EIGHTEEN

The Dystopia of the Spectator

Past Revival and Acceleration of Time in Black Mirror
("The Entire History of You" and "Be Right Back")

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Black Mirror is a "place in abysm." The show portrays a time in which life is technologically exposed and reproduced. Therefore, the British TV series demonstrates a world where every sphere of life is mediated by technology that makes, produces, and reproduces life in the characters' quotidian life, modifying memory and the past with different types of archives, in the sense of Derrida's idea regarding the archive desire of Freud.[2] In a world produced as a copy, the digital archives operate as a feature of "hyperreality"[3] and confer performativity to the replaying simulacra through the making of subjective and *always-new* memorial events.

Our thesis lies within two *Black Mirror* episodes—"The Entire History of You" (S1E3) and "Be Right Back" (S2E1)—and memory's technical mediation that occurs through a mere reliving (not only replaying) of a past that happens to be predominant in present-day life. Through practical uses of technology, characters in "The Entire History of You" can check in a stock of digitalized memories (audiovisual format) whenever they want. They can also show the images to their interlocutors, edit them, and erase the archives they desire. In "Be Right Back," due to the death of her lover (and father of her future daughter), the main character chooses to *reanimate* the lost partner first by using a technology that combines several interactions that the couple had online (which is stored in the "cloud") and second by activating a "mannequin," or an exact replica of the deceased. In each case, algorithms of the deceased's behavior give

credibility to his reproduction and reliving process.[4] This communication through algorithms displays Virilio's idea of *tele-inter-activity*, meaning that the experience is mediated by transferences and digital transports in which velocity is the criteria of truth.[5]

In this world of archives, where algorithms and images are oriented to the reading and overanalyzing the past, the role of the future could be questioned while it becomes uncertain and even irrelevant except for providing instant memories to be archived and reproduced. This is the question of this chapter: the relationship between the point of declaration of the series[6] and the time administration in the episodes. *Tele-inter-activity* transforms the way in which both global and local surroundings are considered. Thus, the characters become both actors and spectators. Their lives are rebooted in an accelerated way to avoid the anguish and anxiety provoked by the future's uncertainty. Moreover, words, objects, and emotions are synchronized by the image's repetition, and, as Paul Virilio points out, the past's immediacy offers control by being both a means and curb toward progress.[7]

PAUL VIRILIO: APPROACHES ON SPEED AND "DROMOSCOPY"

Paul Virilio has analyzed the impact of speed on contemporary societies and realized that as a result of the digitalization of all the files, archives, and the availability of such registries through hyperlinks together with the webs and the audiovisual vehicles, total inertia has been a consequence of all these phenomena. This is precisely *tele-inter-activity*, the idea that one is no longer moving physically to research and connect with the world but relies instead on having access to tele-transferable or tele-presence of these archives, that rearticulates regimes of temporality. Therefore, *tele-inter-activity* results in the fragmentation of history, resulting in a multitude of macronarratives, as Virilio and Sylvere Lotringer discuss in *Pure War*: "The mega-interruption reinterprets man's role."[8] This helps to restore "a unity to humanity"[9] by confirming that humanity's only truth is the negative horizon.

Humanity will share some sense toward the end, as Lotringer points out to Virilio in an interview with him by stating that "the end of time, or the end of temporality [is] the ultimate advent of humanity,"[10] hence the interruption in time would be experienced by all, beyond biopolitics,[11] and would thus replace the interruption in the body itself. Virilio confirms: "It's interesting to privilege interruption on the level of chrono-politics, as opposed to geo-politics. Now interruption in the body is replaced by interruption in time. We plug into everyone's intimate duration. Subliminal effects mean just that."[12] In the same discussion, Lotringer presents the idea of the death of intimacy, strongly related to the *Black Mirror* episodes analyzed here, as the two episodes soak into (and focus

on) the personal and private lives of the main characters. "At the same time, it's the death of intimacy. All the reflections of these last years on an exploded, 'schizophrenic' model of subjectivity correspond to the great esthetic of the collage. The ego is not continuous, it's made up of a series of little deaths and partial identities which don't come back together, or which only manage to come back together by paying the price of anxiety and repression."[13]

If the ego is not continuous, we therefore experience the death of intimacy, and our lives are filled by constant little deaths and identities that are mostly partial. We understand that this continuous interruption that could be called an *interruption* or *suppression of intimacy* is the result of technology's effect on society, something the two episodes of *Black Mirror* analyzed here demonstrate. In the following sections of the interview, Virilio and Lotringer state that the consequences of speed, science, and technology go beyond just their field of action and externalities: "It's not science fiction. Science and technology develop the unknown, not knowledge. Science develops what is not rational. That what fiction is."[14] We relate this idea with the ubiquity and interchangeability of place, due to the interface between all bodies, all places, and all points of the world, which is in direct relation to the destruction of the conception of real time in what Virilio calls "dromoscopy."

