Black Mirror and the Divergence of Online and Offline Behavior Patterns

Benjamin Martin, Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Mainz

Abstract This essay seeks to show the divergence of real and virtual communication codes by means of analyzing Charlie Brooker's dystopian series *Black Mirror,* in respect of the influence of new communication technologies and gadgets in the form of bodily extensions. It draws on both recent sociopolitical phenomena and sociological findings to undermine why and how the speculative fiction of *Black Mirror* displays the characters' engagement in their environs as inherently obscene, and at same time mirrors the recent developments that are looming ahead in the future which makes the series prophetical rather than merely dystopian in its outlook.

Key words: Black Mirror, pornography, nature, the political, utopia, dystopia

Wordcount: 5,078

The series *Black Mirror* by Charlie Brooker, which was aired on Channel 4 from 2011 to 2014 and renewed by Netflix in 2016, has been highly praised for its visionary prediction of our future engagement with new forms of communication technologies and convenient gadgets to increase efficiency in our everyday lives. It offers drastic scenarios that fit into the dystopian framework that ties the stand-alone episodes together into a series that offers the viewer different windows into the future. The series envisions futures in which technologically advanced communication apparatuses or bodily enhancements have a particular affordance on human interaction. However, in accordance with a widespread reception that acknowledges the series' supposedly sinister prophetic character, the narratives strike one as inherently obscene in their speculative scenarios. This paper will argue and demonstrate in reference to a selection of *Black Mirror* episodes, that obscenity is always defined in demarcation to ideologies and is a rather flexible concept located outside of indeterminate social norms.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek analyzes how ideologies manifest in our lives and how we can approach ideologies from a psychoanalytic perspective. In one of his central claims, according to which "the subject can 'enjoy his symptom' only in so far as its logic escapes him" (Žižek, 2008, p.16) we find an assertion also applicable to the perception of obscenity. A person's way of experiencing something as obscene is dependent on their ideological disposition. If one perceives a mode of behavior as obscene, the act is something that departs from or transgresses one's own morally normative compass. An obscene act, then, is to be understood as something outside one's range of tolerance, when a subject fully grasps the supposedly perverted logic of another's act from the assumed position of someone outside of the other's ideological frame. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière similarly theorizes what he terms "the distribution of the sensible" (le partage du sensible) and identifies a situatedness in a specific aesthetic and interpretive community: "*le partage du sensible* refers to the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed" (Rancière,

2015, p. 89). Hence, the way people perceive phenomena, or in Rancières case "works of art" is predetermined by their aesthetic (dis)position, that is to say, their way of distinguishing a work of art from reality is determined by a certain set of criteria.

The first *Black Mirror* episode, titled "The National Anthem", already delivers a prime example of the interrelation between ideology and the categorization of obscenity politically. The episode situates the prime minister, Michael Callow, in a situation of an inevitable blackmail dilemma. He must either publicly display sexual intercourse with a pig, or a hijacker will execute the princess taken hostage. The people show sympathy and nobody expects the prime minister to follow suit. Firstly, state agencies attempt to find the blackmailer and develop a ploy to stage a fake version of the demanded recording; however, the kidnapper discovers their plan and sends a cut-off finger to the media. At this point public sentiment shifts, and Callow is suddenly expected to meet the blackmailer's demands and commit the act live on television. If we consider this example in regard to its ideological implications, one observes a divergence from an unimaginably outrageous act, to an act of pure necessity. The question that arises from this divergence, is how is it so easily acceptable for people to witness this act? To get to the heart of this problem, we have to take into account Slavoj Žižek's theorization of ideology, according to which, "ideology is not simply a 'false consciousness', an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as 'ideological' – *'ideological' is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence*" (Žižek, 2008, p.15f).   First, the demand is viewed as something obscene, inconceivable in the ideological fabric of public opinion; but when the public is confronted with the predicament, the very structure and foundations of predominant ideology are reverted to the exact opposite. Interestingly enough, the public not only expect him to commit the act, but also recompenses the minister by allowing him to remain in office, granting him public backing in the aftermath. With regard to the sudden change of mind, as it is usually the case in *Black Mirror*, the swift dynamics of outrage or so called "shit-storms" are attributed to social media interactions and hashtag *virality*. The way one can see a temporary shift in the popular notion of what is obscene, the mere necessity of committing this act, lays open the dynamic behind the ideology. If the public were to condemn the act of sexual intercourse between the prime minister and the pig, they would consequently make

themselves guilty of not having done anything against the murder of the princess, or at least giving silent consent to the deed. However, the perverse act is temporarily endorsed in order to remain in their ideological bubble, that is, to prolong their ideological dream in Freudian terms. For them, it is only a spectacle occurring on the TV screen or in social networks detached from the event. It is here that one can also find the quintessential difference in the behavior online and offline regarding the inhibition threshold; it would be rather unlikely for them to endorse such an act if they were witnessing it in the same room.

