Philosophical Reflections on Black Mirror

Edited by Dan Shaw, Kingsley Marshall, and James Rocha

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Cover image: *Black Mirror* Season 4 Episode 6 (Black Museum, 2017) (© Netflix)

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Dedication

The editors and contributors dedicate this book to our colleague Dan Shaw, who passed away mid-way through this book project in March 2020. Dan Shaw is survived by his wife Vera Marie Shaw, son Patrick Shaw, daughter Anna Shaw, step brothers Christopher and Trenn Roberts, step sister Catherine Hansen, and his dog Lucy.

Dan Shaw *served as Professor of Philosophy at Lock Haven University, Pennsylvania, for over thirty years. He devoted much of his scholarship to film, served as the managing editor of* Film and Philosophy, *as well as authored the books* Film and Philosophy: Taking Movies Seriously, Morality and the Movies: Reading Ethics through Film, *and* Stanley Cavell and the Magic of Hollywood Films.

Contents

Introduction

Charlie Brooker's Artistic Vision

Kingsley Marshall, James Rocha, and Dan Shaw

Black Mirror (2011–) is a science-fiction television series first broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK before being produced and distributed by Netflix from 2016. The show takes an anthology approach, presenting each of its stories as a discrete single drama commonly situated in dystopic, near-future settings. The episodes are orientated around three main themes: (1) the development, use, and exploitation of technology; (2) the ethics related to the deployment of this technology by members of the public and corporations; and (3) an exploration of the nature of what constitutes consciousness specifically related to artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic or cybernetic technologies. The show's format, atmosphere, and narratives of social commentary have been compared to the influential science-fiction series *The Twilight Zone* (Serling 1959)*,* which initially ran between 1959 and 1964, and was subsequently rebooted in 1985, 2002, and, more recently, 2017 by CBS All Access. *The New Yorker*'s TV critic Emily Nussbaum described the show as an "update on 'The Twilight Zone' for a Digital Age" (2014), and, like its predecessor, philosophy in the show is buried in each story. Each of these two shows extrapolates ideas of the contemporary present into the near future and invites the audience to consider the implications of their own actions, addictions, and use of media, as well as drawing on the nature of rationality, morality, and social consciousness. In this edited collection, our contributors consider this presentation of a relatively unified philosophy, albeit projected into the future.

The series is written primarily by Charlie Brooker, with the writer also taking an executive producer role with Annabel Jones on all of the episodes to date, initially through the production company Zeppotron—a subsidiary of the Endemol Shine Group—and latterly through House of Tomorrow. The

pair left House of Tomorrow to found a new company Broke and Bones in January 2020, leaving the rights with Endemol and future seasons in question. Although each of the twenty-two episodes and the feature film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade 2018) contains its own discreet story, the *Black Mirror* universe is unified and often self-referential, connecting iconography, production design, and narrative ideas. Brooker had described each episode as occupying a "psychologically shared universe" (Brooker in Daly 2017) and in "Black Museum" (McCarthy 2017) made these connections with previous episodes explicit through exhibits that made a direct reference to earlier shows. As such, the series can present a powerfully cogent singular worldview and, in the tradition of the very best science fiction, use the philosophical and sociological implications of the future to reflect upon the dystopia of the immediate present.

Brooker's background is in comedy, Zeppotron's output predominantly consisting of scripted and unscripted shows with Brooker having contributed his TV critique *Screenwipe* (2006–8) and current affairs platform *Newswipe* (2009–10). The production of *Dead Set* (Demange 2008), a five-part miniseries where a zombie apocalypse reaches the inhabitants of a Reality TV show during an eviction episode, can be seen as the seed of *Black Mirror*. The series drew upon the existing lore of zombie films and series, genre conventions that occupy a long tradition in film, television, and literature and serve as a lens through which a critique of philosophical questions is presented—with *Dead Set* exploring the conflation of private and public spaces, of the objectification of life played out as the performance of mediated and real-life identities, and questions of gender and masculinity.

These notions of a television series as parable were initially made manifest in the first season of *Black Mirror*, broadcast in 2011. The themes of each of the three episodes were centered on satire—musing on the impact of social media on news media reporting, the conflation of personal and national politics, and the consumption of reality television. The original treatment alluded to the significance of technology to the series, as Brooker explained: "Just as The Twilight Zone would talk about McCarthyism, we're going to talk about Apple" (Brooker, Jones, and Arnopp 2018). There was an immediacy to these episodes that responded to the conflation of politics and media in "The National Anthem" (Bathurst 2011), the fascination of audiences with the persecution of television talent show contestants in "Fifteen Million

Merits" (Lyn 2011), and ongoing concerns around privacy and online identity, extrapolated to a nightmarish level in "The Entire History of You" (Welsh 2011)—this final episode of that opening season was also the first episode to extend its articulation of the impact of technology from the *representation* of the self to subjective notions of identity and memory in the *construction* of the self. Over the course of this short season, and particularly this last episode, *Black Mirror* began to mine a seam of the fundamental nature of existence and explicitly connect with larger ideas of philosophy.

