FROM 'CONTROL TO INFLUX': READING *BLACK MIRROR* AS THE REPRESENTATION OF A 'TRAGEDY' IN THE AGE OF DYSTOPIAN TECHNOCRACY

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Abstract: Having trodden long from Michel Foucault's disciplinary societies and his structural diagram of power (Panopticon), humans are rapidly moving towards a society of control, as proposed by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. This is the breaking point at which Charlie Brooker's dystopian dark series *Black Mirror* takes a bend. *Black Mirror* takes a quantum leap towards what we would like to call as "a society of influx". The present paper

attempts to read *Black Mirror* in the light of Deleuze's Society of control, that how it anticipates a society of influx with its surf towards augmented reality, trans-human elements

and authoritarianism. This influx primarily includes a terrifying invasion into the personal as such a society would always blur the line between the personal and the public. The Black Mirror Universe (BMU) ─ with its mind-mapping sensors, life-recording devices, eye implants that regulate social-interactions, sense-controlling video games etc.─ aptly mirrors a society of influx which alarmingly carries the portentous message that technology is "still in the making". In a society of influx, subjects are made to believe that they are free to do whatever they want, but their ways are cut short. As the title indicates, the mirror is black and it doesn't cast back the "true" image or the "real I". It rather acts as a vortex into which humans are drawn in and crushed into pieces. While technology is the most obvious link that connects the stand-alone

episodes in the BMU, *Black Mirror* also reverberates the defenceless positions occupied by the human species who fail to discover what they are made to serve in a larger spectrum.

INTRODUCTION

"To photograph people is to violate them… it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder ─ a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time." (Sontag 7) Charlie Brooker's dystopian anthology series *Black Mirror*(2011-) problematizes the effects of ongoing, uninterrupted attempts at such "subliminal murders", through a plethora of methods, in the wake of nuanced technologies. The series was inspired from other television series namely *Twilight Zone*; The mastermind and show-runner of *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker observes-

> Serling, a brilliant writer, created *The Twilight Zone* because he was tired of having his provocative teleplays about contemporary issues routinely censored in order to appease corporate sponsors. If he wrote about racism in a southern town, he had to fight the network over every line. But if he wrote about racism in a metaphorical, quasi-fictional world – suddenly he could say everything he wanted. (Brooker 5)

The Black Mirror Universe (BMU) ─ with its mind-mapping sensors, life-recording devices, eye implants that regulate social-interactions, sense-controlling video games etc.─ aptly mirrors, what we would call, a new society of influxes which alarmingly carries the portentous message that technology is 'still in the making'. The present paper will argue and illustrate in reference to a selection of *Black Mirror* episodes, how the BMU and the society of influxes it encompasses disrupt any meaningful attempts at representing 'reality' in a world

where all that matters is the projection of a halo, mere fluorescence or a specific illustration. "In our image driven society, we don't want the truth. We choose to consume a projected image of what we desire to be true." (Wisecrack 2016) To be more specific, the society of influxes is driven wholly by images in which the inhabitants are more bothered by how they are perceived than how they really are.

As the French philosopher Guy Debord observes, "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images". (Debord 118). The inhabitants of such an influx-driven society are constantly obsessed with curating their image to present themselves more appealingly in a virtual landscape where the meaning of these images is considered insignificant and what merely matters is the lustre of the form. These images reach the spectators in a media landscape where 'performance' is an accepted vehicle to achievement. Such a general concordance robs people off their capacity to think at first place and this generates a paradigm shift from the real to the unreal where every act is valued as a show.

In the episode titled "Fifteen Million Merits", the bikers who sustain the system find nothing 'real' worth buying and thus they wish to gain fame by securing a ticket for the talent show 'Hotshot', which is only their imaginary utopia. Similarly, the narrative framework of "Playtest"largely blurs the real from the unreal. Cooper, the protagonist, has no 'real', filial ties left in his life except his mother with whom he has 'connection'issues. Moreover, his death reaches the audience in a realm where one cannot determine if it is real or not. Hence, rather than fulfilling the visual pleasure of the viewers, Charlie Brooker intends to play with or rather manipulate the sense of sight of the viewers exactly to make them identify with those inside the BMU. This technique serves as a critique of the obvious domination of the sense of sight over other senses in the performance-propelled universe of *Black Mirror*. In this context, the

paper will also address the human impulse to grapple and break out of the rapidly changing consciousness of the BMU, in the light of Deleuze's Societies of Control.

