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The goal of Judith Markowitz’s *Robots that Kill* “is to reveal ways in which robots and other artificially created killers (called ‘robot-precursors’) are part of the human experience” (p. 1). The broad concept she tackles is interesting, but the significant gaps in the coverage and utter lack of effective analysis substantially undermine the utility of this work. What might have been an interesting discourse on how technological creations designed for violence follow patterns established by much older cultural artifacts instead quickly devolves into a choppy series of poor plot summaries and spoilers of popular culture products, including movies, television programs, and books. It is all but impossible to read this work as a narrative—three subheadings per page are the norm, typically with only a short paragraph contained within each section.

The broad categories that Markowitz initially creates are a workable means to organize a very diverse set of data points and individual topics. However, within each chapter and subsection, the organizational scheme becomes both rigid and chaotic, and many of the segments of the work resemble nothing so much as a stream-of-consciousness delivery of every example that Markowitz can muster into a category. Block quotes are dropped in seemingly at random intervals, with little to no context to explain how they might relate to a greater plan for the work. Although she notes in the beginning that she could not possibly cover every work that might fit into the concept of the book, there are still very frustrating, obvious gaps in the discussion that leave the reader to wonder about the author’s process of creation for this work.

The best aspect of this work is the author’s broad coverage—she does not remain bound to only the most obvious sources of information and depiction but instead delves into folklore, oral tradition, music, artwork, tabletop gaming, television, film, and video games, in addition to textual works. She is also extremely global in her approach and eschews the temptation to remain fixated upon the West. This broad coverage, in turn, means that interested readers will be titillated by a wide variety of subjects and will likely find previously unknown materials they wish to examine, ranging from obscure religious texts to twenty-first-century graphic novels, and from blockbuster films to roleplaying miniatures games.

Perhaps the greatest point of contention for this reader is the idea that virtually anything supernatural should be treated as a precursor to machines—but many of the examples chosen by the author are tortured metaphors, at best, and there
just is no plausible way to make the links she sug-
gests in the introduction. The work is beset by
everse, and errors in details. Fans of science fiction,
or any related genre, are likely to take umbrage
with her characterization of their favorite works,
whereas readers who are not fans of science fic-
tion will quickly become lost in the morass of
poorly curated examples. The unfortunate result
is that this work will likely satisfy few potential
readers.

The last portion of the work takes a decided
turn into a discussion of modern warfare and in
particular the development of lethal autonomous
weapon systems (LAWS). Here, the author betrays
a lack of knowledge and a poor depth of research,
proclaiming that autonomous weapons do not yet
exist (they have been in the field for over four dec-
ades), and that they will likely make warfare more
humane rather than enabling violence on a previ-
ously unrealized scale. This segment of the book
exemplifies all of the problems found in the rest of
the work—it is choppy, substitutes block quotes in
place of analysis, contains a plethora of factual er-
rors, fails to supply useful definitions for many
terms, and also creates entirely new (and unnec-
sary) acronyms for well-established concepts. For
example, Markowitz uses the acronym “RPD” for
“remotely-piloted drone,” as if the world needed
yet another acronym for unmanned aircraft (we
already have RPA, RPV, UAS, and UAV, among oth-
ers—why complicate the issue further?) She also
eschews the standard “laws of armed conflict”
(LOAC) in favor of “laws of war” (LOW), which she
then unhelpfully refers to as a synonym for “inter-
national humanitarian law” (IHL) (p. 211). As any
military historian should be able to explain, while
LOAC and IHL have many concepts in common,
and often overlap, they are most certainly not in-
terchangeable terms and should not be treated as
such.

Ultimately, this work is a somewhat novel
concept that is significantly marred in the execu-
tion. While it may accidentally point the reader to-
ward several new sources of interest, depending
upon their personal reading habits, it falls far
short of proving a strong link between the mytho-
logical creations of the past and the mechanical
wonders of the present age. While Arthur C.
Clarke once noted that any sufficiently advanced
technology is indistinguishable from magic, that
does not mean that the two categories are inextric-
ably linked, or even related in any meaningful
way.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

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