

## Section Three

# INTELLIGENT MATTER

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### Nonlinear Cosmogony of “Black Mirror”: Darkness as a Symbol of a Distorted Chronotope in the Futuristic Netflix Series

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*The article is devoted to the study of the symbolic significance of light and darkness in the life of modern humanity. In order to analyze this problem, the author turned to “Black Mirror”, a science-fiction anthology released by Netflix company. This popular series creates pessimistic and dystopian picture of life in a high-tech civilisation. The future in the serial appears as a multidimensional matrix, the elements of which form intricate correlations with the nowadays world. One of the most commonly echoed themes in the episodes of “Black Mirror” is the human being in the world, whose functioning is determined by a nonlinear space with conditions of artificial lighting, when the natural change of day and night matters no more. Darkness and light appear here as symbols that have different, sometimes polar meanings. In search of their identity and a bright future, human constantly returns to the Plato’s cave, but instead of the shadows of divine light on the stonewalls, he sees only flickering pixels. From this perspective, “Black Mirror” is a hopeless attempt to return to the original cosmogonic harmony of light and darkness. Unfortunately, this is the labyrinth without exit, since there is no way one can find the true essence of being in the distorted chronotope of social networks and virtual reality.*

*Keywords: futurology, darkness, light pollution, chronotope, “Black Mirror”*

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## Introduction

The science-fiction anthology “Black Mirror”, the first season the company “Netflix” released in 2011, has the status of one of the highest rated and the most perspective projects. It is not a coincidence, because the picture, created in the serial, is full of themes that the modern humanity is concerned. “Black Mirror” provokes a discussion of a large number of topical issues: ecology of consciousness, artificial intelligence, digital simulation of personal relationships, total tracking and control over the citizens’ privacy, technological intrusion in socio-political life, etc. According to the words of C. Huber, “the depictions of state control and technology within episodes of “Black Mirror” are not just mere spectacles of entertainment, but are rooted in reality” (Huber, 2017: 42).

At the same time, “Black Mirror” provides a possibility to discuss the problem of light and darkness in a high-tech world, which has lost its orientation on the natural rhythm of day and night. The symbolism of light and darkness in the series far exceeds the traditional cultural interpretations of this binom. It touches not only ethical, aesthetic and axiological aspects, but also the general ontological essence of light and darkness, connected with general changes in the time-space perception in modern culture.

The concept of the series is defined by the metaphor encoded in the name, which is directly constructed on the opposition of light and darkness. In the literal sense, “Black Mirror” means the surface of the gadget, which brings people to a completely different dimension of being. According to Charlie Brooker, the creator of the TV series in question, “The “black mirror”... 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” (Brooker, 2011).

In the cultural and historical sense, the mirror symbolizes the portal to the paranormal world of alternative reality, the habitation of non-human entities — gods, spirits and ancestors. In traditional cultures, the difference between physical and metaphysical worlds was clear. Modern high-tech digital mirrors simulate numerous unreal worlds, creating a distorted image of factual life. Therefore, there are new demons of humanity — simulations, which prevent society from seeing an objective reflection of reality. A man of a digital era does not want to seek the reflection of his true Self in philosophical reflections, ethical and aesthetic thinking, spiritual experiences. The digital mirror designs a brilliant multi-colored image in which one can see many options of oneself, none of which will be genuine. Thus, “Black Mirror” becomes a symbol of the high-tech world, in which a real person is lost.

### “The future is bright” (1-2 seasons)

The dystopian story “Fifteen Million Merits” (S01E02, directed by Euros Lyn) tells about the world in which people have to generate electricity using bicycle dynamo machines. Workers live in the building, which is completely isolated from daylight. Each worker receives a certain amount of “merits” and usually spends its on artificially synthesized food or to get rid of annoying advertising. The system has a full control over the day and night mode, even the eyes can be closed only with special permission. In this way, the tranquility of the night and natural darkness of closed eyes is inaccessible to a small person. We see a picture of a total penetration of artificial light in human life, which has become a reality of modern megacities.

