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***Black Mirror's* “Fifteen Million Merits”: Re-Defining Human Bodies with Dystopian Technology**

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Abstract | Two seasons of the British television show *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker, aired on Channel 4 between 2011 and 2013, and three further seasons have been released by the streaming service Netflix since 2016. The show holds a unique fascination since it depicts a nearby future that seems almost graspable by demonstrating dystopian developments of today’s technologies and technological platforms. “Dystopian” refers here to a dark version of a possible future in fiction. Further, it also reflects on our present struggles in society. Accordingly, Laurence Davis defines “dystopian” as a “satire on existing society with a parodic inversion of transcendent or controlling utopian aspirations” (26). In a similar manner, this anthology series reflects upon human dependency on technology in the format of an unsettling and anxiety-inducing dark television drama.

Essentially, *Black Mirror* highlights what it means to be *human* in our digital times. In the context of the impact of digital technologies, the episode “Fifteen Million Merits” indicates a dark vision of the contemporary state of humanity. Arguably, this episode highlights the status of human bodies as commodities in a dystopian, technological environment. In the narrative, human bodies and the “dopple” bicycles become interconnected by creating new spaces of signification. Consequently, mind/body as well as human/non-human binaries become blurry. This analysis will investigate the breakdown of such binaries as well as the accelerating interdependence of humans and their technologies in a posthuman and anti-capitalist reading.

Keywords | Black Mirror, Fifteen Million Merits, dystopia, satire, science fiction, posthuman.



Resumo | O programa de televisão britânico *Black Mirror*, criado por Charlie Brooker, com duas temporadas no Canal 4 entre 2011 e 2013, e mais três lançadas no serviço de *streaming* Netflix desde 2016, tem um fascínio único, uma vez que retrata um futuro próximo que parece quase alcançável ao demonstrar desenvolvimentos distópicos das tecnologias e plataformas tecnológicas atuais. "Distópico" refere-se aqui a uma versão sombria de um futuro possível na ficção. Além disso, reflete-se também nas nossas lutas atuais em sociedade. Em conformidade, Laurence Davis define "distópico" como uma "sátira sobre a sociedade existente com uma inversão paródica das aspirações utópicas aspirações transcendentais controladoras" (26). De forma semelhante, esta série antológica reflete sobre a dependência humana da tecnologia, no formato de um drama televisivo sombrio inquietante e indutor de ansiedade.

Essencialmente, *Black Mirror* destaca o que significa ser *humano* no nosso tempo digital. No contexto do impacto das tecnologias digitais, o episódio "*Fifteen Million Merits*" aponta uma visão sombria do estado contemporâneo da humanidade. Pode-se argumentar que este episódio realça o estatuto dos corpos humanos como mercadorias num ambiente distópico e tecnológico. Na narrativa, os corpos humanos e as bicicletas "dopple" tornam-se interligados, criando novos espaços de significação. Consequentemente, as relações binárias mente/corpo, bem como humano/não-humano, tornam-se indistintas. Esta análise investigará a rutura de tais conceitos binários, bem como a interdependência acelerada dos seres humanos e das suas tecnologias numa leitura pós-humana e anticapitalista.

Palavras-chave | *Black Mirror*, *Fifteen Million Merits*, distopia, sátira, ficção científica, pós-humano



Technological Anxieties, Consumers and the Cold Screen

Kevin Kelly, editor of *WIRED Magazine*, observes that “more than 5 billion digital screens illuminate our lives” (86). He perceives contemporary Western societies today as “the People of the Screen,” an idea which is certainly picked up by *BM* (Kelly 86). *Black Mirror* creates an uncanny feeling of fear and confusion in a quickly changing, technological world. The title and intro of the show indicates this anxiety by pointing out the fragility of screen technologies. Each episode of the show opens with a flickering of the letters “Black Mirror” as they slowly form the title. The words “black mirror” can here be interpreted as a reflection of fears towards technology in current and future (Western) societies. Afterwards, a crack appears, recreating the visual of a splintered screen. In an attempt to break the fourth wall, it seems as if the screen of the viewer is shattered (1:01:55-1:01:40).¹ Thus, the show is broken, dark, twisted and, to a certain extent, imperfect. Charlie Brooker, the creator of the show, describes this “black mirror” as 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” (“Charlie Brooker: the Dark Side of our Gadget Addiction” n.pg.). Thereby, the intro already foreshadows the possibility of a damaged and irreparably changed human interaction with digital technology.

