

# “There’s no cure for the Internet” – Surveillance, Spectatorship, and Sanctuary in *Black Mirror*

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## Introduction

Describing a “pattern in the history of technology” as a dynamic of alternation between “mythical” and “banal” phases, Vincent Mosco argues in *The Digital Sublime* that “the real power of new technologies does not appear during their mythic period, when they are hailed for their ability to bring world peace, renew communities ... rather, their social impact is greatest when technologies become banal—when they literally ... or figuratively withdraw into the woodwork” (19). In a similar vein, David E. Nye claims that “[y]esterday’s technological wonder is today’s banality” (236). Yet, he also demonstrates that the increasing banality of technological inventions does not necessarily entail comprehension; on the contrary—he claims that intensifying obscurity may be observed in the evolution of technology. While progress was quite literally visible in the construction of railroads, bridges, and skyscrapers, from the arrival of electricity and the start of digitalization, keeping pace with progress required the understanding of ever more complex scientific phenomena. Keeping the public informed about the driving forces behind new technologies, however, was not in the interest of their inventors; writing about the 1939 World Fair exhibitions, Nye explains how the “marvels presented” were often intentionally “packaged as tricks,” displacing and obscuring natural phenomena and science by using them to “simulat[e] magic” (216).

As technology increasingly permeates more and more facets of life, from the simplest activities to the most complex tasks, these are also becoming, in a sense, alienating: humans use these systems every day while having at best a rudimentary understanding of how they operate. Although immense vulnerability is implied in this lack of knowledge, a sense of danger rarely emerges. Adam Greenfield predicted that “[t]he truly transformative circumstances will arise not from any one technology standing alone, but from multiple technical capabilities woven together in combination” (224)—and indeed, in our historical moment, we see increasingly intermingling digital systems. Relying on Big Data and artificial intelligence, these networks are used to covertly exert pressure on users, influencing what they buy and who they vote for, and may even determine their prospects for education, insurance and work (O’Neil 124-25). Technologies, however, should not be conflated with the socio-economic systems that employ them. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff reminds readers that “surveillance capitalists [like Google and Facebook] want us to think that their practices are inevitable expressions of the technologies they employ ... when they are actually meticulously calculated and lavishly funded means to self-dealing commercial ends” (21). Zuboff identifies surveillance capitalism as the “operating system” behind

contemporary Western societies, defined as a “new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices” (8). It operates through “a new species of power” (15) called “instrumentarianism,” which “reimagines society as a hive to be monitored and tuned for guaranteed outcomes” (416).

Imagining humanity as a colony of insects is perhaps one of the oldest metaphors, although instrumentarian society, as presented in Zuboff, is also woven through with tropes conflating technology and nature. Conceptualized “as a human simulation of machine learning systems,” it envisions “a confluent hive mind in which each element learns and operates in concert with every other element” (26). Thus it is not only that surveillance capitalism aims to reconfigure individuals into a “social hive,” but the “social hive is meant to reproduce the machine hive” (404). Employing subtle and complex methods of manipulation to achieve this end, the instrumentarian apparatus aims “to shape our behavior while evading our awareness” (415). For the digitally embedded, networked subject, who has a fragmented and limited view of the technological landscape, protecting privacy becomes virtually impossible. Simultaneously producing and being produced by surveillance capitalism, the subject’s range of perspective and maneuver is determined by the operators of a system that violates and aims to eradicate the “elemental ... *right to sanctuary*[,] ... now under attack as surveillance capital creates a world of ‘no exit’” (26).

“[M]eant to startle us with worrying futures of several ongoing contemporary trends” (Johnson 33), British-American anthology series *Black Mirror* (2011-2019) constructs delicately balanced worlds that are “*just* realistic enough to get under the viewer’s skin, yet *just* extreme enough to grab attention and not let go until [the] bleak resolution” (33). The episodes that I will examine here may be read as examples of surveillance capitalism’s modus operandi. “Hated in the Nation” and “Fifteen Million Merits” present over-technologized societies characterized by a complete lack of privacy, eliminating both sanctuary and exit—which, as Zuboff also contends, is closely correlated with the individual’s lack of agency in- or outside the (social) hive (444). Although the selected episodes are characterized by substantial differences in tone, setting, plot, and aesthetic and psychological strategies, surveillance and spectatorship—complicating boundaries between externality and internality—have central functions in both. Concerned both with the characters’ experience and with the audience’s position(ality) and identification processes in the act of viewing, this essay analyses the mechanics of the filmic text in the episodes, looking at how it problematizes the central issues of spectatorship, surveillance, and (the lack of) sanctuary.

### Life in the Hive: “Hated in the Nation”

Over the course of its long history, several transitions have occurred in our ideas concerning the source and focus of what is called the sublime.<sup>1</sup> In *The Ecology of*

1 Defined by Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke respectively as an affect “evoked by things that surpass our understanding and our imagination due to their unbounded, excessive, or chaotic character” (qtd. in De Mul 34) and, most simply, as “delightful terror” (Burke 101-02).

*Wonder in Romantic and Postmodern Literature*, Louise Economides states that “[e]nvironmental sublimity differs profoundly from its romantic sources insofar as human-made phenomena [such as the oceanic garbage gyres and global warming] ... form a new locus of fear and awe, rather than natural phenomena” (30). Although there are no visible signs of ecological devastation in “Hated in the Nation,” destruction is implied through its consequences, that is, the extinction of bees, replaced in the episode by the so-called ADI (autonomous drone insects). While the reason for the bees’ disappearance is never clearly stated in the episode, the artificial pollinators engineered by Granular are hailed for their ability to prevent ecosystem collapse, and their presence is ultimately applauded as an achievement of human creativity.