As Virilio has clearly written: "The world becomes a cinema. It's this effect of speed on the landscape that I call a *dromoscopy*, in the strict sense. We speak of stroboscopy, in other words, the effects induced by an energy and a relation of observation of an object. But this stroboscopy is also a dromoscopy."[15] In Virilio's conception, real time works similarly to the "exposure time" of a camera, meaning that there is no chance for interruption. Speed and perception are keys to approaching the concept of dromology: "Dromology concentrates on how the phenomenon of speed influences, determines or limits the way we perceive objects, how the field of our perception and its structure change by means of acceleration of speed."[16]

In "Be Right Back," "stroboscopy" corresponds with the way in which memories are organized, as flashes, on the subject. In "The Entire History of You," the reflection screens operate as an aesthetic of disappearance, where images appear as quickly as they dissolve. Therefore, while the picture vanishes, the file is still online, suspended in a space called the "cloud." Without interruption, the velocity with which we might access and use the archives is the criteria of perception and truth. The actualization of perception through the immediate image and the possibility to reexperience the past is key to understanding how the future's uncertainty is locked in an omnipresent past.

The concepts presented above are used in this chapter as tools to frame key ideas in order to read and analyze the role of technology, speed, spectator, and reality and their consequences in conceptions of the

self as well as perceptions of time and temporalities based on Virilio's approach to speed and dromocracy.

BLACK MIRROR'S DYSTOPIA: BETWEEN REFLECTION AND REPETITION

Black Mirror is a TV show that assumes a "slightly futurological difference."[17] The element of future is placed in the centrality of technology, in the storytelling and the narrative of each episode. Also, the relationship between contemporaneity and the spectators rests on the knowledge and the existence of technology depicted in the show.[18] The focus of the narrative and the framing of the dispositive through the camera propose a gaze without any empathy. It gives verisimilitude to the show. Furthermore, it is precisely this fact that we think allows the production team and the scriptwriters to assume morals and existential warnings regarding what the consequences of the uses of technology in social and organic life could be. What they are doing is questioning the present and reality.

The organization's strength of these technological tools has the feature of marking and generating *stimuli* in the characters' own bodies. In this sense, we refer to the specific use of the term *gouge*, which is to name and typify the act of the extraction of "the grain" ("The Entire History of You"). We can see something similar occur with the sexual pleasure that the cyborg is able to provide his mistress ("Be Right Back"). Guided by Deleuze and Guattari, *Black Mirror* shows the way in which the machines become social, *full bodied*: the cognitive, the semiotic, the affective, seem to constitute in new ways of life as machine.[19]

The format and shapes of the TV show place heterotopia in the prospective future and fix their narrative in dystopia. These two episodes may seem to take place in a utopia at first glance, due to the massive access to technology and to the solutions and ease of use that it provides in daily life. However, we uphold that both worlds portrayed are dystopias in which from the beginning are directly shown in the ways in which both normality and control are produced by this technology that exponentially affects the community. Therefore, reading a brief history of the concept, the show corresponds with the term *dystopia* since it illustrates how the relationship between humanity and technology has emerged and has been transformed to result in corrosive lifestyles in society, degraded individual development, and, ultimately, subjectivation.

In *Black Mirror*, there is a displacement toward the idea of oppression into post-apocalyptic temporalities or totalitarianism. Therefore, dystopia goes from a totalitarian concept, where the public space disappears due to equivalence between technology and politics, to a demoliberal world with several liberties. The way archives are used makes surveillance appear as a method of ruling quotidian life as dystopic temporality. According-

ing to these definitions, we can affirm that the show is dystopic, but mostly inside the characters' world in terms of whether or not their subjectivity has a chance to unfold or be fully exhibited.

