

Narrating Illusions: A Critical Analysis of The Hyperrealities Constructed Within the Narratives of the *Black Mirror* Series

**Running Title: Analysis of Hyperrealities Within the *Black
Mirror* Series**

P.L.D. Boteju^{1*}

Abstract

This study seeks to examine the manner in which hyperrealities are constructed within the narratives of the Black Mirror series. Hyperreality refers to a distorted condition of consciousness that is unable to discern between the real and the illusion. The French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard argues that within the present-day technologically simulated world of hyperconsumerism, human beings have often misplaced their capabilities to distinguish the virtual from their material realities. Baudrillard contends that this distortion of reality has thus engendered the production of the simulacra that perceives the hyperreality as the real in its place. Within today's hypermediated postmodern world, Baudrillard's theorisations have attained much validity in examining the fast-paced fluctuations of the socio-cultural fabric of human existence that desires for a simulated and virtual way of life. Particularly, the anthological, speculative and science fictional

¹ Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, University of Kelaniya, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka

* lihinib_2019@kln.ac.lk / +94774181623

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5479-7495>

television series *Black Mirror* (2011-) created by Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, uniquely interrogates, and extrapolates upon the obsessions and phobias surrounding human relations with technology. Accordingly, this study argues that a close reading of the visual text depicts diverse ways in which hyperrealities are constructed within its dystopian narratives that ultimately induces the audiences to renegotiate their conditions of existence. Hence, across the predominant application of Baudrillard's theorisations, the present study will investigate the hyperreality production in the *Black Mirror* series, in order to analyse the ways in which its characters and spectators are simultaneously dislocated from their realities, whilst embracing a dual existence within the spaces of the real and the illusion.

Keywords: reality, hyperreality, simulacra, Baudrillard, *Black Mirror*

Introduction

The current 21st century is characterized by the growing omnipresence of the 'black mirror' that Danielle Knafo and Rocco Lo Bosco describe as a ubiquitous culture of dark screens "that we rely on to search for answers to questions both banal and profound" (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, p.1). Elise Morrison argues that the dark screens that surround our existence are significations of the "dark surfaces that reflect our faces, expectations, desires, hopes, and anxieties" (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, p.2). Co-creator and writer of the *Black Mirror* franchise; Charlie Brooker elucidated that the title; *Black Mirror* indicates the "one 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" (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, pp.1-2). Hence, they represent the multitudes of dark screens of televisions, computers, laptops, tablets, mobile phones and many more devices, which have become portals to a hyperreal dimension sustained by technology. Accordingly, the 'black-mirrors' of the contemporary world not only denote the prevalent dark screens that negotiate between image and reality, but a simulated threshold to a digiphenic existence that has pervaded everyday activities and spaces of reality. These omnipresent dark surfaces that reflect disoriented images equally signify the bemused and perplexed culture of postmodernity that engendered it.

*Black Mirror*² is a speculative and science-fictional anthological series created by Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, that explores the fears and anguish generated by human dependency upon technological progress. The series constructed of individual episodes situated in a wide range of dystopian settings, uniquely interrogate human paranoias and obsessions pertaining to technology and the consumption of media content. Inspired by the critically acclaimed science fictional television series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) created by Rod Serling, *Black Mirror* likewise confronts the “existential conditions of the modern technological civilization” (Cirucci & Vacker, 2018, p.8). *The Twilight Zone* is heralded as the first “critical media TV” that examined the angst of the Cold-War era and fears against nuclear power (Cirucci & Vacker, 2018, p.8). Brooker proclaimed as the new “Rod Serling-esque figure” appropriated *Black Mirror* according to similar frames, due to the genres’ freedom to critique and question concurrent socio-political tensions devoid of institutional restrictions (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, p.8). *Black Mirror* investigates a wide range of socio-political anxieties and patterns of hypermediated consumption concerning today’s postmodern society of “liquid modernity³” (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p.17). Themes ranging from consumer culture, free market logic, reality television, data retrieval and archival, political apathy and the prevalent corruption within the public relations industry are explored by the franchise, mirroring “a time very close to our own” (Singh, as cited in Radovanović, 2018, p.104). Hence, the franchise centres around the dysfunctional relationship between human beings and technology, where everyday realities have become hyperrealised due to an “always-on culture” that formulates incessant relations with media and

²*Black Mirror* first aired on the UK network; Channel 4 in 2011 and was then moved onto the online streaming platform Netflix in 2016. To-date the series has produced 5 seasons of 22 episodes and the Netflix interactive film; *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in 2018.

³David Lyon and Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Surveillance* (2013) refers to ‘liquid modernity’ to describe the present condition of the world, where prior frames and references to social forms and institutions are constantly changing and becoming fluid.

technology and regulates the progression of reality (Boyd, as cited in Radovanović, 2018, p.104).

Amongst the studies of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality and simulacra have been recurrently cited in examining the fluctuating cultural paradigms of the contemporary society. Baudrillard (1995) argues that our current postmodern world operates in simulation, where forces of capitalism have functioned to replace the authentic with copies that obscure the distinction between fiction and reality. Hence, he elucidates that a crisis of signification has occurred where the hyperreality determines the progression of reality (pp.1-3). The visual text *Black Mirror* in its depiction of a world enveloped by 'dark screens', represents a visual culture in which the postmodern individual's perception and engagement with reality have become hyperrealised by his/her digiphrenic existence, reflecting upon larger socio-cultural anxieties concerning the co-existence within the realm of the real and the virtual.

