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## **Reality on the Screen: The Subject of the Dystopian Future/ Present. Thoughts on episode “Fifteen Million Merits” of *Black Mirror*<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** Currently one of the most controversial and intriguing science fiction series on television, *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, Zeppotron, 2011–present) gained worldwide popularity through dealing with the issues of technologically-driven society of the near future. The levels of similarity and dissimilarity with contemporary Western society are carefully balanced in order to make a significant cognitive and psychological impact on viewers.

This paper focuses on analyses of the second episode from the first season, titled “Fifteen Million Merits”. In it, people spend most of their days in an automated, high technology environment, surrounded by video screens. Their attention is focused mainly on performing one rather mundane task (cycling on stationary bicycles), and their sparse interpersonal relationships are also carried out through a particular kind of social network. The screens are also the source of fulfillment of individuals’ consumerist and diversionist leanings. Having in mind the theorization of the subject in cyber-space and screen as an interface, as well as questions that emerge from the field of contemporary media ecology, the primary objective of this article is to investigate the complex relations between human subjects and their virtual realities, the entertainment industry, and communication technologies.

**Keywords:** *Black Mirror*; “Fifteen Million Merits”; dystopia; screen; interface; cyberspace; avatar/doppel

With its title referring to the “‘black mirror’ you’ll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone,”<sup>2</sup> as described by the series’ creator and writer Charlie Brooker, the popularity of the British series *Black Mirror* (2011) is unsurprising. This television drama, presented as a series of self-contained episodes, gained worldwide acclaim through

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<sup>2</sup> Charlie Brooker, “The Dark Side of Our Gadget Addiction,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 1, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/dec/01/charlie-brooker-dark-side-gadget-addiction-black-mirror,acc>. February 10, 2018.

dealing with issues topical for contemporary Western society. *Black Mirror* premiered on Channel 4 in December 2011; since then four seasons have been released, counting a total of 19 episodes with runtime spanning between 40 and 90 minutes.

This series critically examines the consequences of technological advancement, and contemporary ‘always-on’ culture (culture of being constantly connected to the ‘network’, as explained by danah boyd), and overall people’s dysfunctional relationship with modern communication technologies. As Brooker explains, the accent is put on “the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes’ time if we’re clumsy”.<sup>3</sup> Brooker’s quote is one of the clues that lead us to assume all the episodes are set in a common timeframe. Likewise, theoretician Greg Singh points out that technologies and attitudes introduced in *Black Mirror* reveal “a time very close to our own”, but with just enough dissimilarity to connote “some time in the future”, while at the same time allowing us to think about our own world, “made strange and therefore not straightforwardly recognizable”.<sup>4</sup> The topics of the show are fashioned from the common ground of consumer culture and notions of free market logic, with particular episodes branching out to problems of reality television, data retrieval and archival, political apathy and the corruption of the public relations industry.<sup>5</sup>

Genre-wise, the series encompasses labels such as science fiction, drama, satire, and psychological thriller. The show’s anthology-like concept and themes revolving around some of the most controversial subjects of the present day have been inspired by the iconic series *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959–64) by Rod Serling, which, in its time, tackled pressing issues such as racism, war, and politics.<sup>6</sup>

Technological advancement and a dystopian backdrop may well be considered prominent enough to categorize *Black Mirror* as an offspring of cyberpunk. However, several points stand against this categorization, at least when it comes to the episode which is the subject of this paper. In his article on cyberpunk philosophy, Thomas Michaud emphasizes some of the most noticeable traits of this literary and film subgenre. With the prehistory in the New Wave science fiction movement which encompasses works of Michael Moorcock, Philip K. Dick, Roger Zelazny, and Isaac Asimov, to name a few, it all begins with Bruce Bethke’s short story (1983) in which the term *cyberpunk* was initially coined. The civil disobedience in the name of the free circulation of emotions in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) in the context of, at the same time, social/political dystopia and technological/virtual utopia, marks the onset of cyberpunk fiction.<sup>7</sup> As Michaud states, “[t]he libertarian philosophy of Cyberpunk

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Greg Singh, “Recognition and the image of mastery as themes in *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011–present): an eco-Jungian approach to ‘always-on’ culture,” *International Journal of Jungian Studies* 6, 2 (2014): 122.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Also, old compendium shows such as *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–96, various broadcasters) and *The Outer Limits* (ABC, 1963–65, and Showtime/SciFi 1995–2002) served as models. Cf. *ibid*, 121.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Michaud, “Science Fiction and Politics: Cyberpunk Science Fiction as Political Philosophy,” in *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*, ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 68–69.

