Ewa Ziomek
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin

Sinister Vision of the Future in the TV Series Black Mirror

Abstract

It is not an exaggeration to say that mass media have seized the modern world. One can hardly imagine life without the Internet and a smartphone. The TV series Black Mirror, created by the British satirist Charlie Brooker, depicts the “side effects” that the technology may have on one’s life as well as the repercussions it may bring if used without caution. Charlie Brooker conjures up the future world in which media and technology destroy interpersonal relationships leading to moral atrophy. Nevertheless, the TV series is not a criticism of both the media and technology as such. What Black Mirror warns against is the abuse of technological inventions and the addiction to the mass media. Examining Brooker’s TV show, the article focuses on social phenomena that may be observed in the modern world. Notions such as the culture of denudating, social exhibitionism and the public amusement are concepts that represent issues which need great attention in the times of change. Looking through “black mirrors” of smartphones, one does not perceive other individual as a human being, but rather as a virtual simulacrum. What nowadays makes people even more virtual are social accounts which give any stranger an easy access to one’s life. The users covet for approval which is reflected in the number of likes. Human being is defined based on an artificial profile, which provides its viewers with fake information. All things considered, Charlie Brooker wants the audience to realize that if one forgets about the value of other human being and starts to abuse media and technology, the “side effects” will impact the forthcoming future.

Keywords: media and technology, culture of denudating, social exhibitionism, public amusement, Black Mirror, Charlie Brooker.

Introduction

It is not an exaggeration to say that technology and the mass media have seized the modern world. Suffice it to say, the world without smartphones and the Internet would be much harder a place to live in. Not only are the media a source of inexhaustible knowledge, but they also enable us to have an insight into other people’s lives. There is no doubt that technological advancements make our lives easier; however, they may also lead to unprecedented consequences if applied without caution. Charlie Brooker, the British
satirist, producer, screenwriter and the creator of the TV series *Black Mirror*, carried out an experiment, proving that technology may have a detrimental effect on people’s lives. In the article “The Dark Side of Our Gadget Addiction” Brooker asks: “If technology is a drug – and it does feel like a drug – then what, precisely, are the side-effects?” (Brooker 2011). Brooker’s TV show may be treated as the answer to this question. *Black Mirror* is a mental experiment, providing the viewer with a glimpse into an alternative reality in which society abuses technology, leading to its own demise. Brooker created an outstanding show, by means of which he persuades, or even manipulates the spectator to conjure up a world, where the media are not a medicine, but a poison. *Black Mirror* is a “technoseptic mini series” (Calek 2016: 167), which “plots are tricksy, […] dystopian themes are whizzy and […] writing is frequently unnervingly prescient” (Cooke 2016: 52). The icon of supernatural fiction, Stephen King, described the show as follows: “Terrifying, funny, intelligent. It’s like *The Twilight Zone*, only rated R” (qtd in Spangler 2014: 18).

*Black Mirror* is, without a doubt, a dystopia, since the vision of the future that has been depicted in it is dramatically negative (Smuszkiewicz 1990: 262-264). While watching the series, the viewer is aware that the protagonists are doomed to failure from the very beginning and the final that will eventually unveil will unquestionably be tragic. Brooker based his show on the American production, *The Twilight Zone*, launched in the sixties. Rod Serling, the creator of the show, decided that instead of joining the instalments of the series by cliff-hangers, he would rather concentrate on post-apocalyptic and fantastic events, telling a different story in every episode. The impact that *The Twilight Zone* had on *Black Mirror* is clearly seen in the structure of the TV series, which is fairly untypical. Although it has been divided into seasons as most TV shows are, each and every episode varies in terms of the narrative and engages unfamiliar characters. What joins the episodes are the eponymous “black mirrors” of the smartphones, TV sets and computers. Annabel Jones, the show’s producer, claims that what they focused on while making the show was “this uncomfortable relationship we have with technology” (qtd in Spangler 2014: 18).

Despite its fictional plot, *Black Mirror* is an apt commentary to the real world build around the media culture. Describing the experience of watching a show, Jeremy Purves writes:

> You want to look away. You can’t look away. And, even worse, Mr. Brooker has designed each story in this show to explicitly point out to you the very fact that you can’t look away. Then, as you’re watching it, his point registers in your mind. You get it. He’s critiquing the very fact that you are absorbed with this TV screen in front of you … and then you just keep watching (Purves 2013).

