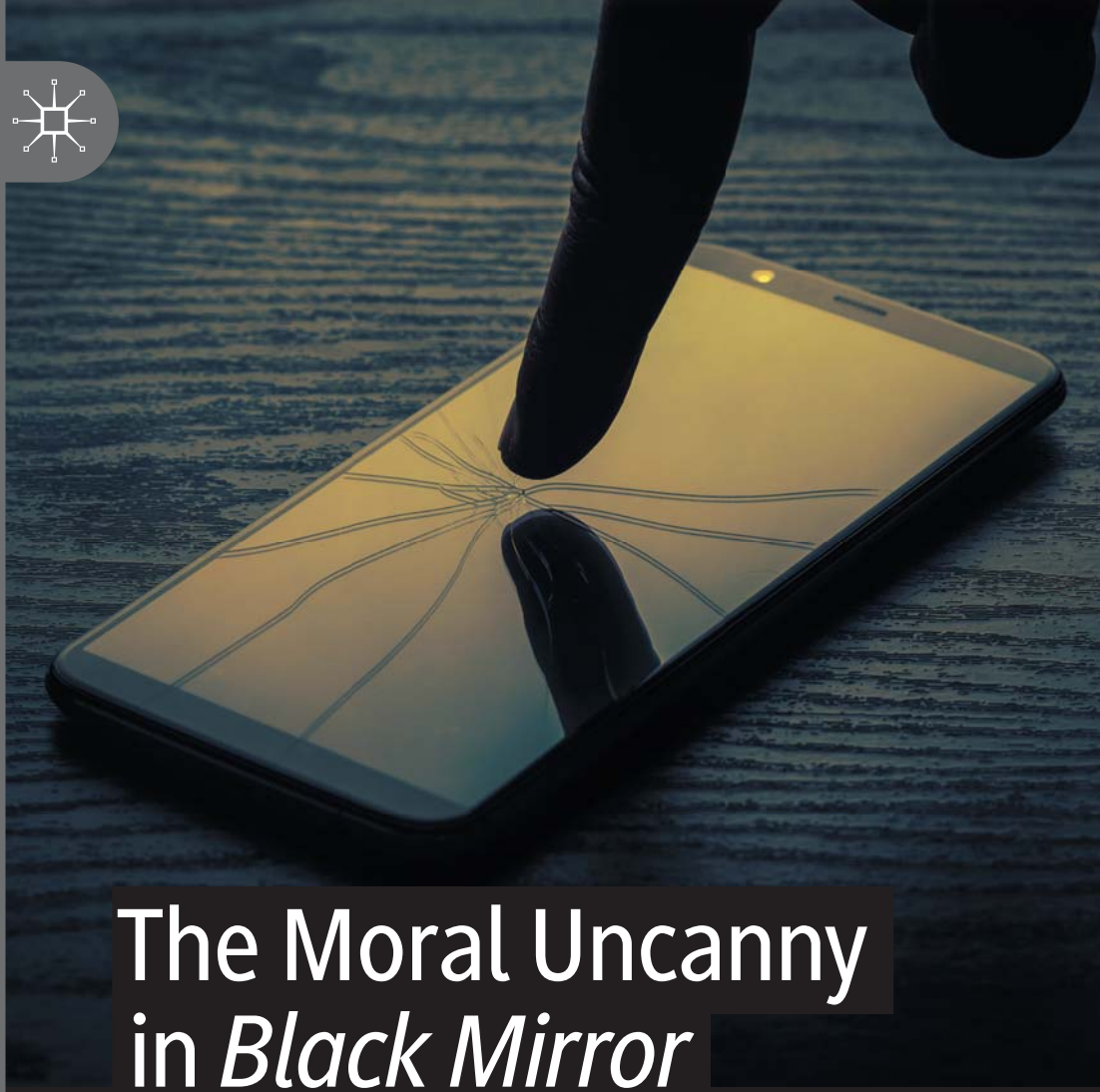

The Moral Uncanny in *Black Mirror*

Edited by
Margaret Gibson
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Introduction: The Moral Uncanny in Netflix's *Black Mirror*

Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden

Netflix's critically acclaimed series *Black Mirror* (2011–2019) brings compelling representations of the emerging fourth industrial revolution in which robotics, data profiling, VR, algorithms and biohacking are enmeshed in systems of governance, work, pleasure, intimate relationships, memory, death and grief. The inventive title *Black Mirror* is itself evocative of countless technological forms—mobile phones, flat-screen TVs as well as small-screen wearable and hand-held devices that mediate our relationship to self, others and world. Notably the mirror is not just a reflecting surface, it is a dark cracked rebound suggesting that the plethora of our technologies are not neutral in their very design. In fact, it is a mistake to assume that technology is impartial since it is in essence an extension of our humanity, and in some cases, inhumanity. Built into the

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endless stream of technologies is an obvious surveillance dimension and this is rigorously explored in Brooker's anthology series.

Already a cult series, *Black Mirror* provokes and disturbs, asking us to question the morality and ethics of devices that now provide unprecedented access to information, real time unfolding events, intimate lives and bodies. There is a deep sense of moral uncanniness as we grapple with how to deal with the ethical implications of being able to access people's information that poses a threat to privacy. In fact, what Brooker's series reveals is the collapsed binary between what is private and what is public, and this operates as a very incisive critique of what is happening right now, especially in light of the Russian Facebook hack and the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

For the most part, Brooker's series addresses the dark side of technologies that have the dual power of bringing extraordinary positive connectivity and intimacies, as well as incredible surveillance and exploitation. It is the latter that the series mainly dramatises, revealing another paradox: digital forms might enable connection, but they are still, at heart, devices that cannot provide us with a "pure" relationship to the world.

It is easy to forget that the countless screens we engage with everyday are highly sophisticated devices that largely mediate what we see, read, think and believe. The world of flesh—blood, bone, sweat, piss and excrement—is both hidden and exposed by devices whose smooth and clean contours enable the forgetting of our messy corporeality, but at the same time our bodies are also captured by the spectacle of the countless black mirrors we use.

The series is grand in its vision: questioning the very foundations of our humanity, it undertakes its philosophical inquiry by often dramatising situations where sophisticated devices, test, challenge and threaten the psychological well-being of characters. The fundamental, existential question "how should we live?" pervades the anthology. There is also a clever dialectic played out in this series that juxtaposes depth with surface as technologies enable characters to forge intimate bonds, while, at the same time, threatening responsibility by the sheer spectacle and moral distancing of devices. Brooker's series places us into often devasting stories that are compelling because of the edgy, satirical humour underneath. Throughout the series' episodes we are confronted by very familiar human flaws of vanity, egoism, taking pleasure in the suffering of others, and the overreach of power through technology.

The ubiquitous, connective, phone screen is its prevailing mirror/moral surface upon which the television series projects not-so-distant dystopian futures where smart technologies are that much more systematically integrated into bodies, intimate relationships, processes of surveillance, streetscapes, systems of punishment and revenge, discovery of crime, torture, sadism, fantasy, desire, love and sex. Indeed, the moral uncanny in *Black Mirror* is this strange sense that this future is already in some sense "here", close to home, both latent and manifest in our digitally embedded human lifeworlds where trust is fragile, social media celebrity ubiquitous, dating apps commonplace, and propaganda daily manufactured and sold as truth on social media.