Yet, when investigating the company, protagonist Karin Parkere marks: “It’s just a shame they’re necessary” (“Hated” 00:32:37-00:32:39), and seems to imply human responsibility, a Granular employee swiftly retorts: “The alternative would have been an environmental catastrophe. Bees were dying out” (00:32:40-00:32:43). Her answer avoids the issue of responsibility by simply referring to the process of extinction and implicitly shifting the focus to the ingenuity of the solution, thus virtually effacing the ecocide it resolves. This logic reflects how the ADI serve as an example of displaced ecological sublimity—inferring the sense that the “power of divine nature has been transferred to the power of human technology” (De Mul 35). However, it also calls attention to the vicious cycle that current (Western) civilization seems to be stuck in: trading one anxiety for another by solving an environmental problem (e. g. the extinction of the bees) largely caused by technology with technology, “regard[ed] ... as a superstructure within which all other problems, and their solutions, are contained” (Wallace-Wells 165).

However, the “illusion of total control, [or the] conviction that engineering innovations can ‘solve’ all our environmental problems” (Economides 116), is quickly dispelled as two of the artificial bees are implicated in cases of homicide. Premised at first as a typical instance of crime drama, the plot begins with the strange murder of a journalist who sparked intense hate on the Internet, soon to be followed by the death of a rapper, similarly caught “in the middle of [an] online shitstorm” (“Hated” 00:38:20-00:38:22). The gruesome cause of death in both cases is an ADI that has burrowed its way into the victims’ brain, both chosen, as deuteragonist and tech-savvy trainee detective Blue Coulson figures out, based on a contest on social media. This “Game of Consequences” involves the elimination of a target—voted most unpopular with the use of the hashtag “Death To”—every 24 hours. Detective Parke and her partner Blue, with the help of the bees’ architect Rasmus Sjoberg and government agent Shaun Li, race against the clock to reach the next victim before a bee does, however, it soon becomes clear that the insects are impossible to escape.

The third target, Clara Meades, is transported to a safe house; as the detectives accompany her inside and Shaun goes off to make a phone call, the camera focus pulls back to the car, showing an ADI climbing out from its hiding-place. In the subsequent scene, following the three women walking through the house, point of view switches from inside to the outside, as the camera, using focus pull again, concentrates on an ADI perched on a window, apparently peering into the house. This shift in perspective places the viewer into a contradictory position: at once voyeuristic, as the viewing

subject's gaze is associated with that of the bee, but also paranoid, due to (potential) identification with the characters being unwittingly observed. Tension arises as an eerie, menacing soundtrack starts playing in the background, while *Bluetakes* center stage: as Rasmus calls to warn her that a whole hive just went off Granular's radar, phone connection begins to break down. Building heavily on horror-genre tropes, suspense culminates as the camera returns to Karin and Clara, then pans to another bee landing on the bedroom window, and finally cuts to Shaun, still outside. The sound of thousands of mechanical wings fluttering is heard before the audience's gaze, following Shaun's, is directed to a swarm appearing on the horizon, almost blackening the sky. Although together with the characters, the viewer has been led to believe that only one ADI was hijacked at a time, police involvement turns assassination into warfare, with the insects now attacking in their multitudes.

Witnessing the artificial pollinators united into a swarm is an experience that is profoundly different from that of looking at a single member of the mechanic hive. Up until the attack on the safe house, the artificial bees are mainly shown individually, with the camera focusing on them in close-ups as they pollinate flowers, but providing the viewer with an "outside" gaze, independent of the characters. The sight of the ADI generates an uncanny effect, associated with the awareness that an element of nature is imitated and actually replaced by human-made simulacra, amounting to a "peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar" (Royle 1). Modelled after "a referential being" (Baudrillard 1), the animal beethat no longer exists, the digital insects seem to "substitut[e] the signs of the real for the real" (2). Their evolution ostensibly corresponds to Baudrillard's "successive phases of the image," being first "the reflection[s] of a profound reality ... [then] mask[ing] [its] absence ... [eventually becoming their] own pure simulacrum" (4). For the ADI "even construct ... hives themselves," which work like 3D printers where "they create duplicates of themselves, [then] create more hives, and spread out exponentially" ("Hated" 00:32:03-00:32:29).

However, even though the ADI replace reality with its simulation, they may not be as deceptive as simulacra described by Baudrillard. On the contrary, their uncanniness stems from the duplicity of their image, acting as stand-ins for real, organic creatures but never fully interchangeable or identical with them. Although still containing an element of the uncanny, the spectacle of swarming multitudes preparing to attack the women generates a far more intense experience for the audience. It does so, as the camera, alternately occupying the position of Karin and Blue, offers their gaze for identification through a sequence of shot/reverse shots, drawing the viewer into the narrative. In this scene, a sublime aesthetic is employed as a strategy to evoke it as an effect in the audience—though not in the characters: too close to the events, both physically and psychically, they lack the distance necessary for the delicate balance of terror and awe that is a condition for the sublime. The "sheer scale and power of [the] interventions" that the bees' presence signifies "inspires both awe that human beings can produce such changes" (Economides 30) and terror at seeing the horrible power unleashed in this artificial "force of nature," the product of human ingenuity. Their strength multiplied by large numbers, the ADI break through the window, whirling in the room, witnessed only by the viewer, as the women find temporary refuge in the bathroom. Still, with their room for maneuver narrowing, they are unable to prevent

Clara's death, as a single bee crawls up her nose amidst the panic created by a cluster of insects finding their way inside through the vent.