METHODOLOGY

The present study that seeks to examine the hyperreality production within the narratives of *Black Mirror* is conducted according to the design of a qualitative research study. This study predominantly employs the research method of a textual analysis that is performed by a close reading of the cinematic text. The present study is principally conducted across the application of the postmodernist theorist; Jean Baudrillard's concepts of hyperreality, simulacra and simulation. Across the adoption of a middle-range approach of theorisation, the research study primarily attempts to examine the ways in which Baudrillard's conceptualisations could be located in the visual text. Even though this study predominantly conducts a deductive application of Baudrillard's understandings of reality, the manner in which the text engages with and portrays hyperrealities will be critically explored inductively.

Furthermore, in outlining the subject position of the researcher, this study principally views the production of hyperreality as a dystopic experience.

While the researcher acknowledges that hyperreality could be located as a utopic experience, however as each selected narrative of *Black Mirror* portrays the pitfalls of a techno-dependent way of life, this dystopic subject position was adopted to explore the implications of hyperreal experiences that renegotiates the character's perception of reality.

Understanding Hyperreality

The Postmodern thinker, Jean Baudrillard's early philosophical criticism was particularly centred upon the examination of the consumer society's relationship between humans and objects, where he identified that "whatever is lacking in the human subject is invested in the object" (Baudrillard, as cited in Lane, 2001, p.29). Baudrillard argues that, with the dawn of automation, there emerged a "fuzzy logic" that allowed the object to respond to external stimuli and humane gestures that reanimated it with qualities of a "new anthropomorphism" (Lane, 2001, pp.29-32). Hence, Baudrillard maintains that the anthropomorphised object (technology) has now become the subject with an abstracted consciousness and identity, while paradoxically transforming the human into an object and an idle spectator.

In the milestone philosophical text, *Simulacra and Simulations* (1995) Jean Baudrillard delves deep into the nebulous landscapes of postmodernity, where he explores a hyperrealised form of commodity fetishism and the implosion of meaning of signs during an age of mass production and consumption. The structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure first expounded upon the concept of signs in his body of work; *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) where he perceived the sign as the product of the combination of the signifier [image/word/ sound] and the signified [concept/ meaning]. He maintained that the relationship between the signifier and signified is not inherent or natural but one of "cultural and historic convention" (Eagleton, 2008, p.84). Baudrillard (1995) thus argues that in the postmodern condition of the "precession of simulacra", the meaningful relationship between the sign and its referent has been intercepted by a hyperreality that simulates a condition

beyond reality (p.1). The hyperreality which generates models of “a real without origin or reality” distorts the distinction between reality and simulation, such that the simulation precedes reality in meaning, creating a simulacrum of a false reality (Baudrillard, 1995, pp.1-5). The structuralist and later post-structuralist theorist Roland Barthes in his *Mythologies* (1973) expands upon a second layer of signification in which Saussure’s sign becomes a signifier to produce the myth. John Storey (2018) explains that Barthes referred to the myth as ideology, where the signs are distorted to promote the values and norms of the dominant groups of society (pp.123-124). Similarly, Baudrillard elucidates that the simulacra misplaced in a “plethora of myths” recalls the past and “nostalgia assumes its full meaning”, where the myth of the simulacra then functions to recreate reality and history (1995, p.6). Therefore, the hyperreality acts as a “deterrence machine” set up not only to threaten the disparity between the real and the imaginary, but to rejuvenate the fiction as the real (Baudrillard, 1995, p.11).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In an age of “liquid modernity”, *Black Mirror* becomes a text that reflects upon and deconstructs the obsessions and phobias of technology (Bauman & Lyon, 2013, p.17). Across a series of five seasons (2011-) *Black Mirror* has produced a tapestry of self-contained stories that uniquely interrogate the spectrum of desires and anxieties that surround the relations between humans and technology. Each individual story located in different dimensions and dystopian spaces of the “*Black Mirror* Universe”, distinctly examine the disoriented human perceptions of reality (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, p.9). Bemused within a “a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real” but imitates a simulacrum of a false reality, each narrative traces our digiphrenic world across the lens of tomorrow (Baudrillard, 1995, p.3).

Accordingly, this study critically examines three selected episodes: *The National Anthem* (S01E01) that depicts the spectacle of media in sensationalising narratives, *Fifteen Million Merits* (S01E02) that creates

unique landscapes of gamified realities and *The Entire History of You* (S01E03) that reflects the impact of heightened voyeurism upon human memory. Although, *Black Mirror* has produced five seasons composed of twenty-two episodes, each depicting uniquely unsettling hyperreal landscapes and warped conditions of existence, this study is limited to the examination of the aforementioned three episodes. These three episodes were selected based upon their intensity in representing the disoriented experiences of its characters.

