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Black Mirror: A Cautionary Tale of Postmodernism

Over the past few decades, technology has progressed forward at an astoundingly fast rate in a wide range of fields. This observation has important implications to the field of media studies. With the advent of technology such as the internet, social media, and smartphones, the consumption of media has become much more prevalent in our everyday lives. When discussing media in today's world, it is also crucial to analyze it from a postmodern perspective. Within this context, the relationship between society, media, and technology can thus be further analyzed.

Black Mirror is a dystopian science fiction anthology series on Netflix that addresses this relationship on many of its episodes. *Black Mirror* is a compelling series to analyze for this purpose because it straddles the line between realism and fiction. The episodes depict worlds that are not set in the distant future, but rather ones that we can be living in next month. One way the show executes this is by marrying the characteristics and cultural phenomenon of modern day society with futuristic technology that is often closely related to media. In this regard, *Black Mirror* is the perfect vehicle to discuss the implications of technology and media to our own society. Through its dystopian depictions, I argue in this essay that *Black Mirror* provides social commentary on postmodern society's increasingly close relationship to technology and media. For the structure of this paper, I break it down into three sections by episode to highlight the

different ways that *Black Mirror* is providing this social commentary, while simultaneously relating details in the show back to postmodernist ideas.

The first episode of season three “Nosedive,” envisions a world where a social ratings system has become determinant of everything in one’s life. This includes where you can live, what job one possesses, and the material goods that are available to you. The result is the merging of social media and reality, with a mutual rating of one another occurring with every interaction, whether physical or online. This episode follows the story of Lacie, who seeks to live in a prestigious community. Her only problem is her social rating, which is too low for her to qualify for a discount. However, when the opportunity to attend the wedding of a former friend with a high rating is presented, Lacie realizes it could be her ticket to this upper echelon. Her obsession in this pursuit ultimately leads her towards a downward spiraling path by the end of the episode. The characteristics of this social media driven world in this episode is a social commentary on our own habits with apps like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

The stylistic and aesthetics of the episode is a crucial detail to understanding the hidden meanings of the world that Lacie lives in. A crucial postmodernist idea that can be applied here is the emphasis of style and look at the expense of substance and content. As Dominic Strinati explains, “...we increasingly consume images and signs for their own sake rather than for their usefulness or for the deeper values they may symbolize...Qualities like intrinsic and artistic merit, seriousness, authenticity, realism, intellectual depth, and strong narratives tend to be undermined.” (Strinati) This voracity for the aesthetic characteristics of images and signs is present all throughout the episode. For example, the visually pleasing pastel colored clothes that everyone wears is a nod to this idea, as well as the constant smiling and laughing that occurs

with each social interaction. There is little genuine depth and emotion in this world, as all these elements are for the purpose of simply increasing one's rating. For example in one scene, Lacie practices smiling and laughing in the mirror. Her effortless transition from giggling to being expressionless in a split second highlights the fakeness of the world she lives in. In this sense, *Black Mirror* is commenting on how social media in our world can also be fake. People don't always mean what they say online and it's easier to get away with it if it's expressed through text and not a face to face interaction.

With this dichotomy of fakeness and realness, the episode can further be interpreted as conveying the message that the difference between these two are blurred. Jean Baudrillard's pivotal postmodernist work "The Precession of Simulacra" explores this idea in detail.

"Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." (Baudrillard 3) Through this quote, he explains that simulations of reality can become hyperreal, where it is difficult to determine its origin and has thus become a reality in its own sense. Applying this idea to "Nosedive," the online social media profiles of the characters are the simulations of their real life persona.

However, the bubbly personas that are presented online have taken over in real life, highlighting this idea of simulacra and the hyperreal. Lacie has two starkly different personalities as a result: the happy-go-lucky charm she exudes in her interactions outside her home versus the more natural and crude interactions she has with her brother. Consequently, it is difficult to determine which personality is "real" and which is "fake." In this way, the episode brings up the question of how exactly social media is influencing our behavior and personality.

The ending scenes of the episode hits the nail on the overall message conveyed and helps to answer the question that was previously brought up. In her journey to her old friend Naomi's wedding, Lacie is eventually knocked down to a dramatically lower rating due to a series of unfortunate events. As a result she is uninvited to the wedding, but she attends regardless, hijacking the microphone and the event to rant about her frustrations with the system and her falling out with Naomi. In the final scene, she is jailed, where she ends up in a screaming match with a cell neighbor. Despite the insults thrown around, she and the man look genuinely happy. The freedom to say whatever she wants is empowering and she regains her sense of authenticity. I interpreted this scene as a commentary on social media's negative influence and ability to suppress one's personality. Societal expectations of how people should act are always being communicated through interactions on social media. People often follow such unspoken guidelines so that we can gain happiness from attaining likes and followers. In this age where we consume media at all parts of the day, "Nosedive" reminds us to stay authentic so we can truly be free and happy.

The sixth episode of season three, "Hated in the Nation," also comments on social media usage in today's society. In this episode, two detectives investigate the deaths of public figures who were the targets of social media hate through the hashtag "DeathTo." Whoever has the most mentions using the hashtag on social media is periodically killed by what we later find out to be small bee drones that have been hacked. In the opening scene, we are introduced to Jo Powers, an opinion writer who has garnered a lot of hate on social media for one of her articles. As she scrolls through her Twitter feed and reads the hate messages, she laughs and seems to brush them off, yet cannot stop looking at the screen. Twitter is essential in this scene as a medium for the

production of simulacrum. The hate messages build Jo Power's image as a public enemy, and become hyperreal to the people that consume the news. Her image becomes a sign of hatred for the public to consume and she is transformed into something less than human. Through this process, social media utilizes the "DeathTo" hashtag and names Jo Powers, essentially giving her a death sentence. Eventually she is found dead in her home by the two investigators. With this scene, *Black Mirror* gives social commentary on cancel culture and the disconnect that social media can bring about between its users.

