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# The Political Unconscious, the Utopian Impulse, Posthumanism and Screen Culture in Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) and Charlie Brooker's Television Series *Black Mirror* (2011)

Omar Cheballah

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**The Political Unconscious, The Utopian Impulse,  
Posthumanism and Screen Culture in Orwell's  
*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Charlie Brooker's  
Television Series *BlackMirror* (2011)**

Omar Cheballah

Sous la direction de: Mme. Hélène Machinal

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## Introduction

“The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: don’t let it happen, it depends on you.”<sup>1</sup> This statement was made by Orwell in a press release in 1949 regarding his dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Orwell clarifies that his work is not necessarily intended to be a prophecy of what the Western world might become in approximately forty years from the time he wrote his novel, as some reviewers have believed. Instead, he considers his work as a warning against the rising trends of totalitarianism, particularly Stalinism, especially with the nuclear threat that followed the outbreak of the coldwar.

Given Orwell's clarifications and warnings against totalitarianism, it is critical to explore the relationship between dystopian literature and the concept of utopia. While dystopian novels, such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* portray the nightmare repercussions of totalitarian governments, Utopian narratives present an idealised vision of a peaceful society. Utopia, is a word borrowed from the Greek language that literally means "nowhere," it connotes a non-existent realm, or an imagined construct. Derin Ryan elaborates on the concept of Utopian literature in “Emerging themes in dystopian literature” (2014), he suggest that in Utopian narratives the fictive world embodies an idyllic state characterised by order, abundance, and a harmonious coexistence between individuals and their surroundings. Furthermore, within this environment, the characters have the opportunity to enjoy their personal autonomy and express their true self as autonomous individuals.<sup>2</sup>

To shed light on the historical development of Utopian thought in the western world, professor Hacéne Benmechiche in his doctoral thesis titled “the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertnard Russel” (2016)<sup>3</sup> provides insights into the forces that have shaped western societies, the interplay between social reality and utopianism, and the evolution of political thought and institutions. He argues that during the Middle Ages, the failure to achieve the idealised "City of God" as envisioned by Saint Augustine and the subversion of religion by the alliance between monarchies and the Catholic Church, led to the emergence of chiliastic and millenarian movements.<sup>4</sup> Benmechiche states that these

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<sup>1</sup> Kumar, Krishan, *Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times*. New York: Blackwell, (1987), p.301.

<sup>2</sup> Derin, Ryan, *Emerging Themes in Dystopian Literature: The Development of an Underground Course*. (Western Michigan: Lee House College, 2014), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Benmechiche, Hacéne, “the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertnard Russel”. Tizi-Ouzou: University of Mouloud Mammeri of Tizi-Ouzou, (2016).

<sup>4</sup>*ibid* p.19

movements led by individuals such as Thomas Muntzer and Joachim of Fiore had the goal of achieving the promised eschatological end, or the ultimate fulfillment of divine prophecy, through their own actions. <sup>5</sup> Eschatology, which is frequently connected to religious or spiritual contexts, is the study of or belief in the end times or the concluding events in human history. It deals with ideas like humanity's ultimate fate, the last judgment, the afterlife, and the accomplishment of divine intentions or predictions. Therefore, it examines the theories and concepts pertaining to the ultimate destiny of individuals, societies, and the entire universe.<sup>6</sup>

Concurrently, Benmechiche explains how the Reformation movement challenged the authority of the Catholic Church, with reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin advocating for individual interpretation of religious authority through the Bible<sup>7</sup>. He suggests that this period also witnessed the questioning of absolute monarchy by the rising bourgeois class and the assertion of reason, free will, and participation in decision-making.<sup>8</sup> In this light, Benmechiche discusses how the Enlightenment further fueled the belief that success, happiness, and how salvation could be achieved through reason and interpretation of moral principles.<sup>9</sup> The struggle for emancipation from traditional orders and the pursuit of utopian ideals faced opposition from vested interests, leading to conflicts such as peasant revolts and inquisitions<sup>10</sup> In response to the absolutism of monarchies and the violence of peasant revolts, a moderate bourgeois trend proposed utopia as a compromise, envisioning a just city guided by enlightened individuals.<sup>11</sup>

According to Benmechiche's thesis, throughout western history, the evolution of Utopian thought has witnessed a gradual but significant shift towards totalitarianism, as ideologies initially rooted in visions of an ideal society have been co-opted by ruling powers to perpetuate control and social inequalities.<sup>12</sup>

To define totalitarianism, it describes a political system that is characterized by exerting control over all aspects of public and private life. The term originated in the 1920s and gained worldwide popularity during the Cold War, particularly in anti-communist discourse, where the opponents of communism draw parallels between Nazi Germany, other fascist regimes, and Soviet communism.<sup>13</sup> While fascist and Stalinist movements are

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid* pp.19-20

<sup>6</sup> source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eschatology>

<sup>7</sup> Benmechiche, Hacéne "the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertnard Russe(2016), 20

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Benmechiche, Hacéne "the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertnard Russe(2016), p.20.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*,22.

<sup>13</sup> Source: <http://www.ula.ve/ciencias-juridicas->

commonly associated with totalitarianism, there have been other instances such as the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right, which declared its intention to establish a "totalitarian polity."<sup>14</sup> The concept was initially formulated by Giovanni Amendola in 1923 to describe Italian Fascism as distinct from conventional dictatorships, and later Giovanni Gentile assigned a positive meaning to it, emphasizing the state's total representation and guidance of national goals.<sup>15</sup> Totalitarianism involves the pervasive influence, if not power, of the state ideology over its citizens, as famously expressed by Benito Mussolini with the motto, "Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state."<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, the shift from utopianism to totalitarianism, according to Benmechiche, can be understood in the context of two conflicting utopian trends: millenarianism and bourgeois utopianism. Millenarianism represented the aspirations of the poor and the working classes, seeking to establish a classless society and equality through revolution. Bourgeois utopianism, on the other hand, reflected the interests of the rising bourgeoisie, envisioning a society governed by an enlightened elite based on reason.<sup>17</sup> Benmechiche adds in this context that during the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, these two utopian trends developed and influenced British political thought and institutions. The belief in science and technology as a means to order society became prominent, leading to the idea that an enlightened elite should govern based on reason. Scientists and philosophers argued that truth could be discovered through empirical observation and experimentation, and therefore, society should be entrusted to scientists to establish order and harmony.<sup>18</sup>

However, as industrialization progressed in the late 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain, the promises of science and technology were not fulfilled for the majority of the population.<sup>19</sup> Social inequalities increased, causing disillusionment and frustration. Benmechiche argues that the subversion of scientific utopianism occurred as it was co-opted by the industrial elites to legitimise their rule and conceal the hardships faced by the working class. He suggests that scientific utopianism, which was initially a tool to challenge

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[politicas/images/NuevaWeb/Material\\_Didactico/MarcosRosales/MarcosRosales/dictaduraliteratura/Totalitariani\\_sm1.pdf](http://www.ula.ve/ciencias-juridicas-politicas/images/NuevaWeb/Material_Didactico/MarcosRosales/MarcosRosales/dictaduraliteratura/Totalitariani_sm1.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Source: [http://www.ula.ve/ciencias-juridicas-politicas/images/NuevaWeb/Material\\_Didactico/MarcosRosales/MarcosRosales/dictaduraliteratura/Totalitariani\\_sm1.pdf](http://www.ula.ve/ciencias-juridicas-politicas/images/NuevaWeb/Material_Didactico/MarcosRosales/MarcosRosales/dictaduraliteratura/Totalitariani_sm1.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Benmechiche, Hacéne, "the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertnard Russel", p.22.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p.24.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, pp.26-27.



the established order, turned into an ideology serving the interests of the ruling powers.

Therefore, the shift from scientific utopianism to dystopian narratives can be understood as a response to the disillusionment caused by the increasing social inequalities and the co-optation of scientific progress by the ruling elites. In this context, Tom Moylan in his book *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia* (2000)<sup>20</sup> suggests that dystopian narratives are a response to the atrocities of the twentieth century, embodied by war, famine, disease and totalitarianism, as well as the increasing commodification of everyday life.<sup>21</sup> The author traces the roots of the genre in anti-utopian novels and Menippean satire, suggesting that it gained popularity in the early 1900s with the rise of monopolistic manufacturing<sup>22</sup>, which refers to the emergence of a single company or entity having control over the production of goods and services. Furthermore, Moylan highlights the negative impact of technology on society as a central theme in dystopian works, starting with E.M. Forster's *The Machine Stops*<sup>23</sup> arguing that the view of earlier works was limited<sup>24</sup>, in contrast to later works, including Zamyatin's, Burdekin, Orwell, and Amis', which offer insights on the role of the government and capitalism in causing alienation and degradation of life conditions<sup>25</sup>. Moylan sees Huxley's *Brave New World* as a crucial example of a critique that evaluates the impact of technology and capitalism on culture, and the role of institutionalization on humanity and the earth.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this dystopian frame became, then, prevalent in popular culture.

Another prominent literary theorist who wrote about utopian literature is Terry Eagleton. In his essay "Utopia and its Opposites" he argues that: "the failure of the present is the only accurate portrayal of the future."<sup>27</sup> In this sense, according to Eagleton, dystopian narratives do not genuinely foretell the future; rather, they highlight the weaknesses and flaws of the society the author is writing about. Consequently, rather than offering an accurate picture of what the future might contain, dystopian writings serve largely as critiques of the problems that are present in a specific era as Eagleton suggests. Because of this, the bleak and pessimistic representation of the future in dystopian literature acts as a warning to modern society, encouraging action to confront and fix the fundamental issues that have the

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<sup>20</sup> Moylan, Tom *Scraps of the untainted Sky Dystopia, Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. The United States: Wetstview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group, 2000)

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*, preface xi

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, preface xii

<sup>23</sup> First published in the Oxford and Cambridge Review, November 1909

<sup>24</sup> Moylan, Tom *Scraps of the untainted Sky Dystopia*, xiii

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*, 273

potential to develop as nightmarish scenarios.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, in their work titled “Utopie et Catastrophe” (2015)<sup>29</sup> Jean-Paul Engélibert and Raphaëlle Guidée assess the political aspect of utopian fiction as multidimensional. They suggest that there is a prevailing belief that utopia is "a thing of the past" and that as a result, dystopias have replaced it. The writers claim that this is a result of the contemporary era's lack of opportunities and loss of political enthusiasm. The essay also makes the case that a decline in interest in utopian ideals was brought on by the perception that "the catastrophes" of the twentieth century showed how utopia and historical reality were not compatible.<sup>30</sup> This viewpoint is challenged throughout the text, which contends that the underlying ambiguity of the genre and what dystopias can teach us about utopia. It implies that the prevalence of dystopias may not necessarily signify a culture lacking in optimism but may instead be a reaction to the general pessimism. Engélibert and Raphaëlle also show a revival of utopian imagination in literature and the arts, showing that utopia still has value and that research into it is still underway. Therefore, their depiction of the political character of utopian literature highlights the conflict between the conviction that utopia would one day be obsolete and the understanding of its continuing significance. It calls for a critical analysis of utopian concepts, their historical background, and how they have influenced social discourse and ambitions.<sup>31</sup>

In light of the exploration of utopia and counter-utopias, as well as the critical examination of dystopian literature and its concerns about socioeconomic shifts and control, it is evident that in contrast to the idealistic world of utopia, dystopian literature portrays citizens as being subject to harsh and oppressive authority, where their thoughts, emotions, and individuality are under strict control. Midway through the 20th century, dystopian literature began to emerge as a result of authors' worries about profound socioeconomic and cultural shifts. Apart from *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, noteworthy dystopian literature include *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury. Spincer, A, Murray in his article entitled “The Author as Culture Hero: H.G Wells and George Orwell” explains how Orwell drew significant inspiration from H. G. Wells, a prominent late nineteenth-century author known for his

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<sup>28</sup> Moylan, Tom *Scraps of the Untainted Sky Dystopia*, xiii

<sup>29</sup> Engélibert, Jean-Paul and Guidée, Raphaëlle “Utopie et Catastrophe”, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, (2015)

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> *ibid*

dystopian and science fiction works.<sup>32</sup> Wells portrayed and predicted a future world in which new technological advancements would be created and used to exert control over individuals. Similar to Wells, Orwell's portrayal of telescreens and microphones used to monitor Oceania's population in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* matches with the themes of surveillance and control.<sup>33</sup> The television series *Black Mirror* (2011) similarly addresses themes of surveillance and control, reflecting the worries expressed by Wells and Orwell in their respective works through its dark portrayal of technology and its possible effects on individuals and society. In this sense, the quote from George Orwell's 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* best captures the chilling portrayal of a dystopian future influenced by totalitarianism. Orwell's words, "if you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face forever,"<sup>34</sup> serve as a striking portrayal of the nightmarish consequences associated with this oppressive ideology. This vivid imagery powerfully illustrates the dehumanising effects imposed upon individuals within a totalitarian system. The dystopian genre has long been a platform for authors to explore societal critiques and envision bleak futures.

Additionally, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the third industrial revolution which is characterized by development of digital technologies and biotechnologies leading to re-questioning human identity and the future of a “post” human. This revolution is characterized, on the one hand, by the development of biotechnologies which opened the door for enhancement of human capacities on the one hand, and the evolution of hyper-connectivity and screen culture on the other. This development initially provides a euphoric promise in the improvement of human conditions, however it also illicit major anxieties, inspiring science-fiction writers to imagine dystopian and nightmarish futures for humanity, often, these futures are not far-fetched, but rather very close to the present, This is particularly relevant to Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a text that can be considered as a precursors to the depiction of the perversion of technology and the role of the screen in mass-surveillance and defusing propaganda. Further, in the context of the contemporary post-digital era, Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones’s television series *Black Mirror* depict a dystopian near-future scenario.

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<sup>32</sup> Derin, Ryan, *Emerging Themes in Dystopian Literature: The Development of an Underground Course*. Western Michigan: Lee House College, 2014), p.2.

<sup>33</sup> Murray, A, Spincer, “the author as culture hero: H.G Wells and George Orwell”, University of Manitoba. (1981). Available on the website of Jstor. URL <https://www-jstor-org.www.snd11.arn>.

<sup>34</sup> Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, London: Penguin Random House, 1949, P.307.

Therefore, two notable works that exemplify this genre are George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)<sup>35</sup> and the selected episodes from Charlie Brooker's television series, *Black Mirror*<sup>36</sup> namely "Fifteen Million Merits" (2011), "White Bear" (2013), and "Nosedive" (2016). *Black Mirror* was originally broadcasted on the British "Channel 4" for its first two seasons and later moved to Netflix starting from the third season. The show consists of multiple seasons, each with its own specific start and end years. The first season of *Black Mirror* aired in 2011, the second Season followed in 2013, With its shift to Netflix, Season 3 of *Black Mirror* was released and spanned from 2016 to 2017, The fifth season of *Black Mirror* arrived in 2019, delivering a fresh set of standalone episodes. Throughout its run, the series has consistently engaged audiences with its unique blend of sci-fi, social commentary, and psychological suspense. Additionally, the sixth season of the television series was recently released in June 2023 on Netflix.

In this work we will apply Fredric Jameson's theories in his work *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*<sup>37</sup> to analyse these works in order to uncover the historical and ideological underpinnings that influenced the authors and shaped their narratives. As a matter of fact, Jameson's Marxist approach to literature departs from formalist and aesthetic readings, as he views literature as a reflection of social and economic conditions rather than focusing solely on the text's literary qualities. He argues that all literary texts possess a political unconscious, a set of implicit assumptions and values that shape their meaning. By delving beneath the surface of the narratives, it becomes possible to uncover hidden layers of social commentary and critique. In this regard, Jameson writes that "the assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artefacts as socially symbolic acts".<sup>38</sup> Jameson emphasises the importance of thoroughly analysing cultural artefacts to uncover their underlying social and symbolic meanings, as suggested by the concept of a political unconscious. Furthermore, we will draw upon Jameson's other book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) to highlight Orwell's and Brooker's underlying motivations for crafting their dystopian

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<sup>35</sup>Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty Four*. London: Penguin Random House, 1949

<sup>36</sup> Brooker Charlie, Jones Annabel. *Black Mirror*. United Kingdom: Channel 4, 2011-2014/ Netflix 2016-2019

<sup>37</sup> Jameson, Frederic, *The Political Unconscious, Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981.

<sup>38</sup>*ibid*, p.5.

visions. Jameson contends that dystopian writers are not solely driven by a pessimistic outlook on the future, but rather by a “Utopian impulse”<sup>39</sup>

Jameson's concept of the Utopian impulse refers to the underlying desire for a better society that is embedded in our cultural practices, social movements, and literary representations. In this sense authors tend to write dystopias as a means to raise awareness of what they perceive as dangers and pitfalls lurking within society, ultimately aiming to inspire change and create a better vision for society. To reformulate, Jameson examines utopia by considering its form, as seen in written works, and its wish which is the desire for a better society. According to Jameson, utopia should also be analysed politically, looking at real-world social movements and revolutions.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Frederic Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* delves into the connection between science fiction, utopian ideology, and Marxism. According to Jameson, science fiction provides a distinctive perspective for examining the social, political, and economic structures of present-day society and imagining alternative futures. He examines a range of science fiction works, including those of Ursula K. Le Guin<sup>41</sup> Philip K. Dick<sup>42</sup> and Kim Stanley Robinson<sup>43</sup>.

Jameson emphasises how science fiction offers a critique of contemporary society and its underlying assumptions, while also offering an imaginative space for inventing novel possibilities and alternative futures. Furthermore, he underscores the significance of utopian thought in envisioning and striving for a better future for humanity.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Jameson's examination of utopia and its political implications aligns with Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Moving back to the works selected for this study, it is worth noting that both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Black Mirror* have gained substantial attention and sparked extensive discussions owing to their profound significance and impact, leading to numerous articles and books exploring these works from diverse perspectives. In his article "Mysticism and Cruelty" (1984) Isaac Deutscher criticizes Orwell's lack of originality, claiming that his ideas, plot, characters, and symbols were borrowed from the Russian author Evgenij Zamyatin's novel *We* (1920-1921).<sup>45</sup> Both authors were indeed shaped by their war

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<sup>39</sup> Jameson, Frederic, *Archaeologies of The Future, The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. NewY: Verso, 2005, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Jameson, Frederic, *Archaeologies of The Future, The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. NewY: Verso, 2005, pp.1-3

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid* 57.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid* 59.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 359.

<sup>45</sup> Deutscher, Isaac, ‘mysticism of cruelty’ London: Hamish and Hamilton, 1984.

experiences: Orwell in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 and Zamyatin in the Russian Revolution of 1905. When comparing Zamyatin's *We* to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it is clear that both novels depict controlling authorities. Zamyatin's state is governed by "The Benefactor," who serves as a prototype for Orwell's "Big Brother."<sup>46</sup>

In fact, when the Cold War intensified, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* sparked numerous interpretations and controversies regarding its underlying message. The novel's critics disagreed over whether it was fundamentally anti-socialist or primarily a critique of Stalinism.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, right-wing critics thought that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a general condemnation of socialism and Marxism. On the other hand, left-wing sympathisers, especially democratic socialists, chose to see Orwell's novel as a denunciation of corruption and the abuse of power rather than a critique of socialism itself. Through his voluntarily joining the Spanish Civil War, Orwell came to the conclusion that all tyranny, including fascism, Nazism, and Soviet communism, represented a threat to freedom, individuality, and the truth. Regarding this, Krishan Kumar notes that "Conservatives and liberals on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly in the United States, gratefully, latched on to it as a tool to criticise the Soviet Union."<sup>48</sup>

Charlie Brooker's television series *Black Mirror*, much like George Orwell's novel, has been subject to various interpretations and commentaries. Ali Yazdizadeh in his article entitled "In and Out of the Black Mirror; an Ideological Investigation into Nosedive"<sup>49</sup> examines the television series through the lens the postmodernist French philosopher Baudrillard relying on his concept of Simulacrum and hyper-reality presented in his book "Simulacra and Simulation" (1998).<sup>50</sup>

To elucidate the concept of Simulacrum, Baudrillard's allegory of "the empire" is employed. According to Baudrillard, an empire undergoes destruction and decay, leaving behind a mere map as its representation. This map serves as a copy of a bygone reality.<sup>51</sup> Baudrillard further delineates the concept of simulacrum into four distinct stages or "orders." The initial stage entails the incorporation of the map or image that faithfully represents a tangible physical world. In the second stage, the image imitates and conceals

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (New York: Blackwell), 289

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p.289.

<sup>49</sup> Yazdizadeh, Ali, "in and out of the Black Mirror ; an ideological investigation into Nosedive, University of British Columbia: *Limina, Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies* Okanagan, (2020).

<sup>50</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p.3.

reality, often by adding symbolic elements to construct a narrative. The third stage witnesses the image becoming a distorted replica of reality, no longer referencing any actual occurrence in the real world. Finally, the fourth and ultimate stage marks the establishment of hyper-reality, also known as pure simulacrum. In this stage, all connection to reality is completely severed, and the image is divorced from any genuine association. As Baudrillard astutely observes, "when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning," indicating that the sole trace of significance remaining within this copy is found through nostalgia.<sup>52</sup>

The concept of simulacrum and hyper-reality, as discussed by Jean Baudrillard, can be applied to the *Black Mirror* episode "Nosedive" in several ways. "Nosedive" presents a dystopian society where characters are constantly rated based on their social interactions, and these ratings determine their social status and privileges. Firstly, in "Nosedive", we see the idea of a copy or simulation of reality. The characters in the episode are obsessed with projecting a carefully crafted image of themselves to attain high ratings. They create a facade, a manufactured version of themselves, which becomes more important than their authentic selves. This manufactured self is the simulacrum, a representation detached from genuine human experiences.

Additionally, it can be argued that "Nosedive" demonstrates the progression of Baudrillard's stages of simulacrum. Initially, the characters engage in the first stage, where they use social media platforms to present a polished image of their lives. They meticulously curate their online personas to align with societal expectations, much like the carefully constructed map representing the empire in Baudrillard's allegory. However, as the episode unfolds, we witness the transition to the second and third stages. The characters' obsession with ratings leads them to mask their true emotions and manipulate their behaviour to seek others' approval and gain social acceptance. They become, in a way, enslaved to the system, gradually losing touch with genuine human connections and replacing them with artificial interactions. Indeed, this twisted copy of reality aligns with Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum becoming disconnected from the real world. Moreover, "Nosedive" touches upon the idea of hyper-reality. As the episode progresses, the characters' lives revolve entirely around maintaining high ratings. The pursuit of validation and acceptance through ratings becomes an all-consuming "hyper-reality", where the boundaries between the digital and physical realms blur.

Moreover, Yazdizadeh suggests that Baudrillard's comment on the Western obsession with appearances is relevant to the themes presented in the *Black Mirror* episode

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, 52.

“Nosedive”<sup>53</sup>. Hence, he suggests that the episode's protagonist, Lacie Pound, embodies Baudrillard's concept of "Evil,"<sup>54</sup> Yazdizadeh adds that the episode also exposes extreme political correctness, which is seen as imposing dogmatic rules that inhibit social interaction<sup>55</sup>Jean Baudrillard's concept of "Evil" can be understood through his classification of appearances and representations. In “Simulacra and Simulation” Baudrillard writes that:

In the first case, the image is a good appearance – representation is of the sacramental order. In the second, it is an evil appearance – it is of the order of maleficence. In the third, it plays at being an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer of the order of appearances, but of simulation.<sup>56</sup>

According to Baudrillard in the quote above, there are four distinct categories: the sacramental order, the order of maleficence, the order of sorcery, and the order of simulation. In the sacramental order, the image represents a good appearance, carrying a sense of sacredness or authenticity. It retains a connection to reality and holds a genuine quality. In the order of maleficence, the image becomes an evil appearance. It possesses a manipulative nature, distorting reality and exerting negative influences. It aims to deceive and harm rather than reveal truth. Moving to the order of sorcery, the image no longer simply represents an appearance but rather plays with the notion of appearance itself. It engages in illusion and magical tricks, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. It seeks to enchant and captivate through its artifice. Finally, in the order of simulation, the image completely detaches from the realm of appearances. It ceases to be a reflection or representation of reality and instead becomes a hyperreal copy or simulation. It creates a world of its own, independent of any original referent.

In the context of the *Black Mirror* episode “Nosedive”, the main character Lacie Pound can be seen as an embodiment of Baudrillard's concept of "Evil" within the order of “maleficence”. Lacie's behaviour and actions revolve around maintaining a carefully curated appearance to gain social approval and validation in a hyperreal system. She manipulates her image, distorting her true self to conform to societal expectations. By engaging in this “hyperreal” game of appearances, Lacie participates in the distortion and manipulation of reality, ultimately leading to detrimental consequences for both herself and society. It is important to note, however, that Baudrillard's concept of "Evil" does not imply a moral judgment in the conventional sense but rather points to the destructive and

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<sup>53</sup>Yazdizadeh, Ali, “in and Out of the Black Mirror”, p.17.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*

<sup>56</sup> Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p.6.



deceptive aspects of hyperreality and the manipulative power of images and appearances.

Additionally, professor H el ene Machinal in her article “L’ pisode « San Junipero de Black Mirror: les miroitements du posthumain”<sup>57</sup> approaches *Black Mirror* focusing on the episode of “San Junipero” through the concept of posthumanism, which refers to the potential disruption of traditional storytelling norms through narrative ruptures, prompting reflection on the blurring of boundaries between the human and the machine<sup>58</sup>. She suggests that the episode presents a “hypermediatic society” where individuals can “transcend” their physical bodies through digital consciousness transfer, raising ethical dilemmas and questions about human identity. She adds that “San Junipero” acts as a metaphorical mirror, reflecting society's aspirations and anxieties about technology's impact on human existence, emphasising the need for critical examination of the post-human condition in the “post-industrial” era.<sup>59</sup>

Last, but not least, David Roche in his article “You know, when you suspect something, it’s always better when it turns out to be true »: M moire et m dia dans l’ pisode « The Entire History of You » (S01E03) de *Black Mirror* (2011-)” studies the episode of “The Entire History of You”. He suggests that Liam, the protagonist of this episode of *Black Mirror*, expresses that “it's better when suspicions turn out to be true”.<sup>60</sup> According to Roche, this echoes a similar sentiment in "Lost Highway" where the protagonist prefers to remember things in his own way<sup>61</sup>. Both remarks highlight the perception of technology as evidence in transgressive acts and its connection to truth. The Grain implant depicted in the episode serves as “a memory prosthesis”,<sup>62</sup> which refers to a technological device or implant that aids in storing and recalling memories, essentially serving as an artificial extension of human memory. This implant, according to Roche blurs the line between being an “augmented human” and a “cyborg”<sup>63</sup>.

According to Roope Raisamo et al, in their research titled “Human augmentation: past, present and future” (2019) the augmented human" refers to individuals who have enhanced their abilities through the use of medical or technological means, such as

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<sup>57</sup> Machinal, H el ene *L’ pisode San Junipero » de Black Mirror: les miroitements du post-humain*. OpenEdition Journals, (2018)1-8. Available on: <https://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/3169>

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Roche, David, “You know, when you suspect something, it’s always better when it turns out to be true »: M moire et m dia dans l’ pisode « The Entire History of You » (S01E03) de *Black Mirror* (2011-)”. *Open Edition Journal*. (2018). Available on: <https://journals.openedition.org/tvseries/3094>

<sup>61</sup> *ibid*

<sup>62</sup> *ibid*

<sup>63</sup> *ibid*

consuming substances or installing implants, as well as utilising external tools like eyeglasses or

microscopes<sup>64</sup>. The research suggests that with advancements in augmented reality and non-invasive wearable technologies, the augmentation of human senses, actions, and cognition becomes “more accessible”, however, they suggest that it also raises ethical and societal concerns related to privacy, social manipulation, autonomy, accessibility, safety, and the uncertain future impact.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, according to Collins online dictionary<sup>66</sup> the cyborg is defined as an individual whose bodily functions are supported or reliant on a mechanical or electronic device. In this sense, Roche’s statement means that the depicted technology is so advanced and integrated with the human body that it challenges the traditional distinction between humans with enhanced abilities and beings with a significant integration of artificial components.