The Spectacles of Media

Across a variety of slice-of-dystopian-life episodes, *Black Mirror* calls attention to the abstraction of reality that has effaced the disparity between the real and the unreal (McKenna, 2019, p.366). Particularly, in the episode *The National Anthem* (S01E01), *Black Mirror* deconstructs the role of the media in the dramatization of narratives that not only dismantle their authenticity but reproduces them as spectacles that manipulate the perceptions of its audience. In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard contends that “we live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (1995, p.55). Likewise, the aforementioned episode portrays the manner in which the social consciousness has been pervaded by innumerable media-generated images, functioning to detach their meanings away from reality.

The National Anthem was the first ever *Black Mirror* episode produced in 2011, depicting the dislocation of power of one of the most prominent figures in the global political arena, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. Taunted by a blackmail video that portrays the capture of Princess Susannah; “the bloody Facebook, bloody eco-conscious national sweetheart”, Prime Minister Callow is forced to perform “full unsimulated sexual intercourse with a pig on all satellite and terrestrial networks” in exchange for her life (Brooker et al, 2011a). Charlie Brooker elucidates that the decision to use a pig was to convey “something that straddles the line between comic and horrifying” (Benedictus, 2015). Inspired by shows such as the reality show *I’m A*

*Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!*⁴, *The National Anthem* draws upon the “public’s appetite for humiliation” (Brooker et al, 2018, p.21). Brooker and Jones particularly parallel the London riots⁵ and the Arab Spring⁶ in referring to the means across which the mass media caters to public desires in the episode, that ultimately disempowers their primeval political leader (2018, pp.20-25).

Within this episode, the landscapes of media and communication become hyperreal spaces that reproduce the real as fiction, while generating simulacra to replace the real. Following the abduction of the nation’s beloved princess, the media spectacles begin its processes of imploding the narratives and their meanings, gradually moving away from reality. In the episode, the newsroom of the UKN network headquarters where journalists are assigned various aspects of the kidnapping, functions to blur the margins between the real and illusion. While some are advised to follow “the snatch” and the “public reaction”, the narrative is further deconstructed to examine the “royal angle” and Princess Susannah’s “upcoming marriage” as well as to trace its “internet” dispersal that occurred likewise during the eve of the “Arab Spring” (Brooker et al, 2011a). The newsroom hence becomes a hyperreal space in which the narrative of kidnapping is reproduced across new frames.

Baudrillard explicates that; “the real is produced from miniaturized cells and models of control that can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against an ideal instance” (1995, p.3). Hence, each new frame of the narrative of abduction is replicated across numerous perspectives that disorient its original

⁴A British survival reality television show that isolates groups of celebrities within remote regions of Australia, where each participant is required to undertake challenging missions and humiliating tasks.

⁵The London riots were a series of uprisings that occurred in the August of 2011 against police brutality. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter played a major role in diffusing violence throughout London.

⁶The Arab Spring was a series of anti-governmental protests that dispersed throughout the Middle East in 2010. Social media and mass media platforms became a driving force that distributed the effects of violence across the Arab world.

meaning and liquidates its referential. In the projection of the narrative, rather than conveying information, the media outlets exhaust itself in the acts of “staging communication” and “in the staging of meaning” such that the viewer is interpellated into the spectacle (Baudrillard, 1995, p.55). This can be best observed when the media networks create polls to garner social opinions with regards to whether PM Callow should or should not perform the demand. This portrays the extension of the hyperreality to another layer, where the narrative takes upon new pathways of re-narration by the larger society, based upon distorted meanings and images. The hyperreality re-negotiates its conditions of existence while engulfing the society by hailing them into partaking in the reconstruction of the narrative. By doing so, the meaning of the original referent (kidnapping of the princess/ Callow is a victim of terrorism) has been imploded across the flood of new meanings and messages that recreates the narrative as a form of participatory entertainment. The populace hence only receives contorted and manipulated information that eventually augments their reality. The novel narrative operates to shift the social consciousness such that PM Callow no longer remains a victim but becomes an agent of the crime in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, the hyperrealised narrative functions to camouflage the severity of the real conditions and re-represents it as an entertaining spectacle. Therefore, the moment the contingency plans of employing a pornographic performer in lieu of PM Callow to execute the demanded sexual act fails in rescuing the princess, the Prime Minister is consumed by public rage, who felt “cheated” from their deserved entertainment and deemed that his humiliation was “nothing in comparison to her suffering” (Brooker et al, 2011a). Consequently, the simulacrum is completed via the implosion of meaning, where Callow, first framed as the victim is then reproduced as the enemy of the state. Subsequently at the end of the episode, he is forced to perform the sexual act as a justified punishment for his failure to rescue the princess, concluding the hyperreality created by the media.

