**Mediated verminisation: ideology, technology, and the Other as monster**

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In “Men Against Fire” (S03E05), set in a quasi-apocalyptic future, a team of technologically enhanced soldiers is sent to exterminate what they believe is a mutant species of human (“Roaches”). After a mission, one of the soldiers starts experiencing disruptions in their neural implants (MASS devices). These implants are revealed to be not simply performance enhancers, but perception-altering devices that make soldiers perceive a group of humans as monsters, therefore making the soldiers more amenable to committing genocide. This chapter chooses “Men Against Fire” as a starting point for a reflection on media, technology, and ideology. By making use of Zizek’s concept of hallucination as ideology, as well as of Mark Fisher’s concept of “verminisation” (originally by Szasz) as a rhetorical device in the justification of war, this text will discuss the role of media and technology in enhancing the uptake of the ideological structuring of social and political realities.

This chapter draws attention to three themes in “Men Against Fire.” Each section addresses a specific theme: the first can be described as the ideological production of social reality, that is, the creation of a shared mindset and interpretation of the lifeworld as a driving force behind the shaping of that same lifeworld through a quasi-hallucinatory process. The second theme is related to the first, and explores the language of dehumanisation (specifically, “verminisation”) as a weapon of political and ideological shaping of social reality; and the third aspect under analysis is the analogy with propaganda, that is, the dissemination of ideology and shared representations of reality by the media. The argument focuses on the physical technological implant as a stand-in for a sociotechnical apparatus of the ordering of reality: the MASS device is an allegory for mass and individualized media, such as digital platforms, and their role in spreading and consolidating ideological representations. In this case, those representations target the dehumanized Other for military and political purposes. This episode of *Black Mirror* is particularly interesting in that it bluntly references contemporary discourse on migration and the spectacular character of virtualised war.

**Playing with fire: episode summary**

“Men Against Fire” is the fifth episode of the third season of *Black Mirror*, and aired in October of 2016. Directed by Jakob Verbruggen and written by Charlie Brooker, it is built around a cognitively enhanced military team tasked with seeking and eliminating a supposedly subhuman group – the “Roaches.” “Men Against Fire” revolves around an advanced technology deeply embedded in human activity, and the plot expands into a social commentary with dystopic elements and a decidedly topical subject matter. The viewer is invited to follow “Stripe,” one of the soldiers of the team, as they undertake a mission to kill a marauding group of “Roaches”. Stripe is a new soldier, who has yet to encounter the enemy. Other members of the team are more experienced – Raiman is an enthusiastic hunter, and Medina is the seasoned squad leader. The episode gives some hints as to parts of Stripe’s biography, including a romantic interest and his original consent to receiving a military implant in spite of the memory-altering consequences. In general, the soldier’s character is presented as self-conscious and questioning, striking a very noticeable contrast with the military structure around Stripe, which demands obedience and submission to the imperatives of the institution and its technology.

“Roaches” initially appear as sickly, deformed, screeching quasi-human forms. Military personnel and technical support staff (including the psychologist Arquette) seem to be convinced that “Roaches” are beyond redemption, possessing inferior genetic traits, and therefore representing a mutated, degenerated form of human that endangers the existence of supposedly healthy human beings. Viewers (with Stripe) first encounter them crouching in hiding in a Christian pastor’s home, trying to escape the military death squads trying to hunt them down. During the raid of the pastor’s home, they are shown to have created a device that interferes with the military implants. This fact alone would, of course, disprove the characterization of “Roaches” as devolved subhumans, since it demonstrates ingenuity, intelligence, and technological sophistication.

We learn that the subhuman features of the “Roaches” are, in fact, generated by the MASS system in order to disguise the fact that they are ordinary human beings. This hallucinogenic technology is developed, according to in-episode exposition, to dehumanize a perceived enemy and solve what might be termed the “problem of empathy”: how to convince a human being to kill other human beings without hesitation or questioning. The implant alters the perception of reality so that the soldiers’ sensory apparatuses present a distorted version of the reality of extermination: killing a fully alien “Roach” is easier than killing a human, and the elimination of sensory overload (the sounds, the smell, the sights) of combat mitigates the risk of disobedience and psychological damage.

