

ROCZNIKI HUMANISTYCZNE

Tom LXVI, zeszyt 11 – 2018

ZESZYT SPECJALNY / SPECIAL ISSUE

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18290/rh.2018.66.11s-10>

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TRANSHUMANIST DREAMS AND/AS POSTHUMAN NIGHTMARES IN *BLACK MIRROR*

A b s t r a c t. This paper analyses a TV series *Black Mirror* in relation to transhumanism, a philosophical movement that endorses (bio)technological augmentation as a means whereby mankind will transcend its current biological limitations and reach a new, posthuman stage in its evolution. Taking tendencies observable in contemporary Western societies as the starting point for its depiction of the near future, *Black Mirror* gives fictional representation to such transhumanist concepts as disembodied, transferable consciousness and enhanced cognition, and suggests that more often than not they may give rise to posthuman dystopia rather than utopia, envisioned by transhumanism.

Key words: transhumanism; posthuman; *Black Mirror*; utopia; dystopia.

The unprecedented pace of on-going digital revolution and other technological changes raises the inevitable question of their impact on the future of mankind. As always happens, humanity's hopes and fears find their manifestation on the one hand in relatively abstract philosophical conceptions and on the other in more concrete artistic visions of the future, these two forms of expression constantly influencing each other. The immensely popular TV series *Black Mirror* is one of the most powerful and thought-provoking explorations of the potential influence of future developments in (bio)technology and media on individual lives and social relations. Taking its cue from the show's self-reflexive title, the present paper reads *Black Mirror* as a reflection *on*—rather than *of*—the key ideas of transhumanism, the intellectual movement advocating the advent of technologically augmented brave new human.

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The original version of the Transhumanist Declaration, published in 1998, asserts that “humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future” and boldly “envision[s] the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.” Even though it acknowledges possible risks resulting from misuse of new (bio)technologies, “an optimistic flavor necessarily permeates transhumanism” (More 13) and underscores its utopian outlook, made explicit in the title of Nick Bostrom’s essay celebrating the bright future we have the potential to create—“Letter from Utopia.”¹

This optimism can be attributed to a certain degree of abstraction, which allows transhumanists to paint with broad strokes the desirable state of affairs without specifying practical solutions whereby it can be achieved. A posthuman—the brave new human of transhumanist future—is likewise described in rather general terms. In “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman when I Grow Up” Bostrom defines a posthuman as “a being that has at least one posthuman capacity [...] greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being without recourse to new technological means” (28) and identifies three major areas in which it can develop—health span, cognition and emotion—only to focus on proving that “for most current human beings, there are possible posthuman modes of being such that it could be good for these humans to become posthuman in one of those ways” (29). He does not, however, attempt to envision what being a posthuman would involve in practical terms. For an exploration of posthuman daily life one therefore has to turn to books, films and TV shows like *Black Mirror*.

Created in an anthology format, the series devotes each episode to a selected aspect of human entanglement with technology and digital media. While many episodes take as their starting point transhumanist dreams of human augmentation, some merely project a possible course of events on the basis of the tendencies observable in the present without introducing new technologies or turn to an allegorical representation of our relation to the media. The striking feature of the former group, which is naturally the subject of the present paper, is their representation of enhancement technologies as part and parcel of everyday life, available to all or at least many people rather than selected few, and their consequent focus on average posthumans,

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the relation between transhumanism and utopianism see “Introduction” in the present issue as well as Chapter 2 of Michael Hauskeller’s *Mythologies of Transhumanism*.

so to speak, who could perhaps be described as science fiction counterparts of supposedly ordinary characters populating typically British soap operas of the *EastEnders* type. The emphasis put on the commonplace aspects of the posthuman condition, reinforced by a recurrent combination of high-tech gadgets and mundane, hardly futuristic locations on the visual level, sets *Black Mirror* apart from earlier filmic representations of posthumanity. In their discussion of representation of posthumans in film and television, Michael Hauskeller, Thomas D. Philbeck and Curtis D. Carbonell chart their evolution from monsters, through villains and ambiguous figures, to heroes, capable of self-sacrifice, and argue that “this trajectory from monsters to heroes is evidence of a change in social consciousness concerning what we consider acceptable posthuman attributes” (3). *Black Mirror* represents the next stage in this evolution, not least because it can be related to such recent TV shows as *Almost Human*, a crime drama in which a pair of a human detective and an android solves a number of technology-related crimes, and *Humans*, depicting the social and psychological impact of widespread use of anthropomorphic robots from the perspective of an average British family. Their titles throwing into sharp relief the obsessive engagement of contemporary culture with potential conceptual and legal realignment of the human, these series explore trans- and post-humanist concepts in the context of daily lives of average citizens in not so distant future, which would further indicate a transition from the concern with acceptability noticed by Hauskeller, Philbeck and Carbonell to the question of feasibility.

