BEYOND PANOPTICON: THE NEXUS OF SURVEILLANCE, TECHNODICTATORSHIP, AND DYSTOPIAN REALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

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Abstract

In Charlie Brooker's series Black Mirror (2011–), critical reflection on the reality of surveillance and its intersection with human experience in digitally mediated societies is examined. Two episodes in particular, "Shut Up and Dance" (2016) and "Hated in the Nation" (2016), highlight how surveillance has shifted from central powers to decentralised networks embedded within technology use in our daily lives. In "Shut Up and Dance," control of incorporation occurs through risk and humiliation, as personal data, such as video footage, becomes a method of extortion and blackmail. In "Hated in the Nation," shared social media outrage becomes algorithmic punishment via autonomous drones. Together, this presents a broader and deeper investigation of surveillance, which is no longer simply observation, but also an affective and economic machine. Based on Michel Foucault's notion of panopticism and Shoshana Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism, the study asserts that Brooker depicts technodictatorship as participatory, psychological, and normalised. Overall, the narratives depict how datafication and emotional susceptibility intersect to abolish freedom, blurring the boundaries between victim and perpetrator in the modern digital society.

Keywords: Black Mirror, surveillance, panopticism, surveillance capitalism, dystopia.

The utopian and dystopian have consistently garnered the cultural imagination such that the utopian and the dystopian form the discourse with which societies express their hopes and fears (Gordin et al., 2010; Vieira, 2010). As utopias embody order and harmony, dystopias make evident the failure of law and order in relation to systems of surveillance, control, and power through domination. Utopian and dystopian texts include perennial classics like Orwell's *1984* (1949/1950) or Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985/1996), which portray a regime where power is monopolised through surveillance and demeaning behaviour. Today, the surveillance comes not from the physical observation of the state, but from technology-related surveillance through an algorithm. In this respect, we can view Charlie Brooker's anthology *Black Mirror* (2011–) as symptomatic of this moment, offering warnings about how technology moved from an empowering form to a subjugated form of experience (Joy, 2019; Stein, 2016).

Brooker began presenting the "black mirror" of screens as a metaphor for our modern experience, suggesting the screen reflects our imperfections and ethical failures (Brooker, 2011–). The popular episodes *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) and *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) indicate the program's engagement with digital surveillance ethics and social complicity. Both episodes dramatise how observability becomes control and surveillance reworks our morality and agency. Their stories can be understood through Michel Foucault's (1975/1995) idea of panopticism [1] and Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) theory of *surveillance capitalism*[2], frameworks that show how modern power functions through psychological regulation and economic exploitation.

Foucault's panopticism, which is based on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon[3] (1791/2011), theorises that visibility disciplines behaviour. In the Panopticon, subjects are self-disciplined because they might be surveilled at any moment. Foucault (1975/1995) drew an analogy from this proposition to modern societies, arguing that surveillance leads to self-government and conformity. The episode *"Shut Up and Dance"* enacts this process through the character Kenny, a teenage boy who is blackmailed by unseen hackers who capture his private acts and acts of violence. The potential for exposure creates the subject of surveillance, Kenny, who, as a subject, is the rule of control, and to follow the rule illustrates what is meant by "the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 201). The episode enacted Bentham's architectural design into the digital age, where the tower is replaced with connected screens and malware. Kenny's obedience, along with fear and isolation, embodies how surveillance infiltrates intimacy and creates self-censorship (Wibowo Putra, 2019; Nolte-Odhiambo, 2019).

By comparison, *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) scales this process to the collective. The episode imagines a society where *Autonomous Drone Insects*[4] (ADIs) monitor and kill individuals based on online outrage. As users join in a hashtag campaign, #DeathTo, they are involuntary agents of violence. Brooker demonstrates how algorithmic technologies cause online outrage to translate to violent behaviours, collapsing moral agency. Scholars like Veel (2020) and Duarte and Battin (2021) read the ADIs as emergent of algorithmic governance where surveillance is dispersed and participative. This is reflected in the conception of withering away of power as diffuse and entrenched in everyday activities rather than exerted downwards (Foucault, 1975/1995). Visibility becomes omnipresent, yet accountability disappears in the aggregated online crowd.

Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism then complements this Foucauldian reading because it describes how data extraction operates as economic governance. Surveillance

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[1] Foucault's term (1975/1995) derived from Bentham's *The Panopticon Writings* (1791/2011), describing a mechanism of power where constant potential visibility produces self-discipline.

[2] Zuboff's (2019) concept describing how digital corporations claim human experience as "raw material" for data extraction, prediction, and profit.

[3] Bentham's eighteenth-century prison design enabling one observer to watch many inmates unseen, producing self-regulation through uncertainty.

[4] Fictional robotic bees in *Black Mirror: "Hated in the Nation"* (2016), designed for pollination but re-purposed for surveillance and execution.

capitalism uses human experiences, which convert human behaviour into a commodity, a supply of predictions and profits. In *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016), personal data becomes a coercive currency for manipulation, while in *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016), aggregated online behaviour operates as algorithmic violence. Both examples illustrate how datafied[5] systems commodify human emotion, fear, shame, and outrage as raw materials. Zuboff (2019) articulates this process by warning that it "unilaterally claims human experience as raw material for translation into behavioural data" (p.8). Brooker both illustrates and uses this warning and outlines how surveillance is no longer only watching: it creates action, compliance, and eventually profits.

Brooker's dystopias uphold the legacy of Orwell and Huxley; they diverge from their predecessors by portraying voluntary non-participation in systems of control. In *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016), the horror is born from the private guilt that is weaponised through exposure. The horror experience starts with common outrage legitimising algorithmic punishment. Joy (2019) argues that this discomfort exists because viewers see their own entanglement with technologies, which is being critiqued. Stein (2016) further argues that social media is the new Panopticon, based on visibility and validation leading to self-surveillance. Therefore, Brooker's stories evoke the way modern surveillance thrives on consent and convenience, coupled with emotional engagement.

Literature Review

The nexus of surveillance, technodictatorship[6], and dystopia has long been a critical and creative exploration. Foundational dystopian literary texts like Orwell's *1984* (1949/1950) are fundamental in laying bare the tension between authoritarian power and the surveillance apparatus. Orwell's Oceania, ruled by the omniscient "Big Brother" gaze, depicts surveillance that suspends the individual through fear, propaganda, and ubiquitous surveillance. The narrative then gestures toward an early form of state control via visibility. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932/1998) adds to this critique by indicating how technologies and pleasure serve as a means of social conditioning; a displacement of repression with internalised regulation.

Entering the twenty-first century, the dystopian imagination turned from a state-centred form of control to one that is decentralised and digitally mediated. Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011–) does just this by reframing these fears as concerns of data capitalism. The episodes *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) and *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) articulate the drift from surveillance by the state to coercion and complicity as the new format. *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) considers the extortionary apparatus of surveillance, where personal data becomes a weapon of control, and *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) imagines algorithmic justice enacted through the autonomous drone insect, which is overruled by public backlash.

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5   Refers to the process or condition of being transformed into data.
6   Term associated with Aldous Huxley (1958/2006) for a regime of control sustained through technology, pleasure, and voluntary submission rather than overt coercion.

These forms articulate the shift away from state power to a new format of participatory surveillance in a networked society (Joy, 2019; Putri & Nafisah, 2020).

Theoretical frameworks further complicate this analysis. Jeremy Bentham's (1791/2011) Panopticon illustrated an idea of unending gaze that propels compliance without coercion. Foucault extended this notion into *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1995), where panopticism serves as a means of diagramming the disbursement of disciplinary power, and noted how discourse and self-surveillance shape disciplinary action. In both works, the panoptic image resonates with Brooker's perspective, whereby the digital self-enclosures compel the individual visitor to internalise the gaze of digital spectation rather than to be surveilled directly. Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019) continues this lineage by illustrating how data extraction extends the economically pertinent power apparatus of control. With algorithmic prediction, for a punitive purpose of obsolescence, surveillance becomes commodified, wherein the human experience has the potential to be monetised.

