



**Black Mirror: a reflection on our society through the eyes of Baudrillard.**

**A postmodern philosophical approach.**

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**Abstract**

This article studies through a hermeneutical and conceptual analysis the representation of our media focused and technological society in the anthological, auto conclusive and avant-garde British-American sci-fi television series, Black Mirror (Channel 4 and Netflix, 2011-) created by Charlie Brooker. This series was chosen for its dystopian perspective of the Information Communication Technologies (ICT's), its groundbreaking aesthetics, narrative and themed-based forms that have brought into life once again, postmodern theories, specifically, those of Jean Baudrillard. Taking into account our current media centric society, these theories help us to understand the new diverse realities and phenomena we face as an audience.

**Keywords**

Black Mirror, Netflix, postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, Charlie Brooker, sci-fi TV series and postmodern philosophy.

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In the last twenty years, television series have achieved three important milestones. Firstly there is support from an audience that finds comparable standards of quality that were once only present in cinema. Secondly, there is an increased praise from critics recognizing the important narrative and artistic values in many titles, categorizing them as the 'third golden age' or 'drama age'. Thirdly, television series have facilitated an important change in the exhibition and consumption, which has been shaped by new phenomena such as *fandom* and *binge-watching*. Television series are social mechanisms that transmit cultural values to an heterogeneous audience (Del Campo, Puebla and Ivars, 2016) creating high-end engagement and allowing intelligent reflections, specifically those of the science fiction genre, as previously argued by Jean Baudrillard about today's technological, multi-faceted, much-mediated and multi-cultural environment. The French theorist's analysis about media, contemporary culture and technological communication are the key components that structure the postmodern world (Lane, 2001: 27).

Frederic Jameson, Donna Haraway, Larry McCaffery and Jean Baudrillard believe science fiction has become a preeminent literary genre of the postmodern era, since it has long anticipated and fictionally explored the drastic transformations that technology, including the fields of information/simulation technology and bioengineering have wrought on Western post-industrial society. Science fiction has ceased to be a genre of fiction *per se*, and become instead a mode of awareness about the world (Banash, 2003: 124).

'Science fiction is in a sense everywhere, in the circulation of models, here and now' (Baudrillard, 1978: 126) acting as the paradigmatic reflexive and destabilized form of cultural experiences (Creed, 1993; O'Riordan, 2008; Dimitrakaki and Tsiantis 2002) and is invariably described as futuristic and even though this is a reasonable characterization (Díaz, 2014: 587 and Campbell, 2016: 22), our current sci-fi television series 'are not only being contextualized in a futuristic environment but a modified present' (Campbell, 2016: 22). Therefore, this genre actually focuses on a series of narratives that raise questions about the potential reach of technologies and mass media. As Campbell points out 'science fiction permits viewers to glance at a strange yet familiar "risk landscape" of future possibilities which are always-already embedded in present realities' (p.16). Hence they no longer act as one simple part of the television flow (Williams, 1975) but as essential insight (Jancovich and Lyon, 2003: 2-3). 'Sci-fi can be seen to offer us the chance to transgress identity positions, question authority and create affecting relations that involve ruptures at the level of feeling and cognition' (Milner and Redmon, 2015: 7). Postmodernism supposes among others a certain rise of science fiction genre, technique and ideologies related to the role that mass media and new technologies play in our perception of reality explored through Baudrillard (Kellner, 2015). The series Black Mirror is a paradigm to explain this connection.

### **Black Mirror: A reflection on today's society**

Black Mirror is an avant-garde, auto conclusive, anthological (Euchari-Soto, 2016: 884-902), science fiction television series with a dystopian approach towards the effects of the Information, Communication and Technology (ICT's), set on a 'modified present' (Musarò, 2014: 3), while displaying *techno paranoia* as its fundamental theme. Most of its episodes can easily be related to everyday aspects of the digital age, such as the violation of privacy on the Internet or the enormous influence of social networks and media, acting as a warning about the implication of human life in the media and technological space. This reflection goes beyond the traditional limitations presented in film and television (Singh, 2014).