The killing of Clara acts as a traumatic core in the narrative, disrupting its coherence. The camera focus, cutting abruptly from Karin's and Blue's eyes widened in terror as they sit collapsed next to Clara's body, transports the audience into the courtroom seen at the beginning of the episode. It thus reminds them of the framing of the narrative: the court testimony of Detective Parke, asked to recount the details of her investigation. As if to deliberately defy "the imperative that the camera deny its own existence as much as possible, fostering the illusion that what is shown has an autonomous existence" (Silverman 201), Karin is first shown in the scene through the court camera recording her account. Then, the actual camera producing the episode moves out from behind it, without having any characters associated with its gaze. Yet, almost as soon as the artificiality of what is seen is suggested, the narrative begins to "suture[e] over the wound" (204) inflicted by the implication of "the operations of enunciation" (213). Kaja Silverman defines suture as "the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers" (195), adding that "one of [its] most effective strategies ... for deflecting attention away from the passivity and lack of the viewing subject's own position is by displacing those values onto a female character within the fiction" (222). Despite being an accomplished police investigator, Karin, the protagonist, is tortured by her lack of agency in the ADI case. Explaining the pause in her testimony, she says: "I'd seen so many bodies before ... But I'd never seen anyone die" ("Hated" 00:55:08-00:55:25), thus confirming her frustrating and apparently newfound sense of helplessness.

As a figure of authority who is accustomed to being in control, for the first time in her career, Karin finds herself up against an enemy that is entirely foreign to her. Feeling incompetent and displaced by the younger Blue who moves more comfortably in this milieu, Karin grapples with the mechanics and logic behind the bees' operation, overwhelmed by an "experience of not being at home in the world" (Masschelein 140). Yet her bewilderment also serves to make her position relatable, facilitating identification for the audience who most likely often share her sensation in navigating their own, increasingly technological environment. Ubiquitous, yet virtually impenetrable and untraceable, the ADI technology and its subsequent corruption may be read as a parable for current AI systems. Widely employed by surveillance capitalist tech giants such as Google and Facebook, their decision-making processes seem impossible to observe; what is more, transparency is not even being demanded of them (Webb 103).

It is not only the complexity of the ADI technology that leaves Karin feeling stunted, but also that the presumed "rules" of their operation, even after going rogue, seem to be constantly rewritten, always keeping the police at a disadvantage. The solitary attacks change into a swarm offensive in the case of Clara; but the bees, at first only going after the targets designated by the game, also kill the soldiers blowing up one of their hives. Despite all of Karin's veteran policing skills and Blue's expertise in digital systems, they are unable to protect any of the targets. Their utter powerlessness in facing the swarm is, already at the very beginning, foreshadowed by Karin's dismissive answer: "You are young," given to Blue's hopeful question: "out

here in the real world, you can genuinely prevent stuff, can't you?" ("Hated" 00:13:05-00:13:13). Yet this dialogue also crucially points out the characters' perception of a divide between the virtual and the real.

Doing away with this illusion of a barrier between virtual and physical reality is exactly what the hacker behind the Game of Consequences, identified later as Garrett Scholes, a former Granular employee, aims to achieve. Taking hold of the elemental force that the artificial bees represent, his twisted purpose is to give substance and consequence to (online) utterances, easily dismissed as weightless. At the beginning of the episode, Karin herself even declares: "That Internet stuff drifts off like weather. It's half-hate. They don't mean it" (00:15:51-00:15:56). On the other hand, online bullying is experienced as quite substantial by Scholes' ex-roommate—when called in for questioning, she tells Karin that she almost committed suicide because of it: "It was like having a whole weather system turn against me" (01:03:59-01:04:04). The twofold use of this metaphor acutely displays the elusive influence and contradictory presence of social media in the age of surveillance capitalism. A constant backdrop of daily reality, it is quite easy to become oblivious of it—it is not until one encounters the wrath of the world web's users that one is reminded of the true extent of its effects on one's life. Besides the ADI technology, the mechanisms of the social network also leave Karin baffled. Her perplexity works to the hacker's advantage, who, crucially, not only uses the ADI, but uses people in a way that would have been inconceivable before social media, one of surveillance capitalism's most efficient tools for manipulation and extracting information. Having witnessed the suffering of his roommate, even preventing her suicide, Scholes is driven to offer a moral lesson to the population "he likens ... to insects [that] revel in cruelty" (01:09:11-01:09:17). Under the delusion that he is serving some sort of vigilante-justice, the hacker successfully harnesses the rampant hatred unleashed on the Internet. By linking the hive of Internet users to the hives of ADI, the swarm of "unreal" utterances in online space are made "real," manifesting in the attacks carried out by the artificial swarms of the insects—which, being "unreal" entities modelled after real ones, embody the reverse of that logic.