Black Mirror's creator, Charlie Brooker, famously stated "technology is never the villain in the show" but it is nonetheless utterly central to the dramatic element of villainy. As a central narrative agent, it can operate as a false mirror, reflecting back what we want to see and concealing what is refused acknowledgement. Importantly, some technologies have reached self-generating levels of algorithmic agency serving to relieve humans of direct action and therefore a sense of responsibility for the things they do or might do to others via technologies as social, economic and political actors. Technology is not unmoored by human agency although there is the fear that AI might, like Frankenstein's monster, gain operational speed and autonomy to such a degree that it will be difficult to control and predict problems before they happen. This is particularly prescient when bots are now directly used on social media platforms to influence elections, profiling voters for targeted information. Furthermore, it is also an ethical concern when big data algorithms are used by governments to monitor social welfare recipients (some of the most vulnerable people in any society) to claw back undeclared income when it has been detected through networked databases. When the algorithm gets it wrong it is especially difficult because this often happens within a culture of communication systems actively designed to hide and displace human responsibility by limiting direct access to human persons. This makes complaint processes (even knowing what to do) harder and especially so for people who are vulnerable and have less socio-economic resources to mobilise for redress. The use of communication technology to strategically prohibit human contact and delimit channels of responsibility is certainly part of our ordinary experiences of the bureaucracy of government and corporations.

Reflecting many existing technological realities in a complex, mobile world of competing interests, values and ideologies, *Black Mirror* imaginatively heightens anxieties about the depth and reach of technological expansionism where social control of populations and individuals as well as economic exploitation are the key drivers. It taps into legitimate concerns about our technocratic lifeworld of ubiquitous data capture and surveillance creep by powerful media corporates and governments alike. Monitoring, regulating and holding to account the actions and interests of global media corporations (like Google and Facebook) is extremely difficult at both national and transnational levels of governance. But importantly there has to be strong leadership in regulation and accountability of social media corporations within and between nation-states. At the same time governments engage in surveillance and secrecy as a matter of course and holding them to account is also difficult especially in weak or precarious democracies or, worse still, when there is no democracy at all. Penelope Papailias' chapter "lifelogging, dataification and the turn to forgetting: Thinking digital memory studies through *The Entire History of You*" is perhaps the most critical of *Black Mirror's* dystopian imaginary, positioning herself as both admirer and skeptic.[1] One of Papailias's main criticisms is the way the series tends to position technology as a "foreign 'thing'" as if it is "antithetical to human subjectivity and relationality". She is also unconvinced that the series sufficiently opens up a "politically useful conversation around platform capitalism, algorithmic culture, dataification, dataveillance" and so on.

It is also important to place *Black Mirror* within the representational history of dystopian fictions in literature and media culture broadly (radio, film and television including translations of literature into these media) as Richard Hand does so expansively in his chapter "Reflected Anxieties and Projected Dystopias: *Black Mirror*, Domestic Media and Dark Fantasy". Among other examples, Hand's chapter develops a comparison between the narrative originality, impact and atmospherics of disturbance of the groundbreaking series *The Twilight Zone* and that of its (arguably) contemporary counterpart, *Black Mirror*. As Hand writes: "*Black Mirror* resonates not just with the telefantasy of *The Twilight Zone* and others, but also with examples of dark audio fantasy from the ground-breaking days of radio – such as *Lights Out* (1934-47) and *Quiet, Please* (1947-49) – through to contemporary podcasting with shows such as *The Truth* (2011 onwards). Dark telefantasy on 1950-70s television

presented metaphorical narratives of social anxiety, ranging from the fear of Communism to the loss of societal values".

As with most dystopian fiction, *Black Mirror's* disturbing scenarios warn against the possible, unforeseen directions of the potentially oppressive and abusive uses of a biometric, algorithmic memory lifeworld. This is particularly palpable in episodes which take audiences into screens as infinite mirrors where simulations of simulations render futile, obsolete or just quaint, notions of a more authentic, trustworthy reality beyond/outside information systems, data analytics and algorithmic circuits.