Influences of critical perspectives bolster this argument. Stein (2016) posits social media as a digitally derived Panopticon, which complexifies self-surveillance through visibility and valency. Joy (2019) examines *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) as a discourse of technological shame and control; Putri and Nafisah (2020) propose a reading of *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) as a critique of algorithmic governance. Laniuk (2021) and Feng et al. (2021) articulate how surveillance capitalism mediates everyday life and where control, data economies, and self-tracking converge. Bringing the discourse from Orwell's totalitarianism to Brooker's "digital dystopia", surveillance transitions away from external oversight into participatory complicity, and ultimately retunes the modern constellations of freedom, privacy, and power.

Analysis

Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* (2011–) redefines dystopian scenarios for a digital world and demonstrates how surveillance/dominance has moved from state to dispersed algorithmic fields. Episodes *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) and *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) also illustrate that surveillance cultures today benefit by utilising fear, shame, and social outrage to accomplish domination. *Black Mirror* (2011–) and Brooker make use of Foucault's (1975/1995) panopticism and Zuboff's (2019) surveillance capitalism, presenting how visibility and datafication work to create a new techno-dictatorial regime.

"Shut Up and Dance" (2016) shows a teenage male, Kenny, who is blackmailed after hackers covertly use webcam malware to capture and record private acts. Surveillance does not arise from institutions but rather from personal technology. Kenny is caught in a condition of fear of exposure, describing what Foucault (1975/1995) termed "the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). In Bentham's (1791/2011) Panopticon, discipline is based on visibility; whereas Brooker digitalises this Panopticon through invisible surveillance that is too often internalised. An immediate outcome is the ability to be obedient without implicitly creating the conditions for coercion; compliance is derived through the consciousness of constant observation.

This diffusion of surveillance, Stein (2016) describes as the "digital Panopticon," as each person self-regulates their behaviour on connected-to-network devices (p. 5). Kenny's computer becomes his tower prison, even while his choice to self-disclose produces vulnerability. Zuboff (2019) cites that surveillance capitalism is when human experience becomes "raw material" to predict behaviour (p. 8); Brooker depicts this as data leveraged to continue to control an individual. According to Wibowo Putra (2019), this episode replaces tangible policing with psychological coercion, producing compliance when viewers feel shame (p. 43).

While the tension present in *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) around consent and coercion is ultimately a personal one, *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) expands this into a sociological issue. The plot of the episode revolves around detectives investigating slayings directly correlated to a trending hashtag, #DeathTo. Swarms of Autonomous Drone Insects (ADIs), created for their intended purpose to pollinate livestock, are hacked to murder everyone most mentioned on social media. The swarms of ADIs are supposedly efficient with facial recognition, GPS positioning, and an algorithm. As Veel (2020) describes it, "the architecture of interaction," whereby human agency and machine agency become coordinated (p. 154).

The episode reveals the responsibility of the collective. Every person who tweeted #DeathTo is unwittingly part of the killing cycle. This scenario relates to Foucault (1975/1995), *capillary power*[7], or power dispersed throughout the ensemble's social body. Power is mobilised by each participant, instead of being the oppressor. The outrage on social media becomes the disciplinary measure, producing a mechanical justice. According to Duarte and Battin (2021), *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) is a commentary on our world, "digital outrage…feeds on punitive affect, and moves through algorithmic architectures" (p. 208). Brooker here manifests what Duarte and Battin (2021) describe as a form of automated violence, illustrating how moral affect becomes an executable algorithm.

The ADI system, originally designed for ecologically balanced crops, has ultimately reverted to total overlapping. The ADI system's inception design is predicated on data collection, supporting Zuboff (2019), modern technological "turn experience into behavioral surplus[8]" (p. 94). Prior to being commandeered, the ADI system exemplified capitalist endeavour for surveillance and cognization. Brooker is neither a technophobe, but notes a peculiar exploitation incidentally occurring in the data economy's architecture.

Despite the fact that the ADI also contextualises Foucault (1975/1995), control operates essentially through normalisation. The citizen would willingly track for presiding surveillance, that is, appearing operated for the public good, safety and sustainability. The bees' original declared ecological purpose disguises their spying capacity. As Smith (2019) argues, Brooker reveals "joining environmental technology with the logic of intelligence agencies," how safety mechanisms' interactions can turn instances of oppression (p. 181).