The series unfolds as a lab that does not organize episodes in relation to a common narrative but articulates them around an object (technology), a question (moral), and a problem (the probabilities that the future may bring for tomorrow's human condition). In the two episodes analyzed here, heterotopia works mainly as a staging scene where "reflection logic" happens in all the episodes in two different ways. First, reflection logic can be seen through the images shown of the characters in reflecting surfaces through which the characters are being unfolded. The point of view of the repetition shows the spectator exactly what the characters see, as if the camera were his or her own eyes. In addition, *Black Mirror* may literally synthesize the three ways of showing reflection through the glass and the screens that multiply the surfaces where reflections occur. It follows Dziga Vertog's idea that "our eyes see very poorly and very little . . . The movie camera was invented in order to penetrate deeper into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that we do not forget what happens and what the future must take into account."[20]

Second, the staging seems to be a mirror. This is the heterotopian vision that we see in a Foucauldian way. The camera-eye projects the place where dystopia locates the catastrophe's narrative at a personal level. The visual omnipresence of close-ups, positions, and especially the storytelling about subjectivity is displayed by structuring these episodes at a slow pace and focusing on the characters' egos. A quotidian time is developed, without much ellipsis, but with some pauses and accelerations. It is precisely this micro-technological focus on the characters' daily life that gives verisimilitude to these *stories of the self*. This daily life dispositive does not unfold a social memory but individualized memories. Technology's omnipresence is activated through an economic regime strongly attached to the neoliberal economy that establishes and places the individual at the center of commercial exchange. In this case, the main product being offered as a result of the connected algorithms is a personal digital archive. It allows the users to exchange images, delete others, and place the ones the viewer/user desires to keep.

The stock of memories implies a new subjectivation, or a new way into which each one self-interprets his or her own essence by redefining himself or herself in each reflection or reliving recent memories or past ones. This is related to the current condition of being reactive in changing environments as well as consumers. In this way, the mnemonic device portrayed in *Black Mirror* replaces collective memory with a biographical time contained in the dispositive and produced as an economic subjectivation of the past, in a context of reactive behaviors.[21] The viewer and each character can be what Virilio calls a "re-seer," which updates immediate images and permanently resumes seeing the same.[22]

MEMORY OVERDOSE AND LOCUS SCARCITY

Black Mirror does not only deal with the relationship between the archive and new information technologies as "digital systems of conservation and recuperation of data [which] makes possible an unprecedented record's capacity, classification and preservation, by promoting and re-enforcing what Andreas Huyssen has coined as 'contemporary memory cultures.'"[23] It also provides a language for those memory cultures by exhibiting them as microsocial phenomena distributed by virtual subjec-tivism's dispositive and biographical time without life projects and fu-ture.[24] Therefore, it all becomes a whole.

The obsession for reconstructing and making sense of the past and memory (an idea many authors have coined as the "museification of life")[25] reveals to be static and locked up in a museum or becomes "offi-cial history." Some of these ideas have been worked on by Maurice Halb-wachs, Pierre Nora, and Svetlana Boym among others, particularly deal-ing with post-communist or post-dictatorship countries and commu-nities. Therefore, this "museification of life" and "market of nostalgia" convey the transformation of subjectivity in a commodity. In the two *Black Mirror* episodes, the phenomenon is distributed according to the traces left in the algorithmic dimension and in the desire of grasping reality by freezing life and time. Within the proliferation of memory's materials (stories, testimonies, data), archiving consists of producing and reproducing images simultaneously in time and space.

This image's ubiquity reduces the perception of these two fundamen-tal dimensions and fits them into a third algorithm that combines the recent past with the *biographical time of the self*, as mentioned previously. The individual use of memory technological devices therefore locates the digital image as material evidence in the regime of biopolitics' verifica-tion. Dystopia goes beyond this technological subjectivity and lies in the fact that identity does not reside in the elaboration of cultural profiles, as they are produced today, but because of the activation of a strictly semi-otic and meaningful reproduction. As Virilio states, "the location of peo-ple is inefficient in a world where individuals are, mainly, traceable."[26]

Accordingly, we propose that the characters end by living through/ with/despite the dispositive. In this dense flux of images, the semiotic use of the archives works as a place of declaration in the relationship between images. For example, in "The Entire History of You," the characters argue about the strength of fixed and stable images, referring to their consoli-dated identities. The non-linear video-staging together with the constant use of high and low angles help articulate the visual language of the one-to-one dispute. This *locus* is precisely situated in the place of scarcity. The relationship between man and machine is developed with the algorith-mic image of absence and the mannequin that is no more than a complex device containing features of the living Ash ("It's software, it mimics

him"). It is the character that embodies the experience of absence. Both of their bodies are confronted through the subjective gaze, showing a com-plete structure of behavior, routines, gestures, and responses that have all been recorded and archived (in something like the cloud) and are now being reenacted, shaped with a form that embodies all of this. As ex-pressed by the dispositive in the show: "I'm fine. I'm not in that thing. I'm remote. I'm in the cloud."