Black Mirror stories are '*born of the digital artifice itself*' (Pousa, 2013: 49), meaning that the plot starting point is the role that technology plays in our day-to-day life. The first two seasons and the Christmas special of the series were produced by Zeppotron, however the third season has been produced by the American streaming OTT platform, Netflix. Provoking a shift from their original essence of the *brit-grit* genre characterized for its strong emphasis on the British social realism, the first two seasons represented the working class beyond London and used darker, dingy and unclean visual styles to portray the British regions authentically. This portrayal is a common characterization of

Channel 4 and has been seen in other well-recognized series such as *Misfits* (2009-2013), *Skins* (2007-2013), *My Mad Fat Diary* (2013-2015), etc. and has been previously explored in cinema through authors such as Mike Leigh, Ken Loach and Alan Clarke. According to Ashby and Higson (2000) 'the idea of realism implies a privileged relationship between an artwork and an external reality. Actual realist practices, however, depend upon the employment of conventions which audiences are prepared to accept as realistic' (p.249). Nevertheless, Netflix fails to maintain this essence and advocates for the 'American production' tradition, shifting the focus from the United Kingdom while placing increased emphasis on more dialogue, slower rhythm, enriched aesthetics and external shots.

Monsieur, un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l'azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des borbiers de la route. Et l'homme qui porte le miroir dans sa hotte sera par vous accusé d'être immoral!' (Stendhal, 1854: 770).

Presenting this metaphor is *Black Mirror's* title, which has a strong and personal Brooker's authorship. Why would a mirror be black when the purpose of a mirror is to reflect a visible image? The mirror is subverted, turned away from reality into the black chasm we have created in our ultra media centric lives. Thus, *Black Mirror* can be seen as a 'dark humor tale about hegemonic power and technology in show business' (Ungureanu, 2015: 22). Brooker has achieved a somber and sickening yet appealing representation of the current obsession with connectivity through 'hauntingly

familiar morality tales which seek to look beyond the represented narrative tropes of technological dystopias' (Singh, 2014: 121). In *Black Mirror* the scary lies in imagining ostensibly how a useful resource can become a nightmare, by prioritizing the twisted endings to the drama, which are one of the main narrative characteristics. On the other hand, the powerful contrast between our humanity and the dystopian future we are heading towards are thought-provoking and breath-taking to the point that the viewer is left wanting to experience more.

As Baudrillard implied in *Simulation and Simulacra* (1978) 'we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning' (p.79), therefore there is a saturation of the medium. *Black Mirror* highlights McLuhan's (1995) theory of '*the entire content of a medium is another medium*' through the meta-television concept since it has a strong hybridization of genres, self-reference and intertextuality (Scott, 1987), particularly in the subgenre of television narcissism, 'as a pretext for a tribute or, more frequently, for self-criticism' (García Martínez, 2009: 657). *Black Mirror* is 'an audiovisual text that can reveal theoretically criticisms that have been made in the field of sociology' (Cigüela and Martínez, 2014: 94) and presents a philosophical approach as well in part due to its strong emphasis on Baudrillard's key postmodernism ideas about reality.

*Simulation* refers to an obvious copy or imitation of reality (Baudrillard, 1978). As it is explored in *Be Right Back* (1x02), the main character Martha hires a high tech company's software after losing her partner, Ash. The company simulates a *cyborg* of Ash by using his 'data cloud', even though it is seemingly adequate and working, she soon discards it for not 'being good enough' or 'real enough' and decides to place 'the Ash cyborg' in an attic, not willing to fully dispose of it. This ending is what Baudrillard would see as the '*wasteful expenditure*', a massive depreciation of something as soon as it is possessed. In a sense, it tributes Mary B. Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This episode not only explores Baudrillard's theories of the capacity for the simulation to replace reality but it also brings alive the concept of '*gizmo*' proposed in *The System of Objects* (1997) 'a gadget purport to be incredibly useful but that usually ends up crammed in a cupboard gathering dust or used once or twice a year' (p. 114). Moreover, posthuman theorists such as Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles would have viewed the episode as 'disembodied' information, that is, something which cannot fundamentally replace the human body but can only be incorporated into it and human life practices. So as Baudrillard, they see that there is a belief that 'technology will always improve nature implying that nature itself it is constructed as a technological device' (Lane, 2001: 34). Furthermore, authors such as Paula Sibilia (2002), aligned with Baudrillard, believes that 'the digital paradigm, constitutes the essence of the being and it determines the confused border between life and death' (p.52).