BBC Channel 4 had been seeking a coproduction partner to fund longer and more ambitious episodes proposed by Brooker and Jones, though challenges to the writer's story ideas—and subsequently to the budget of each episode—created an ongoing tension between the broadcaster and the writers. Netflix had licensed and distributed the first two series in the previous year, and, after negotiations ran their course at Channel 4, Brooker and Jones took the series to the streaming service. Netflix initially commissioned twelve episodes and committed to the higher budgets that sated Brooker and Jones' greater ambition for the show. The release of each season on a global platform set the bar for a worldwide television event, and Brooker responded with stories set at an appropriate scale. "San Junipero" (Harris 2016) was the first episode to be set outside of the UK and was followed by episodes shot in Iceland and Canada. Following the move, the show became increasingly sophisticated in both its social critique and its playful use of form—most apparent in the stand-alone feature-length film *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* in 2018—where users were able to select their path through the narrative by making binary choices on their remote control to navigate the branching story structure. This first interactive story for adult audiences at Netflix allowed for some experimentation with a rudimentary form of nonlinear, rhizomic modes of storytelling that echoed the video game setting of the story. Though the film received a mixed reception, there is little doubt that this interactive device drew the audience further into the wider conceptual determinism of characters and the choices available to them in the narrative.

There is a logical progression to the order and grouping of sections of this book. In Section One, our contributors consider the philosophical implications and central metaphor of the series as a whole. Section Two examines the formation of identity and the self through the prism of technology. Finally, Section Three considers the relationship between a technologically augmented self and dystopic worlds.

In Chapter 1, Robert Sinnerbrink takes a step back from specific episodes and examines the implications of the central metaphor behind the series. Beginning with Charlie Brooker's observation that "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," it seeks to broaden the scope of our appreciation of the metaphor by examining the use of mirrors (and mirrorlike objects) in paramount filmic cases (such as the (black) mirrorlike monolith, the centerpiece of "the dawn of man" scene in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)) and by discussing the strikingly self-referential "act of mirroring" in its current phase of binge-viewing television and internet streaming, the modus operandi of Brooker's series.

In Chapter 2, Lorraine K. C. Yeung and Kong-Ngai Pei suggest that the fourth episode of season three, "San Junipero," philosophizes immortality, technology, and human nature. The episode appears to have a singularly upbeat ending in that its protagonists get to enjoy life together forever in a virtual reality that preserves the life of their consciousness. The chapter demonstrates that the immortal lives in San Junipero illustrate Bernard Williams and Kagan's worry about the inevitability of boredom in an immortal life and shows how San Junipero adds another dimension to the philosophical debate over the desirability of immortality. Yeung argues that the *Black Mirror* world depicted by several other episodes of the series points to a gloomy view of the technology depicted in San Junipero. The gloominess, however, has less to do with the problem of tedium than with human malevolence and with our inherent vulnerabilities in the face of technology. In Chapter 3, Laura di Summa considers the manner in which *Black Mirror* can both exemplify postmodern and poststructuralist criticism, and prompts the audience to question what is described as the tyranny of technology and its transformative impact on the formation of the self.

Closing this section is Dan Shaw, who presents "The Entire History of You" as an archetypal example of the dystopic vision that is to dominate the series. Shaw argues that the inherently philosophical nature and value of dystopia is to serve as nightmarish visions of the future designed as cautionary tales to warn us about present trends in our society. He notes the striking similarities between its condemnation of the prospect of being able to recall and replay any moment in your life and Friedrich Nietzsche's case for the importance of forgetting, throwing light on both the episode and Nietzsche's philosophy.

In so doing, the episode is philosophical, whether or not Charlie Brooker intended to reflect this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy.