The critic Hayward (2009) notes that images play an important role in reproducing cultural tenets and that as such, analysing not only the content of the image but the frame in which is propagated(that is, the narrative the image is conveying) is relevant to understanding the culture in which it is produced. Production of film and television has shifted from conveying information or entertaining audiences to reproducing cultural beliefs that shape reality (Hayward and Presdee, 2010). Through this framework, we might understand *Black Mirror* as truly a commentary on its own medium. In fact, Brooker created the series to explore the "delight and discomfort" that is attached to society's access to mass media and technology—the title of the series itself alluding to the "cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone" (Brooker, 2011).

FIFTEEN MILLION MERITS

"Fifteen Million Merits" is set in a world of screens, where even the walls of the room are replaced by screens which one cannot turn off at will. Bing's cell and the overall set up of the world where he lives in resembles Michel Foucault's panopticon model. This is validated by highlighting the precariousness of the block-like framework they have for the place (apparent home) where the bikers live in. This is brilliantly executed with the aid of a wide angle shot accompanied by Bing's remarkable comment: "Look around…I just want something real to happen."

In the world that "Fifteen Million Merits" represents, all the fundamental necessities of life are obtained through a form of virtual currency called 'merits'. One can earn these merits by playing certain unproductive interactive games, while pedalling on a stationary bike. Here, it is important to notice that everything in this society is viewed from a performance perspective.The famous critic and philosopher Adorno in his work *Aesthetic Theory* argues that

the instant gratification from technology and pleasure provides a superficial satisfaction, and this prevents people from challenging the inequalities present in the social order. In the augmented reality of "Fifteen Million Merits", the citizens' bodies are constantly occupied with cycling and their minds with trivial distractions like video games, advertisements and adult videos. In an era that live-streams everything, which even includes live-stream suicides, the spectator's interest lies predominantly on the immediate (un)reality on the screen in front of her/him. The spectators build stars, one after the other, only to satiate their amusement quotient. As a testimony to this, today anyone can become an overnight sensation by means of superficial performances on 'screen'. Bing's ineffectual rage, in a way, stands in as a metaphor for the rage of the viewers of *Black Mirror*, his rant being a spontaneous outward manifestation of the public's inner hope that a desensitizing-cum-machine-driven society might yet hold seeds of 'real' growth.

In the BMU, power flows through every individual who simultaneously becomes both the subject and carrier of it. Here, the characters are disconnected not only from the society, but are also disconnected from each other which is an index of the capitalist society. There is a kind of mystification in the status quo of the individuals in this thoroughly flagrant society of influxes where everyone and everything has a price. On closer observation, one could infer that there is a three-tier class system working within the society. The overweighed cleaners in yellow suits occupy the lower strata of the social ladder. They do all the menial jobs and serve the needs of the cyclists. Later, the viewers understand that this is a conscious decision taken up by the helpers as they consciously deny the opportunity to be fit as they want to keep themselves away from the trap of 'clockage of merits', thus retaining their sane selves. Though Dustin mocks at them time and again, they are dismissive of his bullying nature and maintain an indifferent attitude. In an outrightly rigged system that fosters efforts to achieve momentary pleasure and satisfaction, the cleaners apparently are an exception. They are the ones who are

least affected by this 'absolutely realistic' mirage exquisitely set up by the imperceptible Alpha. The cleaners at least appear to have some grip over themselves in the uncontrollable influx initiated by an inherently oppressive system. They also appear to be free to an extent from the delusions of everyday life. The middle strata is shared by the riders and the judges of the talent show who have a slight upper-hand over the former group. The judges of 'Hot Shot' are also cogs in a larger wheel though they might appear as the supreme authority. Finally, the upper strata is held by an amorphous 'eye' that governs and determines all aspects of life in the society of influx.