However, the intellectual and psychological impact of the *Black Mirror* anthology is its ability to locate the familiar elements of our existing technological habitus within a larger disturbing version of a social reality. This is particularly true in the episode *Hated by the Nation* which Kristin Veel examines in her chapter "Latent Memory, Responsibility and the Architecture of Interaction". This episode explicitly enters into the dark side of social media in practices of outrage and hate. In this episode a trending hashtag #deathto literally brings death not just to those who become the most hated in the nation as they trend to number 1, but those who use the hashtag, wishing death to others. In a strange twist, the death wish becomes doubly realised, activating a moral economy of algorithmic karma. Veel's chapter explores matters of responsibility and accountability in social media lives, the kinds of stories we make and share, which extends to the *Black Mirror* episode *Bandersnatch*—the only interactive episode putting the viewer into a space of decision-making about the narrative trajectory and outcome of the story (although there are limited options and thus pre-existing possible endings). *Hated by the Nation* is about the automatic, unthinking way people can react to others on social media (often strangers but also people in media spotlights) directing malevolence towards them. It is about the ease with which this is done as if social media activities can be set apart or bracketed as actions which do not make the world in which we live. We know that anonymous online hate speech and relentless bullying causes enormous social harm leading to murder and suicide.

The fear of being physically and mentally trapped within technology by design, by habituation, habitus, and by forces outside individual knowledge and control is one of the most pervasive negative themes within the anthology. This is something that Clarissa Carden and Margaret Gibson's paper explores in relation *Black Mirror's* representations of the capacity to

replicate a human life and sustain its persistence through cookies, traces of DNA material, and artificial bodies replicating voice, gestures, personality and memories through digital data records. The melancholy that pervades these deeply human fantasies of capturing the essence of the self (or soul) for the purposes of overcoming mortality and gaining some kind of immortality ultimately repeats the Christian disavowal of body as essential to who we are as relational, inter-corporeal beings. The fundamental dependency on our bodies as ourselves is one of the critical themes explored in their chapter.

Gareth Schott and Nick Munn's chapter "Invasive Gaming, biosensing and digital labour in Playtest" makes a convincing case for the way the *Black Mirror* analogy takes us into the territory of behavioural psychology and the history of programmes testing the behavioural responses of humans placed in certain scenarios (which sometimes they thought were real), with certain stimulus–response options. Linking behavioural psychology to the episode *Playtest*, they suggest that the frightening game Playtest (which the central character Cooper is immersed within through a process of neurological biohacking) is a contemporary version of the unethical history of behavioural psychology and the traumas of experiments which tested human fear and human capacity to do violence to strangers by following orders. They explore the relation between the idea of a game and the idea of play and how this episode interrogates this coupling adding that additional layer of a test and what this comes to mean in an experimental game that pushes the limits of human endurance in stimulus overload.

The anthology also draws viewers directly, and at times obliquely, into concerns about losing touch with the natural world, the replacement with nature with its simulation, the problem of distinction collapse, and the fragility of trust in the informational drive of consumer capitalism and governance. However, as Grant Bollmer argues in his chapter "Facial Obfuscation and Bare Life: Politicizing Dystopia in *Black Mirror*", every era of technology has its potentials for negative, oppressive impacts and uses, and that what is really at stake in "*Black Mirror* technology is a narrative alibi that motivate reflections on the limits (and potentials) of human desires about interpersonal, social and cultural relations — relations that exist in the present". Bollmer also reminds us that dystopian fiction is often conservative and fatalist with its location aesthetically and emotionally within the concerns and fears of "bourgeois societies of the global north". *Black Mirror* can be accused of a fatalistic indulgence

afforded to privilege. It also develops complex moral themes and scenarios that do not easily fall into a moral logic of technological determinism or reductionism. Indeed, *Black Mirror* puts the human relationship (how we treat each other, how we relate) at the centre so that technology itself whether digital or analogue is secondary. Exploring a range of episodes such as *White Christmas*, *Men Against Fire*, *The Waldo Moment* and *The Entire History of You*, Bollmer's chapter examines facial recognition technologies and its use/critique in the work of artists such as Zach Blas, Sterling Crispin, Jemima Wyman and others. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of "bare life", Bollmer's paper guides us into various ethical dilemmas and contradictions in regard to facial recognition technology and resistance to it.

