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# It's More Like an Eternal Waking Nightmare from Which There Is No Escape. Media and Technologies as (Digital) Prisons in Black Mirror

Julie Ecurignan, François Allard-Huver

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*"It's more like an eternal waking nightmare from which there is no escape.<sup>1</sup>":*

Media and technologies as (digital) prison in *Black Mirror*

Julie Escurignan (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/julieescurignan/>)

Dr. François Allard-Huver ([www.allardhuver.fr](http://www.allardhuver.fr))

## Introduction: New media, new prisons?

In the changing media environment, new forms of incarceration have emerged. If information and communication technologies have always been seen as ways to improve relations, communications and ultimately, people's lives, they also have a darker side, often diminished or forgotten. From manipulating the opinion through propaganda to new surveillance apparatuses, every medium can be used as a way to oppose or negate someone's liberty. George Orwell's *1984* showed the power of a totalitarian state controlling every media in order to create the perfect prison state, for both the body and the mind of its citizen: changing events in the newspaper, destroying historical archive to control the future, creating simplistic songs to numb the masses or turning every "telescreen" into a powerful surveillance device. Numerous scholars have shown that nowadays, these new forms of oppression have become more insidious, more intertwined in our everyday life, more accepted sometimes, and thus more dangerous. Not only can new media help deprive us of our liberty or free will, but they tend to turn every device, every interaction and therefore every citizen in an "inmate" and, at the same time, in a "prison guard".

Nonetheless, if in every epoch warning discourses have been made to question the potential risks carried by every new medium – starting with Socrates criticizing writing – the changes brought by digital technologies and digital media are far from being as positive as those advertised by their accompanying discourses and promoters. Indeed, Manuel Castells, in *The Internet Galaxy* and his later works on the "network society", showed that from the very beginning the Internet has been torn between freedom and boundaries, liberty and control, privacy and surveillance. On the one side, Internet has been developed following the ideals of its founding fathers – hippies, geeks and libertarian – who hoped to create a space "in which the values of individual freedom and open communication became paramount" (2), in which "the values of individual freedom, of independent thinking, and of sharing and cooperation" (24-25) could thrive. On the other side, governments, lobbies and companies very soon understood the potential of the Internet and networks to enforce new forms of surveillance and control in every aspect of one's life: at work, at home, in the public space, in the digital space: "There has been so much enthusiasm about the freedom brought by the Internet that we have forgotten the persistence of authoritarian, surveillance practices" (173). Moreover, these new forms of surveillance are only the preliminary stages to enforce one's power over individuals and are most of the time followed by punishments or incarceration. Nonetheless, the most perverse effects of these new surveillance and control means are that not only they were often promoted as new ways to ensure citizens' safety – protecting them from terrorists or pedophiles – but also advocated as the best way to finally create a "transparent society" in which everybody could be accountable. Manuel Castells precisely criticized the limits of this transparency ideology: "No one has ever been able to live in a transparent society. If this system of surveillance and control of the Internet develops fully, we will not be able to do as we please. We may have no liberty, and no place to hide" (181). By seeking more transparency, we slowly

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<sup>1</sup> "USS Calister", *Black Mirror*, Season 4 episode 1

renounced to privacy and gave others – mostly governments and private companies – means to ensure control over our lives, thus imprisoning us in a house of glass, a transparent prison where screens have become walls.

If surveillance and control have often been at the center of criticism against new media, other problems emerge from their use. If they sometimes promote a false liberation and revolution, they instead create new forms of alienation or incarceration. For instance, Sherry Turkle has shown that new media often reverse the perspective on how we consider our relations with others as well as the way we see lack of privacy as something normal even though it jeopardizes our liberty : “If you relinquish your privacy on MySpace or Facebook about everything from your musical preferences to your sexual hang-ups, you are less likely to be troubled by an anonymous government agency knowing whom you call or what websites you frequent. Some are even gratified by a certain public exposure; it feels like validation, not violation” (263). The perspective is completely reversed, recalling to the darkest hour of our history when Hitler predicted the future of the totalitarian state for the youth: “And they are no longer free their whole life and they are happy” (Giesecke 1999, 17). How did our relationship with new media so quickly evolved from revolutionary communication devices to unprecedented and more alienating surveillance systems? How did our “liberating” devices turned into new forms of servitude and detention for both the body and the mind?