Section Two considers versions of the self in *Black Mirror*. Starting in Chapter 5, Sander Lee considers the implications of viewers being presented with a "Choose Your Own Adventure" style drama in the stand-alone drama *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*, in which a young programmer named Stefan Butler—along with the audience of the film—is faced with a series of choices. Supposedly, viewers can alter the trajectory and ending of the tale by the choices they make. However, many viewers complained that no matter what choices they made, the story took a pessimistic turn, leading to a depressing ending. The only control that viewers (and Stefan) seemed to have is over the degree of the horror in that, in virtually all versions of the story, Stefan murdered his father. The only way Stefan can avoid parricide is by committing suicide, and indeed, Stefan himself complains at one point that he feels that he is not in control of his choices. This chapter argues that the element of apparent determinism is not a failure on the part of its creators but is, indeed, precisely the point they wish to make. The philosophy underlying *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* can be fruitfully compared with that of Arthur Schopenhauer, who believed that everything that exists is a manifestation of an irrational force he calls "the Will." There is only one Will, and it pervades all reality while determining every action. Free will is no more than an illusion, and life is primarily characterized by suffering and despair. Whether knowingly or not, the worldview of Charlie Brooker mirrors Schopenhauer's black philosophy.

In Chapter 6, Diana Stypinska and Andrea Rossi focus on the questions that the episode "White Christmas" (Tibbetts 2014) poses concerning the use of digital technologies as instruments for individual self-enhancement, as well as the management, control, and "optimization" of interpersonal and affective relationships. Building on the work of Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, Peter Sloterdijk, and Bernard Stiegler, Stypinska and Rossi demonstrate how the episode explores the ethical and political consequences of employing digital implements as technologies of the self—tools employed to transform the relationship that the subject entertains with itself (its desires, needs, and skills) and the others (friends, family, colleagues, society). The chapter asks how and under what conditions the enhanced performativity, sense of security, self-mastery, and self-contentment that the "digital technologies of the self" are

designed to provide may bring about diametrically opposite outcomes (i.e., loss of selfhood, privacy, empathy, political freedom, and, ultimately, death).

Closing this section, Kingsley Marshall considers the representation of AI technologies in *Black Mirror*, focusing on "Be Right Back" (Harris 2013). In the episode, the recently bereaved Martha reconstructs a version of her deceased boyfriend through a machine-based entity, or AI, drawn initially from public data created from his lifetime of digital activity. Martha's eventual realization that the technological expression of her partner has corrupted her real-world memories of him and their relationship extends her bereavement rather than her intention of somehow resolving her grief.

In the third and final section, our contributors consider how these presentations of the individual relate to others. In Chapter 8, Clara Nisley considers how, in "Crocodile" (Hillcoat 2017), the moral character of the protagonist Mia Nolan is uncovered. After a night of partying with her friend Rob, Mia finds herself an accomplice to cover up an accident when Rob, driving the car on an isolated road, hits and kills a cyclist. Mia takes out her phone to call the police, but Rob begs her not to make the call. After a moment, she acquiesces to Rob's pleas, and Mia helps Rob throw the body over a cliff into a lake. Several years pass before Rob comes to Mia, announcing his intention to turn himself in to the authorities. Mia kills him; the first of a series of ever more appalling crimes she commits to conceal her guilt. The chapter explores what this episode says about human nature by comparing Immanuel Kant and Aristotle's notions of moral character. It uses Mia as a case study to explore whether moral character requires self-control by practical reason or whether it is an extraordinary force of will that is the foundation for a morally good character.

In Chapter 9, Leigh Rich focuses on "Men Against Fire" (Verbruggen 2016), an episode that depicts a dystopic society whose warriors have brain implants that cause them to see their opponents as monsters and not humans. This makes it easier to kill them, and the episode's title alludes to a 1947 book by S.L.A. Marshall that highlights how many combatants are hesitant to kill their fellow human beings and discusses ways to overcome this resistance. The chapter examines how the dehumanizing propaganda of Second World War sought to achieve precisely the effect of the brain implants: the "Othering" of one's opponents that would enable one to slay them more effectively.

Shai Biderman returns to the idea at the center of the series in Chapter 10, with a consideration of how the *Black Mirror* can only mirror those looking

at, or attempting to look, through it. Where the pursuit of pleasure presents a challenge to a representation of the self, the mirror represents the confliction of an idea of the self—a voyage described in the chapter as familiar, but one that causes a questioning of the real.

Mona Rocha and James Rocha close the book with the most recent episode, examining selfhood and stardom in "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too" (Sewitsky 2019). The pair argue that the story offers a critique of patriarchy through an entertainer whose consciousness is exploited as a digital copy but who is eventually able to extricate from the structures of capitalism in the search to regain her own identity.