Brooker’s TV show does not refer on the past, nor does it describe some abstract system. *Black Mirror* depicts the presence, the reality which we live in. The creator emphasizes that every episode tells a story about the modern world, at the same time presenting an alternative vision of the future world, which awaits us if we are clumsy. He states: “If there’s one thing we know about mankind, it’s this: we’re usually clumsy. And it’s no use begging Siri for help. He doesn’t understand tearful pleading. Trust me, I’ve tried” (Brooker 2011). The criticism conveyed in the series does not pertain to the technology as such; it evinces concern about how a man may use this technology and what negative effects of the unskilful usage it may bring (Boren 2015: 18).

T.S. Eliot writes: “that what shocks one generation is accepted quite calmly by the next” (Eliot 1941: 145). Voyeurism is punishable, yet following other people’s Facebook profiles, which provides the stalker with much more information about a person than gazing through binoculars, is something utterly

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1 Polish sources quoted in the article have been translated by the author of the text.
natural and is not regarded as the encroach on somebody’s right. It is true that sharing the details of one’s life on social networks is voluntary; however, one could say that this phenomenon may be referred to as social exhibitionism, which, just a few years ago, would meet with a public criticism. Brooker argues:

“We routinely do things that just five years ago would scarcely have made sense to us. We tweet along to reality shows; we share videos of strangers dropping cats in bins; we dance in front of Xboxes that can see us, and judge us, and find us sorely lacking [...]. Read that back to yourself and ask if you live in a sane society (Brooker 2011).

He also mentions the times, when he used to be a host of the show *How TV Ruined Your Life*, where he asked the participants about modern inventions that often did not exist at all. In one episode, the audience was urged to comment on the telephone that enables the users to talk with people from the past and the future. Strangely enough, many interviewees believed that such an invention is real. Not only was it an indicator of the participants’ gullibility, but also a proof of “just how magical today’s technology has become” (Brooker 2011). What the creator of the TV show is interested in are the side effects of an unskilful usage, or, to go further, abuse of this magical technology. As the fairytales teach us, not always does the magic lead to the happy ending; sometimes it may destroy the whole universe.

1. Culture of Denudating

*Black Mirror* addresses the issue of how nowadays technology as well as the social media are being used or even abused. The series accurately depicts the, so called, “culture of denudating” (Wójcik 2016: 29). The episodes “National Anthem” and “White Bear” allude to the problems that the modern world has to face. Technology used in those two episodes is not more advanced than the one used in everyday life. Both instalments criticise the lust for voyeurism in social networks. Even though the show takes some scenarios to extremes, exaggerating the problems and presenting certain social behaviours as grotesque, it must be said that the reality depicted in those episodes is not a far cry from status quo. What one can see on the screen is, as Brooker puts it, the future that awaits us if we keep relying on technology as much as we do. Referring to the episodes, he says: “they’re all about the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes’ time” (Brooker 2011).

The first instalment of the series, “National Anthem,” perplexes the viewer with its offensiveness. Taken aback, the spectator feels disgusted and probably wonders, who could come up with so crude a plot. Despite the feeling of aversion mixed with outrage and bafflement, the beholder keeps watching. The story takes place in England. Woken up in the middle of the night, Prime Minister picks up the phone. He is informed that Princess Susannah has been taken. The kidnapper posted a video on the Internet in which a crying princess explains the terrorist’s demands. In order to save Susannah, Prime Minister must have a sexual intercourse with a pig. In addition to that, the whole event is to be broadcast in all the media. What the author of the video aims at is to ridicule and humiliate Prime Minister, destroying his public image once and for all. Feeling pressure exerted on him by the British society and being afraid of the public rage, the head of a cabinet decides to face the challenge. The terrorist “undresses the king, forcing him to behave like a jester before the stunned amusement of his ‘subjects’” (Musaró 2016: 118). Moreover, he thereby proves that the government is in fact powerless. Prime Minister’s efforts appear to
be pointless, as it turns out that the princess was freed thirty minutes before the broadcast, yet it went unobserved as the whole country was staring at the screens, waiting for the politician’s debasement.