Although the fact that the number of people "voting" with the hashtag is growing exponentially seems to confirm Scholes's theory of cruelty, it is also crucial that his scheme is constructed as a game. Confronted by Karin and Blue, one of the people having used the hashtag on the first victim defensively claims that it is "not real, [just] a joke thing" (00:21:37-00:21:40). The deeply ingrained belief that the internet persona is distinct from real life allows for unchecked viciousness, which objectifies the target of hate, not seen as real either. Reminiscent of the current "cancel-culture," those whose behavior has been deemed socially unacceptable are punished by being ejected from the hive, having virtually no way to defend or redeem themselves. Still, just as "[n]othing forces anyone ... to sign up for a profile on Facebook, search with Google, or use Apple computers" (Greenfield 232), nothing forces people to participate in the Game of Consequences either. The fact that they still decide to take part in it, even after information is leaked about the connection between the hashtag and the murders, points to the complex mechanisms of social media and digital gadgets, designed to be addicting. Providing digital connection and mediating human experience, these tools exploit users' fear of missing out, and have become

necessary to be able to fully participate in society, at the same time altering its fabric and dynamics (Zuboff 427).

Already essential to communication, devices like the smartphone and networks like Facebook and Twitter provide users with a sense of community and belonging, displaced onto virtual space. Yet, as Adam Greenfield warns, the smartphone “appeared in our lives so suddenly and totally that the scale and force of the changes it has occasioned have largely receded from conscious awareness” (16). As Blue points out, people “[n]ow ... can’t help but entrus[t] [everything] to their little companions,” acting as if they were oblivious to the fact that “[t]hese things absorb who we are ... [and] know everything about us.” This is the weakness exploited by Scholes’ scheme, which takes advantage of users’ sense of entitlement to pass judgment and their tendency towards public shaming (an increasingly widespread form of social participation in the age of social networks). Fostering the conviction of online “invisibility”—of being anonymous and safe behind one’s screens—the game creates the illusion of untraceability, and is structured to dispel any sense of responsibility: it is “like wishing [people] dead” (00:38:31-00:38:33).

Yet, as it is confirmed by Clara Meades’s death, no one is untraceable. As Blue begins to question why the bees only targeted Clara while they were in the room with her, she confronts Shaun and Rasmus with her suspicion that the ADIs use facial recognition. It turns out at this point that the government has infiltrated the project, having practically established “total nationwide surveillance” (00:57:58-00:58:00). Shaun’s condescending response to the indignant Blue—“They saw an opportunity to get more, they took it” (00:57:48-00:57:57)—betrays an alarming sense of technological inevitability. For the government agent, using the ADIs for “spying on the public” is an unavoidable “side effect” of the very existence of that technology, and absolute observation is easily justified as a means of “keeping them safe, which is what they want” (00:58:05-00:58:08). The constant surveillance exercised by the UK government may call to mind the NSA scandal in the United States, or the outrage caused by Cambridge Analytica’s misuse of data, reminding the audience of their own experiences of governments and corporations spying on citizens’ every move.

Moreover, an essential analogy must be recognized between the dynamics or logic of Big Data and that of the swarm. Similarly, to the bees, which become an entirely different force when present in their multitudes, so too data takes on a whole new level of value in vast amounts, because that is when it exposes patterns of human behavior from which those with adequate knowledge may benefit. Still, “[t]he very idea of instrumentalising swarms—something that by definition has no central control—raises a set of political concerns” (Thacker 165): seizing command of the autonomous insects perverts their purpose and their “nature” even before they are first put into action. Thus, it is actually (the attempt at) imposing control which has catastrophic consequences, leaving the ADI vulnerable to hacking. Furthermore, a rhizomatic logic is “inherited” by this artificial version of the swarm, apparent in the ADIs reproduction system and behavior—as explained previously, they are not steered, but work autonomously. This is what makes them effectively impossible to escape: for a “rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines. You can never get rid of ants because

they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed” (Deleuze and Guattari 9). Interpreted as an allegory of technology’s inescapable, all-encompassing presence, the portrayal of the synthetic insects also undermines any previous sense of mastery over either technology or nature. The bees (continuing to pollinate even while some of them hunt down humans) cannot be turned off, because that would lead to instant ecological breakdown, nor can they be defeated or safely controlled.

Closing in on the hacker, Karin and Blue obtain a hard drive that they find in his lair, which seems to provide them with the key to regaining control over the ADIs. However, just as Rasmus prepares to deactivate the system to get command back, a list of all the people who have used the hashtag is found by Blue. Despite leading the investigation and solving the final puzzle—that it is actually the participants, and not the targets of the Game of Consequences that the hacker means to punish—the female detectives are deprived of the authority to make a final decision, which completes their lack of agency. Ignoring their objections, Agent Shaun pushes the button which was supposed to take back power over the bees but triggers off the endgame instead. The characters and the viewers watch helplessly while the map portraying all the hives in the UK turns red, as the bees set out to murder all the participants in Scholes’ game, leading to the massacre of 387,000 people. The ending of the episode features Blue tracking down Scholes, presumably intending to kill him, and thus implies a sort of judgment catching up with the author of the twisted Game of Consequences, whereby at least one of the protagonists seems to reclaim some agency. Still, it cannot erase the main characters’ ultimate failure to prevent the loss of life on an incomprehensible scale; nor can it ease the feeling of paralyzing helplessness at watching the mastery over technology slipping from their grasp.