Soldiers are technologically augmented by receiving a neural implant – the MASS system. It acts as a neural interface that provides, at the same time, cognitive augmentations and remote-sensing and reconnaissance capabilities. For example, it allows soldiers to visualize the battlefield in order to plan their actions, and to access airborne drone cameras. However, it also acts as a reality-augmenting and -altering device. During the episode, we are also shown that it is able to generate dreams, in which the content and the intensity might be modulated as behavioural rewards – an erotic dream appears to be a reward for the first kill. When Stripe’s device fails after his initial encounter with the “Roaches,” the blocks the device imposed on perception, as well as the hallucinatory images altering the perception of the world, start to break down. He finally realizes that the “Roaches” are human beings and he meets Catarina, who explains to Stripe a slippery slope of screenings, DNA checks, registers, and propaganda leading to the complete dehumanization and calls for genocide of a group of people. It is at this point that we learn more completely the background of a war that is, in fact, nothing short of ethnic cleansing.

The dialogue between Stripe and Catarina is countered by a conversation between him and the psychologist. It is at this point that Stripe learns the truth behind the MASS device, its effects, and the totalitarian thinking underpinning the genocide: the creation of a soldier and of a populace amenable to war through the “ultimate weapon.” This “ultimate weapon” is, in fact, a behavioural technology that enables and automates the lying and killing necessary for the “protection of the bloodline.” The end of the episode shows how the process of implantation of the MASS system requires a degree of consent to the mood- and memory-altering process. The need to train, to desensitize for killing, and to control the “perfect soldier” takes precedence over the humanity or individuality of both soldiers and the persecuted group.

In short, the episode references ethnic cleansing, racism, eugenics, and behavioural control in a context of technological militarism. It is also reminiscent of the totalitarian militarism and propagandistic culture of Paul Verhoeven’s *Starship Troopers* (based on Robert Heinlein’s book) as well as of the simulacral hallucinations of the Wachowskis’ *Matrix* trilogy. Both underline how the cognitive and social dimensions of human life are moulded in a technological context, and how social cohesion or compliance shape perception in tandem with a shared technological infrastructure.

**Ideology becomes hallucination becomes reality**

This section elaborates upon the summary of the episode and the presentation of its main characters by addressing the role of the MASS system as a disciplinary device of a very particular kind. This chapter contends that the device, besides allowing for a more effective desensitization of soldiers in the conditions of modern warfare, also answers a millennia-old question about the creation of the ideal soldier. Specifically, the MASS system is a technological stand-in for the perfect system of ideological indoctrination of soldiers, one that bypasses important neurological and psychological barriers to perfect obedience and compliance. Ultimately, such a device would, in a sense, operate as embedded ideology.[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Men Against Fire” is also the title of a book by S. L. A. Marshall, originally published in 1947, which addressed the problems of soldier training and commanding in modern war and the challenges of guaranteeing combat performance under the stress of battle (Marshall, 2000). The author believed that the demands of modern war are at odds with fundamental socialization principles. Whereas a humanistic or religious upbringing emphasises social bonding through empathy, kindness, and a shared common ground for human beings despite their differences, wartime demands a precise calibration of community among comrades in arms, obedience to command, and unhesitant aggression towards the enemy. The strong contradiction between gregarious humaneness and organized aggression, along with the psychological stresses of warfare, generate a particular resistance to the violence of war, particularly in instances of mass mobilization.

How, then, to answer this problem and eliminate this resistance? Probably the most important theme in “Men Against Fire” is the perennial problem of the creation of “the perfect soldier.” Neither the concept nor the approach presented in *Black Mirror* – the aim for complete control of a soldier’s mind as well as body – are new. In fact, in *The Republic*, Plato describes the city’s guardians, its protectors, as follows:

“ (…) we must select from the other guardians the sort of men who, upon our consideration, from everything in their lives, look as if they were entirely eager to do what they believe to be advantageous to the city and would in no way be willing to do what is not.” (412 d-e)

In Plato’s *polis*, then, guardians are perfect in the sense that all aspects of their lives are set by an institutional and cultural framework that makes it impossible for them to interpret their reality differently. In the words of Allan Bloom, in the *Preface* to his translation of *The Republic*, “there are no guardians above the guardians; the only guardian of the guardians is a proper education” (Plato, 1991, p. xvii). The education and military training of the guardians is essential and it prepares them for a single role and a specific way to operate in the context of the city. The guardians are trained to obey and protect the city, and are specifically selected (bred) to do so. Their reality is created by a specific education system, built around the myths of the city and its glory, while avoiding all potentially demoralizing elements of non-sanctioned music, poetry, or material comforts.