Because of the readiness to sacrifice themselves (to give their merits and then their life), the main character comes to a new level of being, where light and darkness are genuine. He reaches the privileged layer of society, so he can afford fresh fruit juice and a penthouse with

huge windows and view to the forest. This story determines one of the central messages of the anthology "Black Mirror": the darkness associates with artificial imitations of real life, which arises as a result of the remoteness of the modern man from nature.

Formally, scientific and technological progress pursues the target at improving people's lives. In fact, in parallel with the development of technology, doubts are raised about the truthfulness of the phrase: "Knowledge is light and ignorance is darkness". Dramatic story "The Entire History of You" (S01E03, directed by Brian Welsh) clearly denies this old maxim. In alternative reality, everyone has an implanted chip that records everything that a person does, sees or hears. This device also allows playing one's private memories of relatives either directly before your eyes or on the screen. Liam, the protagonist, begins to be jealous of his wife. At the end, analyzing the available videos, he finds out that he is a betrayed man who brings up the unrelated child. Deeply shocked, Liam removes his chip with memories. The screen sharply blacks and the viewer think: is the knowledge of the past really so important to a person? Would not it be better to stay in the darkness of ignorance? Why the knowledge, which has always been associated with the light, can transform a life into the black hell?

Thus, the main idea of the series becomes invariant of the philosophical mirror of Jacques Lacan: here my knowledge of Me is realized not only through the feelings and memories of loved ones, but also through a virtual twin acting in the role of the Other (Lacan, 2006: 75-81). However, the pseudo-personality that looks like a mirror from social networks is not real. This is the main idea of the movie "Be Right Back" (S2E1, directed by Owen Harris). The young widow Martha attempts to get rid of loneliness: she replaces her suddenly deceased husband with an artificial copy — first in a digital format, later in the form of a biotechnical semblance. In this plot, the modernized myth about returning of the deceased can be traced: due to premature death, the anxious spirit continues to disturb his wife. However, human death is an inevitable and logical end: the deceased cannot be turned back neither with the help of magic, nor by using of high technologies. Human is not a simple sum of replicas, statuses in social networks, images in photos and videos, behavioral reactions and algorithms. That is something larger, and the mystery of human nature remains inaccessible.

The moments of social decay of the heroes "Black Mirror" are associated with the time of natural darkness. In the political satire "The Waldo Moment" (S2E3, directed by Bryn Higgins) actor-comedian Jamie, who refused to participate in the local elections in the image of the animated character Waldo, eventually lives as a homeless under the bridge. The final scene of the episode — the loser Jamie is looking at a huge monitor, watching as the glory of Waldo walks around the world. The morale is obvious: the digital mirror in no way reflects the personality, distorting not only creating as a projection of the human soul, but also the entire system of social relations, including the politics.

Transformation of the sense of the opposition of light and darkness in the serial also changes the symbolism of the shadow. Here, this phenomenon does not mean a natural lack of lighting, but becomes a symbol of all sorts of shortcomings of the human nature. The horrible story "White Bear" (S2E2, directed by Carl Tibbetts) is a philosophical essay on the ethics of punishment for a crime. Victoria Skeleyn, the main character of the immersive spectacle, wakes up every morning with erased memories, undergoes persecution, chase and danger. And every evening she understands that all this is just a staging, created to punish her for the murder of a child. Every night, Victoria becomes the central figure of a disgraceful ceremony, similar to the torch walk arranged by the medieval inquisition before the process of witch burning. Historically ritualistic fire (candles, torches, and bonfire) symbolized the sacrificial purification and repentance: though during the ceremony in this series we observe

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only the devilish twinkle of iPhones instead of the true peculiar fire. The night loses its significance of sacral time; it is only a moment that erases the boundaries between moral and immoral. Consequently, in the digital era, brutal snuff-video, where the victim is humiliated and tortured, comes in place of just punishment. The night shadows acquire archetypal significance in the context of Jung's theory: society consciously denies the darkness of its immorality, because the court must begin with the discovery of everyone's hidden depths. Thus, the episode "White Bear" highlights the violent nature of public punishment and "the dark prison tourism" encouraged by the state (Huber, 2017: 40).