As some of the episode’s final scenes also demonstrate—in which Karin encounters a crowd of protesters demanding answers—the view of the technological landscape is not equally fragmented and limited for all. Still kept in the dark about what went down, citizens’ vision is (unsurprisingly) the most limited. By contrast, Karin and Blue’s vista is somewhat less restricted (though it still hinders their room for maneuver), yet still insignificant as opposed to the government, seeming to have full view. The latter conviction, finally, is ruthlessly negated by Scholes, simultaneously exploiting the inescapability of the ADI and the Internet<sup>2</sup> (virtual space being so vast that it cannot possibly be fully monitored). The devastating havoc wreaked by the hacker makes it painfully clear that “[f]ar from affording any kind of psychic sanctuary, the walls we mortar around ourselves turn out to be as penetrable a barrier as any other ... [P]rivate leaks into public, the intimate is trivially shared, and the concerns of the wider world seep into what ought to be a space for recuperation and recovery. Above all, horror finds us wherever we are” (Greenfield 31).

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2 Although shutting down the Internet in the entire UK could be another, quite obvious way to stop Scholes’s game, the idea of taking social media away is somehow suggested to be as impossible as—or even more inconceivable than—deactivating the bees.

### Bread and Circuses: “Fifteen Million Merits”

While watching a film or a TV show, the viewing subject habitually imagines itself as an external observer, possessing a full, unrestricted picture of the fictional world presented. Yet, as *Black Mirror* likes to remind its audience, “the film spectator [does not have] full scopic range, but is rather a subject with a limited (and preordained) scope” (Friedberg qtd. in Giblett 138). Undermining the viewer’s position of knowledge, episodes like “Hated in the Nation” and “Fifteen Million Merits” frequently point out the framing of what is seen, having “[t]he viewer discover that the camera is hiding things, [causing them to] distrust it and the frame itself” (Dayan 448). This is done in order to then suture the viewer even more efficiently into the filmic text, “re-interpellat[ing] [them] into pre-established discursive positions not only by effacing the signs of their own production, but through the lure of narrative” (Silverman 221).

Through the selected episodes, a pattern of narrowing space may be detected. In “Hated,” the country-wide implications and references to the planetary ecosystem impart the effect that the episode takes place on a larger “stage.” By contrast, limiting the scope of vision to witnessing the struggles of protagonist Bing, “Fifteen” presents us with a claustrophobic world entirely engulfed by technology, whose inhabitants suffer, from the very beginning, from a pervasive lack of agency. Removed from the natural world, the characters of this episode spend the entirety of their lives in a digitalized, artificial environment. They live in tiny cubicles which have screens for walls, constantly flooding them with advertisements for virtual programs, and are kept separated except while they work: generating electricity by pedaling on their bikes, to gain “merits.” Although this society is driven by a heavily materialistic logic, consumers have (with the exception of food) no access to material goods. Their merits can only be spent on unimaginative video games, on the senseless streams of Judges Hope, Charity and Wraith—the hosts of the talent show “Hot Shot”—and on upgrading their doppel: an online avatar over whose appearance, unlike its own, the real-life version has some control.

The closed system depicted in this episode is entirely self-contained: the only currency, that of merits (exclusively virtual), is produced within the system in order to sustain it. Even “citizens” are recycled, as those who grow too fat from consuming cheap junk food are demoted from cycling to cleaning, also figuring as shooting targets in one of the online games, and paraded in the repulsive “Botherguts,” a distorted version of Hot Shot. Barely keeping the appearance of a society, this structure deprives its members of political power, of a sense of individuality, and even of authority over their own bodies; it functions more like a hive envisioned by Zuboff’s instrumentalists. Its aim is to “achieve a . . . social confluence, in which group pressure and computational certainty replace politics and democracy” (Zuboff 26). Still, the humans of this hive are provided with a feeble imitation of agency through their daily choices of what to eat and watch, and through their participation in the Hot Shot competition as audience (in the form of their dopples). Here, as the advertisement for the show announces, “[they] decide the victors. [They] control their fate” (“Fifteen” 00:08:42-00:08:45).

Most importantly, *Hot Shot* has the function of being an ostensible exit, proclaimed to be the only way out of spending one's entire life with the monotone toil of cycling. Highlighting some of the stars of the show, the ad encourages viewers to dream big: "Each [winner] headlines their own ... content on one of your eight daylight streams. But they started here, like you, putting their back into giving back for a brighter now" (00:08:03-00:08:14). The phrasing of the commercial reflects and adheres to the circular logic that operates this world: making no mention of a past or a future, it encloses humans in a seemingly eternal present. However, the myth of instant success embodied by the talent show leaves the protagonist Bing unimpressed, and even somewhat annoyed. Gaming in his room after work hours, he impatiently gestures to the smart screen to skip the ad (costing him some merits), only for it to be immediately followed by another one for the porn channel "Wraith Babes." As Bing, exasperated, covers his eyes with his hand, the audience witnesses the screen-walls of his cell turning bright red, accompanied by a high-pitched noise and the sentence "resume viewing" on repeat, revealing an Orwellian lack of privacy and shelter, even in the only space he might call his own. The viewer's feeling of invasion grows even more acute as they watch Bing, glancing at the counter of his merits, change his mind and decide to view the program asking the obscene question: "What else were you planning on doing with that hand?" (00:09:41-00:09:44). Unlike in "Hated," where narrative and shot/reverse-shot sequences—associated with the gaze of the protagonists, or at least the bees—are used to "sutur[e] over the wound of castration" (Silverman 204), here we find ourselves looking in on some of Bing's most private moments, without being offered a fictional (human) perspective to attach ourselves to. Thereby, "the voyeuristic dimensions of the cinematic experience" are foregrounded, which "forc[e] the viewer into oblique and uncomfortable positions both vis-à-vis the cinematic apparatuses and the spectacle which they produce" (206).

