

## ELEVEN

### The Hysterical Sublime

Black Mirror, "Playtest," and the Crises of the Present

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#### APOTHEOSIS OF POSTMODERN CULTURE

It might be an understatement to say that, today, a new mass wave of technological hysteria floods the popular imagination, and the informational torrents flowing through the newsfeeds of our social media homepages. We hear and read much about algorithms, big data, automation, deep learning, internet bots, and international cyberwarfare. Our fantasies of machine control are already so polluted by decades of dystopian sci-fi cinema, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Terminator* to *The Matrix*, that it is no wonder that the new age of media and technology brings with it a paradoxical mix of delight (at the thought of new conveniences) and dread (from fears and anxieties about machinic control). The new digital paranoia, one that is mixed with a sense of euphoric bliss, or *jouissance*, recalls Fredric Jameson's aptly dubbed aesthetic category of the "hysterical sublime."<sup>1</sup>

#### THE SUBLIME OBJECT

Jameson gathers his theory of the sublime from the concept's origins in Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1757) and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790). For Burke, the sublime is an experience akin to terror—a feeling of awe and astonishment at the world of nature and beyond the human

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capacity to comprehend. It is distinguished from the beautiful, which we are able to formalize and comprehend through our human capacities. It is through our categories of reasoning and formal judgment, taste, and cultural capital, that we can ascribe to something the designation of the beautiful. But the sublime is something else entirely: it pierces us—pierces the soul, so to speak. It does this in a way that we fail to even articulate. Consider the amazement of a lightning storm, the view of Earth from outer space, the fear brought about by a natural disaster, like an earthquake or a flood, and perhaps even for us today, the experiences brought to light by ecological catastrophes caused by climate change.

Kant expanded the definition of the sublime to include its relation to representation; or, more appropriately, the inability of the human mind to adequately represent that which lies beyond its capacities. The sublime, in this case, is a category that develops from Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena. Phenomena are aspects of the world that readily present themselves to the human senses and to the human capacity to reason and understand. A phenomenon is the view of an object in the world *as it appears* to the subject who observes it. Noumena, in contrast, are objects as they stand outside of our ability to comprehend because of our corporeal limitations. The human mind is capable of processing the experience of phenomenal reality through our bodily relationship to our senses, but remains unable to access the reality of noumenal objects that are real but still inaccessible. We can know, in other words, according to Kant, only our *knowledge* of things in the world, but we cannot know the noumenal world of *things-in-themselves*.

From the Kantian perspective, there is a gap in our experience of reality: the subject remains unable to grasp that which lies *beyond* representation. What Kant refers to, then, as the sublime, is an experience of something that brings us *closer* to knowing the Thing-in-itself, even if we cannot fully sublimate this knowledge within our very capacity to reason. To do so may in fact bring about our very annihilation; or at least it may bring forth the possibility of annihilating the *significance* of the human species amid the vastness of the universe. This, perhaps, is one reason why fears about technological advancement may figure so heavily in the postmodern sublime.

According to Jameson, postmodern culture has changed our relationship to the sublime. The other of contemporary society—of postmodern capitalism—is no longer the irrational found in nature (or—capital “N” —Nature); it has been replaced by the figure of *technology*. High tech paranoia, according to Jameson, now occupies the place formerly held in modernity by the awe and fear of nature.<sup>2</sup> By referring to the *figure* of technology, Jameson proposes it conceptually as a stand-in for a kind of “alienated power” that remains difficult to fully grasp—that is, the networked, but still somewhat invisible power of capital. For Jameson, the hysterical, technological sublime figures as a force of human creation,

which is presented as the inevitable force of our destruction; and it is perhaps because technology *is*, in fact, very much a symbol of human historical and social development that its terror has become all the more enervating.

As part of our evolution, we have developed technologies to overcome the limits of the human body, to tame the limits of our bodies and societies to properly encounter and defeat the threats caused by changes in our natural environment—it is, in this sense, wrapped up with our evolution as a species; but can these tools which we have developed to control and harness nature end up coming to control *us*? This contemporary (although, no less timeless) fear is fittingly depicted in a series of popular cinema, from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), to Jean-Luc Goddard's *Alphaville* (1965), Joseph Sargent's *Colossus: The Forbidden Project* (1970), James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984), and the Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix* (1999). It is also cleverly depicted in *Black Mirror* episodes, such as “Fifteen Million Merits,” “The Entire History of You,” “White Christmas,” “Hated in the Nation,” and “Playtest.”