Contrary to mercenaries, guardians do not prize money above all else, do not shy away from battle when victory is uncertain, and are loyal to the city instead of their paymaster. Compared to citizens, guardians are better trained, more disciplined, and better able to sustain the hardships of combat. Contrary to the aristocracy, guardians do not fight for riches or glory. They are also not forced to go into battle as a slave might be. In general, the description of the “ideal soldier” in “Men Against Fire,” even in the discussion of the psychological problems of modern warfare, does not stray far from Plato’s view of the perfect guardian. Education, which can be defined as a form of indoctrination, cannot be guaranteed to be a perfect guardian of the guardians unless it is highly constraining. Plato’s answer is that the right myth, that is, a beautiful necessary foundational lie, operates as a shared reality that creates a strong bond to the city and a dislike for anything that is perceived to threaten it. The creation of this founding myth, then, would be the prime mover of a new *weltanschauung* shared not only by the guardians of the city, but also by all those tasked to educate, train, and lead them.

Thus, establishing a founding formative myth in the heart of the vocation (that is, the sort of education that seduces the mind and the passions into loving the city above all else) becomes the central problem in the creation of the perfect guardian. In modern contexts, one might add that persuading soldiers to obey orders beyond any questioning is merely one of the many problematic aspects of mass mobilization and indoctrination as experienced during the hot and cold wars of the 20th and the 21st centuries. Industrial warfare demands wider societal acceptance than is suggested in “Men Against Fire.” Constant indoctrination or distraction is necessary to maintain war preparedness and adherence to discipline or message. It would be unthinkable, for example, for a society to accept the kind of cognitive control made possible through MASS devices without a much wider civilian use of the system. To put it another way, the very effectiveness of the system would make it a very tempting device for commercial applications akin to those of neural implants featured in other *Black Mirror* episodes, such as “The Entire History of You” (S01E03), “White Christmas (a special episode aired in 2014, between series 2 and 3), or “Arkangel (S04E02). In all of these episodes, a readily-available device or a prototype allows individuals or authorities to limit perception or to induce hallucinatory experiences in the users. In this sense, that device operates as a kind of automated shared ideology, or a targeted reality-shaping device: the individual’s experience of the world is directly constrained by the worldview embedded in the control system. This episode helpfully identifies that system with a single person – Arquette –, who has complete command of the technological and ideological operation of the device.

An exceptionally long war period, such as the ongoing “War on Terror,” generates a continuous stream of public persuasive strategic communication, as well as a public discourse saturated with jingoism and demonization of alternative approaches. Indeed, it might be argued, as noted below, that managing public opinion, or shaping social reality and discourse on large social scales, requires a proportionally large-scale message creation and distribution system. The purpose of such a system is not the generation of a “virtual reality” or the production of lies, but ensuring the stability of a structure of power – namely through the enactment of ideology via technology, discourse, and law. Yet, as the intensity of such an effort becomes more noticeable, it becomes harder to sustain the hallucination, that is, to hide the ideological underpinnings of the shared world. As Zižek suggests in “Hallucination as Ideology in Cinema,” in a comparison between Hollywood and Nazi cinema, ideology is more noticeably at work when its fantasies are represented in the most literal way. It also at this point that “the cracks in the ideological edifice are rendered much more visible” (Zižek, 2002, sec. IV).

**Verminisation and extermination**

The previous section addressed the hallucinatory nature of ideology. Like a shared hallucination, ideology imposes a rigid ordering upon a variegated, ever-changing lifeworld (the social and natural world of human existence). It operates by introducing clear, seemingly self-evident distinctions between elements of that lifeworld, coloring experience in broad strokes and discarding most of the complexity of human affect in exchange for a purported unity of action and thought. Some distinctions operate internally to the group to which they are imposed: they reinforce in-group cohesion and identity and, as such, can be described as centripetal and integrative. An example of this type of distinction is group identity, as created through shared rites of passage or lived experiences. More widely, such distinctions are imposed through nationality, religion, or ethnicity. Other distinctions describe the outside of this group, and therefore operate externally and introduce a negative, threatening dimension presented as a form of atmospheric pressure exerted all around the boundaries of the in-group. The “outsiders” are variously described both as strong threats and as weaker versions of in-group – often simultaneously. Either way, “outsiders” are always presented as opponents to fear, to challenge, or to eliminate.

