

STREAMING SERVICES AND CONTEMPORARY BRITISH TV

*An analysis of Black
Mirror's journey from
domestic sci-fi to global
pop culture phenomenon*

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MASTER THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The present Master Thesis used British science fiction series Black Mirror as a case study to investigate the impacts of streaming services in the television business. As it is a programme conceived and produced in the UK, being initially broadcasted by Channl 4 and after bought and produced by international media giant Netflix, Black Mirror is the perfect example to study the differences in terms of production, format and content between traditional broadcasting and streaming. The thesis will draw a comparison of Black Mirror before and after being bought off by Netflix, reviewing what changed and what remained the same in every aspect of the programme, to try and understand what is the impact of new technologies in television's market and viewership. The paper will study the workings of both British television market and streaming services to paint a more complete picture of the problematisation in question, to find out whether or not the arrival of streaming services mean a more diverse and international future for television, in terms of content, format and producing.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BARB	Broadcasters Audience Research Board
IBA	Independent Broadcasting Authority
ITV	Independent Television
MP	Member of (British) Parliament
MVDPs	Multichannel Video Programming Distributor
OC	Original Content
OFCOM	Office of Communications
OTT	Over the Top (non-linear television)
P2P	Peer to Peer
PBS	Public Broadcasting Service
SVOD	Streaming video on Demand
VOD	Video on Demand

INTRODUCTION

An anthology series with no “recognisable stars”, with disturbing storylines about a dystopian future in which technology innovation enables humanity’s darkest side, a pilot¹ in which the British prime minister is forced to have intercourse with a pig on national television as a ransom for the kidnapping of the royal princess. It certainly doesn’t sound like the description of a worldwide pop culture phenomenon television show, which launched actors into stardom and attracts the interest of top names in the show business. Yet, this is the case.

“A bizarre and unsettling British sci-fi series that no traditional American Network wanted to touch, ‘*Black Mirror*’ has vaulted into the cultural zeitgeist stateside after Netflix bought exclusive US streaming rights for the show” (Spangler 2014). This quote by television critic Todd Spangler on his review of the series for *Variety* sums a lot of *Black Mirror*’s trajectory.

Originally released in the UK by Channel 4, it rejoiced popularity for looking at technological innovations that feel uncomfortably close to reality and making them the centre of terribly pessimistic stories. *Black Mirror* seemed like a programme that was made to be confined to the British market, deemed “too British” for elsewhere - especially the US.

However, it was launched right around the time a crucial change was being made in the international television market: The arrival of streaming video on demand services. It was initially just distributed by Netflix to the US, but then the American company brought all the rights to the series and commissioned two new series. With Netflix’s blessing, *Black Mirror* took over the world, seemingly showing there is more space for local and progressive content in this new platform for television shows.

Technological innovation has always walked hand in hand with changes in the way televisual content was created and produced. The arrival of sound cinema forced the movie industry to rearrange completely. The possibility of pre-recorded broadcasting opened a new world of possibilities for television.

Now, we are on a cusp of another important change. The arrival of Internet meant we have switched the way we interact with people, we see the world around us and ourselves, and how we consume media. More and more the use of smart phones

¹ “Pilot” refers to a first episode of a television show.

and other devices is spreading (Statista 2018). More and more it's becoming common to turn to the computer to watch movies or television.

But this change is propelling another one: **We are not only watching differently. We are also producing differently.** Services like Netflix, Prime Video and Hulu are investing big money into producing original content. Far from the restrictions of traditional broadcasting, this new content is more prone to experimenting, and also coming from outside of Hollywood.

In this sense, *Black Mirror* is the perfect case study to examine what do these changes actually mean. It is a domestic product, known for its "Britishness", which thrived inside the linear traditional television system. But it really became a global phenomenon when it was taken out of the traditional broadcasting environment and brought into OTT programming.

Being a niche science-fiction show, it became very mainstream inside Netflix. For this reason, **by looking at *Black Mirror's* journey, we can see how streaming services are reshaping the way we consume and produce media.** What changes in terms of content, budget, production? What stays the same? How does SVOD differs from linear programming when it comes to international distribution and viewership?

All of this in an attempt to answer the question: **To what extent SVOD means more chances for niche content which focuses on diverse themes and is produced outside of Hollywood?**

Within this thesis I will analyse *Black Mirror's* journey into the uncharted territory of SVOD in detail and investigate the factors that contributed for its worldwide success. Moreover, I explore what was Netflix's contribution to the enthusiastic response to the series.

Approach

The main focus of this study is to investigate the behind the scenes changes in production conditions before and after SVOD, this is why the framework will be taking mainly a business point of view. With this in mind, the path will be to investigate the production environment, such as the broadcasting background, budget, and audience reception. However, this thesis cannot be solely focus on the

business part of the media industry, as the changes brought forth by SVOD in *Black Mirror* were broader than that.

As we will see, the production conditions have great influence on televisual content, so in order to have a more complete understanding about our object of study, we will also use a film studies framework to analyse *Black Mirror*, drawing a comparison between seasons one and two - produced and broadcasted by Channel 4 - and three and four, when *Black Mirror* became a Netflix Original.

Methodology and Sources

The subject of this research is something very inherent to our current times and we are trying to study the development of events while they happen. This requires the methodology to create a new framework to approach a new field of study. This thesis will use the model of comparison to understand broader changes. By looking at the way *Black Mirror* in every aspect before and after leaving Channel 4 and going to Netflix, we can try to understand what are the differences between linear and OTT programming, and what does that mean for the future of the televisual market.

Black Mirror's ascend to global success is somehow viewed with scepticism by a number of reasons: It's an anthology, a format in which television drama is not so commonly produced. It doesn't have a star-studded cast, meaning most actors are known by the public but there are no clear celebrities. It has a very dark approach on storytelling. But most of all, when talked about by critics inside and outside the UK, the word "Britishness" seems to appear. Sometimes connected to the characteristics we have listed here, sometimes connected to other qualities, sometimes standing on its own. **So fundamentally, in order to understand what makes *Black Mirror* special, we need to try and define what Britishness means in the television context.**

However, we cannot focus exclusively on the series, as there are other contributing factors that need to be taken into consideration, especially in regards to television production in the UK, British science fiction and the workings of SVOD. This is why these aspects will be analysed and contribute to the comparison in question.

Chapter one will be dedicated to studying the history of television production and content inside the UK; and trying to pinpoint what has been researched about British

drama and what can be applied to *Black Mirror*, creating a framework to define Britishness through which we can analyse the series before and after Netflix. The idea is to pay special attention to British sci-fi, a genre that has a long and successful history with the British public. In order to do so, we will also analyse other series through UK's television history.

But knowing no market is isolated in itself, chapter one will also be dedicated to understand Britain's relationship with the international television business, especially with the American media giants. It is crucial to understand how this influence worked to better analyse the globalisation happening today.

Afterwards we will apply this framework to a detailed analysis of *Black Mirror's* first two seasons, investigating how much of the history behind the series has an influence on it, and what is the "Britishness" that stands out in it. This analysis will not be solely focused on the content, but also on the behind the scenes information on negotiations, budget and production, as well as audience figures and reviews. The goal of using mixed sources to have a personalised analysis of the content, combined with information given by the ones involved in the production and see how the public and critics have reacted to it, to have a broad understanding of the series content and impact. Charlie Brooker's voice, as the series creator and producer, is a strong presence in the media, who made him "the face of *Black Mirror*". And while it is important to look at the information given by him with a grain of salt - after all, an audiovisual product when made stands on its own - it's valid to see what were the tensions and intentions behind *Black Mirror* to better understand it.

In this sense, the content analysis will take the whole series in consideration; casting, production, storytelling, photography, order of episodes, and all the aspects presented by the episodes itself that are relevant to the research in question. It's important to notice there is no data on budget disclosed by Channel 4, but there is other information regarding this matter that can help the analysis. Looking at audience figures is essential to the television mind-set, as will be discussed, so it is vital to look at those numbers while analysing *Black Mirror* as a linear programme.

Moving on, chapter three will be focusing on how streaming services work, how they differ from linear television and what are the main controversies surrounding this business model. To make this analysis we will look at the market environment in which streaming started to first thrive, and were the preconditions that allowed for this change in the mind-set. While all streaming services will be studied, the main

focus will be Netflix, as it is not only the home of *Black Mirror* after season two, but also, the trailblazer in many initiatives that made SVOD as popular as it is today. This is a very extensive subject and it involves countless variables, so the idea of the chapter is give a broad panorama of the workings of streaming and the main points concerning it.

To accomplish this analysis we will look at research done on how the television prospect has been changing in the past years with the arrival of streaming, but also at other series made inside this new context for example effect.

Going on chapter four again we return to *Black Mirror*, resuming our content analysis. However, to do this properly we also need to take a deep look at the negotiations behind the series going to Netflix, as the information on these negotiations is vital to understand the changes in content. To do so, we will use a series of journalistic reports on the negotiations that lasted six months, statements from all parties involved and budget numbers. Afterwards, we will go into the third and fourth season, applying the framework laid in chapters one and three, to find out what remained the same and what switched in comparison to the first two seasons.

Finally, the thesis will look at how *Black Mirror* has become relevant worldwide after going to Netflix, looking at multiple reviews, statistics about mentions of the series on the Internet, and looking and how the changes applied transformed *Black Mirror* from a very endogenous product into a globalised pop culture phenomenon. **It's important to note that Netflix does not disclose audience figures**, a decision which will also be discussed, so we will focus on alternative methods to try and measure the reach of Black Mirror worldwide, such as mentions of the series on Twitter.

Relevance of the Theme

The creative industry is one of the most profitable and important ones in the UK, creating thousands of jobs and making key contributions to British economy (Green 36). It is an established industry inside the UK, but as other markets, is now facing a turning point. **The landscape of television market is changing, thanks to the appearance of a new medium. More opportunities, but also more challenges** (Helm 1). In this sense, it is very important to look over how these changes are happening, why, and what they can mean for the future.

But furthermore, media is more than just an industry. It functions like a mirror, which can tell a lot about our society, not only in its content, but also in the way that it is produced and viewed. **Looking at *Black Mirror* and a new era of globalised viewership, we can have a glimpse at what having an interconnected world means for our society, our identity, and the way we communicate with each other.**

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING BRITISHNESS IN TELEVISION

When it comes to film and television, “Britishness” is a broad and vague term that seems to be used to define an embodiment of characteristics and style which are intrinsic to content produced in the UK. The term itself is controversial, as the United Kingdom is formed of four countries with their own idiosyncrasies, especially when it comes to creating and broadcasting audiovisual content. However, as previously seen, this vague concept seems to be precisely what makes *Black Mirror* special.

In order to understand why the Britishness in *Black Mirror* might be what it makes it stand out, we need to take a step back and try to define what Britishness is in the first place. For the purposes of this thesis, even though the term incorporates a broader sentiment of identity, we will be focusing solely on what concerns Britishness inside the context of film and television.

When delving into the research of what the term actually means, not uncommonly one is met with broad ideas like “sarcasm”, “pessimism”, and “dryness” (Steemers 9). However, as usual with adjectives, all of this can seem loose and vague. **It turns out defining Britishness is an arduous and complex task and there is no final answer to what exactly the term means.** However, it is possible to analyse and understand, within the history of television and film inside the UK what are the characteristics most commonly linked to “Britishness”, how they came about and how they manifest.

In this chapter we will look at the characteristics found generally in British media and, especially, in British television science fiction that sets it apart from the content produced elsewhere in the world – with more emphasis on the USA. And in order to do so, we must first analyse the production conditions in which such content came to life.

When it comes to media, the environment in which content is bred has immense influence in the final product. This is also the case in the United Kingdom. In fact, one could argue this is especially the case, since the media and broadcasting landscape within the island has a very specific history, which can explain a lot about the content being produced the habits of spectators, as will be demonstrated in the following pages.

Production Conditions In the United Kingdom: PBS' Heirloom

Television broadcasting in the United Kingdom was a PBS monopoly for many years. This had a lot of impact in the culture of British television content and shaped the way business is made to this day. From 1932 to 1955, television was an exclusive monopoly of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), owned by the state and funded by a public and mandatory licence fee (Le Jeune 15). To this day, BBC has the largest viewing share of broadcasting in the UK (Statista 2017), and the license fee has been renewed until 2021/2022 (BBC News 2016).

BBC television culture has been pivotal in dictating what British audiences would see. It has been founded and operated under three main pillars: it's non-commercial principle, the Reithian influence and its role in forming British identity. So let's carefully examine these three principles.

Firstly, the idea that BBC is primarily non-commercial. Television regulation has many different faces around the world. There are varied ways of conducting business, most of them combining state regulation and commercial freedom. Perhaps, two of the most poignant examples of those are the UK and the USA. The latter being an example of a landscape mostly dominated by the free market logic (Nevett 62). As we will delve deeper into this difference later, it is important to realise how an exclusively PBS system can impact the content it offers:

Advertisers are primarily concerned that many people see the commercials, not with how much they enjoy the programme. So the aim of advertising funded channels is to maximise audiences and minimise programming costs. Subscription channels on the other hand have to supply a schedule of programmes which are sufficiently valued to justify renewing the subscriptions, just as the BBC has to deliver a schedule which justifies the license fee. (Helm 102)

With the creation of ITV in 1955, a commercial broadcasting channel, BBC's television monopoly of two decades came to an end. However, it still had a grip on audiences, and its exemption from advertising allowed for more risky, sometimes elitist programming. During the 1960s, writers enjoyed unprecedented freedom by being able to present single plays, which made room for a lot more experimentation (Cooke 59).

Secondly, it is a key point that all of BBC's programming, in Radio and Television, was under heavy influence of one of its main idealiser, John Reith, who established

a guideline to what the content provided should strive for: Inform, educate and entertain (Higgins 2014). This set of principles catered for one of the main characteristics of BBC's tone in programming; sober and aiming for nobility. Even if afterwards these principles were considered paternalistic (Le Jeune 17), still it has had a great deal in shaping what British television looks like to this day, even outside of the BBC. Internationally, British television has a reputation of being "high quality", and "non-commercial" (Steemers 3). In fact the influence of BBC being offered as public service helped carve a mentality that "'good' television is distant from popular and commercial" (Turnbull 66).

