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Violence in Hyperreality: The Ideological Development of the Black Mirror Series (2011–2023)

Introduction

Black Mirror (2011–2023) is a British science fiction thriller series. Six seasons have been released to date, sparking much debate about how to depict a dystopian future in Western societies. Created by Charlie Brooker, the critically acclaimed series has been hailed as a seminal work of cinema, exploring worlds where using everyday devices is taken a step too far. In each episode, characters are somehow connected to a specific technology (artificial intelligence, microchip implants, virtual reality, video games, social media) and trapped in a dysfunctional relationship (surveillance, predictive analytics or simply non-consensual).

The biggest influence on the creation of *Black Mirror* was Rod Serling's television series of the late 1950s and 1960s, *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964). To evade censorship, Serling used the masking conventions of science fiction to tell the story of the political and social changes of the time (the threat of nuclear war, the arms race, the struggle for civil rights, the birth of psychiatry, conservative governments). *The Twilight Zone* was the first television series of a philosophical nature, drawing on the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and asking existential questions about the future of the species and the planet,

threatened by nuclear war while striving to conquer space. This television production anticipated the questions that emerged in the 1960s in the works of Marshall MacLuhan, Guy Debord, Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard (Crucci & Vacker 2018). We continue to use these works today, deriving from their tools for analysing and critiquing existing reality.

The changes in civilisation that have taken place over the last few decades, including the widespread use of the internet and social media, and the problems that have arisen as a result, are now the basic point of reference for the series *Black Mirror*. This series represents a critical television that develops in the context of the Anthropocene and the expansion of technology. However, it should be noted that the last season is different from the previous ones. Here, we see a sudden turn to the nostalgic past and horror using popular motifs. Violence explodes on screen and is not disguised in any way. In this context, it is worth asking what the ideological evolution of the series is and whether it has retained its critical potential. I am also interested in the phenomenon of technological violence, or the use of technology to control, manipulate, or oppress individuals and societies. In the context of the *Black Mirror* series, this manifests itself by showing the dark side of technological progress, where innovations – although often created to make life easier – become a source of suffering, exclusion or enslavement.

Hyperreality

The first theoretical context that cannot be avoided when analysing the plot of the series is Jean Baudrillard's (2005a; 2005b; 2006; 2007) theory of simulacra and hyperreality. Simulation is defined as a way of generating – through models, cells, matrices and memory units – a reality without source and reality: hyperreality. Baudrillard presented the process of separating language (a system of signs) from reality in four stages: first, the image was a reflection of reality; then, it distorted and masked it (e.g., in the sphere of science); the third stage was the masking of the absence of reality by the image (magic, religion); and finally, the image no longer had any connection with reality. Here we enter the era of simulacra – signs without an original, beginning, or reference (Baudrillard 2005a). Therefore, simulation is not governed by the principle of truth and rationality because the principle of equivalence is undermined, and the difference between what is real and what is imagined disappears. Reality is replaced by signs of reality, and the average person cannot distinguish between these two dimensions (Baudrillard 2005a). According to Jean Baudrillard (2007), hyperreality is the fundamental ontological structure of postmodernity, distinguishing it from the industrial age, in which the production of things played a key role. The circulation of simulacra

determines the basic communication code of consumer society (Baudrillard 2006). Baudrillard distinguished three orders of simulacra: the first is a situation in which fiction exists in a utopian space unrelated to reality; the second type is the real world projected onto another time and space (science fiction); the third level is fiction existing at the level of reality. *Black Mirror* explores the science fiction genre as a simulacrum of the second and third order. Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and hyperreality suggests that in a media-saturated world, reality is increasingly replaced by signs and representations that no longer refer to a concrete referent, creating a state of hyperreality. Within this condition, symbolic violence emerges subtly but powerfully: individuals are subjected to a regime of images and simulations that shape their perceptions, desires and values without their explicit awareness. This symbolic violence becomes systemic when the hyperreal environment naturalises certain ideologies and norms, embedding them so deeply in everyday experience that alternative perspectives become invisible or unintelligible. As a result, **individuals are not only alienated from the 'real' but also deprived of the cognitive tools necessary for critical reflection and resistance**. The dominance of simulation over reality thus enforces conformity and passivity, reinforcing existing power structures under the guise of choice and freedom.

The first episode of the first series, *The National Anthem* (S1E1), tells the story of the kidnapping of a princess by terrorists and the promise of her release on the condition that the Prime Minister agrees to have sex with a pig and to broadcast the event live on prime-time television. The demand is met, and the British consume the spectacle in pubs and homes and then return to their daily duties. The ordeal of the kidnapped woman, released thirty minutes before the broadcast and wandering the deserted streets, is almost completely forgotten. The intention of the kidnapper, who considers himself an artist, was to show his obsession with voyeurism and sensation. The episode illustrates the problem of the **lack of government control over technology and media**, which are becoming the target of cyber-terrorist attacks, as well as voyeurism and media exhibitionism, i.e., the obsession with "watching" the lives of public figures and celebrities. As Baudrillard argued in *The Spirit of Terrorism*,

> terrorists carry out an **attack on the system of integral reality** by means of an act which, during its duration, has neither meaning nor probable references in another world. It is simply a matter of destroying the system – which is indifferent to its own values – with its own weapons. Not only with its technological weapons – what terrorists assimilate above all and what they make their decisive weapon is the nonsense and indifference that is the heart of the system (Baudrillard 2005b: 79).