When referring to Mexican immigrants to the USA as “rapists,” “criminals,” and “illegals,” U.S. President Donald Trump offered a clear, recent example of this kind of representation. As we now know, that characterisation presaged a more complete concentrationary logic, in which verminisation of foreigners preceded an aggressive imprisonment and expulsion program. It is clear that public discourse and political safeguards failed, until now, to stem the grave consequences of this sequence, which shows how powerful such ideological constructs can be.

In no way is this a new phenomenon. Studies of propaganda in the wake of World War I described the rhetoric structuring this ideological construction of radical antagonism. The idea that the Other is to be feared and rejected doubtlessly predates mass propaganda, but it is the latter that best conveys a continuity in the transformation of antagonism into hatred, and of hatred into ideology and political action. The Institute of Propaganda Analysis (IPA) of Columbia University published, in 1937, a typology of propaganda techniques used in times of war, in which the rhetorical devices were explained in a simple and clear fashion. The famous “tricks” used in mass persuasion, according to the IPA, were “card stacking,” “name calling” “generality,” “testimonial,” “transfer,” “plain folks,” and “band wagon” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2012, p. 237). All of these depend on the construction of a message with a given behavioural or emotional set of responses in mind, and are therefore based on the careful staging of fact and fiction.

Let us examine, among these rhetorical moves, those closer to the object of this text. A “bandwagon” argument is based on the (usually overstated) degree of acceptance of the idea being put forward. Other “tricks” of propaganda identified by the IPA are more directly linked to existing social predispositions of the intended audience. “Plain folks” relies on the persuasive power of the simplicity of the opinion of the supposedly common person. “Glittering generality” refers to a cherished, often abstract idea that is not subject to proof or examination. “Name calling” similarly requires that the audience reject a given person or idea without examination. A more extreme form of name-calling is the outright dehumanization of the opposition, in which the basic human characteristics of the in-group are denied to the enemy. This set of rhetorical resources is a recurring feature of propagandistic efforts, and more recent analyses and models of propaganda have built upon these insights into processes of mass persuasion. For example, in Chomsky and Herman’s analysis of propaganda originally highlighted the role of *anti-communist* rhetoric during the Cold War, but afterwards was replaced by *capitalist pro-market* rhetoric (Herman, 2000), and then, during the War on Terror, the notion of an Axis of Evil (Herman, Chomsky, and Mullen, 2009, p. 14).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Dehumanizing the enemy in discourse and in everyday practice is a particularly insidious form of persuasion, not least because it mobilizes notions such as “race,” “genes,” “heritage,” and other pseudo-scientific biological analogies. Taken to the extreme, it operates in discourse as “verminisation.” This, according to Mark Fisher, is a rhetorical device in the discourse of justification of war that “transforms the enemy into a subhuman swarm that cannot be reasoned with, only destroyed; it also makes ‘us’ into victims of its repulsive, invasive agency” (Fisher, 2018, chap. ‘Conspicuous force and verminisation’). Therefore, verminisation is part of the encouragement or ideological preparation for atrocities, especially against immigrants and other minorities; it presents the in-group as “ontologically Good” and the other as inherently Evil. This representation is not merely aesthetic; in fact, it is predominantly political and behavioural in its aim.

The psychiatrist Thomas Szasz, from whom Fisher adopted the concept, originally identified verminisation as a device for allowing a moral judgement to disguise itself as a scientific or neutral assessment, thereby acquiring legitimacy. In his discussion of the medicalization of society, Szasz, writing in the 1970s, stated that the discourse around drug addiction in the United States followed this pattern of verminisation, by equating addiction with an epidemic to eradicate, even if that meant eliminating drug users and pushers (Szasz, 1974, p. 15–17). Medicine and by law ultimately further reify this metaphor, lending it the legitimacy it needs to become acceptable practice. The complete dehumanization of human beings is, for Szasz, a product of the social discursive constructs that come to be applied to entire groups of people for therapeutic or otherwise disciplinary purposes. Mental illness is one of the instances of this rhetoric of exclusion, wherein the use of the label of “sickness,” far from being an accurate description of a biological condition, is instead a reference to a scientific paradigm as well as, more generally, “a linguistic and social game” (Szasz, 1991, p. 50).