Lastly, the BBC also had a role in creating the principles of a British national identity:

The BBC fulfilled its mandate of Service in the national identity by synthesising a national culture from components that had begun to converge since the late nineteenth century. There was a national educational system to inculcate, a part of the curriculum, the achievements of British history and the glories of English literature. The monarchy had been thoroughly revamped and refurbished with, a whole new deck of ritual functions and ceremonies. The land itself was reclaimed as the national heritage by the National Trust. Nationalism found musical expression in the Savoy Operas and more profoundly in the music of Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Many sports, of quite recent origin, began to organise national competitions on an annual basis. But the full convergence of these developments as elements of a unified national life available to all, awaited the establishment of broadcasting and the new kind of public, commensurate with the whole the society, which it brought into being (Scannell and Cardiff, 277).

On early times, BBC's influence on the public was so great it helped creating a cohesive identity by setting up a calendar of programming that provided Britons with sensation of unity (Scannell and Cardiff, 277).

These three principles set by the BBC are important to comprehend because they had a lot of impact on how content was created throughout British television history. Now that we've briefly understood the production breed ground, we will go more into detail on the history of British drama and, more specifically, science fiction.

British Science Fiction: Brains, Dystopia and Pessimism

Black Mirror might even be a breath of fresh air in the international television market scenario, especially regarding science fiction, but in the United Kingdom, it follows a long established tradition of programmes with a pessimistic, dystopian vision of the future.

Despite following in the footsteps of American science fiction, the British version of this genre has always been considered “minor”; there was less money available and, consequently, the content itself was less visually spectacular. However, it has attracted considerable audience attention around the world (Cook and Wright 1).

With the rise of popular science-fiction shows like *Star Trek*, creators in the United Kingdom also wanted to explore the possibilities of telling stories about the future. In the Cold War period of 1950/60s, the genre saw an explosion of popularity as at the time themes like the exploration of outer space and technological innovation were very present in the collective imaginary. In the United States, science-fiction was a representation of a parallel space race happening in reality and a way of reaffirming American values and identity. The storylines had a heroic, upbeat and at often times nationalist tone (Cook and Wright 4).

In the British scenario, there were two main differences that granted for adaptations in the genre that ended up breeding a new style of science-fiction altogether. First, the production condition realities in the UK; budgets were a lot more modest, and the scenario wasn't so commercialised and industrialised in the US (Cook and Wright 4).

Secondly, while the north-Americans were savouring a victory in the World War II and a boom of their lifestyle, in the UK the mood of the general public was very distinct. The country was experiencing the decay of the British Empire, which granted for a darker, more pessimistic take on the world (Cook and Wright 4).

These two preconditions had deep influence on British's science fiction in regard to style and content. As the budget was limited, instead of offering spectators explosive visuals, British sci-fi turned to a story-telling that was a lot more based on ideas:

Its plots often functioned as metaphors or allegories, reflecting wider social and cultural preoccupations at the time of their production, particularly political tensions, or anxieties about the effects of new technologies (Cook and Wright 3)

The general mood of British public at the time contributed for the plots to be a lot more pessimistic and dry. Science-fiction held up a mirror to British society, functioning as a coping scapegoat. It allowed Britons to explore, in fiction, the space which was in reality American territory. Perhaps the most powerful example of this is

the fact that Doctor Who had visited the moon two years before Neil Armstrong set foot on it (Cull 57). The idea was that while the US had power (and money), Britain had “character and wisdom” (Cull 55).

There was then the inception of British sci-fi: the notion that it could use “brains over muscle” and the possibility of using it to comment on real issues the public was experiencing. Historically, British television drama was imported from British theatre, which has always been considered not only high quality, but also emblematic as a symbol of national identity:

Television drama turned to the theatre for inspiration as a consequence of the perceived cultural value of Britain’s literary and theatrical heritage, combined with the Reithian ideology of public service broadcasting within the BBC (Cooke 9).

As a consequence, acting and *Mise en Scène*² were big points of focus in British drama. Also, because of the nature of theatre, scenes were long and sparsely cut, as the plays were transmitted live and it was hard applying camera work to a pre-existing theatre dynamic (Cooke 11). Although both these aspects were diluted later, to this day they still influence British television drama to a certain extent.

It was on the 1950s that there was a shift in the drama produced by the BBC. New writers were hired and a creative department was created, originating in content that would mark the beginnings of a different era in television broadcast in the UK (Cooke 17). Perhaps one of the most iconic of these programmes was *The Quatermass Experience*. Not only it marked the start of a different way of making drama in TV, it was also the first serialised science-fiction programme. It was, basically, “a consistent basis for what later would become British sci-fi, playing the fears and paranoia of the zeitgeist with each episode focusing on an alien invasion by Professor Quatermass” (Cook and Wright 6).

Quatermass was a milestone in many ways. The fact that it was aired around a time in which television purchasing was dramatically increasing propelled its success and the series became a national point of contender (Chapman 27b). Legend has it that pubs would be emptied at the time the series was broadcasted, generating a new phenomenon of a national television hit, in which the whole of the UK would unite around a plot (Chapman 21b).

² *Mise-èn-scène* is a term used by Film Studies to define everything that happens before the camera including the positioning of actors, props, art direction, lightening, and camera arrangement (Bordwell and Thompson 178)

Post Quatermass Era: Experimental Drama, Darkness and Political Undertones

The monopoly enjoyed by the BBC, combined with a moment of economic prosperity and allowed for much experimentation. During the 1960s, writers had great freedom with single plays, a format which privileges author autonomy (Cooke 191). The content created pushed forward to try and break free from Reithian principles and that time was known as “the era in which the BBC was to gain a reputation for controversial, anti-establishment socially conscious drama” (Cooke 58).

From then on, a tradition was established. British sci-fi drama presented itself as a dystopian kind of fiction, focusing on a dark version of the future to pose social commentary for current issues. Serialised drama was privileged over single plays (Cooke 59) and other programmes came to reinforce this tradition.

Doomwatch, a series broadcasted during the 1970s, was one great example of those. The series was branded as progressive and controversial, focusing on heavy environmental issues (Cooke 124). Another good example of how British sci-fi was shaped up through the years is *Survivors*: The premise for the series was a future in which 95% of the population had been wiped out by a biological apocalypse and the opening sequence reinforced this in a rather chilling manner (Cooke 125). *Blake’s 7*, another programme by the same creator broadcasted in the 1970s also touched upon disturbing subjects, such as “the nature and extent of the total surveillance society (with great influence from George Orwell), the conflict between private and public loyalties, and, in particular, a deep pessimism about both the scope for individual resistance within totalitarian regimes and the possibility of social progress” (McCormack 175).

The Case of *Doctor Who* – Exporting British Content and Flirting with the American Market

At the same time, there was the rise of one of the biggest successes of British television of all time: *Doctor Who*. The series was created by Sydney Newman, a Canadian writer with experience in the American market who introduced a little of the commercial way of thinking and business practices in the BBC (Cook and Wright 8). The premise of the series was to focus on the character of The Doctor, an alien

who would save the day by using his intelligence and diplomatic skills. The budget restrictions bred a very interesting style and although the Doctor was alien, he “embodied British values and mannerisms” (Cull 55) and was a “British character living American B-movie adventures” (Cull 55). Although its production was more aligned with the business way of thinking generally connected to American television, the series also embodied a lot of British style in content:

[...]the drama’s genesis was profoundly influenced by American. At the same time, however, it also reflected a very British liberal political and social agenda synonymous with the BBC’s public service ethos of the period. The Doctor was a humanist scientist who occupied the neutral ground of “tolerance” and “balance” from which the misdoings of the official and the powerful could be challenged and corrected (Cook and Wright 8).

By 1977, Doctor Who was being broadcast in all over the anglophile market, from Australian to Zambia and also the United States (Cull 61). This marked the beginning of an era of considerable success for British programmes in the American television, gathering a somewhat “cult” status that had its own niche following. The difference they carried in style, format and content from traditional American television was exactly what made them stand out and programmes like *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, *The Benny Hill Show* and *Are you Being Served?* enjoyed popularity (Cull 62).

Doctor Who gathered so much success in the American market in 1996 there was an explicit attempt to bank in the character’s popularity in the US. There was a reboot film that was made especially for the American market and it bet on borrowing tropes considered typical from US content, such as “humanising” The Doctor to the point in which he had a love affair with a (American) woman. In the original series, details of The Doctor’s personal life were never explored (Cull 66).

This interesting point illustrates just how much the American market has always been paradoxically vital to British television content. In fact, “some of the most successful British television science fiction need, often, for it to be internationally exportable, particularly to the lucrative United States market (Cook and Wright 8).

This relationship of co dependence and recoil has always been a reality to British television market and it’s also something that has had influence in its style and content (Steemers 3). We will touch upon this subject deeper further in this chapter, while discussing the market correlations and American remakes of British programmes. For now, let’s go back to the internal market to understand a profound

change that happened during the 80s, which culminated in the creation of Channel 4 (something that, decades later, would enable the creation and broadcasting of *Black Mirror*).

The years of experimentation paid off, and television drama was officially “recognized for its artistic value in the UK” during the 1970s (Cooke 126). However, the political changes that happened inside the country at the end of the decade had direct impact in the way television business was conducted, and as a consequence, what kind of content which was broadcasted (Cooke 129).

1980s and 1990s: Channel 4, Free Market and Television as a Business

With Thatcherism and the rise of neoliberalism, BBC started facing criticism for its public service mentality. The logic of the time was to privilege the free market and the model in which the BBC worked, much more focused on content and artistic value than profit, was viewed as outdated and undesirable. There was pressure on the BBC in the forms of budget cuts and the more cutting-edge content was forced to take the backseat in favour of a more market-oriented logic inspired by the television environment found in the United States (Cooke 128), which was, as we have seen, much more commercial and advertising dependant.

These movements naturally found friction, and “during the 1980s there was considerable resistance to the Conservative attempts to ‘tame’ the BBC [...] some pressure may also have been take off the BBC with the November 1982 launch of Channel 4, which immediately began to draw the ire of the conservative press with its inhibited and often radical programming” (Cooke 129).

The genesis of Channel 4 resides precisely on the need for having a medium to “say new things” in an innovative fashion (Dell 1). It was created in 1980 as a mixed funding broadcasting channel, meaning it was self-founded and reliant on advertising revenue but publicly owned. In the beginning, the IBA was the in charge, and the channel was ran by an MP, Edmund Dell, a progressive member of the Labour Party but a politician nonetheless. This gives an idea of how much progressive experimentation in British TV was granted by government sheltering.

Either way, “many of its principal advocates saw Channel 4 as the Left’s opportunity to balance the right-wring slant of the rest of the media” (Dell 9). With this mind-set, Channel 4 began running “controversial” programming and promoting progressive arts (Ranelagh 58), whilst pioneering in advocating for diversity in its

casting and programming, devoting hours of broadcast to regional content (Littler 81). It also included experimental films on its broadcasting hours, taking the tradition of radical programming that stemmed from the 1960s/1970s BBC and bringing it to the next level (Ellis 150).

While the television landscape in Britain has evolved and changed since Channel 4's inception, we will see ahead it carries on the tradition of experimenting and pushing new grounds and that was definitive for the creation of *Black Mirror*. However, as the UK entered the decade of the 1990s, there were major changes in television scenario, thanks to the technological innovation known as cable.

By the end of the 1980s, the world was coming into to the beginnings of an era of globalisation. Within the UK, the government was still pushing for neoliberal practices. As a result of this climate, in 1990 the British parliament approved the Broadcasting Act³, a legislation that consolidated a neoliberal way of thinking into the television making into the UK (Cooke 161). In practise, the IBA was dissolved and ITV and Channel 4 began to be regulated by Ofcom, which presented a much less restrictive approach. This marked the start of a new era within British television, in which it began to be thought of as a "business like any other" (Bignell and Lacey 33). Concomitantly, the world saw a surge of a new technology: cable television. The idea that consumers could pay for advertisement-free channels was entirely revolutionary in the US. Although the British spectators were familiar with the notion of paying a fee to receive commercial-free content, having so many channels available was entirely new (Cooke 161).

The existence of multiple channels, along with the government promoting deregulation led to a shift inside the British television market. With so much competition stemming from cable television, channels were fighting for shares of the audience, which caused a change in programming - from producer-led to consumer-led. As a consequence of this, there was criticism of the system, along with accusations that the content was being "dumbed down" in the desperate seek for viewers (Cooke 162).

During the 1990s and the beginnings of the 2000s, television in Britain was flooded with American content. This meant domestic programming scraped to emulate the new successful American shows, becoming more quick-paced, presenting flexi-

³ The Broadcasting Act was approved by the British Government in 1990 and set a new framework for the television market.

narratives and shorter scenes, all characteristics of north-American TV (Cooke 171). Behind the scenes, the climate was of conservatism - there was no room for risk taking, format or content wise. The broadcast business had become aggressively market-focused (Cooke 195).

British and American Television Relations – Business Insights, Adaptations and Remakes

With the new opening of the market, there was place for strengthening commercial relations with the American market, something that has been vital to British TV since its inception (Steemers 2). The influence of Hollywood in film and television business around the world has always been stark and present, and it's no different in UK, even if its market has been strongly linked to the government and national identity.

As Jefferson Hunter puts, “there has been resistance to Hollywood and frank copying of Hollywood, assertions of independence, postmodern denials that independence is meaningful, adaptations, exercises in quotation or pastiche” (Hunter 108). With the market opening, these relations began to deepen even further. The reasons for that are well known: Even if the US broadcasting market is primarily domestic, importing only 2% of the content it shows, in 2011, out of those 2%, one third is British programming (Steemers 2). And while most of Britain's broadcasting is of British and European content (70 to 85%), cable television relies heavily on American programming, and also looks at it for scheduling inspiration. Furthermore, the UK has always been the biggest television producer in Europe (Steemers 8) and acts a gateway for markets in anglophile world and the EU (Steemers 2).

As a counterpart, the US is the biggest market for UK exports to this day. While it may not be expressive when comparing to domestic programming, it is responsible for a lot of the British exporting revenue (Steemers 2). UK exports content but also sees a lot of profit from reality show formats selling, such as *X Factor*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *MasterChef*, among other major television hits (Steemers 1).

