal Autonomous Robots (LAR) have been heralded as the third revolution in warfare after the invention of gunpowder and nuclear weapons. They should not be easily dismissed as pure figments of science fiction imagination, as recent game-changing advances in both the fields of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics have clearly beckoned their impending immanence. The prospects of real-world developments in emerging technologies such as autonomous 'killer robots' without meaningful human oversight have sobering effects and collide with the limits of human ethics, war conventions, and geopolitics. They are endowed with the potential to ultimately redesign organised violence and reshape war ontologies to fit into the brave new world they will generate. In the words of Peter Singer (2010), humanity has had over 5,000 years a monopoly over warfighting, but that monopoly has ended.

### The Robot Dog in Black Mirror's 'Metalhead'

'Metalhead', the fifth episode of Black Mirror's season four, written by Charlie Brooker and directed by David Slade, could be interpreted as yet another cinematic dystopic ode to *The Machine*, embodied in the faceless technology of the unrelenting robot drone chasing Bella, Maxine Peake's main character, across a desolate black-and-white and nondescript landscape. The episode portrays a neo-noir type of robot nightmare in which the 'killer robot' persistently pursues the protagonist with the callous efficiency of cutting-edge military hardware. However, what is distinctive about 'Metalhead' is that it tells a more compelling story about humanity than the machine itself. At first glance, the episode might find resonance with the familiar science fiction and flashy scenarios typically trotted out by Hollywood, but 'Metalhead' is actually unique in its monochrome simplicity, low-budget aesthetic and unadorned narrative.

What is distilled by the episode is a fundamentally human feeling, that of visceral terror. Acts of terror are nothing new, as Hannah Arendt's work (1973) reminds us, but there is something uncanny and unnatural in the unrelenting pursuit and onslaught in 'Metalhead'. The nature of the threat, the doglike robot, conveys the alarming possibility of a more than likely near future where humanity is under existential threat. Recent technological advancements made by leading American engineering and robotics design company Boston Dynamics and their latest Spot Mini robots are already heralding a brave new world.

The prevalent theme is that of dread, an all-too-human sentiment that the central character faces at every step of her survival saga and during her nerve-bludgeoning resistance against the unyielding technological violence of the dog-like drone. We do not know whether the hunter killer robot is remotely controlled, semi-autonomous, or completely autonomous, and it is uncertain which of these cases is more horrifying. The not-knowing, the guessing, and the

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inferring actually terrify and dismay the most, epitomizing the very essence of technological terror.

## The Tyranny of Technological Progress

What can be inferred is that the survival of humanity is at stake, and this generalized feeling of panic masterfully connects with the current technophobic stances that the dystopia is already with us. Herein lies the effectiveness of the episode's cinematic spectacle and its grainy black and white minimalism, enhancing the feeling of pitiless technological tyranny and the utter helplessness of humanity in the face of technological progress. Terror is the leitmotif of the plot, the acute sense of dismay that looms in the background and confirms our suspicions and anxieties about runaway technological progress and the nightmare-inducing technological artefacts such as hunter-killer drones.

'Metalhead' finds striking resonance with the current arms race in both autonomous robotics and AI. The Predators and Reapers of today, already deployed in combat situations, incarnate the technological fetishism surrounding new security technologies, heralded by the military as silver bullets or panacea for solving security and defence problems. The robot dog in 'Metalhead', reminiscent of the recent disturbing videos of the Boston Dynamics robots, takes its rightful place in the long line of existing deadly devices that constitute contemporary military power.

Drones represents the ultimate reification of surveillance and destruction, the blissful marriage between an all-seeing mobile Panopticon and an assured technological obliteration that have haunted Western European imagination for decades. The feeling of terror associated with autonomous and deadly machines is defined by the sheer possibility that an autonomous thinking machine could develop its own inner universe and an agency geared towards genocide.