The turning point in Bing's disillusioned existence comes with the arrival of a new member to his cycling group. From his very first glimpse of Abi, Bing is enticed by her, an attraction that grows into admiration when he hears her angelic singing voice for the first time. While the narrative of "Hated" is openly structured around Karin's recollections of her latest case, no such framing is provided in this episode. The audience, not really knowing what to expect (although in *Black Mirror*, happy endings count as rarities) might have the impression of watching the unfolding of a love story, albeit in an unusual setting. Bing and Abi's first encounter abounds in romantic movie tropes: as he attempts to start a conversation with her, the screen he faces begins to play an ad for the porn channel, awkwardly cutting the exchange short. Bing, enthralled by Abi's beauty and voice, encourages her to enter *Hot Shot*. He offers to buy her the golden entry ticket, costing fifteen million merits; because all he could buy for himself is "just stuff ... it's confetti," while she has "something real" ("Fifteen" 00:21:43-00:21:52). Up until this point, the camera shows them separately, alternating between Abi and Bing. However, as he begins to convince her, "I just want something real to happen. Just once" (00:22:20-00:22:29), a dolly-shot pictures them simultaneously, suggesting the formation of a connection between them. Although it would be tempting to perceive Bing's persuasion of Abi to take part in the competition as an act of selflessness or chivalry, originating in his honest enthusiasm for Abi's

talent, “the example of courtly love” reminds us that “the love object becomes sublime on account of its elevation to the inaccessible place of the Thing” (Shaw 145). As suggested by his own confession of yearning for something “real,” Bing’s feelings towards Abi do not seem to be entirely pure. The newfound object of his affection and attention, like the “Lady in courtly love,” she is “[d]eprived of every real substance, ... function[ing] as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal. In other words, ... the Lady appears ‘not as she is, but as she fills his dream’” (Žižek, *Metastases* 89-90).

Escorted to the audition by Bing, Abi, spotted by the judges due to her good looks, is quickly called in to perform. As she begins to sing, rack focus is employed to alternately center her and Bing watching her, whose gaze—though not his position, camera-wise—the audience is invited to share. Yet, despite being impressed by the quality of Abi’s stirring performance, by which one of the characters among the fictional audience is even moved to tears, the judges reject her aspirations to pursue a career in music, and instead offer her a place in Judge Wraith’s porn stream:

Your voice is *just* good. I don’t think anyone’s really hearing it ... These looks you got going on kinda get in the way ... You’ve got this pure beauty ... and this sort of interesting innocence going on, and that’s something I think Wraith’s erotica channels could really play with (“Fifteen” 00:34:57-00:35:40).

Posing as the ultimate judges of one’s worth, the Judges’ possess a psychopolitical power—one not over life and death but over success and failure—cunningly shaping the opinions and behavior of the masses. Attempting at first to “benevolently” play down her reservations about a porn career, “Forget about all the shame and all that ... We medicate against that. You will have pleasure forever!” (00:36:51-00:36:58), they soon grow bored with Abi’s inability to make a decision, soul-crushing either way. Their gentle coaxing turns into coercion, redefining Abi’s hesitation as ungratefulness for the toils of her peers: “Who do you think is powering that spotlight?” (00:37:10-00:37:13). Still, as made clear by the show’s advertisement, the audience has the final say over the fate of the participants, even if the Judges’ power of suggestion heavily influences that decision.

Witnessing Abi’s dilemma and her inability to simply refuse might leave the audience frustrated and puzzled. However, her paralysis may be explained by Zuboff, who points out that “[t]he intense ‘anxiety’ ... experienced in confronting a social norm ‘forms a powerful barrier’” (Zuboff 444). Quoting social psychologist Stanley Milgram on how “[e]mbarrassment and the fear of violating apparently trivial norms often lock us into intolerable predicaments” (Milgram qtd. in Zuboff 444), Zuboff also adds that “any confrontation of social norms crucially depends upon the ability to escape” (444): an escape that appears unavailable to Abi. Meanwhile, the audience proceeds to cheer her on to say yes to Judge Wraith’s offer; seeing the reaction of others (dopples), even the one person previously moved by the girl’s song joins in, chanting “do it” along with the rest. This hive mentality manifests throughout the episode, apparently reinforcing the findings of Alex Pentland, a data scientist whom Zuboff designates as one of “the priests of instrumentarian power.” Pentland asserts that “[i]t is time that we dropped the fiction of individuals as the unit of rationality, and recognized that our rationality is largely determined by the surrounding social fabric”

(31). However, their behavior might also be fundamentally influenced by constantly acting in the role of spectators, simultaneously being the objects of perpetual observation by others, an experience not so far removed from that of the users of social networks. Offering a more complex view of the mechanics of surveillance in social media and its effects on users' comportment, Zuboff states that "[i]t is a new phenomenon to live continuously in the milieu of the gaze of others ... The unceasing pace, density, and volume of the gaze deliver a perpetual stream of evaluative metrics that raise or lower one's social currency with each click" (Zuboff 438-39).