In the society that is introduced before us, what matters is what you see and not what you think. Here, one could infer that the means of amusement has changed and in fact amusement itself is commodified. The talent show 'Hot Shot' is the imaginary Utopia where the winners can live a life of opulence. Most importantly, what the viewers need is merely an image of talent and not real talent. The judges do not acknowledge real talent/ real passion, instead they pretend to be amused by Abi's performance primarily to make her feel good with their tempting words only to execute their plans well.

Abi breaks the monotonous life of Bing and compels him to see beyond the cycle rides and screens; the origami penguins signifies the 'real' and natural domain that Bing encounters for the very first time in his life. Bing is made conscious of the system when he sees for himself how the wheel breaks Abi's willpower and how she succumbs to do Wraith's pornographic show, namely, Wraith Babes. The 'Cuppliance' drink clouds her judgment and she gives up the life of a cyclist to be a porn-star.What the spectators witness is not a celebration of talent, but the celebration of exaggeration and fleeting moments. This is validated by the fact that the viewers have access only to the censored version of the show and the uncut version is kept private and left unaired.

Dolly shots are employed to trail Bing's movements and the camera occasionally zooms in to focus minute details like tiny button-functions, toothpaste and advanced headphones. Right through, the camera zooms in and out between the labourers, the bikers and the screens, thus providing insights for the viewer into the faintly contrasting worlds they both represent. All the while, the camera also directs attention towards the mechanical movements of the bodies and feet of the bikers as they ride on their shiny, grey bikes in concordance.

The media in virtual world keeps the power structure intact by eliminating any chances of criticism; the 'society of influxes' becomes a reality by censoring the content and showing the public what the higher authority wants them to see. In his conclusion to the "Postscript," Deleuze points out, "The conception of a control mechanism, giving the position of any element within an open environment at any given instant (whether animal in a reserve or human in a corporation, as with an electric collar), is not necessarily one of science fiction" (1992, 7). The cyclists are concerned about their virtual appearances and are oblivious about other's emotions and feelings; most of them are engrossed in sadist games and are unapologetically ignorant of the basic etiquette.

Bing is the representative of societies of influx. In the present society, at least we have the access to control our 'screens', at least we have the access to turn them off whenever we desire to. Unfortunately, a society of influxes forcefully makes the viewers watch all those we don't desire to and the screens take complete control of the individual. For instance, at one point, Bing is unable to get rid of the pornographic ads due to insufficient funds which ultimately leads to a breakdown in his disposition. The act of breaking the mirror is his attempt to come out of an outrightly oppressive universe. Eventually, when Bing rails against the heartless, oppressive system they live under, he is offered a regular show on one of Hope's channels. In the closing frame, Bing fixes his gaze at the bright sky from an apparent window to the external world, a world that is flourishing with vegetation and life. Maybe, this just can

be another screen and thus leaves the spectators in a confused state. Hence, one could infer that dissent itself is eventually commodified. This is how a society of influxes perpetuates surveillance, eliminates differences and in that way denies a dignified life to individuals who are different in any manner from the constructed norm.

PLAYTEST

The famous French philosopher Jacques Ellul once commented, "One cannot but marvel at an organization which provides the antidote as it distils the poison." (Ellul 378) *Black Mirror* is the perfect emollient for contemporary advancement; the show portrays the real society's technology, of the very age it is critiquing. The tech-cultural 'shock absorber' demands the viewers to break away from their attachment to their black screen mirrors even as it compels them to binge watch an entire season of *Black Mirror*. The mortification people experience while watching *Black Mirror* easily becomes a masochistic expiation that allows people to continue walking down the path to the futures outlined in the show; *Black Mirror* provides the antidote, but it also distils the poison.

"Playtest" is the second episode in the third season of the dystopian dark series Black Mirror. It narrates the story of an American flâneur named Cooper who signs up with a video game company (Saito Gemu) in London to test the beta version of a survival horror game in order to afford his return trip back to America. The episode blurs the thin line between reality and illusion in a society of influxes with its rapid surf towards augmented reality and trans-human elements. The Inception-like framework set up by the writer-director duo Charlie Brooker and Dan Trachtenberg leaves the viewers in a perplexed state as they fail to decipher whether the instances happening on the screen are part of the game or are they in 'reality'.