Black Mirror offers a compelling case study for the idea of "television as philosophy." This collection explores this idea via three aspects: *Black Mirror* (1) as a thought experiment, (2) as reflecting a critique of modern technology, and (3) as engaged in critical self-reflection on audiovisual media and its own status as episodic television. The episodes of *Black Mirror* pose sophisticated thought experiments concerning the ethical implications of modern technology and digital screen culture. *Black Mirror* reveals precisely the kind of ambivalent potentiality of modern technology that Martin Heidegger warned against: it both threatens the imposition of a totalizing reduction of human beings to a stock of manipulable resources and harbors the promise of opening up a transformed way of inhabiting the technological world more thoughtfully.

Charlie Brooker has always been decidedly uncomfortable with having the overall worldview of the series being described as simply dystopic, as it often is in the popular media. This collection presents an argument that *Black Mirror* delivers a coherent and epistemically novel philosophical viewpoint through means that are specific to motion pictures. It does so by exploring how technology is depicted in the series and how such depictions may reveal something counterintuitive. The technology we encounter in the series is not always as bleak as it first appears. Contrary to the more typical portrayal of technology we encounter in most science fiction, technology in the series is not alien but familiar. Its devices are stunningly designed and are often like games that need to be mastered. Learning how to use a given technological device is a central plot point in many of the episodes, a familiar process. Furthermore, the speed with which we "consume" *Black Mirror* is a product of the present status of technology. The series exploits, in this sense, the very environment in which it creates and depicts technology in attractive pastel colors, making it seem so user-friendly.

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Section One

Is *Black Mirror* Philosophy?

1

Through a Screen Darkly

Black Mirror, Thought Experiments, and Televisual Philosophy

Robert Sinnerbrink

The award-winning television show *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011–19) has attracted widespread praise and critical acclaim. Recalling the episodic anthology format of *The Twilight Zone*, *Black Mirror* presents compelling depictions of near-future scenarios exploring the dark side of contemporary digital technology and audiovisual culture. Although most belong to the genre of dystopian science fiction, the episodes of *Black Mirror* could also be described as works of speculative cinematic fiction, deploying a variety of genres such as psychological horror, science fantasy, and the sociopolitical thriller. The stand-alone episodes of the five series of *Black Mirror* explore the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvelous, but always with specific reference to our technologically mediated sense of social reality. With its focus on the ethical implications of current and future technological possibilities, *Black Mirror* offers a compelling case for the idea of "televisual philosophy." In what follows I shall develop this thesis by exploring three related ways of approaching it: *Black Mirror* (1) as thought experiment, (2) as reflecting a critique of modern technology, and (3) as engaged in critical self-reflection on audiovisual media and on its own status as episodic television.

The episodes of *Black Mirror* concern the ethical implications of modern technology and digital screen culture. If long-form TV serials like *The Sopranos* (Chase 1999–2007), *The Wire* (Simon 2002–8), *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan 2008–13), and Netflix's *House of Cards* (Willimon 2013–18) adopt an extended narrative structure, character development, and complex

world-building familiar from nineteenth- and twentieth-century (realist) novels, then the episodic anthology format of *Black Mirror*, focusing on particular situations, specific characters, and well-defined ideas, is more akin to the short story. They offer powerful cinematic thought experiments that engage in philosophical thinking. The idea of film as thought experiment, familiar from debates concerning "film as philosophy" (Wartenberg 2007; Sinnerbrink 2011, 2014), was further developed by Thomas Elsaesser in an essay on "mind-game films" (2009). His approach offers a productive way of conceptualizing *Black Mirror* episodes within the more compressed format of episodic serial television. In addition to testing our moral intuitions, framing alternative realities, and exploring possible outcomes in hypothetical fictional scenarios, cinematic thought experiments can also provide distinctive contributions to our ethical understanding.

Black Mirror offers critical reflections on the ethical implications of modern technology, which recall, but also extend, the speculations of philosophers of technology from Heidegger to Debord and Baudrillard. In a related vein, *Black Mirror* allows us to revisit the debate concerning "film in the condition of philosophy" (Wartenberg 2007, Mulhall 2008, Smuts 2009, Sinnerbrink 2011: 120–35) thanks to its self-reflexive engagement with contemporary media technologies. The episodes of *Black Mirror* reflect on their own status as audiovisual media and comment on the role of television and social and digital media as aspects of an integrated audiovisual system with disturbing ethical and political implications. By reflecting upon its own conditions, complicity, and critical potentials, *Black Mirror* displays the kind of aesthetic and cinematic self-reflexivity that Mulhall (2008: 1–11) claims is one way that cinema—or in this case episodic television—can exist in the "condition of philosophy."

What Is *Black Mirror*?