The sensationalising of PM Callow’s narrative of disempowerment represents the workings of pure simulation that dislocate the origins of spectacles via the manipulation of the social consciousness by the media. *The National Anthem*

reveals at the end, that the kidnapping was orchestrated by an individual recognised as the “former Turner Prize-winning artist; Carlton Bloom” (Brooker et al, 2011a). Yet, the UK media networks portray the kidnapper, and the assailant of blackmail and terrorism as a legendary performer who has accomplished the “first great artwork of the 21st century” (Brooker et al, 2011a). This depicts the manner in which the simulacrum has restructured its origin. The narratives of kidnapping and cyber terrorism have lost their original meanings as a result of media dramatization that has collapsed the distance between the authentic reality and the spectacle. The hyperreality in its efforts to firmly establish itself as the real, recalls the sources of its derivation. In this process of recollection, it recreates its foundation to correspond to the new reality it projects. Hence, the kidnapper is no longer the “terrorist” that subverted the political system, while manipulating the perceptions of “1.3 billion” spectators, but a “genius” who has performed a grand spectacle, entertaining the world. Thus, the public no longer perceives the reality as initially existed, but an illusion compatible to a mythicised origin has been reproduced in its place to correspond to the narrative’s trajectory, sustaining the power of the simulacra. Even though, Carlton Bloom is identified as the instigator of the spectacle, the media sensationalism works to displace the origins such that the narratives become self-sustained realities. These hyperrealities then operate in a phenomenon of doublethink⁷, where despite the public’s knowledge of the narrative’s authentic origin, they concurrently acknowledge the media sensationalised spectacle and its corresponding fictitious foundation as the reality. This condition of doublethink creates a liminality such that the Man behind the curtain⁸ is simultaneously identified as a mastermind and a criminal. Yet, the conditions of generation of the simulacrum are such that the hyperreality is privileged as the truth and objective reality, eliminating the spaces of its authentic reality. As the hyperreality operates in such a way that the simulacrum disguises its

⁷In George Orwell’s *1984*, doublethink refers to the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs simultaneously in complete acceptance.

⁸A reference to the wizard from the *Wizard of Oz* (1939) film, employed as a metaphor to depict Carlton Bloom as a similar hidden architect of spectacles.

real conditions of formation, it compels the populace to concurrently ignore and accept its existence. Hence, the workings of hyperreality and simulacra in the *The National Anthem* represent the means across which spectacles are empowered to become an objective reality that ultimately operates to reprogramme the social consciousness and the ways of perceiving reality of the wider communal body.

The Gamification of Reality

In addition to media spectacles, *Black Mirror* illustrates the creation of hyperrealities via the gamification of reality in the episode *Fifteen Million Merits* (S01E02). Gamification refers to the application of “gaming principles to non-gaming environments” (Bishop, 2014, p.xxi). It involves the simulation of game-design, mobile-application interfaces, and algorithms into everyday activities, where virtual reward-systems are programmed into human cognition in order to motivate the performance of undesirable and demanding tasks via simulated sentiments of achievement and gratification. Accordingly, gamification processes involve an indoctrination of satisfaction and enjoyment that overrides natural human impulses of discontent and distress. This phenomenon is depicted in the episode *Fifteen Million Merits*, where a simulated reward system of ‘merits’ formulates a hyperreality of social mobility that determines the existence and the social engagements of its inhabitants, while generating a sinister “childish veneer” over a reality of “crushing drudgery” (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, p.35). *Fifteen Million Merits* portrays a dystopian realm of endless livestreaming sustained by incessant ‘binging’ of entertainment by its citizens. The episode’s protagonists, Bing and Abi represent the working-class population who are required to pedal ‘cycling machines’ while ‘binge-watching’ the endless streams of entertainment to power their systems and infrastructures. The degree to which each individual pedals the machines determine their ability to earn their merits; “the ubiquitous currency of this world” (McSweeney & Joy, 2019, p.34). These virtual currencies ascertain ones’ purchasing power and ability to mobilize across simulated hierarchies that is composed of the proletariat class

of cyclists who are passive spectators of entertainment and the bourgeoisie class who owns and designs the content that are streamed. Hence, this episode portrays the manner in which simulated reward systems and streams of entertainment create ideologies that regulate and manipulate the human consciousness to embrace oppression with contentment.

In *Fifteen Million Merits*, the gamification is apparent in the lifestyle of the labourer who inhabit small cubicles with screens replacing walls that simulate different environments and streaming content. For instance, Bing is woken every morning by a cartoon rooster that emerges on his wall-like-screens. These massive ‘dark screens’ that construct a prison-like space of inhabitation, exposes an ominous sense of domination over reality, time, and space, where Bing is only capable of comprehending his conditions of existence via the images projected onto the screens. Not only does it suggest that Bing and other proletariat cyclists have no access to a world beyond their cubicles and cycling stations, but it reveals a menacing reality that is constructed only by the images of entertainment available across the streaming platforms. These screens are similarly plugged into the cycle machines, such that the interminable daily labour is suppressed by the perpetual streaming channels of reality and comedy shows, pornography, games of “Botherguts” and “Rolling Road” (Brooker et al, 2011b). Therefore, Bing and his fellow working-class population’s conditions of reality reveals an oppressive existence veiled by a simulated hyperreality of entertainment.