#### (BLACK) MIRROR STAGE

*Black Mirror* portrays technology as the sublime other of society. It presents our technologies, digital media, and devices as an object of fascination, a tool of convenience, but one through which we are controlled, and through which we can control others. This plays out heavily in the third season episode, “Playtest,” which tells the story of Cooper Redfield (Wyatt Russell), an American tourist who is backpacking around the world. While in London, he meets Sonja (Hannah John-Kamen) through a mobile dating app. Sonja introduces herself as a technology correspondent for a website. They flirt, and Cooper ends up spending the night at Sonja's apartment. In the morning, their conversation is interrupted when Cooper receives several calls from his mother, which he ignores. He explains that he had been living with his mother to help care for his father who recently died from early onset Alzheimer's, and that his trip around the world was prompted by this experience—he aims to make as many memories as he can, *while* he can.

Later, Cooper finds out that there is a hold on his bank account and he is unable to make a withdrawal. Left without money or options, Cooper struggles with the idea of phoning his mother, whom he has so far kept at an uncomfortable distance. Instead, he returns to Sonja's to seek help. Together they use an app called OddJobs to help Cooper earn some money to afford a plane ticket home. Sonja draws his attention to an ad for a company called SaitoGemu, a mega company in the world of horror videogames looking for people to test play their new game.

"Playtest" encapsulates many of the overlapping elements of the hysterical sublime found throughout the series, and in an indirect way maps many of the anxieties that we now experience as part of *digital* late capitalism. But it does so, cunningly, through its very inability to directly or adequately represent or narrativize our anxieties about the digital present. The episode plays around with various levels of narrative and visual layering, pointing toward the very difficult objective of trying to capture the essence of the sublime underside of contemporary high-tech paranoia. This is seen especially at a formal level, around the question of where the game ends and reality begins.

Visually, the episode layers different forms of depiction and representation, including digitally enhanced images portrayed in the game, which the episode strategically compares to old media entertainment, such as the handheld video game that Cooper plays on his mobile phone, or the in-flight film that he watches, earlier in the episode. But also, while Cooper is beginning the playtest and while he is inside the game, in the mansion, video surveillance images are used to capture the panoptic sensation many of us now feel when we engage with digital new media. We see video surveillance footage of Cooper, which we might assume is being watched by one of the other characters—perhaps, company owner, Shou Saito (Ken Yamamura) or Katie (Wunmi Mosaku), the game test liaison—but this is never subjectivized diegetically.

Once the test begins, Cooper finds himself going deeper and deeper into newer and more terrifying levels of virtual representation in the game. The same occurs in reverse for viewers at the end of the episode when we initially believe that he has ended the game, only to discover that what we thought was the ending was only a part of the game. Formally, the layering found here is reminiscent of what Todd McGowan<sup>3</sup> has called the priority of the deception, referring to Christopher Nolan's films, like *The Prestige* (2006) or *Inception* (2010). We could even locate this kind of deception in older films dealing with virtual reality, like David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999), or Josef Rusnak's *Thirteenth Floor* (1999), and even the Wachowskis' *The Matrix* (1999). The deception, here, is a plot tool used to misguide the viewer, to draw her in, to lure her at the level of her desire. While the degree of layering may, at the end of "Playtest," appear over the top and absurd, it does help us to better understand the representational complexity of trying to adequately capture the hysterical sublime, and likewise, the contemporary networks of capitalism.

### MACHINIC ENSLAVEMENT

According to Jameson, the hysterical sublime is an aesthetic device that is tied to our inability to fully grasp our own position in time and space,

vis-à-vis the overwhelming complexity of the postmodern world. It is related to what he refers to as "cognitive mapping"—that is, the subject's ability to locate herself and her position in the world, to allow her the clarity to recognize the larger social and political totality. As he puts it, new media technology offers us a "privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp—namely the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself."<sup>4</sup> This is the stage of neoliberal and finance-dominated capital. Its emergence coincides with rapid advances in digital and information communication technologies that have helped to facilitate global networks of capital flows into what Franco "Bifo" Berardi<sup>5</sup> has called "semicapitalism," or what Jodi Dean<sup>6</sup> has called "communicative capitalism," both of which refer to the close-knit ties between capital and digital media, and the integration of users into the flows and matrices of capital through combinations of communication and enjoyment. Both concepts also reflect the sense that Gilles Deleuze<sup>7</sup> gives with his notion of the control society.