Thus, lighting technology changes the archaic perception of hell as a darkness, as an eternal night, which is illuminated only by the fiery glow of lava, torches, braziers and other tools for sinner's excruciation. The invention of electricity "presented" to humanity a new type of torture: the dazzling artificial light in the prison cell or psychiatric clinic's chamber, which is even more striking for the prisoner's mind than the dark space of a dungeon. This is the image of hell from the special Christmas episode of 2014 "White Christmas" (directed by Carl Tibbetts). The protagonist is forced to suffer in a personal jail filled with brilliant snow-white glow for having committed a crime. His mental twin is forever locked in a Christmas gift with a fractal structure. Inside the general form, there is an infinitely split pattern that repeats the captive in his infernal living space, limited by the room of the polar station.

So, even if the original tagline of the first and second seasons of "Black Mirror" proclaims: "The future is bright", the creators of the series give a rather gloomy picture of tomorrow. The brightness of the future is just the illusions of digital simulations that conceal the set of dark, immoral, distorting light images of utopian futurology.

### **"Welcome to the darkness" (3-4 seasons)**

While fans of "Black Mirror" are convinced that the brightness of the future has many dark sides, third season is released with the slogan "Welcome to the darkness". Although such an invitation has a negative semantic of unknown, mysterious and potentially dangerous, life without artificial light is habitual for a natural person. The ancient people did not use the lights at night and perfectly orientated in the obscurity. The dark surface with numerous visual objects has its long-standing prototype — the starry sky. Our ancestors directed their eyes to cosmic darkness every night, considering it as a kind of sacred picture. However, now a monitor becomes the contemporary sacral fetish — a very dubious analogue of the celestial screen.

For Lacie Pound, the personage of the story "Nosedive" (S3E1, directed by Joe Wright), the invitation to the dark becomes fatal. The girl lives in a world, where people appreciate each other using special gadgets. The level of life (work, housing, personal relationships) entirely depends on social rating. At first, the viewer sees a sugary picture of the finest future, and "this effect reinforced by the pastel aesthetics of the images" (Cirucci & Vacker, 2018: 206). Due to a number of circumstances, Lacie loses good grades and befalls at the bottom of society. However, the social decline and at the same time the return to the true nature of the main heroine falls on the dark time, when the savage desire to be sincere awakens. Her absolute liberation from the conventions and hypocrisy, imposed by society, occurs in conditions of artificial lighting of the prison cell. It is there that Lacie gets an absolute pleasure from expressing her true feelings — angry and unlimited sarcasm.

The "black mirror" of the novelty technologies is able to draw on the surface the hidden shades of the human soul, all those dark depths, which psychoanalytic psychology cannot reach. This is reflected in the episode "Playtest" (S3E2, directed by Dan Trachtenberg).

Cooper, the hero of history, agrees to collaborate with the company maker of the virtual games. Specialists implant in his head a gadget capable of simulating realistic images and sounds in his mind. When this device diagnoses anything that frightens Cooper, he creates a creepy mansion in the spirit of Edgar Poe and popular video games. In gothic darkness, the protagonist faces the worst fears of life — nightmares from his childhood, unpleasant images of the past. However, this is only the superficial layer of hidden darkness in Cooper's mind. A truly murderous infusion is his fear of Alzheimer's disease, which led to the death of his father. Thus, the viewer is aware of one more idea: high technologies, that can actualize the darkest and deepest layers of the subconscious, are destructive to the human psyche.

A natural night has always been associated with a mystery, with the ability to hide something intimate, personal, not intended for the public. Technologies of post-industrial society distort the norms of respect for private life. This is the theme of the episode "Shut Up and Dance" (S3E3, directed by James Watkins). The protagonist, teenager Kenny, along with other losers, are victims of unknown hackers: they use a virus to take over the laptop's camera, which captures intimate moments of the user's life. Through the intimidation, Kenny is forced to go on illicit doings. At the end, within self-defense, he committed murder. Despite the fact that objects of blackmail carry out all the rigid and absurd tasks, unknown hackers publish compromising information about the protagonists. The climax of the trolling takes place in the dark time: Kenny and other victims get a message with the "trolls face" and realize that their life is destroyed forever.