Therefore, the hijacker was able to predict the model of the reactions of the authorities and security services because he was able to recognise the psychological mechanisms that govern postmodern society.

The episode *Be Right Back* (S2E1) tells the story of Marta, whose boyfriend Ash (a play on the English word "ash") dies in a car accident. Shortly afterwards, the woman discovers that she is pregnant and decides to use a service that processes the digital traces of the deceased (voice recordings, photos, style of communication) and inserts them into the software of a cyborg that is supposed to simulate the behaviour of its original. The heroine thus attempts to replace reality with a simulacrum. Ultimately, the woman concludes that the cyborg is too obedient and will not replace her deceased partner. The experiment fails because the memory of the deceased, his complex personality, is stronger than the creation. The simulation would have been perfect if Marta had loved the cyborg from the start. Therefore, the episode is, in a sense, a warning against technologies such as realistic chatbots that can simulate conversation or, more broadly, artificial intelligence that uses data to model, predict and imitate the original. The creation of a cyborg to simulate the behaviour of the deceased partner is a form of technological violence that interferes with the emotional and psychological processes of the heroine.

Surveillance Capitalism in the Society of the Spectacle

Another theoretical framework that allows for a deeper understanding of the *Black Mirror* series is the concept of **surveillance capitalism** (Zuboff 2020). It derives from the idea of the panopticon, a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham. It was designed to allow guards to observe prisoners so that they would not know if and when they were being observed. Bentham foresaw the possibility of applying this concept to the design of schools and factories, laying the foundations for a society in which everyone is constantly being watched and watching others (Foucault 1993). Today, social media performs a similar function, using human experience as free raw material to produce behavioural data. This data is processed to predict future behaviour. Surveillance capitalism thus uses technology to monitor our behaviour, to tailor the advertising information we receive, but also to model future decisions (not only consumer decisions but also, for example, political decisions) (Zuboff 2020). Such a system can be understood as inherently violent. It exerts a form of structural and symbolic control over individuals by reducing their autonomy, commodifying their private lives and reinforcing existing power asymmetries under the guise of personalisation and convenience.

The problem does not only concern Western societies but also, for example, contemporary China, where a system of digital dictatorship is gradually being introduced (Strittmatter 2018). Since 2020, a social credit system has been in place that records the economic, social and moral activities of all citizens in real-time in order to assign rewards and punishments. The system gives everyone a predetermined number of points that a citizen can lose or gain depending on their activities. This is ultimately decided by an algorithm that rewards, for example, sorting rubbish, paying bills on time and charity work, and punishes misdemeanours, crimes, traffic tickets, excessive use of computer games and having friends of low rank. Therefore, the system decides whether a given citizen can take out a loan, buy a property, rent an apartment or a car, fly a plane, book a room in a prestigious hotel or send their child to a good school. The content they publish on the internet, including social networking sites, and their history of online activity are also assessed (Marr 2020). A person brought up in such a system gradually self-censors as a preventive measure. This form of **control and surveillance can be seen as institutional violence that violates an individual's privacy and autonomy, as well as psychological violence that affects an individual's well-being**. The escalation of this process is illustrated in the following episodes of *Black Mirror*: *The Entire History of You* (S1E3), *The Waldo Moment* (S2E3), *Nosedive* (S3E1), *Hated in the Nation* (S3E6), *Shut Up and Dance* (S3E3).

The Entire History of You (S1E3) is the final episode of the first season of *Black Mirror*. The main characters are Liam and Fiona (Ffi), a young couple in crisis. The man accuses his partner of cheating on him. Despite the woman's assurances that her romantic relationship with her boyfriend is a thing of the past, Liam decides to use a technology called "Seed" – a biologically implanted memory chip, implanted under the skin behind the ear, that records everything its user sees and hears. Unlike the audiovisual recorders we know, the Seed has no off button. The user can either watch (replay) the recorded fragment on an external device or with their own eyes. The Seed thus collects all the data about the user, adding to the digital archive of interactions that can be easily searched and analysed. In *Your Whole Story*, we see how all people who choose to use the new technology are trapped in the reality of the panopticon – constantly being watched by others and being watched by others. In the original concept of Bentham and Foucault, surveillance was unidirectional. In the original concept developed by Jeremy Bentham and later elaborated by Michel Foucault, surveillance was fundamentally unidirectional. The architectural design of the panopticon allowed a single observer to potentially monitor many individuals, creating a psychological mechanism of self-discipline based on the possibility of being watched. In contrast, contemporary forms of digital surveillance are no longer limited to top-down observation. They are multidirectional, operating simultaneously from

governments, corporations and among individuals themselves – particularly through social media platforms, where users act as both the watchers and the watched.

