Black Mirror Reflections

Terri Murray illustrates Marcuse's critique of technologised society using an episode of the British TV series *Black Mirror*.

In *One Dimensional Man* (1964) and *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), German philosopher and political theorist Herbert Marcuse claimed that developing technology institutes new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion, making totalitarian control through terrorisation unnecessary. Rather, 'advanced industrial society' creates false needs which integrate individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, and industrial management. '15 Million Merits', the second episode of British TV series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011), co-written by Charlie Brooker and Konnie Huq, presents a perfect platform for exploring some of Marcuse's most prophetic observations.

Sex and the System

The tragic hero of this episode is Bing, a man whose very name is an onomatopoeia for something popping up on a screen. Bing inhabits a dystopic future (or allegorical present?) in which life has literally been reduced to a vicious cycle of meaningless drudgery, as the alienated masses churn out their days on exercise bikes which power the ubiquitous flat screens whose contents are both products of this endless labor and rewards for it. The stream of images invades even the private lives of Bing and his fellow drones, filling the walls of their tiny sleeping compartments. Similarly, Marcuse observed that the modern apparatus of production and distribution creates a total system that obliterates the opposition between private and public existence, and between individual and social needs. It shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, of intellectual and material culture.

To make matters worse, in *Black Mirror*, Bing's watching is rewarded in direct proportion to the exploitative insidiousness of the content viewed. *Not* watching pornography incurs penalties. Gaming – which involves obscene virtual violence against the yellow-clad working class – is another popular way to earn points. Marcuse argued that pornography is a tool in the dominant economic system's arsenal of repression, allowing people a release mechanism for their frustration with the system, thereby preventing them from directing their pent-up energies against it. It also reduces sexuality to another commodity – a product that can be bought and sold.

Marcuse contrasted the *de*sublimation offered by sexual release through pornography to Freud's*sublimation*. For Freud, in for example *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), civilized society requires the individual to sublimate his or her most basic sexual urges – repress them by channeling them into socially acceptable 'romantic' or 'elevated' forms. By contrast, Marcuse argues that pornographic desublimation pulls the instincts down and directs them towards an artificial and dehumanized satisfaction, fostering a kind of sexuality that is completely detached from feelings of love or intimacy (see 'Herbert Marcuse's critique of "happy consciousness" and consumer society', Janske Hermens, 2009, p.7, from the net). Sexuality has been reduced to a commodity where it is for sale. It is controllable, and it functions as an instrument to suppress possible revolt against the establishment. In this way pornography supplies the needs of the dominant system.

Marcuse recognized that sublimated forms of traditional sexuality like marriage were repressive, in that property was passed through male heirs, and marriage provided free

domestic labour and sexual release for men, ensuring that they had just enough comfort to remain productive, while keeping women economically dependent and confined to conventionally 'feminine' roles such as childcare and housework. But he also believed that the apparently greater liberty offered by desublimated forms of sexual expression like pornography worked *for* rather than *against* the status quo of general repression: now sex is integrated into *all* aspects of life and is thus made more susceptible to being an instrument of control. Moreover, it is gratifying to the individuals being managed in this way, since it is fun, which ensures their voluntary compliance, and creates a harmony between the individual's needs and socially-required desires and aspirations (see *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of the Advanced Industrial Society*, 1964, p.75). Thus this system of sexual 'freedom' incorporates sex into the system of commodity production and exchange in a way which makes us happy to submit and unlikely to protest.

Momentary Reality

Bing manages to avoid the more abusive forms of controlled release for his sexual and aggressive urges, and finally accumulates a healthy 15,000,000 merits for his hours of mind-numbing, soul-destroying screen pedalling. Then one day his toil is suddenly interrupted by something that seems to transcend the system. Bing hears the voice of fellow drone, Abi, beautifully singing to herself in the unisex toilets at work. Starved of all real human interaction, Bing wants nothing more than to give his 15,000,000 merits to Abi so that she can achieve the only ambition conceivable within this totalitarian technocracy – appear on *Hot Shots*, an *X-Factor*-like talent show.

