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Gender, Society and Technology in *Black Mirror*

The anthology television show *Black Mirror* is critically acclaimed for the manner in which it examines and criticizes the relationship between human society and technology. Each episode focuses on a specifically unnerving aspect of technology, and the topics explored by it range from surveillance to mass media. These episodes may initially provide a cynical perspective of technology, but they are far more nuanced in that they provide a commentary on how human technology reflects the society it is produced for and by. With that in mind, it is evident that *Black Mirror* is an anthology series of speculative fiction episodes that scrutinizes the darker implications of these technologies. Often, these implications are products of particular social constructs such as race, socioeconomic class and gender. It is particularly interesting to analyze the way in which *Black Mirror* presents the interaction between gender and technology. Many of the television show's episodes highlight the differences in the way women interact with technology as compared to men. These intricacies ultimately provide viewers with an understanding of the position women often hold in a modern, technologically driven society.

Black Mirror is renowned for the unsettling way it presents the precarious situations that come up when technology begins to reflect the flaws of a society. The episode "Fifteen Million Merits" explores, among other things, the hyper-sexualized nature of modern mass media. The episode takes place in a simulated world, where humans exist inside a digital world where all they do is cycle to earn credits, spend credits on products of the media and sleep. The only escape from this world is by winning the reality show 'Hot Shot', modelled along the lines of *X-Factor* or *American Idol.* The episode seems to be a larger commentary on the nature of media through a post-modern lens-- the specific Baudrillardan concept of free-floating signifiers is evoked by the presence of frequent and disruptive advertisement in the simulated world (Moser 67). The Baudrillardian crisis in this episode is thus the constant barrage of signifiers by the media, whether in advertising, video games, reality shows. These pieces of digital media lose all deeper meaning and exist solely as works to reiterate the hypermasculine, corporation dominated, capitalist simulation that the characters of the episode live in. Additionally Baudrillard's fear of hyperreality is reiterated by the episode's simulation of a real world—a simulation so overwhelming that characters within it such as Bing and Abi are unable to distinguish between the world in their digital credit-avatar system, and the real world. One of the television shows that is heavily advertised in this world is 'Wraith Babes', a pornographic media that embodies and satirizes the modern pornography industry. The protagonist, Bing's girlfriend, is forced by circumstance into becoming an actress in this industry when she appears on a reality show, and is given the choice to either propel her career into pornography or go back to a life of drudgery on the credit earning bike. Having no other form of exit from the simulation world she lives in, Abi reluctantly decides to enter the pornographic industry. In a

Baudrillardian examination of the episode, Moser explains the meaning behind Abi being trapped in 'Wraith Babes', writing that:

> Pumped full of mind-altering substances to help her cope with the shame of selling her body, Abi appears to be utterly hollow on the inside. Nonetheless, she projects a lucrative, utopian image of sexuality that is compulsively internalized by her millions of adoring fans. The gap between these idealistic, erotic signs of intimacy and genuine human sexuality is so wide that Abi's simulated persona is nothing more than an empty, trite caricature depicting a sexual fantasy world that has never truly existed anywhere with the exception of a screen. (Moser 68).

While Moser's analysis definitely accounts for a Baudrillardian crisis of excessive counterfeit simulacrum that ultimately point to nothing, it also highlights how *Black Mirror* takes on the exploitative nature of corporation driven, internet pornography by showing viewers the way such sexualized industries prey on and forcibly trap young women. At the end of the episode, Abi is essentially left stuck in a television box, reluctantly pretending to be someone she is not, and manipulated and controlled by the mass media. In fact, such technology is used as a tool to enable and facilitate sexual violence and harassment against women in horrific ways. The industry, which is primarily geared towards men, funds films and multimedia which depict acts of sexual violence against women, many of whom are tricked or forced into the industry at the young age of 18 or 19. In addition, the massive influx of internet pornography has violently reiterated media portrayals of women as solely objects of sexual gratification—a problematic dehumanizing portrayal of women. These portrayals encourage sexual violence, misogynistic tendencies and do not respect the principles of individual sexual freedom and identity. Through

'Fifteen Million Merits', *Black Mirror* offers a short, but extremely vivid and unnerving satire of the exploitative nature of a hyper-sexualized media.