In this context, the British series *Black Mirror* stirs much debate around its representation of dystopian futures of Western societies. Often grim, pessimistic and technologically-led, these representations confront the viewers with alternative societies deriving from the current use of new technologies. It not only questions numerous forms of surveillance and control apparatuses, but also explores and suggests new forms of incarceration directly connected to our use of new media in a not-so-distant future. In each of the fourth season shown so far, multiple representations of real prisons or digital incarceration apparatuses have thus been pictured: a personal grading system that limits freedom in the third season, a convict imprisoned in a torture theme park in season two’s “White Bear” or digital clones trapped in a *Star Trek*-like simulation under the yoke of a tyrannical and sadistic captain – their real-life boss’ avatar – in season four “USS Callister”. These episodes present new forms of imprisonment, chosen or not, all linked with new media and technology.

Using both semiology and visual analysis, this work aims at exploring the diverse mediated imprisonment forms proposed in *Black Mirror*. We analyzed more than a half-dozen episodes and the way each proposes, in its own way, a new form of incarceration. Drawing from Foucault’s reflections on penal systems and the biopower apparatus created by Western societies (Foucault 1975 and 1984), this chapter relies on the idea of a new *panopticon*, as crafted by Bentham, developed by Foucault and reused by the authors (Allard-Huver and Escurignan 2018) to analyze the representation of the notion of ‘prison’. Indeed, in this new panopticon, mobile devices and social media serve as “disciplinary” tools to normalize people’s behavior.

### [Surveillance, interveillance and the digital panopticon.](#)

In previous work, we explored the links between Bentham’s vision of a perfect prison – the *panopticon* – and Foucault’s theorization of this model, resulting in a more complex structure in which he assumes that most parts of our modern societies are constructed as a *panopticon* in order to assume surveillance and control over citizens (Foucault 1975). Moreover, Bentham theorization of the *panopticon* not only involves controlling effectively the environments of

incarcerated people, but also to instill the idea that the surveillance apparatus is everywhere, in every moment, thus obliterating every “dark corner” but also every inch of freedom: “Cells, communications, outlets, approaches, there ought not anywhere to be a single foot square, on which man or boy shall be able to plant himself—no not for a moment—under any assurance of not being observed. Leave but a single spot thus unguarded, that spot will be sure to be a lurking-place for the most reprobate of the prisoners, and the scene of all sorts of forbidden practices” (Bentham 1843, 154). Foucault also thought that the *panopticon* was the main model adopted by modern societies to create environments to control citizens: from schools to factories, everything seems to be built on the idea of surveillance and restraining freedom. In addition, he also explored how this architectural model was in fact at the cornerstone of what he called *bio-power*, which is a “set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault 1978a, 16) and more specifically how this strategy of power was ultimately enforced to ensure “the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault 1978b, 140). What interests us here is not how Foucault described the prison system or the control of “insanity” by modern societies, but how he focused some of his work on the “emergence of technologies of security within mechanisms that are specific mechanism of social control” (Foucault 1978a, 25), and how digital media and digital devices can be seen as similar technologies of both control, security, surveillance or even coercion.

Drawing from these concepts, we observed how, in *Black Mirror*, “mobile devices and social media serve as “disciplinary” tools to normalize people’s behavior” (Allard and Escurignan 2018). In the changing media environment, digital media and digital communication devices are not only as means of surveillance but they create an environment in which every citizen become a guardian himself. As explained by André Jansson, the logic of *surveillance* is substituted by a *culture of interveillance* “in which people enjoy following the activities of others as well as the automatized reflections of their own ‘data doubles’ ” (Jansson 2012, 415). In this perspective, controlling and observing is not exerted vertically, from top to bottom, but horizontally. Thus, new media seem to imprison us in a system where every citizen willingly complies to surrender his right to privacy and anonymity.

