Transcending Consciousness: Transitional Bodies, Virtual Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the British anthology television series, Black Mirror (2011-), exploring the posthumanist and transhumanist themes, along with its social and ethical consequences by interrogating the interface between speculative technologies and mind. Instead of seeing the human body as a finished product of evolution, transhumanism positions the human mind and body as a site for continuous technological enhancements. Posthumanism, by contrast, challenges the centrality of humans and emphasizes the interaction of and interdependence between human and non-human agents. The series embodies ideas of virtualism and identity by depicting the implications of these technologies on the individual and society. Using bioethics and posthumanism, this paper studies three episodes, "Be Right Back", "White Christmas", and "San Junipero", focusing on how they critique both, the promises and dangers of transhumanist ideologies while also engaging with posthumanist ideas that subvert the dominance of human beings.

The paper examines the representation of scientific advancements in the context of virtual reality and cognitive enhancement as portrayed in the series. Virtualism is the abstraction of lived human experience through immersive technologies that simulate and potentially replace "reality." It enables the exploration of disembodied consciousness, a concern shared by both transhumanist visions of transcendence and posthumanist ambivalence toward embodiment. Deploying frameworks of identity, consciousness, and posthumanism, the paper interrogates the portrayal of mind-machine interface and digital immortality, considering how these narratives engage with and critique the ethics of technological intervention.

This study investigates how Black Mirror complicates our understanding of the mind and self by positioning virtualism as a mode for both transcendence and alienation. It also interrogates how virtual spaces and cyber consciousness subvert conventional ideas of autonomy, self, and morality. Episodes such as "San Junipero" offer a critique of the ethical dimensions surrounding digital afterlife and the commercialisation of human experience, bringing to the fore issues of consent, the archiving of identity, and the societal consequences of such invasive technologies. The series functions as a cautionary exploration of unchecked technological development and the dystopian narrative underscores the disruptive impact it can have on the matrix of society. This paper contributes to ongoing discussions in the fields of science fiction and ethics, and intends to offer a holistic perspective on how Black Mirror explores the ethical and existential consequences of digital subjectivities.

Keywords: Transhumanism, Virtualism, Ethics, Posthumanism, Identity

1. HUMANISM, TRANSHUMANISM, AND POSTHUMANISM

Humanism places human beings at the centre of discourse as agential subjects, its ideological antecedents being the Renaissance, especially thinkers like Pico that emphasized the mutability of human nature, replacing God with humans, and Enlightenment that valorised rationality, which is seen as a uniquely human attribute (Zalloua, 2021, p. 3). Pramod K Nayar locates the humanist impulse in self-consciousness and rationality which creates the category of the "universal" human that is European and male. It has been instrumental in mobilising the discourse around human rights and dignity (Nayar, 2013, pp. 18–19).

Transhumanism, is a technologically optimistic and anthropocentric philosophy that sees the human body as a site for continuous technological enhancements, which can tackle bodily limitations like age, disability, cognitive, or physical impairment. Cary Wolfe describes it as "an intensification of humanism" (Wolfe, 2010, p. xv) where the human/nature binary is cemented with the aid of rationality as the foundation of the differentiation and human exceptionalism.

Nick Bostrom observes,

> Current human nature is improvable through the use of applied science and other rational methods, which may make it possible to increase human health-span, extend our intellectual and physical capacities, and give us increased control over our own mental states and moods. Technologies of concern include not only current ones, like genetic engineering and information technology, but also anticipated future developments such as fully immersive virtual reality, machine-phase nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence (Bostrom, 2005, pp. 202–203).

Meanwhile, James Hughes predicts that "Our senses and cognition will be enhanced. We will gain control over our emotions and memory. We will merge with machines, and machines will become more like humans" (Hughes, 2004, p. xii). Bostrom focuses on the incremental augmentation of human capacities through technology while Hughes envisions a closer merging of human and machine suggesting a blurring of boundaries rather than a mere enhancement. Both maintain a human-centred optimism about technology's role in human progress.