Steemers explains; “increasingly Britain's export successes are dominated by entertainment and drama formats, which can be indigenised and adapted by the receiving culture and in their more 'universal' appeal are noticeably different from

identifiably British production in the past” (Steemers 1). This apparent pasteurisation of the content has paid off:

[...]co-production income from North America is small (35 million pounds/year), but important, with the US accounting for over 85% of all UK co-production revenue in 2008. Income from North American format production is still modest, but North American accounts for over 80% of the UK’s revenue from format sales and adaptation (Steemers 7).

However, television executives know selling formats might be easy money, but really profitable exportation comes from controlling the product from the creation, production, all the way to distribution (Steemers 8). For this reason, in the pre-streaming era, the UK broadcasting industry saw a surge in US versions and adaptations of British drama. Investigating some of the most iconic cases is pivotal to our analysis, as the differences between UK and US versions are valuable clues to what characteristics constitute British television content.

To understand how these processes came about, we need to understand two different concepts: Americanisation and Hollywoodisation. One is more concerned with content and the other with format, but they can also interlay.

British content, as we’ve touched upon prior, “tends to elongate its narratives, typically deploying three lines of action [...]. As a general result, the US versions tend towards rapid narrative action and stemming of storylines[...]” (Moran 41). There is also a more pessimistic and dry undertone, and also British television content tends to be less moralised. Nudity and profanity suffer a lot more censorship in the US (Moran 47), something that derives from the strong religiousness in the society.⁴

All of these concerns how British content is typically differentiated from US programming. Americanisation is the process of adapting the content so it is more palatable for the American public, more used to optimistic and rapid narratives, with less political undertone and more conservative values (Moran 55).

On the other hand we have the British way of producing, which derives from the US cutthroat mentality in many ways because of how historically television was built in the UK. Even with the policies implemented to stimulate competition in the 80s and 90s, the UK has come from a long time of PBS exclusivity. This means budget

⁴ Up until the 1950s Hollywood operated under a rigid religious guideline named the Hays Code, which forbid, for example, couples to be shown sleeping in the same bed (Black 39).

restrictions and also a set way of thinking. After all, as we have mentioned before, the difference between commercial television and PBS is that;

Advertisers are primarily concerned that many people see the commercials, not with how much they enjoy the programme. So the aim of advertising funding channels is to maximise audiences and minimise programming costs (Robinson, Raven and Ding Low 102).

So American television being so advertisement-oriented can count with big budgets while aiming to generalise the programming as a way of hitting a bigger audience. The process of remaking UK shows in the US with a much bigger budget and generalising themes is known as “Hollywoodisation” (Moran 56-57).

Now that we have defined these two concepts, let’s see how they applied to two real cases of British television shows that were remade in the US: *Queer As Folk* and *The Office*.

Remakes in Practise: Queer as Folk and The Office

Queer as Folk (QAF) was broadcasted by Channel 4 in 1999 and, true to form to the Channel’s traditions, innovated and polarised the audiences showing the life of three gay men in the community scene of Manchester. The series, spread in eight episodes, touched upon subjects like sex, HIV, drug abuse and showcased a love story between an adult man and an underage boy. It was one of the first programmes to explicitly reference the gay lifestyle on television, attracting both appraisal and criticism (Barlam 118). A year and a half later American television channel Showtime introduced their own version of *Queer as Folk* to the US public.

The American version not only had a higher budget but also was intended for a different format, with more episodes being added to compose the traditional American timeslot season (Barlam 131). In terms of content, there was also a big difference; American QAF had more moralising storylines and followed characters through the whole arch, while British ones tended to leave storylines more open, so the audience could draw their own conclusions (Barlam 132). It subdued many of the narratives; while in the British version the protagonist’s love interest was only 15, in the US he was 17, and about to graduate high school (Barlam 133).

These tweaks proved to be very successful, as *Queer as Folk* was considered a pioneering series by both public and critics and extended itself for five seasons,

serving as a mark for gay programming (Di Mattia 2014) and trailblazing the way for lesbian-focused hit show *The L Word*.

The Office has a similar story. It premiered on BBC Two in 2001, as a sitcom presented in a mockumentary form that centred around the boredom and anxieties of the day-to-day in a generic office. It was broadcasted as a six episode special and drew immediate success thanks to its dryness and deep nihilism when presenting everyday life situations. Later, in 2005, US's NBC broadcasted the first episode of the American version of *The Office*.

Again, the format was changed to accommodate a full season and the series had younger, more attractive cast. Also, unlike the British version, the characters of NBC strived for their own personal goals, reflecting on the screen the American sentiment of individualism and self-made success (Boseovski and Marcovitch 145). The show was a lot less harsh in its criticism of life under crushing capitalism and as a result of that the series is way less depressive and cynical (Boseovski and Marcovitch 145).

The Office was one of the most successful television shows in the US of the 2000s, ranking in nine seasons. Critics point out the one of the reasons for such success was the combined Americanisation and Hollywoodisation of the series, especially when it came to toning down the nihilism (Boseovski and Marcovitch 152).

The Contradiction of Comparison

Defining Britishness is a tough thing to do, as it involves many abstract variables. One can point out a few characteristics that generally make up for typically British television: In content, sarcasm, nihilism, dryness, pessimism and gritty realism. In format, longer scenes, focusing on acting and *Mise en Scène*, slower pace. When it comes to production, smaller budgets and more possibilities of innovating with niche programming, as James Chapman puts:

The difference in production values between British and American media further invokes an idea of Britishness, the notion that small is beautiful and that British ingenuity is superior to American technological hardware. (Chapman 8a)

However, those characteristics only make sense if we hold them up against Hollywood content we already know in our minds. Hollywood is so omnipresent that it sets up a standard to which national televisual content comes in comparison. We

consider British programming dry and gritty only because it is so when compared to more optimistic, heroic television produced in the US.

In this sense, as much as British television takes pride in its idiosyncrasies, this in itself is a contradiction. After all, Britishness can only be defined as a comparison to Americaness. This goes to show just how much the Hollywood influence is important to television content in the UK, and how the development of such content has always been linked to it. In other words, Britishness “**can hardly be contemplated without an assessment of American-English relations**” (Hunter 112), and understanding this is fundamental to understanding the trajectory of *Black Mirror* inside and outside the British television market.

After making some sense of what counts to define Britishness in television, we will now analyse the two first seasons of *Black Mirror*, commissioned and broadcasted for Channel 4, and try to apply the principles discussed in this chapter to the content presented in it.

CHAPTER TWO

BLACK MIRROR SEASONS ONE AND TWO: THE DARKEST SIDE OF TECHNOLOGY

An Introduction to Charlie Brooker, *Black Mirror's* Creator

English-born Charlie Brooker made his debut as a television writer in 1999 with *The 11 O'Clock show*, a half-hour satire programme which made comedy off of current events. His career also began controversial; the show was accused of taking humour a little too far (Howson 2010). Nevertheless, it guaranteed Brooker other opportunities in television - and he never stopped. Since 1999 he has worked in several different shows as a writer, for Channel 4 and different branches of the BBC. His ventures were focused mostly on dark comedy, sci-fi and horror - but he also worked in programming about video games (Howson 2010).

It was with *Dead Set*, however, that Brooker really gained momentum. The series, in which he is credited as a creator, is set within the real television show *Big Brother* - in a fictional zombie attack. It was produced by Zeppotron, one of the companies of the Endemol⁵ group and commissioned⁶ and broadcasted by digital television channel E4 (Conlan 2008).

Dead Set was a sound success, and it was sold to several international markets (Metacritic 2018). However, it would take Brooker ten years more to broadcast the first episode of *Black Mirror* on Channel 4. In an article written for The Guardian to promote *Black Mirror* as it was about to premiere, he went in detail about his inspirations and motivations for creating the series.

⁵ Endemol is one of the main media companies in the world. Based in the Netherlands it produces and distributes globally through its many affiliates.

⁶ In television, "commissioning" means the act of a broadcaster ordering a show to be produced. Usually the channel is funding the production which is managed by an outside company, with a guaranteed slot in programming.

He cites *Twilight Zone* as his primary source of inspiration, an American anthology television series aired by CBS between 1959 and 1964. Although it can be mainly regarded as science fiction, it has elements of horror and even surrealism (Brooker 2011). Brooker explains he was fascinated by the idea of criticising aspects of present society by transporting them to a parallel universe - a tactic described by British screenwriter Tony Bennett as **Trojan horse drama** (Cooke 162). Brooker writes he admires how courageous the series is in going deep in their storylines, sometimes being vicious and cruel to the characters (and consequently, the viewers), something he didn't quite see happening anymore.

He also admits that he is fascinated by technology (and this is 2011 still, social media and gadgets are far less complex and available), but frequently wonders if this constant presence of it in our lives is something healthy - hence, the premise of *Black Mirror*. The title of the series is also explained: The black mirror is any turned off screen that can turn into a mirror when we look at it.

Black Mirror: A Product of its Environment

Season one had three episodes, one hour each that were aired on Sundays at 9pm (Brooker 2011). The series was produced by Zeppotron and commissioned by Channel 4. Brooker is credited as producer of the series and writer for the two first episodes.

The series, of course, did not come without its risks. After all, the premise of the first episode can be shocking. The idea of broadcasting a story in which the prime minister of the UK has intercourse with a pig is bold, to say the least. ***Black Mirror could only happen in the UK. It could only happen in Channel 4. And it could only have been written by Charlie Brooker.***

The reason for that is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, UK has a very particular television landscape. It has a tradition of broadcasting bleak dystopian television content. It also has a tradition of having more freedom to experiment than in a strictly commercial environment.

Moreover, Channel 4 had, since its inception, a mission of broadcasting experimental programming. That, combined with Brooker's solid experience, was what made the executives take the risk. This has been publicly admitted by one of

them, Jay Hunt, on a bitter statement following the announcement of the series definitely leaving for Netflix:

Black Mirror couldn't be a more Channel 4 show. We grew it from a dangerous idea to a brand that resonated globally. Of course it's disappointing that the first broadcast window in the UK is then sold to the highest bidder ignoring the risk a publicly owned channel like 4 took by backing it. (qtd. in Plunkett 2016)

Let us ignore, for now, the drama surrounding the Netflix bid - as this is a subject for another chapter - and concentrate on the fact that from the beginning Channel 4 knew the series was a risky bet and still they decided to go with. As we have seen before, this perhaps would not have happened in other linear⁷ markets.

Nonetheless, the show was produced and broadcasted. *Black Mirror* is a dystopian anthology and in the first two seasons was starred by actors who were known by the British public. The time in which the episodes are set is undefined. It seems like a near future or a parallel universe to the time we are currently in. Brooker, on the occasion of the Guardian article, introduced a powerful visual metaphor to advocate the series as an anthology; *Black Mirror* is like a box of chocolates, all of which have the same dark coating, but different fillings. In other words, the main connector of all the episodes is their inherent darkness, even if it is presented in different ways.

An Analysis of Season One: Taking the Risk Pays Off

The series opens with a bang. National Anthem, the pilot, had quite a polemic storyline, as previously mentioned. However, there let us analyse it in deeper detail.

The premise is simple: The royal princess has been kidnapped and the ransom requires the prime minister to have intercourse with a pig on a national broadcast. However, just in that brief explanation we are able to pinpoint how much the British setting is fundamental to the story.

London isn't a mere scenario for National Anthem. The story could only be set in the UK. Princess Susannah is a character that makes a lot of sense in this specific context. The idea of a member of loyalty so loved and important to the people that her kidnapping would be a national commotion is very intrinsic to the United Kingdom, as it is the figure of the Prime Minister as presented in the episode.

⁷ Linear media stands for all real-time, scheduling broadcasting, the traditional television.

The following of the Downing Street, the mentions of British press vehicles, are all part of the story. The feel of the episode is of a parallel universe, or a future not so distant. And those are not the only aspects that resonate with Britishness in National Anthem.

Using the framework proposed in chapter one we can also analyse the formal aspects of the pilot. The pace of the episode is slow, with establishing shots characteristically long if compared to Hollywood standards. The progression of the narrative builds up bit by bit; the tension is never created by frantic cutting or acting, but exactly the opposite. The moments of silence and the excruciating wait until the climax are what make the episode, with quite an absurdist premise, believable.

The photography is noticeably desaturated and dark, and even if it is a high quality product in terms of production, it is notable there is not extra budget for making the looks of the show polished. **All and all, National Anthem ticks all the boxes we have defined for Britishness in the previous chapter:** In terms of content, we have a dark, pessimistic premise and an uncomfortably bad ending. In terms of format, the major tool to keep the tension is the focus on Mise-en-Scène and slow pacing. In terms of production, even though the figures of the budget are not known, it is evident *Black Mirror* relies much more on ideas than big money to convey the message.

So, how did all of this resonate with the viewers?

The pilot ranked in 2.07 million viewers on the first broadcast (BARB 2018), which is an impressive figure. In a review written for the *The Daily Telegraph* by television critic Michael Hogan, he describes how much National Anthem took an absurd premise and brought to life something quirky and compelling (Hogan 2011). He also takes notice of how much the episode follows in the footsteps of previous British television content:

There were echoes of more traditional shows everywhere too: the corridors-of-power voyeurism of the *Thick of It*, the clock-ticking tension of *Spooks*, the sci-fi threat of *Doctor Who*. (Hogan 2011)

The *Guardian*, however, notices in its review of the first season that what makes the show stand out is exactly how much it differs from everything else:

It's a fantastical premise but it still feels grounded in reality, resulting in a story that is easy to relate to. [...] If all this makes the series sound bleak and downbeat, that's because it is – but in the best possible way. While most TV shows exist to reassure people, *Black Mirror* actively sets out to unsettle its viewers. It is, quite simply, unlike anything else on TV at the moment. (Carty 2015)

Clearly *National Anthem* was a risky bet. They could have introduced *Black Mirror* with another episode, and air it once the viewers had been hooked. Instead, Channel 4 and Brooker decided to take the hardest path. It set the tone for the series and the ground for the next two episodes: maybe not so shocking, but even darker.