The show itself envisions a very near future where human life is brimming over with, and arguably dependent upon technology. It recreates the anxieties with regards to the impact of our digital technologies and provides a glimpse into a possible technological future. The implication seems to be that humans, once used to the omnipresence of technological devices, will become unable to function without them. As this analysis will demonstrate, the episode “Fifteen Million Merits” especially underlines how the show represents a dark, satiric version of the contemporary state of humanity. This episode in particular confronts the fragility of human morality and their dependency of technological objects. By breaking down the binaries between humans and technologies, the show and this episode highlight *interconnections*. This characteristic makes the show “posthuman,” since it moves beyond what can be

¹ The timestamps for the various *Black Mirror* episodes are running backwards, following the indicated time on *Netflix*.

perceived as being human (Braidotti 90). “Fifteen Million Merits” achieves this mainly by introducing a re-defined human body.

Katherine N. Hayles defines the posthuman as a theory that emphasizes that there are “no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals” (2-3). Accordingly, Rosi Braidotti asserts that the posthuman concerns the transgression of binaries between human and non-human, between subject and object, between mind and body (90). For David R. Lawrence this move away from a traditional human-centered philosophy symbolizes leaving humanity behind (171). However, as this analysis will demonstrate, the posthuman acknowledges the agency of humans while also investigating the role of digital technologies in our world.

The deconstruction of binaries between humans and technologies oppose the alleged Cartesian mind-body divide. René Descartes famously argued that the body is merely “shape and motion” and unrelated from the “nature of the mind” (86). The posthuman opposes Cartesian dualism by stressing that humans find themselves in forms of “bodily entanglement with an environment” that requires a rethinking “of who and what we are” (Johnson 1). The second episode of the first season, “Fifteen Million Merits,” especially addresses this complication of what it means to be human in a technological environment. The episode demonstrates how humans are shaped through technology and technological processes that take place “within the entire body, not just the brain” (Pugh 5). Thus, the narrative positions human bodies appears as entangled technological spaces.

The first scene already situates the body of the character Bing in such a space. Alongside Abi Khan, Bingham Madsen is one of the main characters of the episode. It is important to note that he is the only non-white character, which accentuates his designated role as the outsider throughout the episode. The episode begins with a wide shot of Bing, who is sleeping on a bed (1:01:24-1:00:12). Everything is dark around him, until, suddenly, the room manifests itself as a space filled with screens, which begin to light up. The screens show a cartoonish, animated landscape with a farm, a rising sun and a crowing rooster. Bing Madsen opens his eyes and examines the screen. An avatar version of himself pops up and four words appear on the screen: “signing in, please wait” (1:00:46). His avatar has a score of fifteen million merits, giving the episode its title. Bing uses these “merits” to pay for the use of applications on the screen,

food items and hygiene products. On the screen, the virtual body of an avatar is introduced in addition to the human body of Bing. This separation between the virtual body and the physical body demonstrates the how technology infiltrates his life. The virtual avatar on the screen anticipates his physical actions and needs immediately.

For instance, when he proceeds to his bathroom, a porn advertisement for a show called “Wraith Babes” pops up in his bathroom mirror-screen: “New: from “Wraith Babes,” the hottest girls in the nastiest situations” (00:59:56-00:59:48). Naked and almost-naked women can be seen in compromising positions. In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Paul Preciado reflects upon the ubiquity of (sexualized) bodies through technology which “infiltrate and penetrate daily life like never before” in representations such as cinema, cybernetics, videogames, and television (77). Thus, this moment in “Fifteen Million Merits” indicates that from the first scene onward, physical human and non-human bodies or virtual avatars as well as sexualized bodies are at the focus of the narrative.