Written by Charlie Brooker, *Black Mirror* comprises five series spanning twenty-two episodes, which range between forty and ninety minutes long. Brooker worked in television as a presenter, comic scriptwriter, and online satirist, becoming infamous for his biting satirical website TVGoHome his critical commentary on news media (*Newswipe* Brooker 2009-10), and for writing and presenting the documentary series *How TV Ruined Your*

Life (Brooker 2011). He contributed scripts for the television horror serial *Dead Set* (Demange 2008), where zombies threaten to invade a Big Brother television set. He lampooned the media in the TVGoHome website that featured the fake Reality TV show *Daily Mail Island*, where the only source of news and information is the titular British tabloid that transforms the island's inhabitants into conservative bigots, and in satires such as *Nathan Barley* (Morris and Brooker 2005), based on a vapid and narcissistic would-be media/fashion "influencer." Many of these themes would be treated in more depth and with more seriousness in *Black Mirror*. The first two series, comprising three episodes each and a Special "White Christmas" (Tibbets 2014), were commissioned by Channel 4 in the UK (2011–13), while the next three seasons (six, six, and three episodes, respectively) were made for Netflix (2014–19). As I discuss later, Netflix also features in the interactive "television film" *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade 2018).

All are stand-alone episodes with different characters, settings, and time frames (generally set in the United Kingdom and the United States, from the 1980s to the near future). Yet various episodes also allude to each other in implicit ways, including a number of "Easter Eggs" (implicit references, recurring symbols, or sundry connecting details) left for fans of the series to enjoy. Beyond adding "texture" (as Brooker puts it), cross-referenced features appearing in different episodes provide an intersecting network or "enfoldment" that could be described as comprising an interactive Black Mirror mediaverse (an idea explicitly articulated in *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*).

The title of the series is telling, referring to the black appearance of a device's screen when switched off, a dark "mirror" in which the user can only see his or her face dimly. The title is also a metaphor for holding a mirror up to our fascination with digital media and social media culture. It alludes to the "dark side" of the technological possibilities afforded by modern media technologies and the social and cultural effects of their ubiquitous uses. As Circucci and Vacker (2018) point out, the opening credit sequence develops this idea in visual form. The black screen appears with a familiar graphic—the rotating circular figure of the device starting up, otherwise known as a "throbber"—suggesting obscure digital operations occurring behind the screen, which then disintegrates and reconstitutes itself as the title, "Black Mirror," accompanied by an ominous electronic sound as the screen glass suddenly cracks. Circucci and Vacker draw parallels with the opening sequence of *The Twilight Zone*,

another series which, as creator Rod Serling remarked, allowed contemporary moral and political themes to be explored by transposing them into science-fiction or speculative genres. Brooker has taken up Serling's strategy and developed it into a highly self-reflexive engagement with the ethics and politics of contemporary digital culture. As Circucci and Vacker remark, *Black Mirror* is "*The Twilight Zone* of the twentieth first century," a "philosophical classic that echoes the angst of an era" (2018: vii); as Stephen King tweeted, *Black Mirror* is "like *The Twilight Zone,* only Rated R" (quoted in Harvey 2016). It also offers a fascinating case study of televisual philosophy.

As many commentators have noted, the series is best described as focusing on the "near future," or an "alternative present," extrapolating from social phenomena and technological possibilities that already exist and amplifying and examining their potential effects and social implications now and in the future (Martin 2018, Circucci and Vacker 2018). This generates an uncanny "anticipatory" effect, and/or *déjà là* (preemptive or premonitory) effect, that combines both recognizable features of the present and disturbing yet plausible amplifications of existing technologies in order to explore their future social and ethical consequences. The "allegorical" dimension of the 1950s *Twilight Zone* episodes—using science-fiction and speculative fiction scenarios to comment on contemporary cultural and political issues such as racism and Cold War politics—has shifted in *Black Mirror.* It adopts a reverse strategy to that of allegory: its episodes offer uncanny simulations, involving slight displacements and amplifications of the familiar present, which is rendered as both strange and threatening. Like the term "Kafkaesque," "Black Mirror" has itself become a byword to describe disturbing developments involving technological media and their social implications. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, for example, recently described the secret use of facial recognition technology as a "Black Mirror"–type situation: "This is some real-life 'Black Mirror' stuff that we're seeing here, and I think it's really important that everyone really understand what's happening because . . . this is happening secretly, as well" (Quoted in Houser 2020).

Black Mirror is also indebted to various television and film genres, such as psychological and social horror in "Shut up and Dance" (Watkins 2016), "Metalhead" (Slade 2016), and "Black Museum" (McCarthy 2017); the sociopolitical thriller through "The National Anthem" (Bathurst 2011) and "Hated in the Nation" (Hawes 2016); as well as domestic social drama in