The television show's exploration of the highly gendered nature of the internet isn't limited solely to pornography and sexualization in media. The episode 'Nosedive' satirizes in great depth the extremely unhealthy cultural expectations that social media services such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat foster. This analysis is especially interesting in that it is presented through the eyes of a young woman, which serves to show the great degree to which these social media services reflect, reinforce and often exaggerate gender expectations in the real world. 'Nosedive' takes place in a not-too-distant future where a unified social media is used to rate all interactions between people, and every individual's socioeconomic status is determined by their rating on the system. This system is pervasive into all aspects of a person's life, to the point that people who disregard the system or have low ratings are placed as outsiders in society—lower in socioeconomic class and viewed negatively by everyone else. The episode follows the manner in which a young woman named Lacie becomes disillusioned with the system, while also exploring the consequences of her revelations. An extremely interesting aspect of this episode is therefore the specific way in which Lacie's femininity is a key aspect of her image in the social media system. As a woman, Lacie is portrayed as someone who cares greatly about her social standing and social media image—while also being forced into the vicious system by virtue of being a woman. As a single woman and bridesmaid to her childhood friend, she is forced to compete for high ratings with other women of her age. The episode is written by famous actress and activist Rashida Jones, and Mike Schurr, who have discussed the way in which women are forced to maintain people pleasing social media avatars, Jones saying

that “Women are taught to be liked, and men are taught to be powerful”, and Schurr saying that “There’s a huge gender aspect to this (…) There’s a woman running for president right now where the timbre of her voice and whether or not she smiles is a thing that people actually discuss, as if that’s fucking important for one second. If that character were a man, it would be a very different story” (Adams). As a woman, Lacie is compelled to maintain a perfect image—without it the system will not enable her from even living in the house of her choice. Her appearances are shown to be the sole determining factor in her socioeconomic status and quality of life. This in itself is a striking criticism of how many women are judged superficially, and their worth determined not by the quality of their work, character or success, but simply by how they look and present themselves. These portrayals are harmful to women as they trivialize women as individuals and reducing their identities to a condensation of their appearances. While being a harsh criticism of the flattening nature of social media with relation to the individual, the episode also

Interestingly portrayals of women in popular media as being increasingly concerned with their social media images are somewhat inaccurate. A study by Internet operations company Kaspersky has disputed this portrayal, showing that:

> “The data also shows that men are prone to checking their social media a little more often than women. And people – men especially – become upset if they do not get the likes they hope for. A quarter of men (24%) said they worry that if they get few likes their friends will think that they are unpopular, compared to one-in-six (17%) women (…) Around one-in-ten (people) would reveal something embarrassing or confidential about their co-workers, friends or employers. Men are twice more likely to

> do this than women, with 12% of men saying they would reveal something confidential about a friend, compared to 5% of women (…) Some people (7%) are even prepared to post photos of themselves naked. Men are more prepared to take these greater risks than women, suggesting that a high number of likes is more important to them and that they are willing to go further for social validation than women." (Bock)

From this data, it is evident that it is a gross misconception that women tend to possess a social media image obsession. Therefore, one school of thought argues that *Black* Mirror's portrayal of social media is not gender specific, making the claim that "It conveys one's broadcasted life (via check-ins, photos, and status updates) as a socially sanctioned status that applies to all genders, even as the episode focuses on a woman's self-destructive obsession" (Betancourt). However, it can be argued that *Black Mirror*'s portrayal of social media with relation to gender is telling of how social media is pervasive into women's lives in that the image expectations it propagates are reflective of many socially defined concepts such as body standards, the concept of being ladylike, and other such norms that are harmful to the female identity. This view is supported by the fact that Lacie's brother is shown as a male who does not care for his ratings, yet is still content, happy and leads a comfortable life. Additionally, the female trucker, Susan, that convinces Lacie that the ratings system is not the purpose-giver of her life is portrayed as having many masculine traits—and is portrayed in an almost androgynous fashion. In the episode, affiliation to the ratings system is shown as being traditionally feminine. This gender link of social media to the individual therefore provides a strong basis for the argument that the manner in which social media determines and flattens female identities is grounded in the fact that social media and women interact in a unique way.