Donna Haraway already foretold in the year 2000 that “[c]ommunication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools redrafting our bodies” (302). Appearing over and over throughout the episode on various screen surfaces, the advertisement of the pornographic show “Wraith Babes” indicates the overwhelming presence of such communication technologies. The objective of the advertisement is to portray sexualized bodies as desirable. However, Bing decides to cancel the pornographic advertisement with a gesture of his hand. Skipping advertisements on the daylight stream incurs a penalty in merits (00:53:02-00:52:54). Additionally, if Bing closes his eyes to avoid seeing an advertisement, a high-pitched noise occurs, and a woman’s voice advises him to “resume viewing” (00:52:40-00:52:25). The screen perceives what he is doing; it *interacts* and punishes. Moreover, it especially impedes and controls his body by forcing him to watch.

Bing could also choose to watch “Wraith Babes,” which would result in a loss of merits. Both the punishment and the decision to watch result in a loss of merits. He is part of a capitalistic merit-system. In this context, it is crucial to thus recognize capitalism as a human-centered or anthropocentric mode of production which thrives on binaries or differences. Digital technologies are here enabling profit and exploitation of Bing and his body. This anti-capitalist reading of the narrative touches upon the posthuman. Accordingly, Rob Wilkie interprets the focus of the posthuman as “a

response to the alienation of labor under capitalism, but it does not provide an alternative to it” (139). However, posthuman readings are indeed helpful to introduce new perspectives on the position of technologies in our world. While technology is often used to benefit a capitalist mode of production, it may develop independently from capitalist structures in the future. For Wilkie it seems difficult to envision a world where humans establish a new form of posthuman identity. Similarly, “Fifteen Million Merits” explores the possibility of a future where humans function in an endless cycle of labor and empty rewards. In fact, this episode demonstrates that the twenty-first century is characterized by capitalist realism, or the sense that capitalism is the only economic system that is viable but that we can also not *imagine* a coherent alternative to it (Fisher 2). Indeed, the episode explores our self-inflicted doom of the capitalist system.

Several aspects of the episode highlight the capitalist characteristics of the technological environment. For instance, in his daily routine, Bing rides on a stationary bike called “dopple” to earn merits in a huge facility which seems to only consist of humans riding on dopples (00:59:01-00:58:05). On the screens in front of their dopples, the riders can watch shows such as “Bothergut,” the talent show “Hot Shot,” ride down a virtual “Rolling Road,” watch the porn show “Wraith Babes,” or learn how to play instruments like the violin (00:58:23-00:58:05). Thereby, human bodies and the dopple bicycles become interconnected by creating a whole new space of signification (Pugh 3). They resemble a gigantic factory of riders or laborers.

However, the utility of the riding remains unclear. The entertainment which is bought on the screens via the mentioned apps do not seem to have any utility other than superficial satisfaction. Further, the games also evoke a hierarchical order in the dopple facility. The shooter game “Brothergut” for instance invites the riders to bully, beat or shoot at the facility’s cleaning staff. The riders function as mindless consumers while upholding established hierarchies and differences. Accordingly, Etienne Balibar criticizes how the use of technology by humans often assigns “intellectual hierarchies” and thrives in mass consumption (27). This evokes a comparison to a capitalist system which thrives on class differences and the exploitation of the working class.

Furthermore, the riders actively use their bodies to access this technology. In fact, their bodies are exploited to access meaningless entertainment. In fact, the bodies of the riders appear in a sort of “abstracted incorporeality” (Massumi 21). This abstraction

of human bodies is especially emphasized when the riders access the talent show “Hot Shot” on the screens. This show consists of the humans acting as a virtual audience with the only exception of the non-virtual judges. An advertisement of the show introduces images of a cheering virtual audience and proclaims: “You decide the victors. You control their fate” (00:53:10-00:53:06). The promise of the show is to enable winners with their own “tempo content” on one of the “eight daylight streams” (00:53:50-00:53:46). Thereby, “Hot Shot” is underscoring the invasiveness of capitalism in the dystopian doppel environment. It also breaks down the binaries between virtual and physical bodies.