No matter how offensive a performance may seem, the media can present it in such a way so as to encourage everyone to watch it. Paradoxically, it was the audience’s urge to see the broadcast with Prime Minister as the lead that played a crucial role in the kidnapping. Had it not been for the people who wanted to watch it, the terrorist would not have succeeded. The “artist” wanted to make people see how impotent the authorities are compared to the media, which have a real power over the audience and are able to manipulate the whole country. A befuddled viewer can no longer differentiate valuable information from junk which the media provide the audience with. In Neil Postman’s brilliant bestseller one can read:

> No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure. That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to ‘join them tomorrow.’ What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters’ invitation because we know that the ‘news’ is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say. Everything about a news show tells us this – the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show, the vivid film footage, the attractive commercials – all these and more suggest that what we have just seen is no cause for weeping. A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertainment, not for education, reflection or catharsis. (Postman [1985]2006:87)

It has been over thirty years since Postman’s book was first published, yet the quote still seems to reflect the role of media in the modern world. The only difference is that now, it is not the television that is the main source of information. It has been replaced by the Internet, which is much more powerful a tool. Having an easy access to the sea of information, one can become a voyeur with impunity. Culture of denuding mentioned before is nothing else than a public consent to abandonment of privacy and intimateness in favour of a social déshabillé. The content and the message of the broadcast are not important anymore; what counts is its extraordinary, stunning and scandalous nature, even if it is vulgar.

Just like “National Anthem,” “White Bear” also refers to the culture of denuding and ponders on the people’s voyeuristic nature. Victoria, the main protagonist of this episode, wakes up in an unfamiliar flat. She does not remember who she is and where she is. Looking for help, she goes outside where an indifferent crowd of people stares at her and records her misery with smartphones. It appears that the gawkers are not the only threat that Victoria is faced with. She is chased by the masked people, who hunt for her as if she were an animal. One can feel unease and sympathize with the woman, who seems to be trapped in some bizarre, dystopian reality. She then meets a young couple in a petrol station, which is hunted just as she is. She discovers that people are influenced by a transmitter, which makes them indifferent or in some cases bloodthirsty. In order to survive, they need to find the transmitter and destroy it. When they eventually reach the destination, it turns out that everything is just a film set and the hunters as well as the allied couple are just actors. However, Victoria is not one of them. She is a prisoner in the “White Bear Justice Park.” The prison is created in such a way so as to serve as an attraction for the tourists who come there, participate in the chase and are even allowed to record the whole event. The spectator finally gets to know Victoria’s story. The woman, along with her fiancé, kidnapped a few year old girl and witnessed her murder. Not only did she not stop her fiancé from killing the child, but she also recorded
the homicide. As a punishment, she lives the same day over and over again. She wakes up in a strange house and does not remember what has happened. Chased by the masked actors-hunters and recorded by the tourists, she is an entertainment for the voyeuristic and detached crowd.

In the episode, voyeurism and preying on human's suffering has been justified, as the main protagonist, indeed, deserves to be punished. Charlie Brooker does not defend Victoria, yet he focuses on a phoney morality that the actors and tourist defend. Convinced of Victoria's guilt, they do not regard her as a human; she is nothing else than a source of amusement (Wójcik 2016: 31). The episode may serve as an excellent example of people's indifference, which finds its reflection in reality. Many a time one can hear about a crime witnessed by plenty of people, none of whom helped the harmed. Even though they did not manage to help the victims, they did manage to record the whole accident. Looking through the “black mirror,” one sees other people's suffering as unreal, unauthentic. Pain, just as in the TV news mentioned before, is depicted as amusement. While recording the catastrophe, a witness becomes an indifferent and detached beholder. Reality seems to be something elusive, intangible, especially when it is watched through the mirror of a virtual screen, just as other human being appears to be a mere simulacrum.

2. Social Exhibitionism

Another issue that has been raised by the creator of the TV series is people's tendency to judge others based on their social profiles. Jeremy Rifkin writes: “while in the twentieth century most of us were in the audience, in the twenty-first century, thanks to YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, the blogosphere, etc. we are all on stage, under the spotlights” (Rifkin 2009: 555). Many critics notice that the episode “Nosedive” may be considered a commentary on the “Peeple” application, launched in 2016. The application was created in order to encourage people to judge others, strictly speaking their professional, personal as well as love lives. It is not a surprise that the application met with a lot of criticism and its creators were accused of propagating harassment.