Therefore, we can question the forms in which the histories of those selves are being inscribed and reproduced within a community and in which ways intimacy, memories, and the act of remembering become a part of the cloud, which can be taken down and then give shape to ab-sence, moreover to death's mourning.

The work of memory operates through vigilant technologies.[27] By this we mean through the total control of the images and the access to the archives. Watchful technologies are openly shown with the *pause gesture*, which allows one to repetitively review the digital archive and even transform it. In "The Entire History of You," surveillance technologies are illustrated through features such as the "retrospective parenting con-trol" and the "redo" (the latter of which is equivalent to the "rewind" function of VCR players). Moreover, surveillance technologies can refer to something called a *full spectrum memory*—that is, a technology con-stantly nurtured by new downloads and updates when organic memo-ries no longer seem reliable and therefore are not considered valid in and of themselves. ("You know half the organic memories you have are junk? Just not trustworthy.")

This lack of memory requires the characters to figure out their memo-ries, or to "redo" them, from two perspectives. From an individual per-spective, when a character involves his or her emotions in the dispositive. In "Be Right Back," it is acknowledged that the machine cannot substitute humans, but the machine is not destroyed, and it is retained to counteract the lack of a partner or a father figure for the posthumous daughter. From a social perspective, how relationships operate by and through mediation of the digital archives is also seen. This is paradigmatic in "The Entire History of You," while "Be Right Back" is built around the secret presence of the mechanical image until its captivity.

In both cases, the *pause gesture* works due to the classification and organization of experience and memory in order to temporarily organize knowledge. Through this, the pause gesture allows for the possibility of a placed use of images in the present. This produces a register in move-ment that accumulates, destroys, and updates the ways of seeing. The pause gesture also manipulates and anticipates, and by these means cap-tures from the present of the narration the open possibilities of the future. The feature also resignifies interpretations of the past by proposing po-tential uses and transforming the present and the future in a constant scarce. The last image of "The Entire History of You" stages the scarcity

of future: after images and memory's obsession, the screen turns completely black, absent of any image or archive. We can interpret this as how the continuous present incarnates this absence.

The *pause gesture* implicates a negative administration of common time, because the time for sharing with others and living outside of the dispositive is exponentially reduced. Memory culture is shown as an individual dispositive of common time's administration. Precisely, in the *pause gesture*, the character is both actor and spectator of this society. The filming technique of pausing the plot has the unfolding effect in the dystopia construction of the series. The universe in *Black Mirror* immerses the viewer in a post-aura world without a mundane topography. This loss of aura becomes a condition for credibility presented as images and returns its authority back. In "The Entire History of You," the conflict between two characters involves the preservation of some past images as they risk losing their own family, whereas in "Be Right Back" the unfolding is expressed also in the grammar. That later becomes clear when Martha says: "You look like him," yet as the days pass and the interaction between the two becomes more intimate, she exclaims: "You're not enough of him. You are nothing!," and "There is no history to you . . . you are just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking, and it's not enough." The difference between the narratives, or between what is original and what is artificial, is staged[28] according to hyperactual interpretations of images that multiply and circulate in the personal digital archives ("The Entire History of You"). These archives are visualized in an obsessive way that transforms them into evidence of the truth and constitutes it while circulating. The repetitiveness in this panoptic society unfolds the life between the digital archive and a sole image, as technology is able to replicate features, gestures, and verbal routines after the death of a living being. It then assimilates its identity to algorithms stages and in movement.

To summarize, the digitalization of images implicates life's museification, whose interactivity exceeds contemplation due to the loss over time control. This "replay" obsession makes the contemplation of the past the possibility of life. In the quotidian space of exhibition, the digital archive's obsession exercises sovereignty over biopolitics. In other words, the conscious exercise of reviewing visual testimonies, whose length can be controlled, is taking a growing extension of time, and consequently goes through life itself. As Virilio states, the "re-seeing" operates in the intervals that create time by movement between subjective events rather than in the visibility of spaces.

RE-SEEING THE NON-HISTORY

What we found here is a decisive knot in *Black Mirror*'s dystopia—a temporary device that makes the memory pause permanent and that paradoxically accelerates time. Velocity is firstly given due to the multiplication of the events, which corresponds to the mere visualization of the digital archives. They bring together the scarcity in order to stage and to personify what is invisible. Thus, the events reorganize memory among this fast temporality of socio- technological relations and the immediate temporality of urgency.