Furthermore, the daily cycling exertions are recorded on a “leader-board” of merits, simulating a hierarchy that motivates the player-like-workers to challenge each other (Brooker et al, 2011b). This virtual reward-system simulates a sense of achievement and pleasure while creating false hierarchies of competition, denoting the operations of gamification that is utilised to ensure maximum commitment of the labourers towards unseen and intangible ambitions. The physical labour portrayed in the episode formulates a significant aspect of the narrative, where the infrastructure of the dystopic world is powered by the electricity generated by the cycling machines. Yet, the episode only depicts the toil of the cyclists that poses an ambiguity

regarding the veracity of the means across which the electricity is being produced, supplied or consumed. Hence, it could be inferred that the labour of the cyclists may not possess any concrete purpose except as a means of subjugation, so as to focus their efforts on trivial tasks while continuous channels of entertainment and merit-driven duties function to inhibit their awareness of oppression.

Moreover, in *Fifteen Million Merits*, gamification functions via a merit-reward system that simulates a hyperreal desire towards social mobility. Amongst the streaming channels, the reality-show “Hot Shot” that parodies the popular British show; *The X-Factor*⁹, works to simulate aspirations of social mobility to “beat the bike” into an upgraded lifestyle from a mere working-class spectator to the bourgeoisie content creator (Brooker et al, 2011b). The reality show is structured to perpetuate an ideology of social control as a potential contestant has to earn ‘fifteen-million merits’ in order to purchase a ticket to enter the competition. Hence, only the most motivated proletariat cyclists who have committed themselves to endless hours of pedalling achieve the opportunity of simply auditioning for the reality show. While the ticket does not ensure one’s selection, it functions to entrap the workers into a fantasy of escaping their hardships, as depicted by the participants who contest multiple times despite their failure. This establishes a vicious cycle of oppression, where the reality show works as a hyperreal deterrent that simultaneously stimulates their hard labour while impeding their realisation of their true conditions of existence.

Baudrillard expounds that the hyperreality functions as an “operation of deterring every real process via its operational double” (1995, p.4). Accordingly, the gamified reality of rewards and entertainment function to deter one’s awareness and submit to the constructed hyperrealities of the systemic ideology. This is well observed in the protagonist Abi, who enters

⁹A British reality television music competition that hunts for new musical talent. *Fifteen Million Merits* makes many references to the show across the ways in which auditions are conducted as well as the personalities of the judges (eg: the character Judge Hope is based on the prominent TV personality; Simon Cowell).

the ‘Hot Shot’ competition with a desire to use her musical talent to escape her hardships. However, each contestant who enters the competition is required to consume a “mood stabiliser” drug termed “cuppliance” before their respective performance. Likewise, Abi who is also made to consume ‘cuppliance’ is thus conditioned into ‘complying’ with the ideological construction of the cyclist/ content creator hierarchy that sustains the workings of the reality show. Despite her talent, the judges sexualise her appearance and instead offers her the opportunity for a better life by becoming a pornographic performer; “you’ll never have to pedal again, not one minute” (Brooker et al, 2011b). The hyperreal nature of the reality show perpetuates the operations of ideology where Abi as a proletariat cyclist is unable to resist her interpellation into the systematised oppression. As the nature of the hyperreality deters one’s awareness, Abi is coerced into accepting her false reality of social mobilisation through a gamified simulacrum that manipulates her into perceiving it as the only true reality that promises her “pleasure for life”.

Fuelled by rage at Abi’s fate, the protagonist Bing then auditions for the show as means to exact vengeance by attempting to commit suicide on the live streaming channel, in order to make a statement of defiance:

“When you find any wonder whatsoever, you dole it out in meagre portions. Only then until it’s augmented, packaged, and pumped through ten thousand preassigned filters till it’s nothing more than a meaningless series of lights, while we ride day in day out, going where? Powering what?” (Brooker et al, 2011b).

Unlike Abi, Bing is aware of the effects of ‘cuppliance’ enabling him to avoid consuming it and consciously voice his resistance. Yet, the hyperreal space of the reality show operates to redefine his tormented declaration as a passionate performance of truth; “That was without a doubt the most heartfelt thing I’ve seen on this stage since Hot Shot began” (Brooker et al, 2011b). The hyperreal nature of the reality show and its stage produces new frames across which Bing is spectated by the judges and audience. Alike, the media dramatization frames discussed in episode one, Bing’s resistance is reproduced in the space of the reality show as a performance of authenticity. The hyperreal nature of

the stage blurs the distinction between his harsh reality and illusions of social mobilisation that deters his realisation and paradoxically relocates him within a vicious cycle of oppression. His vehement resistance is reconstructed as a fervent performance that earns him the judges' applause and is presented with the opportunity alike Abi to 'beat the bike', thus preserving the functioning of the hyperreality and generating a simulacrum of a life of comfort and pleasure. Henceforth, the episode depicts how Bing's authentic voice has been ironically reproduced as a motivational speaker, with his own streaming platform that ironically inspires other proletariat cyclists to "hang in there, if you must!" (Brooker et al, 2011b). Despite Bing's avoidance of the 'cuppliance' drug, his ready interpellation into the ideology and hyperreal social hierarchy exposes the depths of the conditioning sustained by gamified systems that feeds upon the lack of awareness of its slave-like spectating proletariats. At the end of the episode, Bing is seen inhabiting a luxurious apartment observing a luscious green 'view' of a wooded landscape through a 'window' that was absent in his prior cubicle. Yet, an ambiguity remains if the window with the extravagant view is the real or yet another screen projecting a hyperreality. Bing's reality hence remains uncertain, suggesting that gamification may have deterred his perception of reality, to exchange one form of oppression for another.

