



# GRIFFITH JOURNAL OF LAW & HUMAN DIGNITY

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Law and Human Dignity in the Technological Age

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# **THANATOPOLITICS THROUGH TECHNOPHOBIA: USING CHARLIE BROOKER'S BLACK MIRROR TO REFLECT UPON HUMANITY IN THE FACE OF ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY**

LACHLAN ROBB\*

*Science fiction arguably has an effect upon society's understanding of technology and, inevitably, its fear of technology. Exploring the technophobic landscape of Charlie Brooker's anthology Black Mirror, the author draws upon a frame of cultural legal studies to analyse the role of humanity, law, and the biopolitical in the face of advancing technology. This paper takes a deep exploration of what it actually "means" to kill another and the role of technology in making is both physically and psychologically easier to kill. The text ultimately "makes strange" an audience's expectations of the genre in order to critique the role of technology in an arguably dystopian future. This is a method designed to force an audience to actually analyse the role of technology in their lives and society, rather than simply clicking on the proverbial "accept terms and conditions" button.*

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## I THANATOPOLITICS THROUGH TECHNOPHOBIA

Through a platform of fear, a technophobic commentary allows for intriguing insights into the future role of technology, its interaction with humanity, and a changing biopolitical landscape. Science fiction has long since been a predictor of future trends, and the power of this genre's technophobia and social critique are worthy of closer analysis. I seek to demonstrate this by drawing upon a fascinating example of modern television and technophobic commentary, *Black Mirror*, in order to analyse the role of humanity, law, and the biopolitical in the face of advancing technology.

*Black Mirror* is a 2011 television anthology series created by Charlie Brooker that utilises various literature devices to explore the dark side of technology and life.<sup>1</sup> It can be described as a technophobic genre as it approaches scenarios where technologies of the twentieth and twenty-first century have been 'gamed out to their frightening but queasily logical conclusions'.<sup>2</sup> This article will analyse the episode 'Men Against Fire', in order to demonstrate how cultural legal studies serve an important analytical role.

In my own attempt at building suspense, this article will first discuss the "familiar" — it will discuss the role of science fiction in society and look through the concept of the war film genre present in the text. In part two of this article, I will then revisit the same text but through the lens of biopolitics. This revisit is designed to place the episode into the politico-legal frame of biopolitics in order to further explore the "unease" which audience experience in the episode 'Men Against Fire'. This rationalisation of how power interacts with life, and how death interacts with life, serves as a commentary on the uneasiness in which an audience views life, death, and concepts of "evil". This forces the audience to become uncertain if the bright future promised by science fiction is still possible, and by eliciting this technophobic response it can instil a more cautious approach to technology regulation.

As a disclaimer, this article is aiming to achieve a specific purpose — to explore ways that science fiction can reflect contemporary fears in society, and how by raising these fears and sense of unease, it can have an audience self-reflect and unknowingly step through

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<sup>1</sup> IMDB, 'Black Mirror', *Black Mirror* (Web Page, 2019) <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2085059/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Alissa Wilkinson, 'Black Mirror Season 3, Episode 5: "Men Against Fire" is a warning from the past about our future', *Vox* (Online, 21 October 2016) <<https://www.vox.com/2016/10/21/13327162/black-mirror-episode-5-men-against-fire-recap-review>>.

the text's social critique. In order to fully appreciate this article, it is recommended that you enter this having watched the *Black Mirror* episode, 'Men Against Fire'.<sup>3</sup> This article does not intend to recount the episode scene-for-scene, but rather build upon the ideas and try to expand upon the some of the more "unspoken" concepts which it raised through the chosen frame of biopolitics and cultural legal studies.

## II SCIENCE FICTION AND CULTURAL LEGAL STUDIES

Leiboff and Thomas state that, 'given that legal theory must bore deeply into the assumptions and practices of the law... we are very keen not to bore along the way.'<sup>4</sup> Seeking a similar path, I seek to use this article to explore a core aspect of legal theory — that of biopolitics — by embedding my analysis through an "easy-to-digest" form; popular culture. This will draw upon a legal theory driven analysis which highlights the role that technology plays upon the future of humanity — both its life, and its death.

Science fiction is a genre which seeks to draw upon the imagination of a reader and share the wonders of "what might be", as well as the fears of "what might be inevitable". The genre is defined by key themes of speculative fiction that deal with new ideas of science and technology, and often involve specific concepts such as time travel, aliens, or spaceflight.<sup>5</sup> This author personally subscribes to Aldiss' view that one of the earliest examples of science fiction is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*<sup>6</sup> which explored themes of pushing the boundaries of science and what this means for humanity when it is facing an unknown threat. This concept forces us to wonder, just because we "can" create a new human/travel back in time<sup>7</sup>/create a new weapon<sup>8</sup> — should we?

Being someone who has grown up with a passion for science fiction, I have always seen a fascinating reflective quality in the predictive nature of the genre. This is the notion that

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<sup>3</sup> To a lesser extent, the author also does not wish to spoil the ending in such a suspenseful piece of television.

<sup>4</sup> Marett Leiboff and Mark Thomas, *Legal Theories: Contexts and Practices* (Thomas Reuters, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, 2014) 35.

<sup>5</sup> The genre is one which can stretch the limits of definitions and not one which the author seeks to define here. If the reader is interested in learning more, the author recommends reading works such as Wilson Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (Atheneum, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (Dover Publications, 1994); First published as 'Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus', 1818.