Tanne van Bree (2016) introduces the concept of digital **hypermnesia** to describe this change in the structure and function of memory in digital environments. Traditionally, hypermnesia refers to a neurological condition involving abnormally vivid or excessive recall of emotional and episodic memories. According to van Bree, digital technologies simulate a similar condition on a societal level, creating an artificial memory system in which every interaction, image and utterance is archived and retrievable. This persistent availability of the past does not lead to clarity but to compulsive behaviour: repeated viewing, re-reading or re-analysis of past content. Rather than supporting liberation or understanding, this hypermnesia fosters a kind of compulsive loop in which individuals become trapped in cycles of surveillance and self-surveillance. It reinforces anxiety, perfectionism and performative behaviour while inhibiting the ability to live in the present or imagine alternative futures. In this sense, digital hypermnesia not only extends the logic of surveillance capitalism but also intensifies its psychological and affective effects, contributing to what might be understood as a **new mode of technologically mediated symbolic violence**.

The temptation to control and spy on loved ones is also irresistible for the heroine of the episode *Arkangel* (S4E2). It is the story of a mother and daughter who live in a nightmare caused by a device designed to ensure the child's safety. The mother cannot stop monitoring her daughter's every move, depriving her of any semblance of freedom, the ability to think for herself and explore the world. The problem is so serious that many parents "programme" their children's future success in this way: by monitoring their whereabouts with electronic watches, eavesdropping and spying with cameras, checking the results of their studies in an electronic journal, or sending them to the best schools based on competition and pressure to achieve the best results. The situation presented in the episode *Arkangel* perfectly illustrates contemporary forms of symbolic and systemic violence that do not manifest themselves directly but operate through the internalisation of control and the apparent voluntariness of subordination. The mother, convinced of her good intentions, becomes the oppressor in a system of technological care that deprives the child of autonomy, privacy and the possibility of experiencing the world independently. In this context, **technology becomes a tool of relational violence**: not through physical action, but through cognitive and emotional control that models behaviour according to the system's expectations. In a subtle but uncompromising way, *Black Mirror* shows that the line between care and oppression is becoming increasingly illegible – and that the greatest danger lies precisely in this illegibility.

We can see the world that has been taken over by the obsession with evaluation in the episode *Nosedive* (S3E1), which tells the story of a young woman who lives in a world where every interaction (online and offline) is evaluated. Social status and access to goods (an apartment, a car, health care, a job) depend on average grades. The heroine's downfall begins when she tries to get a higher average and access to a premium programme. The situation becomes so complicated that Lacie completely loses control of her life. The audience discovers symbolic violence that forces actions to create a personal brand at the expense of authentic relationships. It is also difficult to talk about truth or the lack of it because it has been replaced by a simulation in which mobile devices and social media serve as tools for disciplining and normalising human behaviour. In the new society, the walls of the panopticon have been replaced by communication devices through which everyone monitors and evaluates the actions of others and builds a sense of self-worth.

The *Nosedive* episode can also be interpreted through the prism of Goffman's (2020) theory of self-presentation and Guy Debord's (1998; 2006) concept of the "**society of the spectacle**," in which a person is likened to an actor playing multiple roles, with the audience watching and reacting to his or her every action. Instead of the literal accumulation of capital, postmodern capitalism accumulates spectacle as a new form of social power. The spectacle is a new form of entertainment that affects how we experience life. Everything that could be experienced directly becomes a representation in Debord's theory (similar to the series plot) and a simulation in Baudrillard's theory. Instead of facing reality, people focus on appearances, commodified fragments of reality. In the series, the spectacle is no longer just a way of distinguishing oneself but also a necessity of life, enabling the satisfaction of needs. **Surveillance** is systematic here, creating new social hierarchies conditioned by a conspiracy of silence that applies to everyone. Lacie's brother and the truck driver are the only people who risk telling the truth (and thus exposing and undermining the existence of the simulacrum). However, they are punished for refusing to participate in the spectacle because in authoritarian systems, it is best to accept a lie as truth and speak it with conviction. As Kai Strittmatter notes, in such societies, "every subject puts on a show – to his neighbours, to his colleagues, and finally to the apparatus of power, and as long as he is aware of it, he can secretly laugh or sigh at it. For most it quickly becomes second nature, and since these spheres cannot be clearly separated, the language of the party apparatus always corrupts the language of the citizens as well" (Strittmatter 2018: 36–37).