Roche also posits that the exploration of memory and humanity is a common theme in science fiction, including *Blade Runner*<sup>67</sup>. He adds that *Black Mirror* goes beyond “allegory” and delves into societal issues related to media and convergence culture. While the series is mostly “technophobic”, a few episodes present utopian possibilities. *The Entire History of You*, according to Roche, focuses on the dystopian potential of technology, such as surveillance, obsession, and the problematic relationship between reality and virtuality.<sup>68</sup> The episode emphasises how the virtual fills a void in the real world but also induces “passive detachment”.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, the Grain's main purpose is questioned, as it merely compensates for human shortcomings.

The state of the art conducted on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Black Mirror* shows that these works share common ground that has not yet been thoroughly explored in parallel. The areas of convergence include themes such the exploration of techno-phobia and the examination of posthumanism and the screen culture, To gain a comprehensive understanding of this subject, we aim to delve into the historical backdrop, ideological aspects, and the Utopian and dystopian dimensions of both works. Therefore, this paper aims to shed light

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<sup>64</sup> Roope, Raisamo, Rakkolainen, Ismo, Majaranta, Paivi, Salminen, Katri, Jussi, Rantala, Farooq, Ahmed, “Human augmentation: Past, Present and Future”. Tampere: *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies*. (2019)

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/cyborg>

<sup>67</sup> Roche, David “You know, when you suspect something, it’s always better when it turns out to be true”

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

on the interconnection and significance of these narratives in the context of societal and technological developments. Indeed, while *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is rooted in the post-Second World War and the outbreak of the Cold War era, highlighting totalitarianism and government surveillance, *Black Mirror* reflects the post-industrial contemporary era, exploring the consequences of advanced technology on modern society. Therefore, the main line of inquiry of this thesis is: How do the narratives *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* intertwine and offer insights into the societal and technological advancements of their respective time periods?

First we will ponder the ideological foundations of these two works, and wonder how do *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* depict and expose hierarchical societal structures, power dynamics, and oppressive social systems, and what are the implications for individuality, social stratification, and privacy? Additionally, how does Orwell's ideological goal of "an English form of socialism" emerge in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a response to the rise of Stalinist communism? Then, we will explore to what extent do the works of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*, when analysed through Fredric Jameson's Historical level of interpretation, reveal the authors' role as active agents in reacting to social problems and cautioning readers about future threats, specifically in relation to the historical context of the Second World War, the Cold War, and the nuclear threat in Orwell's novel and the contemporary post-industrial late capitalist era in *Black Mirror*. We also wonder in this research: to what degree do the works of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* express a yearning for a utopian society?

This work is divided into six chapters. The first chapter, entitled "the social interpretation of the selected works" will focus on employing Fredric Jameson's concept of the social level interpretation to analyse both works. The chapter will explore how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* depict hierarchical societal structures, where individuals' worth is determined by their social ratings, as seen in episodes like *Nosedive* and to some extent in "Fifteen Million Merits". In this part we will delve into the power dynamics and control mechanisms portrayed in the works, including surveillance, propaganda, and social conformity, and discuss the characters' struggle within these power dynamics. A comparison will be drawn between characters like Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Lacie in "Nosedive", highlighting their experiences and resistance against oppressive social systems. Furthermore, the chapter will investigate the ramifications and critiques of these social systems, such as the degradation of individuality, the

consequences of social stratification, and the loss of privacy. It will also show how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a hidden manifestation of Orwell's ideological goal, pushing for "an English form of socialism" in response to the growth of Stalinist communism.

The second chapter, in its turn, is entitled "historical level of interpretation in the selected works". It will focus on applying Jameson's interpretive method, as developed in *The Political Unconscious*, to both *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected *Black Mirror* episodes. The chapter will dive into the historical settings that affected the creation of these works, looking at how George Orwell responded to authoritarian governments, and how *Black Mirror* reflects modern technology breakthroughs. This section will look at how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is inspired by the emergence of totalitarianism in the mid-twentieth century, whereas the chosen *Black Mirror* episodes comment on the impact of social media, surveillance culture, and artificial intelligence advancements. It will also investigate how these historical factors shape the themes and ideas communicated in the works through an examination of these historical influences. It will also contain Fredric Jameson's concept of allegory and apply an allegorical reading to identify symbolic connections, such as Big Brother representing Stalin and "Fifteen Million" Merits highlighting the abuses within talent shows and popular culture industries.

In the third chapter entitled "the utopian impulse in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Fifteen Million Merits": a comparative analysis," the focus will be on examining the presence of the utopian impulse within the dystopian settings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Fifteen Million Merits". This analysis will explore elements of hope, idealism, and aspirations for a better future that emerge in the oppressive societies portrayed in both works. It will delve into the characters' pursuit of freedom, autonomy, or escape from their oppressive systems. Additionally, the chapter will discuss the juxtaposition between the dystopian societies and moments of utopian longing or desire present throughout the narratives. The implications of these utopian elements will be explored, considering whether they represent genuine aspirations or if they are ultimately subverted by the harsh realities of the depicted worlds. This part will draw upon specific examples from the texts and the episode of "Fifteen Million Merits", as well as relevant scholarly sources, to support the analysis and provide a concrete understanding of the social, historical, and utopian interpretations in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Fifteen Millions Merits". The chapter will also conduct a comparative analysis of George Orwell's novel and all of the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* in order to explore shared themes of dehumanization, abuse of technology, and reality distortion, offering insights into their critique of modern society, power dynamics,

and the effects of totalitarian systems.

The fourth part takes its theoretical bearings from Divina Frau-Meigs book *Penser la Société de l'Écran* (2011)<sup>70</sup> and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975)<sup>71</sup> to explore the possibility of considering Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a precursor to screen culture. The focus of this part will be on the omnipresence and dual function of the fictive tool "telescreen" as both a means for propaganda and surveillance, and most importantly, this section discusses the aim of controlling language in Orwell's novel and its outcome; the transition from a culture dominated by text to a one driven by visual media. In the same section, we explore the way in which the novel delves into the concern about the mechanization of literature and art. Considering the novel's limitation on the depiction of the posthuman condition, we employ the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* in our corpus to discuss this concept more exhaustively.

Thus, in the fifth chapter, we will illustrate the reflection of posthumanism in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*. Firstly, the series portrays a technophobic perspective on technology, highlighting societal anxieties and ethical dilemmas related to human augmentation and technological control. Episodes like "Fifteen Million Merits" and "Nosedive" illustrate the dystopian consequences of augmented humanity, where technological enhancements do not liberate individuals but rather entrap them in systems of control and commodification. These narratives critique late capitalism by depicting how technology can dehumanize and exploit individuals, reducing them to mere commodities for labor or entertainment. Furthermore, the series explores the intersection of biopower and technology, echoing Foucault's concept of governance through the regulation of bodies and lives.

In this final chapter, we will analyse selected episodes of *Black Mirror* through the lens of screen culture as developed by Serroy and Lipovetsky in *L'écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l'âge hypermoderne* (2007)<sup>72</sup>. The discussion is divided into three sections: the first examines the hyperbolic nature of the screen in "Fifteen Million Merits," our aim in this subpart is to highlight themes of hypersexuality, advertising, and surveillance as portrayed in the episode; the second part explores the fusion of entertainment and punishment in "White Bear", relying on René Girard's concept of the

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<sup>70</sup> Divina Frau-Meigs, *Penser la Société de l'Écran* Paris: Presse Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Originally published in French as *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, 1975.

<sup>72</sup> Lipovetsky Gilles, Serroy Jean, *L'écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l'âge hypermoderne*. Paris: Éd. Le Seuil, coll. La couleur des idées, 2007.

surrogate victim (victime émissaire) in his book *La Violence et le Sacré*<sup>73</sup> to showcase how Victoria is turned into an expelled figure. Lastly, in the third section we discuss the commodification of desire and social interactions relying on Debord's 'consumer society' and Foucault's panoptic surveillance. In order to emphasise thematic continuities, each episode is analysed separately while drawing comparisons and transitioning flexibly.

As far as the television series *Black Mirror* is concerned, our focus in this work will be dedicated to the episodes that we have mentioned in this introduction, however, we will mention other episodes throughout this work. In the last part of this thesis, for instance, we will ponder upon the episode of Joan is Awful and try to analyze it through the concept of surveillance capitalism.

### **D)- The social level of interpretation in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, “Fifteen Million Merits” “Nosedive” and “White Bear”**

Jameson's three levels of interpretation propose a framework for understanding literary and cultural texts.<sup>74</sup> He asserts that Marxism provides what he terms "the ultimate semantic precondition"<sup>75</sup> for literary and cultural texts to be fully understandable, and that text analysis must take place within three central frameworks that act as the semantic “horizons” of interpretation. The three levels, or “horizons”, of interpretation are the Political, the Social, and the Historical. In the Political level, the text is viewed as the individual literary work itself, whether it be a poem or a novel. Jameson distinguishes this perspective from a formal explanation, where the focus is on the formal aspects of the work.

The focus in this chapter will be on the second level of interpretation, referred to as the Social. This lens analyzes the text in the context of the larger discourse to which it belongs. Jameson's model concentrates on the social aspect of interpretation and makes a distinction between Marxian class discourse, which examines social classes in relation to one another, and mainstream sociological discourse, which examines social strata independently. Jameson contends that in order to comprehend one class, it is necessary to take into account how opposing classes interact with each other,<sup>76</sup> that is how the capitalist class and the working class interact. Interpretation at the social level entails seeing the text as one little expression within a larger class discourse that includes conversations and antagonistic

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<sup>73</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (translated by Patrick Gregory), Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1972.

<sup>74</sup> Jameson, Frederic, *The Political Unconscious*, pp.7-8.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*, pp.60

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, pp.79-71.

discourses between competing classes<sup>77</sup>. The building blocks of this dialogic system are referred to as "ideologemes", which might be real or false concepts, beliefs, values, prejudices, or even pre-narratives. The ideas and characters of the text are shaped by these ideologemes, which have both conceptual and narrative elements.<sup>78</sup>

### **1-In *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Indeed, in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the presence of social classes is a significant aspect that can be analysed relying on Jameson's Social framework of interpretation. Orwell's portrayal of social classes in the novel reveals the hierarchical structure of the society under the rule of "the Party". At the top of the hierarchy is the ruling class, represented by Big Brother and the Inner Party. They hold absolute power and control all aspects of life in Oceania. The middle class consists of the "Outer Party" members, such as Winston Smith, who are responsible for the administration and maintenance of the Party's control. Lastly, the lower class, or "the proles", represent the working class. Jameson's distinction between mainstream sociological discourse and Marxian class discourse becomes relevant when examining the social classes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Party's control over society is maintained through the manipulation and suppression of the middle and lower classes. Winston's job at the Ministry of Truth, where he alters historical records to fit the Party's narrative, exemplifies this manipulation. The Party also distorts reality by rewriting history. They claim to have improved the living conditions by demonising the capitalist past and presenting the Party as the liberator of the people.<sup>79</sup>

Professor Benmechiche in his doctoral thesis, mentioned earlier in the introduction, elucidates how Orwell's experience in Spain revealed to him the distortion of socialist ideals by Russian communists, who aimed to export their revolution and establish totalitarian systems aligned with Soviet ideology.<sup>80</sup> This disillusionment led Orwell to reject Russian communism and embrace "the English brand of socialism."<sup>81</sup> He criticized the British intelligentsia for their silence on the purges committed by Stalin, attributing it to the influence of the Soviet myth on the Western socialist movement. Even though Orwell never visited the USSR, he gained insight into its totalitarian nature through reviews of books

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, pp.61.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>79</sup> Orwell, George, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, 1949, p.39.

<sup>80</sup> Benmechiche, Hacéne the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertnard Russe 2016, p.181.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, p.181

written by sympathisers of the Russian revolution.<sup>82</sup> He saw similarities between the Soviet system and fascism, with power concentrated in the hands of a few, and the proletariat stripped of rights and reduced to a state resembling serfdom. Orwell opposed war against Germany, believing it would perpetuate imperialism and lead to the imposition of totalitarian regimes. He highlighted the impact of modern mass media and psychological manipulation on controlling people's thoughts and actions. Orwell rejected both fascism and communism, fearing that a victory by Hitler could pave the way for an "English version of fascism". He advocated for a socialist state based on common ownership, equality, political democracy, and the abolition of hereditary privilege. Orwell also acknowledged the efficiency of German National Socialism compared to England's shortcomings but emphasised the distinction in their treatment of equality and superiority.<sup>83</sup>

The concept of "the Revolution" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* parallels the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, depicting the historical overthrow of the old Tsarist capitalist system. Moreover, the social classes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflect Orwell's mistrust of totalitarian regimes, including fascism, Nazism, and communism. He highlights the tendency of the middleclass, represented by the Party, to subvert revolutions and exploit the lower class once in power. Orwell's critical view of the perversion of socialist ideals is evident in his use of satire. An example of this satire can be seen in his allegorical novella *Animal Farm*<sup>84</sup> (1945), where the leaders of the rebellion, the pigs, establish a new form of tyranny. Understanding the social classes and their relationships in the story of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* implies relying on the depiction of the theory of "oligarchical collectivism" as it is described in the fictional Goldstein's book "Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism". According to Goldstein's idea, society is split into three classes: high, middle, and poor. While taking advantage of and manipulating the lower class's destitution, the middle class elites, as represented by the Party, are constantly working to topple the upper class and impose their authority.<sup>85</sup>

This notion of oligarchical collectivism sheds light on the power dynamics and the subversion of revolutions depicted in the novel. It suggests that the middle class, often associated with intellectuals and professionals, can become the driving force behind revolutions, advocating principles of equality and liberation. However, once in power, they betray their initial ideals and perpetuate a new form of oppression and inequality, discarding

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<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, pp.182-184.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>84</sup> Orwell, George. *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1945.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, p.213-230.



the lower class. By utilising Jameson's model, the inclusion of social classes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* becomes crucial for understanding the dystopian society presented in the book. Through the depiction of these social classes and their interactions, Orwell effectively communicates his critique of totalitarian regimes, his advocacy for democratic socialism, and his scepticism towards the misuse of authority.

Moreover, according to Jameson, it is necessary to understand texts or cultural artefacts using a dialogical method, much like Michael Bakhtin did with his idea of numerous voices in a text.<sup>86</sup> Jameson emphasises that the dialogical nature of class discourse is fundamentally antagonistic, with opposing discourses engaging in a struggle within a shared code.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, according to him, it is crucial to consider each text as a single utterance or "parole" and reframe it within the framework of the greater class discourse. To apply this dialogical method to the analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, it becomes crucial to consider the text as a manifestation of class struggle. Indeed, the text examines how the social classes interact and conflict with one another. The portrayal of the Party as the ruling elite, the middle class intellectuals manipulating and exploiting the lower class, and the suppression of individual thought and dissent are all elements that can be understood within the framework of the greater class discourse. To reformulate, "the framework of greater class discourse" refers to the broader discussion and analysis of social classes and their interactions within a specific society or context. Hence, we suggest that the portrayal of social classes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, including the ruling elite, known as "the inner Party", the middle class, referred to as "the outer Party" and the lower class, called "the proles" can be understood and interpreted in relation to the larger discussion and dynamics of class struggle. By examining how these social classes interact, conflict, and exert power, we gain insights into the overall discourse surrounding class relations in the novel.

In order to explain this dialogic system Jameson presents the idea of "ideologeme," a versatile formation that might take the shape of a false idea, a belief system, an abstract value, an opinion, a prejudice, or a proto-narrative. Both intellectual and narrative dimensions are present in the "ideologeme. In order to explain this dialogic system Jameson presents the idea of "ideologeme," an amphibious formation that might take the shape of a false idea, a belief system, an abstract value, an opinion, a prejudice, or a proto-narrative, To quote Jameson:

This larger class discourse can be said to be organized around minimal "units" which we will call ideologemes. The advantage of this formulation lies in its capacity to mediate between conceptions of ideology as abstract opinion, class value, and the like, and the narrative materials with which we

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<sup>86</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p.190.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid*, p.79.

will be working here. The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudo idea- a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice — or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the "collective characters" which are the classes opposition.<sup>88</sup>

In plain language, according to Jameson, we can relate abstract concepts like beliefs and values with the stories and narratives we employ to comprehend them thanks to these ideologemes. Ideologemes have the benefit of bridging the gap between abstract ideas and the concrete tales we work with. An ideology is a fluid creation that can take the shape of a “protonarrative”,<sup>89</sup> which is like a compelling fantasy about various social strata and how they interact, or a pseudo concept, like a belief system or bias. The concept of ideologemes is a useful tool to analyse further how themes of power, manipulation, and resistance are conveyed in Orwell’s novel.

Big Brother for instance can be seen as an ideologeme, he dominates the psyche of Oceania's inhabitants, symbolising absolute power and control. Big Brother embodies the Party's surveillance apparatus, omnipresent and all-knowing. Through the haunting reminder of "Big Brother is watching you,"<sup>90</sup> this figure can be perceived as an embodiment of an ideologeme that instil fear, paranoia, and self-censorship among the citizens, ultimately eroding their individuality and autonomy. Big Brother serves as a constant reminder of the oppressive power structures that govern the lives of Oceania's inhabitants. Moreover, language as a tool of control is exemplified through the ideologeme of Newspeak. Newspeak represents the Party's manipulation of language to restrict thought and stifle dissent. By eliminating words that could express rebellious or subversive ideas, the Party aims to narrow the range of acceptable thoughts, ensuring conformity and perpetuating its dominance. Newspeak highlights the inseparable link between language, thought, and power, demonstrating how control over language facilitates control over the minds of the individuals of Oceania. Further discussion of the concept of Newspeak in Orwell's novel and its implications will be discussed in the second part of this discussion.

Moreover, the concept of “Doublethink” emerges as a paradoxical ideologeme that epitomises the ideological contradictions prevalent in Oceania. Citizens are compelled to accept conflicting ideas simultaneously, blurring the lines between truth and falsehood. Doublethink indoctrinates the populace and makes them accept and embrace contradictions

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid*, pp.72,73

<sup>90</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.3.

such as: “War is peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength”<sup>91</sup>. The Party’s aim here is to erode their capacity for critical thinking and reinforce its control over their perception of reality. This ideologeme showcases the Party's manipulation of the individual's thoughts and emotions, compelling them to embrace cognitive dissonance and embrace the Party's version of truth. While the Party maintains a tight grip on power, the ideologeme of the proles, the marginalised working class, embodies the potential for resistance. The Party largely overlooks the proles, perceiving them as lacking the intellectual capacity to challenge their authority. However, the proles symbolise the flickering hope for liberation, possessing an innate humanity and collective strength. Though their rebellion may manifest in subconscious acts of defiance rather than overt political activism, the proles embody the essence of resilience and the possibility of a future uprising against the Party's oppressive regime.

Jameson argues that ideology goes beyond merely influencing symbolic production; rather, the act of creating art itself is inherently ideological. Art serves the purpose of imagining and presenting imaginative, sometimes fantastical, solutions to the fundamental contradictions of a class-based society. The individual text is seen as a form of expression within a social context. Therefore, according to Jameson, in order to fully understand the individual text as a symbolic act, it is necessary to consider its place within the narrowly political level before examining its broader discourse. This involves identifying the contradictions that the work seeks to symbolically resolve. In the following quote Jameson emphasises the commitment of the text with the real, which refers to that which cannot be fully represented or symbolised. The text incorporates and reflects the real within its own structure, functioning as a symbolic action. In this light Jameson writes that:

ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions.<sup>92</sup>

The quote above highlights Jameson's perspective on the relationship between ideology and cultural texts or artefacts. According to Jameson, the production of aesthetic or narrative form, such as in visual art, is itself an ideological act. It serves the function of inventing imaginary or formal "solutions" to social contradictions that may be unresolvable in their own terms. This perspective suggests that ideology is not something external to symbolic production but is inherent in the aesthetic act itself. In this light, Orwell's depiction of the subversion of revolutions in his works reflects his viewpoint on Soviet Russian

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<sup>91</sup> *ibid*, p.49.

<sup>92</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p.64.

communism.

He favoured the British conception of socialism, which advocates for peaceful revolution and gradual reforms to improve the conditions of the working class.<sup>93</sup> His literary works can be seen as a call to resist the spread of radical communism in Britain and instead embrace British democratic socialism to address workers' conditions and establish equality.

Orwell's personal experience led him to believe that common working-class people perceived socialism differently based on their concrete experiences, while intellectuals often justify the abuse of power by tyrants.<sup>94</sup> In his essay *Why I Joined the Labor Party* (1949) Orwell explains his decision to join the Independent Labour Party, expressing trust in its genuine intentions and highlighting the negative influence of money on media and the rise of fascism.<sup>95</sup>

Orwell advocates for democratic socialism and states clearly that his serious work since 1936 has been written against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism.<sup>96</sup> However, he distinguishes between the practices of the Soviet Union and what he sees as true socialism. He believes that with the right institutions and rules, such as checks and balances, socialism can bring positive change to society.<sup>97</sup> In this context, Orwell's novel serves as both an ideology and a utopia. It advocates for democratic socialism rooted in British values while rejecting the collectivist ideology of Soviet Russian socialism. Orwell aims to protect the traditions and individualistic values of his country in the face of what he perceives as a foreign threat, specifically Stalinist communism. Simultaneously, the novel presents a dystopian vision to convey a utopian aspiration, envisioning a future that overcomes the nightmarish destiny it portrays.

## **1-2- The social level of interpretation in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror***

### **1-2-1 Fifteen Million Merits: (a comment on the entertainment industry):**

In light of Jameson's framework of interpretation, the analysis of "Fifteen Million"

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<sup>93</sup>Benmechiche, "Hacene the quest for utopia: from Samuel Bulter to Bertrand Russell" (2016), p.181

<sup>94</sup>Kumar, Krishan, *Utopia & Anti -Utopia in Modern Times* (1987), p.301.

<sup>95</sup>Orwell, George, *Why I Joined the Labor Party*, London: New Leader Magazine, 24 June 1938

<sup>96</sup>Orwell, George, *Why I write*, London: Horizon Magazine, 1946, 4.

<sup>97</sup>Michael, Makovi, *George Orwell as a Public Choice Economist*, 215, p.188: Available on <https://www-jstor-org.www.sndll.arn> (accessed on March 13th, 2023).

*Merits* can be situated within a larger social discourse. Jameson's emphasis on understanding social classes in relation to one another aligns with the episode's exploration of capitalism, authenticity, and the manipulation of emotions. The episode depicts a dystopian society where the masses are easily manipulated and exploited by powerful elites, reflecting the dynamics of class struggle. By analysing how the episode portrays the interaction between the general population and the privileged class, we can understand the wider social significance and the criticism of capitalist systems depicted in the story, as well as uncovering the left-leaning political inclinations of Charlie Brooker, the writer of the television series. To exemplify this facet, we can see how the characters' physical and emotional experiences on the bikes serve as a metaphor for the way in which modern society compels individuals to constantly work and consume. The episode thus becomes a commentary on the destructive effects of late capitalism, in which individuals are alienated from their work, their bodies, and their relationships.

In his article “behind the Black Mirror: the limits of orwellian dystopia” (2019)<sup>98</sup>, Tony McKenn examines the critique of entertainment culture and its connection to capitalist dynamics in the episode “Fifteen Million Merits”.<sup>99</sup> The author praises Brooker's ability to expose the cruelty and hypocrisy of reality TV shows like “Big Brother” and talent competitions such as “Pop Idol” or “X Factor.”<sup>100</sup> According to him, the episode exposes the commodification and degradation of authenticity, particularly through the transformation of Abi's talent into a spectacle.

Bing's rebellion is initially embraced but ultimately co-opted by the system, highlighting the ways in which capitalism masks its exploitative mechanisms behind an appearance of authenticity<sup>101</sup>. McKenn also examines the characterization of the protagonists, arguing that they primarily serve as symbolic figures. Moreover, the portrayal of the easily manipulated masses and the powerful elites reflects a left-wing critique rooted in the rise of consumerism.<sup>102</sup> So, the episode offers commentary on capitalism, authenticity, and the manipulation of emotions in the entertainment industry.

Furthermore, Joe Conway, in his essay entitled “Currencies of control: Black Mirror, in time, and the monetary policies of dystopia (2019)<sup>103</sup> draws a comparison

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<sup>98</sup>McKenna, Tony, “behind the Black Mirror: the limits of Orwellian dystopia: *Journal of Socialist Theory*”, 2019 available on :<https://www.tandfonline-com.distant.bu.univ-rennes2.fr/doi/full/10.1080/03017605.2019.1601887> (accessed on March 12th, 2023).

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Conway, Joe, *Currencies of control: “Black Mirror, in Time, and the monetary policies of dystopia”*, Michigan: Michigan State University Press. 2019.

between “Fifteen Million Merits” and the rise of cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin. He suggests that these cryptocurrencies present a potential threat to established trust-based financial exchange systems<sup>104</sup>. He explains that “Fifteen Million Merits” portrays a society where physical currency is no longer used, and instead, the very basic rhythms of human life, such as sleep and waking, are forcibly taken from individuals since birth by hidden political mechanisms.<sup>105</sup> According to him, these mechanisms, translate these captured aspects of human existence into data and then exploit them as a form of capital<sup>106</sup>. This issue raises concerns about individual privacy and the balance between effectiveness, control, and personal autonomy in a digitalized economic landscape, emphasising the interconnections of technological advancements, social structures, and economic ideologies<sup>107</sup>. In this light, we can argue that Joe Conway's analysis of the *Black Mirror* episode “Fifteen Million Merits” aligns with Jameson's social level of interpretation by examining the episode's portrayal of a dystopian society in relation to larger social and economic discourse.

### **1-2-2 The social level of interpretation in “White Bear”:**

Conley Donovan and Benjamin Burroughs argue in their article entitled “Black Mirror, mediated affect and the political” (2019) that the plot of “White Bear” tests the emotional tolerance of the audience for violently executed justice. They suggest that the show makes the audience think about how mediated public justice can be worse than the most horrific acts, including kidnapping and torture, as they see the woman's suffering as retribution for her crimes. This moral conundrum incites strong feelings of sympathy for the woman as well as a desire for vigilantism in the audience. A response that neither entirely accepts nor completely rejects the show's disturbing spectacle may result from viewers' conflicting feelings as they swing between sympathy and contempt. They add that *Black Mirror* emphasises that its viewers are both “complicit witnesses” and observers, making it impossible for them to claim innocence. Furthermore, the authors of the article suggest that in the episode “White Bear” viewers are compelled to seek vengeance and critique mediated exposure, and are unable to disengage as implicated witnesses.<sup>108</sup> The revelation that spectators paid to witness the spectacle of “justice” satirises reality television and the

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<sup>104</sup> *ibid*, 232

<sup>105</sup> *ibid*, pp.253-236

<sup>106</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>108</sup> Donovan, Conley & Burroughs, Benjamin: “Black Mirror, mediated affect and the political”, Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2019, p.150.

perverse enjoyment derived from others' suffering, creating an atmosphere of expectation and dread.<sup>109</sup>

Analysing the episode “White Bear” of *Black Mirror* through the social level of interpretation, we can examine the class discourse and analysis of class within a larger discourse. Jameson's paradigm emphasises the connection between social classes, and in the context of the episode, it can be observed that the voyeurs who participate in Victoria's punishment represent a distinct class, driven by a sadistic urge for entertainment rather than seeking justice. The episode exposes the spectacle-driven society dominated by images and media, where the pursuit of true justice is overshadowed by the desire for sensationalism. The staff of the “White Bear Justice Park” prioritises putting on a show over the genuine pursuit of justice, highlighting the class dynamics and the exploitative nature of the system. Furthermore, the episode raises questions about the ethics of public justice and the complicity of the audience as witnesses to the spectacle, blurring the lines between sympathy, contempt, and voyeurism.

Conway argues that the plot of “Fifteen Million Merits” depicts a shift in capitalism from its austere origins to a more hedonistic nature. To reformulate, the transformation is presented by showcasing a community where people prioritise amusement, self-gratification, and the quest for enjoyment. This portrayal signifies a departure from the previous emphasis on self-control, thriftiness, and rigorous economic principles typically linked with conventional capitalism. Through the social level of interpretation, the episode offers a critique of the class-based dynamics, justice, and the impact of mediated exposure in modern society.