Science Fiction has anticipated real behaviors of the users of Internet who aim to download files freely”.<sup>8</sup> From “old skool cyberpunks [who] wanted to live in a virtual reality” to “always-on folks who are more interested in an augmented reality”,<sup>9</sup> many things have changed concerning the way we use the Internet. The Internet culture of “user-generated content” and participatory community established on the grounds of Web 2.0,<sup>10</sup> shows us over and over again how fickle and changeable relationship between society and technology is, and how one perpetually (re)shapes the other.

While *Black Mirror* can be viewed through the prism of *technopolitical philosophy*, which describes the impact of the new technologies on societies and its individuals, as we will see further in this paper, it lacks the classical cyberpunk hero, the hacker. What is evident and true to the genre is the plot, which arises from the tension between the most advanced technological and cybernetic achievements on the one hand and the radical social change on the other.<sup>11</sup> In “Fifteen Million Merits”, however, we witness a sort of anti-hero whose rebellious intentions is drowned in the sea of technologically distorted interpersonal relationships and the consumer/reality TV mentality of his environment.

The episode introduces us to the society of technological advancement. Here, people are living their virtual reality through their avatars, able to communicate only to the other people in the closed facility they inhabit. Surrounded by screens, they have access to this type of social network, talent and reality shows and pornography. Other than that, the information from the *outer world* is unavailable. My main goal in this article is to investigate the complex relations between humans, screens, and their avatar, as well as to examine their virtual realities and the entertainment industry that seems to bring them one step closer to the *real world*.

### “Fifteen Million Merits”

*The peak of our dreams is a new hat for our doppel, a hat that  
doesn't exist.*

Bingham ‘Bing’ Madsen<sup>12</sup>

The second episode of the first season, “Fifteen Million Merits”, takes place in a closed world in the near future, in which people’s lives consist of slave-like labor.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>9</sup> danah boyd, “Participating in the Always-on Lifestyle,” in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York, London: New York University Press, 2012), 74.

<sup>10</sup> See more on this subject: Michael Mandiberg, “Introduction,” in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York, London: New York University Press, 2012), 1–10.

<sup>11</sup> Aneta Stojnić, *Teorija izvođenja u digitalnoj umetnosti* (Beograd: Fakultet za medije i komunikacije, OrionArt, 2015), 73.

<sup>12</sup> From the speech given in the talent show.

The majority of the facility inhabitants are required to fulfill the mundane daily task of cycling on stationary bikes, and the exact reason, causation, and consequences of their toil remain unknown throughout the episode. For completed tasks, cyclists are rewarded with the virtual currency ('merits'), which can then be exchanged for food, toothpaste, and the virtual gadgets for their avatars. With merits, they can also – similar with practices of 'video on demand' programming system<sup>13</sup> we see in our time – buy up their own time; a specific amount of the currency enables them to skip the commercials while watching reality programs or playing video games. Finally, a considerable sum – fifteen million merits, to be exact – can be invested in a ticket for a talent show, which seems like the only way out of their monotonous everyday life. All the purchases are carried out virtually, thus indicating the possibility of consumer profiling and data collection. Cyclists, always uniformed in the same grey sweat suits, outnumber the overweight people in yellow uniforms in charge of janitorial jobs. Overall, there seems to be no children, minors, or older people in this facility. Extracting information from some of the dialogue leads us to a conclusion that young people are brought to this object after they turn 21, but, with no details as to where and how their childhood, young age, and senior years are spent.