The issue of surveillance is also explored in *Hated in the Nation* (S3E6) – a story about an investigation into deaths linked to social media shaming. However, the main issue is not so much cyberbullying but the role of robotic bees deployed across the UK to help with pollination. The investigation found

that someone with a deep knowledge of technology had hacked the insects. The link between bees and surveillance is thus simple – there is an identifiable observer and a tool to do his bidding. At one point, we learn that the police have known about the existence of the surveillance bees all along and that the hacker's actions are directed only at those who have committed **cyberbullying**. The figure of the hacker as an anti-hero raises the question of whether this is cyberterrorism or cyberactivism. Similar dilemmas can be seen in the episode *Shut Up and Dance* (S3E3), in which an anonymous troll takes control of a teenager and forces him to do illegal things in exchange for not revealing a recording of the boy masturbating to images of child pornography. This plot structure raises questions about the limits of the state's ability to monitor its citizens. As we watch the episode, we sympathise with the teenager, only to be confronted with the truth about his unethical behaviour at the end.

The panopticon motif returns in a literal sense in the episode *White Bear* (S2E2). The main character, Toni, wakes up in an unfamiliar house and cannot remember anything about her life. She quickly realises that everyone she meets is threatening her in some way, either by pointing a gun at her or recording her with a smartphone. During her escape, the woman is led to believe that a signal has been broadcast for several months, turning most people into indifferent voyeurs or hunters. The heroine sets out to find the transmitter, but when she arrives, she discovers that she is, in fact, taking part in a carefully orchestrated spectacle in which, after rehearsing the escape scenario, her memory is erased, she is publicly judged and insulted, and then she is returned to an unfamiliar house. The spectacle is directed by the so-called "White Bear" Justice Park. The punishment the woman experiences is inhuman, but the spectators accept it – their reactions resemble uncensored statements in Internet forums under articles informing about the crime committed. We are therefore dealing with symbolic violence because the punishment is inflicted in public and is intended not only to punish the individual but also to show society that violating social norms will have serious consequences. The combination of punishment with new technologies and entertainment systems shows that the idea of the panopticon – to exist in reality – must first gain social acceptance and generate profit. In this way, violence is institutionalised because the park's actions are approved and considered acceptable by society, which allows them to continue such actions.

The problem is exacerbated in the episode *The Waldo Moment* (S2E3). The main character, a cartoon bear called Waldo, becomes famous for mocking politicians on a TV show, swearing profusely, showing a complete lack of respect for values and a nihilistic attitude. He contrasts traditional politics, which is just as opportunistic and hypocritical but maintains a game of appearances. The key moment of the episode is a debate between Waldo, Harris (the Labour candidate), Monroe (the Conservative candidate) and two

lesser politicians. Monroe reveals to the audience that behind the character of Waldo is an average actor and member of a theatre company who has never had much professional success. Waldo, however, decides to fight and harasses his rivals, using populist rhetoric and questioning the basic principle of political spectacle: he suggests that Harris and Monroe are media constructs, so the distinction between real politicians and political acting is irrelevant. Waldo reveals the existence of a simulacrum – a copy of the world without the original. This logic leads to the conclusion that the invented cartoon bear is more real than the candidates, who are real people. Moreover, although Waldo does not win the election, after the end credits, we are shown a post-apocalyptic military state in which images of Waldo multiply and the simulation of reality wins. The actor playing the bear wanders the streets of the city, surrounded by fascist symbolism and the violence of public officials.

Politics has always been a spectacle and a show, with the most important actions behind the scenes. What is new and characteristic of hyperreality is the tendency for false information to spread at an extraordinary speed and the rise in popularity of politicians who can attract attention, do not consider themselves ideal and promote the so-called unfiltered emotions, encouraging subjective interpretations of the truth and breaking political conventions (Peters 2017). Over three years after the Waldo episode aired, Donald Trump won the presidential election in the United States for the first time. Many people noted that he resembled Waldo in his brutal language, populist, apolitical message and excellent knowledge of the media world. In an article published in the Washington Post, Chris Cillizza (2015) noted this similarity and stated that traditional politicians do not know how to deal with politicians like Trump/Waldo because they do not follow the rules of public debate but are taken seriously. Rachel Veroff has linked the **logic of Trumpism to the experience of hyperreality**, which makes it impossible to determine where truth ends and fiction begins. People are not bothered by the nostalgic vision of rebuilding the country's multitude, which is only a fantasy (Veroff 2017). The Waldo episode reflects a desire to return to a world in which there is a clear distinction between professional politicians and populists, reality, and hyperreality, politics that respects norms and principles and post-truth. The problems illustrated by the series are symptoms of deeper structural problems in societies and the media environment. The destruction of the boundaries between rationality and reality, i.e., the taking away of people's compass, is shown to be a basic tool of authoritarianism.