<sup>7</sup> Literally any "time travel" movie or book ever written covers this theme and the subsequent paradox of time travel — see, eg, H G Wells, *The Time Machine* (William Heinemann, 1895).

<sup>8</sup> See the Manhattan project and the advent of nuclear weaponry.

as an author or creator can turn their imagination to the future, they draw upon ideas from society that the author either yearns to be a reality — or seek to warn us about dangerous choices, and their consequences — often sharing in a collective community vision of this hope and/or fear. When it comes to human behaviour, indeed, science fiction is a key influencer for society — and we can see certain technophobic plots emanate from popular culture. For instance, the fear of AI systems rising up to kill,<sup>9</sup> questioning the sentience and humanity of robots,<sup>10</sup> or the danger of not being able to identify a robotic foe from a human friend.<sup>11</sup> These science fiction plots can form a cycle with society where fears and dreams create new fiction, and new fiction in turn creates society's fears and dreams.

This cycle is fascinating to watch evolve because it is something that we can indeed see in contemporary debates surrounding the wisdom in developing AI systems,<sup>12</sup> concerns over driverless cars,<sup>13</sup> and unprecedented levels of cyber security concerns over hacking and ransomware.<sup>14</sup> These debates centre on how the regulation of technology should be approached, and to an extent the fallacy of “just because we can do something, should we?”

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<sup>9</sup> See, eg, *The Terminator* (House of Tomorrow, 2016); *2001: A Space Odyssey* (MGM, 1968); *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Hutchinson, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> See, eg, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, (Warner Bros, 2001); *Bicentennial Man*, (1492 Pictures, 1999); Isaac Asimov, *The Bicentennial Man and Other Stories*, (Doubleday, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1976); Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* (Grossett & Dunlap, 1950); *I Robot* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> See, eg, *Bladerunner* (Ladd Company, 1982); Phillip K Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Doubleday, 1968); *Westworld* (MGM, 1973); *Westworld*, (Bad Robot, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> See, eg, Aatif Sulleyman, ‘AI is likely to destroy humanity, Elon Musk warns’, *Independent* (Online, 24 November 2017) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/elon-musk-artificial-intelligence-openai-neuralink-ai-warning-a8074821.html>>; Maureen Dowd, ‘Elon Musk’s Billion-Dollar Crusade To Stop The A.I. Apocalypse’, *Vanity Fair* (Online, April 2017)

<<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/03/elon-musk-billion-dollar-crusade-to-stop-ai-space-x>>.

<sup>13</sup> See, eg, Michael McGowan, ‘Driverless cars: safer perhaps, but professor warns of privacy risks’, *The Guardian* (Online, 22 September 2017)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/22/driverless-cars-safer-perhaps-but-professor-warns-of-privacy-risks>>; Joel Achenbach, ‘Driverless cars are colliding with the creepy Trolley Problem’, *The Washington Post* (Online, 29 December 2015)

<[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/innovations/wp/2015/12/29/will-self-driving-cars-ever-solve-the-famous-and-creepy-trolley-problem/?utm\\_term=.7b87c3369dce](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/innovations/wp/2015/12/29/will-self-driving-cars-ever-solve-the-famous-and-creepy-trolley-problem/?utm_term=.7b87c3369dce)>; Jay Donde, ‘Self-Driving Cars will Kill People. Who Decides who dies?’, *Wired* (Online, 21 September 2017)

<<https://www.wired.com/story/self-driving-cars-will-kill-people-who-decides-who-dies/>>.

<sup>14</sup> See, eg, Kim Zetter, ‘What is Ransomware? A Guide to the Global Cyberattack’s Scary Method’, *Wired* (Online, 14 May 2017) <<https://www.wired.com/2017/05/hacker-lexicon-guide-ransomware-scary-hack-thats-rise/>>; Olivia Solon, ‘“Petya” Ransomware attack: What is it and how can it be stopped?’, *The Guardian* (Online, 28 June 2017)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jun/27/petya-ransomware-cyber-attack-who-what-why-how>>.



It is an inherently binary relationship; the technophiles, and the technophobes — which can be broadly associated with the tech industry, and the legal or regulatory industry. This process of regulation seeks to reconcile society and humanity with technological advancements. And while often diametrically opposed, it is clear that for progress, there must be common ground to move forward and implement technology in a safe and beneficial manner. Ultimately in this context, the value of technophobia is in how it can try to restrain blind innovation and allow for a proper consideration of the implications that advancement may have upon society. This position of technophobic critique, and the cycle of fear and dreams driving science fiction, is keenly observable in *Black Mirror's* themes — the fear of new technology, and the fear of what this means for humanity.

### III TECHNOLOGY, BLACK MIRROR, AND A DEPARTURE FROM GENRE

The *Black Mirror* episode 'Men against fire'<sup>15</sup>, is a technophobic commentary on the role of death and killing when biopolitics draws from a violent undercurrent reminiscent of Nazi-era principles of eugenics. In this text, we observe a military organisation trying to create a better soldier and a "purer" bloodline, but in doing so it reveals a deeper concern around the state of humanity when we perceive our enemy to be "inhuman". Season three, episode five from 2016, 'Men against Fire' follows a few days in the life of the soldier 'Stripe' (Malachi Kirby) as he experiences the psychological and moral ramifications of his first kill as a soldier. This follows his subsequent interactions with fellow soldiers such as Raiman (Madeline Brewer), his superior Arquette (Michael Kelly) and his moral crisis when faced with what he has done, and the prospect of killing unarmed civilians like Catarina (Ariane Labed), and what it actually means for society and humanity that it is his superiors who are knowingly ordering him to commit these attacks.