One of the most important features of this world is the fact that nearly every surface and wall is covered in screens. The walls of the single rooms in which people spend their leisure time consist of screens. These screens reveal an entire new world dominated by the people's avatars – their *doubles* [*doppels*], which represent them in a virtual space, a social network connecting the entire facility. This virtual area is practically the only space which can be somewhat creatively arranged. Also, via the screens, the talent show and pornography commercials are shown, aggressive in volume and colors. Individuals may choose to skip the commercials, which would cost them a significant amount of merits. Video games, such as the one where doppels are used to shoot as many overweight people as possible, are also available. While cycling, every worker has his or her own screen with personalized entertainment. Resembling today's television program, cyclists can watch the talent show *Hot Shot*, reality show *Botherguts*, where obese and overweight people are subjected to humiliation, and the pornography show *WraithBabes*. If, however, the cyclists decide not to watch any of the shows, they can be immersed in the simulation of their cycling performed by his doppel. Usually, there is no excessive communication between workers, although it is not prohibited to reach out to someone in person or with the help of one's doppel. This kind of media saturation, which promotes reality television and dullish video games, goes in hand with the tedious jobs every person is obligated to do. In fact, these factors seem to contribute significantly to overall apathy and alienation.

The storyline of the episode follows two of the cyclists, Bingham 'Bing' Madson and Abi Khan, played by Daniel Kaluuya and Jessica Brown Findlay, respectively. Previously dull and repetitive daily routines become much more interesting for Bing

<sup>13</sup> This system enables the viewers/listeners to watch/listen to the program according to their preferred schedule rather than consuming it in the designated broadcasting time.

when he first hears Abi singing through the toilet walls. He is immediately infatuated with her, and soon enough he offers Abi his merits, inherited from a deceased brother. Bing's humble gesture is supposed to empower her to enter the talent show competition and forego the cyclist life. The precise amount of fifteen million merits required for the show entrance is hardly reachable, but Bing gifts them away with ease.

He decides to join Abi for her audition as support and follows her through the waiting room and onto the stage, where she is welcomed by judges Hope, Charity, and Wraith. Before entering the scene, Abi is given a sort of psychotropic drink, Cuppliance, and her judgment is clouded when asked whether she would like to try and make it in the porn industry (in the show owned, presumably, by the judge Wrath). For, as much as the judges liked her singing, there turned out to be no more room for singers. Sexually harassed and pressured by the crowd and judges, and still under the influence of the beverage, Abi accepts the offer. It is worth mentioning that show's staff, judges and competitors are there *in flesh*, and the crowd appears on the big screen behind jury's back, represented by their doppels while watching the program from their cubicles.

After Abi consents to work for *WraithBabes*, Bing is left with a miserable number of merits, not even having enough to afford to skip the ad when Abi appears on-screen. That way, he is stripped of the possibility given to users who can ransom their time in exchange for money (what we today know as 'premium business model users') and arrange the program on their screen according to the depth of their wallets. He cannot look away either – the automatic screens detect Bing's closed eyes, and loud and unbearable high pitch tone forces him to watch the commercial to the end. Infuriated, he bashes one of the screens, causing the glass to shatter. In a short moment of clarity, he collects and hides one of the larger pieces of the glass, and decides to seek revenge.

Several months of intense cycling and not spending almost any money (he complied with watching the commercials, used as little toothpaste as possible, ate discarded food in the cafeteria) enabled Bing to purchase another ticket for the *Hot Shot*. He hides the glass in his sweatpants and manages to enter the stage without drinking Cuppliance. He then performs the dance number, gaining the sympathies of the audience. In the middle of his act, he pulls out the piece of glass he's been hiding, threatening to cut his own throat as a gesture of protest. The emotional culmination of the episode is reached when Bing delivers to the audience an unprepared speech decrying their living conditions, the way they're being treated, and the artificialness and numbness of the system. At first, the judges are shocked speechless, but they quickly recover and rate his performance "the most heartfelt thing they saw on their stage", offering him his own show on one of their channels. Defeated, he accepts and soon enough, his new and somewhat luxurious room is revealed. The final frame of the episode leaves us with the open ending. It shows Bing standing in front of what appears to be a window to the outer world, blooming with trees and life. Or, is this just another screen?