The Politics of Voyeuristic Pleasure

The episode *The Entire History of You* (S01E03) analyses the ways in which spectatorship is hyperrealised into extreme forms of voyeurism that has warped the human perception of the real while reprogramming the human condition itself. In cine-psychoanalysis, Laura Mulvey defines voyeurism as "a way of seeing that is active" and "controlling", while distancing and objectifying what is looked at (Rose, 2001, p.110). Hence, Mulvey's definition of voyeurism is significant in critiquing the power positions and hegemonic ways in which a spectator locates oneself to engage in visual pleasure. Within technologically mediated spaces that blurs the boundaries between the real and

the digital, Baudrillard contends that the perspectival distance of voyeurism is ambivalent as the “thrill of the hyperreal situation” simultaneously collapses and distances the subject position of the spectator to also become the spectacle of his/her voyeuristic pleasure (Lane, 2001, p.98). Hence, this episode that illustrates the manner in which human memories become an obsession to its bearer and explores the means by which the hyperrealisation of voyeurism has destabilised one’s awareness of self, time, and reality.

The Entire History of You depicts a proximate dystopian world in which human beings possess the ability to preserve their memories as digital recordings that do not fade with time but is readily available in perfect condition upon the behest of its owner. In this narrative, human beings have been augmented by a cybernetic memory implant termed as the ‘Grain’, that functions to record and store memories and audio-visual experiences, while being able to project them onto screens to be shared and collectively examined by others. These digitally enhanced memories can be subjected to “re-dos”, where they can be rewound, watch multiple times, paused and zoomed-in to scrutinize the reactions and behaviours of its participants (Armstrong et al, 2011). Alike the Facebook timelines of “ever-flowing rolls of photos and memories” and devices with unlimited storage-space that can accommodate “passive memories of everything that ever happened to you”, this episode critiques the voyeuristic obsessions of one’s past that ultimately displaces his/her perceptions of time and reality (Brooker et al, 2018, p.68 and p.81).

Digitally enhanced human memories are the principal elements of voyeuristic obsession explored in this episode. French historian Pierre Nora argues that memory remains in permanent evolution, “open to dialectic remembering and forgetting... and susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” (1989, p.8). Accordingly, it can be argued that the fluidity between periodical recollecting and erasing of memories renegotiates one’s perception of self, and others as well as one’s reality. Yet, technology such as the ‘Grain’ implant intercedes this natural transformation and decay of memories to be established as events occurring within a perpetual present. This cybernetic implant augments human memories, paradoxically creating a dysfunctional

relationship with one's mental faculties by intercepting and repurposing his/her ways of perceiving. Hence, the newly recalibrated being no longer efforts to contribute to his/ her biological formation of memory but instead depends upon a manufactured memory device to store and create impressions of one's own life experiences. Therefore, biological memories are replaced by engineered and perfected recordings of one's existence, reprogramming one's relations to his/ her past. This then contributes to the generation of emotionally debilitated individuals who are unable to formulate nostalgic and meaningful connections as the implant remains ever-present and ever-accessible, interrupting the authentic relations to his/ her past.

Moreover, the conversion of memory into a form of footage that can be played-back and objectively examined, functions to create a distance that transforms its bearer into a voyeur of one's own experiences. It can be argued that the external projection of one's most intimate and private experiences removes its essence of the 'personal'. The episode depicts the external projection of memories in two ways, where firstly the recorded footage can be displayed publicly to others, while the second instance indicates how the 'Grain' implant creates an internal display within the mind of the individual so as to view privately. Although, the latter may suggest a personal visual experience, nevertheless the cybernetic memory device operates to interrupt the sense of privacy associated with one's memories. The presence of an artificial tool external to the biological formation of the human body works to intervene the direct relationship between mind and memory, transforming the individual into a distant voyeur of his/ her own past. Hence, when the character Jonas watches "re-dos of really hot times of early relationships" despite his relations to his current partner, not only is his emotional connection to his companion displaced, but his voyeuristic gaze reproduces his own memories as a form of pornography (Armstrong et al, 2011).

The Entire History of You principally follows the marital conflicts of the protagonists, Liam and Ffion, where the former's overwhelming jealousy of his wife's past is further aggravated by the memory implant, ultimately resulting in their hinted separation towards the end of the narrative. Alike

Jonas, the married couple too fetishize upon their intimacy, transforming their memories of passion into pornography. For instance, when the couple is engaged in sexual intercourse, they are seen individually enjoying past moments of pleasure via the 'Grain' implants that project their fervent memories onto their internal virtual display embedded in their consciousness, while simultaneously engaging in the physical act. This paradoxically destabilises their present emotional relationship, where the immediate relations between the partners have been intermediated by a simulated passion. Hence, the memory device not only alienates each individual from themselves and from understanding of their own bodies, but also creates a secondary level of alienation between each other. Thus, these dual levels of distancing between Liam and Ffion operates to further exacerbate their already deficient emotional and authentic bond with oneself and each other.

