

**A Vision of the Future:  
A Debordian Analysis of Charlie Brooker's 'Black Mirror'**

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## Summary

In 1967, Guy Debord of the Situationists International released his magnum opus, *The Society of the Spectacle* and spoke of the downgrading of the modern human condition as a result of a life dominated entirely by the spectacle. Debord's thoughts and concepts laid out in his seminal treatise continue to be relevant in our contemporary society, and also continue to influence many of the great artists of our time. In the following research paper, we will critically analyse Charlie Brooker's innovative science-fiction television series *Black Mirror*, which takes our current reality and speculates as to where society is heading, by applying Debord's concept of the spectacle to the text. This will hopefully enrich our understanding of the modern human condition in the information age.

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## Introduction

What hides under the spectacular oppositions is a unity of misery. Behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other, all of them built on real contradictions which are repressed. The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil centre of misery.

-Guy Debord

If technology is a drug – and it does feel like a drug – then what, precisely, are the side-effects?

-Charlie Brooker

In ‘The Entire History of You’, the third instalment in Charlie Brooker’s satirical British television series *Black Mirror*, the characters have had small devices, called “grains”, surgically implanted into their heads just behind their ears; these grains have the ability to record every single moment of a person’s life, allowing the wearer to replay and scrutinise any memory from their past on demand. In this alternate reality, the next milestone in the relationship between humans and technology has been reached in which these supposedly life-augmenting technologies have succeeded in crossing the threshold of the physical human form, where technology is no longer considered a mere extension of the body, but rather an indispensable synthetic organ that is needed just to function in this society. At one point in the episode during a love scene between Ffion (Jodie Whittaker) and Liam (Toby Kebbell), the couple at the centre of the episode, it is revealed that both parties are plugged into their grains and reliving previous sexual encounters from an earlier point in their relationship. One of the most striking aspects of this encounter is the casual attitude of the characters towards these incredibly complex pieces of technology in their heads; technology has progressed to a point where it is deemed acceptable and normal for people to retreat into their own memories whilst in the presence of other people, even during intimate moments such as this. Their

behaviour of course, is an authentic representation of how we ourselves would react to such metamorphic pieces of technology if they were to exist; because ‘we take miracles for granted on a daily basis’ (Brooker 2011) we would marvel at it upon its introduction into our daily lives, then quickly adapt to its function, and then eventually form undesirable habits by using it to retreat into artificial realities to escape the humdrum and banality of the world around us. In Brooker’s depiction of the future, even our own memories are not safe from commodification.

Humanity is currently entering an era where technological advancements are so commonplace that they are beginning to have an influence on nearly every aspect of our lives; our growth and development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will largely be defined by the near endless possibilities that technology has to offer, such as the rise of artificial intelligence and the exploration of outer space. However, our obsession with technology and the ever-growing pressure to establish and maintain a carefully constructed online presence has permanently altered the human experience and has given us the capacity to form unnatural and arguably, unhealthy habits that would have seemed unsettling and disturbing to us even five years ago.

Whilst many science-fiction television series look to far-removed futures involving hostile alien species, time-travel, or individuals with superhuman abilities, Brooker has instead set *Black Mirror* in the near-future, in environments that are instantly recognisable to us, and contain heightened versions of the life-altering technologies that we already have in our present day reality. Brooker has reviewed our current fascination with technology and speculates as to where exactly this fascination is taking us, and what are the effects this will have on the next generation of humans who will have developed in environments where technology will have an even larger presence than it does today. Brooker depicts the characters that inhabit these environments as alienated and disaffected individuals; they are



slaves to consumerism and the commodity, who would rather reside in simulated realities than deal with their actual lives, and in addition to this, they are completely enraptured by the falsities of major spectacular events promoted by the mass media. This media-driven, technology obsessed, 'image-saturated, comprehensively mediated way of life that defines all supposedly advanced cultures' (Harris 2012) is in direct alignment with the concept of the spectacle, a key element in our discussion of *Black Mirror*. A clear understanding of the concept of the spectacle, formulated by the French Marxist theorist Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle*, is imperative if we are to gain a critical insight into *Black Mirror* and to enrich our understanding of the always connected, passive characters dwelling within these spaces. The aim of this research paper is to discuss the representation of society within *Black Mirror* primarily through the lens of Debord, whilst also looking at Marxist principles in relation to the series. This will in turn give us an insight into the modern human condition and what the future holds for humanity as our lives are becoming increasingly regulated by the spectacles of mass media and the advancements of technology.

## **Literature Review – Marxist and Debordian Principles**

The notion of Debord's spectacle, developed in 1967 along with members of the anti-authoritarian Marxist group, The Situationist International, of which Debord himself was a key figure, has had a profound impact on a multitude of contemporary theories of society and culture, including Jean Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality. In order to grasp the disenfranchisement, indifference, and misery displayed by the characters within *Black Mirror*, it is vital that the foundations of the modern human condition are acknowledged and assessed; that is, what are the forces and powers that led to such transformations in society that in turn led to Brooker presenting us with such a view of the modern world? The forces in question are, of course, the introduction and the advancement of technologies into the human experience, how these technologies have shaped humanity's evolutionary process, and the forces of the economic capitalist system and the concept of the commodity. Undoubtedly, we are living in an age where the growth of technology is rapidly accelerating, and if we were to consider the 'Law of Accelerating Returns' (Kurzweil, 2001), a law that states that technological growth is exponential and predicts that society will experience an astronomical growth in the rate of technological progress in the 21st century, humanity will experience around 20,000 years of progress in this century alone, instead of experiencing 100 years of progress. And so, we are currently on the brink of a major historical turning point on the timeline of humanity's existence and it is difficult to gauge what impact this exponential growth will have on society 100 years from now; life at the beginning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> century very well could be incomprehensible and utterly foreign to those of us who have developed at the end of the 20th/beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