## Human, their doppel, and their screen

*Show us something real and free and beautiful; you couldn't. It'd break us; we're too numb for it, our minds would choke. There's only so much wonder we can bear, that's why when you find any wonder whatsoever you dole it out in meager portions, and only then till it's augmented and packaged and pumped through ten thousand pre-assigned filters, till it's nothing more than a meaningless series of lights, while we ride day-in, day-out – going where? Powering what? All tiny cells in tiny screens and bigger cells in bigger screens and fuck you!*

Bingham 'Bing' Madsen<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the story about failed love and the individual's suppressed revolution, a challenging spot for examination is the relationship between a man and technology, i.e., a man and the screens surrounding him. The person living in this world should be looking at the screens at all times unless sleeping, and the computer in a way controls his life. The doppel represents the human in cyberspace, comparable to the familiar relations of the human and his avatar in today's video games. Their lives are, so to say, simulated in this technologically-generated space, created in a hardware-software interaction between the living organism and digital system.<sup>15</sup> Earning merits for equipping the doppels with gadgets, clothes, haircuts, and designing the doppel's surroundings, is practically the only way for cyclists to express creativity in this world.

Computers are sensitive to movement, resulting in the lack of the usual "place of contact" between the human body and hardware through joystick, touchscreen, keyboard or virtual reality headset. Being connected to computers with this type of sensibility, the only thing separating the body from the computer is the ever-present screen. This particular fact aligns with the usual feature of the cyberpunk pieces of popular culture where the fusion of cognition and the artificial world has occurred. As Michaud notices, the usual modus of connection of individuals to artificial matrices is cognitive,<sup>16</sup> as it is in the episode in question.

The screen thus becomes the paradigmatic form of interface, the locus of joining and separation, representing the real as well as the symbolic manifestation of cyberspace as liminal: *that what is in between*.<sup>17</sup> Concerning semiotics, Lev Manovich points out that interface acts as a code, a notion that is rarely just a neutral transport mechanism, meaning that it provides and affects the message in a logical or ideological sense.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> From the speech.

<sup>15</sup> Aneta Stojnić, "The Problem of the Political in Cyberspace," *AM Journal of Art and Media* 7 (2015), 104.

<sup>16</sup> Michaud, "Science Fiction and Politics," 67.

<sup>17</sup> Stojnić, *Teorija izvođenja u digitalnoj umetnosti*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Manovič, *Jezik novih medija* (Beograd: Clio, 2015), 106–107.

The theorization of the screen can also be performed from the position of Lacanian psychoanalysis, given the fact that Jacques Lacan's concepts such as *mirror stage* and *gaze* (which is, together with the notion of *voice*, added by Lacan to Freud's list of partial objects) profoundly influenced the development of the theory of the screen in the 1970s.<sup>19</sup> With the accents set on the idea of self-recognition and development of subjectivity in a child, Lacan's *mirror stage* is crucial to the way screen theory treats images on screen – as signifiers that code meanings, but also as mirrors in which the viewers can recognize themselves and accept subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> Here, Manovich's explanation of interface/screen as a transmitter of ideological meaning and Lacan's *gaze* meet, in a place where the person can watch the screen and simultaneously be watched through it.

Following up on one of the big debates of phenomenology, with the nature of human and screen relationship in "Fifteen Million Merits", we can address the shifting and certain change in the relation between the sense of sight and the sense of hearing. Namely, Slavoj Žižek claims that "ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything," with the voice or sound pointing to a gap in the field of the visible.<sup>21</sup> The mentioned shift between hearing and watching occurs in the field of significant difference between the two verbs. As Hans Jonas explains, hearing is bound to temporality and perceives sounds only in their succession, while sight perceives every object, permanent in space and time, which is before the onlooker.<sup>22</sup> Another crucial distinction between sight and hearing concerns the subject himself.<sup>23</sup> While listening, the subject is passive and exposed to the sound without a possibility of escaping the sound: "our ears are always open, even when we sleep."<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, sight suggests the active position of the subject, for he can open and close his eyes at will, and is not affected by the object in front of him.<sup>25</sup>

This setting is challenged in the world depicted in "Fifteen Million Merits", because, as mentioned before, the subject *cannot* look away when the commercials are running. Bearing in mind that the rooms are covered in screens, so there is no possibility of turning away from the scene played, merely closing one's eyes at the sight of unwanted content will trigger unbearable noise and a repeated warning to 'resume viewing'. Previously a still object that does not affect the viewer has, in this reality, become the object one mustn't look away from. The statement "[o]bjects do not look

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<sup>19</sup> Stojnić, *Teorija izvođenja u digitalnoj umetnosti*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "I Hear You With My Eyes!, or, the Invisible Master," in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, NC, London: Duke University Press, 1996), 93.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenology of Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 137. Cf. Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 37.