### **1-2-3 The social level of interpretation in “Nosedive”:**

By applying Jameson's concept of the "Social horizon" to the analysis of the episode Nosedive, we can deepen our understanding of its socio-cultural influences and explore the effects of its Americanization on the narrative, aesthetics, and audience reception. Riesco's article, “Black Mirror does America; or, the netflixization of season 3” (2019), highlights the significant transformations that *Black Mirror* has undergone in its production and distribution, particularly with Netflix's acquisition of its streaming rights in the United States. This shift has been accompanied by a perceived decline in the political influence of the show's initial run. Some contend that the show's critical and dystopian reflection on social concerns was diminished by the emphasis on mainstream appeal and the requirement

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

for worldwide accessibility. The show's departure from its British roots, tone alterations, and shift in narrative focus are all thought to have diminished its political influence.<sup>110</sup> This expansion into the American market necessitates an exploration of how the show engages with the social level of interpretation within Jameson's theoretical framework. We argue that the episode "Nosedive" serves as a compelling case study, as it reflects its sociology-cultural context and draws upon traditions in American films to comment on pertinent themes. Through its depiction of the middle-class suburb houses, for instance, the episode offers a social commentary on the pressures and expectations associated with societal norms and the relentless pursuit of social status, which is reminiscent of the same depiction in *The Truman Show* (1998) movie (Directed by Peter Weir. Paramount Pictures, 1998.) for example. In line with Jameson's emphasis on understanding texts within broader discourses, the episode reveals the anxieties and desires prevalent in contemporary American culture, particularly regarding image-consciousness and the performative nature of identity in the digital age.<sup>111</sup>

Additionally, the episode delves into the theme of social stratification, presenting a society structured around individuals' social ratings. According to Riesco This stratification mirrors the wider socioeconomic disparities in American society, where social status often determines access to resources and opportunities.<sup>112</sup> Thus, we argue that exploring the "Americanized version" of *Black Mirror* unveils how the show engages with the political unconscious to expose and interrogate the underlying structures and ideologies shaping the American experience.

The Americanization of *Black Mirror* is evident in various aspects, including aesthetic modifications, thematic shifts, and changes in comedic tone. Increased budget and longer episode lengths cater to the demands of the streaming platform and its target audience. The show's visual style, characterised by overproduced images, aims to capture the attention of a larger American audience, aligning with the need to engage viewers across multiple devices in a competitive media landscape. These changes reflect an adaptation to the economic and technological conditions of the streaming era.

Furthermore, the shift towards an Americanized tone and subject matter responds to the cultural and market forces influencing media consumption. By catering to an American

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<sup>110</sup>Riesco, Daniel, *Black Mirror does america; or, the Netflixization of season 3*. Northwest Jammin, 2017, p.1. Source:<https://medium.com/northwest-jammin/black-mirror-does-america-or-the-netflixization-of-season-3-f736bca6b1a>

<sup>111</sup> Schmerheim Philipp, *Scepticism Films: knowing and Doubting the World in Contemporary Cinema*., New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney 2016, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc, p.167

<sup>112</sup>Riesco, Daniel, "Black Mirror does america; or, the Netflixization of season 3".



audience, *Black Mirror* aligns itself with dominant cultural norms and preferences, potentially increasing its popularity and reach. This strategic adaptation demonstrates the interconnections between language events (visual style and humour), social upheavals (cultural shifts and audience preferences), and economic contradictions (competition in the streaming market). These elements are not artificially linked but are shaped by the broader sociological, cultural and economic context in which the parts of the television series were produced. Jameson's theory underscores the importance of considering socioeconomic and cultural factors in artistic production and consumption. This urges us to analyse the shift in *Black Mirror* (2011) through a lens that recognizes the complex interplay between language, society, and economics. This perspective sheds light on the political unconscious implications of the show's Americanization and prompts critical reflection on the cultural, ideological, and economic dimensions at play.

## **II) The historical interpretation in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror***

In the second chapter of our analysis, we shift from our examination of the social and ideological dimensions discussed in the first chapter to the application of Jameson's Historical interpretation, focusing first on Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and subsequently on selected episodes of *Black Mirror*. Our primary goal in this part is to demonstrate how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* operates as a historical narrative, to demonstrate how Orwell's intentional resistance to prevailing political and cultural influences of his time, specifically addressing the Second World War, the Cold War tensions, and the associated nuclear threat. Relying on Jameson's historical interpretation, we delve into Orwell's disillusionment with socialism and democracy, shaping the novel's narrative in the context of the Cold War. The aim is to highlight how the novel functions as a cautionary tale about language manipulation, totalitarianism, and conformity to ideology. This chapter also delves into Orwell's use of satire and parody, to uncover his critiques of Soviet Russia and British society during his time.

The analysis concludes by unraveling the social symbolism in Orwell's depiction of the working class, illustrating how historical ideologies shape perspectives. The narrative serves as a reflective commentary on major historical events in post second war Britain, which sets Orwell among authors of that period as an active agent shaping and responding to historical events while providing prescient warnings about potential perceived future threats. Therefore, this dual role of authorship emerges as a central theme in our analysis,

emphasising the profound impact of literature from that era as a medium for sociology-political commentary and foresight.

In the second part of this chapter, we delve into the analysis of the *Black Mirror* episodes, starting with “Fifteen Million Merits”. We rely on Jameson's Historical interpretation, to suggest that this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the dystopian society depicted in the episode. We showcase that this episode portrays the capitalist hierarchy, social class formations, and the dehumanising effects of the dominant mode of production as depicted in the narrative. The discussion of “White Bear” in its turn explores the intersection of live and digital economies in Victoria's punishment. Revealing how the episode reflects contemporary cultural practices and the neoliberalisation of governance. Additionally, the shift from public punishment to cultural exhibitions underscores the interplay between power, entertainment, and punishment. Finally, in the examination of “Nosedive,” we uncover the critique of the middle-class suburban lifestyle and the obsession with social approval, while drawing on Jameson's ideology of form, to analyse how the episode satirises societal norms, loss of individual agency, and the dehumanising effects of constant performance for social validation. Further, the discussion delves also into Baudrillard's perspective on “pastel colours” and Freud's concept of the uncanny, in order to provide a nuanced understanding of the episode's themes. We contend that the Historical level of interpretation, where Jameson argues that one mode of production should be understood in relation to other modes and social class formations, can help us better understand the dystopian society depicted in *Black Mirror* episode “Fifteen Million Merits”.

### **Frederic Jameson's historical level of interpretation:**

The Historical level of interpretation in literary criticism according to Fredrich Jameson emphasises the significance of history as the ultimate authority. Drawing from Marxist theory, Jameson explains that each stage of historical development is associated with a specific mode of production<sup>113</sup> and its corresponding “ideoloeme”. These ideologemes can be understood through the contradictions present in various sign systems. To illustrate, the following quote underscores this idea: “Within this new horizon, then, our object of study will prove to be the ideologeme, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes.”<sup>114</sup>

In the quote above Jameson suggests that in the broader perspective of interpreting

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<sup>113</sup>Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 18.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid*, p.61.

literary texts, the focus of our analysis should be on the ideologeme, which he defines as the smallest meaningful component of the conflicting discourses among social classes. In simpler terms, he suggests that when we look at society from a wider viewpoint, we should pay attention to the smallest elements that reveal the disagreements and tensions between different social groups<sup>115</sup>. Therefore, Jameson posits that considering the larger scope of human history and the different ways societies have organised themselves economically (modes of production), changes how we see the values and aspirations of any given society. Therefore, his broader perspective alters how we interpret not only individual texts but also the underlying ideas or beliefs (ideologemes) within them. He argues that we should analyse these texts in light of what he terms the “ideology of form,” which refers to the symbolic messages conveyed through the coexistence of different sign systems. Simply put, Jameson posits that understanding the deeper meaning of texts involves recognizing how they reflect and anticipate economic structures and social relations. The following quote from Jameson’s work illustrates this idea:

When finally, even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativized perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole, and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production, both the individual text and its ideologemes know a final transformation, and must be read in terms of what I will call the ideology of form, that is, the symbolic messages transmitted to us by the coexistence of various sign systems which are themselves traces or anticipations of modes of production <sup>116</sup>

The quote above underscores this concept, suggesting that when the passions and values of a social formation are viewed in the broader context of human history and its modes of production, both individual texts and their ideologemes undergo a final transformation. This transformation requires reading them through the lens of the “ideology of form,” which refers to the symbolic messages conveyed by the coexistence of different sign systems, serving as traces or anticipations of various modes of production. In simpler terms, the quote highlights how understanding the historical context, conflicting sign systems, and their symbolic languages is crucial for interpreting texts and their underlying ideologies. Jameson adds that cultural revolution occurs when different modes of production become visibly antagonistic. Patriarchy, for example, is viewed as an archaic mode based on gender division of labour. The following quote from Jameson’s work illustrates this idea:

Previous modes of production have been accompanied by cultural revolutions specific to them of which the neolithic “cultural revolution,” say, the triumph of patriarchy over the older matriarchal or tribal forms, or the victory of Hellenic

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Frederich Jameson *The Political Unconscious*, 61.

"justice" and the new legality of the polis over the vendetta system are only the most dramatic manifestations. The concept of cultural revolution, then--or more precisely, the reconstruction of the materials of cultural and literary history in the form of this new "text" or object of study which is cultural revolution--may be expected to project a whole new framework for the humanities, in which the study of culture in the widest sense could be placed on a materialist basis.<sup>117</sup>

The quote above suggests that throughout history, shifts in economic systems have been accompanied by significant cultural revolutions. For instance, the transition from matriarchal or tribal forms to patriarchy during the neolithic period or the establishment of Hellenic "justice" replacing the vendetta system in ancient Greece are highlighted as major transformations. These cultural shifts represent moments when societies underwent profound changes in their values, norms, and social structures.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, Jameson argues that history is not a reified force, but rather an entity that sets limits on individual and collective actions. Moreover, according to him, understanding history requires examining its effects, as it shapes and influences contemporary society.

## **1- The historical level in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)**

### **1-1- The Cold War context:**

Considering the theoretical discussion above, it becomes clear that understanding the historical context of the novel helps us gain insights into how Orwell's personal experiences shaped his critique of post War British society and how it contributed to the development of the novel.

It is worthy of consideration that the Bolshevik Revolution, led by Vladimir Lenin in 1917, had profound implications not just for Russia but also for global history, particularly in Europe. The success of this revolution ignited widespread social change, prompting urgent calls for various social reforms. As a result, political leaders and policymakers in Europe, especially in the aftermath of World War I, were compelled to engage in discussions and responses to this transformative societal shift. In this light, Asa Briggs states in his work *A Social History of England* (1999) that:

Revolution in Russia, culminating in the Bolshevik victory of October 1917, directed attention to fundamental social issues. It was in such circumstances that politicians now began to talk more and more about reconstruction of changing society after war.<sup>119</sup>

After the devastating Second World War with its genocidal outcome, several major world powers were weakened, and many of the liberal and imperial countries had to cease

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<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, p.82.

<sup>119</sup> Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*. England: Penguin Books, 1999, 287.

their colonies. Communism was being propagated by the communist leaders throughout Europe. In addition, many of the African colonised countries have endorsed the socialist values against their capitalist colonisers, hence, Marxism influenced the revolutionary intellectuals and liberation movements in these colonies. Additionally, after the Second World War, socialism has gained large support not only from Eastern Europeans, but also from intellectuals in the west.<sup>120</sup>

In the same context, the right wing was associated with the defeated axis. Whereas the communist Soviet Union played a significant role in fighting and defeating against Nazism. Hence, communism became an attractive alternative for many people in establishing equality and improving the socio-economic conditions. So, the Soviets became ambitious in dominating and expending their power. As a result, the American leaders were worried by this spreading power of the Soviet Union. Thus, emerged the ideological struggle between the two camps.<sup>121</sup> During this heated stage of the struggle, appeared the threatening arm race. For example, dropping the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.<sup>122</sup>

Such paramount transformation created the disillusionment of the younger generations along with the avant-gardist literature. Also, many writers felt the urge to depict the situation. Thus, appeared the debate among the literary milieu whether to remain neutral or participate in the ideological struggle. In fact, the intellectuals and writers were motivated to remedy the conditions of workers and the subjected peoples, who were suffering from tyranny of their own government. However, the writers feared that the rise of a potential worker's or a communist revolution in the West would lead to totalitarianism or a dictatorship of the proletariat. This fear stems from the witnessed corrupt practices of the extremist Stalinist regimes. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* mirrors the anxieties and suspicions created by the Cold War era as witnessed by the British author George Orwell.

As far as Britain is concerned, the Labour Party, which was created in 1900, played an important role in standing against radical politics from both communism and fascism. In fact, the labor Party had a different conception of socialism from the Marxist socialism. Indeed, Karl Marx suggests in his *Das Kapital*<sup>123</sup> and *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)<sup>124</sup> that history is shaped by class struggle and that inside the capitalist society the proletariats (the working

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<sup>120</sup>Melvyn, P. Leffler, and David, S. Painter, *Origins of the Cold War*, Psychology Press: 2005,32 .

<sup>121</sup>*ibid*, p.326.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>123</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Hamburg: Otto Meissner, 1867.

<sup>124</sup>Karl Marx, Frederich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. London: the Communist League, 1848.

class) have to sell their physical efforts in order to gain their wage. In this process, their employers, referred to as the bourgeoisie, often exploit these workers. Therefore, Marx calls for a Revolution in order to establish equality and create a classless society. Whereas the British Labour Party sought to establish a socialist society not through a revolution, but through encouraging and establishing labor unions without having to abolish private property. In fact, these were the values of the Fabian Society which is a British socialist organisation founded on 4 January 1884 in London, its aim was to spread social principles through social reforms rather than revolutions.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Pauline Gregg states in her book *A Social and Economic History of Britain* that:

Politically, as the power of the State grew stronger, rival forms of totalitarianism disputed its control in the forms of communism and fascism. In Britain liberalism and individualism grew weaker, but after the Second World War it was the labor Party which found itself at the head of the State, with an enormous concentration of power in its hands, which it attempted to use not in the form of crude dictatorship, but of socialist democracy.<sup>125</sup>

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* serves as a reflection of the societal challenges and upheavals characteristic of the post-war period, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the wartime conditions without directly encountering them. To exemplify from the novel a picture which depicts these conditions, we refer to Winston Smith's residence where there is a smell of 'boiled cabbage and old rag mats', the shortage of razor blades, the cheap victory Gin, the unhealthy faces of people as well as the ill-fitting clothes.<sup>126</sup> This characterises the absurdity of life resulting from the war, Krishan Kumar in "Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times (1987)" states in this regard that:

In one of its aspects *Nineteen Eighty Four* was about a world familiar to anybody who lived in Britain during the war that began in 1939. "The reductions in rations, the odious food, the sometimes unobtainable and always dubiously authentic drink, these were with us still when the book appeared."<sup>127</sup>

Therefore, beneath the dystopian settings of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* lies a nuanced interplay of historical context and ideological message or tone, offering a potent examination of totalitarianism. In his article "The Mysticism of Cruelty", Isaac Deutscher sheds light on the novel's tremendous political significance and offers insightful information about Orwell's political development. Drawing upon Frederic Jameson's concept of the political unconscious helps us to explore the relevance of the historical level in understanding the socially symbolic acts present in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Deutscher argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* serves as a reflection of Orwell's deep disillusionment with both

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<sup>125</sup>Pauline, Gregg, *A Social and Economic History of Britain 1760-198*, Oxford: Holywell Manor, 1949, p.545.

<sup>126</sup>George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, London: Penguin Random House, 1949, p.5.

<sup>127</sup>Krishan Kumar, *Utopia & Anti -Utopia in Modern Times*, New York: Blackwell, 198, p.296.

socialism and democracy. The novel encompasses his disdain for various aspects of his surroundings, including the drabness of English industrial suburbs, government controls, shoddy newspapers saturated with sensationalism, and the restrictive measures imposed during the second World War in Britain.

Furthermore, one of the remarkable aspects of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is its enduring popularity and its transformation into an ideological super-weapon during the Cold War era. Deutscher highlights how the fear of communism that swept the Western world became concentrated in this novel. It came to symbolise the anxieties and apprehensions associated with totalitarian regimes, making it a potent tool for political critique.<sup>128</sup> Deutscher suggests that similar to physical super-weapons, fictions like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could be employed ideologically, regardless of the author's original intentions. Indeed, this phenomenon emphasises the immense political influence that cultural artefacts can possess. (Deutscher Isaac, *The Mysticism of Cruelty*. London: Hamish and Hamilton, 1995.<sup>129</sup>

## **1-2- Newspeak: language as an ideological tool in Orwell's novel:**

As discussed in the first chapter "the Party" in Oceania creates a new form of language called "Newspeak" with the aim of restricting free thought and imposing conformity to the State's ideology. The Party gradually reduces vocabulary and grammar, making certain concepts unthinkable. Syme, a philologist who works with the Party, reveals to Winston the Party's intentions behind this strategy in the passage where he tells him that:

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it, Every concept that can be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten .<sup>130</sup>

The quote highlights that Newspeak serves as more than just an artificial language in the novel; it functions as a potent instrument for totalitarian control. Newspeak does not only limit the vocabulary required to express dissent but also undermines the very ability to conceptualise resistance. The quote also depicts a deliberate linguistic strategy to limit "thoughtcrime"<sup>131</sup>

by simplifying the language to such an extent that heretical thoughts become unspeakable,

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<sup>128</sup>Deutscher Isaac, *The Mysticism of Cruelty*. London: Hamish and Hamilton, 1995.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1955/1984.htm>

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 60.

<sup>131</sup>Thoughtcrime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* refers to the criminal act of holding unorthodox or rebellious thoughts against the government, referred to as "the Party". It is heavily punished by this totalitarian regime.

and therefore unthinkable. This concept of language as a means of restricting thought and molding consciousness finds its echo within Norman Fairclough's work on discourse theory in his book *Discourse and Social Change* (1992), where he draws upon from different scholars including Antonio Gramsci,<sup>132</sup> Louis Althusser<sup>133</sup>, Michel Foucault<sup>134</sup>, and Anthony Giddens<sup>135</sup>. Discourse theory asserts that language plays a crucial role in the exercise of power and the maintenance of ideological dominance. To illustrate from Fairclough's work, he states that:

Discourse' is widely used in social theory and analysis, for example in the work of Michel Foucault, to refer to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice. Thus the discourse of 'medical science' is currently the dominant one in the practice of health care, though it contrasts with various wholistic 'alternative' discourses (e.g. those of homeopathy and acupuncture) as well as popular 'folk' discourses. Discourses in this sense are manifested in particular ways of using language and other symbolic forms such as visual images (see Thompson 1990). Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them; different discourses constitute key entities (be they 'mental illness', 'citizenship' or 'literacy') in different ways...people in different ways as social subjects (e.g. as doctors or patients), and it is these social effects of discourse that are focused upon in discourse analysis.<sup>136</sup>

In his book *The Archaeology of knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (1971) Foucault introduces the complex concept of discourse, which describes the role of language in constructing knowledge through a set of rules and practices that enable the production of meaning throughout different historical periods. Thus, discourse defines and produces the objects of human knowledge. In this regard Foucault states that:

[...] the term discourse...meant that which was produced (perhaps all that was produced) by the groups of signs. But I also meant a group of acts of formulation, a series of sentences or propositions. Lastly – and it is this meaning that was finally used... discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence.... the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation.<sup>137</sup>

Even though discourse analysis is not directly coined as a concept by Foucault, his work is a precursor to this concept. The Foucauldian concept of discourse explains how

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<sup>132</sup>Gramsci, A. 1971: *Selections from the prison notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence and Wishan.

<sup>133</sup>Althusser, L. 1971: Ideology and ideological state apparatuses. In L. Althusser (ed.), *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London: New Left Books.

<sup>134</sup> Foucault, M. 1971: *L'ordre du Discours*. Paris: Gallimard. 1972: *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications. 1979: *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1981: *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1982: The subject and power. Mterword to Dreyfus and Rabinow. 1982, 1984: The order of discourse. In M. Shapiro (ed.), *Langage and Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>135</sup>Giddens, A. 1984: *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press

<sup>136</sup> Norman, Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1992, p.3.

<sup>137</sup>Michel, Foucault, *The Archaeology of knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1971, p.107.



different fields of knowledge gain their authority or credibility through their narratives that become deeply embedded in the social fabric. Knowledge does not have inherent symmetry nor historical continuity, thus social institutions such as schools have to teach different disciplines in an organized way in order to achieve coherence, deciding what is relevant and legitimate and what is not, in any given field of knowledge.<sup>138</sup> In the same context Foucault writes that:

In any case, these divisions- whether our own, or those contemporary with the discourse under examination – are always themselves reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, institutionalized types: they, in turn, are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others; of course, they also have complex relations with each other, but they are not intrinsic, autochthonous, and universally recognizable characteristics.<sup>139</sup>

Considering the role of language in shaping knowledge and its deeper implication to power relationships, Foucault suggests that there are rules that govern the discourse in order to control its influence, potential risks or any deviations from established norms. These restrictive rules reveal the deeper underlying wish for power. Thus discourse is more than a simple conversation, instead, it determines what occurrences should be allowed and which ones should be prohibited. Language in this sense becomes a tool for control. The following quote illustrates this idea:

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality...In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power.<sup>140</sup>

Therefore, Foucault's discourse theory highlights the way in which language in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is employed as a tool to regulate knowledge and shape its ideology. Orwell in his essay "Politics and the English Language" (1949) emphasizes the dangers of language manipulation and the misuse of language in politics, including the use of euphemisms to hide evil intentions. Orwell believes that intellectuals, politicians and people who adhere to various ideologies, all tend to use vague language, and employ "cliché" words with no authentic meaning, but what is even more dangerous according to him is "euphemism", which refers to replacing offensive words with ones that are more acceptable socially. In the context of two world wars, this is done in order to mask cruel intentions. Considering this, Orwell's work can be seen as a cautionary tale against what he perceived as dishonesty of intellectuals especially during the rise of totalitarian regimes and adoration of

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<sup>138</sup>*ibid*, p.6.

<sup>139</sup>*ibid*, p.22.

<sup>140</sup>*ibid*, 216.

the cult leaders such as Hitler, Stalin and Mao. In this regard, he writes in his essay *Politics and the English Language* (1949) that

Political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire within cindery bullets: this is called Pacification. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called Transfer of Population or Rectification of Frontiers.<sup>141</sup>

The above citation is an example of the tendency to justify atrocities through language manipulation. Another example of reality distortion in the novel is portrayed through the practice of “doublethink”. It is to assume two contradictory claims, as depicted in the novel, such as “War is peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength”<sup>142</sup>. As we have already illustrated, such practice aims to falsify facts without leaving the impression of the violation of reality. As for memory, it is denied and forced into oblivion in “memory whole”. Thus, the Party shapes its own world: Who controls the Past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past.<sup>143</sup> The following quotation from the novel illustrates how conformity leads the ‘orthodoxy’ citizens of Oceania to believe the absurdities of the Party’s narrative

They could be made to accept the most flagrant violations of reality, because they never fully grasped the enormity of what was demanded of them, and were not sufficiently interested in public events to notice what was happening. By lack of understanding they remained sane.<sup>144</sup>

In the light of the above quotation, we denote that under the totalitarian state of Oceania, the individual becomes a subject of the Ingsoc ideology, instead of a free agent and all aspects of his life and actions are dictated by the authority and mass-surveyed by the Telescreens. Thus, In order to suppress any potential Revolution, the Party arrests people who may dare to think outside the conventions of its Ingsoc ideology. Totalitarianism as portrayed in the novel is extended to suggest that reality outside what ‘the Party’ holds to be true is inexistent. ‘The Party’ views the individual as incapable of free thought; hence it legitimises its mass control and manipulation. Therefore, language becomes the channel through which the Party channels its ideology to insure its total control. In this light Norman Ferkeloff asserts that

Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour, and the form of social behaviour where we rely most on 'common-sense' assumptions. But despite its importance for language, the concept of 'ideology' has very rarely figured in discussions of

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<sup>141</sup>George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*. London: Horizon Magazine, 1949, p.355. Pdf Available at: <http://www.limpidsoft.com/a5/orwellessays.pdf>.)

<sup>142</sup>George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 6.

<sup>143</sup>*ibid*, p.68.

<sup>144</sup>*ibid*, p.180.

language and power within linguistics, which is itself symptomatic of their limitations.<sup>145</sup>

## **2- In *Black Mirror*:**

### **2-1- “Fifteen Million Merits”:**

In fact, society as depicted in the episode is ruled by the dominant capitalist mode of production, in which labour and activities are commodified and exploited for the benefit of the ruling class. We argue that the meritocracy in “Fifteen Million Merits” represents the capitalist hierarchy and the logic of accumulation. In order to earn “merits”, a form of currency and a social ranking, people are compelled to perform the boring and physically taxing chore of riding electric bicycles. This mode of production is indeed directly linked to social class formations within the society.

Moreover, different social classes are clearly distinguished throughout the episode. The working class, who spend their days riding and earning merits, represent the mass of people who are caught in a cycle of labour and consumerism. They are portrayed as lacking liberty and individuality since they are constantly monitored and controlled by screens and required to achieve tasks. The elite who run the system and profit from this system, on the other hand, represent a privileged class. By promising the working class the chance to escape their monotonous lives on talent shows like “Hot Shots”, they play on their hopes and wants.

However, even this chance for career advancement is constrained and managed by this same elite. We contend that Jameson's theory helps us in our understanding of how the method of production in “Fifteen Million Merits” is not isolated but rather part of a larger capitalist system. The episode criticises how this style of production dehumanises people by subjugating them into insignificant parts of the capitalist machinery. It also draws attention to the power and social class gaps that result from this kind of unequal and unfair society.

In their essay “Dystopia on Television: Black Mirror” (2006) scholars Meltem Cemiloglu Altunay and Hakan Askan argue that in the episode of “Fifteen Million Merits” the show presents a critique of capitalism and its abuse of the use of technology to transform the world into a prison. To quote, the two authors state that:

All social life would be transformed into a prison in this process. The evolution of capitalism is an evolution in surveillance and supervision processes at the same time. Capitalist power uses scientific developments both in productional and administrative processes...“the eye of the power” transformed the social life into a prison.<sup>146</sup>

The two scholars suggest that this episode is reminiscent of Adam Smith's belief of human labour as the source of wealth, yet, the division of labour and the use of machines have

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<sup>145</sup>Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.2.

<sup>146</sup>Cemiloglu Altunay Meltem , Askan Hakan, Dystopia on Television: Black Mirror. Anadolu: DergiPark Akademik (E-Journals), 2006, 336-337.

turned labour into an object of exploitation.<sup>147</sup>Therefore, in the episode “Fifteen Million Merits”, the only escape from this cycle is to become, in their terms, the "watched one", those who are selected to participate in a talent show based on their collection of digital points and demonstration of skills.<sup>148</sup> Thus, according to Meltem Cemiloglo Altunay and Hakan Askan, this episode particularly coordinates with the dystopian themes portrayed in 20th century literature, including subjectification of individuals through technology and restriction of liberties. Hence, another example of this genre is *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley, which depicts a 26th century society in London where happiness, health, and unlimited sexuality are achieved through technological innovations, but at the cost of individuality and personal freedom.

In Huxley's World State, production is so valued that even individuals are manufactured in factories and conditioned to maintain the continuity of the system through drugs and psychological methods. Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden in their article “The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror” (2021) discuss the issue of protection of personal data and the precarious balance between freedom and security in the dystopian world of *Fifteen Million Merits*. They suggest that numerous surveillance techniques, including networked ID systems, CCTV, GPS tracking, and biometric scanning, are acknowledged as contributing to the comprehensive monitoring and control placed on people's lives. Additionally, the essay draws attention to the purposes behind the dissemination and mobilisation of personal data by both human and algorithmic actors, while acknowledging the socio-economic, cultural, and identity prejudices that are built into algorithms and facial recognition software. The following quote from the article illustrates this idea:

In a world of pervasive and mundane networked dataveillance (biometric scanning, CCTV, GPS tracking, networked ID systems and automatic scanning)2 we simply do not know the extensive assemblages, mobilities, archives and profiling of our dataified lives...For what reasons other than economic benefit and security is our information shared and mobilised by various human actors + algorithms? And what of the inevitable situatedness of socio-economic, cultural and identity biases shaping the very human factor of algorithmic programming and facial recognition technologies?<sup>149</sup>

The authors also compare the depicted algorithms to the omniscient omnipresent God of the authoritarian modern state. These algorithms rigorously monitor and examine each digital facet of people's life, going beyond their capacity for self-awareness. This illustration highlights the enormous power and effect algorithms have over people's behaviour, preferences, and even purchasing patterns. The following quote illustrates this idea:

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<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>149</sup>Gibson, Margaret and Carden, Clarissa, “The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror”. Vancouver: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 7.