Black Mirror focuses primarily on two modes of posthuman life: cyborgs and disembodied consciousness. The former are construed in the classical manner as surgically created, “hybrid artifact-organism system[s]” (Clark 25). Significantly, the devices integrated in their bodies are perceived by posthuman subjects represented in *Black Mirror* as transparent technology, that is technology which does not draw attention to itself: it takes, for instance, the form of a tiny grain easily implanted in one’s brain. Charlie Brooker, the creator of the show, thus seems to question Andy Clark’s conviction that surgical augmentation will not become popular in near future on account of its technological ostentatiousness. Clark argues that “the most potent near-future technologies will be those that offer integration and transformation *without* implants or surgery: human-machine mergers that simply bypass, rather than penetrate, the old biological borders of skin and skull” (24). These non-invasive enhancements will thus contribute to a quantitative rather than qualitative transformation of continuous human dependence on

technology epitomised in Clark's understanding of humans as natural-born cyborgs, "ever-eager to dovetail their activity to the increasingly complex technological envelopes in which they develop, mature, and operate" (Clark 26). In the universe of *Black Mirror* invasive and non-invasive technologies are often inextricably interwoven in what constitutes the extended, cyborgian consciousness of a posthuman subject.

Furthermore, the commonplace nature of technological augmentation depicted in *Black Mirror* marks a striking divergence from earlier filmic representations of cyborgs, thus described by Joel Krueger:

First, most on-screen portrayals of technologically augmented embodiment stem from dramatic *medical* interventions, primarily the need to physically recover from some kind of catastrophic accident resulting in the loss of limbs, other body parts or one's entire non-neural body [...]. Second, most representations of cyborgs in films are characterized by the extent to which the subject's [sic] cybernetic augmentation renders them profoundly other. (173)

Posthumans of *Black Mirror* are, by contrast, uncannily familiar, the viewer being encouraged to identify with them and ponder on the way he/she would use technological augmentation. By the same token, he/she is invited to observe the impact of technology enabling the transfer of consciousness beyond human bodily constraints on lives of ordinary (post)humans.²

As signalled by the title, *Black Mirror* tends to underscore the dark, dystopian side of a possible posthuman future, with only a few episodes exploring the utopian potential of (bio)technological progress. It can therefore be read as an artistic exploration of and a polemic with transhumanist postulates expressed in Bostrom's "Letter from Utopia," in which the posthuman sender, who makes full use of all the transhumanist enhancements, proposes three major paths mankind should take in order to become him/her: extension of lifespan, enhancement of cognition and elevation of hedonism.

The eradication of disease and death constitutes the cornerstone of the transhumanist programme (cf. More 4), so unsurprisingly the posthuman narrator of Bostrom's text encourages mankind to "secure life" as "the first transformation" required for the posthuman future to come true and suggests

² It should be noted that cyborg hybridity and disembodied consciousness dominate in Brooker's vision of brave new human but they are not the only forms of posthumanity he envisions. Space constraints do not allow a discussion of modes of being that go beyond the transhumanist definition of posthuman: an android in which human consciousness is simulated by artificial intelligence ("Be Right Back," season 2) or people as sources of energy in an allegorical human-machine-media merger ("Fifteen Million Merits," season 1)

the following course of events: “In time, you will discover ways to move your mind to more durable media. Then continue to improve the system, so that the risk of death and disease continues to decline” (“Letter from Utopia”). As mentioned above, disembodied, transferable consciousness constitutes the recurrent motif in *Black Mirror*, which explores the nature of the new environment in which it may find itself and the mode of its interaction with external reality as two factors determining the utopian/dystopian characteristics of this form of posthuman augmentation.