Verminisation is linked to hate speech as much as to the therapeutic labelling of marginality. Since animal species usually considered to be vermin or pests (such as mice, mosquitoes, or roaches) are vectors of disease for humans, “vermin” becomes a synecdoche for disease and epidemic. Verminisation, then, operates by equating the enemy to a pest, an infestation by an invasive species, bearing contagious diseases and biological defects, which needs to be eradicated as a matter of survival for the pure, but fragile, “full humans.” Because of the obvious rhetorical and logical connection between the discourse of dehumanization and genocide, verminisation is part of “atrocity speech,” presaging a logic of exclusion and, ultimately*,* “extermination,” that is, genocide. It is notable that there is a substantial contradiction in supremacist speech and the rhetoric of verminisation in the Nazi mould. On the one hand, the “vermin” are inferior, diseased, morally and physically deformed. On the other hand, they represent a danger to “purity,” to healthy humans, a threat to eliminate. This duality ensures that a sense of superiority coexists with fear: an urgency to secure borders, both geographic and genetic, against existential threats not just to individuals, but to the entirety of the group.

“Men Against Fire” does away with any subtle allegory in this domain by employing the term “Roach” to identify the target of the atrocities. The characteristics of dehumanizing speech are all clearly present in the speech of the psychologist detailing the illnesses and threats carried by the “Roaches,” whereas the truly human character of the persecuted group is demonstrated earlier in the episode in the main character’s interaction with Catarina. She explains that there is nothing wrong with “Roaches,” and that they are, in fact, migrants, recently arrived to a new country. After being subjected to multiple forms of bureaucratic control and cataloguing, they were ultimately placed at the margins of society and became the victims of genocide. The rigorous labelling and registration of the people preceded its exclusion from society, first through administrative means, then through technology. The first process established a pseudo-scientific pathologizing of the group – couched in the language of genetics. The second process established the basis for systematic elimination without any remorse.

There are multiple obvious historical parallels between “Men Against Fire” and the persecution and genocide of German and European people of Jewish descent in Nazi Germany. The first is, of course, the process of dehumanization, whereby not only Jews but also people considered to suffer from mental illnesses, congenital disorders, or otherwise deemed “degenerate” were catalogued, institutionalized, and killed. Secondly is the construction of consent around the dehumanization of certain groups, along with the imposition of disciplined compliance to all social groups. A third aspect pertains to the technologically-mediated process of elimination. In this episode of *Black Mirror*, the MASS system desensitizes soldiers to the act of killing by superimposing a hallucinatory mask over the reality of, not war, but massacre, to preclude feelings of guilt, empathy, or simple human recognition. In Nazi Germany, the creation of death camps was one of the administrative responses to the call for genocide, and crucially considered the most efficient and least damaging response to the morale of the soldiers. Hardened fanaticism did not seem enough to preclude the pangs of morality. Since the existence of the camps was concealed, and even denied, the realities of the genocide were disavowed by the public, in spite of the generalised rhetoric of hatred (including verminisation and calls for extermination) towards Jews during the Nazi period. In the same way, ideology and technology operate together to enable each other’s discipline and operation.

**Propaganda and technology in the hallucinatory apparatus**

As explained in the previous section, verminisation, as rhetorical strategy, signals an effort to dehumanize and isolate a group of humans with shared characteristics and deny them the rights and privileges ascribed to the in-group. However, the rhetorical machinery of prejudice is neither spontaneous nor innocent. As described above, the attribution of characteristics of vermin to human beings is typically a prelude for the imposition of a disciplinary apparatus, in that it implies a need for control via eradication or exclusion. This process also entails an ideological standpoint in that it seeks to advance a certain worldview to lead to the imposition of a new order of things upon the social world. This section discusses the ways in which the episode “Men Against Fire” addresses the issue of the dissemination of ideology through technology and propaganda.

