**INTRUDING THROUGH THE SCHEMATIZATION OF MEDIA: THE CHALLENGE OF BLACK MIRROR**

Abstract

Undoubtedly, Science and Technology have solved a lot of problems we face in our daily lives. Science and Technology even have made some aspects of our lives more convenient such as communication, travel, research work, education, and finding cures for diseases. However, the same convenience that we enjoy have also turned against us. We as humans, on the pretense of being in control of technology, have become controlled by the same things we intended to master. This paper shall delve on the catastrophic consequences of technology on humanity by using *Black Mirror*, a British television program vis a vis Max Horkheimer’s essay on *Enlightenment and Mass Deception* to analyze our self-made imprisonment.

Keywords: Technology, Black Mirror, Culture Industry, Resistance,

Introduction

Does anyone willfully submit to the imprisonment of the mind? Has everything and anything become commodities for consumption? According to Horkheimer’s essay on *Enlightenment and Mass Deception*, the culture industry has oppressed and standardized not only objects but people. If this is so, is there a possibility to free ourselves and form a resistance? In the contemporary culture, we are rapidly consumed by media and technology where we have become automatons willfully resisting thought. We, on the pretense of directing our lives, are being directed by forces we think we control. As human beings, we revel on the power of our consciousness and the inherent right and freedom that we are born into, which was forged through a social contract, and yet we are insidiously betrayed by the system of industry that lures us into captivity. We must free this imprisoned person and and keep the human race thinking. For as Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living”. The culture industry has seduced us to un-examining life and into consumption where we ourselves become consumed and commodified. The task of this paper is to show how the culture industry has oppressed us through media and technology, and how through the same method we could resist instead of willfully succumbing to the thoughtless routine of consumption. This paper will use *Black Mirror*, a British Television show by Charlie Brooker, in order to present how the media and technology have controlled people and how people likewise have allowed the former to take control. Using *Black Mirror*, this paper also shows the possibility of resistance and the danger of such resistance.

There is admittedly, a lot of topics that *Black Mirror* covers and it has delved into many branches of philosophy such as epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of mind, among others. A lot of social, political, scientific and moral issues have also been covered such as the concept of justice, the ethics of war, questions of immortality, terrorism and technology, social control, consent, autonomy, knowledge, and privacy, the demonization of the other, ethics of journalism, the obsession with commodity, humiliation as entertainment, ethics of cloning, replacement of persons with Artificial Intelligence, standardization of people, loss of personhood, the mechanization of persons, the problem between being and having, the matter of authenticity, and source of self-worth. These are just a few questions *Black Mirror* poses and challenges its viewers to consider and reflect on.

The analysis of every episode of *Black Mirror* will prove far too much for a short essay such as this. As this is the case, I will not perform an in-depth analysis of each, but instead I will be using episodes to present the oppression of technology. While showing how the characters have resisted or failed to resist in these oppressive circumstances.

The Allegory of the Cave in the 21st Century

Plato has presented a clear picture of education and the lack thereof in society. Without education, we are nothing more than prisoners convinced of our own reality which is nothing more than illusions. Fast forward to the 21st century and we think we have the moral completely figured out. We treasure education and we think it is the gem through which we can reach success. We opt for a prestigious school and march to life carrying our university’s name and what it symbolizes. The symbols we carry are in fact the grain not only to our personhood, but to our own self-worth. But even having said that, we find ourselves nowhere out of the cave. We are stuck in our gadgets, staring into screens, taking in virtual reality as the real reality, investing in virtual currencies, ordering sex-robots, and even finding our matches on tinder. We are submerged in the virtual world we consider real. We haven’t come out of the cave, but we have undoubtedly upgraded our dwelling.

We no longer look at the shadow of puppets. We have televisions, computers, and phones and have it in color. We are no longer tied in chains, we attach ourselves to our couches. God forbid the second we have to leave our dear station to take a leak. Our personal interactions in the cave, if we ever did have, are transferred to our mobile phones. Only heaven can answer why people agree to gather just to be hooked up on electronics.