Post 9/11 facial recognition technology was routinely integrated into global airports as part of technologies used by governments to monitor and capture the mobilities of people around the world whether they be tourists, labour migrants, refugees, political activists and so on. *Black Mirror* takes the dystopian image of the all-seeing, all-knowing God of the authoritarian modern State translating it into an Algorithm.<sup>150</sup>

Additionally, the essay highlights the ethical conundrums depicted in *Black Mirror* suggesting that the show as a whole puts viewers in settings marked by a lack of privacy, cruelty, and public humiliation. So, the specific episode, “Fifteen Million Merits”, explores the idea of body data tracking through applications and gadgets, showing how the quest for personal accountability and self-improvement can result in a frightening future ruled by omnipresent screen surveillance and control. Additionally, the episode analysis highlights the significant inequities and inequalities present in the portrayed society. The working class is portrayed as toiling through tedious and physically taxing jobs in order to merit rewards, while the elite class benefits from the system and upholds its domination. This representation reflects the hierarchical power structures and the logic of wealth accumulation of capitalism, which reduces people to insignificant parts of the system.

Therefore, Jameson’s framework supports the key ideas and messages presented in *Fifteen Million Merits* and offers a more comprehensive context for grasping the critique of capitalist production techniques, the development of social classes, and the effects of extensive surveillance presented in the episode. It exposes the power dynamics that occur from the dehumanising effects of the dominant method of production. Overall, the argument highlights the dehumanising features of capitalism and the effects of monitoring on people's lives, illuminating the thoughts and messages offered in the episode.

## **2-2 “White Bear”:**

In the same work Margaret Gibson and Clarissa Carden suggest that the case of Victoria in *White Bear* exemplifies “the intersection of live and digital economies, which structure her experience of terror”. To reformulate in simpler terms, the quote suggests that real-life as well as online aspects of society come together to shape and define the person's frightening or terrifying experience. It also suggests that the combination of physical and digital elements influences how the person perceives and undergoes fear or terror. They add that through a discourse of “infantile subjectivity” that supports the raging sociability of her tormentors, the horrifying abuse she endures is made acceptable. Victoria's punishment is delivered through the fusion of physical and digital media, starting with her pursuit and

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<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*

ending with the overturning of the media machine that created her perception of reality. The audience justifies Victoria's anxiety by thinking that she destroyed the kid figure that supports their social survival. Her punishment guarantees that she will continue to be identified as a criminal, preserving the spectator-social's association with its own infantile subjectivity in addition to serving as vengeance for her supposed crime.

The text also discusses the concept of 'capitalised' punishment and how it relates to the justice system and "commodity system in society". It explores the case of Victoria, whose terrified subjectivity serves as a conditioning medium for the social system. The passage then introduces Scenario 2, which reveals that Victoria is part of a theme park called Justice Park, where punishment is administered as a public spectacle. The park blurs the boundary between entertainment and punishment, using actors and staged scenes to shame Victoria for a crime that she supposedly committed. The spectators who are initially presented as relentless chasers, are actually paid spectators. The authors of the article draw on the ideas of Michel Foucault and Tony Bennett to analyse the shift from public punishment to disciplinary institutions and cultural exhibitions. It talks about how power and amusement are combined in contemporary cultural practices and the idea of "profitable durations". They claim that "Justice Park " might be viewed as a "postdigital manifestation of these practices," fusing disciplinary leisure and punishment methods to make money. The paragraph also discusses the link between punishment meted out by for-profit firms and the neoliberalization of governance. Finally, it investigates the significance of young people as figures for future-focused ideas and socialities, highlighting the paradoxical aspect of youthful innocence. This begs the question as to whether Victoria has actually committed any crimes at all or if the environment has created a fictional account as truth for the aforementioned social governance goals. The next citation highlights the relevance of Foucault's description in his work *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of Prison (1977)* to the episode of

The terrifying of Victoria's subjectivity and the duration of her torment can be understood with reference to Foucault's observations surrounding disciplinary systems as managers of the bodies of the 'criminal' as well as the 'social'—but also, importantly, of time. As the reddit comments make clear, it is Victoria's continuous weeping that contributes to how we sense or experience the duration of the sequence. While her torment produces a visual spectacle, it additionally becomes clear that it is used to actualise a particular construction of time, one that emblematises the paradoxes 'of the expanding, nonstop life-world of twenty-first-century Capitalism.'<sup>151</sup>

The discussion above about Foucaudian punishment as depicted in "White Bear" can be related to Jameson's ideas on the historical level of interpretation. Jameson's emphasis on

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<sup>151</sup> *ibid*, p.88.

the significance of history as the ultimate authority aligns with the examination of the cultural and historical context in which the punishment takes place. For instance, the portrayal of the punishment in the theme park Justice Park reflects the specific mode of production and ideology associated with the contemporary society depicted in the narrative of the episode. To explain this, we can argue that the fusion of entertainment and punishment in the “Justice Park” exemplifies Jameson’s concept of contradictions present in various sign systems, as it exposes the antagonistic relationship between different modes of production. Additionally, relying on Gibson and Carden’s essay “The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror” we argue that the episode highlights how history sets limits on individual and collective actions, as the punishment serves as a manifestation of the hyper capitalised, neoliberal disciplinary regime.

Furthermore, the episode of “White Bear” depicts a near-future dystopian world where an audience takes part in the humiliation and punishment of the potentially guilty through a repressive and voyeuristic form of entertainment. This production method might be viewed as combining consumerism, spectacle, and punishment. Jameson's viewpoint is a useful tool to investigate the underlying social interactions and class dynamics at work in this situation. There is a distinct difference between the ruling class, which is represented by those who run and profit from *White Bear* Justice Park, and the oppressed class, which consists of those who have been convicted and are made the objects of spectacle. The subjugated class is ruled and controlled by the ruling class, who exploit their suffering for amusement.

Examining the broader social context of the contemporary post-industrial era also enables us to reveal the effects of this mode of production. Thus, the episode paints a picture of a society driven by the desire for retribution, catharsis, and social control. The establishment of the Justice Park in “White Bear” is evidence of a dominant ideology that upholds this notion of retributive justice and appeals to the voyeuristic instincts of the general public. To conclude this subchapter, Jameson's Historical lens of interpretation allows us to analyse the interactions between various modes and class formations in the episode, gaining a better understanding of the oppressive features and power conflicts in the society that “White Bear” depicts. While also emphasising how the commodification of suffering and the ways in which the ruling class controls, manages, and manipulates the oppressed class are instances of how the privileged class exerts power and control over the underprivileged class.

### **2-3 “Nosedive”:**

At the beginning of “Nosedive” the setting portrays an idyllic middle-class suburban life, with forced polite interactions and seemingly happy individuals. However, this utopian-like facade gradually reveals the oppressive nature of the society depicted. The episode

critiques the obsession with social approval and the artificiality of relationships created by the rating system. The main character Lacie rates and is rated by others using a mobile app, which influences their social standing. While this fictional system facilitates commercial activity, it also resembles contemporary social media platforms, which emphasises the significance of seeking approval and portraying a superficial form of politeness. We contend that the episode satirises the middle-class suburban lifestyle and the paradoxes and shortcomings of obsession with conformity.

At its heart, the episode of *Black Mirror* (2011), “Nosedive”, exemplifies the ideology of form by satirizing the contemporary, post-industrial American middle-class suburban lifestyle and exposing the paradoxes and shortcomings of a society consumed by images mirroring the inconsistencies that various sign systems attempt to represent. According to Jameson literary texts are evaluated using “the ideology of form”, looking at the inconsistencies that various sign systems attempt to represent. He suggests that History is viewed as “the knowledge of necessity”, explaining why things happened the way they did. However, history as Jameson suggests, cannot be fully understood without knowing its implications. Understanding history is difficult but essential because it places constraints on us and frustrates our aspirations. The following quote from Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* illustrates this idea:

[...] the "emotion" of great historiographic form can then always be seen as the radical restructuration of that inert material, in this instance the powerful reorganization of otherwise inert chronological and "linear" data in the form of Necessity: why what happened (at first received as "empirical" fact) had to happen the way it did.<sup>152</sup>

In the light of the above quotation “Nosedive” can be interpreted through the lens of Jameson's idea that history is the experience of necessity; we can explore how the episode portrays the characters' interactions with societal structures and their impact on individual lives. The protagonist, Lacie, is depicted as obsessed with maintaining a high rating while conforming to societal expectations. Hence, the episode raises questions about the role of social norms, the pursuit of social validation, and the loss of individual agency in a highly regulated society. Within the narrative, the characters' relentless pursuit of social approval reflects the historical necessity of conforming to societal norms which limit personal freedom and hinder genuine self-expression. The episode suggests that individuals' lives are shaped and restricted by the demands of maintaining a positive image and fitting into a predetermined social hierarchy. “Nosedive” also reflects on the dehumanising effects of reducing human connections to digital values and the implications of a society where individuals constantly

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<sup>152</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, p.87.



perform for social approval. Thus, this episode clearly satirises the issues of contemporary American society in the face of technological advancement and late capitalism.

On another note, Gibson and Carden in their essay “The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror” (2021) draw from Baudrillard’s philosophical work *The System of Objects* to suggest that the setting of the episode's use of pastel colours represents a desire to hide the labour required to create goods and encourages a compromise where labour and instinct are buried.<sup>153</sup> Emotions and affect are relegated to individuals who are unable to regulate their emotions in public and fall short of the idealised middle-class fantasy in Lacie's world, where they are suppressed. In a culture in which social media rules, expressing one's true feelings might result in penalties like losing followers or even being imprisoned. The same essay also contends that Lacie's daily routine, which includes practicing fake smiles and chuckles and rating interactions, is a clear example of the cycle of repetition. Her social media posts of her morning coffee and cookie act as model objects that uphold the ideal order of things rather than being intended for consumption. Lacie's quest for significance and her conviction that social media holds the secret to unveiling her true self are what motivate her pursuit of higher ratings.

Lacie eventually reaches her breaking point when her painstakingly prepared wedding speech is interrupted and her rating falls below the minimum requirement for a standby seat on a flight. Despite the repercussions, she attends the wedding and gives a speech in which she expresses her actual sentiments while looking untidy and drenched in mud. After being freed from the restrictions of social media, Lacie and another prisoner yell abuses at one another in the final scene. She, paradoxically, discovers freedom inside the jail, away from the cycle of repetition. Additionally, the authors of the essay entitled “The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror” (2021) draw upon Freud’s idea of the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny to suggest that by fusing truth and fiction, the television series *Black Mirror* highlights the convergence of contemporary surveillance culture and produces a feeling of anxiety. They explain that the term "uncanny" which describes the appearance of hidden, evil parts of oneself or others, frequently in everyday, familiar contexts. The authors suggest that the familiar aspects of social media, screens, simulations, avatars, and the quest for fame in reality television are shown in *Black Mirror* as not just a little weird, but as frightening as well because of the moral ramifications they have. Therefore, It becomes clear that *Black Mirror* echoes current societal issues such as misuse of social media, robots, AI, data surveillance, and governance. The show also portrays important philosophical issues and the

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<sup>153</sup>Gibson, Margaret and Carden, Clarissa, “The Moral Uncanny in Black Mirror”, p.11.

possible repercussions of technology misuse.

### **III) The quest for Utopia in Orwell's "Nineteen Eighty-Four" (1949), "Fifteen Million Merits", "White Bear" and "Nosedive":**

#### **Introduction**

Considering the above, the next chapter delves deeper into the connection between *Black Mirror* and the works of Jameson, particularly his exploration of the Utopian impulse. By drawing upon Jameson's insights, we will also demonstrate how both Orwell's dystopian world in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Brooker's portrayal of a digital society in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* (2011) actually convey a profound yearning for Utopia and the desire to remedy social conditions (of the post second world war Britain and Europe in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and contemporary post industrial era in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*). This analysis will shed light on the underlying motivations and aspirations that drive the narratives within these works, revealing a complex interplay between dystopia and the inherent longing for a better society.

#### **1- Dystopia and anti-utopia in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)**

## **1-1- Definition of the utopian impulse:**

Fredric Jameson in his book *Archaeologies of the Future* explores the concept of utopia as both a literary genre imagining alternative systems and a collective, historical impulse reflecting dissatisfaction with the present and a yearning for a better future. In this regard, according to Jameson, the concept of utopian impulse refers to a fundamental desire or motivation for an idealistic future in society. It embraces a wider aspect of everyday life and actions and goes beyond the particular textual works or genres linked to utopian aspirations. The utopian drive can be identified in political movements, social experiments, and revolutions that seek to bring about a utopian vision. Drawing upon Ernst Bloch, Jameson suggests that “the utopian impulse” has historically served as the inspiration for several social and artistic undertakings and that it can be seen as a pervasive force that influences different aspects of life and culture, often manifesting in unexpected and covert ways. Jameson suggests that the utopian impulse encompasses a variety of human endeavours outside of the written expressions of utopian ideas, such as gaming, technology, architecture, literature, the arts, and even unconscious processes like dreams. In this regard, Jameson states that:

It has often been observed that we need to distinguish between the Utopian form and the Utopian wish: between the written text or genre and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices by a specialized hermeneutic or interpretive method. Why not add political practice to this list, inasmuch as whole social movements have tried to realize a Utopian vision, communities have been founded and revolutions waged in its name, and since, as we have just seen, the term itself is once again current in present-day discursive struggles? At any rate, the futility of definitions can be measured by the way in which they exclude whole areas of the preliminary inventory....a Utopian impulse governing everything future-oriented in life and culture; and encompassing everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology, from architecture to eros, from tourism to jokes and the unconscious.<sup>154</sup>

We argue throughout this first part of the third chapter that there is a tension between dystopia and utopia in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, because it simultaneously rejects and embraces the utopian impulse. In his work *Archeologies of the Future* Jameson's study concentrates on the novel's anti-utopian elements, it is vital to take into account a different viewpoint that emphasises the utopian impulse existence in the story.

## **1-2- The difference between Utopia and Anti-utopia:**

Understanding the distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia is crucial in order to comprehend Jameson's perspective on Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) as an anti-utopian work. In his book entitled *Scraps of the Untainted Sky Dystopia, Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000) Tom Moylan presents utopia and anti-utopia as distinct concepts

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<sup>154</sup>Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, pp.1-2.

within utopian studies. He explains how dystopia refers to a non-existent society described in detail, located in time and space, and intended to be viewed as considerably worse than the reader's own society. On the other hand, anti-utopia also describes a non-existent society, but it is intended to be a criticism of utopianism or a specific utopia. Anti-utopia is directed against utopian thought and programs, while dystopias focus is on portraying a negative and undesirable society. The terms highlight the critical and cautionary aspects of utopian literature, with anti-utopia specifically targeting utopian ideals and visions. Expanding upon Tom Moylan's distinction between dystopia and anti-utopia, in his analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Jameson considers Orwell's novel as an anti-utopian work that denounces and warns against Utopian programs in politics, driven by a conviction in the inevitability of human nature's corruption and lust for power. Jameson distinguishes between "anti-Utopia" and "critical dystopia," with the former characterised by a passionate denunciation of utopian programs, separate from the fears and concerns driving critical dystopias. He also introduces the genre of "apocalyptic" narratives, which portray total destruction and the absence of political illusions. Jameson examines paradoxes within *Nineteen Eighty-Four* such as the discrepancy between advanced surveillance technology and the limitations imposed by totalitarianism. He raises questions about the historical and universal aspects of Orwell's work, including its association with anti-communism during the Cold War era (which was discussed in our first chapter) and its relevance in the postmodern age. Furthermore, according to Jameson's view in his work *Archaeologies of the Future*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is closer to the anti-utopian type of work than to the dystopian type, because he suggests that the novel denounces and warns against utopian programs in politics due to a belief in the inevitable corruption and lust for power within human nature.

### **1-3- The Utopian vision in *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* portrays a totalitarian regime called the Party, ruling over the lives of citizens in Oceania. One prominent symbol of surveillance is the giant poster of a man known as Big Brother reminiscent of Stalin with the caption "Big Brother is watching you"<sup>155</sup>The novel highlights mass surveillance and the constant fear of being caught by the authorities, represented as the Thought Police. Testimony plays a crucial role in the novel, allowing the protagonist, Winston, to communicate the truth and foster hope for a free society. Orwell's work calls for action against totalitarianism, advocating for democracy and individualism. The suppression of memories and distortion of facts by the Party underscores the importance of recording the truth for future generations. Winston's desire to reveal the

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<sup>155</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.3.

truth reflects the role of literature as a catalyst for social change.

George Orwell clarified in a press release in 1949 that his novel was not necessarily a prediction of the future for the Western world in forty years, as some reviewers believed. Rather, it served as a warning. Orwell's intention was to caution against the dangers posed by the atomic threat in both socialist and capitalist societies. He expressed alarm at the tendency of intellectuals to justify various forms of totalitarianism, particularly national fascism and Stalinism. In this regard, he asserted that his literary works functioned as a call to action against such perilous political and social upheavals. Orwell's message was clear: "The moral to be drawn from this dangerous nightmare situation is a simple one: don't let it happen. It depends on you."<sup>156</sup>

Despite the Party's relentless distortion and manipulation, the human connection to the past persists through the senses. Within the dystopian world of Oceania, we observe the presence of objects from the "pre-revolutionary" era, relics of a capitalist past. In an unprecedented move, Winston ventures into the proletarian quarters, driven by a desire to uncover the truth about the conditions preceding the Party's rise to power. His intention is to scrutinise whether the Party has genuinely improved the socioeconomic conditions of Oceania, as it proclaims. What Winston encounters during his exploration is a revelation. The proles' spaces remain untouched by the watchful gaze of telescreens, providing a glimpse into a realm of relative freedom. Upon entering an elderly man's shop, Winston becomes captivated by the allure of various items, such as an old-fashioned glass and a fireplace. These objects, conspicuously absent in the depicted world of Oceania, assume a symbolic significance. They represent authenticity, carrying with them aesthetic and historical value. In essence, they stand as witnesses to a past that was once vivid and teeming with life, in stark contrast to the bleak and oppressive atmosphere of the totalitarian world depicted in the year '1984'. Despite the Party's efforts to erase and distort the past, the human senses and the remnants of "pre- revolution" objects provide a tangible link to a time and a way of life that evoke a sense of authenticity, beauty, and historical depth.

We argue that Orwell's novel contains a utopian yearning and a desire to remedy the social conditions of Britain of post Second World War. His conception of utopia leads him to write a dystopian novel with the intention of conveying a utopian message. As discussed earlier, his purpose is to inspire action and promote positive change. This intention is evident through the character of Winston, who serves as a revolutionary figure aiming to dismantle

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<sup>156</sup>Orwell, George, *Why I Write*. In *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, vol. 1, *An Age Like This: 1920-1940*, 23-30. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968, p 3.

the oppressive regime of Big Brother and establish a new world founded on freedom and prosperity. Despite the Party's oppressive tactics, such as terror and mass surveillance, Winston rebels by documenting the truth and by engaging in a forbidden relationship with Julia, with whom he shares his intimate and individual emotions. However, Julia, although aware of the Party's propaganda, is primarily concerned with pursuing pleasure and freely expressing her desires. She lacks the ambition to overthrow the Inner Party or challenge the dominant ideology of 'Ingsoc'. In this context, Orwell presents two distinct character types: Winston Smith, the catalyst and utopian revolutionary, and Julia, the clever hedonist. While Winston strives for change and a utopian society, Julia remains more focused on her personal desires while avoiding persecution and torture from the Party.

Transitioning from the previous paragraph, it is important to acknowledge the significance of the proles within Orwell's novel. These individuals make up the majority of Oceania's population, comprising the simple working class and accounting for approximately eighty percent of the population. Unlike Party members, the proles are not subjected to the same level of mass surveillance and control. This is because the authorities view them as sub-human and incapable of posing a revolutionary threat to the Party's authority. The proles are intentionally depoliticized and kept distracted through sensual forms of entertainment such as sports, astrology, and sexually exaggerated novelettes. Orwell's advocacy for the rights of these marginalised and impoverished individuals becomes evident as he seeks to raise awareness and shed light on their plight.

Another utopian element in the novel emerges through Winston Smith's perspective on the proles. In his secret diary, he expresses the belief that hope lies in the unity and solidarity of these proletariats. The following is a notable quotation from the novel that exemplifies this sentiment, emphasising the potential of the proles to generate a force capable of dismantling the Party and bringing about change:

[...] If there is hope it must lie in the proles, because only there, in those swarming disregarded masses, 85 per cent of the population of Oceania, could the force to destroy the Party ever be generated if there is hope it lies in them.<sup>157</sup>

This quotation reflects Orwell's utopian vision for the future of society and underscores his socialist leanings, as he places faith in the working class to overthrow the oligarchical totalitarian state of Oceania. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), the proles, in comparison to Party members, are portrayed as relatively free. Despite their impoverished conditions, they find meaning in the struggle for survival, experiencing moments of delight and maintaining a sense of connection with one another. In contrast, Party members live

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<sup>157</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p.252.

under constant surveillance, complete control, and the fear of expressing their individuality. This stark contrast reveals the disillusionment and alienation resulting from industrialization and the impact of two world wars. In this sense, it could be argued that Orwell's portrayal of the proles highlights their potential role in shaping a more hopeful and liberated future, showcasing the author's commitment to addressing societal inequalities and the plight of the working class. Orwell states clearly that his works advocate for democratic socialism, he asserts in his collection of essays *Why I Write* that: "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it."<sup>158</sup>

Additionally, the following quotation from the novel reflects Orwell's utopian vision for society, emphasising his socialist ideas by placing faith in the working class to bring about the downfall of the totalitarian state. The proles, depicted as relatively free compared to Party members, find meaning and connection in their simple daily lives despite their denied human integrity. In contrast, Party members live in constant surveillance and fear, experiencing disillusionment and alienation. Singing becomes a rebellious act against oppression, symbolising freedom and enjoyment of life. Orwell's reference to people singing worldwide highlights the universal nature of the proles' struggle against the common enemy, the Party, which suppresses their basic joys. Therefore, Orwell writes:

The birds sang, the proles sang, the Party did not sing. All round the world, in London and New York, in Africa and Brazil and in the mysterious forbidden lands beyond the frontiers, in the streets of Paris and Berlin, in the villages of the endless Russian plain, in the bazars of china and Japan everywhere stood the same solid unconquerable figure, made after being monstrous by work and child bearing, toiling from birth to death and still singing.<sup>159</sup>

#### **1-4-Is *Nineteen Eighty-Four* dystopian or anti-utopian?**

Finally, we argue that it is possible to reconcile the idea that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* contains a utopian impulse with Jameson's view of the novel as an anti-utopian work. Hence, Orwell's novel can be seen as expressing both utopian and anti-utopian elements, depending on the perspective taken. On the one hand, the novel portrays a dystopian society ruled by an oppressive regime, exhibiting the characteristics of an anti-utopia, by satirising the Soviet regime and what Orwell thought as distortion of the utopian ideals of equality. Jameson's perspective aligns with this interpretation, as he argues that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflects his anti-stalinist sentiments.

On the other hand, within the dystopian context, Orwell introduces elements that can be seen as manifestations of the utopian impulse. The character of Winston Smith embodies

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<sup>158</sup>Orwell, *Why I write*, p3.

<sup>159</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 252.

this impulse through his rebellion against the Party and his desire to establish a society based on freedom and justice. His actions, such as documenting the truth and engaging in forbidden relationships, reflect a utopian aspiration for positive change. Additionally, the proles, despite their marginalised status, represent a glimmer of hope as they possess the potential to challenge the Party's authority and bring about a more egalitarian society. Therefore, it can be argued that while *Nineteen Eighty-Four* primarily functions as an anti-utopian work, it also contains elements of the utopian impulse through the characters' resistance and the potential for social transformation. This reconciliation acknowledges the complex and multi-dimensional nature of Orwell's novel.

## **2- The yearning for Utopia in “Fifteen Million Merits” and a comparative analysis**

Discussing the cultural implications and role of contemporary science fiction, Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky Dystopia, Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000) describes science fiction as a sophisticated and nuanced genre that is neither necessarily liberal nor inherently conservative. He also suggests that it may participate in the propagation of dominant ideologies and social structures, such as technological determinism, imperialism, patriarchy, and consumerism. Science fiction, according to him, can, however, also challenge the current social structure and present counter arguments, potentially invoking anxiety or anger and inspiring the desire for societal change. Therefore this genre has been affected by societal changes throughout its history, shifting its emphasis from physical science to social realities and issues. Moylan adds that different intellectual and cultural movements, such as the Left, the counterculture, and other liberation movements, have influenced it. As a result of the period's social opening, this critical creativity in science fiction and utopian writing arose and contributed to a more public sphere of opposition. In this situation, science fiction can be a tool for radical re-visioning by providing readers with an escape that questions the “status quo”, prompts critical thought, and has the capacity to affect social change. Moreover, by the 1950s, science fiction has started to explore social realities and issues rather than only “physical science”. Moylan also suggest that writers of contemporary science fiction tend to depict near-future stories that are more closely related to the present-day social realities of both authors and audience. The following quote illustrates this last idea:

sf writers, as Xsaac Asimov observed, began to move from stories that focused on questions of physical science to ones that looked at social realities and problems. As they did so, they often opted for near-future tales that were closer itl time and space to the authors? and readers? immediate social realities.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup>Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the untainted Sky Dystopia, Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. The United



In the same context, the creator of *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker, described in an interview the series' purpose and social message by saying the following: “That's what we're aiming for with Black Mirror: each episode has a different cast, a different setting, even a different reality. But they're all about the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes' time if we're clumsy.”<sup>161</sup>

The quotation above aligns with Tom Moylan's perspective on the role of science fiction in exploring social realities and issuing warnings for societal change. Indeed, Brooker's statement echoes this idea by emphasising the relevance of his television series *Black Mirror* to our current lives. The series presents different scenarios and futures that serve as a warning narrative while reflecting the contemporary postindustrial globalist society's potential trajectory if society fails to navigate emerging technologies and societal challenges wisely, according to this view. Brooker's use of the term "clumsy" highlights the need for responsible decision-making in the rapidly evolving world of technological creation and artificial intelligence. Therefore, the following section of the chapter will analyse the underlying urge or yearning for redeeming the social ills that may be caused by technological advancements, as portrayed in the episodes of the three episodes of the television *Black Mirror*, namely, “Fifteen Million Merits”, “White Bear”, and “Nosedive”

## **2-1 “Fifteen Millions Merits”:**

The main character Bing’s passionate speech in front of the judges can be seen on the one hand as a sign of deep frustration and disillusionment with the contemporary capitalist society based on meritocracy and as a yearning to escape the degrading impacts of a culture that is centered on superficial consumption and staged encounters. Bing criticises these ideas of consumerism and the continuous quest of virtual fulfillment in his vent. His powerful and impassioned speech in front of the judges in the episode “Fifteen Million Merits” of *Black Mirror* offers a striking illustration of the ideas presented by Tom Moylan regarding the transformative potential of modern science fiction. As already discussed above, Moylan argues that science fiction serves as a catalyst for societal critique and change, challenging prevailing ideologies and prompting critical reflection. Bing's words, spoken with raw emotion, vividly bring these concepts to life.

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States: Wetstview Press, A Member of the Perseus Books Group,2000, 30.

<sup>161</sup>Charlie Brooker,, *The Dark Side of Our Gadget Addiction*, London: *The Guardian*, December 1, 2011.