The text falls within the genre of science fiction because this plot is underpinned by a futuristic piece of technology that enhances soldiers like Stripe; the "MASS system". This system is an "enhanced reality" system that is implanted into the heads of the soldiers to provide a visual overlay over the world. It is marketed as creating a "better" soldier because it allows for internal communications, display of tactical maps, dossier

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<sup>15</sup> 'Men Against Fire', *Black Mirror*, (House of Tomorrow, 2016).

information — and, venturing into the realm of ‘dystopian science fiction’<sup>16</sup> — MASS (unbeknownst to the soldiers) manipulates how they see their enemies. The MASS implant system makes the enemy into ‘The Other, a bogeyman, a monster.’<sup>17</sup> (See images 1 and 2 below)



Image 1: What a soldier sees through MASS

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<sup>16</sup> Dystopian science fiction being a common subgenre of science fiction which presents an inherently negative picture of the future and commonly depicts the struggle of characters to exist in a world that is unaware of its own flaws.

<sup>17</sup> James Hibberd, ‘Black Mirror showrunner explains season 3 endings’, *Entertainment Weekly* (online, 12 December 2018) <<https://ew.com/article/2016/10/23/black-mirror-postmortem-interview-season-3/>>.



Image 2: Reality without MASS <sup>18</sup>

As a result, it makes the act of killing these “Roaches” psychologically easier for the soldiers because to them, they are killing a savage creature rather than an unarmed civilian “enemy”. This is important to consider because the episode draws its name from Brigadier General SLA Marshall’s 1947 book *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*<sup>19</sup> and Grossman’s *On Killing*<sup>20</sup> — both of these explore the psychological impact of war and killing. The episode builds upon the ideas of these texts and seeks to overcome the psychological barrier that prevents soldiers from killing their enemy through technology, but by doing so it forces the audience to question the very nature of humanity itself.

In the episode, Stripe experiences a failure in his implant system which turns off this “roach filter”. Which means he no longer see the “enemy” as a monster; this forces him to grapple with the reality that the Roaches he has been killing are actually human. He speaks with these “others” and tries to protect them, but in doing so, he betrays his team

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<sup>18</sup> The audience can note that it is the same character, Catarina (Ariane Laped) because of the hair and other non-altered features.

<sup>19</sup> SLA Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2000); first published 1947.

<sup>20</sup> Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Back Bay Books, 1995).

and is returned to the military base to face the consequences. Here he learns from his superior, Arquette (Michael Kelly), that the agenda of the military organisation is actually driven by eugenics principles of extermination. Stripe is faced with an ultimatum — he must either face prison where (through the MASS technology) he would be forced to relive unedited moments of every death he caused— or accept a new “fixed” MASS implant and return to blissful ignorance. The episode ends abruptly as Stripe chooses to forget what he has seen, and embrace ignorance.

The technophobic stance of the text comments upon the current trajectory of virtual reality technologies and advocates of the “singularity” that seek to enhance humans with technology. But this technology allows for a more important critique from ‘Men against Fire’ — one which is the central focus of this article — that the MASS system highlights key commentary about what humanity really is when enhanced with technology. The text makes this critique by exploring a possible future where society is run through eugenics based principles. This inherently dystopian future focuses on “us first” ideals that involve purifying the bloodline; ideals which are disturbingly akin to Nazi thanatopolitical forms of biopolitics. It is argued that the text draws this technology to its “queasily logical conclusion” in order to make this commentary, this method of unsettling the audience to make critique is regarded as “making strange”.

### *A Making Strange the War Film Genre*

*Black Mirror* seeks to “make strange” the war film<sup>21</sup> genre so as to explore the technophobic and biopolitical commentaries that emerge. This is achieved by beginning the text in the recognisable format of the war-film genre, and then departing from the audience’s expectations, thus “making strange”. This is a method of critical analysis deployed by commentators such as Tim Peters,<sup>22</sup> which draws upon the approach by key

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<sup>21</sup> In this article, a war film is considered to be films which explore themes of combat, survival and escape within the frame of conflict and violence. Often this brings forward other these such as sacrifice, morality, futility of war, camaraderie between soldiers, and the psychological effect of killing. This genre is defined (in no particular order) by films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Universal Studios, 1930), *Catch-22* (Filmways, Paramount Pictures, 1970), *Paths of Glory* (Bryna Productions, 1957), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1970) *The Guns of Navarone* (Highroad Productions, 1961) *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (Columbia Pictures, 1957) *Saving Private Ryan* (Dreamworks and Paramount Pictures, 1998) *Platoon* (Hemdale Film Corporation, 1986) *Full Metal Jacket* (Harrier Films, 1987).

<sup>22</sup> See Timothy Peters, ‘Reading The Law Made Strange: A Theological Jurisprudence of Popular Culture’ (PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 2014) 28.

literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges,<sup>23</sup> and Russian Formalists such as Shklovsky that see art as being something that should ‘make objects unfamiliar.’<sup>24</sup> By “making strange” a traditional understanding of the war-film genre, *Black Mirror* forces the audience to be out-of-step with their expectations which makes them critically view not just the text, but their own expectations.