It is quite eccentric that this manner of living would ever come to pass. After all, we have achieved so much in so little time. The kind of technology we never thought would come to life stuff that sci-fi novels were made of are now a reality. Yet the dream, or the dread of it, have come to our doorstep and we seem to be unprepared for it. We weren’t taught on-line ethics or the separation of our real and virtual identity. We seem to be at a loss of how to function in the face of abrupt technological advancement. It is because of this sudden change, that the promises of the future seem to teleport us backwards. We find ourselves being controlled by technology instead of being in control of it. We find ourselves following the pattern of the masses instead of establishing our own unique identity. We find ourselves incorporating the idea of the media and drowning in its gospel truth. In the 21st century, people and objects are interchangeable commodities. The unfortunate reality is that, most of us are not conscious of it.

The Culture Industry

In writing this short essay, I find it important to first talk about Horkheimer’s claims on the Culture Industry before arriving at the conclusion of subverting it.

In Marx Horkheimer’s Essay on *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, he equates culture as producing standardized goods. Films, Radio, Magazines, Art, all come in a preassigned packaging and ready-made available, accustoming people to have the same taste and demanding the same products. As people consume standardized goods, they themselves become standardized. They long for the same thing and demand the same thing, thinking that it was their will that motivates them to do so. The culture industry imposes itself on mankind insidiously by printing in large billboard advertisements of brands and accessories while simultaneously suggesting that this is what an acceptable person of this time should look like and be like. Mankind seems to be easily influenced by media and its suggestions that they incorporate these suggestions into their daily lives. In fact, Naomi Wolf in her work “*The Beauty Myth*” talks about how women conceive of beauty and how the culture industry has twisted their perception of themselves. Media, according to her, places advertisements and therefore influences a woman to strive for what they see on those advertisements and women apparently, are feeble to these suggestions. They become housewives and longed for the new vacuums, pots, and washing machines, for the media advertises that is what a good housewife entails and that the meaning of life is only that. Then World War 2came about and women took on a man’s job in society, in order to support the country’s economy. The culture industry did not miss on this opportunity to make women want to look feminine while carrying briefcases. Not long after that, fashion came to power and women were imposed to look a certain way to what the industry perceives as feminine and therefore attractive. It wasn't long after that women are pressured to go to the gym and develop tiny waists and develop abdominal muscles. The more the culture industry figures out a way to capitalize on a woman’s insecurity, the more it provides a potion to alleviate their sense of self-worth. The culture industry has proven that the imposition of false psychological needs that can only be satisfied by the products of the same, is detrimental our stronghold on power. The culture industry is a system that imposes itself while eradicating the autonomous individual’s capacity to think. Such that autonomy becomes artificial in a system that proliferates automatons. A society that avoids thinking is a society easy to control and control is the core of power wherein the culture industry strives.

The monopoly of interest can easily be found at what mankind spends his leisurely time with. Horkheimer cites the monotony of television shows that mankind follows routinely. Shows that does not really differ from the life of its automatons that works to keep them servile. As mankind sees that there is no life far different from theirs, the more they are convinced that the kind of life they live is the only kind of life there is, and so they should be satisfied with thus. Their only leisurely time to escape work is their time to go back to it. Not only is the culture industry proven effective at deploying psychological needs that only it can satiate, it has proven even far more effective at suppressing it.

Commodification of Culture

“Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system”. (Horkeimer, 94)

Horkheimer further explicated on the monotony of commodities. Music, Films, Paintings, every sort of art has been degraded for consumption. The recurring theme of its production is sameness. All art follows a schema that is constantly being reproduced. Take for example contemporary movies that are being show on the Screen. Blockbuster movies that capitalized on its prequels, that follow the same story and end in accordance to the viewer’s anticipation. The monomyth capitalizes on the procedure by only altering a few details, but nonetheless follows the same structure. We are introduced to a hero that undergoes a trial and a fight or two emerges in which he or she comes out victorious. This same pattern is repeated in the sequels and we are always eager to watch the same thing.