We first observed how, in “Nosedive”, the first episode of *Black Mirror*’s third season, new media create a *digital panopticon*. In this story, a young woman named Lacie Pound lives in a world where everybody rates and is rated by everyone and where every social interaction is observed through the spectrum of digital media, in this case a special type of contact lens. Failing to observe the rules, showing deviant behavior – i.e. being sincere and not faking emotions or relations – not respecting the *digital panopticon* inherent to this interveillance culture result in one being punished, punishment ranging from social rejection to imprisonment. Indeed, the notation system creates a constant *mise-en-scene* of everyday life where most of the actors, including Lacie Pound, act in a calculated, predictable and very polite manner only motivated by the consciousness of being both observed and judged at all times, as it also happens in Bentham’s *panopticon*. In this episode, if incarceration is the final sanction for those failing to have a positive enough grade, the idea of the *panopticon* is transformed, with digital devices playing the roles of walls and everybody being both the warden of others as well as their own self-warden. In the episode, incarceration takes numerous forms: one colleague of Lacie sees his access from the workplace revoked because of a low grade; Lacie cannot take her flight or rent a car with a grade below 4,2 nor can she access a high standing gated community with a strict rule: “Minimum entry 3,8. No exception”. Here, digital devices create a new form of social exclusion and very real forms of liberty privation: liberty of movement, liberty to work, liberty of expression. Therefore, those who do not comply with the *digital*

*panopticon* not only lose their good grades but they are also marked with an infamous sigil for everyone to see and everyone to further degrade or exclude them. For Michael Schur, *Nosedive*'s writer, this dystopian setting is not as much a: "near future [than] a parallel present."<sup>2</sup>. And recent development in the Chinese social control system – with citizens being graded for their online behavior and given access or not to travel depending on their grade – lead us to think that *Nosedive*'s parallel society is now following a collision course with our own.

The society explored in *Nosedive* is the perfect depiction of a *digital panopticon*. Self-surveillance and *interveillance* have been accepted by the population in the most perverse way as grades serve as the principal currency and thus create a system which rewards its members for being good *voyeurs*, perfectly submissive and participating inmates. This turns the whole logic of the *panopticon* over as the prison is now without walls and that the sentence is a life one. Or in another way, the show pushes the logic of the *panopticon* to its maximum extent, reminding the philosophical and ideological principles behind the *panopticon*. Indeed, if we often see Bentham as the architect of the *panopticon* – the apparatus of an almighty power who wishes to see everything at all times – he is also one of the first to promote transparency at the service of the State, as a way to protect citizens and as a personal code of conduct: "my endeavors shall be constantly directed to giving to them the greatest degree of *transparency*". (Bentham 1843, 145). However, what started as a positive and sound principle turned into a fear: "A fear haunted the latter half of the eighteenth century: the fear of darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths" (Foucault 1980, 153). Hence, transparency shall be everywhere, even in the thoughts of men, in order to eradicate all dark corners.

In the 2014 Christmas special titled "White Christmas", the show explores a new communication device called "Eye-Link" inserted in the brain of the subject. This device allows someone to see through somebody's eyes or memories, to communicate, make copies of someone's consciousness – in a small object called a "cookie" – but also to "block" them, by literally taking them out of your sight and ear through a blurry filter. In this episode, the two main protagonists, Matt and Joe, are trapped in a remote cabin together for Christmas after spending five years together, with nothing more to do than to share memories about their past. Matt confides himself to Joe about the nature of his previous work. Not only did he serve as a relationship coach for people using the "Eye Link" but he also created copies of people's consciousness later used as digital "personal assistant" for smart houses. Joe who was at first reluctant to share his past, is so bored that he finally agrees to tell his story to Matt. In a previous relationship, he was "blocked" by his ex-girlfriend who later found out she was pregnant. Joe started to stalk her and the little girl whom he believed to be his daughter. When the woman suddenly died in a train crash, Joe decided to join the little girl and her grandfather who were both living in a remote cabin away from civilization. When the grandfather told Joe he was not the biological father of the girl, Joe killed him in anger and left the dead old man and the little girl alone, who ultimately also died in the cabin.