Furthermore, the episode portrays how the 'Grain' implant functions to agitate the marital vexations between the couple by aggravating Liam's suspicion of adultery committed by his wife. Liam's voyeuristic obsessions to 're-do' not only his wife's day-to-day behaviours but also his memories of her encounters with others, feed into his fears of her infidelity. Baudrillard in his theorisation of the ways in which a camera lens mediates one's view of reality, explicates that the presence of the lens operates to simulate visual perceptions that are otherwise absent by exalting the "non-signifier" (1995, p.22). Accordingly, Liam's 'Grain' implant operates his memory similar to an audio-visual recorder and functions to amplify the meanings of empty or 'non-signifiers' concerning his wife's conduct. Thus, his exaggerated examination of his wife's actions, where he scrutinizes her body-language while at times employing the "lip-read" option to understand conversations he was not party to, distort his perception of reality (Armstrong et al, 2011). Hence, Liam's augmented access to his memories and audio-visual experiences work to construct a hyperreality composed of Ffion's betrayal, where a simulacrum constituted of Ffion's unfaithfulness becomes his reality. Therefore, the paradoxical distancing and collapse of the voyeuristic gaze operates to warp his reality, such that the newly dissected and 're-done' observations become

his novel viewpoint, resulting in the generation of a simulacrum that has replaced reality.

Moreover, Laura Mulvey elucidates that voyeurism is created via the disempowerment of the object by the controlling gaze of the voyeur (Storey, 2018, p.109). In the aforementioned episode, the hyperrealities are able to deconstruct reality, as the holder of the gaze functions to subjugate the narrative of the object. In *The Entire History of You*, Liam and Jonas both control the narrative of Ffion's betrayal by the power they attain across their domineering gaze as the voyeur. While Jonas attains his voyeuristic pleasure by enjoying his recorded memories of his past engagements with Ffion that dehumanises her as a fetishized object, Liam's meticulous examination of his wife's actions via his stored memories, renders her as an object of suspicion. The histories Liam and Jonas share with Ffion respectively, represent collective memories to which the latter possess equal ownership, as they were formed by a process of negotiation between her and the respective individual. However, the technological intermediation functions to complicate these relations and processes of collective formation of history such that the perspectival distance created between each agent and the recorded memories repudiate one's ownership of them, while challenging his/her agency. Yet, as the narrative locates Liam and Jonas as the obsessive voyeurs, a hierarchy of power is created between the agents of the collective memories, whereby virtue of Liam and Jonas' subject position as spectators renders Ffion as a disempowered object of visual pleasure.

Thus, when Jonas recurrently enjoys their shared memories of intimacy, while Liam uses his digital memories to criminalize her conduct, Ffion's agency and sense of privacy is violated. Despite Ffion's attempt to reclaim her memories and narrate her perspective, the voyeuristic gaze renders her powerless while the authority of technologically mediated illusions (enhanced memories) governs the way in which her voice, body and reality is constructed. Therefore, Ffion is no longer in control of her own reality but is defined and reproduced according to the frames of techno-political governance and discourses that locate her as a dehumanised object whose intimate recollections have become

forage for the voyeuristic obsessions of others. Here, Ffion's past composed of her relations with Jonas becomes the reality as the memory devices renders history as the present. The perfect real-time recollection facilities of the 'Grain' implant distort time such that the newly constructed reality becomes fused into a loop of a perpetual present. Thus, the narrative of Ffion's sexuality and crime of infidelity becomes concretised as the simulacra, eliminating the authenticity of time, space, and reality.

CONCLUSIONS

The three episodes; *The National Anthem*, *Fifteen Million Merits* and *The Entire History of You* differently grapple with the hypermediated consumption of illusions that function to augment the viscosity of its narrative personas. These episodes portray how each of its characters are rendered victims of powerful cybercultural systems that distort their capability to grasp their real conditions of existence. Firstly, episode one which examined the ways in which media spectacles generate hyperrealities that reprogramme the consciousness of society, reflects upon the strategies used by media institutions to reconstruct reality according to frames of viewership. PM Callow, a conventional 'victim' of scandal is reproduced as a much more exciting 'criminal' who is made to perform a controversial act to sustain the public's appetite for entertainment via a warped form of social justice. It is across the distorted functioning of the hyperreality, that the demarcations between discourses of victim/ criminal and transgression/ art are blurred, enabling the generation of the simulacrum. Secondly, in *Fifteen Million Merits* the traditional bourgeoisie/ proletariat hierarchical relations are reimagined across hyperreal superstructures of entertainment that gamifies systematic oppression to interpellate the latter into embracing hardship with contentment. The hyperreality of social mobilisation intercedes the desire for resistance of the working class such that the simulacrum becomes privileged as the reality. Lastly, *The Entire History of You's* hyperrealisation of memories renders it as dispossessed footage that engenders a hegemonic divide between the voyeur and the object of visual pleasure. Ultimately, these hyperrealised memories

distorts the flow of time and blurs the borders between history and present to generate a simulacrum consisted of an eternal present as the reality. Accordingly, it can be argued that hyperrealities produced in each episode works to normalise different conditions of oppression by contorting the symbolic relations of meaning attached to its relevant reality that is composed of victim/ criminal (episode 01), bourgeoisie content creator/ proletariat passive spectator (episode 02) as well as the voyeur/ object of visual pleasure (episode 03). These oppositional relations across which society operates in each episode are interrupted and reproduced via hyperreal frames such that hegemonic centres of power are able to eliminate realities that negate its workings and situate a simulacrum composed of a falsified reality to maintain its uncontested functioning of power.