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[7]   Foucault's metaphor for power diffused through everyday relations and institutions rather than descending from a single authority.

[8]   This surplus data is extracted, analysed, and monetised to predict and shape future human behaviour.

These episodes represent that surveillance works through affect, as though they are not monitoring data. In *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016), fear and shame use discipline on the individual, as in states, anger and self-righteousness rally the mob in *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016). Affect underpins Huxley's (1958/2006) term "technodictatorship," a regime of optional contrition. Participating in reproducing control, Zuboff (2019) dissects every click or post as productive labour for surveillance capitalism. Brooker generates such tensions, which affect the function of the engine of the loop and the mode of currency of digital governance.

Foucault and Zuboff coincide in terms of participatory dystopia. Power does not simply relate to a state-based sovereign *Big Brother* [9]authority, but to distributed networks of users that watch, surveil and control one another. As Joy (2019) states, *Black Mirror* (2011–) is unsettling to viewers precisely because it shows us our own complicity in these mechanisms (p. 139). Stein (2016) argues thoroughly that social media collapses the difference between the watch and the watched, and therefore works to establish self-surveillance as a mode of social life.

Brooker's series, in a normative frame, alerts us to the reality that surveillance has become an infrastructure of everyday life that now exists outside the confines of the state. While this is not Brooker's direct concern, his stories seem to suggest that even in contexts that are offshore or liberated spaces conceived as untouched by scrutiny from populations, surveillance remains, exposing communities of solidarity just as. In *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016), technology mediates collective vulnerability from private morals, blurring the line between secrecy and exposure. In *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016), algorithmic systems replace everyday rationalities of deliberation with logical codes, reminding us that code becomes forms of government. Each episode embodies Foucault's (1975/1995) "disciplinary society" and Zuboff's (2019) "instrumentarian power"[10], situating the human condition in forms of prediction and utility.

Thus, Brooker's dystopia shapes the control present in our digital time. His mastery or technodictatorship does not emerge with the emergence of the so-called rulers; however, users or subjects are disciplined in their participation. The tower of the Panopticon dissipates into invisible code as Laniuk (2021) suggests, disrupting freedom and "human subjectivity into predictable behaviour" (p. 69). The algorithmic mobsters of Kenny's obedience and the violence of the nation are synonymous with these means or mechanisms of subjection.

To some, the titles of *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) and *"Hated in the Nation"* (2016) unfold out of a trajectory of surveillance to affect, or experience, and from architecture to the atmosphere. They reveal control to be emotional, economic, and participatory, such that the act of watching and the act of being watched become indistinguishable.

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[9]   *Big Brother* refers to the omnipresent figure of authority in Orwell's *1984* (1949/1950), symbolising total state surveillance and the suppression of individual freedom.
[10]   Zuboff's (2019) phrase for the use of data systems to shape, predict, and monetise human behaviour, contrasting with totalitarian power.

Drawing from Foucault (1975/1995) and Zuboff (2019), Brooker begins to show how surveillance is no longer only a spectacle but truly the new grammar of digital existence. The cautionary sketch incites recognition of the moral obligation for the digital citizen to provide at least some modicum of caution in their search for justice or sympathetic connection, re-stating the very systems that enclose them.

Discussion

Charlie Brooker's Black Mirror (2011–) suggests how surveillance has transitioned from externalised control to internalised participation within digital systems. The episodes *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016) and "Hated in the Nation" (2016) together provide a thorough commentary on a surveillance culture aligned with Michel Foucault's (1975/1995) outline of disciplinary power and Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) outline of surveillance capitalism. Much like the modality of twenty-first surveillance, both depend less on coercion and more on affect, data, and complicity.

In *"Shut Up and Dance"* (2016), surveillance only takes form in the installation of shame and psychological subjugation. The hacker levies Kenny as a point of total visibility in light of considering the depth and totality of humiliation as self-punishment, echoing Foucault's articulation that normalisation is based on individuals' ability to accept self-surveillance. The technology appropriates our privacy, as a digital Panopticon where users are constrained by their own behaviour, under the imaginary gaze of others (Stein, 2016). This episode speaks to the limitations of moral sovereignty in a datafied world where breaches of privacy do not require physical violation. Zuboff's (2019) "behavioral modification"[11] model is relevant here, as the algorithmic control over Kenny's behaviour mirrors corporate manipulation of potential and generating a profit from clients by predicting the pattern of behaviour.