Joe Wright, the director of “Nosedive,” presents the reality in which people indeed use such application in everyday life. Everyone is judged by everyone. Any interaction, any contact with other user may be judged in the scale of 1 to 5. Not only does low rating involve public hostility, but it also has an impact on one's life in terms of losing a job, not being able to rent a flat or a house in a better neighbourhood, not to mention living in seclusion, since no one wants to be associated with a “three” for fear of social ostracism. The world depicted in the instalment seems artificial and absurd, but one could pose a question whether it is so much different from the reality we live in.

It has been a few years since Uber’s passengers started to use the application that enables them to rate the drivers. By all means, in this case the grading system has been implemented out of concern for the passengers, yet it is not the only platform that involves judging others. It is Facebook that is on the leading edge when it comes to rating. Many a time it serves as a virtual space for organizing various types of competitions, whose winner is chosen based on likes. YouTube is just another website which produces new music stars and celebrities out of people whose channels are visited by the highest number of users. By creating any social account, one gives a stranger a chance to be a voyeur of one's life and not only watch, but also rate it. Referring back to what Rifkin claims, we are no longer just the audience. Being the beholders of other people's lives, we are at the same time the objects of gaze. In “Nosedive,” the director of
the episode cautions the viewers against sharing every detail of one's life on Facebook. He also warns that exposing yourself to other people's judgement and putting too much care into creating an ideal, yet unreal profile may have disastrous repercussions.

A phenomenon, which one could call a social exhibitionism, has permeated into social networks. Since social media have become pervasive, in order to keep in touch with other people in a real world, one has to follow them in the virtual reality. In his TV show, Charlie Brooker shows us that a modern man covets other people's appreciation and by opening the door to his life, he relinquishes his own privacy. Both the creator of the TV series and the director of “Nosedive” provide the viewers with the future forecast that does not appear to be sunny.

3. Public Amusement

The topic of the second season's final is an electoral campaign which resembles entertainment for the masses with terrible consequences rather than a political event. The main character of the episode, a blue animated bear with a cynical personality, is a host of a TV show. Waldo has been created by a comedian who dubs his voice. One of the bear's show guests is a candidate in a state election. Waldo insults the conservative politician which meets with both the media and society approval. His popularity escalates rapidly resulting in him being one of the candidates in the election. Needless to say, the political event turns out to have more in common with entertainment than politics. Eventually with media support and the applause of the crowds Waldo becomes a totalitarian ruler taking over the whole world. The secret of Waldo’s appeal lies in his ability to amuse the audience. The offensive jokes that he tells serve as an escape from the serious political issues that concern the public. Searching for the solution to difficult political matters requires some effort. There is no doubt that it is easier to make fun of the problems rather than to try to find the cure. Some critics find resemblance between Waldo’s and Donald Trump’s campaigns (Hill 2017).

Black Mirror encourages the viewer to ask who should be held responsible for the blue bear's victory. The instalment is not out of touch with reality nor does it involve advanced technology that will be used in a far future. “The Waldo Moment” is a commentary to the times we live in, to the social phenomena that have disseminated in contemporary society. Media manipulation, the public demand for fun and entertainment and fake news that are served to us every day are the causes of cultural cancer that may one day, as it is depicted in the TV series, destroy the modern world. Black Mirror is a warning against the abuse of media and technology, showing the dystopian future that awaits us if are not careful.

4. Conclusions

Charlie Brooker shows us a vision of a post-media world, which dystopian character stems not from the technological development as such, but rather from the way in which mankind applies this technology. Society as presented by Brooker consists of manipulated individuals characterized by the culture of denuding, social exhibitionism and the demand for entertainment. In the world depicted by the creator of the series, the media eliminated any moral virtues substituting them with the indifferent attitude
towards fellow men. One perceives others through “black mirrors,” paying greater attention to what information is given on their Facebook profiles than to who another human being really is. Defeatism which is the central point of the series springs from the concern that the advancements in technology are bound to result in the atrophy of interpersonal relationships. The series is not a gloomy projection of the future, yet it serves as a wake-up call. If mankind does not learn how to use technology in such a way so as to keep in mind other people’s rights and remember about their moral value as human beings, the future ahead of us will not be bright. The message of the TV series has been aptly summarized by Brooker: “I think social media is an incredible invention. It’s just that we, as an animal, aren’t yet adept at using this incredible new power we’ve been given. It’s like a new limb we’ve grown, and we’re flailing around and knocking all the furniture over” (qtd in Riley 2016: 48). However, once we know how to use it properly, it will help us rather than destroy everything around us.

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