In relation to this, Bing communicates his strong need for actual engagement in his society, which is controlled by superficiality and identification with virtual image (and the avatars) and appearance due to the commodification of all facets of life, with a strong sense of annoyance he says pleading with the judges to go beyond the superficiality of their expressions of attentiveness, "I just knew that I had to get here, to stand here and I knew I wanted you to listen; to really listen, not just pull a face like you're listening, like you do the rest of the time. A face like you're feeling instead of processing". Bing continues to denounce the pervasive consumerist mentality that rules the superficial society in which he lives. He therefore criticises the limited depth of communication and he denounces the materialism that has reduced conversation to shallow exchanges by declaring, "All we know is fake fodder and buying shit. That's how we speak to each other, how we express ourselves is buying shit". Bing considers the hollowness of his society's goals and his disenchantment grows, he carries on, "I have a dream, Bing carries on, "I have a dream? The peak of our dreams is a new hat for our doppel, a hat that doesn't exist. It's not even there, we buy shit that's not even there."The dream Bing refers to is clearly reminiscent of Martin Luther King, suggesting that Bing calls for the liberation of people trapped in the system that he denounces. His criticism highlights the frustration and futility of individuals trapped in a society driven by artificial desires and nonexistent objects.

As he implores, he begs, "Show us something real and free and beautiful, you couldn't. It'd break us, we're too numb for it, our minds would choke", thus demonstrating a deep desire for truth and genuine encounters. Indeed, Bing's yearning for authenticity and genuine experiences is obvious. ". Bing continues by bemoaning the inability of society to produce such authentic feelings and wishing for a day in the future when true beauty and freedom are experienced free from the numbing effects of technology. The judges, and the repressive system they stand for are the targets of Bing's final outburst of rage when he says: "Fuck you and your spotlight and your sanctimonious faces and fuck you all, for taking the one thing I ever came close to," he screams.

Bing's fervent speech strikes a powerful chord with Moylan's beliefs on the capacity of science fiction to challenge social norms and inspire societal change. It serves as a moving representation of the desire for redemption, real human connection, echoing the denial and fear of a near future where society is dominated by technological progress and the commodification of human experience as well as its digitalisation.

Furthermore, '15 Million Merits' world can be regarded as post-apocalyptic that might have went through some environmental crisis, because people in this episode are stuck in an underground-like confined space without natural light, thus the lights of the screens and the

computer generated scenes substitute for real light and the natural environment. In his work titled *Fabuler la fin du monde: La puissance critique des fictions d'apocalypse* (2019)<sup>162</sup> Jean-Paul Engélibert illustrates through a selection of literary texts and cinematic productions the depiction of the scenario of the end of the world, that is to say the apocalypse. To list some of the literary works evoked in the text, we find Saint- Pierre's *Le Dernier Homme* (1805), Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013) Volney's *Les Ruines* (1791).

He also discusses the concept of the Anthropocene<sup>163</sup> which is defined by the Oxford online dictionary as “[...] The epoch of geological time during which human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth, a formal chrono-stratigraphic unit with a base which has been tentatively defined as the mid-twentieth century.”<sup>164</sup> Engélibert argues that the rise of apocalyptic fiction goes beyond mere fictional speculation; he discusses the political and militant function of this genre of fiction. In this regard, he demonstrates how apocalyptic fiction centres its theme around the potential human impact on the planet. Thus, this genre of fiction offers a critique of capitalism and its role in the destruction of the planet.<sup>165</sup> According to Engélibert, apocalyptic fiction serves as a means for escaping presentism, which puts the present as the focal point in interpreting history, while disconnecting it from the past and the future.<sup>166</sup> Presentism, as Engélibert explains, emerged during the twentieth century, as a result of the end of hope for further progress or for a new potential revolution. This issue creates a sort of “perpetual present”<sup>167</sup> in Engélibert's words.

Departing from presentism, apocalyptic fictions, according to Engélibert, provide a narrative of “immanent” apocalypse instead of an “imminent” one. This suggests that the seeds of the potential end of the world are embedded in the present, in current human actions and their interference with nature and the impact of human activity on the climate and

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<sup>162</sup>Jean-Paul Engélibert, *Fabuler la fin du monde: La puissance critique des fictions d'apocalypse*, Paris: éditions La Découverte, 2019.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid*, pp .9-10.

<sup>164</sup>source: [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/anthropocene\\_n?tab=meaning\\_and\\_use#310362839](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/anthropocene_n?tab=meaning_and_use#310362839) accessed on 21/05/2024).

<sup>165</sup>Engélibert, *Fabuler la fin du monde*, p.15.

<sup>166</sup>Source: <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=presentism>.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid*, p.12.

destruction of ecosystems<sup>168</sup>. The origins of this phenomena are traced back historically to the first industrial revolution.<sup>169</sup> To illustrate with a quote, Engélibert suggests that: “Aujourd'hui, pour la première fois nous serions enfin capables de penser les effets des pratiques humaines sur la planète et de lutter contre le changement climatique.”<sup>170</sup> Hence, these narratives call for action in an attempt to remedy the political actions that are creating this threat. In this regard, Engélibert states that: “Imaginer la fin des temps serait donc la condition à laquelle faire de la politique au meilleur sens du terme: lutter pour faire advenir un monde qui mérite d'être vécu.”<sup>171</sup> Considering the above, June Xuandung, posits that the apocalyptic world of “15 Million Merits” is characterised by two facets, the first one is the energy or environmental crisis that obliged individuals to pedal on their bikes in order to generate power, the second, is characterised by the collapse of human relationships and the exposure to mindless media. Xuandung adds that the secular apocalypse of “15 Million Merits” is embedded with religious symbolism. To quote, he states that:

It must be noted that the apocalyptic depiction of Bing's world, despite its secular appearance, is also infused with religious references. For Instance, there are numerous allusions to the seven deadly sins: lust (pornography), gluttony (the eating show), greed (what drives Bing to accept the judges' offer), sloth (mental laziness), wrath (one of the judges is named Wraith), envy (judge Charity and Swift are both envious of Abi), and pride (Dustin, who sees himself as superior to the cleaners).<sup>172</sup>

Additionally, Xuandung suggests to consider Big as a prophetic figure or a catalyst who calls for change in the face of the dehumanising system that employs technology to enslave individuals and crush any potential for revolution. Through his speech, Bing aspires to overthrow the system and establish a more just society built on respect for individual agency and save the population from a severe brainwashing. Bing's politicised monologue can be interpreted as an attempt to incite a new “apocalypse”, as Xuandung claims. His desperate hope to reveal the distortion of the postapocalyptic system echoes a desire for a revolution and hope for positive change.

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<sup>168</sup> *ibid*, p.31.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid*, p.30.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid*, p.29.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid*, pp.14-15

<sup>172</sup> Machinal Hélène, Michlin Monica, Mullen Elizabeth, Regnauld Arnaud, Thornborrow Joanna, *Médiations Apocalyptiques: Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse*, Université de Bretagne Occidentale: Hal Open Science, 2017, 124.

## **2-2 Comparative Analysis of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Black Mirror* Episodes: “Fifteen Million Merits,” “Nosedive,” and “White Bear”**

It is evident from the prior discussion that the themes of dehumanisation, abuse of technological advancement and the distortion of reality are shared by Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*, namely, *fifteen Million Merits*, *Nosedive*, and *White Bear*. We can conclude this chapter by offering our own insights to study how these narratives may intertwine to critique modern society and raise significant issues about power, control, and the effects of totalitarian systems through a comparative examination.

### **2-2-1 “Fifteen Million” Merits and *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Both “Fifteen Million Merits” and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* explore the themes of utopia, dystopia, and the loss of touch with reality. In “Fifteen Million Merits” the episode presents a “hyperreal society” (as coined by Baudrillard) heavily influenced by technology, blurring the boundaries between meaning and meaninglessness. The impact of technology on human relationships is also evident, raising questions about the authenticity of connections in a technologically driven society. The episode further delves into the issue of class inequality, with the oppressed class serving as a symbol of the unequal distribution of resources and power. Additionally, it examines the negative role of entertainment, acting as a distraction from harsh realities and perpetuating the status quo. In Orwell’s novel the prole situation echoes the topic of class inequality that is presented in this episode, stressing the stark contrast between the members of the ruling Party and the downtrodden class. In addition, the Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) uses novelettes with explicit sexual content as a way to distract and appease the proles, diverting their attention from the harsh realities of their lives, and maintaining the established social order, matching like the role of entertainment in “Fifteen Million Merits”. In this light, Baudrillard suggests that:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup>Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p.1.

After Bing sends Abi the gift; the entry ticket to the talent show ‘Hot Shot’ he becomes enchanted, smiling and satisfied, instantly Bing is again bombarded with a pornography advertisement. Setting clearly a contrast between the calming, charming scenes of love and the generous gesture of Bing, and the instant shift towards the screen forcing pornography and creating an unsettling disturbing feeling. We notice a similarity between Bing and Abi’s love story and Winston’s with Julai. Both couples in the two narratives aim to escape through their love, both are constantly confronted by screens Abi gives to Bing the Origami of a penguin that she made (26:30) which is symbol of the tangible in the face of a world saturated by the digital representations and avatars, these symbols, reminiscent of the “pre-revolution” objects discovered by Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are very important as they represent the contrast of light, a glimpse of hope in the confined era of “Fifteen Million” world, which lacks natural light and relied only on the lights of the screens.

Moreover, the opening scene, with Bing's impassioned speech and the song "I Have a Dream," sets the stage for a narrative of yearning for change and acts as a catalyst for subsequent events. The accompanying song and the portrayal of the oppressed class engaged in intense physical workouts convey a palpable desire for change and serve as a reflection of the ideology held by this group. This yearning for transformation can be likened to the hope Winston Smith places in the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In both works, singing becomes an expression of coping and resistance. However, a notable distinction arises in the contrast between the relatively free proles who sing as an outlet, and the oppressed class in “Fifteen Million Merits” who endure constant monitoring and control. This disparity highlights the stark difference between the two societies and emphasises the oppressive nature of the dystopian world portrayed in the episode.

Furthermore, the episode's hidden dystopian system shares similarities with the routines and practices of the Inner Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The forbidden relationship between Bing and Abi can be seen as a symbol of rebellion against the oppressive regime, paralleling the clandestine affair between Winston and Julia in Orwell's novel. Both instances challenge the established order and expose the inherent desire for freedom and human connection. In this light June Xuandung Pham suggests in the collaborative work titled *Médiations Apocalyptiques: Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse* (2017) that:

The apocalypse that Bing wishes to incite through his passionate onstage monologue derives from his painful and complete awareness of how postapocalyptic his world really is. There is hope in his desperate attempt to unveil truths and for a brief moment, we see the possibility of

### **2-2-2 “Nosedive” and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:**

In the episode of “Nosedive”, Lacie, the main character obsessively checks her mobile phone, rating and interacting with others based on their ratings. This obsession with social validation and conformity in a technology-driven society is reminiscent of the themes explored in Orwell’s novel. Both works depict societies where individuals are controlled and manipulated, either through constant surveillance or the pressure to conform. It satirises the societal pressure to seek approval and conform and seek validation emphasising the shallowness of human interactions as depicted in the near future to the contemporary post-industrial era.. This portrayal aligns with the motif of telescreens used by the Party to survey individuals and defuse its propaganda, while alienating individuals and eradicating genuine human connections. In this light, both works explore the dehumanising effects of technology on consciousness manipulation of language and perception play a significant role in controlling individuals.

### **2-2-3 “White Bear” and *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Both works delve into the concept of memory and its manipulation. In *White Bear*, Victoria's memory is repeatedly wiped out, ensuring that her suffering is fresh each day, distorting her sense of self and agency. This erasure of memory contributes to her dehumanisation and underscores the controlling power wielded by those in authority. Similarly, Winston's job at the ministry of truth in *Nineteen Eighty* is to distort reality and produce the party’s propaganda."The Party, in this sense, seeks to control history and memory, altering past events to maintain its dominance over the present.

The episode “White Bear” in the TV series *Black Mirror* examines the public's sadistic participation, which reflects the concept of the spectacle. The audience finds pleasure and entertainment in the suffering of the accused, highlighting society's fixation on punishment. The episode questions the prioritisation of vengeance over rehabilitation and justice. It challenges the notion that punishment should be a source of amusement and prompts viewers to reflect on their own complicity in perpetuating this cycle of violence. In contrast, George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) explores the theme of justice

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<sup>174</sup>Machinal H el ene, Michlin Monica, Mullen Elizabeth, Regnauld Arnaud, Thornborrow Joanna, *M ediations Apocalyptiques: Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse*, Universit e de Bretagne Occidentale: Hal Open Science, 2017, 124,125.

within a totalitarian regime. The Party in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) manipulates the truth and uses punishment as a means of control. In this dystopian society, justice is distorted, and individual rights are completely disregarded. The protagonist, Winston Smith, experiences severe psychological and physical torture as punishment for his dissent against the Party. While punishment in *Black Mirror* serves as a sadistic form of entertainment, in "1984," it serves as a tool of control, instilling fear in individuals. This is evident in the character of O'Brien, who not only tortures Winston to make him say that "2+2=5" but also aims to make him genuinely believe it.

Last, but not least, the depiction of public lynching in "White Bear" resonates with the theme of public punishment and manipulation of public opinion in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Both works highlight the danger of social media and mass surveillance, where innocent individuals can be punished without trial. The role of the audience in "White Bear" as participants in the spectacle raises questions about justice, ethics, and the sadistic nature of collective punishment. This is reminiscent of Goldstein's portrayal in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) where he serves as a scapegoat to divert attention from the totalitarian government's oppressive practice.

#### **IV) Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: a Precursor to Screen Culture**

The concept of "société écranique" translates into English as "screen society". It cannot be traced back to one determined origin in academic or literary studies, however, as a term, it evolved gradually mainly in the lexicon of French media and sociological



contemporary discourse. The concept designates the role of screens, including television, computers and smartphones in reshaping society and human relationships in terms of communication and information consumption in the postdigital era. With the rise of television in the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan published his book *Understanding Media* (1964) where he argues that mediums such as technology and television are “extensions” of both human senses and nerves. To illustrate, he suggests that: “when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media Whether the extension of consciousness”<sup>175</sup> Additionally, Divina Frau-Meigs' in her book *Penser la Société de l'écran* (2000)<sup>176</sup> interests us in understanding the hegemonic function of the screen to interpret the role of the telescreen in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In her work Frau-Meigs discusses the transformation from written to visual culture within the industrial-comercial contemporary society, or Frau-Meigs words:

Le déplacement de la culture alphabétique au profit de la culture visuelle. Celle-ci, non verbale, se caractérise par un besoin accru de médiation technique, en renforçant la co-évolution homme-machine et l'hyper-visualité, tout en favorisant le recyclage culturel de nos récits constitutifs.<sup>177</sup>

Frau-Meigs adds that the small screen, (in contrast to the large screen of cinema) carries multifaceted signs. Instead of being a mere artefact, the screen contributes to the creation of meaning while manipulating symbols and narratives.<sup>178</sup> She suggests that the screen as an artefact transforms into an apparatus, or a “dispositif” in French. When it enters households, the screen's proximity builds a sort of intimacy with individuals. This “domestication” of the screen entails that “the spectacle” as theorised by Debord becomes very close to the viewer. Since it becomes a part of the house's decor as suggested also by Lipovetsky and Seroy. This proximity empowers the screen in shaping discourse and norms that are channeled by the media and cultural institutions. In this regard, Michel Foucault delves into the historical military purpose of the screen and its function as a tool for panoptic surveillance.<sup>179</sup>

The panopticon, historically designed by Jeremy Bentham, is a prison with a central surveillance tower that enables one single guard to observe all inmates in their cells. This strategy creates a feeling of constant surveillance in inmates without being certain whether

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<sup>175</sup>Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media The Extensions of Man*, London, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, pp 5,6.

<sup>176</sup>Divina Frau-Meigs *Penser la Société de l'Écran* Paris: Presse Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2011.

<sup>177</sup> *ibid*, p.11.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid*, p.33.

<sup>179</sup> *ibid*, pp.33-34

they are being observed. Due to anxiety induced by this uncertainty, the inmates automatically regulate their behavior and constantly monitor themselves. To put it simply, the panopticon leads them to survey themselves. Foucault explains the role of the panopticon's role in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) with the following words

[...] The major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."<sup>180</sup>The Panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men's behaviour; knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised."<sup>181</sup>

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* embodies the hegemonic and panoptic role of the screen and the gradual transition from an alphabetic culture to a visual one, as theorised by Frau-Meig. It can be argued that the party's strategy to limit thought through Newspeak, as discussed earlier, is accompanied by the will to impose its omnipresence and control through the constant surveillance of the telescreen. Thus, reflecting the concerns about the implication of this transformation and the anxiety surrounding the disappearance of all literary works. This is reflected in Syme's words to Orwell, revealing Newspeak's goal to Winston, Syme says: "The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespear, Milton, Byron..."<sup>182</sup> Indeed, while Orwell envisioned the erasure of literature by banning books, Huxley in *Brave New World* was anxious about loss of interest in emotional and intellectual engagement, where people abandon reading altogether.<sup>183</sup> Ray Bradbury, in his novel *Fahrenheit 451* on his turn, depicts the act of burning books.<sup>184</sup>

The telescreen is described as "an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall...The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely."<sup>185</sup> To reformulate, the telescreen is embedded in the wall with a rectangular shape that resembles a tarnished mirror and it cannot be completely turned off. The description of this tool carries a lot of symbolism. First, the device is "a dulled mirror", hence, unlike a typical mirror that reflects one's image rather faithfully, the telescreen distorts it. This symbolises its role in distortion of reality through propaganda and shaping narratives that align strictly with the

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<sup>180</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 201.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid*, p.204

<sup>182</sup> Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. p.61.

<sup>183</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, New York: Harper and Row Publisher, 1946, pp. 94,195.

<sup>184</sup> Ray Brad Bury, *Fahrenheit 451* The United States: Ballantine Books, 1953.

<sup>185</sup> Orwell *N.E.F*, p.4.

Party's narrative, or ideology, namely INGSOC. Further, the permanent integration of the telescreen into the structure of Winston's room symbolises the omnipresence of this tool that makes Winston under its constant gaze. The impossibility to escape the screens is equally depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and "Fifteen Million Merits". Both screens' primary function is control instead of communication. The telescreen is not only a means for surveillance, but also for communication, mainly defusing the Party's propaganda. The following quote illustrates the way in which the telescreen is used to impose the party's propaganda:

Day and night the telescreens bruised your ears with statistics proving that people today had more food, more clothes, better houses, better recreations—that they lived longer, worked shorter hours, were bigger, healthier, stronger, happier, more intelligent, better educated, than the people of fifty years ago.<sup>186</sup>

Therefore, the telescreen is not only watched, but also the watcher, at the same time. The following passage describes the panoptic effect of surveillance:

It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time. But at any rate they could plug into your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized.<sup>187</sup>

Thus, under the gaze of a telescreen, the individual has visible evidence of being watched. However, it can rarely be confirmed through the voice speaking through the telescreen. Unlike the telescreen whose presence is physically and intentionally evident. The microphone is placed in a hidden way, in the room above the antique shop making it unnoticed, enabling the party to spy on individuals.<sup>188</sup>

The previous quote also illustrates Michel Foucault's discussion about the panopticon, because surveillance of the telescreen and the microphone clearly has a psychological impact on the characters. Similar to the concept of the panopticon where inmates regulate their behavior, due to being subject of constant surveillance of the central watchtower, Orwell describes that the Party "watched everybody all the time", without being certain at what point they are being watched. In addition to the effect of the telescreen, the microphone contributes further in inducing the uncertainty of being surveilled, as illustrated in the previous passage. Characters survey themselves, because they assume that they are under constant surveillance in Orwell's words "from habit that became instinct" under the

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<sup>186</sup> *ibid*, p.84.

<sup>187</sup> *ibid*, p.5.

<sup>188</sup>Heinz C. Luegenbiehl , "1984 and the Power of Technology", *Indiana: Social Theory and Practice*, available on Jstor website, link : <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23556567> accessed on January the 18th, 2024, 290

assumption of constant surveillance. Thus, while Newspeak is concerned with control of language and the erasure of all words through which independent thought can be articulated, the telescreen serves a similar purpose. With its visual and auditory features described above, the telescreens has two functions; surveillance and indoctrination. Through language manipulation, exemplified in Newspeak, and the audiovisual control of the telescreen, the Party under its oppressive regime clearly embodies the shift from the “alphabetic” culture to a visual one.

The depiction of mass surveillance in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* still finds its echoes in contemporary society, stirring debates about the relevance of the novel. In his Article titled “They Know Much More Than You Think”<sup>189</sup> James Bamford brings to light the famous affair of Edward Snowden, a former NSA contractor who leaked secretive documents to the Guardian and The Washington Post. These documents revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) was monitoring data of millions of American citizens, from phone calls to internet communication through a “nationwide bulk e-mail and Internet metadata collection and storage program”.<sup>190</sup> Due to its controversy and coverage in the media, Snowden’s revelation of these programs of domestic surveillance, according to Bamford, led to a drastic rise in sales of the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The affair was compared to Orwell’s portrayal of totalitarian mass surveillance; the public drew a parallel between the capabilities of “the Party” and the practices of the NSA in real life. To illustrate, Bamford states that:

Within days of Snowden’s documents appearing in The Guardian and The Washington Post, revealing several of the National Security Agency’s extensive domestic surveillance programs, bookstores reported a sudden spike in the sales of George Orwell’s classic dystopian novel 1984.<sup>191</sup>

## **Technology and robotisation in *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Portrayal of technological advancement in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is rather superficial. The major technologies depicted in the novel, in addition to the telescreen, include the

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<sup>189</sup>James Bamford, “They Know Much More Than You Think”. New York: The New York Review of Books, 2013. available on google scholar website, link : <https://www.immagic.com/eLibrary/ARCHIVES/GENERAL/GENPRESS/N130815B.pdf>.

<sup>190</sup> *ibid*, 4

<sup>191</sup> *ibid*.

helicopter, the floating fortresses, the rocket bomb and most interestingly the novel writing machine. Despite the mention of these various technologies, their role in the novel is not as clearly emphasized as in other science fiction and dystopian works.<sup>192</sup> As Heinz C. Luegenbiehl states in his article “1984 and the Power of Technology”: “All of the technologies discussed in the novel were extrapolable from the technologies already in existence 1940's. Only the writing machines did not exist in some form.” In this regard, what interests us here is the role of the novel machine writing.<sup>193</sup>

Further, Orwell in his essay *The Prevention of Literature* (1946) Orwell suggest that :  
“It would probably not be beyond human imagination to write books by machinery. But a sort of mechanising process can already be seen at work in the film and radio, in publicity and propaganda, and in the lower reaches of journalism ”.<sup>194</sup>

To contextualise this quote, Orwell expresses his concern in regards to the rise of mass media, especially the radio during his time, and the intersection of these media with governmental and corporate interests. Another possible context to consider, is the rise of advertisement during this period, which Orwell might have deemed as catchy and phony. Additionally, as discussed earlier in this thesis, Orwell clearly denounces manipulation of language and the reliance on euphemism as a means to influence the masses during the two world wars. Moreover, Orwell's comment above denotes his anxiety about the possibility of the automation of writing and creativity in general, as well as literature and journalism in particular. Therefore, he predicted the automation and the robotization of creativity as an end result of the trends he witnessed during his time. Orwell's projection finds its echoes in contemporary postdigital age, especially the debate surrounding the rise of artificial intelligence and more specifically, the generative language tools. In this context, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we find an interesting passage that depicts a machine referred to as “versificator”, which is used by the party to generate its propaganda songs. The following quote is an illustration:

The tune had been haunting London for weeks past. It was one of countless similar songs published for the benefit of the proles by a sub-section of the Music Department. The words of these songs were composed without any human intervention whatever on an instrument known as a versificator. But the woman sang so tunefully as to turn the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound. He could hear the woman singing and the scrape of her shoes on the flagstones, and the cries of the children in the street, and somewhere in the far distance a faint roar of traffic, and yet the room seemed curiously silent, thanks to the absence of a telescreen.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Heinz C. Luegenbiehl, “1984 and the Power of Technology”, 290.

<sup>193</sup> *ibid*, p.92.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>195</sup>Orwell, *N.E.F*, pp 159,160

Therefore, the quote above describes a song common in London among the proles that is produced by a machine. Orwell's description contrasts the artificial origin of the song and the human touch added by the woman when she sings it. Despite the trivial and lifeless tone of the machine's production of this piece of music, the woman's voice adds a sense of warmth and makes it rather pleasant listening to it. This passage can be seen as a comment on the irreplaceability of human creativity and emotions by machinery.

### **Control over bodies in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: intersection with Haraway's cyborg:**

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the party reduces the whole purpose of sexuality to procreation. Outside this defined utilitarian purpose, sexual acts were regarded as disgusting, mainly within the "Outer Party" circle, which represents the middle class in Oceania. In this sense, women's bodies become a sort of machine for making children while depriving the body of any right to pleasure. This indeed echoes Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985),<sup>196</sup> where authorities of the religious totalitarian government of Gilead kidnap young fertile women to force them to have sex with the commanders in order to bear their children, while also taking away their children that they have had before Gilead's rule. To illustrate the party's control over sex and its purpose, as depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell writes that:

The aim of the Party was not merely to prevent men and women from forming loyalties which it might not be able to control. Its real, undeclared purpose was to remove all pleasure from the sexual act. Not love so much as eroticism was the enemy, inside marriage as well as outside it. All marriages between Party members had to be approved by a committee appointed for the purpose, and—though the principle was never clearly stated—permission was always refused if the couple concerned gave the impression of being physically attracted to one another. The only recognized purpose of marriage was to beget children for the service of the Party.<sup>197</sup>

Further, to escape arrest, Julia and Winston have to meet far away from the telescreen's gaze, in the wilderness. Indeed, this highlights the power of technology in controlling women's bodies, in this particular case. Julia however defies the party's grip over the bodies. Through her forbidden sexual encounters with men including Winston, she regains control over her body and sexual desires. This rebellion, indeed, challenges the party's utilitarian approach to sex and procreation that is devoid of any personal touch. Later, Julia explains to Winston that the "Party" forces this chastity to ensure loyalty of the outer party members, because pleasure, according to Julia, generates personal fulfillment, leading to

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<sup>196</sup>Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

<sup>197</sup>Orwell, *N.E.F.*, pp 75,76.

disinterest for the Party's plans and Big Brother's vision.<sup>198</sup> However, contrary to the Outer Party members, the 'proles', representing the working class, are encouraged to indulge in sensations, and consume erotic novelettes, as they were deemed as less human and without impact, as we illustrated earlier.

In *Black Mirror's* episode "Fifteen Million Merits" Abi is coerced to become a porn star, obliging her to drift away from her dream of becoming a singer, hence, contrary to Julia who uses sex as means of liberation, Abi is coerced to perform erotically in front of the camera for the entertainment of the public and the wealth generated from the spectacle. At 31.26 One of the judges asks her to lift up her top in order to see her breast, disregarding the fact that she said that she came to the show to sing, this commodification of bodies, especially the females', Haraway in her work *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (1991) states that:

[...] a woman is not simply alienated from her product but in a deep sense does not exist as a subject, or even potential subject, since she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation.<sup>199</sup>

To contextualise the quote above, Haraway evokes the Marxist concept of workers' alienation from the products of their labour. She draws a parallel between this type of alienation and women's alienation from her power and control over her reproductive choices. Hence, the term "her product" in the quote is seen as reference to women's bodies and the process of "producing children". In this quote, Haraway proposes a possibility of denial of a woman as a real subject with agency, due to the patriarchal power structure. Since, according to her, it is men's sexual desires and need for reproduction that dictate and justify, in a sense, the presence of women and their function in social life. Haraway's focus is on the intersection of technology and patriarchy in late capitalism which leads to women's oppression. Thus, Abi's fate in "Fifteen Million Merits" is more representative of the issue at hand, especially since the episode is set in the contemporary late capitalist and post digital age. In contrast, considering the historical context of Orwell's novel, his depiction of the "party's" totalitarian system embodies a combination of different trends of totalitarianism, including stalinism, nazism and fascism. Nonetheless, Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be seen as a figure that aims to escape this commodification and control over the body.