However, *Black Mirror* also portrays how technology can be useful to women, and in some cases how it can be unintentionally overused or misused. An interesting example of this is the parental surveillance technology introduced in the Season 4 episode 'Arkangel'. The episode chronicles the manner in which a single mother uses a new surveillance technology system implanted in her daughter's body in order to raise her in a safe, secure environment. However, her constant monitoring over her daughter's life ultimately leads to a stunted relationship between her and her teenage daughter. Therefore, themes of motherhood, parenting and the dynamics of a single mother-daughter relationship are heavily explored in the episode. Famous feminist actor and director Jodie Foster directed this episode, and in an interview discusses how she intended for the technology to reflect a mother's eye:

"'I grew up with no women (on movie sets),' she says. 'There was a lady that played my mom, and maybe occasionally a script supervisor or makeup artist, but most of the time, it was just me in an all-male society. I've only worked with one female director in my whole life, and it is amazing to me that I've really never been in a movie that was about a woman where it was seen from a first-person perspective, without there being a male idea or fantasy.' (…) 'Arkangel' marks an exception, she says. 'It's a female director, it's about women, and deals with being in a woman's body: What is that perspective? That idea of a female eye is what the (episode) plays with.'" (Ryan)

Foster purposefully directed the episode in a direction that explores technology through the eyes of a woman, and in the process also made some revealing criticisms about 'helicopter parenting'. Through the technology that allows the mother to monitor what her child sees through her eyes and examine her vitals, the episode also examines the psychological notion of

a mother identifying a child as part of herself. The mother's inability to make a distinction between her and her daughter has many negative consequences on her daughter's mental health, and ultimately her daughter decides to leave home. Additionally, the concept of motherly nurture being taken to an overbearing extreme is significant in that it not only explores the mother's female mind, but also that of the child. Since the child too is female in this case, the introduced technology also provides a cultural examination of what it means to be a daughter, with Foster saying that "It's a lot of interesting questions about child-rearing, but also about being a woman and how we raise women, and what fears we bring based on our own lives. My child will never live what I had to live. I want her to not have to know that she's continually sexualized, or that she's lesser than, or that she's not strong enough. I want her to not have those references, but there's a price that she pays for not having those references. In some ways, she's built the perfect monster, but then the monster is like, "Stop holding on to my leg or I'll kick you in the face" (Fernandez). The Arkangel surveillance technology is not merely a tool that the mother uses, but also an inhibiting factor in the daughter's development as a young woman. Because of her mother's constant monitoring, she is unable to healthily and safely explore her sexuality, experiment as an adolescent, and grow up with a distinct identity. The surveillance technology, while not inherently gendered, is used as a tool to reinforce a mother's insecurities and curb the teenage duaghter's development. While in this case the technology is not significantly reflective of a real-life link between women and the digital world, it definitely provides insight into two significant factors of femininity—being a mother and being a daughter.

Interestingly, *Black Mirror* has also made the conscious decision to address issues of feminist concern using its background in science fiction as a medium for its critique to take place in. The season 4 episode 'USS Callister' is notable for the novel manner in which it satirizes *Star Trek* in order to tackle issues of workplace sexual harassment. This is especially relevant as the episode was released when the '#MeToo' movement gained great traction in the wake of many famous workplace sexual harassment cases such as those filed against Harvey Weinstein. 'USS Callister' follows a sexually and personally frustrated video game developer, Daley, who traps his fellow colleagues in a Star Trek-esque video game in order to play out his fantasies of being the dominant figure in the company he works at. As a character, Daley echoes many behavioral tropes of unchecked white male privilege, misogynistic perspectives on women, and toxic sexual entitlement. Therefore, his position as the primary antagonist of the episode leads to a damning critique of power dynamics in the workplace being used as tools for sexual harassment. Additionally, many believe the episode to be an exploration of the sexism in *Star Trek*. However, 'USS Callister' is written by Black Mirror creator Charlie Brooker and William Bridges, both of whom are huge fans of the television show *Star Trek* and have explicitly stated that the episode is a homage to the famous television series (Mellor). In an interview, *Black Mirror* co-creators Brooker and Annabel Jones discuss why they decided to use Star Trek as a basis for this discussion on male entitlement, with Brooker saying that "It's his (Daley's) interpretation of that show, rather than what that show would have actually been, it's his simplistic fable version of it and it's quite reductive and out of date. We're not saying that shows of that nature are reductive and out of date, because they were actually very progressive at the time" (Mellor). Jones followed up Brooker's statement by explaining