The “San Junipero” episode represents the eponymous place, a virtual reality, as the place which elderly people can visit and to which anyone can decide to have his/her consciousness uploaded after he/she dies. Depicted as a small seaside resort, it becomes the setting for a story of love between two young women: a shy Yorkie and an outgoing Kelly. Most of *Black Mirror* episodes relying on a twist, typical of mind-game films (cf. Elsaesser 15), it is only in the second half of “San Junipero” that the viewer discovers that it is a simulation and that in the physical reality Yorkie has been suffering from the locked-in syndrome for forty years and that Kelly visits San Junipero because she is terminally ill. It is precisely the interplay between their bodies and identities in the physical and the virtual realities that provides the episode with narrative pathos. For Yorkie San Junipero signifies liberation not only from her paralysed body but also from the social constraints of her background: her condition is the result of the accident she had when she was driving away after she confessed to her fundamentalist parents that she was a lesbian. For Kelly it is initially just entertainment and she is planning to pass away rather than through, just as her husband did out of solidarity with their daughter, who had died before the San Junipero technology became available. In an unexpected departure from the gloomy tenor of earlier episodes, “San Junipero” ends on an overtly optimistic note: Kelly, who initially resisted her own feelings for Yorkie, decides to join her in San Junipero. The lyrics of the song accompanying the final scenes of the episodes—“Heaven Is a Place on Earth” by Belinda Carlisle—foreground the utopian characteristics of virtual reality as a secular heaven, in which one can discard physical bodies with their limitations, cherish one’s true identity and explore new modes of living. The techno-utopianism of “San Junipero” is further reinforced by the final peaceful image of robots servicing the endless walls of tiny blinking cogs, each presumably representing a single uploaded consciousness. The film does not depict any social ills in San Junipero, which cannot but evoke earlier visions of Land of Cockaigne. Significantly, it is a

self-contained environment, which renders any interaction with the physical reality unnecessary or perhaps even undesirable, for the uploaded mind perceives it as real as the external world and experiences equally real sensations.

However, the transfer of the mind to more durable media can equally well become an element of dystopian reality, when it becomes a means of oppression or when consciousness becomes a digital entity freely movable from one container to another. The latter option is presented in the “Black Museum” episode, which presents three interrelated posthuman narratives. One of them is similar to Yorkie’s story in that it introduces the motif of a comatose woman, Carrie, whose consciousness is initially transferred to the brain of her partner, so that she could interact with him through an inner voice and with the external world through his body and his sensations. However, after some time he gets tired of her continual presence and decides to have her consciousness transferred to a toy monkey, which their son gets as a present and which he soon discards. This grotesque plotline highlights the extent to which the container determines the way in which consciousness can interact with the environment. Carrie can see through the monkey’s (presumably) digital “eyes” and make it pronounce in a strikingly mechanical voice one of two basic messages: “Monkey needs a hug” and “Monkey loves you.” Eventually, she ends up trapped in the toy, as it becomes illegal to delete human consciousness, the very same regulations stipulating that it can only be downloaded to containers permitting expression of at least five emotions.

Even more dystopian is another storyline in “Black Museum”—that of an innocent man, who is sentenced to capital punishment and who agrees to transfer the rights to the digital copy of his consciousness to an entrepreneur, who convinces him that the royalties will keep his family afloat. The latter uses the digital copy thus acquired to create a holographic representation of the convict, which visitors of the eponymous black museum can put to death again—and again, as after each execution the digital consciousness is revived. In contrast to San Junipero, the digital afterlife thus becomes an endless nightmare, the profound inhumanity of the procedure being thrown into sharp relief by a souvenir each visitor receives—a digital snapshot of the mind stuck for ever at the most painful moment of death.

Much more mundane and perhaps for that reason even more distressing is the use of consciousness digitally copied into an elegant, egglike gadget as the central element of smart home in the “White Christmas” episode of *Black*

Mirror. It presents the events from the point of view of the copied consciousness, which—being identical to the original—perceives itself as the primary one and has to be forced into acceptance of its new status of perfect housekeeper, who can best fulfil the expectations of her owner on account of being identical to her. The primary procedure whereby the secondary consciousness is “tamed” involves manipulation of its perception of time: after a few months (which amount to a few seconds in the physical reality) in an empty white room it is more than willing to fulfil its duties. Significantly, in the world depicted in “White Christmas” digital copies appear to be fairly common. In another plotline one of them is put in a simulated reality, where a professional manipulator extracts its confession of the crime committed in the physical reality, this digital admittance of guilt being sufficient for prosecution.

The episode does not specify the exact legal status of digital copy: on the one hand, its use as home appliance suggests that the primary, embodied consciousness has the right to multiply itself and use its own copies for its own purposes; on the other, its use as a part of criminal investigation indicates that the mind can be copied without its own consent and simultaneously the copy thus created can be considered as being co-extensive with the original.