Another pronounced example of the theory of simulation is *Playtest* (3x02), in which the main character Cooper is escaping from his issues at home by traveling around the world which is revealed through his Instagram pictures. Baudrillard (2011) would criticize the Instagram obsession by saying

Who watches them? They watch themselves, but who else does, since everyone can get off, virtually speaking from the same domestically integrated circuit? There will soon be nothing more than self-communicating zombies, whose lone umbilical relay will be their own feedback image. (p. 25)

At the end of his trip Cooper finds an opportunity to earn enough money to return home by testing digital games for SeituGamu a well-known tech company. The game that originally began as an exciting experience soon turned into a seemingly real nightmare where Cooper's worst fears were simulated without him being able to decipher reality from the simulation. However, the game 'is just a surface effect or myth, a way of making people feel that they are getting some kind of authentic experience in a sanitized safer environment' (Lane, 2001: 41).

*Simulacra* refers to a copy that depicts something that either has no original to begin with, or that no longer has an original (Baudrillard, 1978). *Men Against Fire* (3x05) accentuates on our current technical scientific revolution, with the accelerated development of genetic engineering and biotechnology, cybernetics and telecommunications, that has given an accelerated pace to the army. The episode

narrates a military organization that is exterminating mutated humans. Stripe, a new soldier, finds out that his MASS implant has altered his senses to disguise the fact that the mutated are actually regular humans who are hated by civilians due to war propaganda. This clearly portrays Baudrillard's different approaches to war. In his essay *The Gulf War did not take place*, Baudrillard (1995) argued that the Gulf War was an atrocity which was masqueraded as a war. The closely watched media presentations made it impossible to distinguish between the real experience of the conflict, and its stylized, selective misrepresentation through simulacra (Baudrillard, 1978). When Stripe finds out the truth, the company wipes part of his memory and get his MASS system reset. Baudrillard (1998b) would consider this as a life 'sheltered by sign, in the denial of the real' (p.34). Also, *Men Against Fire* is a clear example of what Baudrillard (1944:81) depicts in *The Implosion of Meaning in the Media*, where it criticizes the image media portrays about Holocaust, giving an aesthetic dimension to the Shoah.

The 'mediatization' of History separates us from the real event, to the point that hypereality takes over reality. In the postmodern era science fiction has presented the crisis and paralysis of historical authenticity and continues to contribute to its enfeeblement and repression acting as a warning (Jameson, 1991). 'If there are no more dustbins of history, this is because history itself has become a dustbin. It has become its own dustbin, just as the planet itself is becoming its own dustbin' (Baudrillard, 1994: 263). To this, Frederic Jameson (1991) adds

Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future. Defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy. (p.284)

*Hyperreality* produces a reality of its own without being based upon any particular bit of the real world (Lane, 2001: 30), becoming more definitive and real than reality itself. In *Fifteen Million Merits* (1x02), Brooker presents us a world where everyone must cycle on exercise bikes in order to power their surroundings and generate a currency called merits. These merits allow people to present themselves to an entertainment show, which offers a chance to get out of the slave-like world. This satire especially underlays criticism for the capitalistic system. The main character who criticizes the capitalistic system, ends up being part of it because the system incorporates 'his resurrection and critics, showing its capacity to transform anyone or anything that is an element of rebellion in a product of entertainment that can be commercialized for, paradoxically, fed and increase the homogenous beliefs' (Díaz, 2014: 592). It brings to the idea of nihilism according to Baudrillard (1978) 'the system is itself also nihilistic, in the sense that it has the power to pour everything, including what denies it, into indifference' (p. 163).

Baudrillard's theories in this episode stand out by presenting a completely hyperreal world. The walls of the cyclers have been replaced through screens and landscapes that are artificial reproductions, the virtuality has replaced and absorbed the physical

presence. People are constantly watching media content, it is an obligation, transforming entertainment into an omnipresent and tyrannical institution and consequently provoking insatiable thirst for distraction. Baudrillard (2005) would imply 'the main driver of our capitalistic society its consumption rather than production, [...] and advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea'(p.193). So the subject is seemingly brought closer to the world of events, that is consumed via signs, which keeps the real at a distance (Lane, 2001: 71). 'Essence was opposed to appearance, life was turned into an appearance. Now essence is denied but appearance is retained. Everything is merely appearance' (Deleuze, 1962:148).