Viewpoints alternate between close-ups of Abi's face with tearful eyes, wide shots panning the swarm of the audience—the contours of dopplers' bodies appearing to merge, evoking a similarly uncanny visual effect as the swarming ADIs of "Hated"—and individual shots of certain characters in their cubicles. Such camera movement "obliges the viewing subject to make abrupt shifts in identification ...; thus [they find themselves] inscribed into the cinematic discourse at one juncture as victim, and at the next juncture as victimizer" (Silverman 206). The viewing subject, apparently "outside" the fiction, replicates the viewer "within." This makes the viewing subject vicariously complicit in the pressure applied by the fictional audience, entirely devoid of empathy, perceiving Abi exclusively as spectacle. Positioning the viewer as a member of the spectating crowd inside the narrative, while simultaneously urging identification with the victimized female protagonist, the episode "terrorizes the viewing subject, refusing ever to let them off the hook. That hook is the system of suture, which is held up to our scrutiny even as we find ourselves thoroughly ensnared by it" (212).

Deprived of the chance of becoming the next star of *Hot Shot*, bullied into choosing pornography instead of going back to the bike, Abi's virginal beauty turns into abject. As Shaw explains, "as soon as the woman is encountered in her substance, she changes from the sacred object to the transgressive abject (see Kristeva); she is shown, that is, from the point of view of masculine desire, to be monstrously sublime" (145). Although "physically" she disappears from the plot, her presence remains pervasive on the screen, with samples of her recent "work" widely displayed, haunting Bing. Confrontation with Abi's abjection, however, reaches its climax when an advertisement for "her stunning erotic debut" (00:41:50-00:41:53) finds Bing whilst he is staying in his cubicle. Having spent all of his money on giving her the opportunity of a big break, he now has insufficient funds to skip the commercial, consequently being literally unable to close his eyes to avoid seeing her sexual objectification. As he tries in vain to turn away from the inescapable screens that surround him, the camera moves beyond the display panels so that the audience sees Bing from behind them, superimposing Abi's projected image onto his. Such viewpoint "forces the viewing subject to take up residence not only within one of the film's discursive positions (that of victim), but a second (that of sadistic and legalistic voyeur)" (Silverman 208). Sutured into the narrative that "transforms cinematic space into dramatic place" (214), the viewer is not only provided with a vantage, but also occupies the subject position of a character. Thus, through identification with Bing, they feel compelled by the abject affect, which, "[a]lthough it disgusts us and inspires horror, [also] continues to exert a fascination" (Masschelein 133).

Having absolutely no way out of the cell whose door is closed during the commercial, in his utmost desperation Bing hurls himself against the walls to destroy them. While watching the protagonist's breakdown and futile attempts at resisting what is only the physical manifestation of an oppressive and obtrusive surveillance society, the audience might feel uncomfortable and disturbed, yet still have the impression of safety behind their own screens. However, as "Hated" also reminds us, there is no need for transparent walls for the apparatus of surveillance capitalism to be able to penetrate one's privacy and innermost life. As Zuboff asserts, "[t]hat our walls are dense and deep is of no importance now because the boundaries that define the very experience of home are to be erased ... [Surveillance capitalism] swallows refuge whole (447). Yet, crucially, Bing only recognizes the need for refuge as he, run out of merits, is forced to witness Abi's abjection. Implying a dialectic of subjective and objective violence theorized by Slavoj Žižek, the Orwellian world of the episode is one dominated by objective violence, interiorized by the people populating it.<sup>3</sup> As described by Žižek, this is "The violence inherent to [a] 'normal' state of things ... invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent" (*Violence 2*). It is Bing's encounter with subjective violence, embodied in Abi's treatment by the Judges and her consequent fate, that tears him out of passivity and idle compliance. He decides to go after those who actually seem to keep the order in place, and labors for months to collect the merits necessary for purchasing another entry ticket to Hot Shot.

Swiftly selected from the crowd of auditioners because of being a person of color, Bing proceeds to step onto the stage, where he pulls out a glass-dagger (obtained from his previous attacks on his cubicle) concealed in his clothes, and puts the weapon to his own throat: "No one stops me, not till I've said my piece, then you can do what you like" ("Fifteen" 00:51:38-00:51:40). Gaining the support of the audience, and the Judges' newly invested attention, words begin to pour out of him:

I just knew I had to get here ... and I knew I wanted you to ... really listen, not just pull a face like you're listening ... A face like you're feeling instead of processing ... And all you see up here, it's not people ... it's all fodder! And the faker the fodder is the more you love it because fake fodder's ... all that we can stomach. Actually not quite all. Real pain, real viciousness, that we can take (00:52:33-00:53:05).

His ability to deliver a speech that they are willing to hear endows him with an agency that was (always) unattainable for the female protagonist. This is a pattern recognizable in "Hated" as well. Despite occupying a position of power as police detectives and representatives of the law, Blue and Karin's room for maneuver and thus agency reduces throughout the episode, while "the man's role as the active one of advancing the story, making things happen" (Mulvey 20) is continuously confirmed. Without telling the lead investigators, secondary character Detective Nick Shelton uses the hashtag *DeathTo* on Scholes, accidentally revealing to the hacker that the police are onto him. Government agent Shaun Li robs the female detectives of the

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<sup>3</sup> This is not only apparent in the cruel treatment of Hot Shot contestants being normalised, but also in the absolute dehumanization of the cleaners, invisible at best, ruthlessly ridiculed on stream shows or appearing as zombie-like targets in shooting games.

final decision; and the hacker, always one step ahead, firmly retains command of the events, whereas the protagonists grapple with their helplessness. Yet, an essential distinction between the female protagonists of the two episodes is that Blue and Karin are not sexualized, nor are they reduced to spectacle or the mere objects of the gaze—in fact, it is mostly Karin whose perspective and subject position is offered to the viewing subject for identification. As opposed to this, Abi, from the very beginning, cannot help but be a spectacle, an icon: mostly pictured by close-ups of her face, the image of her “fragmented body destroys ... the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative” (20).