Posthumanism, in contrast, questions human exceptionalism and positions them co-existing in a world shared with non-human agents. Braidotti points out that "Humanism's restricted notion of what counts as the human is one of the keys to understand how we got to a post-human turn at all" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 16). It decentres homo sapiens, focuses on interdependence, and blurs the boundaries between human/animal/machine with an emphasis on the ethical rights of non-human actors. As Cary Wolfe notes, "Posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited" (Wolfe, 2010, p. 47). Zalloua locates it in four figures: cyborgs introduces hybridity as the line between human/machine is blurred, animals' proximity with whom makes us question the singularity of human beings, objects which are often outside our control and comprehension, and lastly, racialised others that subvert the universal subject that is the White man, reducing others to dehumanised apparitions (Zalloua, 2021, p. 23). She remarks that both ideologies can be exclusionary, with the dominant section "upgrading" due to access to transhumanist technologies that enhance the body and self while the underclass for whom these are inaccessible remains human (Zalloua, 2021, p. 35). It can thus deepen entrenched social and economic inequalities.

Thus, transhumanism focuses on human enhancement with the aim of transcending the body, favouring virtuality, while posthumanism critiques human centeredness but favors embodiment instead of an escape to the virtual domain. Braidotti's posthumanism critiques the narrow humanist focus on 'the human' by emphasizing fluid identities, whereas Wolfe advocates for an ethical responsibility in traversing these new modes of existence. Together, they argue for a dethroning of human exceptionalism and greater humility in our interactions with non-human agents.

The episodes "Be Right Back", "White Christmas", and "San Junipero", critique both the promises and dangers of transhumanist ideologies. They also explore the notion of embodiment, which emphasizes the irreducibility of the biological body and the consciousness inherent in it. The centrality of lived, material experience is valorised as one seemingly experiences the world through one's body. Virtuality, on the other hand, works through abstraction and simulates reality, which is disembodied and detached from physical parameters - bodily and/or spatio-temporal factors. These episodes take a critical look

at the notions of identity and consciousness and highlight the ethical considerations that are often sacrificed at the altar of digital posterity.

2. BE RIGHT BACK

It narrates the story of a young widow, Martha, who resurrects her husband, Ash, through a digital bot that harvests their memories through texts and photos and creates his representation in a cyborg machine, which lies beyond the realm of just virtuality in a tangible human-like machine. Her decision is driven by intense grief, mourning, and longing as she resorts to Artificial intelligence to reconstruct Ash from his digital footprint. It problematizes the transhumanist possibility of replicating a human being and their essence in the digital sphere.

Martin Heidegger explores the notions of *Being* (existence) and *being* (things that exist, inanimate). *Dasein*, which means being there, gestures towards human beings having self-consciousness and awareness to reflect upon their life and surroundings. We exist within networks and situations, or being-in-the-world. Heidegger states that technological enframing reduces people to tools, so AI tries to simulate Ash, but *Dasein* can't be replicated (Lacerda & de Mattos, 2020).

Her first interaction with the bot is quite disconcerting as she is confronted with the familiar and unfamiliar, which creates the sense of the uncanny. Martha eventually realises that AI can't recreate her husband as it can't capture his "essence", his flaws and unpredictability. Since the footprint is static, it can only imitate a preserved version, that is, memories, voice, manners, but there is no growth or lived consciousness. The final version uploaded in a physical vessel lacks depth, highlighting how the complex essence eludes duplication. It makes her question if his digital footprint can map the true consciousness or is it a mere recollection of his memories and quirks. It becomes harrowing for Martha to see her husband's doppelganger that is not truly him. And it is quite jarring to see him "modify" his behaviour to suit her version of Ash. Lacerda and Mattos observe that when the Ashbot tries to affect human flaws, it becomes quite apparent it's a "performance". Eventually, it makes us reflect on the extent to which AI can read us, or if anyone can. Martha is surprised to know he likes the Bee Gees, but that again underlines the limits of our own perception about the other. The Ashbot has no autonomy or authenticity but can only respond and react to Martha. As Paul Treschow remarks, the bot is a resurrection of Ash *for* Martha, whose complacency makes her quite distraught (Treschow, 2021, p. 55).