This occurs during the ‘first kill’ at Heidekker’s farmhouse,<sup>25</sup> which quickly devolved into a frenzied moment of hand-to-hand combat.<sup>26</sup> While to a modern audience, it may not seem overly “gory” or “disturbing” — it should be seen as a direct link back to a trope used in the war film genre. It is a brutal scene of death and the struggle for life which is reminiscent of the death of Pvt. Stanley Mellish in *Saving Private Ryan*<sup>27</sup> — an iconic scene where the audience is forced to witness “the death grapple” and slow-motion death as the German’s knife is slowly pressed into the chest of one of the central characters.<sup>28</sup> It is a highly influential scene for the genre and is used to explore the damaging psychological effects of killing that Grossman would call ‘killing at sexual range’<sup>29</sup> as an ‘intimate brutality.’<sup>30</sup>

In the “typical” war film, we see directors use this as a classic turning point for a character and would allow for the director to explore the darker side of the genre, and the mental trauma that can be associated with death and killing.<sup>31</sup> However, Brooker “makes strange” the text at this point by showing how Stripe enjoys the kill — fuelled by the adrenaline, he commits acts of “overkill” — an act which is made further disturbing by how it was congratulated later on by his unit, commenting ‘[w]ith your knife? Holy shit!

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<sup>23</sup> “[I]f this absurd postulate were developed to its extreme logical consequences, he wonders, “what world would be created”; Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New Direction Publishing, 1962) xi.

<sup>24</sup> Victor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’ in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Articles* (Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis trans, University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 12.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Men Against Fire’ (n 15), 00:11:11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid 00:12:30.

<sup>27</sup> *Saving Private Ryan* (Dreamworks and Paramount Pictures, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Eliot Cohen, ‘What Combat Does to Man: Private Ryan and its Critics’, *The National Interest* (online, 1 December 1998) 85 <<https://nationalinterest.org/bookreview/what-combat-does-to-man-private-ryan-and-its-critics-640>>.

<sup>29</sup> Grossman, (n 20) 134.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 120; for abstract example of this scene being used, see ‘Brian’s a Bad Father’, *Family Guy* (Fuzzy Door Productions, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> See, eg, Katherine Golsan, ‘Murder and Merrymaking: The “Seen” of the Crime in Renoir’s 1930s Cinema’ (2007) 32(2) *Film Criticism* 28; Sonia Allue, ‘The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working against Ethics in “The Silence of the Lambs” (1988) and “American Psycho” (1991)’ (2002) 24(2) *Atlantis* 7.

— Pretty good, right? — Yeah, you fucking Terminator.’<sup>32</sup> When asked later about the kill by the psychologist, Stripe was asked ‘how did that feel?’ to which he replied ‘I didn’t’.<sup>33</sup> Stripe, in trying to further search his emotional response to his first kill, said, ‘I guess all I felt was, you know, relief’<sup>34</sup>... ‘I thought maybe I’d feel I don’t know... like regret. Something like that, but that just wasn’t there.’<sup>35</sup> Through a departure from expectations, the audience is made to feel uneasy as they no longer recognise what might happen next. In an interview, Brooker discusses the role that this sort of distance plays in killing, and states the expectation that ‘if you have to slide a bayonet into somebody’s ribs that stays with you forever’<sup>36</sup> — and yet Stripe felt nothing. By “making strange” the expectations of the audience, we begin to suspect the manipulation of the MASS system and are observant of the military organisation’s agenda. This technology has removed the seemingly normal human aversion to killing.

### B *The Mass System As “Necessary”*

The MASS system is the key technological advancement explored in the text, it is a system that “makes better soldiers”. Yet, it achieved this by changing traditional human responses in a direct commentary upon the role that humanity plays in technology and death. The psychological effect of killing is one of the reasons that the MASS system in the text is portrayed as being “necessary” as the system allows the soldiers to be “better” because they can kill without hesitation and with no psychological repercussions. As discussed, the ‘knife-kill’ scene alienates the audience because there is an expectation that the “intimate brutality” of the knife fight should have a damaging impact on Stripe’s psyche.

This expectation is derived not just from popular culture, but from psychological analyses of the historic effect of killing, such as Grossman’s text *On Killing*,<sup>37</sup> and Brigadier General SLA Marshall’s 1947 book *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*.<sup>38</sup> Given the title of the episode in question, an understanding of these texts is important to

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Men Against Fire’ (n 15) 00:15:45; a clear reference to the film, *The Terminator* (n 3).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid 00:23:35.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid 00:23:43.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid 00:23:58.

<sup>36</sup> Hibberd (n 17).

<sup>37</sup> Grossman (n 20).