## V) Posthumanism in the Selected episodes of *Black Mirror*

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<sup>198</sup> *ibid*, p.167

<sup>199</sup> Haraway, Donna J, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149-181. New York: Routledge, 199, 24.

“Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe ...there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of ‘world history,’ but nevertheless, it was only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die.” - Fredeich Nitzche- <sup>200</sup>

## **Introduction to posthumanism: (general definition)**

Posthumanism <sup>201</sup>is an umbrella term that emerged in western philosophy, cultural studies and arts since the 1990s. According to H el ene Machinal and Elaine Despr es in their article titled “PotHumains, fronti eres,  volutions, hybridit es” (2014)<sup>202</sup> Posthumanism entails questioning human identity and re-imagining its uncertain future within the context of the aftermath of the second world war and mainly the third industrial revolution, which is characterised by the development of information technology, biotechnologies<sup>203</sup>and cybernetics.<sup>204</sup>Posthumanism also offers a dual expectation towards technology’s impact on humanity, a technophilic one and a technophobic one<sup>205</sup> Further, this concept captures the potential development of the human to a cyborg, that is to say a hybrid being between human and machine, especially within the context of the rise of artificial intelligence, cyberspace, eugenics and the question of human enhancement.

Relying on Rosi Braidoti’s book entitled *The Posthuman* (2013) Posthumanism can be further understood by tracing its origins back to the rise of humanism during the enlightenment era. Initially, humanism is a philosophy that puts humanity as the center of beings and the most important entity in history which makes this philosophy anthropocentric in its essence. Humanism also puts emphasis on the unique human capacity for rationality and the nature of consciousness, departing from theology, or the rule of the divine, which prevailed during the middle ages. Moreover, Braidoti posits that humanism is rooted in

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<sup>200</sup>Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On Truth and Life in an Extra-Moral sense* . (Edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann), New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 53.

<sup>201</sup> Posthumanism vs Transhumanism: We should consider the fundamental difference between posthumanism and transhumanism, which are often used interchangeably. While transhumanism as a scientific project aims towards improving human physical and cognitive capabilities through technology, posthumanism questions the place of humanity among other forms of existence , be organic or artificial,

<sup>202</sup>H el ene Machinal, Elaine Despr es, *PostHumains, fronti eres,  volutions, hybridit es*. Rennes: Presse universitaire Rennes, 2014.

<sup>203</sup>Biotech: “the use of living organisms such as bacteria and cells for industrial or scientific purposes such as making drugs, recycling waste, and genetic engineering”, source: Cambridge Online dictionary: available on: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-french/biotechnology>, accessed on 22/05/2024.

<sup>204</sup>Definition of cybernetics: ... systems that: “exhibit automatic control, esp. Self-regulatory control through feedback mechanisms. (as an adjective) and: The field of study concerned with communication and control systems in living organisms and machines. (source: Oxford online dictionary: <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=cybernetic>).

<sup>205</sup>H el ene Machinal, Elaine Despr es, *PostHumains, fronti eres,  volutions, hybridit es*, 11.



classical Antiquity with Protagoras assertion that: “Man is the measure of all things”<sup>206</sup> since it calls for the integration of the biological, the intellectual and the moral capabilities of the human, under the guidance of the divine.<sup>207</sup> Further, humanism can be summed up in the Cartesian duality of body and mind, where supremacy is given to the mind and rationality. This materialist view sees the body as merely a biological machine. In this regard, Machinal and Després explain that while the prefix “post” indicates “what comes after”, that is to say a departure from what preceded, posthumanism goes beyond mere change. Likewise, posthumanism does not entail the end of humanity, but rather, as the two authors put it: “renegotiation, a questioning, a work on and with the human condition and the humanist tradition.”<sup>208</sup> Another issue raised in the post-human condition is the potential risk of annihilation of humanity, especially following the remarkable advancement in technology and its employment in weapon creation. Weaponry was advanced in a more terrifying scale during the cold war with the nuclear threat raising concerns about human brutality and the dehumanising impact of technology. All in all, posthumanism encourages humans to rethink the relationship between the body and the soul, man and environment<sup>209</sup> in the post-industrial age.

Considering the context of the third industrial revolution and its importance in understanding the concept of posthumanism, *Black Mirror* is an example of a television series that embodies elements of dystopia and science fiction, making it reflect the posthuman condition. *Black Mirror* portrayal of technology throughout its seasons and episodes can be considered technophobic. Technophobia in the context of science fiction refers to the bleak depiction of technological advancement, reflecting societal anxieties and ethical dilemmas that arise from abuse of technology.

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<sup>206</sup>*ibid*, 13.

<sup>207</sup>*ibid*, 12.

<sup>208</sup>*ibid*, 17.

<sup>209</sup>*ibid*, 9.

## **1-Augmented humanity in the selected episodes of Black Mirror:**

### **1-1 In Fifteen Million Merits:**

The concept of augmented humanity entails the enhancement of human physical, intellectual and social capabilities through an integration of ‘human-computer’ technologies. This process aims to achieve a holistic and symbiotic interaction between the human and the software in order to enhance productivity as well as to address disabilities, refining the human potential.<sup>210</sup>

Unlike the episode of “San Junipero” where augmented reality offers a euphoric vision of immortality and a happy ending, the concept of augmented humanity and augmented reality in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* are depicted in a negative light. The technologies depicted in each episode do not necessarily enhance human capabilities to achieve the utopian promise of the transhumanist project. Instead, the technique contributes to dehumanisation of individuals, distortion of reality and alienation. In “Fifteen Million Merits”, for instance, the screen's role is to control physical labour and generate electricity; enhancement of productivity in this context is seen as a form of enslavement, given the dystopian tone of the episode. There are, however, a few other scenes that depict augmented reality, for instance, we observe a female character playing violin, by mimicking the instrument with her hand, producing music on the screen(6:5). This sequence highlights the role of technology in realising artistic potential, but also disconnection from the physical object, suggesting a loss of physical interaction with the object, where the image replaces the real, as theorised by Buadrillard.

Moreover, another instance of augmented humanity is seen in the depiction of cybernetics. In this episode Bing is trapped in a confined space with screens. Moreover, escape from advertisements defused on the screens is challenging. For instance, when he wants to carry on with his videogame, he is compelled to watch the advertisement, skipping the advertisement causes the loss of his merits. When Bing closes his eyes and stops looking at the screen, the screen compels him to resume viewing, this sequence illustrates cybernetics principles as employed in digital technologies. Cybernetics, defined by Nobert Wiener, refers to a system of automatic control in machines as well as organic beings that relies on communication and feedback loops<sup>211</sup> In this specific scene, Bing’s engagement is monitored by ‘algorithms’ of the technology at hand, that is to say, the screen. The screen in this

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<sup>210</sup>source: Augmented Humanity (definition), Scholarly Community Encyclopedia, source:<https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/19052>).

<sup>211</sup>Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, 2.

scenario also provides immediate feedback as a way to enforce compliance and correct deviations, ensuring that the individual remains engaged with the advertisement. This mirrors the functionality of algorithms used by platforms like YouTube, which track viewer behaviour, recommend content, in order to optimise engagement accordingly. The system's relentless surveillance and enforced compliance highlight the inescapability of cybernetic control. This concept entails the fusion between human and machine, which reflects the posthuman condition as suggested by Hayles in the following citation:

From Norbert Wiener on, the flow of information through feedback loops has been associated with the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject, the version of the "human" with which I will be concerned. Although the "posthuman" differs in its articulations, a common theme is the union of the human with the intelligent machine.<sup>212</sup>

Additionally, Abi is asked to face the screen before entering the Hot Show stage, she is asked to say that she wants to be as big as Selma one day, Selma is a former contestant who won the Hot Show, this is to the idealised figure or star that individuals are pushed to aspire for (29:30). Abi is given a drink and forced to drink it, it must contain a drug which altered her decision making and accepting the role of a pornography porn star, to which she was coerced later on stage. Later (30:36) we observe a stage with avatars that represent the audience who watch 'Hot Shot' behind the screens. These avatars are substituting for the physical presence of the audience while this image depicts the simulacra of Baudrillard, it also echoes the metaverse project of Mark Zuckerberg on the one hand, and the accelerated trend of virtual conferences which is significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020.

## **1-2 In "Nosedive"**

In "Nosedive" the technology of the contact lens is significant in understanding the depiction of augmented reality and humanity in the episode. Reality is filtered through this fictive device, which makes it almost impossible to see underneath the imperfections and distortions in the world of this episode. In the scene where Lacie interacts with a woman in the lift (5:38), she swipes on her phone without looking at it, to check the woman's social media profile. Notably, instead of looking at her phone this time, Lacie sees the woman's profile through her contact lens, making Lacie's perspective align with the audience's view. Thus, two distinct technologies are presented in this scene, the phone, which is analogous to contemporary smartphones on the one hand, and the eye implant, on the other. The contact lens allows Lacie to view the content of the phone without directly looking at it. Additionally,

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<sup>212</sup>(def of cybernetics) *ibid*, 2.

the lens in “Nosedive” is reminiscent of the grain portrayed in “The Entire History of You”, another episode of *Black Mirror*.

Therefore, “Nosedive” portrays a combination of near present technologies and fathomed and fictional ones, that depict the potential for human augmentation, such as the eye implant, and less or so the Hologram. Lacie is shown by the real estate agent a hologram, on the kitchen side of her potential future self with her potential partner, a fit and physically attractive man. Gender roles are also perceived in this hologram, where Lacie is depicted cooking (9:46). This sequence suggests a potential for the individual to choose their partner and their physical attributes, echoing the concern over eugenics, the advocacy of selecting breeding and genetic intervention for the purpose of improving genetic quality of human population. Knowing that eugenics is historically linked to Nazism. Later, even Lacie’s brother refers to this programme as eugenics.

The idyllic, initially Utopian, rose colored world of “Nosedive” relies on augmented reality. Technology and the contact lens specifically, in this episode, serve as a means to mask imperfections and polish reality. This becomes clear when the lens is removed from Lacies’ eyes in prison, she is finally able to see dust particles (59:34). Thus, removing the tool eventually liberates the protagonist from this distorted reality. These contact lenses are similar to Photo-shop, which airbrushes imperfections and presents a form of sanitised version of reality. We also observe for the first time Lacie’s genuine smile in prison; we see her real tears this time (59:54), in contrast to the tears she was performing and rehearsing in her preparation for Naomi’s wedding speech.

## **2-Technophobia in *Black Mirror*:**

According to transhumanism science might offer a euphoric image of technology depicting a sort of “technoheaven” that promises a possibility for immortality by uploading human consciousness into a computer after one’s death. This promise is akin to the religious afterlife, which is free of pain and suffering, this aspiration is deeply rooted in the human desire for immortality. In this light, in his book *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology* (2005), Daniel Daniello discusses the political and ethical issues raised by science fiction narratives. So, contrary to the euphoric faith proposed by transhumanism, technology in several science fiction narratives is depicted in a pessimistic dark light, capturing the technophobic tone of these narratives. In this regard Daniello posits that:

Science fiction... In its obsession with mad scientists, rampaging robots, killer clones, cutthroat cyborgs, humanhating androids, satanic supercomputers, flesh-eating viruses, and genetically mutated monsters, science fiction expresses a technophobic fear of losing our human identity, our freedom, our emotions, our values, and our

Further, technophobia is closely linked to the figure of the mad scientist and the Promethean myth. In her introduction entitled “le savon fou” to Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s book *Prologue. Généalogie de l’archétype du savant fou, ou: le savant Cosinus était-il fou* (2022) professor Machinal explains how the figure of the mad scientist embodies perversion of Enlightenment ideals and the epistemological crisis created in the enlightenment period. The enlightenment period saw the departure from the theological ideas, which gave birth later to more radical theories, such as the theory of the Darwinian evolution. Machinal states that:

[...] le siècle des Lumières est un exemple indéniable de confrontation entre deux ordres, l’ancien et le nouveau, un exemple typique de ce que l’on peut considérer comme une contradiction fructueuse, qui peut donner lieu à la création/projection de possibles engendrés par une nouvelle épistémè<sup>214</sup>

Additionally, professor Machinal traces the historical origins of the mythical figure of the mad scientists to antiquity, more precisely to the Greek myth of Prometheus and his transgression in stealing fire from the gods in his quest for knowledge.<sup>215</sup> The myth evokes an important epistemological question as it delves into the role of the human being in the universe, as he dominates other beings in his quest for attaining divine knowledge.<sup>216</sup> This myth is indeed prevalent throughout literature of the romantic period, a pillar example is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Prometheus echoes the radical epistemological and political upheavals in the western world during the era.

Considering the above, *Black Mirror*’s depiction of human relations to technology and its impact on social relationships is rather satirical, this is obvious through exaggeration and ridicule of its character’s behaviours, for instance, the behaviour of the passive voyeurs in “White Bear” is an exaggerated depiction of the behaviour of people and their relation to the use of smartphones. Technophobia is a prominent concern in the posthuman condition, additionally, among the issues raised by technophobia is the commodification of humanity under late capitalism, reflecting at the same time the political function of science fiction and dystopian narratives. Indeed these themes are prominent in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*. Moreover, we can say that *Black Mirror* does not portray a concrete mad scientist figure, instead it portrays what we can refer to as “mad science”, which captures the perversion of science, precisely the digital and biotechnologies in the context of the

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<sup>213</sup>Danielo Daniel, *Technophobia! Science Fiction Visions of Posthuman Technology*, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2005, 2.

<sup>214</sup> Hélène Machinal, *Le savant fou* (introduction), Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2022, 2.

<sup>215</sup> *ibid*, p.7.

<sup>216</sup> *ibid*.

contemporary post-digital and post-industrial era.

## **Human commodification in:**

### **2-1 Fifteen Million Merits:**

In “Fifteen Million Merits” Bing convinces Abi to participate in the talent show ‘Hot Shot’. He sees in her talent a potential for escape. In a sequence, while Bing and Abi stand together talking, we observe the building behind them, we see through the window all the individuals biking. The building consists of different floors, separated by walls, reminiscent of prison cells (at 22:23). This setting in the background resembles clearly the corporate environment, this echoes the political aspect of science fiction in critiquing late capitalism and the implication of the digital in commodifying individuals. Further, Bing uses his earned “Merits” to buy Abi the entry ticket for the “Hot Show” (24:40), this is the sum of the merits that he has generated, this means that he spends all his earned Merits for the her sake, showcasing the power of emotions, such as love and hope in the face of materialism and commodification as depicted in the episode.

A further example of commodification of humanity in the episode is evident in this scene where the judges of ‘Hot Shot’ coerce Abby to accept a career in erotic films. Abi is told by the judges that “You’ve got this pure beauty, seems to be a knockout figure, and this sort of interesting innocence going on, and that’s something I think Wraith’s erotica channels could really play with” and: “That's right, the thing I thought the moment I saw you.. You’ll be a star on our stream. On his you’re furniture at best”, (35:14) this dialogue echoes dehumanisation of people and reducing their value to a physical one, a theme that is presented throughout the episode as we can see, even with the characters pedaling to generate the fictional currency called merits, this in posthuman terms depict the perversion of materialisation. It is a satire on materialisation in the post industrial age, the mind and emotions and all what makes up the human is deprived away, making the human a merely biological machine, for labour in the pedaling bikes scene, and for sex fused with entertainment as seen in the judges proposition to Abi. This echoes Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower. Foucault conceptualises biopower in his book *The History of Sexuality* (1978)<sup>217</sup> to argue that modern humans became subjects to political institutions and structures. Foucault argues that the mechanisms employed in power relations are dissimulated and masked. Etymologically biopower refers to biology and power, to describe how biological life

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<sup>217</sup>Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, (Translated by Robert Hurley). New York: Vintage Books, 1978.

is governed by power relations, where the aim is to manage humans in society. To achieve this, governments employ regulation and discipline. The following quote from Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* illustrates this definition:

Hence there was an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the Subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of "biopower." The two directions taken by its development still appeared to be clearly separate in the eighteenth century. With regard to discipline, this development was embodied in institutions such as the army and the schools, and in reflections on tactics, apprenticeship, education, and the nature of societies.<sup>218</sup> ...Biopower...brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life."<sup>219</sup>

Similarly, The system reduces Abi to her physical appearance, denying her humanity. This aligns with Foucault's discussion of biopower, where political and economic interests could be achieved through the regulation of human bodies. In the same context, another aspect of biopower is manifested through the characters who have to pedal bikes to generate merits, the system in *Fifteen Million Merits* reduces individuals to a sort of biological machines. To illustrate, at 36:56 the judge, named Hope, reveals to Abi that the light from the spotlight is powered through the people who paddle daily; this suggests the initial place of human labour in powering technological tools. Thus, this episode can be read as a satire of the commodification of human beings either through labour or sexual exploitation. To illustrate what has been said, the judge tells Abi that:

Who do you think is powering that spotlight ? Millions of people, that's who. All out there right now, putting in an honest day on the bike, giving back to the world, while you stand in the light they're generating and dither. And you know what? They would give anything, do anything to be where you are now, to have what you have. (at 37.20).

Moreover, on the political tone of the episode, the judges tell Abi that there is no more room for more singers, or "average singers", and the female judge tells her that: "There is just no slots left for an above-average singer, not for the next few years at least" and: "No, Saturation point singer wise" (36:12-37:20). Abi then becomes subject to guilt trip by the judges . She is left with two choices only, either to carry on pedaling on the bike or to accept the judges offer. This might be read a social political comment, on the job market and the issue of unemployment, to clarify, this scene comments on the saturation of the job market in the late capitalist, post-industrial era, where young graduates are struggling more and more to find the job that meets their qualifications or align with their level of education. Abi, is not accepted as a singer, but gets an offer of becoming a porn actor, which she accepted with a broken heart, this might mirror the saturation of the job market, where some young graduates

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<sup>218</sup>*ibid*, p.140.

<sup>219</sup>*ibid*, p.143.

are forced to accept positions that do not align with their initial aspirations in order to fulfil their financial needs, Thus it is a comment on economic survival.<sup>220</sup>

## 2-2 In “Nosedive”

As previously mentioned “Nosedive” delves into commodification of social interactions and aspirations through the rating system. Lacie is told that in order to gain enough ratings and become qualified to purchase her dream house, she needs to impress “high quality people” (13:10) emphasising further loss of authenticity. We also observe that the screen of the mobile phone is also used as a tool by Lacie to enter her work building, making the screen multifunctional and indispensable. Later, she gets rated down by the woman in the lift, after offering her a croissant and engaging in small talk in a forced fragmented speech. Her ratings start gradually decreasing when others sense her inauthenticity (14:47). The “reputelligent” tells her: “don’t try too hard it’s impossible to respect, high fours can smell it a mile off, you just be you, authentic gestures, that’s the key ”(14.55). Yet, paradoxically the system is inherently designed to push individuals to be inauthentic. Nevertheless, this outcome might also reflect Lacie’s misuse of technology instead of the inherent flow in the technology. In other words, Lacie’s inauthenticity and desperation could be seen as accountable for her final dramatic downfall.

Another instance of the social injustices enforced by technology in this episode is evident in Lacie’s dialogue with Suzan, the Truck driver who offers Lacie a ride on her way to Naomi’s wedding, after denying the protagonist’s flight. Initially Lacie hesitates to accept Suzan’s help when she notices her low rating (37:54). Suzan who does not possess a phone is made an outcast in the eyes of her society. The truck driver delivers a monologue telling the tragic story of her husband who died of cancer after being denied treatment for lacking a few points in his ratings. Suzan tells Lacie: “..a couple of months in, we heard about this experimental treatment. It was very expensive. It was very exclusive. I did everything I could to get him a spot there. Tom was a 4.3. They gave his bed to a 4.4”(40:20). This story highlights disparities in health care where social standing dictates life-or-death situations. The experimental treatment reserved to the elite also highlights meritocracy and the difficulty in accessing medical treatment in the United States. This narrative can be read as a failure of the transhumanist project, which strives to integrate science to improve human conditions.

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<sup>220</sup>source:<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/10/college-degree-economic-mobility-average-lifetime-income/675525/> accessed on 26/05/24)



## 2-3 In “White Bear”:

### Victoria’s punishment and the cyborg

The concept of the cyborg is crucial in understanding posthumanism. Historically, the term “cyborg” gained its popularity from Manfred Clynes and Nathan S. Kline in 1960, it emerged in the context of the Cold War’s space race between the United States and the USSR to describe a human whose physical capabilities are enhanced by integrating his body parts with technological parts for the purpose of space exploration. The cyborg then became prominent in science fiction works.

Further, Haraway in her book *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) defines the cyborg as: “...a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”.<sup>221</sup> This quote defines the cyborg as a hybrid entity that blends the organic and the mechanical or the technological. She adds that this notion extends to being merely a fictional depiction in science fiction and that it is embedded in reality. “Haraway’s cyborg” transcends being a fictional entity, it is rather embedded in social and historical reality. The cyborg in this context is a concept through which the narrative of western progress can be questioned. She sheds light on issues such as racism and patriarchy within the technologically driven society. These issues according to her contributed to the posthuman question of the blurring boundaries between Man and Machine. As already discussed in the introduction, the quote also suggests that the cyborg as a non-binary being, has the potential to question the power relationships established under late capitalism, suggesting that the cyborg can disrupt traditional power structures and pave the way for new forms of social organisation. To cite Haraway in this regard, she writes that:

The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation. In the traditions of “Western” science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the productions of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other—the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.<sup>222</sup>

“White Bear”’s protagonist Victoria is a victim of the perversion of this concept of the cyborg, to explain, Victoria can be seen as a cyborg, because her memory is wiped each time by an electromagnetic headgear, (35:55) to relive the same psychological torment repeatedly.

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<sup>221</sup>Haraway, Donna. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149-181. New York: Routledge, 199, p5.

<sup>222</sup> *ibid*, p.7.

Suggestion a fusion of the technology and the organic, that is to say the headgear as a tool in altering her memory and perception. This makes Victoria, as a woman of colour, a victim of the capitalist system depicted in the episode.

The commodification of suffering in “White Bear” is crucial in understanding the technophobic aspect of the posthuman condition. In this regard, Angela M. Ci Rucci and Barry Vacker in their article entitled “Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory” (2018) describe the “Justice Park” Punishment in White Bear as “a neoliberal cooption in the reconfiguration of White Bear society's justice system and its punitive practices into an entirely purchasable commodity”.<sup>223</sup>

To reformulate, the authors refer to the commercialization of the punitive spectacle by the justice system depicted in the episode. In the episode, “The theme Park” replaces the traditional western justice system, making punishment not only a source of entertainment, but also of commercial profit. Concretely, the spectators are not mere participants in Victoria’s psychological punishment; by recording her. They also have to purchase an entry ticket to attend this “show”. We see a signboard at the entry of the “Theme Park”, with the caption “Welcome to White Bear Justice Park” on top, and the details of booking a ticket in the middle with the following instructions: “Please present your ticket to the guard, and follow the signs to the visitor centre immediately. Further, we can read the details of the tariff for parking as well. With a caption on the bottom saying: “enjoy the show” (37:54). Thus, the episode clearly exaggerates and satirises the possibility of the fusion of punishment and profit. “The Theme Park” has embodied the values of neoliberalism by commodifying the punitive practices. In other words, justice and rehabilitation is made into a source of profit, while disregarding ethical considerations.

## **VI) Screen culture in the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*:**

### **Introduction to the chapter:**

In addition to the development of biotechnologies, augmented reality, cybernetics and the technophobic concerns around these advancements, screen proliferation is another major characteristic of the contemporary post-industrial era. Therefore screen culture is a major facet of the posthuman condition. Thus, in this final chapter, we will analyse the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* through the lens of the concept of screen culture as developed by Serroy and Liovetsky in their book *L'écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l'âge*

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<sup>223</sup>Angela M. Ci Rucci and Barry Vacker, “Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory”, New York: Lexington Books, 2018, 195.

*hypermoderne* (2007). The discussion will be divided into three primary sections. We chose to analyse each episode separately in each of the three parts, while drawing some comparisons between the episodes within the same part, for instance, we will analyse the screen excess as expressed primarily in “Fifteen Million Merits”, to transition then to “White Bear” while applying the same approach to highlight similar themes.

The first section will be a thematic discussion of the hyperbolic nature of the screen as depicted in “Fifteen Million Merits”. We will analyse how each episode reflects the excess of contemporary “hypermodern” media and culture. To exemplify, we explore the depiction of hypersexuality and advertisement in “Fifteen Million Merits”, then, we will investigate the role of the screen, in the same episode, as a tool for surveillance, and its transition from being a tool for sharing to a personal tool, considering how this episode comments on the implications of this transition in the post-digital era and the post-industrial society. We will then consider the metaphorical implication of the screen to highlight self-referentiality in the T.V series and illustrate how *Black Mirror* provides a parody not only of society but also a satire about its role in the entertainment industry.

In the second part, we discuss the fusion of entertainment and punishment in “White Bear” to explore how Victoria becomes a surrogate victim, relying on René Girard’s work *La Violence et le Sacré (Violence and the Sacred)* (1972). We will analyse these elements under Serroy and Lipovetsky’s discussion about screen excess and proliferation, while ensuring to avoid redundancy of the theoretical element of the discussion.

Finally, in the third part, we apply the same theoretical approach to explore the role of the screen in the commodification of desire, social interactions and even spirituality. In addition to Serroy and Lipovetsky’s theories, this part takes its theoretical bearings from Debord’s discussion about the ‘consumer society’ as well as the panoptic surveillance of the screen, relying once again on Foucault’s work, by shedding light on the depiction of the impact of screens’ surveillance and digital algorithms on personal behaviour and social interactions.

To summarise Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy’s work *L’écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l’âge hypermoderne* (2007)<sup>224</sup>. The book explores the dominance of screens in contemporary life, encompassing everything from surveillance screens to mobile phones. They introduce the concept of “global screen” which captures the omnipresence of different types of screens including surveillance cameras, television, game consoles, mobile phones and computer screens. The work also examines the issue of continuity of cinema in

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<sup>224</sup> Lipovetsky Gilles, Serroy Jean, *L’écran global: culture-médias et cinéma à l’âge hypermoderne*. Paris: Éd. Le Seuil, coll. La couleur des idées, p.2007.

the face of the radical revolution of the digital, in which humans become witnesses and participants, in this regard Lipovetsky and Serroy express that: “We have transitioned from a century of spectacle screens to a communication screen, from ‘one-screen’ to ‘all-screen’. This is the era of the global screen. A screen present everywhere, at any time”.<sup>225</sup> Thus, this quote denotes a shift from the large screen, referring to cinema screens, to ‘multiscreens. Lipovetsky and Serroy’s quest might be summed up as the following: what lies underneath the proliferation of screens?<sup>226</sup>

In the first part “hypercinema logic” Lipovetsky and Serroy describe the digital revolution in a positive light, since this era, according to them, is not signaling the decline of cinema, as the industries of the cultural sector often claim inaccurately. On the contrary, this period saw the astonishing birth of the hypermodern aesthetic movement, which they describe as “hyper-fluid, hyper lucrative and innovative”: the hypercinema”<sup>227</sup>. The two authors illustrate three characteristics of hypercinema. First, the general hyperbolization and the quest for the faster, the more spectacular, and the more violent: “image- excés” (image-excess).<sup>228</sup> Lipovetsky and Serroy suggest the possibility of a new “screenocracy”, insisting on the omnipresence of the screen. This screen becomes an indispensable object that structures one’s relationship with the world and others, they state that:

[...] It is the era of the world screen, of all screens, contemporary of the networks, as well as surveillance screens, information screens, and entertainment screens. Art (digital art), music (videoclip), game (video games), advertisement, conversation, photography, knowledge escapes completely the digitized nets of the new screenocracy”.<sup>229</sup>

Serroy and Lipovetsky also suggest the possibility of the screen to transform humans into what they call “Homoscreen” this idea highlights how the screen gained its central place as a medium through which humans access the world, information and images. The screen’s presence becomes nearly unavoidable and indispensable from all aspects of contemporary life. To capture the essence of the concept of the hyperbolic, or screen excess in the postdigital era, Lipovetsky and Serroy discuss how the media magnifies every aspect of life, from sports to genetic manipulation to digitalization, to urbanisation, pushing them to the extremes. In its endeavour for novelty, in the postmodern era, the screen strives to bring “the wildest” and extravagant fantasies and inventions. In this sense, society is governed by a culture of spectacle which constantly challenges and surpasses the norms or the old. To illustrate with a

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<sup>225</sup> *ibid*, 10. (our own translation of the quote from French).