The society of control, as Deleuze explains, is one in which the corporation has replaced the factory; where individuals have become "dividuals": samples of data for markets or banks.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the surveillance society that Michel Foucault<sup>9</sup> describes in his analysis of panopticism, where enclosure ensured compliance, the subject of the control society is, according to Deleuze, doomed to perpetual reinvention as a subject of debt.<sup>10</sup> We can view the surveillance footage of Cooper in *Playtest* in a different light from the point of the view of Deleuze's control society, which even has particular resonance in the context of semio- or communicative capitalism. On the one hand, Cooper is a precarious worker. He is playing the game as a job—as an "odd job." But more than just his labor; Cooper's entire sense of selfhood is being exploited and mined by the company through the act of "playing," much like the way that we are, as "prosumers"<sup>11</sup> of social media mined for our data.

Cooper's work, here, is more like the kind of "entrepreneurial"<sup>12</sup> or precarious work that we find in contemporary neoliberal capitalism where workers are no longer employed by a single company for life until retirement, but are required to constantly reinvent themselves in order to acquire the next new contract. The fact that Cooper is also brought to this kind of labor by being without his own flow of money speaks to the idea that debt more so than enclosure is the contemporary impetus of control. As the late Mark Fisher put it, if the disciplinary subject was seen as a worker-prisoner, "the figure of control is the debtor-addict" who ends up paying for her own exploitation.<sup>13</sup> We are less so controlled by ideological duping than by the sheer necessity to survive within the complex circuits of neoliberal capitalism, exceedingly trying to navigate its amorphous plane.

Cooper only seeks out the job at SaitoGemu because he has lost all access to his bank account. He is forced out of necessity to take on odd jobs so that he can afford a ticket home. The connection between "Playtest" and the Deleuzian notion of the control society is also demonstrated by the fact that, unlike in the panoptical society that Foucault had described, where workers, for instance, are only supposed to act in a specific, prescribed manner of production—a manner parodied, for instance, in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936)—here, the worker is expected to act only according to his desire. In fact, the game test depicted in the episode only works best, supposedly, if the user lowers his inhibitions and opens himself up more freely to allow the technology to "read his desire," which can be read to mean his fears and anxieties, too. He is interpellated, so to speak, by the machine's ability to read his desires and fantasies. This is perhaps, even, why the mansion sequence figures so much like a dream or a nightmare. We see this when besides the scary images of spiders, Sonja enters the picture, mixing sublimated sexual desire with images of dread, the grotesque, and repulsion. Here, the technological sublime is brought to bear upon even the quintessence of human subjectivity.

#### SINGULARITY, ASSEMBLAGE, ACCELERATION

The technological sublime comes through thematically, too, as the show deals with the question of machinic intelligence. Cooper discovers a book called *The Singularity* at Sonja's flat. Singularity has become a popular shorthand for "technological singularity," referring to the perceived threat of artificial superintelligence—the idea that artificial intelligence will someday (soon) overpower and dominate or destroy human civilization. Although the Singularity, as it has been described by Ray Kurzweil in his book, *The Singularity is Near*,<sup>14</sup> is portrayed in a more utopian light, whereby he envisions a merger between artificial intelligence and human intelligence as part of our evolutionary development. For Kurzweil, AI has the ability to serve and benefit humanity. It would seem, then, that Kurzweil's version of the Singularity is a key target for *Black Mirror* as a whole. In "Playtest," specifically, this response is in fact quite pronounced as Cooper is ultimately devoured by the technology of the game, and indeed, it is the "black mirror," his mobile phone, that ends up leading to his demise.