In a world of pervasive and mundane networked dataveillance (biometric scanning, CCTV, GPS tracking, networked ID systems and automatic scanning)[2] we simply do not know the extensive assemblages, mobilities, archives and profiling of our dataified lives. How secure is our information and at what price in the balance between freedom and security, moneymaking and rights to privacy? For what reasons other than economic benefit and security is our information shared and mobilised by various human actors + algorithms? And what of the inevitable situatedness of socio-economic, cultural and identity biases shaping the very human factor of algorithmic programming and facial recognition technologies? Post 9/11 facial recognition technology was routinely integrated into global airports as part of technologies used by governments to monitor and capture the mobilities of people around the world whether they be tourists, labour migrants, refugees, political activists and so on. *Black Mirror* takes the dystopian image of the all-seeing, all-knowing God of the authoritarian modern State translating it as Helena Bassil-Morozow argues into an Algorithm. Her chapter "God is an Algorithm: Free Will, Authenticity and Meaning in Black Mirror" engages with the majority of episodes (from season 1–4) as it unpacks the meaning and consequences of this idea in the *Black Mirror* universe. Bassil-Morozow's thesis is that algorithms are our new gods (gods and devils) tracking and tracing our every digital move; knowing us better than we know ourselves. As all seeing, and all knowing, algorithms (and the economic and political interests behind them) keep us within the circuits of our digital actions, patterning the compulsion to repeat, feeding those compulsions while tempting us, through recommendations, into patterning ever-widening networks of interest and consumerism. Through the work of Baudrillard

and a range of literary works and concepts such as the uncanny, the sublime, the gothic and the soul; Bassil-Morozow discusses the residues of what is missing and missed (both in the sense of what is not able to be captured or recognised, and also that which we long for) in striving for the elimination of error, doubt, risk, pain and death.

Black Mirror is a moral provocation, immersing audiences into bleak scenarios of ultra-surveillance and perverse scenarios of righteous cruelty, torture, public and personal humiliation. It provokes audiences into wondering how close we might be to living some of the scenarios, simulations and mentalities depicted. For example, *Fifteen Million Merits* (2011) explores the proliferation of motivational apps and devices for body data tracking embraced in liberal individualism's ethos of being personally responsible for the kinds of lives we live and bodies we have. This episode draws us into a sinister lifeworld of total screen surveillance and body-tracking where people's work *is* working-out while they watch always on television screens. In this working-out as work workplace, there is also an overweight, underclass cleaning-up after the exercise working class who suffer the indignity of being both "invisible" and thus inconsequential, and conversely, too visible and vulnerable to cruel treatment as abject. In *Fifteen Million Merits* (2011) we see the main character of Bing Marsden wake up each day in his little prison cell of screens to be greeted by the smiling face of his annoyingly chirpy avatar (his *dopple*). Unlike his avatar, Bing wakes into a mental state of demoralised dread and exhaustion. Once awake he is watched for the watchfulness of his watching. He lives in a world in which watching pornography is not a choice or surreptitious pleasure but mandatory daily viewing. Enslaved by screens, any lapse of attention, any sign of self-will or distracted interiority, sets off a high-frequency alarm and a voice commands "resume watching". With their bodies logged into bike machine circuits for energy transfer the calorie burn of the gym workers not only earns them individual merits but powers the screen world that entraps them. There is a golden number of 15,000,000 merits, which, if reached, can be spent on a chance to upgrade one's life by performing on a talent show *Hot Shots*. *Hot Shots* references globally franchised shows like *America's Got Talent*, *Britain's Got Talent or American Idol*. One day Bing overhears a new recruit in the workforce, Abi, singing in the toilets. Her transcendent, exquisite voice brings a sense of hope and true beauty to an ugly, meaningless life. In a key dialogue Bing tries to convince Abi, who he has befriended, to take the gift of his 15,000,000 merit points and go on *Hotshots*. It is a highly satirical scene in which their absurdly banal existence is illuminated:

Abi: Why don't you spend it on you then?
Bing: And buy what, some new shoes for my dopple to wear?
Abi: I don't know, upgrade your MOS?
Bing: Or get a Fat Acts season pass (he says sarcastically)
Abi: Buy one of those wall buddies, the new ones. They talk to you after shut-in and solve your problems. They guide your dreams like gurus. It's amazing actually what they can do.
Bing: Yeah, a mirror plug-in that shows me how I look as a werewolf. What's the point?
Abi: No, it can be quite fun. (she says with a look that says, lighten up).
Bing: That's all just stuff. It's… its stuff, it's confetti. It's… You've got something real.
Abi: You heard me singing in a toilet. Is that real?
Bing: More than anything that's happened all year.