that *Star Trek* offered them very well-defined power dynamics, stating that "Daley could choose his characters, people who didn't give him the respect or common courtesy in the real world, he could then put them into the Callister world and they would have defined roles and he would understand who he was within that" (Mellor). *Black* Mirror's implementation of power structures in existing popular science fiction works as a basis to reflect on the misuse of such power dynamics in real-life modern society echoes the argument that *Black Mirror* uses technology as a tool to critique issues of gender and sexuality in human society.

As the Captain of the spaceship crew in his imagined world, Daley forcibly kisses his female subordinates, and plays out his sexual fantasies by having his in-game clones of his colleague's dress how he wants them to, and be servile to him in a manner that fuels his misogynistic tendencies. Additionally, interesting ideas are presented by the character of Nanette, a new employee in the workplace who seems to be the subject of Daley's advances and frustration. Nanette is initially portrayed as a quiet, passive female character, but as the episode progresses it becomes apparent that she is the strong protagonist who leads the episode to its happy ending. It is Nanette who plots and executes a plan to defeat Daley and escape from his twisted video game. Cristin Milioti, who portrays Nanette, discusses her characterization as a strong woman amidst workplace harassment, saying that "the way I tried to portray her in the office is as someone who is overwhelmed by the niceties that she has to insist upon herself in the business world. If she wants to get ahead, she has to just smile, and as opposed to just ripping the hand off of her back, she shrugs her shoulders. I tried to make her voice a little higher, too, because it's that thing where you're just like, 'Oh gosh, sorry!' when you really want to be like, 'Don't kiss me on both cheeks, we're not in Europe!'" (Turchiano). By

portraying Nanette in such a fashion, Milioti captures how women navigate rampantly misogynistic workplaces such as those in the video game and technology industry, where mostly men hold positions of power, and often abuse them. This is the reality for many women, and often workplace sexual harassment by people in positions of power goes unreported, ignored, or is enabled without consequences for the perpetrators. Therefore, *Black Mirror* addressing such issues in the guise of a satirical science-fiction is an imperative reflection on these problems that women face in society.

While many of *Black Mirror*'s episodes do not directly address issues of sexuality and gender, the series is notable for the fact that many of its episodes are led by strong female characters—not only protagonists, but antagonists too. This sets *Black Mirror* apart from the typically male-dominated genre of science fiction, where primary characters are male, and women exist solely in supporting roles. In fact, every episode of the Netflix produced 4th season of the show features exclusively female leads. In an interview with Hollywood Reporter, Annabel Jones states that this casting of female leads was unintentional but goes to show that "what's lovely about the show is that it's not a strident statement. It's more: Why not? We don't even think about it from a gender perspective and I hope that's progress" (Strause). However, she also discusses how the producers of the show intentionally switched the gender of the controversial lead figure in the episode 'Crocodile' from male to female, in order to capture a "mother reduced to this level of desperation" (Strause). The episode, which follows a female professionally successful architect who goes to great lengths to protect her reputation—murdering an entire family and even an infant in the process. While the episode is extremely disconcerting in the graphic violence it displays, it is important in that it breaks the typical

representation of women in science fiction as meek, supporting characters and instead presents an extremely strong-willed, determined and powerful female lead.