<sup>38</sup> SLA Marshall (n 19).

understanding the critique of the text, as well understanding that the military organisation was seeking to protect the minds of the soldiers. Grossman's text explores the 'demonstrable fact that there is within most men an intense resistance to killing their fellow man'<sup>39</sup> and that 'it has long been understood that there is a direct relationship between the empathic and physical proximation (sic) of the victim, and the resultant difficulty and trauma of the kill.'<sup>40</sup> The research further suggests that at a close range, the effect is greater upon the soldier, while conversely, an increased distance allows us to avoid empathising with the target; 'from a distance, you don't look anything like a friend.'<sup>41</sup> Historically, technology has always been at the centre of solutions to this "problem", as technology allows for an increased physical distance between the action and the resultant death. This is seen through platforms such as aerial warfare, or through remote systems like drones.<sup>42</sup> During the Gulf war, this was referred to as 'Nintendo warfare',<sup>43</sup> as new systems were developed to increase the distance between warring humans and thus make it harder for a soldier to see the enemy is also human. This understanding of the psychological dimension to warfare is relevant to the text's critique because the MASS system can allow combat to be close-quarters again by making the enemy not 'look anything like a friend.' As Arquette states, 'MASS, well, that's the ultimate military weapon. It helps you with your Intel. Your targeting. Your comms. Your conditioning. It's a lot easier to pull the trigger when you're aiming at the bogeyman.'<sup>44</sup>

This principally seems like an altruistic endeavour, but seen through a biopolitical lens, this is a dangerous path to take which is being amplified by a dystopian application of technology.

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<sup>39</sup> Grossman (n 20) 4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid 99.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> The concept of drones is particularly apt for *Men Against Fire* because of the drone scenes where the soldiers are able to directly control the UAVs with the MASS system and therefore it can be seen as a direct call to the distancing of warfare and the relevant 'place' of a soldier within a drone – it is interesting to note though that despite this technological rich society and military structure, there is no discussion of Artificial Intelligence's role. This is interesting especially considering the fears around automatic drone targeting. These concepts on drones and distancing of warfare is a rich area for expansion, but is not further discussed in this article.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid 169.

<sup>44</sup> Men Against Fire' (n 15) 00:50:15.

## IV BIOPOLITICS, THANATOPOLITICS AND TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPING HUMANITY

Biopolitics is a political and legal concept coined by Foucault in order to rationally consider strategies of how human life is managed by authority and power.<sup>45</sup> This form of thought is a way of considering the reality of power, life, and death — and, according to Foucault, biopolitics ‘consists in making live and letting die’<sup>46</sup>, which is expressed as the paradox ‘to preserve life, it is necessary to destroy life.’<sup>47</sup>

If we look from a biopolitical lens, we can see that the MASS system, and the eugenics driven motives of the military organisation serve as a commentary on the dangers of both technologies. This forms thoughts that are focused upon death, rather than life. This is an expression of the politico-legal concept of biopolitics. This section of the article seeks to draw upon the ideas already discussed — the notions of making strange, and the protection of soldiers through the distancing of warfare — and explore this commentary in three ways — firstly, through a simple interpretation of Foucault’s biopolitics, secondly through the violent biopolitical construct of thanatopolitics, and finally through Derrida’s expression of an auto-immune response to these biopolitical expressions.

The second part of this article will build upon the “uneasy feelings” explored earlier and expand on this by exploring the basic ideas of biopolitics. It will then show how the text draws this beyond a kill-or-be-killed scenario, and into a concept more in line with “global civil war” and thus flips biopolitics into the more violent thanatopolitics. This will then explore how this can result in a form of auto-immunity which means that the pursuit of this radical violence to protect, in fact ends up as an act of self-destruction. It will finally bring this back to the science fiction genre and briefly discuss the role and the affect that this type of “entertainment” has upon society and law.

### *A The Form of Biopolitics*

Biopolitics is important in the critique made by *Black Mirror* because of how it portrays the different value in life of the soldiers as opposed to the inhuman life of the Roaches.

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<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: an Introduction* (Robert Hurley Trans, Pantheon Books, 1978) 245.

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France, 1975-76*, (David Macey trans, Picador, 2003) 247; Timothy Campbell, “‘Bios,’ Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito’ (2006) 36(2) *Diacritics* 2, 12.

<sup>47</sup> John Lechte and Saul Newman, *Agamben and the Politics of Human Rights: Statelessness, Images, Violence*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2013) 3.



When Stripe and a Roach come face-to-face (for example, the aforementioned knife scene<sup>48</sup>), the biopolitical paradigm is one of 'kill-or-be-killed' and as such, the decision must be made that the life of one (Stripe) involves the death of the other (Roach). This is a simplified application of this type of biopolitical exchange in warfare. In his original conception of biopolitics, Foucault states that '[t]he principle underlying the tactics of battle-[is] that one has to be capable of killing in order to go on living'<sup>49</sup>. In the text, this capacity is physically given to a soldier by the MASS system by enhancing their ability to kill without any hesitation or psychological questioning. It further serves as a biopolitical commentary on warfare because the technology enhances a soldier at the cost of the life (and humanity) of the enemy. It is a balancing exercise; if one side is enhanced, the other must be reduced. By depicting the Roaches as something "other-than-human", it prevents a psychological attachment of empathy and allows for the soldier to kill in order to go on living. However, this has a more symbolic affect upon the "biopolitical battleground" — it is no longer a battle of Stripe against Roach — but rather "humanity" against "inhumanity". The way in which this is presented shows the audience that the biopolitical paradigm of this technologically distorted future is far more complex, and far more concerning than they may have otherwise thought.