The birth of the information age has also given rise to the two new opposing phenomena of technophilia and technophobia, with proponents of the former espousing the endless benefits of a life dictated by technological growth whilst incorporating a utopian discourse into their

viewpoint, and proponents of the latter excoriating technological growth as one of the major causes of concern in contemporary society. In reaction to these two conflicting viewpoints, a new rhetoric of “technorealism” appeared in 1998 (see [technorealism.org](http://technorealism.org)), with the aim of establishing a middle ground so as to create a space for critical thought and analysis where both the benefits and the potential disadvantages of emergent technologies could be discussed. Regardless of the stance one might take on the issue however, most theorists are agreed on the transformative power of technology, and that its indelible properties have always shaped humanity’s progress; technology is “pivotally embedded in the human adventure from the start, and is thus bound up with the nature of the very beings that we are” (Kellner 2006, p. 7) and technological changes will invariably shape our perceptions, affect how we think, how we communicate, and how we live our lives:

Technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological. I mean "ecological" in the same sense as the word is used by environmental scientists. One significant change generates total change. If you remove the caterpillars from a given habitat, you are not left with the same environment minus caterpillars: you have a new environment, and you have reconstituted the conditions of survival; the same is true if you add caterpillars to an environment that has had none. This is how the ecology of media works as well. A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry (Postman, 1993, p. 20)

The technological advancements that gave rise to the industrial revolution, industrial capitalism, and consumerism prompted philosopher Karl Marx to form his theory of alienation and the concept of commodification. Debord’s philosophy put forward in *The Society of the Spectacle* is heavily influenced by Marx’s concepts on the grievances of capitalism, so much so, that Debord’s concepts can be seen as a development or an expansion on Marx’s ideas. Debord begins his treatise with the following statement:

The whole life of those societies in which the modern conditions of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles (Debord, 1967, Section 1)

When we compare the statement above to the opening statement from Marx's *Capital*, we can clearly see the conscious effort from Debord to link his ideas to the Marxist philosophy:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as "an immense accumulation of commodities," (Marx 1867, p.26)

Europe was undergoing rapid and far-reaching transformations in the areas of economics and culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the industrial revolution, and with it, the flourishing powers of the capitalist system were also beginning to greatly affect specific sections of society, in particular the working class and the labourers. Marx observed that these new industries demanded an ever-increasing number of workers, many of whom were forced to work exceedingly long hours under strenuous conditions and in some cases, in extremely hazardous environments. In addition to this, the rampant exploitation of children, by employing them to work long hours in conditions that were detrimental to their development and overall health, was commonplace in English factories in the 1800s, and *Capital* contains many examples of factory owners and other employers defending these practices, which included employing boys below the age of 13 (Marx 1867, pp. 172-176). An insight is given in *Capital* into the working life of young boys employed in English mines in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century:

In the mines the work, inclusive of going and returning, usually lasts 14 or 15 hours, sometimes even from 3, 4 and 5 o'clock a.m., till 5 and 6 o'clock p.m. . The adults work in two shifts, of eight hours each; but there is no alternation with the boys, on account of the expense. The younger boys are chiefly employed in opening and shutting the ventilating doors in the various parts of the mine; the older ones are employed on heavier work, in carrying coal. They work these long hours underground until their 18th or 22nd year, when they are put to miner's work proper. Children and young persons are at present worse treated, and harder worked than at any previous period (Marx 1867, p.319)

For Marx, this is representative of the voraciousness and pure cruelty inherent within the capitalist system; he sees this economic model as having an extraordinarily negative impact

on the condition of the average worker, in which the casual exploitation and mistreatment has led to the commodification and objectification of the labourer. In this sense, the whole system of capitalism treats the workforce as if they were objects and that they can only be defined by how much they can contribute to production on the factory floor. Marx defines a commodity as “in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another (Marx 1867, p. 26)” which possesses a use value and an exchange value, with the use value defined as the uses to which the owner can put the commodity, and the exchange value defined as the valuation of a commodity expressed in terms of other commodities. Prior to the rise of industrial capitalism, the labourer would benefit directly from his/her own labour by exchanging their products or commodities with another person; exchanging a commodity results in one person directly receiving the advantages of another person’s specific labour. However, in a capitalist system, the commodification of individuals and labour power is promoted, complete with a use value and exchange value where labour makes its way onto the marketplace to be bought, sold, and exchanged just like any other commodity.

As a result of this, in the eyes of capitalism, the average labourer is now seen as nothing more than a commodity for the expansion of capital. The dehumanization process is complete; “food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery. It reduces the sound sleep needed for the restoration, reparation, refreshment of the bodily powers to just so many hours of torpor as the revival of an organism, absolutely exhausted, renders essential (Marx 1867, p. 176)” and also, the time spent socialising and fulfilling intellectual pursuits is deemed wasteful and unnecessary in the code of capitalism and should be kept to a minimum, so that more time is allocated for the production process.

All of this contributes to the phenomenon of alienation, in which the labourer now feels alienated from his labour and the objects and products that this labour produces; in this case, describing this phenomenon as a feeling of misery or despondency would be an oversimplification, rather, it occurs when an aspect of a person's sense of self or a person's sense of humanity has been subconsciously externalised and as a result, they are unable to relate to that particular aspect and perceive it as contentious or alien. The labourer sees his/her own creations independent from themselves, beyond their control, and feel as though they are now at the mercy of their creations. In pre-industrial times when agricultural modes of production drove the economy, the labourer could directly see the benefits of his/her labour; the labourer in this context was a working member of a community and could see how the fruits of his/her labour had an impact on the people around them and contributed to the development and growth of the community and by extension, society as a whole. In the capitalist system however, labour has now become a commodity and the labourer must now look to sell his labour in order to survive. The concept of labour has transformed and now only exists for the creation of capital and profit; the labourer is unable to see the how his/her labour directly affects the people around him/her and thus, becomes alienated from labour:

..labour is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour.  
(Marx 1844, p.30)

Thus, upon analysing Debord's concepts in the *The Society of the Spectacle*, we can see how the two texts are closely linked. Here, it is imperative that the connections between the two theorists are made clear, so we can form a precise definition of the term "spectacle". Debord and the Situationists were themselves part of a French society that was undergoing a rapid

transformation in the form of modernization; following the Second World War, the consumer society was rapidly developing in the United States, fundamental aspects of which began to emerge in French society in the 1960s “with new “drugstores,” shopping malls, and a proliferation of consumer goods and services (Best & Kellner, 2007)”. Seeing these widespread changes occur, Debord and the Situationists sought to analyse how these transformations affected society directly: “Their program was to reinvigorate Marxian revolutionary practice and to supplement Marx's critique of capital and the commodity, attempting to trace the further development of the abstraction process inherent in commodity production (Best & Kellner, 2007)”.

For Debord, this abstraction process inherent in commodity production has managed to evolve: the process has now made its way outside of the factory and away from the spaces of commodity production, and now the objectification of the already alienated labourer continues even when he/she leaves the workplace and they are subjected to all the trappings of consumerism as a result of the perpetual expansion of the capitalist machine. Marx posits in relation to the labourer, that when he is working he does not feel at home; Debord however, expands upon this idea and asserts that the labourer does not feel at home even outside of the workplace, in his own home, or in familiar environments. Hence Debord’s use of the phrase, *whole* of life, in his opening statement; it is not just the *wealth* of the labourer’s life, but every aspect of the labourer’s existence is influenced and in some ways completely dictated by the domineering powers of capitalism.

The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world. Modern economic production extends its dictatorship extensively and intensively (Debord 1967, Section 42).

The previous iteration of the capitalist system that developed during the industrial revolution objectified the workforce because the worth of an individual was determined only by their

labour power in the production of commodities, but in the iteration critiqued by Debord, the worth of an individual is also determined by how much they can consume; thus, the objectification of the individual has now intensified the spectacular capitalist system's intention now is to have the individual consume as much as possible: "At this point in the "second industrial revolution," alienated consumption becomes for the masses a duty supplementary to alienated production (Debord 1967, Section 42)". The conversion to a society of the spectacle involves a crass commodification of sections of social life that were previously left untouched by corporate control; in this society, education, knowledge, art, culture, the true desires of the individual, the mediums through which people express themselves in order to have a purpose in life, are put through the capitalist system, commoditized, mass-produced, packaged, and sold to the alienated consumer.

In order to keep profits rising and to keep inhabitants of the society of the spectacle consuming, the commodity is advertised and presented to the consumer as a life-enhancing necessity that "represents the hope for a dazzling shortcut to the promised land of total consumption and is ceremoniously presented as the decisive entity (Debord 1967, Section 69)". As a result of this form of representation, the authoritative figures within the spectacle create a meticulously constructed illusion in which the path to unadulterated bliss and happiness is through the consumption of products and luxurious items, attaching qualities of omnipotence to their creations; any human ailment or depression of the mind can be cured by the almighty product. The spectacle's dominance over everyday life is reliant on the unceasing creation of pseudo-needs for the consumer, needs that can only be satisfied by the purchase of supposedly revolutionary new products, the use value of which becoming more abstract and abstruse in the process, to the point where the need for the actual product is lost on the consumer; passive consumption is what fuels the spectacle's dominance over contemporary society. However, the product's supposed innovativeness and charm is lost as



soon as the consumer comes into possession of it, and by then, the allure of a brand new product presents itself to the consumer, creating a new pseudo-need in the process:

A product acquires prestige when it is placed at the centre of social life as the revealed mystery of the ultimate goal of production. But the object which was prestigious in the spectacle becomes vulgar as soon as it is taken home by its consumer—and by all its other consumers. It reveals its essential poverty (which naturally comes to it from the misery of its production) too late. But by then another object already carries the justification of the system and demands to be acknowledged (Debord 1967, Section 69).

This continuous consumption and unnecessary commodification of all aspects of the individual's (or the spectator's) life leaves him/her in a perpetual state of desire for the products that he/she is led to believe will augment their existence; commodities in the society of the spectacle are heavily propagandised across the visual mediums of film and television and across giant billboards and other advertisement displays that are littered across every major city, and consequently, artificial desires, the desires of the spectacle, are planted in the mind of the spectator and regardless of the quantity of commodities purchased, these artificial desires will never be satisfied. For example, contemporary artificial desires can come in the form of the pursuit and consumption of technological mobile devices and gadgets such as the latest smartphones and tablet devices; the product is promoted heavily across the media as a life-enhancing tool and “acquires prestige” as a result, but “reveals its essential poverty” after consumption, and by then, its successor appears on the market demanding attention, rendering the old product obsolete, out-of-date, and unworthy of recognition.

Another key concept associated with the spectacle is the idea of separation. Debord states that “separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle (Debord 1967, Section 25)”; the spectator has assumed his role as passive consumer of the commodities endlessly glorified wherever he/she goes and as a result, the spectator is separated from their true desires and aspirations. The spectators can be seen as living out a passive existence: because the spectacle decides what products should be bought and consumed, driving the spectator to consume more and

more in an effort to satisfy his insatiable artificial desires, this prohibits the spectator from actively participating in their lives and fulfilling their own true ambitions. Debord presents us with a passive, mollified society, in which “individuals, separated from one another, can rediscover unity only within the spectacle (Trier 2007)”. They are distracted from revolutionary thought, from becoming producers in their own life and separated from achieving their goals, whether they are the pursuit of knowledge, the broadening of one’s horizon or participating in artistic modes of expression.