Further, “Hot Shot” points out another important characteristic of “Fifteen Million Merits,” namely its meta-discursive self-referentiality which alludes and references other media formats (Sola and Martínez-Lucena 5). “Hot Shot” re-mediate the well-known format of a talent show. Additionally, the entire episode is very reminiscent of a colorful video game since humans ride their “dopples” to add more merits to their accounts, in the same manner as a player collects tokens or trophies. They also live out their fantasies in virtual bodies. In this context, it is important to take the insights of the media theorist Marshall McLuhan into consideration in order to realize *how* the episode treats different media formats (apps, television shows, games). According to Nicholas Carr, “McLuhan understood that whenever a media format is invented and introduced to society, people naturally get caught up in the information—the ‘content’—it carries” (2). The tech writer, influenced by the theories of McLuhan, interprets such formats as windows to the world and ourselves (3). Such formats can change “who we are, as individuals and as a society” (3). Carr appeals to the effects of media formats on humans, an approach which is also imperative to this analysis.

In “Fifteen Million Merits,” apps are constantly used and consumed by the doppel riders. Their bodily motion produces more merits and initiates an endless cycle of riding and app usage. Thus, their bodies are central to enable their dystopian technological environments. McLuhan also introduced the idea of “cold” media which requires a “high participation or completion by the audience” (2003, 3). McLuhan describes it as the alluring power of technology to “create its own world of demand” which is foremost “an extension of our own bodies and senses” (2000, 15). In this regard, the screens on the doppelers can be designated as “cold” screens (McLuhan 2003, 39). The “cold” screen enables the doppel riders to access another world entirely. The riders focus on the

content of the apps and do not critically engage with the utility of the dopples. They do not question whether they have to ride their dopples and for what. Instead, they seem entirely absorbed and distracted from critical inquiry.

Machines and Humans: “Powering What?”

The episode later reveals that the humans riding on the dopples are in fact powering the facility that they find themselves in. On “Hot Shot,” the character Judge Hope explains: “Who do you think is powering that spotlight? Millions of people, that’s who, all of ’em out there right now, putting in an honest day at the bike” (00:24:54-24:34). This uncovering of the utility of bike-riding blurs the distinction between the human body and the “dopple” machine. Indeed, such an explanation positions these bodies as *posthuman*. The humans power the technologies that they indulge in. This opens up the question whether their physical power might be the only reliable power resource that is available. In this context, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes how we treat the world as “an inexhaustible resource” and suggest that we should “refashion our relations to materiality and objects” (58). The eco-critic calls for action in a world that is threatened by climate change. Therefore, the episode can also be read as a critical comment on human waste of resources.

It becomes almost impossible to escape the vicious circle of the bike riding and the permanent flickering of the screens, powered by an unseen mass. All of the humans riding their dopples appear as “one.” In a capitalistic system, these humans are replaceable since their only goal is to maintain their physical health. Accordingly, in George Orwell’s famous dystopian work *1984*, the character Winston observes that “[n]othing was your own except the few cubic centimeters inside your skull” (27). This aspect also makes “Fifteen Million Merits” highly comparable to movie franchises like *The Matrix*, where human enslavement of bodies enables machines to run. The dopples cannot power the building without human energy. A different type of bodily feeling is thus created. Bodies enable electricity while the objects that help to generate this energy become relied upon. An inter-dependency between humans and technological objects (dopples) emerges. Again, the differences between machines and non-machines appear blurry; crossing the binaries of the human and the non-human, the subject and the object. This does not, however, mean that humans and technology become the *same*,

but evokes to the question: can a body leave this premediated framework of human-technology intertwinement?