But the monomyth proves not only effective in producing heroes, the myth also produces itself in lifestyle channels by continuously showing extravagant homes and exaggerated lifestyles. The myth perfectly aligns the structure of oppression by showing what a good life looks like and this structure of producing psychological needs are met with consumption of unnecessary products in order to satiate the illusion produced by the culture industry itself. We as viewers, are always being shown the same thing in different packaging and in each single time we are made to think that this is what we want or rather what we should want.

Magazines are no exemptions. We are provided different faces of supposedly successful and attractive males and females while providing us with advice on how to be just like the products they produce in the industry. They give us insider “tips” which simultaneously refers to the mechanisms of sameness. “Be like us”, “Dress like us”, “Sound like us”, “Eat like us”, “Be part of our machinery”, these are the voices of the industry that seduces us to be standardized.

Subverting the Promises of Technology

By now, we have already established the caprice of the culture industry and some of us try to establish our own independence apart from it.

Most of the people nowadays try to an extent to impose their own unique individuality upon the world and cease to be influenced by the media’s propaganda; be it aesthetical or political. We try to get ourselves more educated, more critical in the way we do things, and the way we think about things. In one way or another we try to subvert the culture’s imposition on us.

Charlie Brooker, an English producer has created a television series called *Black Mirror* which refers to the black screen of our gadgets such as television, phones, and computers. It signifies the dark aspects both of our technology and our human nature. In a way, technology seems to replace God in which it has become a sort of like an Idol we worship. Technology’s promise is to make our lives convenient and machines are supposed to be things we control; however Black mirror shows that the machines we invented for mankind’s use in evidently takes on the role of using us. We are not only subservient to technology but we also are in danger of being commodified by it by it making us believe that their products are what we need in life to make our lives better. But *Black Mirror* warns us that technology also has the capacity to change us and illuminates the dark side of our human nature. Technology is the eyes of *Black Mirror and it* has the power to enslave us while eliminating our humanity.

The Technological Art of Terrorism

In the first episode of *Black M*irror season 1 entitled *National Anthem*, technology is used to terrorized a Prime Minister and elicit mankind’s perverse seduction to cringe which makes that certain act of terrorism successful. On the face of it, we would like to think that we do not support the act of terrorism, but the episode shows that people are more than willing to watch inhumane acts. It is something that people can’t turn their eyes away from. As much as the characters say they cannot bear to watch the Prime Minister having sexual intercourse with a pig, they continue to do so.

According to the theory of cringe (Books for Better Living), something about the cringe gives an emotional rush., “Seeing others cringe makes us feel their pain. So why do we like it so much? One explanation is that feeling such intense empathy makes us feel closer to people, and not the exact people in the videos but to humanity as a whole.”

It is as if the article is saying two things. One, that we are in need of a surrogate to act instead of us and experience shame that we would rather avoid. Second, that it acts as a safety net. So by the time a shameful thing has happened to us, we will be comforted by the thought that it already happened to someone else.

However, it ignores the ethical implications of watching. Watching ceases to be a neutral act and becomes as a catapult for catastrophic events. Take for example the hostage crisis in 2010. A bus full of tourist from Hong Kong was held hostage by a former Philippine National Police officer. Philippine Television was providing live footage of police activity and because of this, the gunman saw it on the television which was inside the bus and knew the police’s intended action.

Technology has provided many possibilities that has made a lot of things convenient for people, but the same technology is used without caution. Technology is used both to sabotage rescue missions in the name of audience numbers and as in the first episode of Black Mirror, technology is used for terrorism. These two events have a striking similarity, the perpetrators succeed in their act of terrorism, because both their actions and the viewers guaranteed customers.