Our understanding of the spectacle therefore is a society in which the commodity impacts upon every aspect of life plus the sum total of all the heavily moderated images that reflects this state of society. In order for society to remain pacified and to maintain the pervading sense of alienation, the only desires permitted by the spectacle are ones that can be bought and sold for profit. These desires of course, are promoted through brazen advertising and mass media, and the other countless unavoidable images that invade the individual’s daily life. The spectacle therefore, is not just the accumulation of images, media spectacles and events, but rather, these are the visual embodiments of the objectification and alienation of the spectators within the society of the spectacle. As Debord says, “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images (Debord 1967, Section 4)”.

## Methodology

"Ideology is usually defined as a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture. The term is generally associated with politics and party platforms, but it can also mean a given set of values that are implicit in any human enterprise -- including filmmaking" (Film110)

The methodology of this research paper will be focused on an ideological textual analysis of *Black Mirror*. Science fiction texts take the cultural ideologies and phenomena of their respective time and bring to its logical conclusion, and in the case of *Black Mirror*, Brooker has taken all of our cultural artefacts and looks at a far-removed future and posits a plausible and logical conclusion. For this research paper, I have looked at past television texts that carry the same agenda as *Black Mirror*, and how they represented the prevalent ideologies of the time, in order to get a sense of the fears and concerns of the people of the time.

The anthology format of *Black Mirror* is based upon that of the American television show *The Twilight Zone* which aired during the 1960s. *The Twilight zone* was created under the shadow of the Cold War and explored the impending threat of communism that many Americans felt at the time. Episodes such as 'The Obsolete Man' and 'The Fugitive' were thinly veiled Anti-Socialism narratives played out under the guise of supernatural fairy tales. Fast forward fifty years to Brooker's *Black Mirror* which keeps the essence of *The Twilight Zone* alive but replaces the "red panic" that was so prevalent in the series with the new modern society's relationship with the spectacle and fascination with technology.

In order to understand the ideologies of that gave rise to science fiction shows such as *The Twilight Zone*, research was undertaken to discover the root cause of the fears and alienation of the modern age. This led to discovery of Marxist philosophy and the Debordian spectacle,

which will be used to give us an insight into the mechanisms of and meaning behind *Black Mirror* and what it posits for the future of humanity.

## **Black Mirror and the Permanent Opium War**

### **-The Megaspectacle**

Animals, all of us: dying, desperate animals, alone in our skulls, in our souls, quietly tortured by our foreknowledge of death, wandering a mindless rock, baying with pain or killing each other. That's the working week. Come Saturday we crave relief. Slumped defeated in the corner, our flagellated cadavers scarcely held together by the gentle cocooning pressure of our armchairs, wearily we pivot our milky, despairing eyes in the direction of our television sets, seeking consolation or distraction or maybe just a little inconsequential merriment: a dab of balm to spread on these anguished bones, this empty heart (Brooker, 2009).

This aforementioned “social relation” that is mediated by images is what simultaneously unites and separates the spectators within the society of the spectacle; the spectacle’s dominance on society is reliant on alienated and by extension, isolated individuals who can only find solace in the consumption of more and more commodities and also, the consumption of media spectacles. In relation to media spectacles and events promoted by the mass media, they also possess the ability to unite the alienated spectators by providing them with overhyped and sensationalised news stories; this in turn allows the spectators to socialise and interact with one another in relation to the spectacle, whilst also giving them a sense of community and belonging. However, the media spectacle is also “a permanent opium war (Debord 1967, Section 44)” which promotes inactivity and also “stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life -- recovering the full range of their human powers through revolutionary change (Best & Kellner 2007)”. In other words, the aim of these media spectacles is to further the objectification and pacification of the society of the spectacle.

The advancement of technology and the growth of the internet in the past two decades have had a dramatic impact on how contemporary society consumes news stories and other topical events. It has led to the advent of 24-hour news channels and the unprecedented growth in the

number of online news sites, which has ultimately resulted in the media engaging in the commodification of news stories and major events. It has also led to large media events and scandals to be played out in the form of “megaspectacles (Kellner 2007)”. These megaspectacles in question have come to dominate the media landscape; in order to fill column inches and the 24-hours of airtime, contemporary media has proliferated a culture centred on the fusion of information and entertainment – or “infotainment (Kellner 2007, p.11)”. In the culture of infotainment, news outlets bombard their audiences with extended rolling coverage of events to the point of oversaturation, where they analyse and scrutinise every minute detail of the story and offer theories and opinions from select journalists and commentators who are deemed to be experts on the subject, and allow feedback from readers and spectators in the form of online polls or on social media sites to add an interactive element to the events, so the spectators of these megaspectacles can voice their opinion on the subject and form a distinguishable collective consciousness or hive mind within the general public. In fact, this culture of infotainment greatly encourages user feedback and the formation of a hive mind through social media, so news outlets in turn can exploit it to generate another spectacle from the original spectacle and therefore, produce more stories and content related to this new spectacle, for example, the reaction to the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, in January 2015 (Martinson, 2015). This culture of infotainment therefore, lies at the very core of contemporary mass media and the concept of the megaspectacle, where distraction of the masses is the key to more hits on news articles and higher rating on news channels, with the result being “a spectacularization of politics, of culture, and of consciousness, as media multiply and new forms of culture colonize consciousness and everyday life, generating novel forms of struggle and resistance (Kellner 2007, p. 15)”.