In 2025, it will be crucial to reflect on the impact of technology and institutions of power on the lives of citizens. The accelerating development of artificial intelligence, the progressive digitalisation of the public sphere and the increasing data centralisation are leading to profound changes in the social, political and cultural fabric. The boundaries between reality and its digital

representations are gradually blurring, giving rise to new forms of control and domination that are often difficult to discern. In the context of these phenomena, the article by investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr (2025), published on the Substack platform, entitled *It Is a Coup*, deserves particular attention. In it, the author analyses a contemporary form of *coup d'état*, carried out not by traditional military means but in the digital space, and points to Elon Musk as one of the key figures in this process. Cadwalladr argues that we are currently operating in a hybrid reality in which information warfare tools – originally used by authoritarian states – have been adapted and deployed by internal actors, including political parties, to manipulate public opinion and influence the outcomes of democratic processes. According to the author, we are now facing a new stage in this process – a radical paradigm shift, the essence of which is the concentration of technological and state power. Cadwalladr calls this phenomenon "**broligarchy**," referring to the increasingly close links between Silicon Valley and state structures. Particularly significant in this context are the actions of Musk, who – with relatively few cyber resources – has managed to control key digital infrastructure assets. It means not only gaining access to data and source code but also challenging the basic principles of the functioning of the administrative apparatus. The consequences of these actions, as Cadwalladr suggests, are only beginning to emerge, but we can already speak of a significant shift in power relations in the digital age.

Biopolitics and Technologies of War

Foucault's concept of biopolitics, developed in the 1978–1979 lectures *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977–78*, stems from the question of the state and its functions. Foucault proposed to understand biopolitics as a set of actions, methods and ways in which power, the state and politics relate to human life as a biological species (Foucault 2010; 2012). For Foucault, "biopolitics is a historically created mode of government, characteristic of modernity, a specific way of organising the life of the population, carried out at the level of the state; biopower – in the more technical sense of the word – is an instrument of this way of organising" (Dominiak 2012: 254). Though often administered through norms, statistics and institutional care, this form of power is inherently violent. Its violence is not always direct or visible; it operates through the **classification, normalisation and control of bodies and populations**. By defining what constitutes a "healthy," "productive" or "safe" life, biopolitics excludes, disciplines, and marginalises those who do not conform. As such, it imposes systemic constraints on human agency and freedom, shaping lives according to political and economic

priorities rather than individual needs. This structural violence is particularly evident in practices such as mass surveillance, algorithmic governance or data-driven health interventions – all of which treat human life as a measurable and governable resource.

Black Mirror provides an immersive, fictionalised view of how technologies create and maintain social hierarchies and systems of oppression. A representative example of this process is the episode *Men Against Fire* (S3E5). It describes a reality in which an implant allows soldiers to become a kind of cyborg. The main character is a young recruit named Stripe, who is involved in a mission to find and destroy the population of "cockroaches." The squad leader explains that cockroaches must be eradicated because they carry disease. Their DNA is programmed to make them more susceptible to cancer, multiple sclerosis and other diseases. However, when the implant stops working, the soldier begins to understand that his mind has been manipulated and that the "cockroaches" are other people who are considered enemies by the state. The soldier is sent for therapy and, under its influence, returns to the role of a soldier carrying out orders. Symbolic violence here involves the creation and maintenance of images and narratives that **legitimise structural violence**. Therefore, the episode *People Against Fire* can be interpreted as a critique of racist theories and the war machine that drives them. The cyborg is merely a tool that carries out the commanders' orders. As Diana Leon-Boys and Morten Stinus Kristensen argue, the episode does not sufficiently reflect the complex ways in which **racism** is produced in society. Although some roles, including the main character, are played by actors of colour, their race is not problematised in any way. "Cockroaches" is fought mainly because of its alleged genetic imperfection and tendency towards disease, whereas real racism is a variety of techniques by which social hierarchies are constructed, and some bodies are seen as pennies over others (Leon-Boys & Kristensen 2018).

The symbolic violence in both the episode and contemporary Western politics lies in producing a legitimising discourse: the idea that some lives are worth less than others because of their genetic make-up, cultural background or perceived deviance. This form of violence is not loud or spectacular – it is embedded in algorithms, biometric systems, political language, and surveillance technologies that disproportionately target black and brown communities.

The Hypnotic Power of Heterotopia

The issue of biopolitics is also addressed in the episode *San Junipero* (S3E4), one of the few episodes to offer viewers a happy ending. We learn the story

of two women, Kelly and Yorkie, who meet and fall in love in San Junipero, California. As we learn at the end of the episode, their relationship is unlikely – in the real world, Kelly is a widowed, elderly woman dying of cancer who never followed her heart, and Yorkie is a hospital patient paralysed after a car accident. The heroines undergo "immersive nostalgia therapy," in which their consciousness is transferred to the virtual town of San Junipero for five hours a week. The women move through space and time. Eventually, they are given the opportunity to undergo state-controlled euthanasia and live forever in a simulation. Because the restrictive social system has limited their rights, they accept the promise of a better future offered by technology.