<sup>23</sup> Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

at [the subject] and, above all, they do not require him to look”<sup>26</sup> thus becomes obsolete, as the object is violently insisting on subject’s attention and sight. As the viewer compliantly continues to watch the screen, through the same screen he’s observed continuously.

### **Human, his environment, and society**

As shown in the series, it appears that in this closed society there are no leaders or visible power structures. Still, some classification can be determined, considering that the cyclists are highly or, rather, differently, perceived than the obese people who “fell off the wagon” of the cycling job because of their weight and were thus downgraded to janitorial duties. The judges of the talent show most likely are of higher rank than the cyclists. In between of cyclists and judges, there appears to be another social class, entertainment industry workers. This poses the question whether the entertainers (singers, performers, porn stars) or others within the industry (judges, staff on the show, etc.) are in actuality in hierarchically higher positions than the cyclists, or is it all one part of the self-sufficient vicious circle that consists of people cycling to gain merits and finally enter the entertainment industry, and people entertaining the cyclists while attempting to do so.

This episode accentuates all the haunting aspects of modern society, with the special focus on extremization of capitalism, the entertainment industry, and media consumption habits, in order to deliver a satirical commentary on societal structures obsessed with money. This reality is braided out of the intense media saturation and fascination with micro-celebrities. Some of the individuals, like Bing, strive to experience “something real,” and the reality television seems the only possible way to do anything that could bring them closer to the realm of the *real*.

Communication with other people and the system is conditioned by the fact that people are always connected to the main network. Recalling the words of danah boyd, this network creates “an ecosystem,” but with the slight difference in comparison to the social networks of the contemporary world. Namely, advocating in favor of being ‘always-on,’ boyd explains that today people can stay “peripherally connected to one another through a variety of microdata” shared via social media;<sup>27</sup> in Bing’s and Abi’s world this ‘peripheral’ connection turns into a constant, cognitive interdependence between humans and their surroundings.

Capitalism is brought to the extreme of slavery, with only minimal wages obtained virtually. The fact that merits can be, in terms of physical objects, used just for food and toothpaste, is a direct reference to redirecting consumerist urges towards cyberspace, where it doesn’t take up any physical space, allowing the facility to remain as compact as possible. The apparent reference to the residual traits of consumerist

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> boyd, “Participating in the Always-On Lifestyle,” 73.



society from the past is more than evident. “Fifteen Million Merits” also addresses the more bared and harsh reality of entertainment. Stripped of all political correctness and politeness, the nature of the talent show epitomizes the horror of sexual harassment, and is especially conspicuous towards the velocity required for Abi to turn from the life-long dream of being a famous singer to the new star of a pornographic show.

As mentioned, people are shown observed and controlled through the screens, the detail that leads us to popular culture references such as George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* (1949), to Michel Foucault’s notions of discipline and bioregulation of society. Through surveillance, which is only one of the general ideas for these authors’ writings, the society is being controlled. Like in Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, workers in their rooms are separated, invisible to the rest of the population, but observed by someone behind the screens. According to Foucault, the productivity of the people in power is realized through the politics of forming the individual (through the normalization of discipline) and the population (with the extensive biopolitical interventions).<sup>28</sup> As it turns out, power relations built on these type of bases – like in this dystopian world of screens – limit the possibility of subjects operating outside of the system, because the ‘outside’ doesn’t exist. This explaining Bing’s failed protest attempt and, after his participation in the show, even stronger immersion in the system.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Stojnić, *Teorija izvođenja u digitalnoj umetnosti*, 91.

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