Episode two, *Fifteen Million Merits*, brings forth a completely different aesthetic. Bright colours and artificial scenery are used to complement the narrative. In a dystopian era, humans are forced to bike inside a closed compound to earn merits, and spend them with every little mundane activity (using toothpaste, eating, showering, etc.) the protagonist, Bing, has 15.000.000 of them, and spends them all to give a shot to give his love interest a shot at a *X-Factor* like talent show.

The bold colours, along with the saturated photography, enable the visual creation of this extremely artificial world. The use of lights and electronic effects, simulating a videogame, put a stark contrast with the characters' dull and empty existence. This trope of using photography and colour to reinforce artificialness is used again in season three, something we will discuss further, but it is important to notice *Fifteen Million Merits* is shot entirely in studio, minimising costs a great deal. This of course contributes to the claustrophobic feel of the whole story, but it would be naive to believe wasn't done for budget purposes either.

The story falls into a cruel path once Abi, Bing's love interest, is co-opted to act in pornography. Riddled with anger and hopelessness, Bing again earns enough merits to go back and audition one more time. He threatens to kill himself on air as he delivers a speech against the system which imprisons him. This grants him a weekly show in which he artificially showcases his anger to the viewers. The ending, while bittersweet for Bing, is cruel to the spectators of *Black Mirror*, who watch the moral corruption of two characters they grow to love.

It is important to notice that while the protagonists are played by actors known by the British public (Kaluuya for *Skins* and Jessica Brown Findlay for *Downton Abbey*),

and the general feeling of darkness and stillness of time are still very much in line with British television content. What differs *Fifteen Million* from *National Anthem* is that **it could be set anywhere**. This dystopian future doesn't have its roots in British national symbols, unlike the pilot. And this is also true for the third and final episode of the season.

The Entire History of You has a premise that more incisively talks about technology. In a universe in which everyone has an implant that records all of our memories, this becomes a problem for the protagonist. He is consumed with jealousy of his wife and the new technology enables his paranoia. He then discovers she had been unfaithful and his daughter might not be actually his, which ends the relationship completely.

In terms of photography, the episode is very refined, using warm tones in various moments. This is probably to reinforce the posh atmosphere in which the characters are inserted. Regardless, the feel of hopelessness that it brings is undeniable. *National Anthem* maybe was more shocking; *The Entire History of You* is more provocative because it feels very close to reality, playing into the fear that technological progress might work to fuel our darkest sides.

Season one of *Black Mirror* made a lasting impression. The whole series ranked nearly four and a half million viewers, with *National Anthem* being responsible for almost half of those (BARB 2018). The popular reviewing website Rotten Tomatoes rates it with a general score of 97% and 92% of audience approval, impressive figures for the platform standards (the reviews were made before and after *Black Mirror* was available in Netflix, however). Of course, there was a lot of criticism around it as well, especially when it came to deepening the characterisation of protagonists, which is something inherently difficult in an anthology; usually series have a span of various episodes to explore their characters. Ed Cumming, from *The Telegraph*, wrote:

It's sometimes strange, given Brooker's well-documented love of video games and other gadgetry, that he has such a peculiarly bleak outlook on technology's effect on wider society. While his critic's eye gives the satire a delicious edge, he's not nearly as good at characterisation or dialogue [...] (Cumming 2014)

Emily Nussbaum, in her review of the season for *The New Yorker* magazine, admitted how powerful the episodes were in making an impression:

Black Mirror, Brooker for Britain's Channel 4, has a swagger to its strangeness, a swallow-the-red-pill, anything-can-happen audacity. For a full day after watching the first episode (which I obtained through occult means, before Netflix made the show available to U.S. viewers), I felt disoriented, dropped on a new planet. (Nussbaum 2015)

It is important to notice Nussbaum admits to using unorthodox downloading methods to get a hold of *Black Mirror* before Netflix bought its rights. This means the series had already sparked American interest even when it was just producing for and thinking about domestic market.

The first season of *Black Mirror* was nominated and won the category of best TV movie/miniseries of the International Emmy, a subcategory of the Emmy Awards⁸ that prizes only productions made and aired outside of the US (International Emmy Awards, 2018). It was a considerable recognition, but also a sign that *Black Mirror* was considered in the US as foreign production, a programme indigenous to the UK.

Season two: Consolidation of *Black Mirror*

The success was enough to have Channel 4 commission a second instalment of the series, however. On February of 2013 *Black Mirror* season two premiered, after an extensive promoting campaign within the UK, including a compelling trailer with complex visual arts that was aired on television and cinema theatres (Digital Arts Online 2013). Again, the season would present three separate episodes.

Be Right Back, the first one, is a chilling tale about a woman who loses her beloved husband in an accident and falls into the temptation of purchasing a robot who is an exact replica of him. Even though the episode is set in a near future, the gadgets and general feel of the art direction do not stretch the sci-fi scenario, presenting a world very similar to ours, which probably makes the story more believable - and consequently more disturbing. The episode presents a very slow pace from begging to end, with slow silent scenes. The de-saturation of colours is present in all the season, making it more visually cohesive than the first one.

The second episode of the second season, White Bear, has the most action of all *Black Mirror* instalments until then. A woman is punished by her violent crime by

⁸ The Emmys are the main award ceremony for television in the USA and one of the main ones in the world. It is produced and hosted by the American Television Academy.

unknowingly participating in a reality show inside which she has to escape from humans who turn into hunters in a technologically zombified society, only to have her memory erased and everything done again the next day. The episode brings the most frantic pacing of the whole series, but in comparison to Hollywood products of the same genre, its rhythm is moderate.

Finally, the third episode of the second season aired. Named *The Waldo Moment*, a politically incorrect cartoon character ends up running for office, in a mockery of politics and general establishment. However, the parody is taken way too far and the creator of Waldo ends up in tragedy while the character lives on.

Funnily enough, *The Waldo Moment* resonated a lot with posterior moments in the years following its broadcast, such as the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump in the US, among many others. This contributed for a reputation of being able to “predict the future” attributed to the series (Weller 2018), a sign of just how much Brooker is able to capture the *Zeitgeist* and present it back to viewers in his storylines. Of all three episodes, *The Waldo Moment* is also the one that relies on the UK as a setting the most, as its storyline has direct connection to the UK’s political system and the fact that it is set in Britain is crucial to the narrative. So in it, Britishness doesn’t only appear in style and format, but without it being set in the UK, it would have presented a completely different story.

In general, the second season consolidated many of the tropes that made *Black Mirror* successful: The dark undertone, the slow pacing to build up tension, and the idea that technology might be a dangerous tool. There is also the reinforcement of human mundane acts as grotesque, especially sex scenes, which are always uncomfortable to watch. However, season two intensifies its political undertone a lot, addressing explicitly the politics in the UK and being harsher in its portrayal of modern lifestyle, posing lingering ethical questions for the viewer. It is also important to notice that unlike the first season, Brooker wrote all three episodes and doesn’t credit any co-writers.

Just like season one, all of the episodes have sad, unsatisfying endings, which leave the viewer with an upsetting sensation all around. Just like his inspiration source, Brooker is not afraid to being merciless to the viewers, making it so there is no “relief” for whoever is watching.

It ranked in nearly 5 million viewers altogether (4.98 to be precise), surpassing the first one in nearly 500.000 spectators (BARB 2018). The consistency in the audience and its increase were impressive numbers for Channel 4. Not to mention the attention the critics were already giving to the series.

However, on December of 2013, Charlie Brooker made it clear a shift could be coming for *Black Mirror*. On the 16th, Channel 4 aired a two hour special of the series called *White Christmas*. Set around holiday time, it was a tale about using virtual clones to extract information of people, with some side plots about pickup artistry⁹ and invasion of privacy. The episode ranked in impressive 1.66 views, making it the 8th most watched programme of the season for Channel 4 (BARB 2018).

White Christmas: *Black Mirror* not so British Anymore

While we will dive into detail about the episode's plot further, the great twist brought by *White Christmas* was the casting of John Hamm. The American actor is known for his role as Don Draper in *Mad Men*, one of the most successful series in American television of the past years. The decision of casting Hamm broke completely with the tradition of using British actors for all main roles in *Black Mirror* and was a preview of what was to come. Not only it was an American actor, playing an American character, but also it was one of the most recognizable faces in television for the American public.

This decision was not in vain. Two weeks prior, Netflix had made the entirety of the two first seasons available on their catalogue in the US (Sherwin 2014). By that time, the buzz around the series was already hyped all over. As we have seen, American viewers were already getting hold of the episodes through piracy. In fact, in 2013, American actor Robert Downey Jr.'s production company had purchased the rights of *The Entire History of You* to make it a feature-length film (Child 2013). The interest of the American public in *Black Mirror* was evident.

By then, the series was no longer a mere local product, being sold in over 90 territories around the world (Ritman and Roxborough 2016). The release of a Christmas special was indication that a third series was practically guaranteed, as

⁹ "Pick-up artistry" is the name given to the activity of using strategies and techniques to seduce and deceive women.

this is a commonly used strategy by television channels to “calm” fans between seasons.

But as we have seen before, the US market has always had special importance to UK television production. The casting of John Hamm is a clear appeal to the American public, something that even resembles the attempts of humanising The Doctor to capture audiences on the other side of the Atlantic (Cull 66). In fact, it has been publicly admitted that there was the idea of making an American version of *Black Mirror* at first (Harris 2015), something we had seen before with *Queer as Folk* or *The Office*. Later on Netflix chose to create a new path for the series and *White Christmas* was the first attempt at that. *White Christmas*' bet is not to innovate in the content or format; the episode, although offering a somewhat confusing attempt at multi plot was very much in line with the rest of the series. Instead of tweaking that, they just adjusted the casting.

It's speculation whether or not Brooker was already thinking of transferring *Black Mirror* to Netflix altogether back then. We know for a fact however that there was the idea of making an American version of it, and *White Christmas* was a clear attempt to cater to the American (and also the international) market. The episode was broadcasted initially only on Channel 4 but would soon join Netflix catalogue in the beginning of 2015.

In fact, the release of the two first seasons in the US and the broadcasting of *White Christmas* in the UK were connected by a heavy marketing campaign, especially inside the American field. Many of the main specialised websites had articles praising the series and urging them to go check it on Netflix, like Yahoo, Vox, and The Decider (Sherwin 2014).

The second season, along with *White Christmas*, resonated a lot with the audiences, in the UK and the US market. Domestically, *Black Mirror* ended the year of 2014 consolidated as one of Channel 4's most successful programmes. It was gathering audiences, selling well overseas, and it was a success of both critic and public. A Guardian review shows that *White Christmas* gave the British public what it came to expect from *Black Mirror* by that point, and that was a good thing:

It's typical – and typically brilliant – *Black Mirror*. Brooker takes something that's already here, like blocking, and pushes it forward in time. Not too far though, more of a nudge than a shove, so that his dystopia isn't outrageous,

it's plausible, and all the more terrifying for it. Less sci-fi, more like now after a couple of software updates (Wollaston 2014).

Meanwhile, by the end of 2014 *Black Mirror* was downright causing frisson in the US. While in the UK the praise was how realistic the series seemed to be in its critics, in America the point of interest revolved around its darkness and courage to show things in a way the public was not used to:

It's hard to imagine any American broadcast or cable or even streaming network making a show this aggressively political, so critical and withering in its take on Western society. Most episodes ridicule technophilia, with some kind of just slliiiiightly (sic) more advanced computing encroaching on our selfhood (Lyons 2014).

In an article of popular American web magazine The Verge titled "Black Mirror,' one of the best sci-fi shows around, is finally streaming on Netflix", Josh Dzieza strongly recommends the series, but alerts the readers:

Before you go off and watch it, I should say, *Black Mirror* is dark. Like, *really* dark. **The first episode in particular is unlike anything I've seen on television.** It's satire, but the sort of satire that starts as a joke until you realize Brooker is prepared to mercilessly follow through on his premise" (Dzieza 2014 - Emphasis added).

This goes to show that *Black Mirror* was something completely refreshing and different for the American public (especially National Anthem). However, perhaps one of the most emblematic examples of just how much *Black Mirror* became a phenomenon in the US and how crucial it became to pop culture, is an interview Daniel Kaluuya gave fellow actor Thimothee Chalamet in 2018, following both of their nominations for Best Actor in the Academy Awards¹⁰.

Kaluuya, a British actor, had played Bing in *Black Mirror's* Fifteen Million Merits, aired in 2011 in the UK. In 2017 he played the protagonist in *Get Out*, one of the most acclaimed movies of the year, nominated for best picture and winner of best original script. He discusses how the movie's director, Jordan Peele, found him:

Chalamet: How did you hear about the project, was there an audition process, how did you get into it?

Kaluuya: It was a weird situation, because I did this show called "Black Mirror", back in England. 2011.

¹⁰ The Academy Awards is the main award ceremony for Film in the US and in the world, also known as The Oscars.

Chalamet: Bing?

Kaluuya: Bing! Oh, you know. Jesus! See, this is surreal to me, that it still lives. I did it in 2011. Nothing really happened in England. And then Netflix happened. So Netflix happened in 2014, 2015... And then Americans started watching this show that I did three years before. And then Jordan Peele watched it.

[...]

Chalamet: Did he say how he watched... How he came across that episode of *Black Mirror*, on his own, was it a casting director?

Kaluuya: No, he just came across it. But I think it was a time when like, a lot of people in the industry, on a certain frequency were just watching *Black Mirror*. That it became a thing.

Chalamet: Yeah, I was part of it becoming a thing. I was not on the first wave of *Black Mirror*.

Kaluuya: It was like before the new series came out. It was the older episodes. (Variety 2017)

Daniel Kaluuya describes in detail how much a domestic series grew to become a phenomenon of pop culture after Netflix purchased the rights to the first two seasons. He also demonstrates just how much the series became important. To the public, and also insiders of the entertainment industry, enough to change the course of his entire career.

By the time 2014 ended, *Black Mirror* had taken the world by storm by using tropes and characteristics that were always connected to the television industry inside the UK, especially inside the sci-fi genre. It was an anthology, a format traditionally popular in the UK, which fit right into the tradition of bleak dystopian futures, used pessimism and realism to produce social commentary relying on powerful premises and acting performances instead of over the top special effects.

And while exporting had always been a goal in British industry, previous series did not have streaming giants changing the industry workings completely. So to understand in what ways this makes a difference, it's time to talk about Netflix and VOD streaming services.