Serving primarily as a symbol representing Bing’s dreams and desire for something “real,” Abi may sing, but she has no voice; whereas Bing, her male counterpart, has the power of speech and dissent. At first deliberately making a spectacle of himself, he then proceeds to do what Abi was not able, nor allowed, to do; that is, reclaims the space as his own by confronting the Judges: “Show us something real and free and beautiful, you couldn’t ... There’s only so much wonder we can bear, that’s why when you find any ... you dole it out in meager portions, ... while we ride day-in, day-out—going where? Powering what? All tiny cells in tiny screens and bigger cells in bigger screens” (“Fifteen” 00:53:34-00:54:13).

Mulvey states that “In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure ... demands a three-dimensional space” (20), which explains why Bing now intends to expose the system for what it is, suffocating, fake and utterly pointless, reminding his fellow users of the futility of their toil and struggles. Yet in an unexpected twist, he is lauded for his authenticity:

“You’re so articulating something we all ... agree on. ... I get where you’re coming from and I like your stuff”

“It’s not stuff it’s...”

“It’s truth. Am I right? Your truth, admittedly, but truth nonetheless. And you’re right, authenticity is in woefully short supply.” (“Fifteen” 00:55:20-00:56:02)

Up until this point, it may have seemed that Bing has finally claimed stepping up as “a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify” (Mulvey 20). However, as his revolt is dismantled by the Judges’ endorsement, as his rebellion is engulfed by the system, made into part of it, he loses any agency he previously had.

Due to its remarkable genuineness, Bing is offered a slot on Judge Hope’s stream, his anger made into performance art, thereby emptied of all authenticity. As he is promoted from his tiny cubicle to a more spacious cage, this time with a view, his prize is still nothing but a somewhat upgraded fantasy. Having access to a panorama of nature (or at least a simulation of it) provides him with the illusion of an extended view, while it also implies a reversal of the logic of industrial expansion: as in Bing’s world, instead of the cityscape, it is the view of natural landscape that is cherished as a symbol of status. Although the moments after his impassioned speech may have inspired some hope that “a new order [might] replace one which has been fractured [the] new order ... turns out to have been the original order, temporarily interrupted” (Silverman 221). By “allowing” his rebellion within the system, the Judges have guaranteed that it has no impact on its fabric: for, if this “society” is to function, if its symbolic order is to be kept in place, the Hot Shot prize must preserve its mythical

quality, remaining out of reach but in sight. Having Bing publicly channel his “anger” into his stream keeps the current order intact. It perpetuates the myth of success that conceals “the traumatic emptiness, the primordial lack” (Shaw 138) that dwells at the core of the system, encountered only by the winners who must live with the disillusioning knowledge that there is nothing behind the scenes, no outside to the structure they exist in.

## Conclusion

Imagining some of the most frightening outcomes of current tendencies of gamification, and virtual space altering humans’ perception of reality, these *Black Mirror* episodes offer sharp critiques of our approaches to digital presence and treatment of technology. Showing that unthinking reliance on technology may prove treacherous, “Hated in the Nation” and “Fifteen Million Merits” amplify how the social environment’s influence on behavior might be taken advantage of, and demonstrate that being careless with one’s digital presence and data could have dire consequences. However, while watching, it is worth keeping in mind that the “side effects” of technological practices are rarely their “inevitable expressions” (Zuboff 21), but mostly cleverly disguised instruments employed by surveillance capitalists to achieve their (commercial) ends. Indeed, the nightmarish scenarios “Hated” and “Fifteen” construct are direct “descendants” of already existing surveillance capitalistic practices and their consequences. Always surrounded by screens which simultaneously observe them, and transform them into constant spectators, the humans in these episodes function as a sort of hive, seemingly devoid of empathy and individuality, virtually effectuating the move from society to instrumentarianism. Influenced by covert mechanisms which posit “victims” as mere spectacle, and exploit peer-pressure and the fear of missing out in nudging people towards participation, the characters make decisions over fellow humans’ fates and lives—acting as judge, jury and executioner, quite literally in “Hated,” rather figuratively in “Fifteen.” Yet, crucially, the episodes make clear that the instrumentarian society deliberately employs concealed methods that mediate and transform human behavior in order to make it predictable, controllable, and marketable (Zuboff 331). In “Hated,” the government exercises absolute surveillance for national “security” purposes; in “Fifteen,” the underlying system, equally order- and profit-oriented, keeps humans distracted with entertainment and the virtual capital of merits, while it harvests the only truly valuable resource: the energy generated by the members of the hive. Generating worlds without sanctuary and technological environments without exit, “Hated” and “Fifteen” underscore how modern capitalism’s unrestricted reach and unrelenting spread (Economides 109) begins to obliterate any sense of refuge, disrupting and subverting boundaries of privacy and identity. Walking the fine line between present and future, playing with the ever more elusive boundaries of virtual and real, the examined episodes of *Black Mirror* provoke complex emotional and intellectual reactions through the metatechnological parables they produce, thus challenging the audience to consider their very “positionality,” their constructedness as audience and vice versa, their participation in the construction of fiction.

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