The transhumanist dream of transferrable mind thus proves to be inextricably entangled with the questions of embodiment, identity and agency. For N. Katherine Hayles it is precisely the constitutive role of the body that is frequently overlooked in facile conceptualisations of uploadable consciousness, represented, among others, by Hans Moravec:

How, I asked myself, was it possible for someone of Moravec’s obvious intelligence to believe that mind could be separated from body? Even assuming such a separation was possible, how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment? (1)

In his representation of mind transfer Brooker does not venture into the territory of radical alteration of consciousness, considered inevitable by Hayles. The posthuman minds of *Black Mirror* retain the characteristics of human embodied minds, though some of them need to readjust to a new environment and/or interface. The episodes set in the simulated reality suggest that it will not induce transformation of consciousness, for it will be perceived as real, just as it happens in dreams. It is only when the uploaded mind needs to interact with the physical reality that the medium or rather

interface becomes crucial, as “Black Museum” demonstrates. This episode further highlights the issue of control over the transferred mind, suggesting that disembodiment may involve loss of agency, which may in turn lead to oppression.

The problem of agency is also central to “White Christmas,” which can be related to another crucial aspect of Hayles’ (critical) posthumanism. In contrast to transhumanists and in line with such posthumanists as Cary Wolfe and Neil Badmington, she construes the posthuman as the category which contests rather than enhances the humanistic understanding of human as a unitary agent: “The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 3).³ This is precisely what happens when consciousness is copied rather than transferred. Significantly, while posthumanism envisions posthuman dissolution of binary oppositions as liberation from culturally constructed constraints, “White Christmas” reveals the dystopian potential inextricably intertwined with its utopian promise. In his discussion of the utopia/dystopia nexus Gregory Claeys observes that whether a particular form of social organisation is perceived as one or the other depends on the perspective: “we can certainly see the case for treating some dystopias as utopias of the equal few based upon the oppression of the many” (8). “White Christmas” offers a paradoxical twist on this concept by providing a snapshot of the equally divided society in which a split posthuman subject is simultaneously the oppressor (the original embodied mind) and the oppressed (the digital copy), the question of former’s (un)awareness of the latter’s suffering looming large throughout the episode.

In a similar vein, Brooker’s disclosure of the dystopian potential of Bostrom’s second transhumanist postulate—“Upgrade cognition!”—involves representation of the susceptibility of augmentation technologies to manipulation and their detrimental impact on social relations. In “Letter from Utopia” the posthuman narrator offers the following advice to mankind: “Your brain must grow beyond the bounds of any genius of human-kind, in its special faculties as well as its general intelligence, so that you may better learn, remember, and understand, and so that you may apprehend your own beatitude.” The link between manipulation and supposedly en-

³ For a brief overview of the relation between transhumanism and posthumanism see “Introduction” in the present issue. An in-depth analysis can be found in Chapter 1 of David Roden’s *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*.

hanced perception is the key element of “Men Against Fire,” an episode devoted to the military application of technological augmentation. The soldiers depicted in this episode are equipped with a neural implant called MASS. It enhances the processing of their senses but also—as the protagonist, an ordinary soldier, discovers in the dramatic course of events—distorts their perception of reality: it turns helpless civilians into zombie-like mutants called “roaches,” which the soldiers readily kill in what they believe is a heroic defense of mankind against monsters. The function of MASS is thus to mask genocide, which is carried out in the name of genetic purity. “Roaches” need to be exterminated due to the undesirable elements in their gene pool— “higher rates of cancer, muscular dystrophy, MS, SLS, sub-standard IQ” (“Men Against Fire”)—the episode foregrounding ruthless eugenics as a potential path towards supposed enhancement of mankind. The army controls not only senses but also memories of its perfect killing machines: in one of the twists of the story the protagonist discovers that his happy-go-lucky younger self agreed to have MASS implanted in his brain and to have the memory of this consent erased in foolhardy renouncement of his own agency.

Admittedly, this episode of *Black Mirror* explores the familiar motif of the oppressive misuse of technologies altering perception and memory rather than the dystopian potential of what transhumanism envisions as unquestionable augmentation. It is in “The Entire History of You” that Bostrom’s dream of enhanced memory, retaining all the events, turns into a nightmare. A vast majority of posthumans presented in this episode use a “grain,” a device that allows one to record and replay in the head or on a TV screen one’s past experiences. It proves to be a curse when the jealous and self-conscious protagonist, Liam Foxwell, not only begins obsessively re-watching different events from the history of his marriage but also forces his wife to play back her intercourse with another man, which she had when Liam had walked out on her after an argument. Having thus destroyed his own marriage, in the final scene he crudely removes the grain from his head.