<sup>226</sup> *ibid*, pp 151-228. (idem).

<sup>227</sup> *ibid*, p.51

<sup>228</sup> *ibid*, pp 77-98.

<sup>229</sup> *ibid*, 23. (Translated from French).

quote, Serroy and Lipovetsky state that:

Technologies génétiques, numérisation, cyberspace, flux financiers, mégalo­poles, mais aussi porno, conduites à risques, sports extrêmes, performances, happenings, obésité, addictions: tout grossit, tout s'extrémise et devient vertigineux, "hors limites"...Le jeu avec les technologies permet ici de donner corps aux rêves les plus fous, aux fantasmes les plus incroyables, aux inventions les plus délirantes et les effets spéciaux jouent comme autant de stimuli.<sup>230</sup>

### **1- The hyperbolic in "Fifteen Million Merits":**

Thus, it becomes clear that hypersexuality is a focal point in understanding screen excess, Lipovetsky and Serroy trace back the historical development of Hollywood films highlighting the cultural shift from classical movies to the "cinema of studio" suggesting that the movies focused on youth representation, where cinema becomes increasingly influenced by the liberation movement of the 1960s as well as Freudian theory on Libido. After a long tradition of prudent Victorian era, cinema in modern eras is characterised by a more open depiction of sexuality. The two authors state the example of the French singer Brigitte Bardot and the popular culture icon Marilyn Monroe, as pillar figures of liberated expression of sexuality on Screens. To quote, Lipovetsky and Serroy state that:

Freud investi Hollywood et le libido se donne à voir au grand jour, tant dans les drames du refoulé que dans l'explosion du corps et du sexe. B.B. ouvre la voie de ce sexe libéré avant que Marilyn n'étende son empire, puis qu'un cinéma de la marge et de la contre-culture, s'élaborant dans l'underground, ne s'autorise toutes les audaces.<sup>231</sup>

Considering the above, in "15 Million Merits" Bing is constantly bombarded by pornography advertisements, when he is confronted by the screens. Thus, we suggest that the episode comments on the transition from the role of the screen "in liberating the libido" to imposing the male gaze. For instance, a video of sexually provocative women appears constantly in the mirror when Bing checks himself.(2:05). Bing struggles to switch off this forced pornography, interestingly, the viewer notices that the number of his merits drops off each time he switches off the advertisement (3:53). Bing is depicted as a catalyst, since the beginning of the episode, he tries to escape the hypersexualization and strives for deep human connection. In contrast, Dustin, who embodies the opposite, is depicted watching a scene of lesbian pornography, while pedaling intensely as if he wants to get inside the screen.(6:38).

Moreover, Serroy and Lipovetsky explain that the hypermodern society is characterised by an overwhelming 'presentism'<sup>232</sup> which refers to the focus on the present under consumerist society, the immediacy of digital networks and short-term financial gains, in this

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<sup>230</sup>*ibid*, 283.

<sup>231</sup> *ibid*, 55

<sup>232</sup>*ibid*, pp 20-21.

sense, reshape different aspects of life including information, fashion advertisement and leisure. Consequently, immediate gratification overshadows long term thinking. In other words, hypermodernity prioritises the ‘here and now’ through digital networks, by providing platforms that allow immediate communication. The screen, in this sense, fuels constant engagement and consumption. A concrete example of social media platforms that encourage this immediacy is Instagram, through its real-time updates and the characteristic of sharing ‘stories’, as well as the emphasis on likes and comments, this platform encourages instant gratification. To illustrate with a quote, Serroy and Lipovetsky state that:

La société hypermoderne est celle qui est dominée par la catégorie temporelle du présent. Consommation, publicité, information, modes, loisirs, c’est toute la quotidienneté qui se trouve désormais remodelée par les normes de l’ici-maintenant et de l’instantanéité [en] développant une culture de type présentéiste s’arc-boutant sur le temps court des profits financiers, l’immédiateté des réseaux numériques et des jouissances privées.<sup>233</sup>

In “Fifteen Million Merits” there are several references to advertisement, the screens bombard the characters with these advertisements, reminiscent of the American film *The Truman Show* where Truman’s wife Meryl offers Truman a drink to distract him, she delivers it in a way that mimics the language used in advertisement perfectly. To exemplify with a scene from ‘Fifteen Million Merits’, Bing becomes impatient with the advertisement of Hot Shot and abruptly shuts it away. Then we see a dialogue box popping up suggesting to resume viewing, each time he skips an advertisement, his score of “Merits” drops, and porn pops up again (8:50). This scene can be read as a comment on the compulsory advertisement in social media platforms, where the user has to purchase the premium version in order to be able to use the platform without interruptions by advertisements.

Additionally, Lipovetsky and Serroy suggest that the hyperbolic, or screen excess also involves producing stories about ‘everything’, where there is no hierarchy of topics according to their importance. Therefore, in the hyper modern era, every narrative is important. This phenomena gave birth to reality television (télérealité) which highlights the postmodern urge to tell one’s story, it entails that everyone’s life is important. However, initially, reality T.V is concerned with the depiction of the “real” life of celebrities, Lipovetsky and Serroy refer to this phenomena as “anti-art” or “art of the real”<sup>234</sup> As Serroy and Lipovetsky suggest: “La fiction ne remplace plus le réel, c’est la réalité elle-même qui se fictionnalise à travers un dispositif scénique qui “n’est ni vrai ni faux”.”<sup>235</sup>

Further, in *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard also describes the phenomenon of

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<sup>233</sup>*ibid*, 173.

<sup>234</sup>*ibid*, pp 162-163.

<sup>235</sup>*ibid*, 243.

TV reality shows referring to the TV program of the family of “the Louds’ , “a family who agreed to deliver themselves into the hands of television and to die by it,”<sup>236</sup>as Baudrillard suggests. An example of American films similar to “the Louds” is *The True Man Show*, Truman's life is an idealised American middle class life, happy and surrounded by neighbours in a suburban house, moreover, Truman’s mother tries to convince him to have children, an idea that Truman resists, all of these indeed represent the American ideology of the traditional family values.” Baudrillard argues that the audience derives pleasure from the violation of privacy of these individuals, and it provides them with a sense of direct participation in the lives of these recorded people<sup>237</sup>. In this respect, to quote Baudrillard he says: "You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you”<sup>238</sup>, this citation captures the sense of involvement given to the audience by watching other people’s lives. This is especially relevant to the film, the audience of Christof’s Truman Show are fixated and obsessed with every detail of Truman. Truman becomes like their “raison d’etre”.<sup>239</sup> Similarly *Black Mirror* episode “Joan is Awful”, featured in the sixth season of the television Show, depicts the violation of Joan’s privacy where her life becomes an exaggerated form of a reality T.V show.

In the same context, in “Fifteen Million Merits”, the relatively overweight man, named Dustin, who pedals next to Bing, chooses to watch a show called ‘Botherguts’ on his screen. This show is akin to a reality show, it portrays a group of over sized men in silly and humiliating situations that elicit amusement in Dustin. This scene underscores how banality and absurdity becomes the source of entertainment in the postmodern era. It resonates with the concern over the role of social media platforms such as Ticktock and some of their content that is considered as trivial amusement and a form of passive consumption, which raises concerns about the youth’s disengagement from considering serious issues. Indeed, the theme of the domination of the trivial in the public sphere is depicted in other *Black Mirror* episodes such “The Waldo Moment”, this episode is a political satire about comedians becoming politicians. The concern about the role of triviality in controlling the masses is also expressed in Huxley’s novel *Brave New World*, the forms of sensualism and hedonism such the drug soma numbs the masses and keeps them under the World’s State control.

To add to what has been already discussed, violence is a prominent characteristic of the excess screen proliferation, to exemplify from the episode, Bing plays a violent videogame where he uses his finger to mime a gun. He blows off the heads of overweight

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<sup>236</sup>Baudrillard Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press,1988 (english translation), p.21.

<sup>237</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> *ibid.*

CGI characters who are running at him, making grotesque grunting sounds as they approach (at 07:42). These CGI characters resemble the janitors seen in the space where Bing bikes for merits. While Bing, Abi and the other side characters who generate Merits, represent the middle class, the janitors portray the working class. Fantasising extermination of the working class in the video game can be read as comment on the dehumanisation of these workers and a rooted hatred towards them, highlighting the classist nature of “Fifteen Million Merits” world. Another example of classicism in the episode is depicted in the scene where we observe a female character gesturing with her hands to mimic the act of playing on a violin, in contrast we observe the janitors behind, with their yellow uniform cleaning. Another example of mistreatment of these janitors is portrayed in the scene where Dustin, insults the maintenance worker yelling at her and calling her ‘lazy fuck’ (at 11:10).

Further, Serroy and Lipovetsky suggest that hypermodernity extends beyond consumerism; the individual strives to engage with the external world to reclaim personal autonomy. This is achieved through recording, capturing and framing events like a reporter, a photographer or a filmmaker. The motto of this phenomena, as Lipovetsky and Serroy suggest is: “I record, therefore I am”. The world in this sense becomes an aesthetic field that inspires in the individual an artistic urge to use his screen and record events. To quote, Lipovetsky and Serroy state that:

L'individualisme hypermoderne n'est pas seulement consumériste: il cherche à reconquérir des espaces d'autonomie personnelle, à se construire en s'appropriant le dehors, à mettre en image et en scène le monde, un peu à la manière d'un reporter, d'un photographe, d'un cinéaste.”Je filme donc je suis: désormais sommeille en chaque homme de loisir un désir: “artiste” et en chaque quidam un “cinéaste”, le rapport au monde devenant de plus esthétique.<sup>240</sup>

Moreover, another negative characteristic of screen excess and the hyperbolic, according to Lipovetsky and Serroy is the narcissistic tendency of individuals in the postdigital and post industrial era to record the most banal and mundane details of their lives to defuse it on the internet, we highlight the relevance of this discussion in the contemporary era, especially with the ability to post stories on social media channels such as Instagram, and reels and videos on platforms such as Ticktock. The authors also evoke instances where social media users have performed atrocious acts of violence on innocent people for the sake of recording them and sharing them to generate “views”.<sup>241</sup> They Suggest that the act in itself is not enough, but there is a further need to “authenticate” it<sup>242</sup>. Thus, contrary to Orwell’s concern over mass surveillance of the totalitarian regime and the omnipresence of telescreen,

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<sup>240</sup>Lipovetsky Gilles , Serroy Jean , *L'écran global*, 323.

<sup>241</sup>*ibid*, 323-325.

<sup>242</sup>*ibid*.



the contemporary era is characterised by an anxiety of not being watched in a certain way.

Additionally, ‘Hot Shot’ Judge named Hope comments on a contestant singing with the following harsh words: “That was achingly terrible. You have the magnetism of a towel. I don’t want to ever look at you again”(57:40). This is a clear depiction of the entertainment industry and mainly the humiliation of contestants on talent shows such as the X factor. The judges of Hot Show parody X factor judges, Judge Hope is reminiscent of Simon Cowel.<sup>243</sup>

In “Nosedive” there are many instances where Lacie records herself to post her pictures on a platform that is reminiscent of Instagram (the scene at the cafe shop). Whereas, in “White Bear” the passive voyeurs record Victoria while she was running away from the sadistic hunters. The voyeurs become passive sadistic hunters themselves, but also the way they record her suggest that they are doing it with enthusiasm and joy, this is reminiscent of how the crime in detective fiction becomes some sort of aesthetic expression in its mysteriousness eliciting the fascination of readers, or viewers in the case of Victoria’s state of distress and her relationship with the voyeurs.

In “Fifteen Million Merits” After Abi’s singing performance, the judges coerce her into accepting a career as a pornographic actress. The audience through their avatars are depicted applauding, cheering and encouraging her to accept the judges’ offer (38:16), this is an extreme example of lack of critical thinking or sympathy, mirroring Lipovetsky and Serroy discussion about the excess of the screen society, and the rejoice behind recording suffering of others. The scene parallels the passivity of the voyeurs who follow and record Victoria in *White Bear*. We can say that there is no escape from the screen, Bing is even forced to watch Abi's sexual performance on the screen, she is dressed in a way that gives her an innocent appearance, which highlights pornography tendency to fetishize looks of innocence. “Fifteen Million Merits” is a world that is saturated by images that dictate every aspect of life, this echoes Debord’s society of the spectacle as we will explore in the next paragraphs. Bing is the only one who seems to escape and rebel against the dictatorship of the image, since he experiences true love and caring for Abby.

In this light, in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967)<sup>244</sup> Debord discusses the role of commodities, images and different sorts of representations in shaping new experiences that are completely alienated from reality. So he argues that in the late capitalist era, appearances

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<sup>243</sup>source:<https://bpb-eu-w2.wpmucdn.com/blogs.grammar.sch.gg/dist/a/4/files/2014/04/Black-Mirror-Notes-1qze4cx.pdf>.

<sup>244</sup>Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (translated by Ken Knabb, Paris: Editions Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

and consumerism determine human relations. In this regard, Debord states that: “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation<sup>245</sup>. Indeed this quote echoes Karl Marx's assertion that in capitalist societies the accumulation of goods and commodities is primordial in measuring prosperity. Marx states that “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an immense accumulation of commodities.”<sup>246</sup>. Thus, in this quote, Debord presents a close link between his concept of the spectacle and the economy by showcasing how television and advertising, for instance, contribute to the fetishization of commodities.<sup>247</sup> In this light, Debord states that:

The fetishism of the commodity-the domination of society by "imperceptible as well as perceptible things" -attains its ultimate fulfilment in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a selection of images which is projected above it, yet which at the same time succeeds in making itself regarded as the perceptible par excellence.<sup>248</sup>

The quote above illustrates that fetishization of images and products leads ultimately to identification with them, and ultimately to loss of touch with reality. Thus, the world is perceived through the spectacle. Images gain a supreme status in the interpretation of reality and products determine the worth of individuals. Thus images under capitalism push individuals to purchase goods for the constructed cultural symbolic value that they present instead of their inherent value.<sup>249</sup>

This sentiment about the fetishization of commodities and the role of the image under late capitalism is expressed by Bing in his emotive speech when he asserts that: “It’s all fodder, and the faker that fodder is, the more you love it, because fake fodder’s the only thing that works any more. Fake fodder is all we can stomach...all we know is fake fodder and buying shit”. (from 52: 27, till 53: 15). Therefore, it becomes evident that Bings’ words capture what has been said, so far, in this part, about the role of the images and representations in alienation of individuals. In this regard June Xuandung suggest that:

The society portrayed in “Fifteen Million Merits” perfectly illustrates Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle,” in which “mere images become real beings – dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behaviour”. [8] Once this hypnotic behaviour has been integrated thoroughly enough, surveillance is no longer necessary. What is essential to the stability of such a society is, on the other hand, its citizens’ commitment to images, to the spectacle. This explains why the act of not watching incurs penalty: in order to skip the commercials, Bing is required to pay. As he does not have

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<sup>245</sup> *ibid*, p.2.

<sup>246</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Capital Economy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers (1867), 27

<sup>247</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 27

<sup>248</sup> *ibid*, 14.

<sup>249</sup> *ibid*, p.4.

enough merits, he shuts his eyes to avoid seeing the porn actress Abi.<sup>250</sup>

## **2-The paradox of the screen as a tool for surveillance, sharing and isolation:**

A major concern raised by screen proliferation in the postdigital era is the subjection of the individual to an Orwellian mass surveillance leading to the erosion of privacy and loss of social solidarity and trust. Serroy and Lipovetsky warn against the possibility of the “digitalization” of Big Brother, suggesting that omnipresent surveillance become not only personalised and pervasive, where the individual is not only a subject to surveillance, but also a participant in it. In other words, individuals are surveyed and surveilling others simultaneously. To illustrate, Serroy and Lipovetsky state that: “Big Brother s’est transistorisé, numérisé, individualisé, risquant de reconduire la guerre de chacun contre tous, chacun devant l’espion de l’autre.”<sup>251</sup> This quote highlights a contemporary implication of Big Brother, making Orwell’s vision a futuristic allegory on surveillance. Indeed, the concern of control by the foucauldian panoptic surveillance and the gaze of others are two recurrent facets throughout the selected episodes *Black Mirror* episodes. The screen in the narratives acts as a tool for separation and barrier to communication. In “Fifteen Million Merits”, for instance, characters are trapped in a confined space where their relationship to each other is dictated by the screen. Each individual is represented by an avatar, which echoes the rise of virtual reality and Mark Zuckerberg’s unachieved project of ‘Metaverse’.

Throughout the episode characters are pedaling bikes, surrounded by screens in a confined space reminiscent of a workplace, where each individual is focused on their own screen and each screen represents the simulated interest of each character. For instance Dustin’s main interests are violence, pornography and reality T.V shows, another female character is interested in music, mainly playing violin and so on. Hence, individuals are gathered in two different confined spaces; the workplace and their personal living space. The omnipresence of screens creates an unsettling anxiety of confinement. In the opening scene of the episode, for instance, we observe that Bing’s bed is almost integrated with the wall, in close proximity to the screen, generating a feeling of claustrophobia.

Another scene that depicts these unsettling feelings created by the screen is when Bing suddenly sees Abi’s erotic performance on the screen. Despite his desperate attempts to avoid

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<sup>250</sup>Machinal Hélène, Michlin Monica, Mullen Elizabeth, Regnauld Arnaud, Thornborrow Joanna, *Médiations Apocalyptiques: Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse*, Université de Bretagne Occidentale: Hal Open Science 2017, pp.124-125.

<sup>251</sup> Lipovetsky Gilles, Serroy Jean, *L’écran global*, p.292.

watching these scenes, by putting his hands over his eyes, the advertisement insists that Bing resumes viewing. The walls turn dark red with light and the klaxon becomes even louder. Eventually, Bing is confronted with the screen showing a close up of Abi's face with her makeup spoiled, while she keeps singing the song that she learned from her mother as a child. Bing, deeply distressed, pounds himself against the screen in an attempt to destroy it and it starts cracking (at 43:00). Therefore, in this scene the screen is depicted in a bleak light, it is transformed into a menacing presence. Figuratively, it envelopes Bing in a suffocating embrace.

Moreover, "Fifteen Million Merits" provides a notable contradictory contrast between the screen as a tool for communal activity and as a tool for isolation. To explain, on the one hand the characters are isolated by labour while biking in front of their screens, which parodies computers in a workplace. On the other hand, they are gathered virtually to watch the talent show 'Hot Shot', creating a semblance of unity. Through 'Hot Shot' the screen offers a festive promise, a form of mindless entertainment and escapism. To highlight the communal power of the screen, Serroy and Lipovetsky comment on the role of cinema with the following words: "le cinéma a fonctionné comme promesse de fête, cathédrale du plaisir des masses modernes, à travers une féerie d'images et de fictions."<sup>252</sup> This citation showcases how cinema provides a grand captivating spectacle that immerses audiences in visual and narrative experiences. In the context of contemporary screen culture, this role has transitioned due to the various digital platforms, such as Netflix, Hulu and HBO. These platforms enable the user to watch content across various devices. Thus, Screens become a source of endless distraction. This evolution from large screens to personal screens is echoed in "Fifteen Million Merits", the talent show 'Hot Shot' for instance, portrays the dual function of the screens, as a source of pleasure through which characters are invited into a simulated isolated engagement.

### **3-The screen as a Mirror: Symbolic significance of *Black Mirror***

*Black Mirror's* title is embedded with significant symbolism. The title clearly refers to the sleek physical surface of a smartphone or a television screen, when it is switched off, it resembles a reflective "black mirror". As the television series' producer Charlie Brooker suggests in his article written for *The Guardian* "The 'black mirror' of the title is the one you'll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smartphone".<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>252</sup>*ibid*, 43.

<sup>253</sup>Brooker Charlie, "The dark side of our gadget addiction" (an article written for *the Guardian*

The mirror can be seen as a metaphor for the T.V series endeavour in reflecting both the present and the future, portraying technophobic concerns. Considering that some episodes depict near-future technologies that resemble present technologies, such as the mobile phone used for rating in “Nosedive”, while some other episodes feature future technologies such as the grain implants in “The Entire History of You” and digital consciousness in “San Junipero”.<sup>254</sup> In an interview with Channel 4 Charlie Brooker states that: “I quite like the fact that people are watching it on their TV or on their laptop, or their smartphone or whatever, and then as the end credits start running and the screen cuts to black, they see themselves reflected.” Thus, this quote highlights the cautionary aspect of *Black Mirror*.<sup>255</sup> Moreover, the opening of each episode features a shattered screen, to explain the symbolism behind this picture, Machinal suggests in her analysis of the episode of “San Junipero that:

The broken mirror, thus, refers to the possibility of an absence of reflection, or of a reflection that refers, simultaneously, to absence and presence, to the deceptive shimmer of illusion and simulacra associated with the virtual as a world of the after, of eternal youth and the consumption of an artificial happiness.<sup>256</sup>

Considering the citation above, the episode of “San Junipero”, like the other episodes *Black Mirror*, series reflect both the posthuman condition and the screen society as discussed by Liposetsky and Serroy. San Junipero explores the possibility of transferring human consciousness into a machine and making it eternal. It provides individuals, especially the terminally ill, the ability to live a youthful and healthy life in a simulated universe. This theme of immortality within the digital realm is also discussed in the T.V series upload where the main character lives in a digitalised world after his death in an accident. Machinal explains in her article the relevance of these themes within the context of the third industrial revolution.

While *Black Mirror* portrays a bleak dystopian future with a technophobic tone, paradoxically, the series itself becomes addictive, making its audience engaged with it through their screens; television, phones or computers, especially considering the binge-watching possibly offered by Netflix, the streaming platform on which the television series is aired, making the show addictive. The experience of watching *Black Mirror* showcases the extent to which screens are integrated into people’s daily lives, bringing the audience closer to the dystopia that it depicts. In this regard, Sébastien LeFait suggests that:

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*Newspaper*), London: *The Guardian*, December 1, 2011.

<sup>254</sup> Machinal Hélène, Michlin Monica, Mullen Elizabeth, Regnauld Arnaud, Thornborrow Joanna, *Médiations Apocalyptiques : Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse*, Université de Bretagne Occidentale: Hal Open Science, 2017, pp 126-127.

<sup>255</sup> source: Creator Charlie Brooker Explains... | Black Mirror: White Christmas » Channel 4. Publiée le 16 décembre 2014, consultée le 9 avril 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2YPxSDIoPE>

<sup>256</sup> Machinal Hélène, *L'épisode « San Junipero » de Black Mirror: les miroitements du post-humain*, Université Rennes 2: OpenEdition Journals, 2018. (quote translated from french to English).

Cette remise en question générique remplit un but précis : si *Black Mirror* n'est qu'à peine de la science-fiction, c'est que le futur cauchemardesque qu'elle décrit est (quasiment) là. La série nous le renvoie en temps réel: l'écran même par lequel nous la visionnons, et que nous avons du mal à lâcher tant elle nous captive, est ce qui nous rapproche de la dystopie. *Black Mirror* nous rappelle que les écrans sont si bien intégrés à notre quotidien qu'ils parviennent à se faire oublier. Or, c'est ce constat même qui motive le renouvellement du genre dystopique.<sup>257</sup>

Considering the above, “Fifteen Million Merits” reflects on how the television series itself can become a part of the system or the entertainment industry that it denounces in the episode. This is reflected in the episode when Bing delivers his speech that attacks the system, after a striking silence and tension in the audience, The judge, named Hope, comments on Bing’s speech with the following words: “that was without a doubt the most heartfelt thing I’ve seen on this stage since *Hot Shot* began!” and the audience starts cheering and applauding intensely, which suggests the lack of agency and spontaneous acting by the audience, they seem to wait for the reaction of the judges, who represent authority, in order to react (At 55.05). Further, this reaction makes Bings’ emotionally and politically charged speech that denounces the injustices of the system, into another segment of entertainment, depriving it from its initial purpose. In other words, his effort became a sort of a show itself, Bing is even offered his own show, this indeed mirrors *Black Mirror*’s audience’s relationship to the television series itself. While initially engaging with the stories’ deeper themes and critiques, the audience eventually consume the production as entertainment, each one carries on with their own lives with passivity towards real change. As Xuandung suggests:” [...] using its own tools, Bing’s opposition to the entertainment industry has fallen prey to the practice it exposes and has eventually resituated itself firmly within the very same industry.”<sup>258</sup>

Likewise, the episode *Joan is Awful*, released on June 2023 in the show’s sixth season, depicts a similar issue, Joan’s distorted life is portrayed on the fictional streaming platform “StreamBerry”, which is a nod to Netflix, the real life streaming platform on which *Black Mirror* is aired. This inaction or hopelessness towards change is, indeed, reminiscent of Winston’s fate in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* who eventually learned to “love Big Brother”.<sup>259</sup> after all the torture he experienced in Room 101. Furthermore, after its adaptation by Netflix, *Black Mirror* falls in a certain way into the trap of commercialization. This is seen

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<sup>257</sup> LEFAIT, Sébastien. « "It's not a technological problem we have, it's a human one": *Black Mirror*, ou la dystopie intégrée », op. cit., p. 130.

<sup>258</sup> Machinal Hélène, Michlin Monica, Mullen Elizabeth, Regnauld Arnaud, Thornborrow Joanna, *Médiations Apocalyptiques: Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse*, Université de Bretagne Occidentale: Hal Open Science, 2017, p. 129.

<sup>259</sup> Orwell, *N.E.F.*, 342.

in its expansion to six seasons, as of the time of writing this master's thesis. This is arguably reflective of *Black Mirror's* ability in social satire, but also self-parody. Similarly, relying once more on June Xuandung's reflection, he states that:

Ironically, *Black Mirror* is also caught in an irresolvable paradox: it attempts to give a social critique of a system of which it is a component. Just like Bing, who now relies on a TV show to deliver his attack on a society that uses screens to dumb people down, the series, in its own act of criticism, contributes to the commodification of the apocalypse, to the perpetuation of the "always on" culture. It is not difficult to find evidence of the impact the industry exerts on the show: the first two seasons of *Black Mirror* have 3 episodes each (the mini-series format), but as the series gained more popularity and recognition, Netflix immediately commissioned a third season including 12 episodes, which was later divided into two 6-episode seasons.<sup>260</sup>

#### 4- The Screen Culture in "White Bear"

In the book *Inside Black Mirror* Annabel Jones, executive producer of *Black Mirror* comments on the episode of *White Bear* suggesting that: "The focus is very much on how we bring people to justice and how outrages we can do it, if we feel we're morally justified".<sup>261</sup> Considering Serroy and Lipovetsky discussion on screen proliferation, in *White Bear* A mysterious signal appears on a T.V screen, it alters people's behaviour and makes them passive voyeurs (1:15) recording Victoria as she attempts to escape the hunters who follow her around with a gun, they point their phones towards her (6:35). We can also say that these watchers' cameras replace the surveillance camera, highlighting the omnipresence of screens, especially with the widespread use of smartphones. We notice that Victoria's Whole experience of constantly reliving the horrific hunting is a show as we already discussed, this highlights the fusion of punishment, even Jem, the woman who helps her at the beginning is finally revealed to be a part of the show, which is reminiscent of *The Truman Show*, where Trueman's wife Meryl his friend and all his family are participants in the fictional life and deceptive reality in which Trueman lives, similarly, *Black Mirror* episode "Joan is Awful" depicts a scenario of simulated life and possibility of total deception.

The passive voyeurs record Victoria with enthusiasm and joy, this is reminiscent of how the crime in detective fiction becomes some sort of aesthetic expression in its mysteriousness eliciting the fascination of readers, or viewers in the case of Victoria's state of distress and her relationship with the voyeurs. This depiction echoes Serroy and Lipovetsky

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<sup>260</sup>Machinal H el ene, Michlin Monica, Mullen Elizabeth, Regnauld Arnaud, Thornborrow Joanna, *M ediations Apocalyptiques: Imag(in)ing the Apocalypse*, Universit e de Bretagne Occidentale: Hal Open Science, 2017, p. 127.