San Junipero bears the characteristics of a **heterotopia**, which Foucault defined as a kind of effectively enacted utopia, an experience between reality and virtuality that can positively affect reality itself. Heterotopia begins to function fully when people – like the heroines of the *San Junipero* episode – find themselves in a situation of absolute rupture with their traditional time (Foucault 2005). It may be an inspiration for the real world. However, it is worth noting that despite the series celebrating the bonds between non-heteronormative people, the heterotopia created still reflects the traditional, idealistic and somewhat nostalgic notion of paradise for disembodied simulations of eternally young souls. The theme of non-heteronormativity returns in the episode *Striking Vipers* (S5E1), which tells the story of two friends who meet in a video game after a long separation. It turns out that the opportunity to pretend to be the opposite sex and play out a romance opens up the characters to reflections on exploring their identities. The process ends happily only when the characters are honest with themselves and their loved ones when they take control of how they use technology, and when it ceases to be an escape in their lives. In a word, when the simulacrum does not replace offline reality but allows them to function better within it.

The protagonist of the episode entitled *USS Callister* (S4E1) is much less comfortable with technology. It tells the story of Robert, a frustrated programmer for an online gaming company who creates a personalised *Star Trek* game in which he plays the role of a tyrannical captain of a crew made up of digital simulations of his colleagues. By designing the game, he is trying to free himself from the frustrations he experiences in the offline world. His alter ego is meant to compensate for the shortcomings of his original ego, and the disembodied online reality is meant to relieve everyday worries. The effluent is a visual manifestation of the hypnotic effects of hypermimetic technologies. Robert's personal game is imbued with a sexist, racist and phallocentric ideology typical of the 1970s. It means that, contrary to postmodernist claims, *Black Mirror* shows that hyperreal simulacra have not completely transcended the logic of 'imitation' and all that it implies.

In all the episodes that deal directly with the theme of an alternative simulacrum (*Playtest* S3E2, *USS Callister* S4E1, *Striking Vipers* S5E1, *Beyond the Sea* S6E3), the state of people immersed in digital simulations is illustrated by a scene in which the user of the new technology freezes and falls into a hypnotic trance. He becomes defenceless, unaware of his surroundings, a reflection of what happens to gamers when they enter a digital reality.

While many of these episodes depict the dangers of technological immersion and the reproduction of systemic violence in digital spaces, they also suggest possible alternatives to domination, control and erasure. Episodes such as *San Junipero* and *Striking Vipers* show that when individuals can consciously engage with technology – rather than being passively subjected to it – it can become a space for healing, self-expression and relational authenticity. These narratives challenge the inevitability of violence in digital systems by presenting moments of **agency, emotional vulnerability and ethical re-engagement with self and others**. In this sense, *Black Mirror* offers glimpses of non-violent futures – futures in which technology is not used to discipline, categorise or exploit but to explore fluid identities, rework traumatic pasts and reimagine intimacy outside normative frameworks. Such visions reflect what Foucault might call 'technologies of the self': practices through which individuals act upon themselves to transform their subjectivity (Foucault 1988). These episodes invite viewers to consider how digital tools might serve not only state and corporate biopolitics but also personal liberation and ethical coexistence – provided that power is decentralised, transparency is ensured, and choice remains meaningful.

The World of Show Business

An important thread in considering the impact of media and technology on human life is a reflection on contemporary show business. The episode *Fifteen Million Merits* (S1E2) is about the world of advanced technology, where all cultural content is reduced to cheap and standardised entertainment. People are judged by how much they conform to the prevailing norms. There is only one way to free yourself from this yoke – to win the brutal and dehumanising television production *Big Short*, which works similarly to the reality shows we know (*Got Talent*, etc.). The main character, Abi, enters the competition and faces a jury of grotesque characters with coarse tastes. Abi is successful on stage but has no chance of winning due to the strong competition. Instead, she receives an offer to take part in erotic programmes. Dazed, intoxicated by drugs and the promise of pharmacological 'desensitisation', she accepts. The entertainment industry is portrayed as a closed, algorithmically regulated system in which individuals are reduced to mere consumers and

performers, trapped in an endless cycle of accumulation and self-surveillance. Culture has been hollowed out and commodified, reduced to emotionally manipulative, formulaic content designed to entertain, pacify and distract. Authenticity and resistance are punished or absorbed into the system. Abi's trajectory – from hopeful contestant to commodified sexual object in an adult entertainment show – illustrates how individuals are coerced into participating in their own exploitation. The promise of pharmacological desensitisation (a chilling euphemism for the erasure of resistance) underlines how the system neutralises dissent not by silencing it but by anaesthetising it. This is a form of biopolitical violence in which the body, emotion, and identity are subjected to external regulation and optimisation for capital.

A similar story returns in Season 5, in the episode *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too* (S5E3). Ashley is a successful young pop star who is growing increasingly frustrated with being a teen idol. However, this time, she manages to break out of show business and live on her own terms. This episode offers a rare glimpse into the possibility of resistance and reclaiming subjectivity in a system designed to standardise and commodify affect, identity and creativity. Taken together, these episodes critique the violence of **neoliberal media culture**, which presents itself as meritocratic and liberating while, in practice, imposing rigid norms and suppressing dissent. The characters' arcs highlight the tension between commodified visibility and personal autonomy, between being seen and being heard.