Fifteen Million Merits (2011) like *Hang the DJ* (2017) has moments in which human beings genuinely connect to each other with humour, pathos and tenderness despite or because of the controlling conditions of their technological imprisonment. However, it is also about the way in which dystopias engage in a kind of "soul murder" which crushes the human spirit, obscuring the opportunity or capacity to recognise true beauty.

Peter Weir's film *Truman Show* is powerfully resonant in many *Black Mirror* episodes, including this one, and while it offers an escape from the television screen of a scripted life of character actors, *Black Mirror* tends to represent any portal into freedom as an illusion—as just another entry point into another simulation. The total "shut-in world" of *Fifteen Million Merits* also references reality television shows like *Big Brother* (2000–2004) with Orwell's dystopian vision of total surveillance translated into light entertainment. As a global television franchise *Big Brother* was the apotheosis of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* with people auditioning to live with strangers in a house watched and recorded by 24/7 CCTV cameras with the hope of gaining celebrity traction. It generated many spin-offs (*Celebrity Big Brother*, *I'm a Celebrity get me out of here*) before its super-succession by other reality television. The idea that privacy was completely evacuated in *Big Brother* in the interests of total visibility was of course a fiction manufactured for shock value—the fantasy that hooked people in or turned them off. Paradoxically, perhaps, the moral urgency of the novel *1984* was redoubled by a television programme where surveillance became part of the cultural logic of the entertainment

industry raising the question—is this strangely more frightening in its very normalised banality? And is it disturbing that viewers might have no idea of the original reference, the gravity it held before its commoditised superficial appropriation?

Emotional and physical exhaustion are pervasive themes in many episodes especially *The Entire History of You*, *Shut and Dance*, *Fifteen Million Merits*, *White Bear*, *Metal Head*, *Nosedive and Crocodile*. In each of these, exhaustion is linked to the obsessive paranoid micro-analysis of recorded memory data, excessive screen time demanding excessive attention, being under constant threat of one's life, the constant threat of humiliation and being discovered for one's criminal act, and the uses of remembering and forgetting in methods of spectacularised punishment. Byroni's Trezise's chapter "Spectacular Return: Re-performance inexhausted in *White Bear's* exhibitionary complex" draws on the theme of exhaustion in her analysis of the relentless psychological torture of the young woman Victoria Skillane trapped in a theatre of punishment ("Victoria's plight *is* theatrical itself") seemingly without end. Drawing on Crary's work on "24/7 capitalism and a culture of non-sleep" and Foucault's work on technologies of the body, and histories of punishment of the body and the soul, Trezise examines questions of memory, forgetting, spectacle and medial violence.

Suzie Gibson and Dean Biron in their chapter "Borges 'Infinite Finite' in Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*" similarly explore the double-sided exhaustion of amnesia (in Victoria's pharmacologically imposed amnesia in *White Bear*) producing the exhaustive struggle to-piece-together clues and remember; and, the concomitant psychological exhaustion of constant memory capture explored in the episode *The Entire History of You*. In this episode, every moment of one's life is logged as fully realised video capture projected for playback within the inner eye as screen or onto external screens for other people to watch, dissect, and interact with.

Drawing on Louis Borges' "Funes the Memorious" and "The Library of Babel", Gibson and Biron explore the conceit/fantasy of a total process of memory capture given a particular rendering in *The Entire History of You*. Apart from the misery and paranoia that comes from a prosthetic technology called an "eargrain" which disables forgetting as a natural part of human brain function, Gibson and Biron raise important questions about what is sacrificed and paradoxically lost when forgetting, secrecy and not-knowing is not respected or understood as a necessary part of an ethical existence: They write: "What is frequently conjured in