At the end of the episode, we understand that Matt was not really talking to Joe himself but to his digital duplicate located in a 'cookie'. Matt was playing the role of a "snitch" in order to obtain a confession from Joe's digital duplicate. The whole story actually took place in a digital environment created by Matt to get a confession - the cabin being nothing more than a digital

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<sup>2</sup> Eliana Dockterman, "Sci-fi evolves into disturbing reality in Black Mirror and Westworld," *Time*, October 13, 2016, <http://time.com/4529439/sci-fi-evolves-into-disturbing-reality-in-black-mirror-and-westworld/>.

prison for Joe's digital clone. The different levels of imprisonment in this episode are complex as well as extremely interesting if we consider not only the idea of the *panopticon*, but also the concept of bio-power and its apparatuses. Indeed, the first level of imprisonment is the cabin in which the two men share their memories. But as it is revealed at the end of the episode, the cabin is in fact a *digital panopticon* where police officers monitor the interactions between the two digital avatars in order to indict the "real" Joe and obtain the murder confession from him. Here, only Matt is conscious that he is observed at all times. Joe is not aware of this intrusion. Transparency has become a new form of imprisonment, and the house of glass becomes the prison of glass. The *digital panopticon* does not leave any dark corner anymore: the mind of the prisoner or its digital copy, both can be used against him; even memories are exposed to the eye of power and can thus deprive us of our freedom.

Hence, the new media technologies shown in these two episodes question the notion of *panopticon* by creating and exploring *digital panopticons*. By feeling and sharing the life of the protagonist we are made aware of some of the dark consequences that our interveillance culture can lead to. However, if the nature of the prison and the relationship between prison and digital media are explored in different ways here, the concept of bio-power developed in *Discipline & Punish* can be further examined in other *black mirrors*.

### Will digital media discipline and punish our (digital) bodies?

In *Black Mirror*, the evolution of digital media or digital devices is never a simple pretext, it is always the starting point of a reflexive thought on how these technologies have modified the way we perceive our world and how the more we entrust them, the more freedom and free will we give away. Interestingly, the show also explores the complex and intimate relationships we create with digital apparatuses. They are not only devices we use or interact with, they are also devices which, at some level, shape our bodies and minds. We let them penetrate our intimacies in a very invasive way that can also be seen as a form of submission.

In the second season of *Black Mirror*, the idea of disciplining and punishing someone's body with the help of digital media is presented in the episode *White Bear*. The episode pictures what appears to be a living nightmare for Victoria, an amnesiac woman chased by "hunters" while passive "voyeurs" record the action on their smartphones. A glyph that appears on televisions, computers, phones, "everything with a screen" and which seems to "manipulate" people's minds, is also present on the face of the hunters. At first alone, Victoria finds help in Jem, another woman escaping hunters and trying to deactivate the transmitter apparently turning men into hunters or voyeurs. After a fearful hunt, both women finally try to shut down the transmitter. This is when the truth is finally revealed: Victoria is a convicted murderer who abducted a young girl and filmed while her fiancé tortured and killed her. All the action takes place in the "White Bear Justice Park", an amusement park built around the sentence of Victoria, who has to relive the hunt every day. In order to do so, a digital device is used to erase her memory every evening so she doesn't have any recollection of her past. "Hunters" and adjuvants are actors / wardens and voyeurs are guests visiting the park and attending her sentence. This episode is one of the most interesting for our research on the links between new media and prison. Indeed, the "park" reminds of the old tradition of what Michel Foucault called the "spectacle of the scaffold" or more precisely "punishment-as-spectacle": "the insatiable curiosity that drove the spectators to the scaffold to witness the spectacle of sufferings truly endured" (Foucault 1975, 88). Remarkably, in this "punishment-as-spectacle", the body "produced and reproduced the truth of the crime", the punishment thus becoming a ritual which sole purpose is to show that the crime committed is "inscribed" on the body "in the most striking

way". Nonetheless, there is no spectacle without an audience which could sometimes become "actor" of the punishment ritual: "Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it". (Foucault 1975, 107).