For Baudrillard, Postmodernity is about the play of 'appearances' and the destruction of symbolic meaning. *Nosedive* (3x01) presents an alternative reality, where meritocracy is the focus of the narrative. People can rate one another by using an app on their phones, impacting their entire life by creating a classification of society. The increasing banality of the world that Baudrillard argued was associated with and accompanied by information overload, excessive visibility, and obscene amounts of images. These developments have a direct relationship with the proliferation of screens. *Screen promiscuity* is witnessed here, where everything has been revealed to the viewer so that there is nothing left to expose. According to Baudrillard's thesis (1994a:160), *Nosedive*, would represent the destruction of symbolic meaning. Baudrillard (1997) notes that 'whatever is lacking in the human subject is invested in the object' (p.82).

The series also explores one of the main motifs of postmodern audio-visual: the concept of *nostalgia*. *San Junipero* (3x04) is the most desolated image of our present obsession for nostalgia. It narrates a fictional California city under the leitmotiv of '*heaven is a place on earth*' set in the 1980s, but that also allows for time travel, since the episode tells the story of two women who fall in love there but in the end the viewer realizes that what is imagined as San Junipero is only in their conscience. The real bodies are either lying on a hospital bed or dead, so the only way they 'can be happy' is in the virtual world of San Junipero since its their own consciousness 'saved' by the TCKR machines are 'living' the experiences. However, even though it is meant to represent a 'happy ending', we wonder if it truly is since 'heaven' is not a place on earth, rather a hyperreal world where their conscience live. According to Frederic Jameson (1991) 'the classical nostalgia film, while evading its present altogether, registered its historicist deficiency by losing itself in mesmerized fascination in lavish images of specific generational pasts' (p.296). *San Junipero* is an illusion of a reality that is created, and people's imagination about the real world is satisfied by man made and contrived structures. In other words, *San Junipero* is for Brooker what Disneyland is for Jean Baudrillard (1978) 'the Disneyland imaginary is neither true or false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary' (p.175)

## **Punishment in Black Mirror**

In this distorted world the postmodern concept of punishment emerges. Michel Foucault (1995) appears as a reference here on the juridico-political function applied to public execution.

The public execution belongs to a whole series of great rituals in which power is eclipsed and restored; over and above the crime that has placed the sovereign in contempt, it deploys before all eyes an invincible force. Its aim is not so much to reestablish a balance as to bring into play, as its extreme point, the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength (p.48).

*White Bear* (2x02) ostensibly exposes this balance described by Foucault by exploring how a young woman that is subjected to the law through media and popular punishment loses her rights of the offender, since it does not allow the possibility of having her sentence reviewed and therefore the loss opportunity for reintegration into society. However, this does not seem to cause an ethical dilemma to viewers, who enjoy and entertain themselves by participating it as if it was a theme park. In this sense, the increasing participation of the audiences in televised products has caused an evolution in a process in where they are usually passive spectators. The use of screens of mobile phones symbolize that 'what is consumed is the image and not the phenomenon itself' (Zakin, 2011). *White Bear* investigates the reality television shows

and audiences that entertain themselves participating in the suffering of the contestants, dehumanizing them. Certainly, it is consumed by spectators as mere spectacle (Baudrillard, 1978).

In that sense, *White Christmas* (Christmas special) explores the idea of artificial intelligence, technological management of our environments and the meaning of consciousness. The multipart special follows multiple characters including Matt, a social coach, and his family, as well as Greta, a woman who decides to undergo surgery that would copy her consciousness and be used in a 'cookie' device to control her home and act as a personal assistant. Most of the episode focuses on the interactions between the newly created conscious device and Matt who assigned as the trainer. The episode represents a hyperreal perspective of the artificial consciousness that parallels with what we currently understand to be smart home devices such as *Google Home* or *Amazon Echo*. Moreover, it narrates the story of Matt the creator of the 'cookie' who after committing a crime helps the police solve the crime committed by Joe by using his cookie to confess. The victory earns Matt freedom. However he is entirely blocked from everyone resulting in people being viewed as silent blurred shapes. This compares to current social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, etc. where we are able to completely block individuals from communicated. The result is a dark and twisted punishment leaving Matt unable to experience humanity.