Additionally, the fact that these female-led episodes earned critical appreciation as a Netflix series is notable because it represents a wider acceptance of untraditional stories. As a streaming service, Netflix has caused major changes in how television shows and films are consumed by the public, and has also expanded therefore the sort of content being created due to its accessibility, rejection of strict censorship, and availability across the world. While many of the newer Netflix produced *Black Mirror* episodes are lighter in tone than the early Channel 4 produced ones, Charlie Brooker continues to challenge and criticize society and technology while making these stories more accessible to the public. Brooker chooses to ensure that each episode is relatable, by keeping characterization and technologies limited to what viewers encounter everyday. The New York Times explains this phenomena, writing that "the show returns again and again to the domestic: horror, Brooker understands, begins at home" (Harvey). Brooker aims to have viewers relate to the characters in these episodes and worry about the consequences technology has on their mental health, interpersonal relationships, and families. In a discussion about the episode 'Playtest', New York Times writer Giles Harvey makes the important observation that "It is typical of Brooker's grimly ironic narrative sensibility that Cooper's (the lead protagonist) escapism should bring him to a technologically enhanced haunted house, a dark parody of home" (Harvey). The direction each episode moves in is thus ultimately determined by the individual characters' identities with respect to family, gender identity, and sexuality, which are intentionally designed to be relatable and familiar. As a result of this familiarity, discussion of gender issues is always apparent, even if the issues

themselves are not explicitly the focus of the episode. The accessibility of such female-led episodes therefore contributes greatly to *Black Mirror*'s ultimate goal as a critique of modern technology.

As a speculative fiction series, *Black Mirror* is harshly critical and fearful not only of the technologies it extrapolates from existing technologies, but also of the cultural and social implications of these technologies. Its portrayal of strong female characters is as notable as its damning critiques of hyper-sexualization in media, overwhelming social media gender standards, workplace harassment or helicopter parenting. Therefore, the social and cultural intricacies of gender are explored by *Black Mirror* by using science-fiction as a basis for examination, as well as in relation to technology. *Black Mirror* creators Brooker and Jones' intensive cultural examination of technology with relation to modern society is thus a product of the many constructs that exist in society—and gender is at the forefront of this discussion.

Annotated Bibliography

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This interview with the Rashida Jones and Mike Schurr, who wrote the episode ‘Nosedive’, provided me with valuable insight into their motivations creating the episode.

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This analysis of the portrayal of social media in Hollywood films argues that ‘Nosedive’ provides an ungendered portrayal of social media. I wanted to refute this argument in order to highlight the manner in which female characters in the episode interact with social media differently from males.

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This interview with ‘Arkangel’ director Jodie Foster and actor Rosemarie DeWitt provided me with valuable insight into Foster’s motivations as a director, and her intentions in implementing female characterization and themes of motherhood.

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This Baudrillardian analysis of the episode 'Fifteen Million Merits' provided me a valuable perspective with which to approach the episode, which deals with themes of a hyper-sexualized media, reality television, and overwhelming media control of a simulated world.

Ryan, Patrick. "Jodie Foster's 'Black Mirror' Episode Casts a 'Female Eye' on Futuristic Sci-Fi." USA Today, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 27 Dec. 2017, www.usatoday.com/story/life/tv/2017/12/27/jodie-fosters-black-mirror-episode-casts-female-eye-futuristic-sci-fi/967132001/.

This interview with Jodie Foster provided me with interesting perspectives into her motivations as a female director telling a story about motherhood through the eyes of a single mother and her relationship with her daughter. This highlights the importance of gender to the 'Arkangel' story.

Strause, Jackie. "'Black Mirror' Delivers a Timely Female-Led Season 4." The Hollywood Reporter, The Hollywood Reporter, 27 Dec. 2017, www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/black-mirror-season-4-inside-female-led-episodes-1070345.

This article discusses Black Mirror's female led episodes in Season 4, and provides many interesting ideas with respect to these episodes. I specifically discussed its ideas on the episode 'Crocodile' and Annabel Jones' discussion of her unintentional focus on gender.