While the initial intent of the half hour daily news segment was to relay information to the viewer objectively, the biggest transformation with the arrival of the internet was how news

channels discarded objectivity and embraced subjective angles on world events. This transition from objectivity to subjectivity occurred due to the over saturation of media, distinctive voices needed to be created in an attempt to be heard over the sea of information. The news campaign became increasingly popular along with this transition, which is essentially the creation of news where there was none. A contemporary example of this would be the “Sachsgate” scandal that occurred after airing of an episode of Russell Brand’s radio show in October of 2008 (Martin, 2008). A series of voice messages left on the phone of Andrew Sachs by Russell Brand and Jonathon Ross were the cause of the controversy, and as a result of this, tabloid newspaper the Mail on Sunday and the Daily Mail spearheaded this campaign seeking “justice” for Andrew Sachs. What’s novel about this situation is that the story was picked up a nearly a week after the incident, after Brand and Ross had apologized to Sachs who had accepted the apology (Goslett, 2008). This story was effectively “dead” or was at least no longer relevant; The Daily Mail was campaigning for justice with an issue that had seen a resolution between all parties. This is where one can see the fragility of the media campaign as it becomes desperate for a megaspectacle, the Mail had become a self-perpetuating spin machine of opinion based articles, and they had in a sense invented news where there was none in an attempt to combat declining print sales. The most chilling aspect of this event was that it actually led to the forced resignations of both Brand and Ross even after the supposedly victimised Andrew Sachs had stated that he wished for no action be taken against the two, Andrew Sachs opinion on the matter was conveniently ignored by the Daily Mail’s campaign as it didn’t fit into the narrative they had created for their readers, that he was an elderly gentleman that had suffered serious abuse at the hand of his tormentors, Brand and Ross (Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe - Manuel Gate [Series 4 Episode 1] (2009)).

## **-The National Anthem and the Hive Mind**

The concept of the media spectacle, the alienated masses, and the power of the hive mind are reoccurring key elements that can be found within *Black Mirror*; from the spectacle-hungry onlookers in ‘The National Anthem’ to the rambunctious crowds participating in the mockery of the political system in ‘The Waldo Moment’, the media spectacles presented to us throughout the series appeal to the society of the spectacle’s near-insatiable need for easily-digestible entertainment and distractions in order to cope with the loss of control experienced from living in a commodity-driven society. It’s important to note that *Black Mirror* is fundamentally a commentary on the state of contemporary society and the reactions and behaviour of the characters in relation to the variety of scenarios within the series are true representations of the psychology of our current society. We only need to take a look at the conduct and the attitudes of the masses in the first episode in the series, ‘The National Anthem’, to gain an insight into how media spectacles and scandals manipulate our own behaviour, cultivate the hive mentality, and limit our capacity to think as individuals.

‘The National Anthem’ is set in our present-day reality, complete with the digital vestiges of the information age: 24-hour rolling news channels, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and even GoPro cameras, and is centred on the kidnapping of the Duchess of Beaumont, Princess Susannah (Lydia Wilson) and the dilemma faced by the British Prime Minister Michael Callow (Rory Kinnear), as to ensure the safety of the Princess’ return, he must give in to the kidnapper’s bizarre demands, and perform sexual intercourse with a pig live on national television. After the ransom video, which outlines the kidnapper’s demands and all the stipulations for the indecent act, is initially uploaded to YouTube, the twittersphere and other social media sites erupt into an uncontrollable frenzy; the kidnapper (who is revealed to be Turner Prize winning artist Carlton Bloom) takes advantage of this hyperconnected world, in which information can reach every corner of the globe with minimal effort, so his magnum



opus will have pride of place on every single news outlet in an extremely short period of time. Eventually, the mainstream media outlets start to report on the story with the expected infotainment discourse, as confirmed by one of the members of the governmental press office:

“..Telegraph has the whole video and an interactive timeline...  
...The Sun runs with “TAKEN” with a big grab of Susannah...  
...The Guardian is running a fucking live blog and a short  
think piece on the historical symbolism of the pig.”

Now that the mainstream media is reporting on the event, and the hive mind has been established, the megaspectacle can begin, heralding a new chapter in the permanent opium war. Following the widespread release of the story, it becomes quite clear that the major news corporations are uninterested in moral standards and maintaining a sense of decorum; the capitalist system has taught them that they must exploit the kidnapping of a young woman as much as possible in order to attract more consumers and in turn, more revenue. In one particular scene set in the offices of the fictional news channel UKN, who are vigorously propagating the megaspectacle, one determined journalist named Malaika (Chetna Pandya), thinks nothing of sending an impromptu semi-nude photograph to a credulous young employee of the governmental press office in order to obtain information on the whereabouts of the princess. Objectifying oneself in the eyes of a peer and the loss of journalistic integrity are small prices to pay in return for the rewards offered by the spectacle.

Throughout the rest of the morning and the afternoon, it becomes quite clear that the media’s modus operandi is to filter the spectacle through the voices of the public. Through the use of vox-pops, online opinion polls, and comments from social media, the media begins to construct a narrative that is sympathetic to Callow’s cause and the general consensus among the spectators is that he should not give in to the kidnapper’s demands. Unfortunately, after the kidnapper sends a package containing the princess’ severed finger along with a USB stick containing a video of the severance to UKN headquarters, public opinion shifts upon release

of the video to the public. Now, the voice of the hive mind is in the ascendancy, and the calls for Callow to follow through with the demands cannot be ignored. After one of his political aides, Alex Cairns (Lindsey Duncan), chastises Callow for his reluctance, stating that non-compliance will endanger himself and his family and will result in the death of his political career, Callow agrees to give in to the kidnapper's demands and perform the act.

The behaviour of the spectators throughout the day and during the actual broadcast, and also the influence of its hive mind over proceedings reinforces Debord's statement that the "spectacle is a permanent opium war (Debord 1967, Section 44)"; after the severed finger is delivered to the news station, they immediately run the story in order to provide the spectators with the opium they so desperately need, to foster more engagement from the masses, and to elicit impassioned responses from individuals, who, after witnessing the distressing video, will now demand the Prime Minister perform the indecent act. The media outlets are depending on Callow to follow through with the demands; they will in turn be able to justify the production of countless articles of analysis and other news items relating to the spectacle following the completion of the act itself; it would be the main point of focus for the media for weeks to come. As well as belonging to the society of the spectacle, the media outlets are also responsible for the commodification of the spectacle and selling it to the masses; they are complicit in their own alienation and in the prolonging of the spectacle's dominance over society. The priority for the media outlets is not the welfare of a young woman, or the dignity and mental wellbeing of a politician, but the selling of spectacles that will in turn generate profit.