If Foucault states that this kind of punishment diminished or almost disappeared after the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the western world, *Black Mirror*'s "White Bear Justice Park" recreates and amplifies the worst parts of the carceral and punitive system. Indeed, every "voyeur" is here to witness the sentence of Victoria. The fact that they use hidden cameras to observe her or their cellphones to record and take pictures – which is not only allowed but encouraged by the wardens – plays a dual role similar to the punishment-as-spectacle theorized by Foucault: not only does the punishment resemble the crime but spectators must become actors of it. Nonetheless, this unique digitally enhanced punishment-as-spectacle also contradicts the purpose of the traditional sentence: if communication and media devices amplify the suffering of the victim, they should normally serve as a reminder of her crime. However here, Victoria has no recollection of it, making the imprisonment and the sentence even more pointlessly cruel. Finally, as always, *Black Mirror* uses visual elements to foster our reflection and to suggest a "moral": the glyph that appears everywhere is, as we learn at the end of the episode, Victoria's fiancé neck tattoo. Jem, the woman playing the role of Victoria's adjutant, gives an interesting take on the situation the protagonists live: "Screens [...] They did something to people. Like, almost everybody just became onlookers, started watching, filming stuff, like spectators who don't give a shit about what happens." The glyph is therefore to be understood as the symbol of the omnipresence of the media system and of its incursion in every corner of our lives and bodies, as well as to the transformation of our nature and tolerance to violence.

In addition to exploring the discipline and subjection imposed on our bodies by digital media, the show interrogates the nature of our digital double, our avatars, and the relationship we have with them, while also questioning the power these doubles have on our "real" offline selves. Indeed, during the episode *White Christmas* we understand that the "cookie" is a *digital panopticon* but also a torture device for the digital avatars falling in the hands of Matt: in order to create perfect digital "personal assistants" for smart houses he duplicates the owner's consciousness in a "cookie". The digital avatar is then forced to obey and serve its "real" self and if not compliant, it is tortured by Matt who distorts time perception in the device: seconds become weeks, minutes become years during which the digital avatar has nothing to do and cannot escape the emptiness of its digital prison. *Bored-out*, the digital avatar eventually obeys and accepts to become a "personal assistant". At the end of this episode, every protagonist gets convicted and condemned to a form of imprisonment: the "real" Joe remains in jail for murder, his "digital avatar" stays trapped in the cabin where minutes become years, and Matt, although being freed from prison, is now labelled a "voyeur". As a sentence, he becomes "blocked" by everyone carrying the "eye-link": everybody is "blurred" for him and he appears in a red "pixelization". Hence, not only is Matt's digital avatar visually "branded" and "marked" to punish him for his offence, but he is also deprived of contact and communication with everyone else. If he retains his freedom of movement, he is in a new digital prison which effectively isolates him from the rest of the world. As Foucault precises it, isolation is the first principle of every form of incarceration. If isolation is a mean to avoid further crimes, Beaumont and Tocqueville noted in their report on the American prison system that it also serves a punitive purpose: "Thrown into solitude, the convict reflects. Placed alone in the presence of his crime, he learns to hate it, and, if his soul is not yet blunted by evil, it is in isolation that remorse will come to assail him" (Beaumont and Tocqueville, 109). Visually, the color white is omnipresent

in the episode as a reminder of its title, “White Christmas”, as well as a reminiscence of all levels of imprisonment, torture and suffering encountered: the white vastness where the little girl was left alone with her dead grandfather, the isolation of the digital cabin that plays both the role of Joe’s avatar torture and imprisonment apparatus, the white wall of Joe’s real prison cell and finally, the white noise and blurriness that now surround Matt every time he tries to interact with someone. Thus, digital media can also create new punishment forms imbedded in the subjection they foster, directly or indirectly, for those using them.