While biopolitics can help us understand these interactions, there is a darker side of this socio-political structure that we can see emerge in the text; thanatopolitics. A simple way to understand biopolitics is to consider the paradox: 'to preserve life, it is necessary to destroy life;<sup>50</sup> however, when this concept is gamed out to its frightening but queasily logical conclusions we can observe the interplay of thanatopolitics. Thanatopolitics is a further socio-political concept which Foucault discusses and it is something inherently "darker" — it is the mobilisation of entire populations 'for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity.'<sup>51</sup> It is viewed as an inversion of political thought that considers the value of death, rather than the value of life.<sup>52</sup> This form of thought is considered to be always overshadowing any expression of biopolitics,<sup>53</sup> and is also 'its

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<sup>48</sup> 'Men Against Fire' (n 15) 00:12:30.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (n 45) 137.

<sup>50</sup> Lechte (n 47) 3.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (n 45), 137.

<sup>52</sup> Campbell (n 46) 11.

<sup>53</sup> Lechte (n 47) 3.

ultimate fate.<sup>54</sup> The idea is that when a violent biopolitical agenda explores this “homicidal temptation” we can observe the extreme forms of the paradox where ‘the decision of life is transformed into the decision on death, and when biopolitics is thus inverted and becomes thanatopolitics.’<sup>55</sup> This is seen in the text when we start to observe the interplay of eugenics within the biopolitical decisions of the military.

Eugenics is the ‘theory or practice of improving the genetic characteristics of a population, especially by controlling reproduction in order to produce offspring with qualities considered desirable’<sup>56</sup> and is typically associated with the biopolitical practices of Nazi Germany.<sup>57</sup> It was Nazism, through this agenda, more than any other form of political organisation, which was able to ‘propel the homicidal temptation of biopolitics to its most complete realisation.’<sup>58</sup> To look at this paradigm through a lens of eugenics means expanding the scale of what is being considered. In this instance, the “us” is extended to “all humanity”, and the “them” become “all inhumanity”. A concept which may very well be indicative of Schmittian notions of the ‘Global Civil War.’<sup>59</sup> Within this idea of Global Civil War, conflicts continue to grow in scale as contemporary conflicts depart from state-on-state conflicts into a larger notion of fighting for the survival of humanity itself against those who represent “inhumanity”. This is the notion that ‘entire populations are mobilized (sic) for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity;’<sup>60</sup> and within this paradigm ‘massacres have become vital.’<sup>61</sup> In the opening pages of his famous text, *Homer Sacre*, Agamben, quotes Foucault:

What follows is a kind of bestialization (sic) of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques. For the first time in history, the possibilities of the social

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Didier Fassin, ‘The Politics of Death: Race War, Biopower and AIDS in the Post-Apartheid’ in M Dillon and A Neal, *Foucault on Politics, Security and War* (Springer, 2015) 153.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Eugenics’ in *Macquarie Dictionary* (7<sup>th</sup> ed, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Timothy Campbell trans, University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 58.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid 59.

<sup>59</sup> See, eg, Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a political Paradigm* (Stanford University Press, 2015); Niklas Olsen, ‘Carl Schmitt, Reinhart Koselleck and the foundations of history and politics’ (2011) 37(2) *History of European Ideas* 197.

<sup>60</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (n 45) 137.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

sciences are made known, and at once it becomes possible both to protect life and to authorize (sic) a holocaust.<sup>62</sup>

The ‘bestialization (sic) of man’ and the possibility of protecting life while ‘authorizing (sic) a holocaust’ are apt concepts that have clear parallels to the *Black Mirror* text. It is this notion of transitioning from a “pure” idea of protection into a corrupt idea of destruction that the text seeks to explore — especially the fear that this process can be so gradual that it is imperceptible for those within the society.

*B Thanatopolitics in ‘Men Against Fire’*

**Stripe:** *Roaches. They look just like us.*

**Arquette:** *Of course they do. That's why they're so dangerous.*<sup>63</sup>

The text explores these broader concepts of biopolitics by first presenting the benefit to the soldiers and the “us”. The text makes it clear that the protection of the soldiers’ mental wellbeing is a principle aims as the military psychologist Arquette directly draws from Grossman and SLA Marshall’s discussions in his monologue, stating that:

Even in World War II, in a firefight, only 15%, 20% of the men would pull the trigger. The fate of the world at stake and only 15% of them fired. Now what does that tell you? It tells me that that war would have been over a whole lot quicker had the military got its shit together.<sup>64</sup>

From Arquette’s perspective, their biopolitical agenda has a clearly altruistic benefit because it serves to protect the soldiers from the psychological harms of battle, and end conflict sooner — both of which would be of far greater benefit to the victor. This scene is of great importance to the text’s plot and its critique because of the way that this discussion and monologue is delivered. The scene, beginning 00:46:15 is the longest scene in the text, occurs in a single room, and is entirely devoid of external bright colours. The white room, the grey clothing, and the professional style of Arquette is used by Brooker to draw clear parallels to not just the prison that it is, but also to a mental ward as Stripe is facing the prospect of being either imprisoned physically, or mentally. The use

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<sup>62</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homer Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1<sup>st</sup> Ed, 1998) 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Men Against Fire*, (n 15), 00:48:10.