CHAPTER THREE

STREAMING SERVICES AND THE DISRUPTION OF LINEAR TELEVISION

Streaming VOD services contracting logistics is similar to cable television and even licensed-financed PBS services. For a fixed fee, the viewer has conditional access to broadcasting. The difference is how the content is made available: Usually the cable subscription offers a set combination of channels, while streaming services offer content on the Internet the viewer can select by programme.

This difference might seem subtle but is in actuality something that has the power to disrupt the broadcasting industry structures. Streaming services, as we will see ahead, are not only changing the way people watch television. It is changing how content is made, where, and by whom.

But to understand this dynamic better, and further dive into the specifics of Netflix's working, essential to comprehend how *Black Mirror* ended up at its platform, we first need to take a look at the foreground just before SVOD began their exponential growth and understand what led to it. In order to do so, we need to go back to the decade of 2000s, a time when television was increasingly becoming globalised, as well as cable had been consolidated for years.

2000s: An Era of Cord-cutting and Piracy

With the spreading of Internet around the world there has been a surge in piracy all over. P2P sharing content gained traction. Access to televisual content shifted to spectators, who began to experiment with a power they had never had before. This clashes with the main logic of the broadcasting in itself, as the media industry tends

naturally into control and oligopoly (Strangelove 21). OTT programming puts all the control of creation, distribution and scheduling on the market. In other words:

One of the main reasons Internet represents a threat to the television industry is written in the history of television itself, which is defined by recurring issues of choice and control. The television industry has a long tradition of trying to control audiences and limit choices. (Strangelove 21).

This opposition between choice and control is nothing new. We have seen that inside the UK, the possibility of giving viewers more channels and more content was an uphill battle, first with the dismantle of BBC's monopoly, than with the introduction of cable. Another example of this conflict is the introduction of the remote control, seen at first as a major problem by the broadcasting industry as it allowed spectators, for example, to skip commercial breaks (Strangelove 22).

But with content available online and linear channels scraping to maintain control, there was a divide between consumers and producers of media content along the 2000s.

Some piracy advocates suggest that the only way to stop it is to make content more easily and cheaply available (Strangelove 35). Amidst this, there was the start of a movement called "cord-cutting": Consumers who cancelled their cable subscription over VOD services and/or piracy (Strangelove 94), unsatisfied with prices, programming or both.

It is true the cord-cutting movement was strongest in the US, where cable was considered a very essential necessity to households. However, it did spread around the world and inside the UK. All and all, **it was about viewers trying to claim more control over the content they watched**. The market was struggling to come to terms with the fact that Internet was changing television forever:

Piracy and cord-cutting need to be understood, at least in part, as audience responses to pricing issues in the market place (Strangelove 99).

It is important to have in mind that the media market operates differently from many others. It is a different kind of good, because its consumers are not rivals, meaning one spectator does not impede the other of watching the same thing (Helm 7). So the medium is of utmost importance, after all it is the physical good which connects broadcasters and viewers. And when it changes, a lot of the dynamic changes

along. So, there is general hope that technology generates active consumer participation (Sim 187). However, this might be a little more complicated in reality.

Regardless, this disruption and the increase of piracy are signals of something that has already been clear: Consumers have always wanted more control over what they watch:

What consumers want is abundantly clear. They want television when they want it, where they want it. [...] Time and again [...] both industry and regulators have the opposite goal in mind - keeping consumers in the current broadcasting system. (Strangelove 22).

So the climate was of general dissatisfaction between the stiffness of programming offered by television and the viewers who wanted more choice. And every time there was a technological innovation, in media, this meant changes for the way it was consumed and produced. The market reorganised itself with the introduction of sound cinema, with the arrival of television, of pre-recorded television, with tape. Even in the beginning of the 1990s, many believed videotaping would be a revolutionary device, since it enabled P2P sharing. However, because the sharing had to be very much physical, the change it promoted was limited (Lotz 132).

During the 2000s, many file sharing softwares were made available. The market was adjusting to the changes. But by the end of the decade, a few companies started offering subscription VOD, and then again, there was a big shift.

Subscription Video on Demand: The Beginnings

First ones to steal the spotlight in this new market were HBO Go and Hulu. HBO Go offered unlimited access to HBO content on the Internet, on demand. However, it was only offered for those who already had a linear subscription of the channel. Still it was a very coveted service and many consumers pressured the company so HBO Go could be something paid for independently. It didn't happen, but pronounced how the business was rearranging itself.

Hulu on the other hand is a subscription service owned by broadcasters and production companies such as Disney, Universal, and Fox. It mostly distributes their content into one platform, but also offers some original content. Hulu has been operating since 2007 (Strangelove 157).

Amazon, a giant web platform that operates as a giant market for all kinds of goods also implemented its own VOD service, called Amazon video in the US and Prime Video in Europe. Starting off as a download-based service in 2006, it shyly began offering streaming in 2008. It doesn't have the same market penetration that Netflix has, but on the other hand it offers not only original content but also some exclusives (such as *The Sopranos*), and the possibility of pay-per-view¹¹ in certain regions (Strangelove 156).

HBO Go eventually found itself in the market as a channel-based service, as other broadcasters around the world started offering VOD of their own content. Hulu continued to be mostly a distribution platform, and only recently started investing more in original content. Amazon is today one of the SVOD services with the most subscribers worldwide, but it has clearly modelled its business model after Netflix (Spangler 2018).

Netflix is currently the SVOD with the most subscribers on the world, disclosing 125 million paying members all around the globe (Statista 2018), launching its streaming service in 2008. Its reach power is impressive, and we will dive into what decisions exactly made for this success further in this chapter. First, let us analyse just how much the SVOD business model differs from traditional broadcasting.

OTT broadcasting: A Whole New Experience

The experience of television has changed over the years. In the 1950s, families had only one device, and everyone would gather around it to watch it. With the passing of time, devices multiplied within households, and so did the programming available.

SVOD, however, takes this to the next level. Today, nearly five billion people have smart phones worldwide (Statista 2018). This, along with personal computers and tablets, makes the experience much more individualised. Spectators log into their personal devices to watch content. This means what is produced is also very personalised, and the tendency is that "any further commonality in the experience or the use of television is likely to continue to erode" (Lotz 263), because even though linear broadcasting still is present in most households, increasingly they are becoming "broadband-only", meaning the only access to media is through Internet (Lindsey 173).

¹¹ Pay-per-view refers to a service in which a specific content – film, series, football match, etc. – can be bought and watched separately from scheduled programming.

Traditional broadcasting is usually concerned with producing content to maximise the reach, as we have seen before. Meanwhile SVOD wants to offer the more varied content possible, to attract more subscribers. This means that SVOD providers are more willing to invest in niche programming because they want to “provide as many viewers as possible with adequate reason to keep paying their monthly fees” (Lotz 236).

In this sense, while SVOD does make use of advertising as we will see ahead, it is not attached to commercial intervals. This means a number of things: Content doesn't need to be restricted to a schedule. It doesn't need to have breaks, and there is no restriction of duration. This changes the way the content is being produced (Strangelove 151). Further on, as we have seen before, freedom from advertising can promote more experimental content. **The viewer finances the content, so the services don't have to cater to advertisers:**

Many focus on the freedom from advertiser influence when considering the distinction of subscription television networks, but the difference in these networks' economic process is more fundamental. Broadcast and basic cable networks are primarily concerned with how many people tune into their programming [...]. In contrast, subscription cable services rely on viewers desiring to watch their programming so much they are willing to pay for it (Lotz 235).

It is similar to the model that we have seen in progress in the UK, and which bred content such as *Black Mirror*, but on an international, more individualised scale, and freer from regulation.

However, there is a big change that differs SVOD from PBS: Audience figures. Traditionally, measuring of ratings is not so reliable. After all, they can only tell how many televisions were connected and showing a specific programme. It doesn't tell anything about the viewers; their age, their consuming power. They just show quantity, which ended up being seen as a diffuse, mysterious mass. Numbers were great for showing advertisers how many people were watching, but they don't provide accuracy (Arnold 49). Netflix does not disclose their audience figures for the most part, showing as a branding strategy, that these figures don't really matter within SVOD context.

Notwithstanding, SVOD has information about who is watching their content and how in much more detail (we will delve into detail on how Netflix uses this data

further on). This information is not only precious for advertisers, but for producers, who can be better informed about their audiences when thinking about new content (Arnold 55).

For all of this, SVOD is disrupting the workings of the broadcasting industry completely:

Upending industry conventions - ordering an entire season of a series without asking for a pilot, withholding ratings and even throwing all of a new show's episodes online at once, in one big bundle, so viewers don't have to wait for the next instalment of a series they love. This is proving to be disruptive within the television industry and is altering audience expectations (Strangelove 151).

For younger generations, the ones that had access to Internet for at least half of their lives, Internet has become the main source of televisual content. This bred the term "cord-nevers"; viewers who were never subscribing to traditional cable or linear programming. In fact, currently many young people do not own television devices, or if they do, it's only to watch streaming content (Strangelove 99). The whole market is shifting, and demands are changing:

Television is no longer a linear trickle of programming dictated by network executives but had swelled into a wide ocean of content that viewers can dip in at will - provided they are willing and able to pay directly for content or for services that enable such flexible, nonlinear use (Lotz 132).

It is within this scenario that *Black Mirror* comes from a very specific regional industry, inside the UK, with a history of special production conditions and takes over a highly technological device. As much as the production landscape within the UK has its own idiosyncrasies, *Black Mirror* was produced and formatted for traditional broadcasting.

And while "entertainment industries have always been internationalised and content has flowed across national boundaries for profit since the first Lumière films appeared on American nickelodeon screens in the 1890s (Robinson 151), the challenge was transforming this linear series into something that continued to appeal to audiences, but working under different rules.

In the next chapter, we will analyse how Charlie Brooker and Netflix accomplished this. But first, we need to understand the inside workings of Netflix, its business

model, where it succeeds and where it fails, and how the company handles its original content.

Netflix: An OTT Content Trailblazer

Netflix was launched in 1997 in the US, as a DVD-by-mail service (Davies 1). In 2008, it began its transition to streaming (Lotz 142). At first, Netflix would offer licensed content from television and film at a much lower price than traditional cable.

Many broadcasters were interested in licensing¹² their content to Netflix. Not only because they would be paid for otherwise obsolete content, but also because many times this would boost audiences to their own linear programming. With *Breaking Bad*, for example, more viewers were attracted to watching the last season on television after watching all of the previous ones on Netflix, something called the “Netflix Effect” (Lotz 148).

Despite that, for a long time Netflix faced harsh criticism for its dated catalogue, as it could never get hold of a lot of recent releases, whether it being television or film. Even spending a lot of money in licensing content, it was not the main feature that drew viewers in at first (Strangelove 153)

Netflix, however, had another feature that set itself apart:

Netflix’s viewer, however, is substantially different from the imagined universal spectator. Before Netflix introduced its original content, the services main competitive advantage was the personal profile and its “recommended for you” feature. To that extent, the company’s business model demonstrates the shift from a mass economy into a niche market of personalised services (Alexander 84)

This session allowed subscribers to navigate the catalogue in a different way, in which Netflix functioned as a curator in this environment of larger choice (Robinson 170). Navigating through the interface, Netflix presents the subscriber with a large list of sub-genres that can get weirdly specific, and bases recommendations on what viewers have watched before. The reason why the recommended for you session is so precise relies on its genesis:

Netflix recommends genres that are intensely, almost bizarrely personalised. That’s because seven years ago, Todd Yellin, a film obsessed executive at

¹² “Licensing” in television happens when a broadcaster or distributor buys content already made by other production companies and channels with the intention of broadcasting it.

Netflix, set out to break down every movie into data. He hired aspiring screenwriters and paid them to watch movies and rate their levels of romance, gore, quirkiness and even plot resolution. In a sense, Yellin wanted to reverse engineer all of Hollywood's formulas so that Netflix could mathematically show you the movies it knew you would like. Now it's become one of the company's big selling points. Netflix doesn't provide streaming movies and TV shows. **It knows you** (Alexander 88).

In this sense, Netflix presents itself as a friend, not a service (Alexander 88). And the marketing of the company plays into that. Just looking at the company's Twitter feeds in different countries, we can see just much this plays a part on the branding strategy. In figure number two, we see an interaction between a customer and the brand's social media account, in which they exactly discuss the recommended for you session (the user's interface recommended the romantic comedy *Love Actually* suggesting 97% of relevance).



Figure 1 - Netflix US on Twitter –
www.twitter.com/netflix/status/940051734650503168



Figure 2 - Netflix UK and Ireland –
www.twitter.com/NetflixUK/status/944271969993871360



Figure 3 - Netflix Australia & New Zealand on Twitter – www.twitter.com/NetflixANZ/status/893801455357841408

Netflix’s Consumer Data: A “Big Brother” of Spectators

As the first tweet proves, Netflix has a lot of data on the content it provides, but it also has a lot of information on their viewers as well. Netflix knows “what movies and television shows customers watch, when they are watching, whether a show is watched in part or all the way to the end, and even when viewers re-watch a particular scene of a favourite star” (Strangelove 26). This gives the service unprecedented and valuable information on their audiences, something that linear television was never able to grasp. It became one of the core pillars of the enterprise, changing the way it deals with its subscribers, who are “no longer conceived of as an audience or a collection of individuals, the Netflix user becomes classified as a set of data and the information drawn from this data becomes the primary source of knowledge produced by Netflix” (Arnold 55).

So, what use does it make of all this power?

First off, it uses it to curate and suggest content to the viewers and guide them into programming they wouldn’t normally watch on their own. Basically, “as a business Netflix, much like Hollywood itself, does not offer you exactly what you want - instead it offers some of exactly what you want a little more that you might like to try” (Smith-Rowsey 70).

But it also uses this data for advertising purposes. Yes, we have seen before SVOD are not reliant on commercial breaks, as the subscriber is paying for the content. However, it enables another type of marketing; inside the content itself. Something more subtle but infinitely more productive, since the targeting of the audience is much more precise. It’s known that studios and distributors pay a fee to

have their content be featured in the first pages of Netflix's interface or to be put into this or that category, for example (Smith-Rowsey 70).

But this goes even further.