## Humans versus Machines

Drone technologies exist in a shrouded void of accountability and their proliferation may have dangerous consequences for both civil liberties and the structure of relations between states. Not to mention their impact on human and machine relations and the decision-making cycle in combat situations. In contemporary security practices, there is a fast growing belief that it is better to allow the technology to decide in the first place, due to rapid reaction imperatives in analysing massive and complex data (Leander 2013). The 'human in the loop' tends to be dislocated or rendered secondary from the military decisional cycle, in part because of what critical theorists like Ian Shaw and Majed Akhter (2012) have called the 'better-than-human efficiency ethic.'

While drone technology can be employed efficiently with little risks and costs, it removes human oversight in increasingly automated military operations and also involves worrying de-humanising tendencies that lack empathy and a sense of proportion. Faced with the brutality of the drone, Bella cannot negotiate the way out of her predicament or plead for compassion, as technology takes no prisoners.

According to drone theorist Grégoire Chamayou (2015), drone technologies radicalize the very notion of remote warfare or warfare without the risk of casualties. Feminist theorists such as of Karen Barad have long ago drawn attention that we need to take the materiality of technological objects seriously (Karen Barad in Aradau 2010). Even though no information is offered to the viewer concerning the backstory of the world that created the robot dog, the destructive materiality of the hunter-killer drone in 'Metalhead' points towards a host of implications about technological intentionality and autonomy. A lot can be inferred from the annihilating and post-human performativity of the doglike drone, namely the agency of the machine and more generally, the impact of technological artefacts on human beings.

In the words of Edward Tenner (1997), technology bites back, and unmanned weapons systems are no exception. According to Mark Andrejevic (2016), drones are 'dedifferentiating machines' that are engaged in a dangerous process of homogenization between the battlefield and the home space and between civilians and combatants. The episode's cynical depiction of technology can easily fall in the category of doom-and-gloom scenarios where the boundaries between the military and the civilian realms are completely blurred. It is not clear why Bella needs to be annihilated in the first place and at all costs. Is she an evil enemy, the last vestige of human resistance in a machine-

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dominated world, or the civilian victim of a technologically superior and invading foreign power? Does it really matter? What is certain is the fact that hunter killer drones are already engendering feelings of perpetual terror in theatres of war in faraway places.

The poetic justice and irony of 'Metalhead' is that it recreates the technological dread of such weapons in a familiar and Western European landscape, in which the remote battlefield has finally come home. The aerial scenes capturing the advancing pack of deadly drones running towards the safe house where the main character is hiding are reminiscent of the omniscient gaze provided by the high-tech drone footage in the battlefield. What better to represent the pinnacle of the Western European technological civilization and reason than the highly accurate automated robot? The technology is endowed with a better-than-human algorithmic data processing capacity and an omniscient Gorgon-like stare, due to its real-time and high-definition surveillance capabilities.

## Technological Rationality and Hunter-Killer Robots

The Frankfurt School's philosophical critique of technology in the aftermath of the Second World War (Marcuse 2006, 1998; Adorno 1978; Horkheimer and Adorno 1973; Habermas 1970) and regarding the use of nuclear weapons could also be applied to current advancements in autonomous military technologies. Critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (2006 1998) doggedly pursued a cautionary tale about the dangerous dynamic between technology, capitalism, domination, and war, described as the interdependence of productive and destructive forces in advanced industrial societies. According to Marcuse, this intimate interlinking is what characterizes technology as a form of domination, the very tendency to suppress any difference between what is considered the normal and the abnormal use of technology.

In the technological order of 'Metalhead', the actions of the hunter-killer drone could be considered as the 'new' normal. We already seem to take the technological efficiency of drones for granted, their proficiency being normalized and justified by their technical accuracy, their superior technical performance as policing tools, surveillance machines, for enhancing border management, and as security enablers in warfare. So why not presume that the technological efficiency and rationality of the robot dog is what will be considered the new normal. That is why we need to develop what Heidegger meant by a critical and reflexive relation to biased military technologies such as drones that originated in the battlefield and that are being currently normalized as viable solutions by decision-makers for internal and external security problems.