According to the ideals of transhumanism, the goal of which is the infinite continuation of human lifetime in the metaphysical digital world, one can enjoy the vivid completeness of existence even after the death of the physical body. In the utopian story "San Junipero" (S3E4, directed by Owen Harris), virtual reality models a resort town, where old and sick people can download their consciousness. A digital imitation of existence allows everyone to turn off the experience of pain and feel young. Externally, a happy Eden is depicted in a specific coloring — here dominates darkness with sparkles of pink and blue neon (a hint of bisexual relations of the main heroines). A city with artificial lighting, which does not sleep at night, becomes an amusement park for superhuman life, a twisted model of a beautiful paradise garden.

Cybertechnologies can absolutely control the dark, irrational depths of the human psyche. This is proved by the anti-utopian world of a story entitled "Men Against Fire" (S3E5, directed by Jacob Verbuggen). In the post-apocalyptic future, according to a eugenics program for the purification of humankind, scientists have developed a technology for the use of neural implants MASS. The purpose of the system is to dehumanize the enemy, which allows the soldiers to kill more efficiently. Inculcation takes place in two phases — at night, when the system suggests erotic images of "normal" people, and in the day, when people with minimal genetic defects appear in the minds of the soldiers as vile "roaches". The darkness on the screen as the dominant visual effect equals the two groups of images created by the MASS system. A young attractive woman in a semi-illuminated boudoir and people-outcasts hiding in dark-skinned homes or dugouts are all products of virtual consciousness. Thus, the suggestion of a management system of consciousness only distorts the vision of reality and removes a person from its true nature.

The creators of the series also urge to reflect on the problem of collective responsibility in media communities. Social networks from the innocent communication environment are increasingly turning into a dangerous tool allowing to influence the society. They become tools for spreading propaganda and misinformation, coordinating criminal gangs, total

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tracking and interference with privacy. Episode “Hated in the Nation” (S3E6, directed by James Hawes) tells us about the danger of slacking collective emotions on the Internet. According to the plot, the using of the hashtag #DeathTo leads to the death of persons, which has been convicted of the community. An Autonomous Drone Insect (ADI), designed to replace extinct bees, is looking for victims of trolling and destroy their brain, entering the head through the earing canal. At the end, bright posts and dark hatred of users should lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Only the operational work of special services allows avoiding tragedy.

Scientific and technological progress allowed not only to consider space through special devices, but also to visualize numerous fantastic worlds. At the same time, the inhabitants of the metropolises do not see the real stars due to the global pollution of the environment. In this case, digital technology creates a paradoxical illusion of the proximity of humankind to outer space, although people are just as far from traveling through the universe as their distant ancestors are. Ethical maxims of a modern person remain sometimes at savage level. So contemptible is the inward world of the protagonist cosmopolitan “USS Callister” (S4E1, directed by Toby Haynes). Robert Daley is a talented programmer and co-author of a popular online game; he suffers from lack of respect from his colleagues. As he became an alien in real life, Robert expresses himself in the virtual world. He creates a game simulation of the spacecraft from the series Star Trek. Team members are clone colleagues, simulated with DNA. In a dark cosmic world, he plays the role of the captain of a space boat, to whom all must worship.

Night and day, darkness and light, good and evil are inevitable parts of human life. When technology distorts the natural balance, it provokes negative consequences. Mary, the main heroine of the drama “Arkangel” (S4E2, directed by Jodie Foster), loses her little daughter Sarah in a crowded place. So that this incident does not happen again, Mary agrees to take part in the special Children Protection Program. An embedded chip and a special “paternal tablet” allow her to know her daughter’s location, her vital signs and visual impressions. Technology “Arkangel” protects the child from the dark sides of human life — violence, pornography, horror. All dangerous objects are blocked, turning into grey spots. However, the isolation from negative sides of being is, in fact, a brutal restriction of children’s freedom, which has catastrophic consequences. Teenager Sarah, who finds out about the intervention of her mother in private life, begins to beat her in the onset of rage. The gray filter on her eyes prevents her from seeing damages she is causes.