Advertising within content can be a very popular way of sending a message to the right viewer. The most prominent examples of that being **product placement**, which can be basic (when a product is just inside the context of the programme or film), or advanced (when the product has a role inside the story's context) (Lotz 179-180). There is also something called **branded entertainment**, in which an advertisement is offered as an entertainment product (most famous example being the Victoria Secret's Fashion Show, a phenomenon of audience worldwide) (Lotz 191).

In all of those examples, the effort is that the commercial message is has always to be "organic", meaning it fits well with the content and the audience it targets, almost naturally, like it's not meant to be an ad (Lotz 189). This obviously means that **while SVOD gives viewers a lot of control, it also takes it away**, by slipping in advertising and making use of data, in ways in which the viewer is not as aware as in linear television. This scenario is described by Strangelove as a "post-TV" reality:

One of the ironies of a post-television future may be that commercial television gains more power over the audience, power hidden with a ubiquitous and seemingly harmless process of automated recommendations and guided choices (Strangelove 26).

But most importantly, this big amount of data backed up one of the most important decisions of Netflix as an enterprise, something that meant another massive change inside the business, and made possible that *Black Mirror's* seasons three and four were produced the way they were: The move towards original content production.

Netflix Originals: Changing the Rules of The Production Game

Basically, Netflix knew that it was vulnerable, as the licensing of content was in control of whoever owned such content. While one broadcaster might be interested in having their content in Netflix today, tomorrow that might change. Moreover, Netflix recognised how difficult it was to have access to prime programmes and film (Strangelove 152). **These factors combined drove the creation of original content, series and movies branded as "Netflix Originals"**.

However, the decision was also backed by the fact that it had a lot of data on their audience's viewing habits, making the investment a "calculated risk". In a quirky coincidence, Netflix's original content debut was an American remake of a British television drama: *House of Cards*, which had been broadcasted by BBC in the 1990s as a miniseries.

Netflix's *House of Cards* vaguely uses the same premise, but changes a lot of the content and dynamic, not only transporting the story to the reality of American politics, but also updating the visuals and formats to the American public's taste. It was produced by Media Rights Capital and commissioned by Netflix with a first season of 13 episodes, released all at the same time. The decision of investing in such programming was backed by research Netflix did of its own costumers:

Although Netflix was notoriously guarded about its data as of 2013, executives often implied they knew a great deal about the viewing behaviour of their subscribers [...]. Netflix executives suggested that this data enabled them to better understand viewers' preferences and to value content. For example, executives defended the high cost of *House of Cards* on the grounds that they knew their subscribers particularly enjoyed complex, serialised drama. Given the limited availability of such content in the secondary market, they chose to produce an original show in this form (Lotz 228).

But this decision also had to do with branding strategy. By making high investments in original content from the start, Netflix was positioning itself in which kind of content it was looking to produce. It learned the lesson from linear broadcasters, as "after twenty-five years of audience erosion, broadcast networks were far less cavalier in their attitude towards the audience and recognised that while cheap programming might aid the short-term bottom line, they could not take viewership for granted" (Lotz 202).

Netflix knew, from their data, they had a market void to fill up. And they knew their survival as a business depended on producing OC. But the way the leap made was very significant to the kind of subscriber they were hoping to attract. In short, this business decision reinforced the value of the subscription:

Before MVDPs developed their VOD libraries and increased license fees required Netflix to increase its subscription price, it provided a strong value proposition. Once MVPDs made similar offerings available as part of top subscription tiers, the value of adding on this service was less clear - necessitating Netflix's move into original production, to again distinguish its value proposition (Lotz 176).

So the tone of the original content produced by Netflix was set by *House of Cards*; high production value, not afraid of diving into dark or polemic storylines. Basically, **Netflix was building itself a reputation around how “disruptive” its originals were**. At the same time, it had access to detailed data, which allowed it to minimise the risk of pushing the envelope with content (Farr 166).

As we have seen before, the nature of SVOD enables Netflix to experiment with niche content (Sim 191). And it did. After *House of Cards*, Netflix starting pouring money is lesser safe bets. There are many examples of this; one of the most prominent being *Orange is the New Black*: A series focused within a women’s prison, in which all main characters are female, that pushes to produce relevant content about the most marginalised members of society. *Orange is the New Black* is praised by its diverse casting, even if there are some harsh criticism to the fact that the series’ protagonist is a white middle class woman to capture viewer’s interest and identification (Christian 245-248).

Regardless, the efforts paid off. *Orange is the New Black*’s first season received nothing short of twelve Emmy nominations, winning three of them. This is a game changer because Netflix is positioning its original content as elite television right on its first ventures. And also means that diversity and focus outside “safe” themes generally explored by Hollywood pay off both by audience and critic standards. This way Netflix built itself a reputation for taking risks with its programming and investing in avant-garde programming, which attracted main talents in the industry, who started pitching projects to Netflix before presenting them to traditional studios/broadcasters, generating a full cycle of “quality content” (Strangelove 151).

This prestige is a branding strategy. If Netflix couldn’t compete for other content, it could lure in subscribers by investing in niche, progressive programming. Basically, “Netflix produced ‘quality’ specifically to brand itself as a source and venue of binge-worthy¹³ programming. Ideologically, ‘quality’ is a shiny result that burnishes the company’s achievements, validating capitalism’s promise that productivity and innovation arrive via an ‘invisible hand’ that guides individualistic effort” (Sim 189).

But Netflix decided to take its disruptor reputation a step further by taking the production elsewhere in the world. Producing film and television was traditionally a

¹³ “Binge-watching” refers to watching several episodes of a series back to back, a phenomenon typical of SVOD consuming.

locally concentrated activity, and for years it was made by Hollywood and distributed to the rest of the world. **And this is especially important to understand why producing *Black Mirror* was a strategic move.**

Shifting Production: A Market flow Outside of Hollywood

One of the boldest strategies of the company was to invest in content produced elsewhere, especially non-English products. It has “invested substantially in European content production, although it has primarily put its money towards English language programming or genres that will play well into the American market” (Robinson 163). Netflix did all of this exploring bit by bit. One good example is *Narcos*, a series about the Colombian drug trafficker produced by José Padilha and starred by Wagner Moura, both Brazilian. The story is told by the point of view of an American policeman, and it’s spoken half in English half in Spanish, luring in English-speaking spectators who might otherwise shy away from foreign language content. *Narcos* is today one of Netflix’s biggest hits, renovated for a fourth season (Smith 2017).

After this experimentation, it invested in other non-English content; 3%, a Brazilian sci-fi series which was the most watched non-English OC of 2017, and major hits like *Dark*, from Germany, are examples of the company’s efforts to make content available all over the world at the same time, with an extensive list of language options for both subtitles and dubbing. With this strategy Netflix is completely disrupting the way the televisual market flows, making it so that content is distributed around without going through Hollywood at all, something that reflects a worldwide tendency:

American product, while still dominant, no longer has the claim to assumed worldwide popularity - regional markets are reflecting niche tastes, such as the popularity of Turkish soap operas and K-pop in South America (Robinson 157).

In this sense, *Black Mirror* ticks many of the boxes of Netflix’s branding. It is produced outside of the US, but is still an English spoken product, making it easier to absorb in other markets. It is considered “high quality television”, and it presents itself as a progressive show that is a complex drama which fully dives into controversy.

Netflix: The Other Side

In short, the general idea is that because Netflix is “freed from the allure of broad appeal, [it] could presumably empower creative producers by supplying data to support unconventional ideas to niche audiences (Christian 244). However, we have to remember that as said before, Netflix takes risks that are calculated, supported by a massive amount on data on their consumers’ viewing habits. Also, a lot of the original content it commissions is based off work which is already successful, making it a somewhat safe bet. *Orange is the New Black*, for instance, is based off a bestselling novel. There is a lot of investment in spin-offs of previous audience hits, such as *Gilmore Girls*, a popular series in the 2000s which had a four episode special in Netflix in 2016. *Black Mirror* itself is a perfect example of this strategy, as it had been tested and approved by audiences domestically in the UK and worldwide, plus in the United States through piracy.

Another downside of Netflix’s business model is the encouragement of binge-watching. By making entire seasons available all at time and enable episodes to be automatically played after each other, Netflix encourages viewers to sit through hours of programming non-stop. The use of binge-watching as vocabulary is a recurring theme in Netflix’s marketing, as we will see further ahead. However, studies show that binge-watching complex dramas has psychological effects on viewers, as they perceive the narratives more strongly emotionally (Snider 117). Furthermore, it can induce paranoia and anxiety (Snider 118), and in some cases can be treated as an addiction and be linked to health problems such as depression, obesity and fatigue (Snider 119). In one of the reviews made to encourage the American public to tune in and give *Black Mirror* a chance analysed in the previous chapter, Margaret Lyons warns readers to “watch this show, but not binge-watch this show”, as the “six one-hour episodes, spread over two seasons, are cynical, searing, shockingly good — and often disturbing’ (Lyons 2014).

And in terms of production, Netflix likes to pose itself as the “primary disruptor” of international television market (Robinson 161), investing in progressive, provoking drama, but facts have shown it has also its commercial restrictions, and **prestige is not to be maintained if it’s not generating profit**. In 2017, the cancellation of Netflix original *Sense8* after its second season caused uproar on the Internet (Nguyen 2017). The series had a diverse cast, was shot in different series around the world and touched upon many LGBT themes, being both starred and directed by trans women. Despite being “ground-breaking” the series proved to too expensive,

and audience numbers were not adding up. After a lot of fan pressure, Netflix backtracked on the decision, giving *Sense8* a two hour special finale. The episode proved Netflix is in tune with the demands of its subscribers, but might not be as free from money pressure as it would seem at first.

Furthermore, Netflix has had immense difficulty of expanding to markets in the eastern world, where in some countries the subscription fees is more expensive than cable service (Robinson 164). Another barrier faced by Netflix is the debate around net neutrality and the regulation of Internet as a service. After all, in order to access Netflix users need high speed broad band. In many countries this clashes with local government regulations, which can difficult the expansion of subscription numbers. (Robinson 170).

With Prime Video and Hulu following hot on Netflix's heels and investing in the same branding strategy of producing "high quality" OC, it's possible in the next years we will see other similar services coming to pose as competition, and the market will possibly again rearrange itself. It's also important to notice, Netflix and SVOD in general are vulnerable because new technologies can make it obsolete, as we have touched before on how much technology can disrupt the media business (McDonald 204).

But it is important to notice the point of this chapter is to state that Netflix's future as a company doesn't matter as much as the unrest it has already provoked in the market:

Whatever happens to Netflix in the long run is less important than what it has demonstrated; tons of millions of consumers want to be able to legitimately stream television shows and movies directly to their computers and television sets if the price is right (Strangelove 154).

This is a very complex theme and in this chapter we have only scraped the surface of the changes promoted by SVOD in the media world. But before we go back to our object of study, to understand how *Black Mirror's* third and fourth seasons came to life in this scenario, we have zoom into the UK market once more and talk about Netflix inside Britain.

Netflix in the UK

The UK was one of the first testing markets for Netflix internationally and the first one in Europe (Ward 220). It first started offering SVOD services in the country in 2012, and nowadays the UK is one of the biggest markets for the media conglomeration, with the number of subscribers growing exponentially (the forecast for 2020 is 9.5 customers) (Statista 2018).

To navigate the very complex and strongly regulated British television landscape, Netflix's approach was "characterised more by assimilation and integration with the existing local television ecosystem than on any claim to supersede it" (Ward 220), as watching linear programming is still the main source of entertainment in the UK (Robinson, Raven and Ping Low 116), and the cord-cutting movement was never as powerful inside the island as elsewhere (Ward 221).

Netflix knew it had to fight local viewing habits, and that there was always a lot of aggregated value in broadcasting "quality" American content. A good example of that being the deal made by Sky Atlantic in 2011, who paid 233 million dollars to be "the home of HBO in the UK" (Ward 224).

With that in mind, in the beginning Netflix promoted American hits such as *Breaking Bad* and also distributed British content. It invested in marketing to produce an image of the British subscriber as an "international trailblazer" (Ward 226-228), and made a partnership with Virgin Media, one of the Internet providers in the UK, to boost subscriptions (Ward 229).

As a result, by February 2014, half of the nominees in the international category of the BAFTAs¹⁴ had not been 100% aired on linear television. However, the penetration was still low; only 8% of spectators were turning to SVOD (Ward 231). Amidst this, Netflix gained interest in *Black Mirror*, a programme which already was a domestic hit. Netflix took it from Channel 4 not only to broadcast previously produced seasons, but to commission new episodes that were not an "American version" of it, but something entirely new. In the next chapter we will investigate how exactly this process happened, and what were the results.

¹⁴ The BAFTA awards are hosted by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts and are the most important awards of the media industry inside the UK.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM CHANNEL 4 TO NETFLIX: SEASONS THREE AND FOUR AND THE GLOBALISATION OF BLACK MIRROR

Black Mirror's third season was announced on September 2015. It was already in production and would be six episodes long, instead of three as the previous instalments, but Netflix closed a deal for twelve episodes in total, meaning a fourth season was guaranteed. Most importantly, ***Black Mirror* would no longer be commissioned by Channel 4 and was, officially, a Netflix Original Production.** (Birnbaum 2015).

Zeppotron stepped out of the production as Endemol launched a new affiliated production company along with Brooker, called House of Tomorrow, which would be responsible for the new seasons' production. Brooker was appointed to be the enterprise's creative director and the company was set to not only produce *Black Mirror* but also other content – with British products taking precedence (Barraclough 2014). This consolidated Endemol's and Brooker's partnership, as well as the author's establishment in the industry as an entrepreneur and executive producer.

At the time of the transition, both Brooker and Netflix were very public about their mutual admiration. In a 2015 interview, Brooker said the following about the change:

It's all very exciting — a whole new bunch of 'Black Mirror' episodes on the most fitting platform imaginable. Netflix connects us with a global audience so that we can create bigger, stranger, more international and diverse stories than before, whilst maintaining that 'Black Mirror' feel. (qtd. In Birnbaum 2015).