While “The Entire History of You” discloses the detrimental potential of apparent human enhancement on the micro-scale of single relationship, “Nosedive” depicts a whole society in which technological augmentation is combined with narrowly and broadly understood cyborgisation, leading to an extension of identity from a single embodied consciousness to the social media. Taking its cue from rating systems used on contemporary social media platforms, it depicts a society in which people share their daily activities and

rate their interactions with others through eye-implants and mobile devices, allowing instant access to each person's current average rating on the scale from one to five. As it determines one's socioeconomic status, including access to services and even healthcare, the protagonist of the episode struggles to increase it, but after a series of misfortunes ends up in prison with the zero rating, her fate emphasising the precariousness of her position in the social hierarchy thus determined. The society depicted in "Nosedive" is divided into the higher class of popular high-fliers, who maintain their status by interacting with and highly rating each other, the middle class of people struggling to increase their position, just as the protagonist does, and the lower class of social outcasts, who refuse to participate in the system or are demoted to the bottom of the social ladder on account of their presumed unsociability. The constant (self-)surveillance of behaviour leads to complete erosion of meaningful interactions between people, forced to hide any negative emotions and refrain from any activities that might have a negative impact on their rating. Interestingly, even though the social organisation depicted in "Nosedive" is clearly oppressive with its rigid, though constantly fluctuating, division into the happy few and the struggling many, the show does not identify a single centre of power apart from the rating system itself: even relatively safe high-fliers have to maintain their position by projecting an image of success and fulfilment.

A majority of its characters exuding happiness and sociability from the moment they post the image of their morning coffee on the social media, "Nosedive" with its pastel aesthetics can be construed as a parody of Bostrom's third commandment—"Elevate well-being!"—which his posthuman narrator develops in the following way: "Pleasure! A few grains of this magic ingredient are dearer than a king's treasure, and we have it aplenty here in Utopia. It pervades into everything we do and everything we experience. We sprinkle it in our tea" ("Letter from Utopia"). While in "Nosedive" pleasure is simulated from within by posthuman subjects who are desperate to come across as happy, in "Men Against Fire" it is simulated from without: the MASS system rewards the soldiers with ultra-realistic dreams of sexual fulfilment. In the moving final scene the protagonist, who has apparently agreed to have his memory erased again and who has now been discharged with military honours, is standing in front of an old, dilapidated shack, which he sees as a lovely house with his dream girl running towards him. The scene becomes even more poignant and ambiguous, when the viewer notices tears running down his cheeks: they appear to indicate that some

part of his consciousness is aware that he is seeing an illusion. While these two episodes disclose the illusory nature of posthuman pleasure produced by augmentation technology, in “San Junipero” Yorkie insists that the pleasures she and Carrie experience are real and the latter comes to accept her point of view. At the same time their love is contrasted with the empty pleasures of the place called Quagmire, depicted as a BDSM club, in which the immortals of San Junipero turn to perversity, “trying anything to feel something” (“San Junipero”). Thus, rather than celebrating posthumanist transcendence beyond humanistic paradigms, *Black Mirror* presents a meaningful relationship with other people as the basis for worthwhile (eternal) existence.

The revised version of the Transhumanist Declaration released in 2012 acknowledges the possibility of undesirable outcome of the technological progress:

We recognize that humanity faces serious risks, especially from the misuse of new technologies. There are possible realistic scenarios that lead to the loss of most, or even all, of what we hold valuable. Some of these scenarios are drastic, others are subtle. Although all progress is change, not all change is progress. (54)

While the signers of the document see these potentially negative developments as the reason why “research effort needs to be invested into understanding these prospects” and why “we need to carefully deliberate how best to reduce risks and expedite beneficial applications” (54), Brooker appears to take a more sceptical view of our posthuman future, *Black Mirror* demonstrating how easily transhumanist utopian dreams can turn into dystopian nightmares.

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TRANSHUMANISTYCZNE SNY I/JAKO POSTHUMANISTYCZNE KOSZMARY W CZARNYM LUSTRZE

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł poddaje analizie serial telewizyjny *Czarne lustro* jako swoistą polemikę z transhumanizmem, prądem filozoficznym propagującym (bio)technologiczne ulepszenie jako środek, który pozwoli ludzkości przekroczyć biologiczne ograniczenia i osiągnąć nowy, postludzki etap ewolucji. Wychodząc od tendencji dających się zaobserwować we współczesnym społeczeństwie, *Czarne lustro* przedstawia w fikcyjnej formie takie koncepcje transhumanistyczne jak świadomość oddzielona od ciała czy też wzmocnione poznanie i sugeruje, że w większości przypadków mogą się one przyczynić do rozwoju postludzkiej dystopii raczej niż utopii, zakładanej przez transhumanistów.

Słowa kluczowe: transhumanizm; postczłowiek; *Czarne lustro*; utopia; dystopia.