Furthermore, *Black Mirror* invites its audiences to contemplate on the ways in which they consume media-generated content via the depiction of victimhood of its narrative personas. *Black Mirror* in its exploration of the present-day society's techno-paranoias create parallel landscapes that 'mirrors' our own everyday conditions of existence. Hence, each character of the aforementioned episodes is represented as a mirror image of modern human societies and their patterns of hypermediated consumption of technology. However, this conclusion can be argued as a paradoxical outcome as *Black Mirror* too is a hyperreal product oriented to displace the audience's relations with reality. *Black Mirror's* hyperreal narratives are composed of actors performing scripted stories within constructed and simulated dystopian environments, designed to make-believe that its conditions are close to the realities of its viewers. By generating a contorted mirror image of our everyday social fabric of existence, it operates to inform the viewer regarding his/ her ways of media consumption that drives him/ her to self-reflect on one's ontological relations to reality. Hence, as the narrative personas may be assumed to be performing a moralistic function to guide the audience in comprehending the dangers of the modern hyper-consumerist lifestyle, it can be argued that the visual text's hyperreal narrative structure then operates to negotiate the audience's process of meaning-making of their respective realities. Hence, it performs a didactic function that operates as a means for its

spectators to navigate the complexities of their own real conditions of existence. Consequently, it can be contended that the visual text's hyperreal medium works alike a superstructure that expresses certain ideologies pertaining to how a spectator should perceive their existence in the modern technologically dependent world. These ideologies then work to influence and dictate the way the viewer formulates his/her own ontological relations to reality.

Black Mirror is a product of the very hypermediated processes of production and consumption that it critiques. It sustains itself as a globally popular television show that spanned across five seasons since the 2011, via the very frames of hyperrealities that it questions in its narratives. To further its distribution as a capital product it feeds upon the everyday audience's addictions to their media platforms and devices. Hence, to perpetuate its existence, it depends upon the formation of simulacra to interpellate the viewers into continuing their habits and patterns of media consumption. Therefore, it can be concluded that the audience of *Black Mirror* are reproduced as distorted mirror images of its characters, where the visual text operates as a hyperreality to establish recurrent practices of media consumption. By paradoxically formulating a simulacrum that invites the audience to internalise the illusions it moulds as an extension of their own reality, *Black Mirror* can be perceived as a hyperrealising visual text that works to determine how the viewer should associate with one's own real conditions of existence.

References

- Armstrong, J. (Writer) & Welsh, B. (Director). (2011, December 11). The Entire History of You. (Season 1, Episode 3) [TV series episode]. In C. Brooker & A. Jones (Executive Producers), *Black Mirror*, Zeppotron; Channel 4 Television Corporation.
- Baudrillard, J. (1995). *Simulacra and Simulation*. (F.S. Glaser, Trans). Michigan: University of Michigan Press. (Original work published in 1981).

Bauman, Z. & Lyon, D. (2013). *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Benedictus, L. (2015, September 21). Charlie Brooker on Cameron and #piggate: 'I'd have been screaming it into traffic if I'd known'. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/shortcuts/2015/sep/21/pigs-prime-minister-black-mirror-ashcroft-allegation-charlie-brooker>

Bishop, J. (2014). *Gamification for Human Factors Integration: Social, Education, and Psychological Issues*. Pennsylvania: Information Science Reference, an imprint of IGI Global.

Brooker, C. (Writer), & Bathurst, O. (Director). (2011a, December 11). The National Anthem. (Season 1, Episode 1) [TV series episode]. In C. Brooker & A. Jones (Executive Producers), *Black Mirror*, Zeppotron; Channel 4 Television Corporation.

Brooker, C. (Writer), Huq, K. (Writer), & Lyn, E. (Director). (2011b, December 11). Fifteen Million Merits. (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In C. Brooker & A. Jones (Executive Producers), *Black Mirror*, Zeppotron; Channel 4 Television Corporation.

Brooker, C., Jones, A. & Arnopp, J. (2018). *Inside Black Mirror*. New York: Crown Archetype.

Cirucci, A. & Vacker, B. (Eds.). (2018). *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory*. Maryland: Lexington Books.

Eagleton, T. (2008). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Lane, R. (2001). *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Jean Baudrillard*. New York: Routledge.

McKenna, T. (2019). Behind the Black Mirror: The Limits of Orwellian Dystopia. *Critique*, 47(2), 365-376.

McSweeney, T. & Joy, S. (Eds.). (2019). *Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nora, P. (1989). Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, 26, Spring, 7-24.

Radovanović, B. (2018). Reality on the Screen: The Subject of the Dystopian Future/Present. Thoughts on episode “Fifteen Million Merits” of Black Mirror. *AM Journal*, 17, 103-112.

Rose, G. (2001). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*. London: Sage Publications.

Storey, J. (2018). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. (8th ed.). New York: Routledge.