The episode also throws light upon the basic breakdown of human communication in the age of the hyper-real. Cooper, essentially, is an escapist who travels round the globe only to evade any tangible contact with his mother. When Sonja asks him whether he went on this

trip to find himself, Cooper responds, "really to get away from the family home is what I'm doing". This indirectly reveals that though Cooper appears on the outside as a thrill-seeker with a carefree attitude towards life, he is suppressing considerable amount of inner trauma. Ultimately, when he is forced to face his biggest fears, the viewers realize how Cooper's inward weaknesses make him more susceptible to the horrors that he encounters.

Here, Cooper himself is the predator and the prey rolled onto one. With the aid of his smartphone, he is able to find his best match, earn money and travel around the world. Yet, there is a hue of hazard to everything that surrounds him, as his smartphone can generate bleak simulacrums for these abstract articles, detracting any chances of genuine/ realistic encounters. Eventually, Cooper himself becomes responsible for his death by turning his phone on while 'playtesting'.

The cinematography in tandem with various sounds from Cooper's phone generate multiple effects via a wide range of noises and close-up shots that are similar to the manner by which smart devices are dealt with in actuality. For instance, subjective points-of-view and displaying of images/clips taken via smartphone instead of actual shots/images are all reflections of everyday smartphone operation.

An impressive array of close-ups that outline the smartphone as the focal point particularly via a low-angle enable the viewer to recognize a conflicting dichotomy of smartphone's applications. Also, the viewers are shown a montage of Cooper's adventures which enables the audience to directly get involved with a sequence of selfies taken by Cooper on his smartphone. This technique, though merely for a short period, aids in trapping the viewers in a mirage of reality. Similarly, when Cooper sits at a café and observes a couple kissing, he's mostly out of focus and the frame focuses the couple's passionate act of kissing, thus highlighting Cooper's discontent and explicit loneliness.

Interestingly, the name of the inn where Cooper meets Sonja for the first time is 'The Raven Inn'. Set up almost like how an Edgar Allan Poe short piece unravels on a cold December evening, '"Playtest" shares considerable parallels with Poe's most celebrated poem "The Raven". Maybe, this is because the implant facilitates the player's brain to texturize the entire environment of the game based on experiences from the real world Cooper might have read the poem somewhere in the past and it might have had a significant influence on him since the narrator of the poem and Cooper himself share certain characteristics in common. "The Raven" is a poem about the dilemma faced by the narrator, about his desire to either forget/remember the loss of someone he loved. On a winter evening, the narrator seeks shelter in "a curious volume of forgotten lore" only to get over the death of his beloved Lenore. Similarly, Cooper too attempts to elude the forgetful memories of his past which include the mournful memories of his dearest father who recently died of Alzheimer's. Both of them desire to forget parts of their past and similarly, they only wish to endure selected memories. The raven, in the poem, after rapping and tapping at the narrator's chamber door, finally perches upon a bust of Pallas. The Harlech mansion is also home to several such busts which are displayed right through the episode.

'Mushroom' is the augmented reality implant that Katie fixes inside the back of Cooper's neck. It is an interactive augmented reality system which is more like "layers on top of reality" as Katie goes on to describe how the implant works. But, only at a later stage one gets to know that the implant not just monitors brain's activities but also does it play with Cooper's insecurities, eventually throwing him into an irrevocable state of madness. It compels one to scrutinize one's experiences, the nature of them, and the means by which one acquires them and eventually how they have become. And at that particular point, it constrains you to think whether everything is the illusory creation of your smartphone. Cooper is always shown under a panoptical gaze, where his actions are assisted by Katie, the game-test liaison. Here,

smart phone is the surveillant and Cooper the surveyed; he is always at the mercy of his gadget. In his "Postscript on the Societies of Control", Deleuze talks about how individuals have become 'dividuals' and how they are constantly losing and reinventing their selves- "Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other, or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from one point to point." (Deleuze 2)

Here, the art of deception is exquisitely used as a plot tool to misguide the viewer, as he/she is forced to believe that Cooper is going deeper and deeper into newer and more terrifying levels of visual representation in the game. Lest they know that all of this is a part of his imagination; he never entered a simulation in the first place. Katie later says that Cooper lasted for only 0.04s as his synapses lit up together when the mobile signal interfered with the game signals.

