

# Class, Race and Corporate Power

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Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 4

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2017

## Screen Savior: How Black Mirror Reflects the Present More than the Future

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### Recommended Citation

Sculos, Bryant W. (2017) "Screen Savior: How Black Mirror Reflects the Present More than the Future," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: 10.25148/CRCP.5.1.001673

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol5/iss1/4>

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## Screen Savior: How Black Mirror Reflects the Present More than the Future

### Abstract

Despite the media treatment of *Black Mirror* as a dystopian series dealing with the (near) future, this essay explores season three of Charlie Brooker's immensely successful Channel 4-turned-Netflix series in order to show how the central themes of the series are actually more concerned with the present than they are with the future. The present that is reflected is, to put it mildly, not very pretty, but it offers the necessarily dark vision of the current conjuncture that we need if we are to fully appreciate where our present tendencies are leading us.

### Keywords

Black Mirror, Dystopia

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### Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Bryant William Sculos earned his Ph.D. in political theory, is a contributing writer with The Hampton Institute, and is the "Politics of Culture" section editor for *Class, Race and Corporate Power*. His work has also been published in *New Political Science*, *Political Studies Review*, *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*, and *New Politics*. Bryant is an at-large member of Socialist Alternative in the US.

In their seminal text *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that it was not the failure of Enlightenment reason that has brought us to the contemporary condition of blind subservience to the dual perils of exploitative labor and oppressively commodified cultures. Instead, they contend, it was precisely the successes of the Enlightenment, which freed us from the mythologies of divine-right monarchy and religious dogma more broadly, only to lead us into the co-constituted willing hands of new corporate masters. Enslaved again by the tool of our liberation; this was not how things were supposed to turn out, neither for Kant nor for Marx.

Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*<sup>1</sup> is precisely about this dialectic of enlightenment, and not just in the (near)future as the plots seem to indicate, but rather *Black Mirror* is about the dystopia of the present. This dystopian dialectic is found in the first two seasons, and will likely be carried into the fourth and any subsequent seasons, but this essay focuses on the most recent third "season" of the series. (I put season in quotes only because that is how the show is organized on Netflix, which now produces and distributes the show. However, because of the non-contiguous nature of the episodes, the fact that a given episode is within a given season is largely unnoteworthy.)



(Source: <https://static.independent.co.uk/s3fs-public/thumbnails/image/2016/10/20/16/black-mirror.jpg>)

Before I say anymore, I want to warn the reader that there will be some spoilers in what follows. I will try to mitigate them, but it really is an incredible series that you should watch before you read this. If you have not gotten the chance to watch it yet, I cannot recommend it more highly. It is without question the best show on Netflix, and probably the best show "on TV" at the moment (even though it's not really on TV anymore...). The show combines entertainment, originality, and critical thoughtfulness in a way that TV has not seen since the *Twilight Zone*, and on which *Black Mirror* is modeled. If you haven't watched it yet: do it. You will neither regret it, nor be able to enjoy anything for a few days at least. Enjoy that too. Then, come back and read the rest of this essay. Anyway, if your life is never the same because I ruined season three of *Black Mirror* for you, at this point, that's really your own fault.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the series "*Black Mirror*" is a metaphorical play on the reflective surface produced by a laptop, television, or smartphone when it is off.

Episode one (“Nosedive”) leads us off into a world where everyone, except only the most pitiful and apathetic people, live in a world nearly entirely driven by social media likes, followers, and ratings. Similar to Uber driver and passenger ratings, every interaction throughout the day is rated on a 5-star scale, and the results determine your job prospects, friends, what apartments you can get, and even what cars you are allowed to rent. I’m pretty sure this episode took place yesterday actually, but I can’t be certain. It is, at the very least, the episode of *Black Mirror* that is most obviously about the present. And as we see around us all of the time, people are driven crazy by their social media obsessions. No, I really really don’t care what your dinner looks like, and if anyone else does, it’s only because they’re already living in *Black Mirror*’s already-existing dystopia.



(Source: <http://www.themetropolist.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Black-Mirror-Season-3.jpg>)

The second episode (“Playtest”) takes us deep into the present where precariously employed or unemployed (especially immigrants and vagrants) are exploited through a TaskRabbit-like app platform by corporations wanting to test their dangerous new inventions on people the world ostensibly won’t miss. The only futuristic element of the plot here is the new virtual reality technology that the game developer is testing. Literally every other element of the plot, including the denigration of family, the speed and temporariness of millennial relationships, and the app used, is straight out of the present. The future here is again a mere plot device to show us the present dystopia we already inhabit—a truly dark mirror indeed.

The third episode (“Shut up and Dance”) is probably the most disturbing of season three, given that it deals with a character who we eventually find out is a pubescent pedophile (or at least consumer of child pornography) who is digitally blackmailed, by a less politically motivated Anonymous-like group, into committing a variety of crimes, including murder, to avoid having his secret revealed. There is actually nothing futuristic about this episode at all, but it might just leave us hoping that the Russians do have some evidence for Donald Trump’s urine-soaked hotel adventures. Maybe they can blackmail someone else into the Oval Office.