Monstrous Simulacrum – Sixth Season of Black Mirror

While the first five seasons surprised viewers with the way they conceptualised problems related to the use of new technologies, the sixth season – in addition to episodes that fit within the previous convention – introduces an entirely new way of conceptualising problems derived from the conventions of thriller and horror.

The episode *Joan is Awful* (S6E1) is still a conventional story about mass surveillance by large corporations. One day, the heroine learns that a well--known streaming platform has designed the plot of a new series based on data provided by software that monitors customer behaviour. She launches a battle to regain her image, which is almost impossible to win. It is a meta-media narrative that criticises not only corporate systems of surveillance and user data recognition but also the logic of media content production in the age of streaming. As a parody of Netflix, the new series did not so much address the issue of surveillance *per se*, but rather the mechanisms of the culture of spectacle: the personalisation of narrative, the limitless reproduction

of privacy in content, and the loss of control over the representation of one-self in media space.

Equally conventional is the episode *Beyond the Sea* (S6E3) – a story about an alternate past in 1969, in which two astronauts spend half a day in space and later transfer their consciousness to robot replicas on Earth. The family of one of the men is attacked by fanatics from a group trying to protect the 'true' nature of man. In this way, a story about technology becomes a story about toxic love, betrayal, loss, and revenge and complicated human relation-ships. The message is clear: although technology advances at an astonishing pace, emotionally and as a society, we are still in the same place. This episode uses a retro-futuristic aesthetic to juxtapose the visual distinctiveness of sci-ence fiction with a deeply human existential drama. The episode operates a narrative counterpoint: on the one hand, it shows the cold, controlled world of consciousness transfer technology, and on the other, the brutal and emo-tionally extreme reality of interpersonal relationships.

However, the episode *Loch Henry* (S6E2) introduces elements that surprise the viewer. It is the story of a young couple who go to a sleepy Scottish town to make a nature documentary. In the process, they discover a local criminal mystery involving the main character's family. Blood is spilled on the screen, and people are tortured. *Loch Henry* refers to the **contemporary obsession with true-crime production,** and although there is no advanced technology here, the nostalgic longing for the past and the obsessive expectation that the media will give us powerful impressions are exposed. The episode breaks away from the techno-dystopian imaginary that dominates the series and shifts the centre of gravity from technology to the media sensibility of the viewer, who – it turns out – does not need futuristic interfaces to participate in the spectacle of violence. The camera, the VHS archive and the document-ary format are enough to expose both the power of the image and its rela-tional violence against memory, trauma and intimacy. It reconstructs the true-crime genre not just as a form of storytelling but as an aesthetic and cultural practice that fetishises the violence and trauma of local communities and transforms them into a consumer media product. This process reveals the structure of the **attention economy**: tragic stories gain value not as events of social significance but as sources of intense sensation and narrative excite-ment. In this sense, *Loch Henry* can be read as a meta-commentary on docu-mentary and the **aestheticisation of violence** – much like films by directors such as Joshua Oppenheimer (*The Act of Killing*) or Michael Haneke (*Funny Games*), the episode forces viewers to confront their own voyeurism and media consumption habits.

The problem illustrated in *Mazey Day* (S6E4) is also familiar – the photo-journalistic stalking of public figures. The introduction of horror elements (photojournalists being stalked by a celebrity – a werewolf) means that the

satire of paparazzi and **celebrity culture** is transformed into a story about the literal monstrosity of modern times. The horror aesthetic is used not only to surprise the viewer but, above all, as a metaphorical tool to criticise contemporary media culture. The transformation of a hunted celebrity into a literal monster – a werewolf – reverses the logic of the true-crime genre or tabloid narrative: the paparazzi become victims, and the "victim" gains supernatural power. This inverted scheme exposes the inhuman structure of violence present in the relationship between the media and public figures. Photojournalists – originally portrayed as thoughtless image hunters – are literally torn apart by what they previously wanted to make public and consume. It is also worth noting that this episode is part of the body horror tradition, where a physical transformation (the transformation into a werewolf) manifests an inner conflict. In Mazey's case, it symbolises the disintegration of identity under the pressure of media exposure, a life torn between privacy and public image. Thus, horror becomes a language of terror and empathy for a person dehumanised by the camera lens. It is not the monster that is 'bad' here, but the system that created it.

The season ends with the episode *Demon 79* (S6E5), which takes place in the past, in 1979. A shopgirl from the north of England is forced to join forces with a demon to prevent the world's end. Set in the aesthetics of occult and psychological horror, the episode functions as a tool of **political allegory**: the demon is not a figure of evil but an embodiment of repressed anger, agency and inner strength. It can be read as a metaphor for queer or immigrant otherness that is tamed and acknowledged – not as a threat, but as an ally in the fight against real evil: systemic racism, state violence, and fascist ideology. In both cases, horror is used not just as a genre convention but as a language of political and cultural commentary. Unlike previous seasons, which were dominated by technological dystopia, *Black Mirror's* sixth season broadens its formal spectrum, turning to horror narratives to diagnose contemporary anxieties. Monsters – whether in the form of supernatural beings or ordinary people – represent hidden social tensions that cannot be directly expressed in the language of everyday media discourse. Horror enables this expression by allowing both characters and audiences to confront the repressed, the uncomfortable, the unnamed.