Indeed, the predictable behaviour of the media and the subsequent response from the masses is all part of the kidnapper's grand design; in order for his art piece to reach a wide audience and to have a deep impact upon its viewers, the kidnapper threatens the life of one of the media's most beloved characters and one of their greatest sources of content. The

combination of the constant referring to the victim as “princess”, as if she is the clichéd damsel in distress from a whimsical fairytale, and the idealised representation of her as the universally adored “People’s Princess”, appeals to the emotions of the masses. The media is relentless in its manipulation of the spectators; their narrative depicts this kidnapping as an attack on the grand British institution of the monarchy, creating not just a megaspectacle, but a *royal* spectacle in the process. UKN then begin to broadcast the emotional and sentimental responses from the public, as if to confirm the success of their manipulation:

“He has to do it, what’s the alternative? We can easily get another Prime Minister but we can’t live without a princess. ‘Course he should do it.”

In the end, the expansion of the megaspectacle has utterly transformed the composition of the spectators; they began the day as a diverse collective, with different identities and voices offering varying opinions on the subject, some sympathetic and compassionate, and some unsympathetic and deliberately derogatory. By the time the 4pm deadline arrives however, the spectators have discarded their feelings of compassion and understanding and demand a spectacle; as they excitedly crowd around screens and gleefully cheer and raise their glasses in the air when Callow finally appears on screen in a state of utter disbelief at what he now must do, it becomes apparent that the spectators’ demand for a spectacle is more pathological than political. But, their elation rapidly diminishes as soon as the act itself gets underway, and they soon start to show signs of disgust and repugnance, as if they’ve come to realise their own complicity in the events of the day; the spectacle has now revealed its “essential poverty” and the exhilaration of the crowd mentality has vanished, and the spectators now find themselves isolated and separate from each other once again, underlining Debord’s statement that “separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle (Debord 1967, Section 25).

The televised act that Callow must undertake is an interesting conflation of socially acceptable and unacceptable digital media videos that are consumed by the general public

daily. The Prime Minister addressing the British people through television and online media occurs daily as does the consumption of online pornography. With the advent of ubiquitous internet usage no industry fell quicker than that of the porn industry, the over saturation of free pornographic content led to the industries complete demise (Theroux, 2012). The public was consuming more pornography than ever but with no cost, and in addition to this, recent studies have shown that watching large amounts of this content has led many to adopt feelings of shame around their sexual habits and even addiction to pornography. This is the result of an overexposure to any type of sexual act, be it socially normal or completely taboo. The televised pornographic act that Callow performs shows us in a microcosm the process of this oversaturation of content, while there is initially an excitement within the general public over this event when it actually occurs the excitement is lost and replaced by shame (“the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil centre of misery (Debord, 1967, Section 63)”). This set piece can be seen as a comment on overexposure to rolling news as much as pornography (Gilkerson, 2014).

### **-Fifteen Million Merits and Reality Television**

The concept of the media spectacle also takes centre stage in the second episode of *Black Mirror*, ‘Fifteen Million Merits’, whilst also focusing on the concept of the alienated labourer and on another grand phenomenon attributed to the society of the spectacle, the deep-rooted obsession with the celebrity figure. ‘Fifteen Million Merits’ is set in a far-removed future where the majority of the population spends their working day pedalling exercise bikes to generate electricity, which in turn, powers all the omnipresent screens and technologies in this post-oil future. We observe this through the eyes of Bingham "Bing" Madsen (Daniel Kaluuya), an apathetic labourer who spends the majority of his waking hours searching for something authentic or something “real” in this gloomy artificial existence, but what exactly

constitutes as “real” in this world is uncertain. The dwellings of the inhabitants of this world are windowless one-room cells constructed entirely of screens, in which the people waste away their existence watching gratuitous pornography, playing violent video games, or watching degenerative and exploitative reality television shows, such as ‘Botherguts’, in which overweight individuals are physically and verbally abused in order to provide mind-numbing entertainment to the masses.

A hyper-realised vision of Debordian concepts, the setting of this episode can be seen as a literal interpretation of Debord’s statement “The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world (Debord 1967, Section 42)”, in which the spectacle, particularly its visual manifestation which usually appears to the spectator in the form of the mass media, is physically unavoidable. The spectators are harassed by pop-up advertisements that randomly appear in whichever screen they happen to be looking at and this is of course, quite a regular occurrence for the spectators, as there is a screen in the eyeline of every spectator almost every second of the day, and in addition to this, the spectators must pay with their digital currency if to wish to avoid watching the advertisements.

In reward for their pedalling of the exercise bikes, the workers receive wages in merits; but instead of exchanging this currency for physical, tangible products that could temporarily alleviate their suffering, they can only spend it on customizations for their digital avatars that represent them in the digital world, or if they happen to collect enough merits, on the chance to appear on a reality television talent contest, entitled ‘Hot Shots!’.

According to Marx, the consumerist lifestyle had a profoundly negative impact on the wellbeing of the labourer, which resulted in the “degradation of being into having (Best &

Kellner, 2007)”, where priority is given to the endless and unsatisfying accumulation of possessions and material objects as opposed to a life of attempting to achieve one’s ambitions and true desires. Debord expands on this notion:

The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of having into appearing, from which all actual “having” must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function. At the same time all individual reality has become social reality directly dependent on social power and shaped by it. It is allowed to appear only to the extent that it is not (Debord, 1967, Section 17)

Here, Debord refers to superiority of the symbolic representation of the commodity over its actual function or use-value. The possession of certain products and objects can act as a symbol for one’s social status, and help to project an image of success or wealth; “Within this abstract system, it is the appearance of the commodity that is more decisive than its actual "use value" and the symbolic packaging of commodities -- be they cars or presidents -- generates an image industry and new commodity aesthetics (Best & Kellner, 2007)”.