Stephen David Ross makes an interesting comparison of the human self to “a body machine, producing machine, desiring, recording, expressing machine” (263). Without explicitly referring to them, Ross remarks can be compared to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of “the desiring-machine” (2). They state: “There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together” (1-2). The desiring-machine describes how desire is produced within human beings. Accordingly, Karl Marx defines desire as a fuel to the objectification or commodification of a thing (143). This process can be applied to *BM* as a whole and “Fifteen Million Merits,” which emphasizes the production of desire as a common human experience. While the bodies in “Fifteen Million Merits” produce energy to keep the system alive, they also find themselves trapped by their desire to collect millions of merits. This desire is constantly renewed within a framework of body politics and peer motivation in a feedback loop. At the same time, energy is produced to keep the system alive. Again this desire to consume invites a comparison to a dominance of capitalism as a mode of production.

Attempting to Resist Body-Machine Interdependencies

The episode also implies that human behavior changes due to the routine of interacting with dull technology such as the dopple. It makes the user passive, unaware and willing to get entirely lost in the content of the screen in front of them. This is especially demonstrated in the narrative with the experience of Abi Khan, the other main character in this episode. She is a shy but quite talented singer who proceeds to compete in the show “Hot Shot” with the help and support of Bing. Throughout the episode, his romantic interest in Abi becomes explicit. This becomes particularly clear when Bing gifts her 15 million merits so she can enter the singing contest. Abi reluctantly accepts Bing’s offer. It becomes obvious that they like each other, exchanging smiles and joking regularly about the world or system they are a part of.

At “Hotshot,” Abi performs Irma Thomas’s “Anyone Who Knows What Love Is (Will Understand)” from 1964. She describes the song as a “hand-me-down” in her family, a nostalgic piece of a bygone past and an attempt to retrieve something like authenticity in a technologically dominated space (00:42:02-00:42:01). However, the

song only seems “authentic” since it is in fact a copy of an older song; nothing more than a nostalgic reminder of a more organic or even less capitalist past. The song can be contrasted to the emphasis on bodily production and passive exploitation. It expresses Abi’s willingness to resist body-machine interdependencies.

Thus, the characters of this episode constantly strive for something “real.” Bing expresses this desire by stating: “I just want something real to happen. Just once” (00:39:35-00:39:26). Love especially is portrayed as enabling access to this “realness.” Abi therefore sings: “The world may think I’m foolish, they can’t see you like I can. Oh, but anyone who knows what love is will understand,” which bears symbolical meaning since love cannot be consumed or materialized (00:48:57-00:48:21). This episode is essentially opposing the authentic, “real” love of Bing and Abi to the highly constructed, virtual environment around them. By introducing the distinction between the authentic love and technological or virtual environment, dualisms are enforced. By striving to obtain authenticity through love, the main characters’ actions oppose the intertwining of human bodies with technology. Humans stand out as beings that are able to love while the machines are not.

However, after Abi’s performance at “Hot Shot,” the judges and the virtual crowd push her to become a porn star, an audience demand to which she eventually complies. Judge Hope tells Abi that she performed “the best piece of singing we’ve had this season,” but that he “couldn’t help” picturing Abi in an erotic scenario (00:26:55-26:44). Abi’s facial expression seems frozen with shock when the judge expresses his admiration for her “pure beauty” which also has an “interesting innocence going on” (00:26:34-00:26:28). Thereby, she is objectified and reduced to a sexualized object. The presence of sexism at the talent show can be explained by “Western science and politics — the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism” (Haraway 292). The entire crowd chants, pushing her to “do it,” and finally she breaks down from the hive-mind peer pressure and complies to their wishes to “do it” to become a porn star in the show “Wraith Babes” (00:23:58-00:23:24). Thus, again, the humans in “Fifteen Million Merits” are depicted as an unquestioning, collective unit.