Darkness is a convenient background for checking sincerity, because sex and immorality in the modern world are associated with intense lighting, with bright simulations of reality in the Internet network. The utopian System of searching for couples compatibility algorithms prompts its subjects to rebel against experiments over them. This idea lies at the base of the story called “Hang the DJ” (S4E4, directed by Tim Van Patten). The main characters of the episode, Amy and Frank, use the Dating System, which forces them to experience many models of marital relationships. At the end, a couple gets tired of it: lovers run into the dark, the world breaks down to the pixel, and the heroes find out that they have become the actors of 1000 simulations. The darkness in this episode becomes a symbol of natural sincerity, the time of knowing the truth, and the night loses direct connotations with immorality: in this virtual space, sex without love is associated with illumination of different intensity and color. Therefore, the denial of the virtual brightness of the digital world, reproduced by the System, leads to the adoption of the only correct solution of sincerity.

Black-and-white episode “Metalhead” (S4E5, directed by David Slade) tells a depressing story in the horror style. The plot of the episode is very simple: the dogs-robots attack people.

The director David Slade says that the story is very "pared down, bleak and post-apocalyptic". The graphical picture of the world is an imitation of digital mechanism's view. "The world has been starved of color — there's not much hope left in the world — so to have the world be drained of color felt right, — Jones says. — And also, for a lot of it you are seeing the robot's POV, and it has digital, it is kind of grainy. The idea that we paint the whole world through the robot's eyes appealed to us and made sense and we embraced it wholeheartedly" (Turchiano, 2017).

The episode "Black Museum" (S4E6, directed by Colm McCarthy) is an anthology of three stories. Each is devoted to technologies that allow exploring the human consciousness and transferring it to inanimate objects. The proprietor of the Black museum, Rolo Haynes, conducts an excursion and tells the visitor Nish the various horrors associated with exhibits: about a psycho-doctor, who was pleased with a pain of patients; about a toy monkey with the consciousness of a real woman; about an unlawfully convicted man, who suffers in the digital eternity.

The Black Museum is a collection of all the dark vices of the human soul. This story contains links to each of the previous episodes of the series: a comic called "Fifteen Million Awards"; torture video by Victoria Skeleyn from the "White Bear", an artificial bee from the episode "The Enemy of the People", the paternal tablet from the episode "Arkangel", etc. The darkness of "Black Museum" acquires tactile characteristics: it is a stuffy hot space, a viscous substance, which, incidentally to the biblical image of the ninth Egyptian treasury (Ex. 10: 21-29), slows down movements, causes asphyxia and eventually death. In the final of the episode, sadist Haynes dies of poisoning and Nish places his mind in the chamber of eternal torture.

"Bandersnatch" is an interactive film directed by David Slade (released in 2018). The nonlinear script of this episode is based on the principles of art and challenges the concept of free will. The life of the protagonist of the programmer, Stephen Butler, appears as a wandering in a dark labyrinth, whose structure raises and branches storylines. The viewer turns into a co-author of the series and active management of the fate of heroes changes the usual time-space guides. The interactive principle of constructing an episode makes it possible to transform the artistic reality into one's own instead of passive contemplation. Although there are five main variants of the endings, this is a story without a good final, because its nodus at the symbolic level is the product of darkness: an upright fateful action in the life of the protagonist Stefan (his father takes a toy rabbit that accidentally leads to the tragic death of his mother) occurs at night.

In this cinema world, life is full of options, as in a computer game. However, the choice of the line of developments is made not by the acting personages, but by spectators: for a few time they are happy to test the functions of the gods. In support of the theory of absolute determinism of human life, the hero of "Bandersnatch", leading programmer Colin Ritman, tells Butler about a secret government intelligence program, alternative time lines and various options for fate. In order to demonstrate this theory, Ritman invites Stefan to jump from the balcony (the viewer has to choose which of them will jump). If Ritman jumps, he misses from the further history. If Stephen jumps, the game ends without him. In this episode, there is a very significant moment: when Colin tells about total control over mind and absurdity of life choices, he looks in the dark window of his reflection. It is as illusory as the nighttime metropolis, which shines by the lights behind the mirrored surface of the window.