## Politics and cartoons

*The Waldo Moment* (1x03) presents a digital cartoon character with an unconventional message that ends up running for British Prime Minister representing a breakthrough to the hegemonic political system. Presenting the popularity of empty ideals in a spectacle society and revealing the political and life sphere as an amalgam of entertainment, full of empty phrases and superficial morality. Illustrating Guy Debord's worst nightmare since it parodies how politics are consumed in the media. It reexamines the reconfiguration of political discourse when it is received through an unconventional medium or discourse that lack on proposals or electoral action. His sarcastic and empty speech does not seem to matter to a large number of citizens, willing to support the cartoon character. Forwarding the idea of *infotainment*, (Castells, 2009) sees the creation of agendas as a tool to allow citizens to interpret certain subjects or people in a concrete way, even when these ideas seem to go against the same system that promotes them. As seen in the episode, these agendas are not exclusively created by the traditional media, but also by social networks and platforms as Youtube. The hegemonic system becomes more aware and invisible, when ideas and facts are disseminated by a synergy of vertical traditional media with horizontal communication networks. Citizens are allowed to be responsible for transmitting, facilitating, and providing credibility to information.



Baudrillard's definition of terrorism is the field of symbolic exchange. It's a reflection of the system's own violence and the violence which is beyond it. Terrorism is the growth of violence and politics and the September 11th, 2001 attacks are an explicit example of this new type of symbolic terrorism. Baudrillard (2002a) refers to 'the clash of triumphant globalization at war with itself represent a new kind of terrorism, exhibiting a form of action which plays the game, and lays hold of the rules of the game, solely with the aim of disrupting it... they have taken over all the weapons of the dominant power'. A part of the *National Anthem* (1x01) attempts to draw parallels to this by using the figure of the loved British Princess as the target of a national threat that can only be rescued if the British Prime Minister has sexual intercourse with a pig on live television, showing the obsession for media voyeurism. In this way, the event gives effect to the society of the spectacle described by Guy Debord, in which the news gets more transcendence by the fascination they cause in the spectator, than its political, economic or social relevance. 'The information contained in the image is symbolic, it is a product that has a meaning that is not necessarily linked to the events it represents' (Baudrillard: 2001: 2-3). Therefore, the viewer must give meaning to the images, which turns audiences into active protagonists of some events in which sometimes they are not even present.

## Surveillance and the panoptic-disciplinary mechanism

Baudrillard describes surveillance cameras in terms of deterrence, which physically prevent shoppers in a mall from stealing merchandise. Surveillance collapses the distance between the illusion and the real; it simulates repression (Maudslien, 1998). Baudrillard draws his theories through the panoptic-disciplinary mechanism in the symbolic perspective. In *Shut Up and Dance* (3x03), Kenny a young man is forced by an anonymous troller of the Internet to complete illegal tasks after they recorded him masturbating while watching child pornography. The show explores the violation of privacy especially when done through anonymity, advocating to both cyberbullying and hacking. The hacker figure is also explored in *Hated in the Nation* (3x06) presenting a moral debate that questions the hackers motive as being hacktivism or cyberactivism. In a sense he is an anti-hero, which is an obsession of postmodernism shown through other characters such as *The Joker* or *Frank Underwood*, that rely on their own principles and in the case of the hacker in *Hated in the Nation* he leaks a type of *Manifesto* to avoid cyberbulling but doing so ends up killing 387,000 people. It is also curious how surveillance is always perceived as something exterior; however, in *The Entire History of You* (1x03) the underlying criticism relies on a type of self-surveillance. The characters have a grain that allows them to record and rewatch their experiences 24/7, acting as

the monitor of their personal activities, remitting to the surveillance control we see in *Wikileaks*, *Snowden*, etc. where everything is seemingly controlled.

## **Conclusions**

The discussion above illustrates that *Black Mirror* is not an audio-visual piece that solely criticizes technology. Instead, it focuses on how humanity is interacting with a rapidly evolving technological world, acting as a dialogue between Baudrillard theories whether it is intentional or not. The TV series reflects on how the evolution of technology creates complex challenges that postmodern theorists have both explored and criticized. Specifically, Jean Baudrillard, since he has deeply analyzed beyond a strictly philosophical approach the effects of the ICTs in our current context.

Both, Baudrillard and *Black Mirror*, perceive technology as a transgression beyond the limits of traditional functionality by provoking and facilitating the questioning of our morality and thinking, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in a process that promotes critical-thinking beyond what has been presented through many other science fiction pieces through a more relatable modified present, twisted endings and humanistic focus. However, the French theorist has been widely criticized for this holistic perspective that lacks scientific validation. Nevertheless, the importance in his

theories as well as Black Mirror lies within the ability for both to create stimulating texts that question where we are heading and our future understanding of humanity.

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