This statement is very interesting because it touches on many of the main points concerning this change. First of all, Charlie Brooker is very vocally appreciative of Netflix and its interest for *Black Mirror*. He makes it clear that Netflix is a bridge for the world outside of the UK. When he says he can create “bigger” stories, one can infer he's referring to bigger budgets, as well as being free from commercial restrictions. And obviously, it's important to make the transfer while maintaining the series authentic to what made it popular in the first place.

In this chapter we will analyse in detail how this was executed in practise. But first, we need to take a step back and look at the behind-the-scenes fussy negotiations that involved big money and some of the most important media vehicles in the world. The bid for *Black Mirror* was much more than a mere negotiation for a product; it was an illustration of the push-and-pull relationship between SVOD and linear television that characterises our post-TV reality.

The *Black Mirror* Bid: Traditional Broadcasting Trying to Keep Control

For decades on end, linear television was the absolute controller of television content. This is especially true in the UK. Even with the rise of cable television and piracy, the production of new material was still in the hands of the broadcasters, in a very hierarchical system that had years and years to stiffen and cement its edges. When streaming services decided to take matters into their own hands producing original content there was a shift. Channel 4 and the UK television system were very used to having partnerships with distribution companies and other channels overseas to sell their content worldwide. As we have seen in chapter one, the British television system profits a lot from selling of formats to other markets, and there has been a great deal of versions and adaptations of content produced in the UK in other countries.

The “natural” move for Netflix and *Black Mirror* was to make an American version. As mentioned before, this was cogitated by both parts. But instead, there was a total shift, something that took Channel 4 completely by surprise. So what happened?

Netflix tested the waters with *Black Mirror*, by making season one and two available (Plunkett 2016). It certainly collected a lot of data on the viewership of those episodes, as we have previously seen. It had been a success of public, and then Netflix made its move to commission the whole series.

Reportedly Netflix offered 40 million pounds for the *Black Mirror* bid (Plunkett 2016). The Guardian, in an analysis at the time, saw it as a mere question of money-over-matter:

Now Charlie Brooker's acclaimed Channel 4 drama *Black Mirror*, described as a *Twilight Zone* for the digital age, is set for a big-money move to on-demand service Netflix, in the latest example of the new breed of digital broadcasters snapping up established UK talent (Plunkett 2015).

However, taking everything we have seen so far in consideration, this seems like a simplistic explanation. Of course that bigger budgets are the dreams of any executive producer in television. But there is more to this.

When looking at the statements made by Brooker, we can see a number of other reasons why *Black Mirror* would move to Netflix. First off being that as we have previously seen, the desire for British content to take on other markets is inherent to its existence. Before, however, a technology such as SVOD did not exist to make this possible in this scale.

It is clear on the previous quote by Brooker that it was his desire to see *Black Mirror* as a global brand - as much as it is something bred in a very specific domestic environment. But furthermore, there are other differences posed by SVOD that can attract a production.

As an anthology *Black Mirror* is not a series that can be followed week by week. In this sense, being forced to fit into traditional scheduling was constrictive; something that Brooker has admitted himself:

I think that anthology shows like this have been waiting for a platform like Netflix or streaming services in general to come along. We don't have cliff-hangers, we don't have recurring cast members or characters; really, shows that reinvent themselves every week have struggled in the ratings. And ratings were the king for years. The only other way to drum up support for your show would be to run lots of trails, which risk blowing the story. On Netflix we can put the whole thing up and it's like a short story collection [...]. (Brooker interview 2016b).

Brooker states clearly there was pressure when it came to audience figures inside Channel 4, something completely expected from linear broadcasting, even in a mixed-funding platform. As in Netflix it doesn't really matter - or not as much, as we have seen, it takes some of the pressure off.

There is also more freedom when it comes to the running time of episodes. On season three, every episode runs for a random number of minutes, something that would never happen on linear television, where everything is calculated down to seconds. The limit really was Brooker's imagination:

It is more global and the running time... you don't have to cut it for ad breaks, and you don't have to cut it to 43 minutes. So we've done a feature-length episode that's 90 minutes without a break - we couldn't do that on commercial television (Brooker interview 2016f).

Does this strategy work? Well, we will discuss that when analysing the episode in question. But meanwhile there was this negotiation, Channel 4 was scraping to maintain control over *Black Mirror*; there were still negotiations ongoing so it would maintain its "first-look-option", meaning it Channel 4 would be the one airing season three in the UK exclusively. However, this would cost Channel 4 a fee (Plunkett 2015).

These negotiations lasted for long, with Channel 4 making claims the bid was an attack on the UK's local channels by US companies who posed commercial threat. After six months, it was announced Channel 4 had lost all rights to *Black Mirror*, and the series would be completely produced and aired as a Netflix Original (Plunkett 2016). On the occasion of the announcement, Endemol Shine, the production company behind the two first seasons was very outspoken about the negotiations:

It is unfortunate that having explored every avenue with Channel 4 an agreement was not able to be reached. Channel 4 have had the opportunity to recommission since 2013, and passed on this and subsequent co-production options put to them. Only following this and the first series' exceptional performance when aired on Netflix, did Netflix offer a longer order of twelve with an increased budget that allowed producers [Endemol Shine-owned] House of Tomorrow to realise their ambitions for the series. Further efforts were made to try to reach a settlement regarding a UK window for Channel 4 but these were also sadly to no avail (qtd. in Plunkett 2016).

On the other hand, Channel 4 argued it made a "serious offer" to keep *Black Mirror* in its schedule, but refused the idea of broadcasting it after it premiered on Netflix, arguing that the broadcaster "doesn't follow orders" and is a "home for first transmission content" (Plunkett 2016). Regardless of what really went down in those

six months of negotiations one thing became very clear; **linear television was not the primary option for prime content to be created anymore**; whether for budget, prestige, or format reasons.

Charlie Brooker has always been vocal about what went on behind the scenes of his career and it was no different with the *Black Mirror* bid. During the press tour for season three he achieved celebrity status as the face of the series and gave a number of interviews signalling what was about to come. He never held back when talking about the transition. He praised Netflix's work environment a lot, saying they didn't constrict him creatively:

I haven't seen a satanic side. They've been brilliant. [...] They're very thoughtful and when they have notes on the script, it's always very useful, annoyingly useful. I haven't seen a down side (Brooker interview 2016d).

He also cites this poses a contrast to his work while still on Channel 4:

Channel 4 wanted to see every single thing in advance and wouldn't have even had to put in much money. They wanted to see every single storyline, every single script. It was just impossible and held the whole thing up (Brooker interview 2016d).

So it's clear that general creative freedom played a big part in Brooker's decision. But coming to Netflix and producing directly to a global (and American) audience, it would mean to think of making the show on a bigger budget and catering to another type of audience.

Contradicting himself in another interview, Brooker said that there wasn't much difference, in creative terms, in working with Netflix or Channel 4, citing "just the running time, really. Nothing really in terms of content. I've been very lucky, I think, throughout my broadcast career" (Brooker interview 2016e). However, as we will see ahead, that is not what actually happened when season three arrived to the Netflix interface all over the world on October 2016.

Season Three: New Platform, New Style

As we have previously seen, a lot of times when producing American versions of British content, the first step to extend the number of episodes per season. By doubling the number of episodes, Netflix was following those steps. Also, *Black Mirror* was now counting with bigger budget and Netflix's global marketing machine (which includes translation to several languages when premiering originals).

But *Black Mirror* was not only catering to another audience. **It was also dealing with another way of thinking television content.** No running time restrictions on one hand, but having to bear in mind binge-watching on the other. No commercial restrictions, but the pressure of having the whole Internet commenting on the show.

The new batch of episodes reached the screens on 21st of October, 2016. In all episodes, Brooker is credited as writer.

The first episode is a clear steer away from seasons one and two, in terms of tone, content, budget, casting and format. Named “Nosedive”, it’s a tale about an extremely self-conscious woman named Lacie in a world in which social media is taken to the next level; people have ratings for all of their interactions, and one’s popularity affects their whole life. After obsessively trying to achieve better ratings and always getting her expectations frustrated, Lacie loses all her social interaction points and ends up in jail.

Nosedive has that stomach-churning ending that we have grown to expect from *Black Mirror*, the familiar spiral in which every plot twist is a turn for the worse. It also has a critic of social media that resonates with current times and it’s not so subtle at all. When it comes to pacing, the episode is quite slow, growing more frantic only towards the ending. However, in terms of photography and art direction, it’s interesting to note it has a theme of pastel colours. This enhances the idea of “artificiality” of the universe in question, perhaps like *Fifteen Million Merits*, but there is a roughness to the latter that lacks in Nosedive. It is a high budget episode, the looks are very refined, and it’s a big leap from what we have seen in *Black Mirror* so far.

Moreover, the main cast is predominantly American, and while the episode doesn’t specifically state it is set in the US, it has a feel of *Stepford Wives* which is hard to ignore. In many ways, Nosedive looks a lot like a diluted version of what we have seen of the series so far, shifting the thematic and cast to cater to American audience. In other words, it is what an episode of the “American version of *Black Mirror*” would look like.

But then we have *Playtest*. In a lot of ways, it resembles *White Christmas*. The story is set in England, but the protagonist is an American man. This time, a stray world backpacker who had some banking problems and decided to be a part of an experiment testing a new virtual reality videogame to get some extra cash. Aside the difference that John Hamm’s character is a villain while the protagonist in *Playtest* is

who we actually root for, there is a lot of other connecting points between the episodes. Same polished feel, but very desaturated photography, extreme slow pacing and even diffuse attempt at multi-plot. Not to mention the idea of being inserted into virtual reality, a common theme to both stories.

All in all, Playtest is a lot more faithful to the *Black Mirror* we have seen in the first two seasons, which sets an odd contrast in comparison to Nosedive. Yes, the series is an anthology, and all the episodes have always been loosely connected, but as shown in the previous analysis, there was always some kind of coherence in all of them. **Season three ditches this idea.**

The third episode, Shut Up and Dance, is perhaps the “most British” of them all. It’s extremely gritty and pessimistic, with a cruelty that sticks with the viewer. The story centres around Kenny, a teenager who is filmed while masturbating by a spy software hacked into his computer. He is blackmailed by a mysterious entity, who threatens to send the video to all of Kenny’s contacts if he doesn’t comply with instructions. Kenny then embarks on a journey with another man who is also being blackmailed, ends up robbing a bank and having to be involved in a lethal fight in which he kills his opponent. All in vain: his secret is out and in the end his mom reveals in the video he is caught masturbating to child pornography.

The episode is riddled with action, but sets up a mild pace, much like White Bear - surveillance and themes of punishment are also featured in it. However it makes prime use of tension, with every scene slowly mounting up to carefully placed turning points and scene beats that come at the right time. In terms of photography, it displays the same opaque desaturated tone, but now with spectacular grand angular establishing shots that show us the series uses its bigger budget to make the most of external scenes. Shut Up and Dance is terribly dry and finishes with the audience realising they have been rooting for a paedophile (who also turned into a murderer at the end). The episode is essentially what we have seen of *Black Mirror* in the first two seasons, not afraid to push the envelope, but taken a step forward with superior screenwriting technique and production.

However, on episode four, we hit a big break. San Junipero represents a rupture with a lot of we have seen of *Black Mirror* so far. The story is about a lesbian couple. Both are at the end of their lives and seek subterfuge in virtual reality, escaping to “San Junipero”, a virtual Californian town stuck in the 1980s, where they meet. After going back and forth with existential questions, they decide to “pass over” - die in the real world and transfer completely to the virtual one, where they can be together.

The episode ends with them driving into the sunset while cheerful 80s music plays on.

While San Junipero deals with some bleak themes throughout the episode, it's mostly upbeat. However, the big difference is the ending; **San Junipero is the first episode of *Black Mirror* so far that ends in a positive note.** Brooker admitted it was the first episode he ever wrote for Netflix, and he decided to set the story in California to toy with people's expectations of *Black Mirror* losing its British quality, stating: "I'd read that some people were worried that after *Black Mirror* went to Netflix it was going to be all Americans. So I thought, [...] opening scene: California" (Brooker interview 2016a).

So Brooker addressed the unrest in the public the *Black Mirror* was going to lose its authenticity. But as we have seen before, overboard cynicism is not known to set well with American audiences. It's hard to think San Junipero is - at least in part - not catering to that. Brooker has also admitted to have crossed out a bit in which dead children were supposed to appear, making the episode less dark (Brooker interview 2017c).

There is something else to be considered here. San Junipero is put right after Shut Up and Dance for a reason. We emerge from a painfully pessimistic episode, and San Junipero is a relief. Placed more or less mid-season, it works as a palate cleanser. This is because *Black Mirror* is now being produced under the logic of batch release. As we have seen, Netflix spectators are used to binge-watching series. But to follow that logic, *Black Mirror* would be a terrible show to intake all at once (as seen in previous reviews). San Junipero gives viewers a moment to breathe. **This would not be necessary if *Black Mirror* was following linear programming logic**, as each episode would be aired a week apart from the other. And Brooker himself has admitted that six depressing episodes in a row would be too much for any viewer (Watson 2017).

In terms of looks, we can associate San Junipero and Fifteen Million Merits. Both make use of saturated photography and bold colours, but again, San Junipero takes footage outside of studio. The tweaks paid off; the episode was one of the most commented of the season and it granted Brooker his first Emmys in the main award category – Outstanding Writing for a Limited Series or TV Movie and Outstanding TV movie (Stolworthy 2017).

Afterwards, comes *Men Against Fire*. Following a military intervention in foreign soil, it doesn't make it clear the action is taken by the American government necessarily, but some tropes and clichés about the American army are reproduced. The story is that soldiers use a device to kill “roaches” more efficiently, a population with a seemingly zombie-like disease. However, soldier Stripe's – played by British actor Malachi Kirby - device malfunctions, and he starts seeing the roaches for what they really are; just real, normal people. He then understands the device dehumanises the targets and is faced with deep regret for the atrocities he has previously committed. In the end, Stripe agrees to have the system re-implanted in exchange to wipe his memory of the murders he had committed before.

Men Against Fire is the most political episode of the season and makes poignant criticism of war culture and the sense of superiority used by “developed” nations to justify invasions and cruelty. It is not, like in the *Waldo Moment*, a more locally targeted critique, but instead something that resonates globally. It's disturbing, and even more so towards the end, in which the protagonist's cowardice makes the audience wonder if they would act differently in such a situation.

