

Blood Machines

by Finch, May 2016

The 1990s in America are widely remembered through a nostalgic haze, floating on memories of a skyrocketing NASDAQ and air-pump Nikes. Our most salient national concern was whether the president had received a blowie in the White House. Few, however, remember the decade as an early iteration of today's disquiet over swiftly shifting relationships with computation and biotechnologies, and the emergence of new kinds of carefully orchestrated small-cell terrorism.



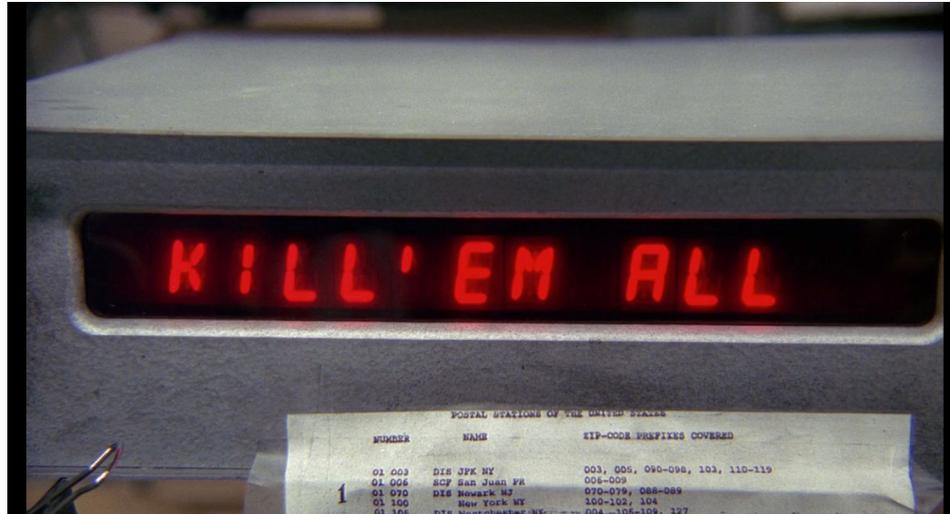
Speculative fiction can piece disparate concepts together in illuminating ways. The X-Files was an experiment in this kind of combinatory storytelling, where stories about monsters and aliens were translated from an undercurrent of national anxiety. A 1994 episode, Blood, reflected widespread cultural fears over the rapid penetration of machines and chemical compounds into our lives and our bodies.

Mulder and Scully are called upon to investigate a small, all-American town plagued by a rash of unexplainable spree killings, committed by ordinary folks. The violence of each attack is prefigured by a shot of an electronic display, where the characters see murderous commands written in a TV screen, a digital elevator display, an office scale. The messages in the screens are focused on corporeal horror and visceral phobias, of rape, of suffocation, of blood.

The investigation turns up that the government was testing a new kind of pesticide in the area. Chemicals within incited bursts of paranoid schizophrenia in otherwise healthy people.



The premise is based loosely on actual events, when the state of California conducted tests of the pesticide Malathion throughout the 1980s. The tests, while claimed safe by the EPA, were terminated following eco-terrorist attacks in California in 1989. A group calling themselves "The Breeders" claimed responsibility for the release of millions of medflies in the Los Angeles area, devastating crops and agricultural revenues for the state, in what they called "financial retaliation" for the pesticide testing.



Cultural and social acclimation to the speed with which technological advances changed our agricultural food supply, our domestic spaces, and working lives in the 90s are easily dismissed now, in goofy movie depictions of hackers wearing hoodies crouched over flickering screens. This episode is a more nuanced observation of anxieties over machines penetrating both our gardens and our bodies.

A sly nod to the history of speculative fiction, and its morphing of fears over both biology and machines, is in the casting of the lead character. An ordinary postal worker whose descent into madness frames the episode, he's played by the same actor who appeared in Blade Runner as the inventor of both animal and human machine replicants.