It makes us think whether machines can possess intentionality and fully simulate a human being, or if, what they do will always be just a performance. Our consciousness comprises just memories and emotions, or something more intrinsic to our biological self. Can humans be replaced, and if is there any space for human-technology co-development, where both evolve together? Eventually, Martha puts the digital Ash back in the box, as technologically mediated simulations cannot heal the void. We see the monetization of emergent technologies, as Ash was a commodity even when alive, Martha completes the process of his commodification when she creates the chatbot. Ash never gets to consent, which raises questions about the moral implications of posthumous data harvesting. This highlights an important posthumanist concern of human consciousness being detached from the body and the irreplaceability of the embodied experience.

3. WHITE CHRISTMAS

"White Christmas" introduces us to Matt (played by Jon Hamm) and Potter (played by Rafe Spall) who are relaying stories to each other, each more disconcerting than the other. The first story details Matt's side gig of guiding introverted men through dating with the use of "Zed-Eyes", an augmented reality tool that enables him to access the sights and sounds of the clients in real time. One of his clients, Harry, tries to lure a woman with mental health issues, and it ends with both characters dying in a homicide-suicide. This leads the law enforcement authorities to apprehend Matt and his wife's divorce and to "block" him via Zed-Eyes which ensures he cannot be seen or heard by her and their daughter as his visage would appear just as an outline of white pixels on screen, entirely inaudible and hidden.

The second story reveals that the company Matt worked for in the past designed "cookies" or virtual copies of individuals to work as AI assistants in smart homes with the premise that nobody is better positioned to know your likes, dislikes, and quirks better than you. We see a woman Greta being "copied" or replicated and the clone, which is a miniature version, with her own subjectivity and memories, and is psychologically tortured to accept her subservient place to the "original" real self. As Christine Muller notes,

> In "White Christmas," the cookie, cognizant of her existential dependence on the whims of her own original consciousness, instantiates

the horror of which human beings are capable, casting a reflecting surface by which our fears about AI merely point us back to ourselves (Muller, 2019, p. 97).

The interaction between human and non-human agents, that is clones, has posthumanist consequences. It raises profound issues of identity and ethics of cloning - do clones (referred to as "it") have a separate self or is their identity always relational and inferior to the original? Do they have human rights or are they a property of the tech company or the individual who can use them as their personal slave?

Matt recounts the third story in which he was "blocked" by his girlfriend Beth after she found out she was pregnant. She eventually dies in an accident and it is revealed that the child was not his, which makes him kill her father in rage for which he is arrested. It is then revealed to the viewers that the entire interaction between the two is actually taking place inside a cookie as Matt is interrogating Potter's digital self and trying to extract a confession for the authorities under the pretence of a friendly confessional conversation. After the police get the vital intelligence, Potter's cookie version is punished by setting the time perception to 1000 years per minute during Christmas, essentially making it a digital hell of eternal agony and torment. Matt, still blocked by everyone, sees everyone as muted and pixelated, making him a social outcast.

The episode shows a version of virtuality where consciousness exists entirely in the digital plane and one cannot distinguish between the two realities. The cookie-Potter believes it possesses a body, the AI clones are punished in the digital realm with dilating time and manipulation of sensory perceptions, and "blocking" ensures that people cannot be perceived in spite of their physical presence. Technologies like Zed-Eyes that enhance cognitive abilities, cookies that work with uploading and controlling mind, and digital incarceration with digital immortality and punishment show a transhumanist strain that both augments human capacities and devises novel ways to punish and exploit. State surveillance is also more invasive and insidious. Finally, it interrogates what it means to be an individual - do cookies have an autonomous existence with rights and the moral implications of enslaving them in a world that treats them as expendable. Consciousness becomes transferable and dispensable and we see a posthumanist decentring of the biological human as the centre of identity and consequent rights.