The perception via TV or social media channels, then, functions as a filter encoded with its own ideological implications; that is to say, virtual media require behavioral norms clearly divergent from 'real life' conduct. The audience's reaction can be likened to what Jacques Rancière discusses in *The Emancipated Spectator*. Talking about aesthetic separation, he points out that "[h]uman beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of 'being together'" (Rancière, 2011, p. 56). Thus, the way people interact is dependent on what he terms a "*sensus communis[,]*" i.e. an ideological norm accepted by a specific community (Rancière, 2011, p. 57). The virtual space, however, opens up a community in which this normative bond is suspended.

In political landscape, we observe something very similar. For example, if one takes into consideration the recent populist tendencies such as the German Pegida (2014-) or Alternative für Deutschland (2013-), the French Front Nationale (1972-) or the campaign of and widespread support for Donald Trump in the last few years, one should not neglect the important impact social media channels have. The way people express their concerns departs in many ways from what might be considered appropriate, i.e. uttering *obscenities* or behaving in an obscene way. That is to say, the self-contained online communities make it easier for people to radicalize their world-views because the affirmation they get legitimizes their way of expressing concerns. Consequently, common decency, which would demand people to behave according to a social norm, is suspended, because people are encouraged by their peers and have the option to remain anonymous. But why do people suspend their decency and allow even politicians to offend common decency? In a prominent and very recent example of this ideological fluctuation we can trace back this phenomenon. Donald Trump's

use of tirades or *obscenities*, and the widespread support or tacit approval of his jargon have been met with strong opposition and outrage.

In May 2017, the *Washington Post* published an article on Trump's use of obscenities and indecent language to discredit people on Twitter and in interviews. The author points out that in order to mock people, Trump "is calling into question their mental stability" by making use of insults like "nut job", "crazy" or "wacko" (Wang, 2017, n.pag.). Similarly, the *New York Times* conducted a survey in which they list every false statement, titled "Trump's Lies" that meticulously documents every untruth from his inauguration on the 20th of January to 21st of June 2017. In the article, the authors remark that "[n]o other president — of either party — has behaved as Trump is behaving. He is trying to create an atmosphere in which reality is irrelevant" (Leonhardt and Thompson, 2017, n.pag.). This perception of Trump as a loudmouthed and indecent person has, however, also been endorsed by the people, both before and after his election. In their study "The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle," Kira Hall et al argue that

> "Trump as a branded commodity to be consumed—or rather, Trump^{TM}—has entered politics in a way never seen before, as technological and institutional forces harness the power of Trump as old-school capitalist and entrepreneur of spectacle and escort his brand into the political spectrum. His ability to bring previously distinct forms of semiotic extravagance together (reality television, beauty contests, wrestling matches) and insert them into his candidacy for the most powerful position in the world is precisely what makes Trump a never-ending spectacle" (2016, p. 92)

By making use of the Debordian theory of the spectacle, which he laid out in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Hall et al categorize the phenomenon of Trump as a symptom of the capitalist society, and argue that Trump's success is due mostly to his entertainment value. That is to say, the lack of pragmatic and stringent political agenda is overshadowed by both his entertainment value and the spectacular qualities it implies. Consequently, Hall et al point out that "[i]t does not matter whether the spectacle is respected, simply tolerated, or even abhorred, the outcome remains the same: *we keep on watching*" (p. 91). As many of Trump's statements and lapses were uttered through social media platforms, I observe the spectacle in light of its

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manifestation in the digital realm of both the TV and the Internet, linking it to an episode in Black Mirror.