The biggest advantage of the final season is the change of perspective and the attempt to reclaim the past: the action of the bloodiest episodes takes place in the 60s and 70s when racist and fascist narratives were intensified under the Conservative governments in Britain and the US. The message seems clear: new technologies dehumanise us, and we are still torn by the same emotions, passions, fears and ideologies. Combining genre hybridity (sci-fi, horror, retro-drama) with socio-political critique, *Black Mirror* reasserts its cultural relevance at a time when media, memory and ideology are more intertwined

than ever. By revisiting the past, the show reclaims it and reanimates its suppressed truths, forcing contemporary audiences to confront the cyclicality of violence, discrimination and collective delusion. In doing so, *Black Mirror* positions itself not just as a critique of technology but as a cultural archaeology of power and violence.

In one of her essays, Margaret Atwood recalls Naomi Alderman's 2011 book *The Meaning of Zombies*, which highlights the link between the state of society and popular culture:

> While vampires tend to become more popular in times of economic prosperity (for example, the wild success of Interview with the Vampire in the eighties and early nineties), zombies – a shuffling crowd of ragged people – tend to come to the fore in times of belt-tightening [...]. Zombies are a terrifying crowd of poor people who are reaching for something, but if you gave it to them, you would pay for the gesture with your own destruction. Zombies are precisely those identical, anonymous, loose people we meet every day on public transport and cannot recognise as human (Alderman 2011, quoted in Atwood 2022: 236).

Following this line of thought, the transformation of a harassed celebrity into a menacing werewolf highlights the process by which the entertainment industry and surveillance culture dehumanise people and ascribe to them behaviours derived from our collective imagination.

Summary

The *Black Mirror* series undeniably exposes the dysfunctions within a society that has evolved towards universal surveillance, revealing its inability to prevent the paradoxes and dangerous consequences of technological progress. Through this lens, the series' creators provoke viewers to engage actively, attentively and critically with new technologies. By examining the theme of violence in various episodes, we observe how technological tools are used to perpetuate existing structures of power and inequality. In addition, these tools often serve as a means of escaping reality, a strategy that fails to address fundamental social problems and often exacerbates them.

Despite being categorised as a dystopian show speculating on the (near) future, the primary issues that *Black Mirror* brings to light are more relevant to the present than to future scenarios. This observation suggests that hyperreal simulacra have not fully transcended the logic of 'imitation' and all its implications. An analysis of the ideological trajectory of the series and its shift towards the horror genre provides an extremely pessimistic diagnosis of the

state of the world. It depicts a dehumanised, anti-rational and threatening environment.

However, by bringing these issues to the fore, *Black Mirror* encourages viewers to actively, attentively and critically engage with new technologies and reflect on their values and beliefs. In doing so, the show reveals how systemic violence in hyperreality is embedded in visible technological tools and the invisible ideological mechanisms that govern their use. Over time, the show's evolution – from cautionary sci-fi to deeply existential techno-horror – reflects the increasing entanglement of human experience with simulation, emotional manipulation and symbolic domination.

Through this progression, *Black Mirror* reveals how contemporary media, politics and consumer culture perpetuate violence not through overt coercion but through seduction, distraction and simulation. The violence portrayed is no longer merely physical or institutional; it is psychological, symbolic and existential, thriving in a hyper-real world where images replace meaning and control is disguised as freedom. As such, the series stands as a crucial cultural artefact of the postmodern condition, revealing the ideological underpinnings of a society that normalises dehumanisation and alienation in the name of progress and innovation.

Ultimately, *Black Mirror* does not simply depict dystopia. It performs a critical function by forcing the viewer to confront the dystopia already present in everyday, hypermediated structures of power, consumption and control.

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Abstract

Black Mirror (2011–2023) is a British television drama that combines thriller and science fiction conventions. So far, six seasons have been released, sparking many discussions about how to portray the dystopian future of Western societies. However, the last season brought a sudden turn towards the nostalgic past and horror using folklore motifs. The author uses concepts from the theories of Jean Baudrillard ("simulacra," "hyperreality"), Guy Debord ("society of the spectacle"), Erving Goffman ("theatrical metaphor"), Michel Foucault ("panopticon," "biopolitics") and Shoshana Zuboff ("surveillance capitalism") to answer the question: what is the ideological evolution of the series and has it retained its critical potential?

Słowa klucze: *Black Mirror*, symulacja, hiperrzeczywistość, heterotopia, dystopia, biopolityka

Keywords: *Black Mirror*, simulation, hyperreality, heterotopia, dystopia, biopolitics

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