Verminisation presages the use of force, providing it with ideological justification while reinforcing the representation of the in-group as inherently Good regardless of the violence employed by its members (Fisher, 2018, chap. ‘Conspicuous Force and Verminisation’). In “Men Against Fire” the rationale for the elimination of the “Roaches” is that of logical necessity, of need, of a service to the Good of humanity – a logic of intervention as a burden of the wardens of morals and purity. At this stage, communication technologies – and the media in particular – become the vehicles for the anticipation of violent action and for controlling negative attitudes towards its exercise. It is not surprising, then, that in this episode of *Black Mirror* military action – filtered by the MASS device – resembles that of a video game or a movie. That representation is the corollary of the correspondence between means and ends: genocide is a technical problem, best accomplished by sterile means and flawlessly calibrated systems. That the result is unbearable violence and ruin is of no consequence for a reality thoroughly saturated by hallucinatory images: military violence in “Men Against Fire” can be justified because it is seen as righteous and the enemy is no better than vermin. Any moral qualms about this action are, therefore, presented as the true hallucination or delusion: religion, education, common sense must all give way to the ludic and erotic rewards of true integration.

The MASS system, as noted above, embeds ideological control directly into the perceptual system, taking control of sensorial inputs as well as of oneiric and erotic aspects of personality. In so doing, it effectively replaces perception and reasoning. For Fisher, “hyper-realisation is precisely what permits the production of very real deaths on a mass scale” (ibid.), where reality is permeated with fiction to such a degree that it becomes hallucination. In *Black Mirror*, this effect is typically introduced by information and communication technologies of some sort, with neural implants and interfaces being common plot devices throughout the series. Baudrillard noted that propaganda conceals itself in mass communication in order to enhance its effectiveness in mixing the real and the lie, thus generating something akin to a hallucination by interfering with the construction of a lifeworld – its language, its shared iconography, its myths. A centralized political economy of communication allows for an even more effective dissemination of that mix (Baudrillard, 1988, p. 141).

In “Men Against Fire” the technological trope of the implant operates, at the same time, as a stand-in for the diffuse hallucinatory system of mass media, and for a centralized, technocratic attempt to de-politicize ideology through scientific justification. In short, MASS devices act as a delivery system for propaganda and ideology. Like typical propaganda, the implant’s purpose it to influence and change attitudes, delivering emotional and sensorial reinforcement by overwhelming individuals with rewards while, at the same time, blocking any contradictory signals. Naturally, this reinforcement and interference binary works only if it engages with the expectations, desires, and fears of the target, but cannot operate except by disguising its disciplinary purposes. In this episode of *Black Mirror,* as already noted, those purposes are clearly stated by Catarina and Arquette, while Stripe’s fellow soldiers exhibit the same blissful videogame-like alienation as *The Matrix*’s Cypher. It is in this sense that Kenneth Payne defines propaganda as a kind of psychological and anthropological construction, necessarily grounded in “narrative elements most likely to resonate with the target groups” (Payne, 2009, p. 110). Ideological construction of discourse is most effective when it is supported by acculturation and socialization.

In their analysis of propaganda, both Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Ellul recognise the role of mass persuasion in the integration of the individual in industrial society. Their arguments converge in the assessment that industrial society requires, especially in the context of an optimized technocratic economy (such as a wartime economy), the compliance of individuals. Concomitantly, mass society requires mass communication and persuasion in order to maintain cohesion – it is an integrative, centripetal force counteracting the effects of specialization and distribution of social labour in modern societies. Therefore, mass persuasion has a necessary disciplinary role in industrial society. For Ellul, propaganda operates both at the individual and at the mass levels, creating an aesthetic and historical re-grounding that aims to overcome any residue of resistance in eliciting the appropriate response. It is less about eliciting a reflected response than “to provoke an action. It is also not to make one change his allegiance to a given doctrine, but to irrationally engage him in an *active process*” (Ellul, 1962, pp. 36–37). Here, too, we find parallels in the way “Men Against Fire” interprets the mutual dependency between Stripe’s psyche – his ego, but also his conscience – and the military technocracy controlling the cognitive implant. The latter requires compliance and integration, but it must do so under the guise of rational, enlightened conscious acceptance of the reality of the MASS device. Of course, this choice is merely an illusion, since one suspects that the removal of the device would not set the soldier free of the psychological effects of the terror he had helped sow, and even less of that military technocracy with which he had signed a contract. In fact, this formal contract and the form of consent is an unnecessary flourish in the narrative. In no way does the revelation that Stripe had signed a contract accepting the negative consequences of the MASS implant differ from a soldier’s enlisting in times of violent conflict. It does, however, call into question the blind acceptance of technological normativity typical of, for example, the online agreement forms for digital platforms’ terms and conditions of service. It is perhaps this allegory of passive consent that should give one pause to reflect upon the creeping techno-cognitive infrastructure of our lifeworld.