<sup>64</sup> *Men Against Fire*, (n 15), 00:49:25.

of cinematography is important to the struggling power of the characters and the ideals that they represent. For instance, the above quote of ‘they look just like us’<sup>65</sup> involves camera shifting from a low shot of Arquette which imparts a sense of power, to a distant and off-centre show of Stripe dejectedly sitting in the corner. The aesthetics of this scene are clinical, professional, and utterly sterile — and this perfectly captures the way in which Arquette justifies the darker side of the biopolitical agenda. This shift from biopolitical discussion to thanatopolitics occurs in that clinical room when Arquette explains the threat of the Roach as “The Other”:

Do you have any idea the amount of shit that's in their DNA? Higher rates of cancer. Muscular dystrophy. MS. SLS. Substandard IQ. Criminal tendencies. Sexual deviances.... It's all there. The screening shows it. Is that what you want for the next generation? Don't feel bad about doing your job.<sup>66</sup>

The cinematography of this scene further “makes strange” our expectations because Arquette is calmly explaining how a holocaust could be authorised. By being delivered in this room it draws upon the dual clinical/asylum aspect and places Arquette in the position of a doctor administering a diagnosis or a cure to the problem. Through these aesthetics it elevates Arquette’s radical ideas of eugenics into an authority of “truth”, thus becoming the reality, while Stripe is conversely placed in the position of someone who is sick and in need of help. This delivery of disturbingly Nazi ideals through this misappropriated position of power further alienates the audience and highlights the danger of this type of thought. It demonstrates how disturbingly logical an idea can seem when delivered slowly, calmly, and systematically from an authority that evokes “trust”. However, one of the more disturbing realisations is that the psychologist, Arquette, who holds these strong eugenics ideals is not actually implanted with the MASS system. He is not technologically enhanced or manipulated — instead he is one of the “most purely human” characters in the text. A deliberately disturbing notion that is a clear commentary being made by the text.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid 00:48:10.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid 00:50:50.

*C An Auto-Immune Response*

Finally, this article seeks to discuss this in light of the concept of Derrida's "auto-immunity" because *Black Mirror* is a text that highlights how a violent biopolitical mechanism can actually be a self-destructive force. Derrida uses the figure of a wheel to show how a route can turn back on itself through an additional turn or twist into 'the law of a terrifying and suicidal autoimmunity'.<sup>67</sup> In his discussion in *Rogues*,<sup>68</sup> Derrida explores this notion through a process of democratic autoimmunity following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the response of the American government to the 'Axis of Evil'.<sup>69</sup> This idea holds that a sovereign decision is often made to suspend an idea in order to protect it from self-perpetuated abuse.<sup>70</sup> To illustrate this Derrida here gives the example of the Algerian government suspending the electoral process in order to protect democracy from those who would abuse it.<sup>71</sup> This process is an act of suicidal autoimmunity where democracy was destroyed in order to protect it from being destroyed by others — however, regardless of who is responsible, the process is still destroyed.

This same notion of suicidal autoimmunity can be applied in this instance to violent biopolitics. In the text, the intention of the military organisation is to protect their soldiers and their bloodline from both the threat of "tainting by inferiors" and through the psychological harm of having to kill human beings. As such, the military suspended the humanity of their soldiers through the implant of the MASS system, but in doing so they triggered an autoimmune response and effectively destroyed the psychology and humanity that they were trying to protect. If we accept the premise of Grossman's studies, and that a fundamental condition of 'being human' is the ability to empathise, then the removal of it is to eradicate a piece of what it means to be human. It could be argued that this further adds to the technophobic rhetoric of the 'soldier as human drone' in popular culture.<sup>72</sup> It shows that a soldier's technological enhancement is a removal of humanity and an embrace of a science-fiction driven dystopia of "drone warfare" which draws upon

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<sup>67</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Articles on Reason* (Pascale-Anne Brault trans, Stanford University Press, 2005) 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid* 40.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid* 31.

<sup>72</sup> See, eg, Ian Cohen, 'Muse: Drones' *Pitchfork* (Online, 9 June 2016)

<<https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20520-drones/>>; Kyle Bishop, 'Technophobia and the Cyborg Menace' (2008) 19(3) *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 349.

further ethical debates around “what it means to be human” beyond the scope of this article.<sup>73</sup> Within these aforementioned conceptions of biopolitics, thanatopolitics, and auto-immunity, the text serves as a commentary on the dangers of violent forms of politico-legal thought which can be transposed into contemporary criticisms, and as an indicator of societal technophobia.

#### V FEAR AS MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

*Black Mirror* extends beyond a narrative of “dystopian futures” and beyond the “war film genre” and instead it can be considered a clear piece of social critique. This article has sought to demonstrate this through the close reading of *Men Against Fire*'s key technophobic themes, and as such the evolution of biopolitical thought in the text (from biopolitics, to thanatopolitics, to auto-immunity) is a theme which forces an audience to consider the role that technology has upon “the humanity” of humans. It elicits societal fears through the genre of science fiction and brings these to the forefront of our minds in order to the audience rethink our actions and the actions of our government and military.

One such fear that I feel is particularly prominent within the text is the “denial of a bright future”. The promise given to us by science fiction is one of “a better tomorrow”; that through technology society will be better, medicine will be better, life will be better. However, the truth is that we can never really know what the future holds — and the underlying fear of this is that technology will not bring upon the promised “brighter tomorrow”. The future depicted in *Men Against Fire* draws upon this, and presents it as a darker cyclical history — that through technology we have triggered this Derrida-esc autoimmune response and in fact regressed — we are not moving forward, we are moving backwards and are doomed to repeat the mistakes of humanity's past.