The Backward Future

At some point, we all wish we can relive the past especially the joyful ones. In the third episode entitled, the *Entire History of You,* people are installed with brains that can make them see every detail they have seen in the past. But this act of constantly replaying that which already occurred is counter to living towards the future for it brings us back to what already was. Technology promises control and the flow of time which is in the domain of nature is usurped by technology. Whatever is natural can be artificialized, can be commodified, and can be controlled. What this implies is that we no longer abide by the laws of nature and the limits it has imposed on us. Instead by going beyond this limit, with in memory particularly, we transgress our own limits as people. We can no longer move past what we could have before. We can no longer forget what we naturally do. Because we can always replay it back. In this episode, technology has enslaved us to produce and live in the past by obsessing and replaying things that have already happened. It is at the very least, contradictory to the promise of the future for it traps us back to the past.

The fourth episode *Be Right Back,* is very similar to the previous episode. Technology has become successful in cloning people and installing memories as well as personalities. Consciousness has become a data that can be inserted. But the main character soon realizes the difference of a real human being from a clone even if it looks, talks, and acts exactly like her dead husband whom she cloned. This episode blurs the line of what is real and what is not, as well as making us rethink the replaceability of humans in the future and what Paul Ricouer terms as “the working through of mourning”. In the episode, instead of working through one’s grief, the character opted for an immediate gratification of needs: restoring the loss loved one. However, according to Freud whose *Mourning and Melancholia* Ricouer studied, the work of mourning is a process of detachment. One must internalize that the loved one is already lost and then integrate the narrative of loss to one’s own life story. Only then can a person be free to attach one’s self to new objects, people, and experiences. But this process is sidetracked in *Be Right Back.* What technology does is not help the person confront reality, but to project its desires to something else which never fully satisfies.

The Social Credit System

In the first episode of the third season entitled *Nosedive*, people’s socioeconomic status is dependent on how many likes they get on their phones from social interaction. Their jobs, loans, housing, etc. are heavily dependent on a ranking system which ranges from 1 to 5 stars. We see characters tweaking their behaviors in a way that will suit society. They do this by uploading their daily activities and checking how many stars their activities have been given. These ratings are not for display alone. These ratings form the structure of being inside or outside of a social class and even society as a whole.

Such an episode seems to be farfetched when we compare the nature of likes we give on Facebook and Instagram. However, China is setting up a ranking system which they call as their social credit. Its aim is to monitor the behavior of its citizens. Bad driving and smoking in non-smoking zones will make one’s ratings go down and affect the privileges one may otherwise enjoy such as flying, getting on the train, exclusion from certain schools, preventing a person from getting good jobs, or being unable to book good hotels, and among other privileges.

The way China sees it, it is a way of keeping their citizens not only under control but on behaving like model citizens which will ensure everyone’s safety and enjoyment of life by upgrading the integrity of its citizens.

Military Robots

In season 3 episode 5 entitled *Men Against Fire,* markets on a military framework. One can ask one’s self how convenient it would be if our military sees monsters as targets instead of human beings. The episode acknowledges that the humanity of a person prevents him or her from killing each other. In fact, many researches prove that there are a lot of people in active military duty who comes back from a war acquiring mental disorders. The most common would be Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. We can assume that we have a system in our personhood that retaliates in taking the life of our own species no matter the cause. However, when one’s life and one’s country is in danger because of the enemy, killing the enemy in a sense becomes a duty. What the episode does to counter the basic structure of humanity is to eradicate its faculty to discern. The soldiers acquire implants that enhances their sense and provides augmented reality. The second one comes into question when instead of seeing a human being they are pointing their guns at, they are seeing *roaches* instead. As one character said, “it's a lot easier to pull the trigger when you’re aiming at the bogeyman.”

In The Philosopher’s Way Thinking Critically About Profound Ideas. John Chaffee notes the three stages of knowing: The Garden of Eden, Anything Goes, and Thinking Critically. According to Chaffee, the first stage of knowing believes everything to be in black and white, either this or that, good or evil, right or wrong. However, a closer look on reality makes us realize that there are many gray areas that cannot be simply compartmentalized to only purely being one thing or another.