This portrayal of Abi as someone who gives into peer pressure is important since it demonstrates the transformation of her body into “a kind of private satisfaction- and utility-maximizing machine” (Haraway 306). Additionally, she is seduced by the opportunity to escape the everyday routine of riding a doppel. Judge Wraith persuades

her: “You will never have to pedal again, not one minute! (...) Forget about all the shame (...) we medicate against that. You will have pleasure forever” (00:25:58-00:25:05). The drugging of Abi’s body emphasizes its function as an instrument while stripping her agency. The sexualization of Abi’s body makes her an object in an environment in which individuals are constantly objectified. By pushing her to perform as a porn actress, female bodies thus become “objects of desire” in the narrative (Hennessey 100). Accordingly, in his capitalist critique, Theodor Adorno observes that humans live in a “pleasure-loving society” where people are always aiming to fulfill their desires instantly (61). In the context of “Fifteen Million Merits,” the technology allows the consumer to enjoy pleasures and to consume endlessly without the necessity of moderation.

Abi’s performances as a porn star appear on the screens surrounding Bing. In fact, he is even forced to watch her first performance in his little “screen cubicle” living space. Abi’s face appears on every screen. No matter which way he turns he cannot escape it. Unable to look away, in a sudden burst of anger, he destroys the screens around him. Following his mental breakdown, Bing decides to re-enter the “Hot Shot” contest in an attempt to overthrow the system. After saving enough credits to participate, he appears at the show. He disrupts the routine of the passive audience and attracts the attention of the judges by threatening to kill himself on stage with a piece of glass. Ironically, this piece of glass originates from a screen in his cubicle, demonstrating his wish to literally cut himself off from the dependence to the screen.

Bing begins a speech, declaring that “I wanted you to listen. To really listen, not just pull a face like you’re listening, like you do the rest of the time” (00:09:42-00:09:37). Bing attacks his virtual audience for their artificiality and their processed and almost “programmed” behavior. Bing provocatively analyzes the fakeness of the audience around him: “all you see up here, it’s not people, you don’t see people up here, it’s all fodder. And the faker the fodder, the more you love it, because fake fodder’s the only thing that works any more” (00:09:26-00:09:15). The audience’s joy with regards to the mistreatment of the shows competitors highlights the cruelty of the spectators. A common theme of *BM* is thus pointed out: humans appear or behave extremely artificial and emotionally distant.

Bing criticizes this behavior by critiquing the interdependence of human bodies and technologies as “augmented, packaged, and pumped through 10,000 preassigned

filters till it's nothing more than a meaningless series of lights” (00:08:30-00:08:11). It takes a minute for the crowd to react to Bing’s outbreak, until Judge Hope declares: “That was without a doubt the most heartfelt thing I saw on this stage since ‘Hot Shot’ began” (00:07:17-00:07:05). He sees it as entertainment, a performance that one can profit from. Judge Hope adds: “And you’re right, authenticity is in woefully short supply” and gives Bing a slot on one of his streams (00:06:19-00:06:14). Again, the crowd’s pressure overwhelms a character who, until that point, seemed to be set on destroying the capitalist system around him. When Bing decides to perform a satiric show on the screen by giving similar speeches, he loses his agency and becomes part of his technological environment once again. Bing is stuck in his position within the capitalist system that surrounds him. He and his fellow peers forgo and are unaware of the possibilities of democratization via modern technologies but act instead as opportunists who disable this possibility.

Within his work *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe’s rightfully acknowledges the human as a “prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicality and materiality, forms that are radically “non-human” and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is” (xxv). This *BM* episode exposes what Wolfe designates as “the horrors of anthropocentrism” (xxx). Some of these horrors include human-technology interdependence, hive-mind and a consumerist, pleasure-loving economy based on merits. The dystopian narrative is creating awareness of the reality and downfalls of Western consumerist practices. The show demonstrates a shift in fiction towards a non-human future, a dystopian age where humans do not dominate technology but where instead technology might even control us humans. Technology and humans are thus fused together and are not regarded as separate entities. These fictional visions of the future emphasize the disparities and inequalities which are created by human abuses of technologies. *BM*’s “Fifteen Million Merits” points out how humans and technology *depend* on each other, and how humans have become unable to break out of their self-imposed systems.



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