<sup>261</sup>Anna Jones, *Inside Black Mirror*) Brooker Charlie, Jones Annabel, Arnopp Jason, *Inside Black Mirror* London: Crow Archetype, 2018, p. 22.

discussion of the modern urge to record everything, “je filme donc je suis”.

In the final scenes, the director of “Theme Park”, replays the recording of the murdered child Jemima on T.V screen to Victoria, telling her “why don’t we watch some in-flight entertainment?”(36:00). This is indeed a bleak disturbing picture of punishment. Moreover the director tells the audience to enjoy themselves watching Victoria's punishment, he tells them: “... that’s probably the most important rule of all, okay? Take lots of photographs..try to stay safe... we’ll be keeping an eye on you to make sure you’re all okay. So let’s get out there.. and let’s make this show happen!”. This highlights once again the fusion of punishment with entertainment as discussed through Debord’s lens of the society of the spectacle. We also see a sequence of a couple by the end of the episode watching Victoria's torment as she wakes up again on the chair, with the ache on her neck, they watch it and look at each others and smile at each other, as if they are watching a film, highlighting the double function of the small screen as a surveillance tool, and as extension of cinema, or as discussed by Serroy and Lipovetsky, the transition from big screens to small screens.

Furthermore, when Victoria is paraded in some kind of transparent vehicle, the audience is screaming and yelling at her with all sorts of insults (33:12), the hysteric outrage portrayed in these sequences is reminiscent of the “Two Minutes Hate Speech”, the same mechanism is at play, the spectacle in both narratives becomes a source of catharsis, just as theorised by Girard in his concept of the surrogate victim, which we will analyse deeply in the following paragraphs. We notice that catharsis release is a recurrent theme throughout our selected episodes of *Black Mirror*. In 15 Million merits, Bing’s emotive speech and critique of the system is turned into a part of entertainment, whereas in “Nosedive” the cathartic release is seen in Lacie’s speech, in her case, the cathartic release serves as a way to free her suppressed anger and resentment towards the system. Yet she is made the outcast and was imprisoned for disrupting Naomi’s wedding and the social order along with it. Victoria in “White Bear” represents Girard’s surrogate victim; she is subjected to public humiliation and ritualised punishment, this echoes how society’s collective outrage is channelled into a sort of controlled spectacle. The spectacle in this sense, provides a cathartic release for the community and maintains social order.

In his book *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) René Girard discusses the sociological implication of violence and the way in which societies historically perform sacrificial rituals in order to contain and control this violence. To explain, Girard suggests that people relied on sacrifice, such as animals or even humans, as a way to prevent the accumulation of uncontrolled and disruptive violence. To illustrate with a quote Girard states that:



if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area” thus, “the role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into ‘proper channels.’<sup>262</sup>

Girard argues that there are two types of societies, the first is that which relies on sacrifice and the other one is that developed judicial systems in order to get rid of this violence. According to him, it is the system of law that differentiates between civilised and primitive societies, to him, this is not a value judgement, but an objective knowledge that helps understand the two different models of societies in the way they deal with violence.<sup>263</sup> Yet, these two models share a common ground so he posits that: “Sacrifice in both types of societies is defined as “an instrument of prevention in the struggle against violence.”<sup>264</sup> He also believes that religion served as a means for managing violence in civilization. Through religion Girard suggests that seeks “curative or preventative means against his own violence”.<sup>265</sup>

Girard also discusses the function of literary narratives and myths and especially tragedies in portraying how the masses employ violence achieve resolution and transcend conflicts.<sup>266</sup> Thus, Girard introduces the concept of the “surrogate victim”, which is a figure that is expelled or killed in order to unify and stabilise a community while appeasing the impulse for collective uncontrolled violence. To explain how Girard presents the figure of the surrogate victim, we can illustrate with the following quote from the book: “When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand”.<sup>267</sup> The surrogate victim is also blamed for all the ills in a given society as a mechanism “particular ills or sins that the victim is supposed to take upon himself to realise that we are indeed dealing, not simply with an illusion and a mystification, but with the most formidable and influential illusion and mystification in the whole range of human experience, one whose consequences are real and manifold.”<sup>268</sup>

Girard views collective violence against the surrogate victim in a given society as more than mere pathological deviation. Thus, violence is seen by rationalist thinking as short lived while overlooking its sociological significance and long term impact on society’s

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<sup>262</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (translated by Patrick Gregory), Paris: Editions Bernard Grasset, 1972, p. 10.

<sup>263</sup> *ibid*, 19.

<sup>264</sup> *ibid*, 17.

<sup>265</sup> *ibid*, 23.

<sup>266</sup> *ibid*, 56

<sup>267</sup> *ibid*, 2.

<sup>268</sup> *ibid*, 82

structure. This rationalist view also posits that collective violence is rooted in a deeper need for cathartic release, reminiscent of the release of emotions during rituals of sacrifice for instance. The role of this emotional release is to alleviate or soothe tension momentarily as Girard explains. To quote, Girard states that:

It is generally assumed that collective violence – in particular, the pitting of all against one – is an aberration in the history of a society; a perversion more or less pathological in nature, whose study can hardly be expected to yield anything of sociological significance. Our rationalist bent...leads to an innocence of outlook that refuses to concede to collective violence anything more than a limited and fleeting influence, a ‘cathartic’ action similar, in its most extreme forms, to the catharsis of the sacrificial ritual.<sup>269</sup>

Further, the single is what causes the people to be passive voyeurs, as Jem explains to Victoria she says that the behaviour of people started changing since the appearance of the single on every screen, computer, T.V and phone(11:50). Indeed this symbol can be read as a parody on the role of the media and T.V news in inciting mob mentality, where individuals may commit acts of violence or become fueled with hatred for a particular person. This is reminiscent of the depiction of Two Minutes Hate in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which portrays the Party’s propaganda of an unreal war as a demagogic aspect of the Party’s ideology. To illustrate from the novel, Orwell describes that:

The horrible thing about Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act as a part, but on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretense was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge-hammer, seemed to through the wole group of people like ab electric current, turning one even against one’s will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp.<sup>270</sup>

Two Minutes Hate Speech is also similar to the depiction of the spectacle of Theme Park in White Bear. Victoria is led repeatedly to a stage to be confronted to an audience watching her, as she is shown the picture of the parents moaning their murdered child whom Victoria is accused of participating in her killing. The stage here is akin to theatre, but the prevalence of screens and the overall theme, suggest that it is a dark comment on the role of screens and social media. The watchers are gathered to witness the punishment of Victoria, offering them a sense of moral superiority. Their presence provides them with a sense of a community, similar to the depiction of Two Minutes Hate in Orwell’s novel, as illustrated. In the context of the fusion with entertainment, the director of “Theme Park” tells the audience: “Keep your distance...Don’t forget she’s a dangerous individual. Imagine that she’s an escaped lion...We still step in if she gets too close.. we’re all equipped with Tasers...but then

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<sup>269</sup> *ibid*, 81.

<sup>270</sup>Orwell, *N.E.F*, 23.

the story will have to be shut down and we would have wasted a day... It's best to stay at least three metres back... you can use your camera zoom!"(38:56).

## 5- Screen Culture in “Nosedive”

In “*Nosedive*” Several types of screens are depicted, for instance the phone used for rating, personal computers, work computer and tablets , suggesting that the omnipresence of screens discussed by Lipovetsky and Serroy, furthermore the screens are so similar to the present day ones. In a scene we see Lacie in the coffee shop, she takes a bite of a biscuit and even though she is disgusted by it, she continues to feign enjoyment, even though nobody is watching her (at 4:26), reflecting simultaneously Foucault's concept of the panopticon as discussed earlier in relation to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depiction of the telescreen. Moreover, the scene reflects the screen society as theorised by Serroy and Lipovetsky where everything from the most mundane activities is depicted. To quote, Serroy and Lipovetsky in this regard, they state that:

Filmer, cadrer, visionner, enregistrer les mouvements de la vie: nous sommes tous en passe de devenir des réalisateurs et des acteurs de cinéma, au professionnalisme près. Le banal, l'anecdotique, les grands mouvements, les concerts, les violences même se trouvent filmés par les acteurs de leur propre vie.<sup>271</sup>

While Serroy and Lipovetsky *l'écran global* was published in 2007 when social media was less popular than nowadays, this phenomena is more popular in present days with the use of social media platforms such as instagram. The described scene picture of the cafe that she disliked for the sake of performance and posting it, is a perfect example. She gets a higher rating for her picture, in a satirization on the use of instagram This scene also can be seen in the light the commodification of desire. This scene also echoes the consumerist behaviour discussed by Jean Baudrillard in his work seminal *The Consumer Society (la Société de la Consommation)* (1970), where he expands on Marxist theory of exchange value, Baudrillard develops the concept of symbolic meaning of commodities in the realm of postmodern consumerist society. He argues that objects deviate from their utilitarian value to the symbolic value that they provide to consumers, where possession of commodities is equated with prestige and social status. To quote Baudrillard, he states that:

[...] a washing machine becomes a consumer good at the point where it is no longer an implement but a luxury, prestige element. We know that, at that point, it no longer has any specific presence and many other objects could be substituted for it - culture being, precisely,

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<sup>271</sup>Lipovetsky Gilles, Serroy Jean, *L'écran global*, 26.

one of them. Culture becomes an object of consumption in so far as, sliding towards another discourse, it becomes interchangeable and homogeneous with other objects (even if it remains hierarchically superior to them).<sup>272</sup>

Thus, similar to the washing machine which transitions from its practical utility to a symbol of prestige, the act of drinking cafe for Lacie becomes a social performance. Put simply, she does not drink coffee to enjoy it, but to post about it and signal that she has a happy life, a step to secure the luxurious apartment (flat). In light of the quote above from Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*, the scene of Lacie in the coffee illustrates the issue of the commodification of mundane activities, particularly leisure. Thus, for Baudrillard in the consumerist culture objects, such as washing machines can transition from their utilitarian value to a symbolic one, where they become a signal of luxury and prestige. Lacie's action reflects how both objects and experiences depart from their inherent utility to their symbolic meanings and associations. In this light, the scene can also be seen as a satire of Starbucks experience. This brand leads consumers to fetishize the act of drinking coffee, considering that the products sold by this brand are arguably overpriced, without necessarily reflecting their quality. Visits to Starbucks become acts of cultural consumption instead of just a purchase of a beverage. Starbucks along with other global fast-food brands employ meticulous branding strategies such as the standardisation of ambiance of their stores worldwide. The mechanism at play is to push the projection of a desirable and fetishized identity.<sup>273</sup>

## **6- “Joan is Awful” through the lens of Zuboof’s *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019):**

An important rising concern over screen proliferation, especially with the widespread of smartphone usage in the contemporary era is the loss of privacy to the hands of large tech corporations. In this light, *Black Mirror's* sixth season episode titled "Joan is Awful," portrays the story of a middle-class woman named Joan who discovers that her life is constantly filmed and broadcast, without her consent, in a form of reality T,V show on “Streambery” platform. The producers of this television show, in the episode, rely on a

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<sup>272</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society Myth and Structures*, London: Sage Publications, 1998 (English translation, p.10).

<sup>273</sup>Source: Short documentary: *Why Starbucks is actually a Bank*, available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr039xnco-8>).

quantum computer to create a fictionalized version of Joan who is portrayed by the real life celebrity actress Selma Hayek. Bothered by the invasive show that exaggerates her flaws and reveals all her secrets, Joan strives to terminate the show, but she confronts the truth and discovers that this show is legal due to the convoluted online agreements that she had accepted (26:34). When Joan is shown a file of the terms that she has supposedly agreed upon, she does not recognize their origin, and she has been told: “You assigned them the right to exploit all of that...terms and conditions... all of that would have popped up on your phone or whatever when you first signed up to Streamberry and you clicked “accept” (26:50). Later in the episode, Joan discovered that her life is a simulation within another simulation and the real, original Joan succeeds in stopping the show.

In her work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019) Shoshana Zuboff coins the concept of surveillance capitalism to describe the exploitation and commodification of large tech companies, such as Facebook, Google and YouTube of data and the sum of human experience into profit. Data in this sense become a form of “raw material”. Zuboff claims that these companies operate by collecting vast amounts of behavioral data from individuals without their full awareness or explicit consent. The original purpose and justification of these companies in data collection is to enhance products and provide personalized services. Zuboff explains that artificial intelligent and advanced algorithms are used in order to create algorithms that are capable of predicting people's current, near-future, and long-term actions, based on what they search on the net for instance and even on their conversations in their daily lives which are tracked by the microphone of their phone, knowing that this technology is enabled by the users themselves when they agree upon users terms while using a social media platform for instance. The predictions made by these algorithms are later turned into “prediction products” which are subsequently traded in what the Zuboff terms as “behavioral futures markets”, which refers to the monetization of these behavioral predictions by turning them into large scale capitalist profit. The following quote from Zuboff’s book illustrates the meaning of surveillance capitalism:

Surveillance capitalism unilaterally claims human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data. Although some of these data are applied to product or

service improvement, the rest are declared as a proprietary *behavioral surplus*, fed into advanced manufacturing processes known as “machine intelligence,” and fabricated into *prediction products* that anticipate what you will do now, soon, and later. Finally, these prediction products are traded in a new kind of marketplace for behavioral predictions that I call *behavioral futures markets*. Surveillance capitalists have grown immensely wealthy from these trading operations,

for many companies are eager to lay bets on our future behavior.<sup>274</sup>

Therefore, in the context of the quote above on surveillance capitalism, the *Black Mirror* episode “Joan Is Awful” can be seen as cautionary tale about the expansion of surveillance capitalism and violation of privacy under screen proliferation. In real contrary life under surveillance capitalism every casual search, like, and click becomes a form of an asset to be tracked and monetised. In this episode, the depiction of ‘Streamberry’ platform is a clear satirisation of Netflix, the platform on which this season of *Black Mirror* itself is defused. Furthermore, the theme of perception distortion under digital technologies in the episode echoes Zuboff’s discussion on how surveillance capitalism has taken root so quickly suggesting that this form of capitalism thrives in the habitat provided by neoliberal ideology and policy. Zuboff traces a potential swift evolution of economic power, likening it to a “lurking shark” beneath the surface. To quote Zuboff in this regard, she writes that:

It was as if a shark had been silently circling the depths all along, just below the surface of the action, only to occasionally leap glistening from the water in pursuit of a fresh bite of flesh. Eventually, companies began to explain these violations as the necessary quid pro quo for “free” internet services. Privacy, they said, was the price one must pay for the abundant rewards of information, connection, and other digital goods when, where, and how you want them. These explanations distracted us from the sea change that would rewrite the rules of capitalism and the digital world.<sup>275</sup>

Furthermore, in the episode, Joan's reluctance to read the lengthy and convoluted user agreements, as illustrated earlier, provides an insight to a possible deliberate complexity of these agreements which serves a dual purpose; first, to discourage users from investing the time and effort required to comprehend the details of the agreements, and second, to take advantage of the legal precedent that often upholds such agreements despite the flawed uninformed consent of the users. To quote, Zuboff states that: “Scholars point out that these digital documents are excessively long and complex in part to discourage users from actually reading the terms, safe in the knowledge that most courts have upheld the legitimacy of click-

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<sup>274</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*”Public Affairs, Hachette Book Group, United States, 2019, 8.

<sup>275</sup> *ibid*, 41.

wrap agreements despite the obvious lack of meaningful consent”<sup>276</sup>. Joan's act of signing without paying enough attention echoes the systemic issue identified by Zubboof. Joan's unwillingness to read the conditions for lack of time or disengagement with the lengthy terms mirrors a real life trend where users of digital technologies often opt for quick agreement without delving into the details of the terms. This behavior, as Zuboof warns, is exploited by large tech companies who are aware that users are unlikely to invest the necessary effort and understand the implications fully, enabling these companies to obtain a form of consent. Thus Joan's narrative is a cautionary tale about the result of users disengagement, but also helplessness to a certain degree in protecting their data and privacy.

## **Conclusion:**

To conclude this master's thesis examines the utopian impulse in Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*; namely “Fifteen Million Merits”, “White Bear” and “Nosedive”, we also explored the notion of the posthuman and screen society in each narrative respectively. In this first chapter, we relied on Jameson's interpretive framework to examine the political and the social aspects of the selected works. Through its depiction of social classes, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* criticises authoritarian governments and the abuse of power. Using "ideologemes," the totalitarian ruling class of the party has been able to manipulate and repress the middle and lower classes, as seen through Jameson's prism. In a similar vein, the *Black Mirror*'s episodes *Fifteen Million Merits*, *White Bear* and *Nosedive* adhere to Jameson's paradigm by examining capitalism and the distracting role of entertainment in “Fifteen Million Merits” authenticity, social media addiction and punishment in both of “White” Bear and “Nosedive”. The episodes portray detachment from relationships and employment as a criticism of the damaging impacts of late capitalism, which reflects the dynamics of class conflict and denounces capitalist systems.

Throughout this chapter we explored how Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is a direct criticism of Stalinism, on the one hand, and as a commentary on what he perceived as the distortion of the utopian ideals of equality that emerged during the beginning of the twentieth century following the Bolshevik revolution, on the other hand. It is clear that the ideological conflict that developed between the Soviet Union and the United

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<sup>276</sup> *ibid*, 49.

States, or the Cold War, had a considerable impact on Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which he wrote in 1948. The novel urges readers to put an end to what he perceived to be authoritarian communism.

We also demonstrated in this part that through his writing, Orwell advocates the ideology of democratic socialism which is influenced by his position as a British middle-class writer. The themes and motifs present in the novel, such as the surveillance state, language manipulation, and the destruction of individualism, are all linked to Orwell's commentary on the political and social issues of his time. Moreover, the paper's findings reveal that the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* are a reflection on the contemporary era's misuse of technology. Considering that the series can be seen as "technophobic" as expressed by David Roche, its themes are shaped by real-world events. For instance, the episode "Fifteen Million Merits" can be seen as a critique of talent shows and the exploitation of performers. The show offers a bleak outlook on the future and suggests that the rise of technology has the potential to erode human connections and exacerbate societal issues.

Overall, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* demonstrate the applicability of Jameson's theory by offering insights into power relationships, deception, and resistance in various socio-cultural settings. They reveal more extensive social discourses that are concealed inside the texts. While Brooker demonstrates his left-wing leaning through a critique of capitalism and class conflict, Orwell presented the ideology of democratic socialism to attack Stalinist communism, according to Jameson's framework.

In the second chapter of our analysis, we shift from our examination of the social and ideological dimensions discussed in the first chapter to the application of Jameson's Historical interpretation, focusing first on Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and subsequently on selected episodes of *Black Mirror*. Our primary goal in the first part of this chapter is to demonstrate how *Nineteen Eighty-Four* operates as a historical narrative, showcasing Orwell's intentional resistance to prevailing political and cultural influences of his time, specifically addressing the Second World War, the Cold War tensions, and the associated nuclear threat. Relying on Jameson's historical interpretation, we delve into Orwell's disillusionment with socialism and democracy, shaping the novel's enduring Cold War significance and conveying cautionary messages about language manipulation, totalitarianism, and societal conformity. This chapter also scrutinises Orwell's use of satire and parody, to uncover critiques of Soviet Russia and British society.



The analysis concludes by unraveling the social symbolism in Orwell's depiction of the working class, illustrating how historical ideologies shape perspectives. The narrative serves as a reflective commentary on major historical events in post second war Britain, which sets Orwell among authors of that period as an active agent shaping and responding to historical events while providing prescient warnings about potential perceived future threats. Therefore, this dual role of authorship emerges as a central theme in our analysis, emphasising the profound impact of literature from that era as a medium for sociology-political commentary and foresight.

In the second part of this chapter, we delve into the analysis of the *Black Mirror* episodes, starting with "Fifteen Million Merits". We rely on Jameson's Historical interpretation, to suggest that this framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the dystopian society depicted in the episode. We showcase that this episode portrays the capitalist hierarchy, social class formations, and the dehumanising effects of the dominant mode of production as depicted in the narrative. The discussion of "White Bear" in its turn explores the intersection of live and digital economies in Victoria's punishment. Revealing how the episode reflects contemporary cultural practices and the neoliberalization of governance. Additionally, the shift from public punishment to cultural exhibitions underscores the interplay between power, entertainment, and punishment. Finally, in the examination of "Nosedive," we uncover the critique of the middle-class suburban lifestyle and the obsession with social approval, while drawing on Jameson's ideology of form, to analyse how the episode satirises societal norms, loss of individual agency, and the dehumanising effects of constant performance for social validation. Further, the discussion delves also into Baudrillard's perspective on "pastel colours" and Freud's concept of the uncanny, in order to provide a nuanced understanding of the episode's themes. We contend that the Historical level of interpretation, where Jameson argues that one mode of production should be understood in relation to other modes and social class formations, can help us better understand the dystopian society depicted in *Black Mirror* episode "Fifteen Million Merits".

In the second chapter our analysis of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and the selected episodes from Charlie Brooker's television series *Black Mirror* (2011) reveals the dystopian portrayal of oppressive governments and the dangers of technological control. Both works serve as cautionary tales, highlighting the need for vigilance against totalitarianism and the potential negative effects of advanced technology on society. Through the examination of these works using Fredric Jameson's theories, we uncover the underlying social and symbolic meanings embedded within the narratives. Furthermore, the exploration

of utopian impulses and the connection between science fiction and Marxism provide insights into the motivations behind crafting dystopian visions. Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Black Mirror* (2011) exemplify the dystopian genre's ability to offer societal critiques and envision bleak futures, ultimately aiming to inspire change and a better vision for society.

In the third chapter our findings suggest that screen culture in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* elucidates a profound shift from an alphabetic to a visual culture, a transition fraught with implications for surveillance and indoctrination. Drawing on McLuhan's and Frau-Meigs' theories, the telescreen in Orwell's dystopia serves as an omnipresent tool for the Party's control, embodying Foucault's concept of the panopticon to induce self-surveillance among citizens. This study reveals how Orwell's vision resonates with contemporary concerns about pervasive surveillance, illustrated by parallels to the NSA's data monitoring exposed by Edward Snowden. Moreover, the novel presciently critiques the potential automation of creativity, as seen in the versificator's production of propaganda, foreshadowing today's debates on AI's impact on human creativity. Orwell's depiction of technology's role in societal control is further mirrored in *Black Mirror*'s "Fifteen Million Merits," highlighting the commodification of bodies, particularly women's, under patriarchal surveillance. Through these analyses, the thesis underscores Orwell's enduring relevance in examining the intricate relationship between technology, power, and human autonomy.

Further, the selected episodes of *Black Mirror*, "Fifteen Million Merits", "White Bear" and "Nosedive," offer insightful reflections on the posthuman condition. The episodes, aligning with the major theme of the television series, echo the concerns of the contemporary post-industrial era, characterized development in biotechnologies, cybernetics and screen proliferation. Posthumanism, as defined by scholars such as H  l  ne Machinal and Elaine Despr  s, involves a critical reassessment of human identity and, especially in the context the post-World War II era and the Third Industrial Revolution. This philosophical framework challenges the anthropocentric views of humanism, which prioritizes human concerns and puts the unique human capacity for rationality as the central aspects of existence.

In "Fifteen Million Merits" individuals are reduced to a sort of laboring cogs, cycling to generate electricity, this depiction symbolises the commodification of human life, echoing Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, which describes the practice of the post second world war states and their regulation of bodies. The individual for Foucault, becomes a subject under the control of an array of institutions such as the sanitary system, school and media. In this light, in "Fifteen Million Merits" depicts a near-future totalitarian system that

commodifies and dehumanizes individuals for entertainment and profit. Similarly, "Nosedive" portrays a society governed by a pervasive rating system, where social interactions and self-worth are commodified through technological surveillance and artificial enhancements like contact lenses. Lacie's downfall illustrates the alienation and loss of authenticity that result from a society obsessed with superficial metrics of value. Both episodes underscore technophobia, reflecting societal anxieties about the loss of human identity and autonomy to technological systems, a theme that resonates with the critiques of transhumanism's optimistic visions of human enhancement and immortality. Brooker's *Black Mirror* thus serves as a satirical yet profound critique of the posthuman condition, urging viewers to reconsider the ethical and social implications of our technological trajectory.

In the final chapter of our work, our findings suggest that the title of *Black Mirror* as illustrate throughout our analysis of the selected episodes, provides a metaphorical comment on our relationship with the screens on the one hand, and the paradox of he television series itself, that is to say the addictive nature of the show due to its "binge-watching possibility".

## **Annex:**

### **Summary of the plots of the selected works:**

#### **1)- *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Written by George Orwell in (1949), this novel was first published in London in 1949, it depicts a futuristic society under the control of the totalitarian government, referred to as “the Party”, which constantly monitors individuals through various techniques including the technology of “telescreens” and manipulates language in order to maintain control over the population. This futuristic world is divided into three blocks considered as super states, which are ‘Oceania’, ‘Eurasia’ and ‘Eastasia’. The novel tells the story of Winston Smith and his attempt to rebel against Big Brother and the Party. Winston works for in ‘the Ministry of Truth’ which is concerned with distorting reality in order to conform to Big Brother’s rule. This latter is the leader of “the Party” as well as the face who controls everything under the principles of “Ingsoc” (English Socialism). Oceania is divided into three classes from which we can distinguish: “the Outer party”, “the Inner party” and “the Proles” who represent eighty-five percent of the population. Night arrests are one of the tasks performed by the secret police known as the ‘thought police’. Further, the party distorts language by inventing a new language named ‘Newspeak’ which seeks to narrow the range of thought. Torture and denying the identities of political opponents are ways for the Party to induce terror and remain in power.

#### **2)-The selected episodes of *Black Mirror*:**

##### **2-1- “Fifteen Million Merits”**

*Black Mirror* delves into the perils of technology and the manipulation of reality within a modern framework. In recent times, this anthology science fiction television series is renowned for its targeted exploration of dystopian themes, and it has received critical

acclaim for its insightful exploration of subjects like social media addiction and the transformative impact of technology on relationships and consciousness.

To summarize the plots of the selected episodes of *Black Mirror* (2011), first, “Fifteen Million Merits” is set in a dystopian future, where individuals live in a confined space surrounded by personalized screens, and they earn digital currency by riding exercise bikes. Overweight individuals face oppression and ridicule, while the protagonist, Bing Madsen, falls in love with Abi Khan and convinces her to audition for a talent show. However, Abi is coerced by the judges of the talent show into accepting a role as a porn star. Bing becomes disillusioned, but eventually earns enough merits to audition in the show, where he uses a shard of glass to demand to be heard. He criticises the system and is offered his own show, leading to a life of luxury. The episode concludes with Bing contemplating a seemingly real forest outside his room.

### **2-2- “White Bear”**

Second, the episode of “White Bear” follows the story of a woman named Victoria Skillane who wakes up with no memory of her past life and discovers that most of the population has become passive observers, constantly recording her every move. Alongside a man named Jem, she seeks to reach a transmitter at White Bear to stop the disturbing effects of some signal that she sees on screens. However, Victoria and Skillane are confronted by hunters who aim to harm them. After a series of events Victoria learns that she was convicted for the abduction and murder of a young girl. Her memory is wiped, and she is returned to the room where she first woke up. The episode concludes with the realisation that this scenario is repeated daily for the amusement of an audience.

### **2-3- “Nosedive”**

Last but not least, “Nosedive” depicts a dystopian society in which individuals rate each other using a five-star system using their mobile phones, thereby influencing their social and economic standing. The protagonist, Lacie, endeavours to increase her personal rating to 4.5 in order to qualify for a prestigious apartment. However, she encounters a series of adverse circumstances that result in a decline in her rating. Consequently, Lacie faces difficulties and she is unable to secure a flight ticket to her childhood friend Naomi’s wedding. Then she is given a ride by a truck driver named Susan. Through her interactions with Susan, Lacie becomes cognizant of the oppressive nature of the rating system. Despite being advised against attending her friend's wedding due to her low rating, Lacie attends the event and disrupts it, leading to a further decline in her rating to below one star. Subsequently, she is apprehended and subjected to a punitive procedure involving the

removal of her artificial eyes, which liberates her from the pressures and constraints associated with the rating system.

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