There is a problem when we only see things in black and white or in either-or. We fail to see the spectrum that comprises the thing perceived because of our clear cut biases. This causes a problem when we singularly point out our friends and our enemies. We condemn our enemies and see them as the real evil, while our friends are nothing but good. Such cases can be seen in the fight between pro-life and pro-choice movements in America. Some are killing abortionists for they think that the abortionist is the representation of evil on Earth while completely ignoring the fact that the abortionist may be a good father, a charity donor, or a community volunteer. Such an inkling of goodness simply cannot exist in a black and white point of view. A person is merely either evil or good, there is nothing in between.

That is the aim of the implants installed in the soldier’s brains *Men Against Fire.* With no faculty to discern, they simply obey orders from “authorities”. With implants that tells them who’s a person from a roach, killing requires no discernment. A person is either a monster or not a monster.

These analyses merely peek at a couple of episodes on *Black Mirror* and admittedly doesn't’ do enough justice for what all the episodes ethically and politically predict for the future of humans. However, we do get a picture of a dystopian world where technology has gotten hold of our lives and how, instead of making our lives better, it becomes disadvantageous in the worst possible scenario.

In as much as we would like to think that it is only a television show, it has proven far more to be true. We are using technology in the worst way possible. We lack human contact and are stuck on our handheld devices most of the time which distracts us from reality and actually living life as what we presume what life is to be. We use technology to terrorize and post threats on other people and countries. In as much as we want to say these problems are far off in the future, China is already imposing a Social Credit System much like in the first episode of season three. We are also trying to make our military less human as possible to accomplish goals that would otherwise pose a dilemma for human conscience. *Black Mirror* is not something that could happen a million years in the future, it is already happening now which makes the show haunting. It reflects our relationship with technology and how it is transforming the darker side of our nature.

Where do we draw the line? How do we confront the abuse of technology and its abuses against us? Where do ethics come in and where does our humanity comes to an end? These are only some of the questions the series make us rethink.

In an interview Charlie Brooker says, “It is not a technological problem we have; it’s a human one.” (The Telegraph)

Hence, the challenge of this paper which Horkheimer criticizes yet fails to answer, is how do we subvert the technology that enslaves us?

In Helene Cixuous essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, one of the issues she problematizes is how can we achieve an *ecriture feminine*. She suggests that we must speak through our bodies as women and that we may possibly enter the patriarchal dialogue by slipping through the gaps. These gaps is where I would like to take as my point of departure.

The media is not full-proof in covering the gaps in its structure. What I suggest in this paper is that we must slip through these gaps they leave behind and initiate an attack of its systems by using the same system it uses to attack us. Since media can alter our perceptions and actions, it will also be through media that we change how humans think. *Black Mirror*, takes on the best platform to make people who watch it think critically of how they are situated in the world and how they make use of it, especially how they behave and are taught to behave. If technology and the media’s relationship to us is to capitalize on the enslavement of its viewers, it shall be the platform to free them. If media and technology has capitalized on its assumption that humans are easier to control when they cannot think then that's precisely the method of how to subvert the media, by using the same platform that will allow humankind to think.

Conclusion

The culture industry has not only standardized goods but people. It produces sameness in everything and in everyone. It has hypnotized people into living mediocre lives sitting on their couch or as individuals with commodified fetishes whose hunger for products are insatiable.

However, a question can only be answered if it is asked and a problem can only have a solution if it is discovered. By knowing how the industry functions and how we respond to it, we are initiated to act against that which enslaves us and therefore lead us back to reclaiming our freedom.

A word of caution to this advice. Although to the best of intentions, in using the culture industry’s platform against itself it is also possible that we are ingesting poison instead of potion for we are once again obsessed in tuning into another episode on our dark screens. We can be once again fooled into believing a reality which is not ours and commands us to think the same as everyone else when we aim to think differently. What we can do for now however, is to create warnings for each other and make us more responsive and responsible for our thoughts and actions in order to free ourselves from being automatons produced by the media industry. In this way, we can repossess our humanity.

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