Towards the end, a brief montage displays Cooper's homecoming, thus demonstrating a predictable ending where all the occurrences were mere hallucinations of the protagonist. A tranquil underscore along with a warm colour-tone and shots from Cooper's own perspective are all make-believe only to convince the viewer that Cooper's mental health has apparently been restored. He enters his home to find his sobbing mother upstairs. Immediately, the scene cuts to the white chamber where Cooper began playing the game. He yelps "MOM" and collapses after severe convulsion. For the first time, spectators are exposed to the warped reality that Cooper has been dead this whole time. In the end, the game developers reveal that the signal interference from Cooper's phone led to his death, thus making the viewers realize that majority of the events did not 'really' occur.

In "Playtest", 'societies of control' operate elusively; Cooper willingly becomes the 'game-tester', but his potential and selfhood are variably exploited by the company by the act of 'playing' the game. Cooper is under a work system where he has to constantly adapt and

reinvent himself in order to survive in the game. The Deleuzian control society can be traced in the manner in which the game test is designed; the game test operates in full potential only if the candidate lowers his diffidence and allows the program to 'read his desires and insecurities'. The program designed becomes more individualistic catering to the needs of specific candidates, thus, asserting more control over their everyday life.

When the reality hits in the form of 'society of influxes', one can see how technological advancements pans out and devours Cooper himself. In the climax scene, the game designer Saito indifferently says to his assistant Katie to note how much Cooper lasted in the game. From their conversation, it becomes evident that Cooper is not the first victim of the game. There have been many human sacrifices and the company is concerned about the potential and success of the new game; it cares least about the candidates who enter the simulation. The society driven by influxes questions augmented reality and mechanic intelligence; Cooper discovers a book titled *The Singularity* which talks about the same video-game at Sonjas's flat. *The Singularity* can be analyzed as the technological superiority of the artificial intelligence, where the entire human race is devoured by the artificial super intelligence – which is exactly what the Saito Gemu is doing. The human users are terminated by the simulations day by day and the capitalist system operating is least bothered by the same.

In the overwhelming influx and its complementary pressure towards the establishment of a trans-human universe, humans have turned their lives into a high-end game. One is forced to think if our grandest cravings and even our most sublime reveries might just be simulated manifestations of our smartphone addiction. When everything fails, one loses sight of her/his 'access point' and shows the impulse to break out of the rapidly changing world around her/him. Cooper's act of breaking the mirror in the apparent access point of the survival horror game is one such attempt to come out of the changing consciousness of the BMU.

CONCLUSION

Black Mirror does not offer any tinge of hope for its viewers. Instead, what the creators intend to fulfil is to represent the 'tragedy' as it is. That is, to express their concerns regarding the action of watching and the device that facilitates it ─the shiny screens. Incorporating flicker and merry neon colours into inane pornographic ads, positioning of cheerful songs that carry rays of hope amidst the bleak backdrops of imminent techno-struggles and the intermittent use of ephemeral optimistic moments not only highlight the precariousness of the characters in a topsy-turvy universe, but also casts and further amplifies the hollow-promises of techno capitalism that supplies individuals with perilous products. The recurrent use of light colours within the gadgets introduced before the viewers is indicative of the furtive use of devices for meddling purposes while basking under a frisky guise. All the while, it is important to notice that *Black Mirror* was originally aired on British television's channel 4 before being purchased by Netflix in 2015. Thus, a series that attempts to represent the tragedy of life on a terrain of influxes eventually becomes part of a performance-driven vicious cycle and thus itself indulges in the discourse it overtly seems to critique.

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