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## Conclusion

“Black Mirror” has a compound dramaturgy with a nonlinear chronotope, cosmological fantasies, utopian and anti-utopian pictures of the future. The future in the serial appears as a multidimensional matrix, whose the elements form intricate correlations with the nowadays world. The author of the idea, Charles Brooker and directors of episodes, created a variational picture of an open composition designed to embody original ideas and unexpected storyline twists. This fantastic world, like the mirror labyrinth with fractal structures, reflects a variety of forms of human existence: from its material aspects to important spiritual problems. In this series, futuristic forecasts are made by using the structural principles of computer hypertext: the representation of alternative virtual reality, the choice of viewers or characters in the course of occasions, the presence of numerous points of intersection of different plot lines, etc. Thus, the viewer, who looks into the prediction of tomorrow through the black mirror of his monitor, becomes the creator and participant of the future.

“Black mirror” reflects a bright future, which has many dark sides. Darkness appears here as a symbol that has different, sometimes polar meanings. On one hand, the image of darkness has negative connotations: it is associated with depression and despair. It appears as evil and hidden vices of the human soul; it is a cold that envelops a non-viable space, and at the same time a stifling, hot environment; it is a viscid material that not only disorients, but also slows down the movement. A dark night can provoke and stimulate the release of human savagery, be a time of horrors and dangers. On the other hand, we see the traditional historical and cultural understanding of darkness in the series: night is a time of sleep, a union with nature, a return to the pre-civilization condition of a person. From this point of view, darkness is a symbol of primary freedom, unpredictability, creativity, sincerity. Night is a time of rest, enlightenment, intuitive decisions. The night is associated with astral journeys of the soul, prominent dreams, communion with spirits, gods and ancestors; the night dream is mythologized as a model of death and as a parallel life, which soul lives far from the body.

The creators of the series emphasize that people are increasingly distancing themselves from the natural perception of darkness and night. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries generate the phenomenon of night civilization — a culture of artificial lighting that avoids darkness. The urban environment contributes to the desacralization of the night: it ceases to be the time of sleep and dreams, the moment of communication with the higher forces. Excessive illumination is a symbol of human presence, an unnatural, non-animal rhythm of being. Hazardous from an environmental point of view, global environmental pollution is the result of wastefulness of energy and unconcerned attitude of humans to wildlife: the illumination of the night sky leads to a change in the conditions to which all forms of organic life are adapted. Human turns into a night creature; everything goes away from its natural biorhythms, which is really a heavy stress factor.

Therefore, in conditions of urban light pollution, even darkness becomes an artificially acquired object. Modern artistic forms mimic the darkness both on physical and symbolic level. The following institutions are becoming more and more popular: the museums of darkness, where exhibits need to be touched, restaurants where food is served in absolute dark, reserve areas of the starry sky — zones where artificial lighting is prohibited. Consequently, we can state the following trend: humanity is tired of complicated technologies and seeks simplicity and naturalness.

This idea is reflected in “Black Mirror”. The authors of serial, using a complicated symbolism of light and darkness, discuss one of the main contradictions of the modernity: although the physical conditions of bodily existence have not changed, human consciousness



in their reflections is more and more wandering at the crossroads between natural being and its digital imitation. In search of his identity, human constantly returns to the cave of Plato, but he sees only flickering pixels instead of the shadows of divine light on the stonewalls. From these positions, “Black Mirror” is a hopeless attempt to return to the original cosmogonic harmony of light and darkness; this is a portal without an exit, since the distorted chronotope of social networks and virtual reality does not reflect the true essence of being.

Thus, the futurological stories of “Black Mirror” encourage fans of science fiction to understand the main ethical, ecological, socio-political and aesthetic problems of the present. The creators of the anthology continue to shoot new episodes, and viewers wonder about many things. Whether the rapid growth of the global population will lead to a lack of energy and nutritional resources? Is knowledge a real light for a humanity? Should we further develop biotechnology, fight for the immortality of the body and the individual consciousness? Is it safe to create artificial intelligence? Why the using of the achievements of science and technology alienates humans off nature? Unfortunately, these issues are not rhetorical, and for the sake of a bright future, they need to be resolved immediately.

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