**Final remarks**

As I have argued**,** “Men Against Fire” attempts to address a particularly distressing set of biopolitical and discursive phenomena. The episode addresses a complex interaction of ideology, technology, war, and perception, calling into question the arbitrariness of myth as well as its generalized acceptance through its absorption into ideology. We may make a distinction between the several subjectivities presented in the episode, each revealing a particular position in the biopolitics of atrocity. In the first instance, Stripe represents the main subject of the biopolitical apparatus, the one that needs to be disciplined and brought into submission through constant surveillance and technical care. Second, the MASS system, understood not just as a particular case of a technical device but as a dispositive – a technosocial assemblage built to mobilize the armed forces in the most efficient and predictable way.[[3]](#footnote-3) Third, the group called “Roaches,” an essential artificial construct (the “hallucination”) which provides the enemy at the core of the ideological underpinnings of the disciplinary system.

In other words, the propagation of a lie and its crystallization into an acted-upon worldview is the *sine qua non* of the operation of ideology as hallucination: the lie must be *lived*. The only possible way to ensure that the hallucination overcomes the material presence of that which would belie its character is to force it onto the very perceptual apparatus. Thus, ideology becomes active in the world through the mediation of a technological perceptual bypass, which manifests a perceptual reality coherent in every way with that ideology, thereby guiding thought or action. The moment where that bypass is negated is, in a way, the return of the repressed reality forcing a new choice upon the disciplined subjectivity (Stripe): either to face this new perceptual and intellectual reality, thus abandoning not just the hallucination, but also their lifeworld, or to fully embrace the hallucination. Stripe’s choice, in fact, is similar to that of the character Cypher in *The Matrix* (1999), who regrets having accepted the “red pill” that freed him from the Matrix and betrays the free humans in exchange of being reintegrated into the Matrix as a privileged person. Forgetting his previous life out of the simulation is the crucial element of the agreement: embracing the lie is perceived to be the only form of liberation.

“Men Against Fire” is interesting not because it is particularly masterful television, but in that it makes literal and visible the interaction of ideology and technology. My contention is that this episode brings verminisation to the fore in as a crucial step in the transformation or creation of a worldview amenable to manipulation, and potentially leading to persecution of minorities (and genocide). The most evident example is that of Nazi Germany, but more recent instances of genocide – the persecution of the Rohingya people in Burma comes to mind – show that the dissemination of propaganda and the ideological construction of a shared negative view attempt to superimpose that perception upon the experience of the lived human world. In early 2020, the association of the spread of the COVID-19 virus with Chinese travellers or emigrants constitutes a powerful reminder of the persistence of verminisation as a rhetorical threshold for discrimination and even violence.

In sum, this episode keeps with the dystopian tones of most *Black Mirror* episodes. It includes a thoroughly disheartening and fatalistic, albeit somewhat ambiguous, ending. As a reflection on technology, it addresses the compulsion for human augmentation by calling into question human autonomy in the era of disciplinary, managed technological systems. It also portrays speculative simulation technologies and human augmentation as an extension and radicalization of the current social trends, where persuasive discourse and ideological manipulation give shape to new divisions or, even more often, make old fears and hatreds resurface. The final scene – the return to a crumbling American suburban home – suggests that the hallucinatory veneer of simulation and ideology, far from being a fragile construct or reality effect, is the product of a willingness to accept illusion, deception, or distraction, rather than facing the disagreeable realities of a dysfunctional *polis*.

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1. This text follows, loosely, Lukács in defining ideology as a translation of the dominant classes’ modes of thinking into a form of suppression of the consciousness of the proletariat, which makes this class view social reality in terms defined by others who rule over them. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács states that the dominant ideas in capitalist systems do not correspond necessarily to the operation of the system itself, but rather to “the ideology of the ruling class” (Lukács, 1972, p. 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Herman and Chomsky also placed focus not just on rhetoric, but on the political economy of the communication system, characterizing ideological dissemination as a tool of social control at the disposal of ruling classes (Herman and Chomsky, 2002, p. 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Foucault’s concept of dispositive (or apparatus) sheds light into the technosocial construction and articulation of power relations. The dispositive is not a rigid structure of domination and alienation. It is best understood as an adaptive, fluid process wherein human beings, technologies, institutional arrangements and discourses shift and rearrange themselves in those relations of power (cf., in particular, Foucault, 1994, pp. 298-329). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)