The award-winning “San Junipero” is episode four in season three. This episode is a bit more futuristic in its plot than the previous episodes in this season in that it involves the ability of people to vacation in, and eventually live out their lives for eternity (or until the power goes out) in a virtual reality world. This episode expertly tackles the complexities of non-heteronormative love in a heteronormative world that even among futuristic technology, isn’t quite ready for it,

and to such a degree that even the couple isn't exactly sure how they feel. Though not queer myself, this episode seems to portray the relationship with complexity and nuance that one expects to find in any authentically loving relationship taking place within our fucked-up world, and though still a characteristic Black Mirror episode, it is probably the most hopeful iteration we've seen thus far. That said, "San Junipero" still portrays a world where some people (white wealthy men) try to control the decisions other people make with their bodies, including end-of-life decisions, which can be made both simpler and more complex as technology advances. Absent a reconfiguration of power relations in our society, will we be lucky enough to end up with a world even remotely as habitable and humane as the one portrayed in "San Junipero?" I was left wondering though, what massive corporation is profiting off of the people who chose to live/die in San Junipero's virtual reality? This part of the story is noticeably left unaddressed.

Episode five ("Men Against Fire") tells a story as old as time, and though it is my favorite episode in any of the seasons thus far, it is actually the least original (given that multiple *Star Trek* episodes deal with nearly identical plot devices). I say this story is as old as time, because, despite the fact that the futuristic technology described in this episode does not, and as far as I am aware, has never existed, the same process has been achieved by manipulative political leaders and generals for ages. From Sparta to the Spanish Conquistadors to World War Two to the current War on/of Terror, soldiers have gone through extensive conditioning to make killing their supposed enemies easier. Despite its lack of originality in plot device, how "Men Against Fire" tackles the manipulation of soldiers into becoming hateful murderers of those defined as different or "other" and therefore dangerous is decidedly original. What is different here is that the technology in this episode gets around the eventual trauma that comes from the realization that those who were killed (the "roaches" as they're referred to) were people too. By literally changing the "others" into horrific monsters, the soldiers in this episode are not supposed to ever know that the people they are killing are simply other humans who have been made poor by an unjust system or who have simply decided to live their lives beyond the bounds of "civilized society" (though the episode gives us a pretty good indication that these people have been excluded not of their own choosing).

This takes the war on poverty to a whole new level, though not a level that is uncommon in our present dystopia. What makes our world a whole lot grosser than this episode of Black Mirror is that our war on the poor and the "different" is accomplished with the visible knowledge that the people being killed are people too. One wonders if we'll ever be able to forgive ourselves for what we've allowed to happen—after all we lack the technological "advancement" that makes our structural and imperial genocides more palatable. We're left with the same propagandistic ideological mantras that have served mass murder within and between human civilizations for centuries. Let's hope they begin to fail finally.



(This image made its rounds on a variety of social media sites and is from one of the many protests that have occurred, likely in New York City, since Donald Trump has taken office.)

“Most Hated in the Nation” closes out Season Three. It is ostensibly about killer robotic drone bees, originally designed to takeover for actual honeybees who died off presumably due to the environmental damage of capitalism, but this episode, while perhaps one of the more seemingly superficial episodes in season three, actually has a lot more going on. First of all, it isn’t really about killer robots and artificial intelligence (a la Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot*). It isn’t even about the world we may be faced with if we keep shitting on the environment so badly (to paraphrase George Carlin, the planet will be fine, it’s the people who will be fucked). It is about both of those things, but not really. Upon deeper examination, this episode is about a lack of democratic control in a society where people are distracted by bullshit “news” stories that are contrived to drive a digital outrage economy populated by mind-deprived zombies—zombies that feed on the self-esteem of others. This is a story about what happens when we care more about our toys than we do about our politics, our planet, and our people. This is the story of the present. This isn’t about the future. It is about right now. Look around. This episode of *Black Mirror* really does suck.

*Black Mirror*, season three is a dark breath of really dank air that we all need to take a big deep breath of, throw up, and then get our shit together—collectively. *Black Mirror* is the one show on television that represents where not just the worst tendencies of our society will or might take us, but where the dominant tendencies already have taken us—and what that looks like for the people who have already been born into that world. It is both present and future, and insofar as it allows us to see both the present and our collective future, it truly is a cultural savior.

There is one problem with *Black Mirror* however; it exists well-within the contradictory world, of the present and future, it depicts. Its commercial success is a sad and scary testament to just how screwed we are: even the most critical art can be commodified and neutralized. Let’s hope the master’s tools can be used against the master. Let’s hope *Black Mirror* breaks through the black mirrors, even just a little bit.