Consider the way in which his mobile phone has come to replace many of the intimate and social connections that we take for granted. From the beginning of the episode, we see Cooper continuously ignoring phone calls from his mother—"Mom" as her name is displayed on Cooper's phone. The mediation of the mobile allows him to maintain an uncomfortable distance from her. Cooper also uses his phone to take pic-

tures of his trip around the world. We see images from Australia, Thailand, India, Dubai, Spain, Rome, Paris, and then finally in London, England, where Cooper snaps a selfie in front of the Thames. He tells Sonja later on that his father has recently passed away from early onset Alzheimer's and that he wanted to take the trip in order to make as many memories as he could while he was still able to. The irony, of course, as the show presents it, is that in one of the layered endings, the game causes Cooper to completely lose his memory and even any recollection of himself and his own identity, clearly mimicking his fear of falling like his father did before his death. But also, it is the mediation of the mobile phone, its capacity to record "memories" in the form of the photograph—as in the famous advertising slogans, "A Kodak Moment," or "Memorex-ed"—that demonstrates some of the ways that our devices are coming to replace, or at the very least mediate our human experiences of self.

There is a sense, here, in which we see the anti-essentialist notion of the cyborg, developed in posthumanist work of thinkers like Donna Haraway<sup>15</sup> or N. Katherine Hayles,<sup>16</sup> coming to light—the idea that our devices show just how our bodies are or always have been enhanced by technology. Part of human evolution has been through the construction of new technologies that aid us in overcoming the barriers and limitations of our bodies, so much so that the next phase of human evolution might in fact be perceived as one of deeper entwinement with the digital and the cybernetic. But for some, this image of human-machine assemblages, as it is been dubbed by Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>17</sup> might seem grotesque, and perhaps even hysterically sublime in this sense, too.

Yet another way to read this outgrowth of the machine, overpowering the human, is to see it as a political indication, in traditional Marxist terms, of the means of production outgrowing the relations of production. That is, where the technologies produced to exacerbate the efficient production of surplus value, and the disciplining of labor, ultimately comes to outgrow the relations of exploitation and domination that they were meant to serve in the interests of capital. This is still another view that has been popularized in the work of the Accelerationists, who argue that the fastest way to achieve the end of capitalism is through the heightening of the contradictions brought about by the introduction of new digital media and technology into the production process.<sup>18</sup> The question then becomes one of how to structure the *democratic* control of the technology. Is this even possible?

#### REVERSAL

In his book *Four Futures*, Peter Frase argues that the twenty-first century will be haunted by two specters: that of ecological catastrophe and that of automation.<sup>19</sup> Anxieties about ecological catastrophe are wrapped in con-

cerns over scarcity, the loss of natural resources, agricultural land, and habitable environments. Fears about automation, conversely, he says, is a fear of too much: "a fully roboticized economy that produces so much, with so little human labor, that there is no longer any need for workers."<sup>20</sup> At its core, *Black Mirror* addresses this very tension—the dialectical tension between nature and technology. Sigmund Freud writes, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, that with the help of technology guided by science, humanity has gone on the attack of nature—subjected nature to the human will.<sup>21</sup> But in a kind of dialectical reversal, it is technology that has now come to occupy the place of the sublime formerly held by nature. As depicted in "Playtest," our attempts to evade the limitations of the body and nature through technology still present us with an irrationality that we cannot ever harness or tame.

The inability to adequately represent the affective dimensions—to "cognitively map"—the contradictions of the present, to portray it in some kind of totality, is what makes the hysterical sublime resonate. "Playtest," through its thematic and visual layering, helps us to map out the network of contradictions and limitations that we face in the world today: the crisis of nature, the crises of subjectivity, anxieties about control, economic crises, and so forth. The episode, and the series, are as such less moral tales about the advances of technology than an attempt at representing the network of crises and limit points that we feel about the present.

## NOTES

1. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review*, I no. 146 (1984): 77.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Todd McGowan, *The Fictional Christopher Nolan* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012).
4. Jameson, 79–80.
5. Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2009).
6. Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
7. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* no. 59 (1992): 3–7.
8. *Ibid.*, 5.
9. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
10. Deleuze, 6.
11. See Christian Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
12. See Maurizio Lazzarato, *Making of the Indebted Man: Essays on the Neoliberal Condition*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).
13. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).
14. Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

15. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto." In *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Tim Kaposy, 454–471 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
16. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
17. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
18. See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (New York: Verso, 2015).
19. Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2016).
20. *Ibid.*, 2.
21. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, ed. Todd Dufresne, trans. Gregory C. Richter (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2016), 57.

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