Thus, "White Christmas" makes us rethink our notions of consciousness, virtuality, and eternal punishment. It also shows us the limits of human empathy as the world it weaves is psychologically horrifying with blurred distinction between reality and simulation. Christine Muller remarks:

…whether biology-based or code, whether readily understood as real or not, an entity's consciousness-the subjective experience of one's self- and the integrity of personhood-the agency to advance and protect one's own interests and well-being-prove vulnerable to disregard and exploitation by others (Muller, 2019, p. 106).

4. SAN JUNIPERO

We are introduced to a simulated hyperreal space which uses "immersive nostalgia therapy" for the aged and terminally ill to relive the past (May, 2022, pp. 51–52) Their consciousness is uploaded to the system, their own notion of their self-image invents a persona and they get to transition from one era to another. The digital selves, as Kafer says, recreates "the ideal normalcy" of "(imagined) able-bodied/able-minded pasts (Kafer, 2013, p. 44)". It illustrates a transhumanist project that creates a space for virtual immortality by transcending the body. The uploading of consciousness creates digital afterlives, which can be seen as a mark of technological advancement and/or escapism. The digital consciousness makes one interrogate the true "essence" and if it can be retained in the process.

It gives the users an opportunity to shape their identity or forge a new one in the virtual space in which their persona remains frozen in a state of perpetual youth and able-bodiedness. Yorkie is paralyzed at the age of 21 after she comes out as queer to her family. She has lived her life primarily in cyberspace - so what iteration of her identity and self do the viewers see, is it her "authentic" self or a radically altered one? The central tension lies in the question of Kelly's rejection and Yorkie's embracing San Junipero for eternity. Kelly had rejected it in the past as she did not want to lose her identity and become "someone else" - she locates in the biological body a certain essence that can't be duplicated or replaced, rejects the afterlife as consciousness can be altered in the process of uploading and existing there. Her eventual decision to upload her consciousness raises further questions- can consciousness exist apart from the biological body? It makes us wonder what it is like to live in the simulated sphere and ultimately what constitutes our identity. The quest for immortality is an ancient one, but here it gets a

digital twist, and the concern remains whether it is worth it. Moreover, the entire enterprise is owned by a corporation, so the uploaded consciousnesses are owned by a commercial entity with a possibility of abuse, as the subject is no longer in a position to control their consciousness in the real world. Thus, while the transhumanist enterprise enables leaving the body behind leading to a posthumanist fluid self, the capitalist premise underlines the ambivalence towards seeing it as an entirely empowering project. The liberating queer paradise thus has a dark undercurrent that even the affirming end cannot quell.

Thus, we see the lines between reality and simulation being blurred as the individual attempting to locate and navigate their fractured consciousness in the maze. It can also widen the gulf between the privileged and the marginalized by making emergent technologies accessible only to the former which ensures power is now channelised through the body in a visible way. In conclusion, the transhumanist vision of human augmentation and virtual immortality seeks to transcend bodily limitations, yet these stories also explore moral and existential dilemmas involving the irreducible nature of consciousness which cannot be replicated. The posthumanist focus on connectedness and embodiment challenges humanist centredness but also expresses apprehensions about virtual escapism that has the potential to become a digital prison. These episodes encourage viewers to reflect on emergent technologies and underscore the importance of ethical advancements that preserve the humanity of its users. We are also looking at a transitional zone of change - from embodied subjectivities to virtual identities that open up space to explore the ethical and the existential consequences of transhumanism and posthumanism.

Conflict of Interest

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