Social media is interesting in that it can simultaneously connect and disconnect people since online interactions often lack the authenticity and human empathy that a face to face interaction can produce. "Hated in the Nation" builds on this idea to call to attention the ethics of public humiliation on social media. The killer drones stand in as a metaphor for the consequences of cancel culture. Canceling someone can ruin their life and the show exaggerates this idea with a literal death sentence. Although the users who used the hashtag are in part responsible for the murders, they don't feel the guilt because of mob mentality. By participating in something together, there is less individual blame to be handed out. At the end of the episode, the hacker reveals his true plan by turning the bees on the users who used the hashtag, killing hundreds of thousands of people. This further bolsters the episode's social commentary on cancel culture and its message that those that participate should face consequences as well. The underlying nature of cancel culture stems from the postmodernist idea of the loss of authenticity in media consumption today. Online profiles and personas are reduced to mere signs to be consumed, with them becoming hyperreal to the point where you envision them in real life based

on their social media presence. As a result, there is a loss of meaning to their real life counterparts and thus the consequences of cancel culture are not as readily felt by our conscious.

“15 Million Merits” is the second episode of season one, in which society and media have become one to the point where humans live a slave-like existence to screens. Bing is the main character, who like everyone else in the episode, lives in a room where the walls are entirely made up of screens. The screens offer media entertainment like video games, talent shows, and pornography in exchange for currency called merits that are earned through pedalling stationary bikes in a facility where others do the same beside him. This premise is reflective of the postmodernist breakdown of the distinction between culture and society. “The idea is that popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. It tries to come to terms with, and understand a media-saturated reality.” (Strinati) This episode explores these ideas in depth through this exaggerated situation where screens are quite literally always surrounding the people who live in this world. Bing rejects this bleak world and goes about his daily routine in a depressed manner. However others like his bike neighbor Dustin, openly accept the circumstances and happily consumes the media presented by the screens. The contrast between these two characters highlights again the dichotomy of what is real and what is not as Dustin accepts his situation as his reality but Bing yearns for something more real.

This episode not only comments on the loss of authenticity that mass-media has brought forth, but also on the negatives of capitalism in postmodern society in relation to the media. The mass-production of material goods is a theme of “15 Million Merits” that persists throughout the story. With merits, one can buy digital items to improve their online character but Bing rejects

this materialism as being hollow. In this way, the show is commenting on how postmodern advertising in the media has become a spectacle to fuel consumerism, with less of a focus on the actual usefulness of such goods. “It is argued here that advertisements used to tell us how good, useful and essential a certain product was, whereas nowadays they say less about the product directly, and are more concerned with sending up or parodying advertising itself by citing other advertisements and by using references drawn from popular culture.” (Strinati) Bing also mentions that even the food that is bought in the vending machines is said to be grown in a petri dish.

Later on in the episode, Bing meets Abi, another cyclist who can sing, and finds this authenticity and feeling in the form of romance. He eventually spends all his merits to buy her a ticket to enter a talent show. After her performance however, the judges don’t offer her a singing contract, but instead a place on a pornography show. Under the pressure of the judges and audience, Abi accepts, much to the dismay of Bing who is even more devastated and broken than he was before. After this, he decides to save up enough merits to enter the talent show himself. Under the guise of a dance routine, he then surprises the judges by holding a knife to his neck and vents his frustrations in an emotionally powerful way with the society he lives in, much like Lacie did. Unexpectedly, the judges are moved by the authenticity of his emotion and offer him a talk show. By accepting the offer, despite his reservations against the system, *Black Mirror* is giving social commentary on how even though we are cognizant of how our relationship to media has negatively affected us, we are still slaves to this existence. From this scene and the episode in general, the show effectively holds a mirror to the audience and compels us to wonder what is real and what is not as a result of our interactions with media and technology. This is in

line with postmodern theory that dictates that reality is what you make of it, and that universal truth cannot be attained.

The theme of reality vs simulation and by extension the loss of authenticity, are key to understanding how society interacts with media and technology in today's postmodern world. The effects of these interactions are not as clear, but *Black Mirror* presents the negatives and potential dangers of this relationship through its dystopian scenarios. Since many of the technologies are not that far off from becoming reality, the show provides the audience with this social commentary so that we may not eventually recreate such situations in real life. However, this relationship between society, media, and technology does not have to be so pessimistic. Automodernity is a term coined by Robert Samuels which describes a period after postmodernism. He explains, "...in order to understand the implications of how digital youth are now using new media and technologies in unexpected and innovative ways, we have to rethink many of the cultural oppositions that have shaped the Western tradition since the start of the modern era. To be precise, we can no longer base our analysis of culture, identity, and technology on the traditional conflicts between the public and the private, the subject and the object, and the human and the machine." (Samuels 1) From this new perspective, he asserts that these conflicts that postmodernist ideas address do not have to occur. For example, instead of media technology creating a sense of mechanical alienation from one another, harmony can be achieved between humans and technology. By embracing such harmonies, society can be more productive and even gain a newfound sense of freedom.

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