In addition, memory is expressed through an *always-new*, which is founded on the active use of archives. The sense of the images changes according to the moment in which they are being watched. The decision of calling the archival revisions a "redo" is crucial. It shows that the use of a specific image is an action and/or a reaction. In fact, we can see in "The Entire History of You"[29] how in replaying the same images, the main character works the material by using functions such as the zoom or a rebuilding of a scene by lip reading in order to give a new perspective to that memory. In the accelerated repetitiveness of the digital archives, reproduction is not identical; some data are lost in each transference, circulation, or visualization.

Technological devices also operate with data storage logic that necessarily implicates the destruction of a part of the accumulated information kept until that moment, generating new memorial practices with the immediacy of the archive's resource. By the end of "The Entire History of You,"[30] immediacy is located between the main character's catastrophe, the repetitiveness of the replayed memories, the revisions from the points of view of each character, and the editing of the images. The immediate exhibition of memory disorganizes biopolitics' time life as it is experienced for the characters that have trouble resting and sleeping.

The pause gesture is another feature that is placed in an algorithm's flux that allows presenting or *re*-presenting scarcity and death and then provoking a loss of control over time. The acceleration and repetitiveness of the image expands the image's control for each human being in its own and accelerated mobility. In effect, it can activate the exhibition while a character is getting around (for example, in a taxi that has the projection device) or in a totally autonomous way (through the same characters' eyes that have the grain incorporated). In other words, the exhibition time is administrated in an external way (as in the cinema) and also in an individual manner between the desire of remembering and social norms. In *Black Mirror*, memory occurs through an accelerated movement that is immediate and acquires social performativity. In this sense, we agree with the idea described by Virilio that human beings have become the destination of movements regardless their own mobility.[31]

To conclude, the technologic dispositive produces rules and a control capacity for the individual as well as conflicts in order to control others' images. The shapes and temporalities of the artist, the curator, and the viewer converge in the production's immediacy and the images' exhibition. The credibility occurs through the copies' circulation of an *always-new* memorial event. Thus, instead of generating time excess, this archival movement turns these remains in historicity scarcity due to the images' omnipresence, resulting as a dystopia of the actor-viewer-character and at the same time a dystopia for the television viewer. *Black Mirror* neutralizes the future where it is understood as present progression between an immediate temporality regime and a reliving of the omnipresent past.

NOTES

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2. "Derrida sees in Freud's writing the very desire that is *Archive Fever*: the desire to recover moments of inception, to find and possess all sorts of beginnings." Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, 5.

3. Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacres et simulation*. Paris: Galilée, 1981.

4. The genesis of the replica can be read with the intertextual reference of *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. The novel was created during one night on a storm in the English countryside. The same occurs in this episode, where the replica is animated in one night. However, Dr. Frankenstein's creation runs away and falls in love, whereas in *Black Mirror*'s episode "Be Right Back," Ash cannot fall in love and cannot escape, so it could be read as an improved Frankenstein. Also, the name of the character, *Ash*, can also be read with the idea of fugacity, since it also means "ashes" or "dust," which has the quality of disappearing into air.

5. "We should never forget that the truth of phenomena is always limited by the speed at which they spring up." Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, 82.

6. We refer here to the term *énonciation*. In Foucault vocabulary, it is an event that is not repetitive and is charged of authority. See Foucault, *L'Archéoilogie du savoir*, 133–34.

7. Virilio, *Le Grand Accélérateur*.

8. Virilio and Lotringer, *Pure War*, 43.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*.

12. Virilio and Lotringer, *Pure War*, 43.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 65.

15. Ibid., 85.

16. Hauer, "Dromology, Politics and Logistics of Perception," 731.

17. Puech, "Black Mirror ou l'ambiguïté du pire."

18. The production team confessed that for certain episodes, it had to go over its initial intention because the reality outplaced the heterotopic decision it had made (quoted in the same article). See: Ibid.

19. Gómez-Moya, "La de archivo es la primera condición," 31.

20. Vertog, *Kino Eye*, 67.

21. In regard to reactivity as subjectivation in a neoliberal regime, see Kathya Araujo and Danilo Martuccelli, "Individu et néolibéralisme," 125–43.

22. Virilio, *L'horizon négatif*.

23. Costa, "Poéticas tecnológicas y pulsión de archivo," 93.

24. Leccardi, *Sociologie del tempo*.

25. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*.

26. Virilio, *Le Futurisme de l'instant*, 12–13.

27. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*.

28. Groys, "De la imagen al archivo-imagen –y vuelta: el arte en la era de la digitalización," 13–26.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Virilio, *La vitesse de la libération*.

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