The lyrics of the song she sings on *Hot Shots* foreshadow her fate. She sings, "You can blame me, try to shame me, and still I'll care for you. You can run around, even put me down, still I'll be there for you." The judges recognize Abi's talent – but only as more fodder for their oppressive machine. They politely explain to Abi that she has only one chance to 'make it' – she can only save herself from the endless hamster wheel by transforming herself into a hyper-sexualized object. In a sinister twist, the judges turn her lyrics back on her and *do* try to shame Abi by pointing out that the millions of consumers out there who are pedalling in order to watch her sing deserve to have the chance for success that only she has been offered. Abi's only 'reasonable' option is to submit to their desires.

As Marcuse points out, in advanced industrial society the individual reproduces and so perpetuates the controls exercised by her society. Moreover, the dominant system no longer needs to 'introject' its values into the individual from without, since that implies the existence of an inner dimension or conscience apart from, and antagonistic to, the external pressures of public opinion and behaviour. Today, however, this private space has been invaded and eroded through technology. Advanced industrial society silences and reconciles the opposition, transforming reason into submission. The result is *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with her society. And so Abi is indeed still 'there for them' – but this means for the system whose all-pervasive artificiality had made her voice stand out as something *real*. Now her entire identity has been occupied and formed from within the dominant system, with its constant advertisements and manufactured 'shared' desires and beliefs. Her inner dimension has been eradicated, replaced by the social needs and public uses for her body and mind. Soon Bing is forced to watch Abi's semi-nude body filling the screens in pornographic poses while her voice is all but silenced.

The Recuperation of Rage

Bing is the only person who can see how perverted it all is. He plots his revenge, patiently churning out another 15,000,000 merits to buy his way onto *Hot Shots* in order to confront the panel of judges. Once on stage during the live broadcast, he holds a shard of glass to his own neck and begins to rage against the machine, telling the judges, "All you see is not people, just fodder – fake fodder!" Here Charlie Brooker is evidently putting his own protests about society on Bing's lips: all we know anymore is fake fodder, and the only kinds of dreams we have are consumer dreams – buying a new app for our own screen, for example. We also are becoming too numb for anything free and real and beautiful. Bing tells the judges, "When you find any wonder whatsoever you dole it out in meager portions, where it's augmented and packaged and pumped through ten thousand pre-assigned filters, til its nothing more than a meaningless series of lights, while we ride, day-in and day-out. Going where? Powering what? All tiny cells and tiny screens and bigger cells and bigger screens and fuck you! Fuck you for sitting there and slowly making things worse!'

After a pregnant pause, the Simon Cowell-like Judge Hope (Rupert Everett) delivers his solemn verdict. "That was," he says, "without a doubt… *the* most heartfelt thing I've seen on this stage since *Hot Shots*began." The crowd cheers. Bing, somewhat bewildered by this tolerance, is being softened up for integration into the dominant order of things. His anger, which simultaneously expresses the repressed anger of viewers and provides a nice, safe, commercially-viable medium for its catharsis, will be given a slot on one of Judge Hope's streams. As such, his anger will be managed, controlled and transformed into a commodity. Bing's rejection of the system fits perfectly into the supply-and-demand economy, and any threat it might pose is absorbed into the dominant system. Bing's revolt is thus put to work for the Establishment, and its popular appeal will produce revenues to sustain it. After all, as the Judge explains, "Authenticity is in woefully short supply."

In *Repressive Tolerance* (1964), Marcuse explained that what is proclaimed as 'tolerance' is often merely serving the cause of oppression. New language and ideas may be spoken and heard, but they are immediately evaluated in terms of public language – a language that has determined beforehand the direction in which thought-processes will move. Bing's attempts to persuade viewers to an opposing viewpoint is bound to fail because the avenues are closed to ideas other than the established ones. As Judge Hope explains to Bing, people don't fully comprehend what it is that Bing is saying about the whole situation, they just 'feel' it; and since it feels good, it's the perfect product to sell back to the people – not as a *danger* to the established order, but as yet more fuel for its preservation. Thus the satisfaction of the individual's need for protest has been perfectly incorporated into the system that keeps them oppressed.