"Hated in the Nation" (2016) extends the diorama of surveillance from isolated individuals to collective action. The collective violence shows how social outrage, mediated by technology, became a form of automated disciplinary development. Each user in #DeathTo punishes through technology in a qualitatively similar way, with or without seeing their copyright. This reaffirms Foucault's notion of capillary power, instrumentation, governance through the individual user's actions, and, correspondingly, Zuboff states that user engagement sustains surveillance capitalism. The Autonomous Drone Insects (ADIs) identify complex entanglements, collateral acts, and weaponised data, practices that evolve from efficiency into implements of control's typically benign desires (Smith, 2019).

Together, these episodes emphasise how the ethics of surveillance manifests through emotional and systems of infrastructure. Fear, shame, and outrage act dynamically as a means of control, while user engagement action sustains the system. Brooker's dystopia is not futurist but rather a diagnosis, endorsing present cultural conditions in that surveillance is now normalised, as a convenience and justice.

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[11]   In Zuboff (2019), the process by which platforms adjust stimuli and feedback loops to influence users' future actions.

As Laniuk (2021) observes, systems are limited in terms of freedom, translating forms of behaviour into predicted data. Brooker's warning is visceral; in this digital reality, control does not require constraining, but participants engage the systems and become both the tool and object of the surveillance system.

Conclusion

Charlie Brooker's Black Mirror (2011–) provides a sharp cultural critique of digital surveillance and power. The episodes "*Shut Up and Dance*" (2016) and "*Hated in the Nation*" (2016) examine how surveillance is woven into our daily lives through the technologies we use, going from an authoritarian state and centralised control to a decentralised, participatory state. Using Michel Foucault's (1975/1995) panopticism and Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) analysis of surveillance capitalism, these critiques delineate how control today operates by means of psychological internalisation, emotional manipulation, and algorithmic automation.

"*Shut Up and Dance*" (2016) explores how fear and shame become disciplinary technologies when our private lives are at risk of becoming public. Kenny's compliant submission demonstrates that surveillance is not coercive, but takes control of consciousness. Here, the Panopticon has been shifted to the digital realm, using malware and data breaches to ensure exact compliance without physical coercion (Stein, 2016). This episode demonstrates the obliteration of privacy within a hyper visible society, where a ranged threat to personal freedom is made co-terminus with being able to exchange data for fiat currency.

In "*Hated in the Nation*" (2016), the critique is no longer about the individual surveilled, but the collective complicity. Automated killing of individuals using an Autonomous Drone Insects algorithmically mediates social media outrage to produce automated violence. Collective surveillance fits Foucault's (1975/1995) nomenclature of capillary power, where authority circulates through the ordinary, and Zuboff's (2019) observation that participation is a commodity of behavioural surplus. By making ordinary citizens the agents of punishment, the episode invites the audience to contemplate their complicity within the digital systems, which escape accountability and morality.

These episodes tell us how dystopian power structures have transformed. Unlike Orwell's Big Brother, Brooker's dystopias illustrate technodictatorship as distributed, normative, and an outcome of user practices. The Panopticon is superseded by invisible code and algorithmic infrastructures, while surveillance capitalism generates surplus value from every behavioural action and sentiment. As Laniuk (2021) reminds us, physical coercion does not extinguish freedom; freedom evaporates through turning the human experience into normative, predictable data.

Brooker's warning is not speculative, but diagnostic. He shows us that surveillance is not an apparatus of exception, but a grammar of digital existence. Both "*Shut Up and Dance*" (2016) and "*Hated in the Nation*" (2016) indicate that in discovering connection, justice, or convenience, societies are reproducing systems of oppression in order to undermine individual autonomy.

The real test of sustaining individual action, collective action, is in confronting the digital collusion, behaviours, and ethical duty in a context where observing and being observed are indivisible.

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