We can attach this notion of “having into appearing” to the consumption of the commodities in ‘Fifteen Million Merits’. An alternative form of consumerism is promoted in this universe, where the labourers can only spend their hard-earned merits on mindless entertainment or digital clothes and items to customize their avatars so as to give themselves a semblance of individuality in this cold and lifeless environment which, in its essence, is a further reduction in the concepts presented to us by Marx and Debord. Whilst Marx spoke of the degradation of being into having, prompting Debord to expand on this notion with the degradation of having into appearing, ‘Fifteen Million Merits’ presents us with a new form of appearing, which falls in line with the concept of simulation (Baudrillard, 1994). Whilst Baudrillard does not form part of the framework of this essay, his concepts are nonetheless useful to describe this particular phenomenon evident within this episode. Baudrillard was concerned with the abstraction of the world “through semiological (re)processing (Best & Kellner, 2007)” in

which symbols and signs that represented reality, simulacra, were beginning to alter our perception of the world around us. Baudrillard theorized that the signs and images were effectively replacing “real life” and constructing a simulation of reality, a postmodern world filled with signs and symbols without depth and no origin. This simulated environment filled with simulacra created a new mode of existence, entitled hyperreality, a pure simulation which is ultimately “the end-result of a historical simulation process where the natural world and all its referents are gradually replaced with technology and self-referential signs (Best & Kellner, 2007)”.

All of the consumerist desires in this universe are realised in cyberspace and where the concepts of possession or “having” a commodity, or even appearing to have a commodity has lost all meaning, because these commodities that once constituted the real at one point in history have been replaced by their representation or virtual copies; if one wants to purchase an item of clothing, they can only purchase a simulated item of clothing for their avatar, if one wants to play football or go cycling through the countryside, they must do so through a simulation. Thus, the next stage in the degradation of the human condition has been realised in ‘Fifteen Million Merits’, which has now gone from having to appearing, to ‘appearing to *simulating*.’ This is clearly articulated by Bingham when he finally confronts the judges at the end of the episode:

“All we know is fake fodder and buying shit. That’s how we speak to each other, how we express ourselves is buying shit. I have a dream? The peak of our dreams is a new hat for our doppel, a hat that doesn’t exist. It’s not even there; we buy shit that’s not even there. Show us something real and free and beautiful, you couldn’t. It’d break us, we’re too numb for it, and our minds would choke.”

‘Fifteen Million Merits’ can also be seen as a scathing critique of society’s relationship with fame and the notion of the celebrity, and the rise in popularity of exploitative reality television shows like *The X-Factor* and *Britain’s Got Talent* that feed into the society of the spectacle’s

lust for escapism and passive entertainment and point towards a “deep-seated voyeurism and narcissism (Kellner, 2003)” inherent in society.

The trivialized notion of "challenge" on these shows represents an extreme example of commodity fetishism, an insatiable appetite for gazing at others, who, while serving as our surrogates, undertake ridiculous risks for our pleasure and our hope of attaining sublime levels of personal experience, albeit vicariously, while we sit complacently in the comfort and safety of our living rooms (Garoian and Gaudelius, p. 305)

The rise of the digital age also coincided with an explosion in the demand for passive televisual entertainment; competition between television channels began to increase at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as society became more reliant on visual culture and entertainment in an effort to cope with the increasing sense of alienation resulting from the drudgery of working for the capitalist system. Established broadcasters in Great Britain, such as the BBC and ITV, were effectively unchallenged in the sale of television advertising from other competitors up until the early to mid-1990s. However, the increasing “penetration of cable and satellite delivery systems meant that multichannel television became a reality (Sparks, 2007)”, and soon, the television corporations were seeing a decrease in viewing figures as a result of the rise in competition. Therefore, the mainstream broadcasters needed to adopt a new and relatively inexpensive strategy in order to compete with these new channels that were taking its viewers. The result was the extremely economical and easily-accessible reality television show, which was far easier to produce than, for example, an hour of television drama, due to the fact that there is no need to pay for actors or writers, or for the need for endless rehearsals (Sparks, 2007). And in addition to this, there would always be an endless supply of fame-hungry individuals, who are desperately seeking their fifteen minutes of fame, and who possess a “seemingly insatiable lust to become part of the spectacle and to involve themselves in it more intimately and peer into the private lives of others (Kellner, 2003)”.



In modern times, thousands upon thousands of people queue up to perform in front of the canonised talent judges of *The X-Factor* or *The Voice*, in the hopes of escaping from the perils of obscurity, and in turn, transform into a celebrity adored by millions with vast amounts of wealth. Indeed, the allure of the celebrity lifestyle and the media's obsession with these stars is all linked to our current image-saturated reality, where celebrities are the epitome of the perfect image, the perfect life, who promote the accumulation of commodities by "defining personality in terms of image (Best & Kellner, 2007)"; by purchasing the commodities of the stars, we can lead ourselves to believe that we are living out a portion of their perfect lives.

Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification with the shallow seeming life that has to compensate for the fragmented productive specializations which are actually lived. Celebrities exist to act out various styles of living and viewing society unfettered, free to express themselves globally. They embody the inaccessible result of social labour by dramatizing its by-products magically projected above it as its goal: power and vacations, decision and consumption, which are the beginning and end of an undiscussed process (Debord, 1967, Section 60)

To become one of these people who specialize in the "seemingly lived" is the desire for many a spectator residing in the society of the spectacle, but these desires are of course formed by the spectacle and are therefore, artificial. But the spectacle perpetuates this idea that the pathway to fame and fortune is active participation in consumerism and the purchasing of celebrity-endorsed goods. We can see this in 'Fifteen Million Merits', where the only way to become a contestant on 'Hot Shots!', the platform for all the up-and-coming celebrities, is to pay for it.