The idea that digital devices can become digital prisons for our digital doubles is explored in multiple episodes of the show, always interrogating our relationship with them. The episode “Black Museum” which depicts a museum of crime-related objects also presents some of the show’s main concerning imprisonment apparatuses. The most disturbing one is the re-creation of a prison cell for the digital double of a murder convict, Clayton Leigh, sentenced to the electric chair. At the moment of his death, the digital double of the man’s consciousness was copied by the museum’s curator, a former scientist with a shady morality, in order to be the principal “attraction” of his exhibition. Represented by a hologram, the digital double of the man is not only trapped within the cell, he is also subject to a horrific reenactment of his sentence: every museum visitor can pull the lever to electrocute him again and witness his “digital” execution. Even more dreadfully, at the end of the ten seconds brutal digital execution, the episode shows that every visitor receives a keychain showing what looks like a video of Clayton’s torn face, but which is in fact, according to the curator, a real fragment of Clayton’s mind: “Every time you finished juicing him out pops a conscious sentient snapshot of Clayton. Not a recording a true copy of his mind perpetually experiencing that beautiful pain. Stuck forever in that one perfect moment of agony. Always on, always suffering”. All communication and visual devices serve here as punitive devices to punish both the body and the mind. The body is restrained, the digital body is incarcerated and tortured and so is the mind of the prisoner. It reminds of the most brutal form of torture and of the “liturgy of punishment” where “the very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory: the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force” (Foucault 1975, 90). In addition to this ceremonial of the execution which visitors reenact over and over, the keychains they take home are the symbols of “those tortures that take place even after death”, and where “justice pursues the body beyond all possible pain” (Foucault 1975, 65). The digital device originally created to save a person’s mind becomes an object of everlasting incarceration and torture, to discipline and punish the mind of the convicted forever, and more sadistically for the pleasure of tourists.

Finally, in the first episode of the show’s latest season, *USS Callister*, we observe how a somewhat recluse and underappreciated game designer creates digital copies of his colleagues and trap them in his own version of the game in order to enslave and subjugate them to his will. In this case, the digital media, the video game, is used to create a spectacle which serves the “rectification” process the game designer decided to inflict on those who did him wrong in “real” life or worse, to enslave women which affection he has difficulty to gain in his life. The digital body becomes an object, a commodity, that can be bent, tortured or even monstrously twisted for the amusement of the creator. If we do not have yet technologies able to originate digital copies of one’s consciousness, these episodes question the traces we leave behind us. They also interrogate how we define and invest our online identities and “digital” doubles. By watching the avatars trapped in the *USS Callister* or Clayton’s digital prison, the show arouses our reflexivity toward new media: what part of these digital selves can also become a liability for ourselves and our real life? The more we invest ourselves in these online identities, the more we can fear seeing them used against our will and become new prisons.



Conclusion: from digital prison to digital heterotopias

The more we explore the digital prisons created by *Black Mirror*'s episodes, the more we find out that the show does not only explore existing or possible punitive and imprisonment apparatuses, but challenges our understanding of digital media while offering us an interesting and unique exploration of these "parallel presents". Hence, we argue that the dystopian societies depicted in *Black Mirror* are in fact heterotopias, as defined by Michel Foucault: "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1984).

According to the philosopher and historian, every society creates heterotopias in time of great changes or in major crises. Our changing media environment and its digital "revolution" is consequently the perfect time to acknowledge such heterotopias. But heterotopias are not only specific constructs juxtaposing in the same time and space, different times and spaces, they are also places to explore multiple realities, particularly realities and people society has difficulties to accept: the dead, the insane, the exiled, etc. Every society needs a place to store and question its monsters, a place to project its fears and hopes, the things that should not be said but cannot completely be forgotten. But what characterizes the heterotopia is also its system of "opening" and "closing", which are the rituals a society produces to mitigate potential dangers and crises as well as to safely investigate what is within the heterotopia and ways to free the society from it.

And indeed, if *Black Mirror* questions new forms of imprisonment, it also suggests, paradoxically, new ways to escape or be liberated from them. We can thus draw from these analyses the idea that *Black Mirror* not only creates digital heterotopias but is also, within our digital culture, a heterotopia itself. As Greg Singh suggested: "It might come as no surprise to know that the title of the series, *Black Mirror*, is a direct reference to the look of various screens that surround us: if you have ever looked into a monitor, or an iPad, or a smartphone when switched off, you won't see nothing; tellingly, you see your reflection, darkened, untrue. Is this a black mirror reflecting what we are to become: switched "off" and self-obsessed; a constellation of fears, anxieties and desires; possessed by the urge to look and be looked at?" (Singh 2014, 122).

Therefore, *Black Mirror* serves as a *mise en abyme* of heterotopias, a heterotopia itself containing heterotopias. This speaks of the complexity of this show, which does not mean to foresee a potential future as it does to make us reflect on our everyday practices and the boundaries we should astrain them. As such, *Black Mirror* is a cautionary tale for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, very much like the Brother Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales*' books were in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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