In the episode "The Waldo Moment", from *Black Mirror*'s second season, one can see an instance of how appealing these spectacular 'barroom' politics can be, that uncannily resembles electoral campaigning in the US. Again, we are dealing with a propagandistic debate that mimics what is generally termed "post-truth politics" (Keyes, 2004). In an English by-election led by two commonplace politicians from two major parties, a cartoon character called Waldo, known for mocking people in interviews, attacks both candidates and ends up also running for the elections. However, the person dubbing this fictional character quickly decides against partaking in the campaign. The dialogue between the Waldo speaker Jamie and his producer Jack, who talk about the political prospects of their character, precisely captures the very logic of both Trump voters' enthusiasm and the fictitious euphoria Waldo is met with:

> Jamie: Waldo's not real.
> Jack: Exactly! That's what you said that really hit home. He's not real, but he's realer than all the others.
> Jamie: He doesn't stand for anything.
> Jack: Yeah, well, at least he doesn't pretend to. Look we don't need politicians; we've all got iPhones and computers, right? So any decision that has to be made, any policy, we just put it online. Let the people vote thumbs up, thumbs down, the majority wins. That's a democracy. That's a …, that's an actual democracy. (Brooker, 2013)

One can see the very irony of this situation. Instead of the other supposedly genuine politicians who maintain a certain seriousness and profess to have an agenda, Waldo displays the obscenity that lies at the bottom of the political status quo. To the viewer then, the real obscenity does not lie in a superficially altruistic agenda but in the very act of expressing oneself as decidedly offensive and insulting without pretense. In light of the spectacle, we have to consider one of Guy Debord's claims from the chapter "Ideology in Material Form", in which he postulates that "The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of

real life" (2006, p. 151). In other words, to refer back to Žižek, the logic reflected in Waldo's obscenity mirrors the very hidden logic of the politicians' agenda. Viewers are struck by the obscenity of the whole affair and can no longer enjoy their "symptom" because they are confronted with the logic at its very core, that is to say, the way political representatives pursue an agenda of self-interest and fail to satisfy their obligation to the people to a greater or lesser extent. The public in the episode prefer an insulting symbolic character in the form of a cartoon figure as their representative. Again, this is where one finds the underlying ideology that finds expression in Žižek's claim that an "ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor" (2008, p. 50). They accept a figure not only deprived of content but also without an 'ideological mask', with no underlying agenda, not supporting statements with facts, but with meaningless statements and no empty promises, in fact no promises at all. Hence, one perceives this situation as inherently obscene, not only because Waldo is bombarding the world with a torrent of *obscenities*, but also because the ideological mask is removed, and people are contented with a completely empty figure. This corresponds to the concept of "desubstantialization", i.e. depriving objects or constructs of its substantial content, or as Žižek (2002) asserts, "beer without alcohol or coffee without caffeine" but also "war fought behind computer screens, a war experienced by its participants as a computer game" (p. 37). In reference to Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Žižek (2008) points out that the "cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less insists upon the mask" (p. 27). The people voting Waldo, then, are exactly those cynics who observe that the mask Waldo offers is in fact not a mask at all. In want of a better alternative to the old politicians, however, they act as if there was deeper meaning or down-to-earth agenda at the core of Waldo's demagoguism, and therefore maintain the ideological masquerade, turning the whole affair into a spectacle of the obscene.

If we take into consideration the episode "Be Right Back", from the second season of the series in which a woman, called Martha, unaware of her pregnancy, loses her husband Ash, under tragic circumstances, we are also confronted with an ideological mask that sustains the wife's symbolic world. During the period of mourning, a friend tells her that there is still hope for her to come to terms with the

death. By means of her late husband's online persona, which includes voice tracks from videos, photographs, posts, tweets and likes, there is a possibility to restore the decedent's memories and to reconstruct behavioral patterns into a digitized version of him. First, she is only able to write and talk to Ash, but then, and here events become crucial, he gets materialized in an artificial yet uncannily humanoid body. This act as such already alludes to the two deaths, which are also addressed by Žižek (2008) in the chapter "You Only Die Twice", when he arrives at the heart of the Lacanian understanding of the death drive: "the thing itself is more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality" (p. 145). By creating this android semblance, the wife delays the second death of the husband and therefore delays her awakening to the Real. With regard to Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung*, in order to continue to dream or to stay in her symbolic universe, she comes to terms with a substitute: "Ähnlich unbestimmter Natur sind nun die Eindrücke, welche die Seele im Schlafe durch äußere Reize empfängt; sie bildet auf Grund derselben Illusionen, indem durch den Eindruck eine größere oder kleinere Anzahl von Erinnerungsbildern wachgerufen wird, durch welche der Eindruck seinen psychischen Wert bekommt" (2015, p. 46). It is here, that we find what is at the heart of the obscene, namely, the symbolic act of substitution that prolongs the subject's illusion and neglect of the lack in the Other. Precisely this desperate act is a necessary factor to fully grasp the psychoanalytic implications:

> "not its symbolic interpretation but the experience of the fact that the fantasy-object, by its fascinating presence, is merely filling out a lack, a void in the Other. There is nothing 'behind' the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this 'nothing' - that is, the lack in the Other" (Žižek, 2008, p. 148).

Having restored her husband Ash, one of Martha's first acts is going to bed with the android, where it tells her that it learnt its sex prowess from a database of pornographic videos. It is in this encounter that she first recognizes her surrogate husband as lacking certain qualities her late husband had. While the android is able to control its erection like a switch and to satisfy her sexual needs, a scene in the beginning of the episode shows the couple is copulating and engaging in an inherently repressive dialogue: "*Ash*: Oh Oh, shit Oh, shit Sorry. *Martha*: It's OK. *Ash*: Do you want me to? *Martha*: No, it's all right. *Ash*: I don't mind. I am knackered though, so…

Martha: Don't worry." (Brooker, 2013) Why is this scene handled with so much repression while she freely engages in conversation about the sexual act with the android? Unsurprisingly, the explanation can be found if one approaches this behavior by questioning its obscene implications. Even though she is aware that the android is not her husband, she desperately tries to deceive herself into believing so. In his exegesis of Deleuze *Organs Without Bodies* (2004)*,* Žižek tackles the implications that electronic gadgets, bodily extensions, or in this case an automaton have: "The trend in the development of computers is toward their invisibility. The large humming machines with mysterious blinking ligthts [sic] will be more and more replaced by tiny bits fitting imperceptibly into our 'normal' environs, enabling them to function more smoothly" (p.19). Furthermore, it lays bare the problematic logic of mortality, that Žižek points out in reference to Alenka Zupančič's manuscript "Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft" when he claims that this question of mortality and immortality can be likened to the "'death drive,' the obscene persistence of life just going on, not even ready to follow its natural path and dissolve itself in death" (2014, p. 340) The obscenity, then, is to be found, for one in the infinite suspension of acknowledging her husband's death but also in her dealing with the fragmentary surrogate as if it were human, and finding a place for it in everyday routine invisibly stashed away in the attic for later use. It is no wonder then, that it is kept hidden.

In the episode "White Bear", from the second season, one can see yet another example of the influence of ideological perspective on the degree of how obscene we deem an act. In the beginning, we see the main character, Victoria, waking up from a drugged unconsciousness to a completely alien environment, which was constructed as a penal system without her knowledge. Her initiation to the punitive environs happens, of course, in front of a mirror. She then proceeds through the house, looks at scattered objects and observes her surroundings. However, everything remains alien to her, and she finds no point of connection. When she leaves the building, people outside the house, also unrecognizable, constantly film her and ignore her inquiries. These people perceive her through their filming phones as if they were watching her from a remote screen. The distance that can be observed here already indicates the obscenity of this gaze and the supposed detachment that makes such an act seem natural. Similar to the abovementioned example of the changing attitudes online, which result from a feeling

of anonymity, by means of per- and receiving the world through a device, people in this episode take part in a spectacle. This occurs much like Peter Weir's notorious *The Truman Show*, in which the main character is unaware of her artificial environment. This allocation of subject positions being produced by a visually filtering device creates a clear-cut division between "performing actors and passive spectators" qua aesthetic separation (Rancière, 2011, p.62). Even when a mysterious man fires at Victoria, it seems as though no one reacts whatsoever. This sequence causes uneasiness in the viewer, because the standpoint of the viewer is likewise behind a screen; that is to say, one is allocated to the role of the impassive voyeur. This example ensembles the Debordian spectacle par excellence: "The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate" (Debord, 2006, 153). Hence, the phones the spectators are using to film the protagonist are "magical devices" which prolong the illusion that they are merely perceiving a freak show. There are also, however, actors who communicate with her. One of the performers, named Jem, films and accompanies Victoria in her discovery quest. Jem summarizes the underlying logic of the events occurring: "I guess they were always like that underneath. Just needed the rules to change, for no one to intervene" (Brooker, 2013). This reveals the central message of the series, which illustrates that for behavior to relinquish its obscene qualities, a readjustment of the etiquette by means of technological change is necessary. The person being gazed at then becomes objectified – the focus of the spectacle – not only because she is exposed to what Michel Foucault theorized as a punitive Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in this case put into practice by cameras, but also Jacques Lacan's reflections on the objectifying function of the gaze developed in Seminar I:

> "The gaze is not located just at the level of the eyes. The eyes may very well not appear, they may be masked. The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. It is an x, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object" (1991, p. 220).

People have only to be recalibrated to a different ideological disposition by means of alienating them through new visual apparatuses or "objects", as Lacan puts

it, that is something blocking the gaze of the Other. This is related to the phenomenon of sensation seeking, "rubbernecking" or the bystander effect, which was analyzed in a study with regard to the limitations and restraints the use of devices imposes upon the user/spectator. The study found that "[c]ell phones, along with other interactive and mobile communication technologies, function as masks that hinder active users from recognizing the needs of others" (Banjo, Hu and Sundar, 2008, p. 134).

In this direction, the episode "White Christmas", from the series' second season develops this phenomenon in Banjo et al.'s study further to the extreme. In the episode a technology, which allows people to block others from their perception, both visually and sonically, is pervading the different strings of narration. In two of the story lines, people experience this in their familial environment, being blocked out by their wives. Again, it is the technology that enables people to withdraw from the resolution and discussion of conflicts and arguments, creating a bubble of illusion. To once again draw back on psychoanalytical theory, it stands out that this obliteration of the Other deprives the individual from the identity-establishing human counterpart; by blending out his or her environs, the person is deprived of the Other that is formative of the subject position. This not only resembles the way post-factual politics is developing but also a decline of discussion culture in social media. It has never been easier to block oneself off from displeasing opinions, to disengage oneself from social discourse. This episode, as in all the above-mentioned episodes, confronts the viewer with the possible outcome of a shift in online etiquette or 'netiquette,' most likely to have a strong effect on our daily lives in the near future. In his seminal work *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Walter Benjamin tackles a similar problem. In discussing the way film altered the perception of the spectator, he states that "[d]er Film drängt den Kultwert nicht nur dadurch zurück, daß er das Publikum in eine begutachtendene Haltung bringt, sondern auch dadurch, daß die begutachtende Haltung im Kino Aufmerksamkeit nicht einschließt. Das Publikum ist ein Examinator, doch ein zerstreuter" (2011, p. 52). If we confer this concept of affordance in the cinematic environment on the way we use communicative devices and media, it becomes apparent that it has a comparably 'spectacular' effect in that it alters communicative modes and norms: by means of the apparatus of the cinema camera, smart phone or TV screen the spectator becomes an impassive witness who is

"zerstreut" (absent-minded) and only perceives the substantiality of the virtual subject matter in a distorted way.

Coming back to the main thesis of this paper where the obscene is something perceiveable from the confines of one's own ideological framework. *Black Mirror* offers speculative perspectives on how the progression of online interaction manipulates our ways of behaving in both online and offline contexts. The series cuts the ground under the very supposition of the diverging spheres of virtual and real communication, and thereby confronts the viewer with their potential social practice in those spheres. In an article for *The Guardian* entitled "Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace," Žižek critizes the way people interact online, elucidates that "'Interface' [the platform used for communication] means precisely that my relationship to the other is never face-to-face, that it is always mediated by digital machinery" and therefore always diverges from offline interaction (2006, n.pag). Similarly, Brooker opens up a space for debate if a concept such as netiquette is necessary or even stimulates the divergence and real life split. The way people have incorporated the very rules and structure of new technologies, oftentimes in the very literal sense of implanting it into their bodies as gadgets, strikes the viewer as a terrifying and sinister vision. Tackling the de facto high tech revolution, Brooker only developed further the adopted technological path and transferred the ways of interaction and the implications of data policies into a scenario in which the real and virtual flow into each other, in a manner that makes a distinction between the two impossible. The way in which new media obscenely isolates people and designates it possible for 'smartphone zombies' to retreat into their microcosm and blank out their environs, foreshadows potential implications in the future.

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