Bingham, in his search for the "real", offers to buy a ticket for his love interest, Abi Khan (Jessica Brown Findlay), who has been led to believe by the power of the spectacle that fame and fortune is what she duly deserves, only for her to be coerced into entering the world of adult entertainment, much to the ire of Bingham. His mistake was attempting to discover the "real" in something that is inherently false, which is, of course, the spectacle. But his search

continues, and after earning enough merits to appear on 'Hot Shots!' himself, he brandishes a shard of glass and gives an impassioned speech on the artificial life that he leads, the alienation he suffers, and on the loss of the only thing he ever cared about, which of course, was Abi. Finally, it seems, in this Debordian nightmare where the spectacle reigns supreme, Bingham has found his "real"; unfortunately, the spectacle again reinforces its dominance when Bingham becomes a "sell-out", and is turned into a celebrity whose trademark is to regale against the system. His rebelliousness is deemed to be a performance, and it is repackaged and sold as a commodity.

In a world which really is topsy-turvy, the true is a moment of the false  
(Debord, 1967, Section 9)

## The Three Artists and Conclusion

This act of denouncing the system is also present in “The Waldo Moment”, which focuses on a failed comedian named Jamie Salter (Daniel Rigby) who performs the voice and motion-capture movements for a foul-mouthed cartoon bear named Waldo. The character’s main selling-point is his mockery of politicians on a late-night comedy sketch show, and because of his enormous popularity, a pilot for his very own series has been commissioned. In order to promote the series, Jamie’s producer, Jack Napier (Jason Fleming) suggests that Waldo should run in an upcoming by-election against one of his past interviewees, conservative candidate Liam Monroe (Tobias Menzies). What follows in the rest of the episode is a critique of the attitudes of contemporary society towards the political system, and society’s need to make a spectacle out of political events.

In the age of media spectacle, politics is mediated more and more by the forms of spectacle culture and, in particular, by appearance, image, style, and presentation, but also narrative (Kellner, 2003)

In this section, I want to focus on the three so-called artists in *Black Mirror* that all relate to the episodes concerning the notion of the media spectacle: The kidnapper in ‘The National Anthem’, Bingham from ‘Fifteen Million Merits’, and Jamie. These three characters are perhaps the most interesting characters from the series, as they all partake in some kind of performance or art as a means of expressing themselves in an otherwise, bleak and creativity-stifling world. They are unique in the *Black Mirror* universe as they all seem to possess the trait of self-awareness; that is to say, they are fully aware of the spectacle and its complete dominance over society, and go to extraordinary lengths to form an identity that is true to themselves and free of the artificial desire of the spectacle. Whilst everyone else around them is utterly captivated by the trappings of consumerism or the hype of the media spectacle, these three characters attempt to break away from the system, even if it results in their downfall.

Like Marx, as much as Debord emphasized the commodification of reality, he also emphasized the reality of commodification and the ability of individuals to see through its illusions and fantasies (Best and Kellner, 2007)

The kidnapper for example, possessed the ability to see through the illusions of commodification; he was living in a society dominated by the spectacle that restricted intellectual thought and suppressed the creation of an identity that was antithetical to the spectacle's teachings. It should be noted, that at the very beginning of 'The National Anthem', we learn through a news item that the kidnapper (Carlton Bloom)'s art exhibition was cancelled the day before the kidnapping, due to the controversial nature of the art itself. Perhaps, this was the reason why Bloom decided to kidnap Princess Susannah in the first place; the society he was living in was too confining and he was unable to get noticed, and unable to achieve his true ambitions. He then decides to "opt out", to leave this artificial society, but not before he releases "the first great artwork of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". It's unfortunate that the most striking aspect about this piece of art will never be revealed, which is the fact that the princess was released half an hour before the beginning of the indecent act; a timeless cultural monument if ever there was one and, perhaps, fully deserving of its title.

Jamie is also aware of the reality of commodification, and through the course of the episode, gradually comes to realise the insidious nature of his actions. After witnessing the effect his seemingly harmless comedy act can have on the mindset of the spectators, he attempts to relieve himself of his own duties from the façade. As a blue cartoon bear whose only real function is to shout obscenities at politicians during debates, Jamie begins to feel alienated from his own labour and from the people around him, in particular his work colleagues, who objectify him and view him only in his ability to voice Waldo. It's only after his meeting with a mysterious American man, a member of "the agency", who wishes to expand Waldo's exposure and take him global, that Jamie becomes aware of the true nature of the spectacle's powers. And when Jamie witnesses the physical and verbal abuse of a rival candidate at a

political rally, he sees once and for all that the spectacle, his own creation, is indeed “a tool of pacification and depoliticization “(Best and Kellner, 2007)”. By actively participating in the depoliticization of the masses, Jamie feels complicit in the spectacularization of general politics, where a blue cartoon bear could potentially make its way to power due to the popularity of its juvenile, yet accessible antics.

Bingham has also long realised the falsities of the spectacle, and the reality of commodification, yet his outburst at the end of the episode has resulted in him transforming into a celebrity, leaving behind his quest for the “real”, and upgrading to a larger cell, that is still covered in screens. Admittedly, the conclusions given to us for nearly all of the characters within *Black Mirror* are nearly always dark, but because *Black Mirror* is fundamentally a satire on the way we live now, it is deliberately presenting us with the falsities of our current existence, so as to facilitate intellectual thought and generate a new discourse on humanity’s passage into the future. Debord’s seminal treatise on the modern human condition was written nearly fifty years ago, and with this research paper, hopefully it has been shown that his profundity and concepts are still relevant to not just the deconstruction of contemporary texts, but to contemporary society also. We have shown that the concept of the spectacle is still embedded into the philosophy of Western culture, and will surely be for generations to come. It would be an injustice to both Brooker and Debord’s works to label them as simply pessimistic or nihilistic because of the lack of solutions presented; rather they hold a (black) mirror up to society and point out the incongruities of human behaviour in order to foster progressive thinking towards a better future.

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