By eliciting this fear, it makes the audience wonder how the fictitious world will go to be where it is, and as a response, it wants to know what caused this disastrous future. However, it should be noted, that this text does not explain what happened in the world to bring us to that point — we do not know what decisive event lead to the adoption of eugenics principals by “the good guys” (if it was even one event at all). It is that

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<sup>73</sup> For further debate see, eg, Antoine Bousquet, ‘Chaoplexic Warfare or the Future of Military Organization’ (2008) 84(5) *International Affairs* 915.

uncertainty which causes concern to fester within an audience because it may have been small changes so gradual that society doesn't realise until it is too late. This is a journey that can be likened to the Sorities Paradox,<sup>74</sup> or the concept of 'Death by a thousand cuts'<sup>75</sup> — the fear is that this change will happen so gradually that we cannot distinctively know when the change occurred, and when our “wondrous future”, became a “nightmarish present”. In *Man Against Fire*, could this tipping point have been the introduction of the MASS system? The deployment of troops? The declaration of enemies? Or perhaps the election of political parties? The uncertainty elicits the fear, and fear drives change.

I see this eliciting a change reminiscent of the trope of “just because we can, does this mean we should?” which is intrinsically linked to the Manhattan project and the advent of nuclear weaponry. In contemporary culture, a current fear is playing out around artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. This ultimately all relates to questions of how society should be approaching the implementation of technology. It raises questions about how progress and advancement comes with risks, and proper appreciation of risk is always needed.

I believe that science fiction is important because it at least has the sense to recognise that technology can go wrong. In fact, it is interesting to follow a reading of this text that shows humanity as the problem — after all *Black Mirror's* technophobic portrayal demonstrates how it is not the technology that is the vulnerable part, but the humanity which wields it. This is a recurring theme of that frequently underlines science fiction. For example, *Frankenstein* can indeed be read as a text that shows that humanity itself is a fear-driven and violent species; to be met with the unknown is to react out of fear to destroy it.<sup>76</sup> Therefore it is not technology that is the problem, but the fear, ambition, and

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<sup>74</sup> The Sorities Paradox, (or Eubulide's Heap) is a philosophical logic paradox from the 4<sup>th</sup> century where we are asked to consider the vague concept of a heap. One grain of sand is not a heap – nor is 2, or 3. But what about 100, or a 1000? At what point did the grains of sand become a heap? By adding more grains, one at a time, it will never turn into a heap because changing something by an imperceptible amount, paradoxically, will never change the overall features. See, eg, William Nava, 'Vagueness: The Sorities Paradox', *William Nava* (Blog Post, 28 April 2017) <<http://williamnava.com/vagueness-sorites-paradox/>>.

<sup>75</sup> See concept of 'lingchi' as explored in articles such as Jérôme Bourgon, 'Abolishing Cruel punishments: A Reappraisal of the Chinese Roots and Long-term Efficiency of the Xinzheng Legal Reforms' (2003) 37(4) *Modern Asian Studies* 851.

<sup>76</sup> See, eg, Aldiss and Wingrove (n 5).

power of the humans that seek to control it — a concept which we can similarly read in *Black Mirror*.

As a genre, science fiction can make an audience consider these ideas embedded within entertainment — this is important because simply by being “entertaining”; important concepts like those from *Black Mirror* can to pervade into conversations, and ultimately policy making. This awareness can allow society to take more deliberate steps forward — through possible frames of cautious technophobia — which can in turn foster a more deliberate and careful consideration of technology’s integration with humanity. This is a concept which we are seeing develop in relation to driverless cars and other autonomous systems; an awareness of dangers creates a more risk-averse policy system, which in turn allows for the legal structures to develop alongside the technology — rather than have to race to catch up.

## VI CONCLUSION

*Black Mirror’s, Men Against Fire* is a commentary that embraces the technophobic fears of society. It shows the threat that society can pose to itself through technology, in the pursuit of protection. Through Brooker’s ability to “make strange”, an audience’s expectations of the text are offset and the text draws forth key critiques of not just technology, but the role of humanity to be inherently self-destructive. This is a key thought that society must bear in mind as technology forces us to continue to evolve society, but protect from the auto-immune devolution of humanity. The text serves as a commentary on how humanity (even without technology) can be but one step removed from violent and self-destructive practices; thanatopolitics remains the shadow of biopolitical thought. The power of the text is that through this guise of technophobia, it changes the direction of blame — it is not purely the fault of the technology, but rather the inhumanity within humans that leads to the re-emergence of thanatopolitical thoughts. The uncertainty creates fear, and texts like *Black Mirror* draws upon this technophobic fear in order to “make strange” an audience’s expectations and make society uneasy as it advances technologically. This emotion and process of “making strange”, allows for self-reflection of where society is, and how we interact with technology. This awareness through technophobia can help create more cautious and considered approaches to technological regulation. While a science fiction story can be



something that we can dismiss as entertainment, the strength of *Black Mirror's* message is in its ability to “make strange” its audiences expectations — this is a far harder message to ignore because when we think of the proverbial “face of evil” we expect it to be a monster, like the Roaches, or the Terminator — not a human being that could be our neighbours, friends, or even ourselves.

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