The commercial and political method used, Marcuse says, is to unify opposites into a single dimension. So the media of the established order exhibit anything that contradicts that order as a token of its truth, closing down any discourse that is not on its own terms. The efficacy of the system, says Marcuse, is that it blunts the individual's recognition that it broadcasts no facts that communicate its repressive power. "The concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them" he writes in *Repressive Tolerance*.

Freedom is Control

Bing and Abi reflect on their situation
Black Mirror still © Zeppotron Productions 2011

Some might protest that surely this is scaremongering that vastly overestimates the indoctrinating power of the media. Marcuse would say that this objection misses the point. The mass distribution of radio and television and the centralization of their control is not the beginning of the indoctrination: rather, it expresses and perpetuates power relationships and class distinctions that already exist – only it makes them invisible by 'flattening out' the conflicts that exist between satisfied and unsatisfied needs. If everyone reads the same newspapers, watches the same TV programs and tweets in the same social networks, this is not indicative of the eradication of class differences, but of the extent to which the individual has been persuaded to identify the needs of the technologised establishment as his own. The technical controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests, to such an extent that all non-compliance seems irrational, neurotic or impotent.

In 1948, the behavioural psychologist B.F. Skinner published a sci-fi novel called *Walden Two*, which envisages a socially-engineered society in which systematically altering environmental variables generates unfree, but happy, citizens. The character Frazie describes the determinants of human behaviour to Castle, who foolishly believes free will still exists. He says Castle's mistake is to imagine that physical restraint, handcuffs, iron bars and force exhaust the means of controlling human behaviour. Force or threat is a poor way of controlling human behaviour, he explains, since the controllee knows he is being coerced and doesn't *feel free*, therefore he is not loyal to his masters. Frazie further explains that positive reinforcement exerts a subtler and more powerful control over the individual. When an individual behaves as the masters want him to behave, the masters allow him to create a situation he likes, or remove one he doesn't like. This way the controllee feels as though he is doing exactly what he wants to do. And since the masters control the motives, the desires, the wishes of citizens, although they're more controlled than ever before, the controlled nevertheless *feel free*. This being so, the question of their freedom never arises. They don't revolt against the very things that make them act the way they do. They do not even have a vocabulary of freedom concerning what they want to do, since men only feel unfree when they are up against police and jails. Frazie says, "What is emerging at this critical stage in the evolution of society is a behavioural and cultural technology based on positive reinforcement alone." Since positive reinforcement (reward) works and the negative reinforcement (punishment) of the past doesn't, explains Frazie, cultural design is now more successful than ever before.

Charlie Brooker, who is a newspaper columnist as well as a scriptwriter, has important things to say about how technology shapes the universe of human discourse and action – how it institutes new, more effective, and ever-more-pleasing forms of social control. The title of the series is a reference to blank TV and computer screens. But Brooker's black mirror cannot fully reflect back to us the terrifying image of what we have become and how helpless we are against the totalitarian media manipulation of our needs and

desires by vested interests. This is because the institutions he critiques have already assimilated his message. In fact, what is so remarkable (and depressing) about *Black Mirror* is that these hour-long television episodes constantly reference their own impotence and obsolescence: they are about how the system absorbs the very energies that oppose it, eviscerating and precluding any intelligent rejection, or even widespread recognition, of its mind-numbing, sense-deadening cycle of oppression. But *Black Mirror*'s inability to transcend the dominant industrial forces to which he calls our attention is not some failure on Brooker's part. On the contrary, his genius is to show us why the mirror he holds up to our society cannot reflect anything. The very fact that his project is just another TV show, assimilated as another enjoyable escapist product that we want to consume – another entertaining, pleasant instrument of our systematic repression and pacification – makes his mirror absorb all the light it might otherwise shed on our reality.

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