In Margaret Atwood's haunting poem 'A Drone Scans the Wreckage' (2012), the drone has an actual robot personhood and the machine is epitomized in the reflexive and rhetorical question 'Was I bad?'. By contrast, in Black Mirror's 'Metalhead' there are no ethical, legal, or philosophical questions asked nor answered. No rhetorical reflection is needed in the storytelling and we are given little information about the backstory of how humanity has reached this point, who is responsible with deploying the pack of drones, and whether they are remotely piloted or completely autonomous and capable of intelligence. What is clear is that the robot dog in 'Metalhead' consistently exceeds its functionality as a simple surveillance and killing machine, raising questions about the nature of humanity, power, and technology.

Drone theorists such as Caroline Holmqvist (2013) have argued that drone technologies constitute metaphysical objects in terms of their ability to shape and construct the world and, through their ontological effects, transform our conception of the human. They are fundamentally fetishized technologies that go beyond the 'metal-head' of the hardware, as they symbolize very complex regimes of violence profoundly altering the dynamic between material objects and humans. Their hybrid nature resides in the interlocking of humans and objects, technical and power relations, machines, values, and interests.

What 'Metalhead' is good at is illustrating the ultimate objectification of human life, reduced to a bleeping and pulsating dot exposed in this case to the structure of exception that constitutes technopower. The robot dog's drone vision is masterfully represented in the episode, how it sees the world, what it senses, how it acts, all contributing to an algorithmic-mediated targeting logic. Bella's character becomes another equation in the encoded dead sea of zeros and ones, a data-driven pattern of life waiting to be solved, monitored, and ultimately eliminated. The sheer

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biological fact of life is impossible in the dystopic world of 'Metalhead', in which the assured technologically mediated extinction of humanity seems to be a given. To paraphrase Martin Heidegger's (1977) expression 'everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology', in the desolate world of 'Metalhead' there remains little room for resistance and freedom in the case of the lead character.

The robot dog represents the true realisation of Theodor W. Adorno's (1978) fear concerning the subject-less weapon, in which the human presence in the kill-chain is minimized or inexistent. When the robot dog constructs its knife-appendage to chase Bella in the safe house where she has found temporary refuge, we witness an instance of technological prowess and the maximization of the machine's efficient killing potential. Adorno's foreboding insights confirm what Benjamin Noys (2015) has also identified as the creation of a faceless and nameless 'automatic self', the hunter killer robot dog chasing its human prey, opening doors and starting cars with a flash drive, recharging its batteries during the night, wounding its enemy with a final blow even in death.

## Conclusion

Is, then, resistance futile in the world of 'Metalhead'? In broader terms, can humanity survive the implacable technological progress of our age? The disruptive potential of advancements in autonomous robotics and weaponized artificial intelligence might as well be terminal for humankind. 'Metalhead' seems to leave little room for hope. Bella's desperate attempts to communicate via her rudimentary walkie-talkie to fellow human beings are answered by the implacable silence of the static void. Is her suicide at the end of the episode, in a way foreshadowed by the dead residents in the safehouse, the cowards' way out as there is no point in resisting technological terror? Or is it an ultimate final act to preserve the last vestiges of human agency and control over the very moment of death? Bella's ingenious survival tactics and bricolage-like improvisation during her tense flight from the drone manage to preserve a glimmer of hope, suggesting that by using creative thinking and resourceful resilience we can fight against the dreariness of technological tyranny.

However, recent advancements in augmented computational creativity seem to disprove even this point, introducing questions on whether creative thinking as an essential component of human intelligence can be modelled, simulated or replicated by using a computer. What is certain is that we are witnessing an unprecedented high technologization process in security and defence, or what Ayse Ceyhan (2008) has described as making high-end technology the centrepiece of security systems and its perception as an absolute security provider. Such a world that emphasizes the role of efficiency-driven technological solutions in contemporary security policies could produce the bleak universe of 'Metalhead', in which humanity is terrorized by its own technological offspring. A horror scenario of living in a post-human syntax.

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