In terms of production, *Men Against Fire* presents the same signature opaque look. The episode tones up a notch when it comes to editing, but nothing too frantic. What stands out is the concept and the performances (something that is sticking to the British television tradition, even if the storyline is less domestic).

But *Black Mirror* makes another turn with the final episode of the season, *Hated in the Nation*. The feature length noir/detective crime episode is 90 minutes long, and presents a complex narrative about social media, herd behaviour and surveillance.

Through the use of a hashtag, people choose a target of “most hated people every day”. These people end up murdered in mysterious circumstances. Two detectives try to solve the puzzle, but they find out they are running against time as the real targets are the ones who got involved in the hashtag in the first place. A hive of robot bees, initially designed to substitute real bees in pollination after they were extinct, are being reprogrammed to execute the crimes.

The story is set in a close future London and starred by Kelly Macdonald, born in Glasgow, and Faye Marsay, natural of North Yorkshire. They both keep their original accents throughout the episode, and this fact alone needs a deeper analysis. Brooker's choice of casting is not coincidental; the episode carries an inherent British feel, mixing classic noir elements with the dark realism natural to television in

the UK. It would make sense to cast British protagonists, but usually actors from elsewhere in the UK have to tone down their accent, using received pronunciation¹⁵ (Hastings 2004), and that's talking about domestic programming alone.

So to have two actresses bring their idiosyncrasies to the screen like that would already be ground-breaking if *Black Mirror* was a domestic programme. But to do it on a series that is now of Global scale, especially with the Glaswegian accent, known for being thick and foreign to those not used to it, is something entirely new. It's not something that Americans are used to hearing and by making this decision, Brooker is making a statement: *Black Mirror* is now a global brand, but still has roots in the UK - in **all** of the UK. This doesn't go unnoticed; Telegraph references it, telling its readers that if they "enjoy the lilting musicality of West-Coast-Scottish-accented swearing, Macdonald is your new favourite virtuoso" (Collin 2016). There is a whole thread on Reddit¹⁶ dedicated to fans discussing the origins of Macdonald's accent - with mixed reactions to it (Aionis09).

The episode ends on a bittersweet note; both detectives fail to stop the bloodbath from occurring, but there is a hint one of them might have caught the man behind it a long time after the fact. The story drags on. It's hard to keep the tension up with such a long run time, and at times it drops and it's picked up again. Hated in the Nation brings forth a mix of many of the themes previously explored in the series, using the bigger budget to put together a high-quality version of what *Black Mirror* stands for.

By ending the season with this episode, Brooker provokes two things. First, even if the third season takes you on a roller coaster ride where there are mostly lows (and really low lows at that), when it ends it doesn't leave you with the underlying hopelessness we have seen the first two seasons. It somewhat soothes the viewer. Secondly, it reaffirms that *Black Mirror* has taken a journey all around, but it is a British series, and "comes back" to London in the end.

The next chapter will be dedicated solely to analyse the unfolding following the release of season three; in regards to fans, critics and the series as a brand. But it's important to notice that what Netflix and Brooker accomplished was something new; instead of making an American version of *Black Mirror*, they decided to merge everything, creating a season that doesn't really have that much visual or tonal

¹⁵ "Received pronunciation" refers to an English accent that was considered for many years the "standard" for the language.

¹⁶ Reddit is an American website used worldwide which presents a web forum format: users create topics of interest about any given subjects, starting a discussion with the fellow peers.

coherence, but that tries to cater to what the American and international public would want, toning down the cynicism in some episodes, and talking about broader themes, while making really dark stories in others.

Season three was a tremendous success and season four was announced in the beginning of 2017. Right off the bat, Brooker revealed some details of it, citing it would probably be “even more diverse” than season three and announcing one episode would be directed by American actor/director Jodie Foster, who got into the production because she already was a Netflix collaborator. He also revealed the list of locations would no longer be confined to the UK and US, and one episode would be shot in Iceland (The Telegraph 2017).

The series was later confirmed to be released close to the New Years, and as part of the marketing strategy, Netflix launched “13 Days of *Black Mirror*. Starting on Nov 24, the streamer dropped season four episode trailer bread crumbs that led to a 13th-day release of the full season trailer, along with its launch date” (Strause 2017). There were also posters for each episode, as if they were separate feature films, reinforcing the anthology quality of the series. Again, all episodes credit Brooker as writer.

Season four: A Step Ahead

USS Callister opens the season. It is the most obviously set in the US of all stories so far, with a majority of American actors on the cast. The episode it starred by Cristin Milioti, an actress known by the US public for her appearance in *How I Met Your Mother*, a very successful sitcom in American television’s throughout the 2000’s. The plot goes back to the idea of making virtual copies of people inside computer generated reality. Robert Daly is a socially awkward programmer who is the co-founder of a successful online game. Despite this, he is bitter and resentful of the fact that people around his own company do not give him the recognition or attention he thinks he deserves. So he creates a mock simulation, extremely resembling of the original *Star Trek* series, and uses his co-workers’ DNA to create virtual copies of them in the game. In it, he is the captain of star ship USS Callister, and abuses the clones for what their real counterparts do in real life. Nanette Cole is then brought onto the team and, infatuated by her, Daly creates a copy that has to obey to his demands. Cole is having none of it and begins a rebellion that frees the whole crew from Daly, and probably leaves him for dead in the real world.

The episode touches upon a lot of themes that are very dear to American culture, but it is in its format that it mostly brings forth American television. Unlike the rest of *Black Mirror*, in which everything is more nuanced, USS Callister has a clear set of evil vs. good. It's a classic hero narrative and we root for Cole as she single-handedly saves her peers. It is the repetition of the classic American movie structure, and this is also reproduced technically. The episode is making use of a bigger budget, but also changing the tone of editing, using frantic cuts and storyline progression that are feel very familiar to Hollywood product.

Basically, what USS Callister does is make a list of all the tropes of American sci-fi and apply them. The twist relies on the fact that a woman is the hero of the story, and the villain is the nerdy outcast, not only who is usually the hero in this type of content, but also a projection of the audience typically attracted by it. **Brooker makes a choice “beating the enemy at his own game”, but in doing so, it distances himself from the feel of *Black Mirror* that has set the tone for the series since its beginning.**

USS Callister resonated a lot with the American public - either for the nostalgia of going back to classic sci-fi, or for the shock of the narrative itself, or seeing an American sweetheart referring to her genitalia as “my pussy” on the screen. It was nominated for an extensive list of prizes, both in the US and the UK, and it won four Emmy awards (including editing - which is interesting because the editing technique is very Hollywood-like).

Black Mirror then slows down the pace with Arkangel, the episode directed by Jodie Foster. Still an American casting, the story is focused on a mother who agrees to have her daughter be the tester of a spy software. She can “see through her daughter’s eyes” with it. At first this seems to strengthen the mother-daughter bond, but as the child, Sara, gets older the device proves to be damaging to her psyche. They both agree to put it away and this goes on for some years, but when Sara decides to experiment with sex and drugs in her teenage years, her mother uses the software to enable her monstrous controlling side. Things escalate and Sara ends up murdering her mom and fleeing the scene.

The reception to Arkangel was mixed, but there was a general feel that it was a “return to origins” for *Black Mirror*, as we can see in this review by The Telegraph:

Arkangel is ultimately archetypal Black Mirror, almost to a fault. The violent denouement isn't telegraphed exactly – but it's clear from the outset things are not going to end well for mother or daughter. After the revelatory

optimism of *San Junipero* and risk-taking new outings such as *USS Callister* – *Black Mirror*'s playful *Star Trek* deconstruction – long-time fans will be encouraged the series hasn't completely abandoned its bleak opinion of humanity (Power 2017).

Following, we have *Crocodile*, perhaps one of the darkest episodes of the whole series. It tells the tale of Mia, who gets involved in an accidental murder with her boyfriend as they run over a man on the road. Fifteen years later, she is married to another man, a successful professional and mother and has an encounter with her ex, who is still disturbed by the burden of what they have done. Blinded by the will to not lose the life she has, Mia kills him. She is then tracked by a device that can access people's memories, and goes on a murder spree that doesn't spare her husband and baby, to try and keep the memories a secret. The revelation that Mia's baby is blind, and therefore didn't pose as danger to her plan and was killed in vain leaves the spectator with an awful aftermath taste.

Crocodile was shot in Iceland and the lifeless and cold setting perfectly fits the slow placing and dark tone of the episode. Again, we go back to the desaturated tones. The episode is fifty-five minutes long.

The fifth episode of the season is *Hang the DJ*, *Black Mirror*'s intake on the current reality of dating apps. In a detached, somewhat artificial world we are introduced to Frank and Amy, a pair of young people who are seeking romantic partners. They are instructed by a digital coach on their first date, who tells them the forecast for the duration of their relationship. They find it they only have one night together, which makes them both disappointed. After being forced by the system to be in unfulfilling relationships, Frank and Amy decide to "rebel" and run away from the facility which imprisons them. Then we find out they are just computer simulations, that have tried to rebel together 998 out of 1000 times, which makes them 99,8% compatible. The real Frank and Amy, in the real world, check their computer screen and realise it has found their "match", before locking eyes with each other.

Despite the bittersweet fact that the Frank and Amy the spectators have been rooting for don't really exist, the episode ends on a positive note. And the treatment given to the plot is also very endearing. Contrary to most *Black Mirror* episodes, love is seen as something pure and good. The main cast is completely British, and in terms on production and format, *Hang the DJ* is very well in tone with seasons one and two, but it's also a softer storyline if compared to *Crocodile*, or the two final episodes following it. **It works, like *San Junipero*, as a palate cleanser.**

Metalhead is the chapter that has the biggest stretch/innovation when it comes to aesthetics. Following an apocalyptic/artificial intelligence up rise plot very typical of science fiction, the twist is that the robots are guardian dogs. The episode is shot in black and white, using high contrast to accentuate the technique - something imported from Film Noir, but that poses as a rupture with the rest of the series so far. The camera angles and movements are also more venturesome than the clean, transparent editing we have grown to expect from *Black Mirror*. The story's protagonist, Bella, fails her rescue mission and succumbs to a gruesome death after being tracked down by the robot dogs. In the end it's revealed the mission was to rescue teddy bears for the surviving children.

The episode has the shortest run time of the season, only forty-one minutes. Still the pacing sometimes can throw the spectator a little off. In general, the reception to Metalhead by the audience was lukewarm (Starkey 2017). Bella is played by Maxime Peake, an English actress.

Black Mirror's fourth season ends with Black Museum, another episode that much like White Christmas, works with two central characters visiting a series of other stories through memories, a multi-plot with various side stories that have beginning and end. The episode was written by Brooker but adapted from a story written by American television personality and magician Penn Jillete, a first for the series.

Nish comes to visit the Black Museum, owned by Rolo Haynes (played by English actor Douglas Hodge). It has collection of sinister artefacts, most of them containing real people's consciousness which was transferred into objects. Rolo tells the terrible stories behind some of the items, bragging about how he acquired them. It is then revealed Nish is in the museum to avenge the consciousness of her father, a convicted criminal whose mind is being tortured by Rolo. She poisons him, destroys the museum and flees the scene.

Black Museum revisits a lot of the themes explored in all four season, and in this sense it is a good choice for a last episode. However, the multi-plot doesn't work that well, which drags the whole story. The reaction was mixed, and there was also controversy sparked about the way the episode addresses race (Addawoo 2018).

The biggest news is the casting of Guyanese actress Letitia Wright. The decision of casting Wright expands the front row casting of the series, emphasising its global status but also opening a door to showcasing talents from lesser known parts of the English speaking world

Season four of *Black Mirror* follows a lot of what season three had laid down; **more variety between episodes, the mix between American/global storylines and casting with British ones, dark and cruel narratives intercalated with more upbeat/optimistic stories**. It consolidates the idea of making a global series that still brings British talent elsewhere, and remains faithful to the premise of not being scared of being cruel to viewers - at least most of the time. Brooker breaks the first season traditions of nonstop cynicism and bad endings. Maybe in thinking that now viewers are probably watching the season all at once, maybe because global audiences are not as used to terrible endings like the domestic viewers, maybe because both of these reasons.

Now that we have analysed the negotiations between Netflix and Charlie Brooker, and the results of those, in the next chapter we will see in detail what that meant for *Black Mirror* as a global brand.

CHAPTER FIVE **BLACK MIRROR TAKES OVER THE WORLD**

Doctor Who, *Monty Python*, *Sherlock Holmes*, were all examples of British television shows that won over the world with their “typically British” quiriness. In many other cases, successful programmes were bought by American broadcasters and had their “American versions” made. The arrival of SVOD however, opened new possibilities for niche and/or domestic content. Services such as Netflix created a platform to take film and television created outside of Hollywood format to the world in a scale never before seen.

Black Mirror is on the fringe of this phenomenon because it is a very endogenous show. It settles into the heritage of dystopian, bleak sci-fi that is a long tradition in the UK, as a direct descendant of shows that exploit the concepts of surveillance, privacy, and dystopian futures under a very dark, pessimistic intake of technology.

However, this breed of idiosyncrasies considered domestic went global when the series started being commissioned by Netflix.

We have touched upon what changed and stayed the same in terms of content and format after *Black Mirror* became a Netflix original. Now, it's time to explore outside of the screen; the reactions of fans, critics, and what was the actual impact of the change in the show's viewership. In order to accomplish such analysis, we cannot count with audience figures, so instead a mix of reviews and data will be used. The idea is to broaden the sources to try and see the new scope of the series from different perspectives; professional reviewers, fans, specialised statistics companies, academic studies and Netflix itself.

***Black Mirror* After Netflix: Bigger Budget, More Variety and the UK/US Dichotomy**

Flexible run times, bigger budget, international cast. All of that became a part of *Black Mirror* when it left linear television and started being produced for an OTT screen. But how were all of these changes and influence they had on content, perceived? One of the things noted by the reviewers is the variety of tone and format between the episodes - something that starts off in season three and gets taken to next level on season four. Some even call it a range of different genres (Hooton 2017).

To some critics, this is a good thing. For some reviewers, though, the series' Britishness still stands out from what they are used to seeing on television. Morgan Jeffrey writes that in season three, "Black Mirror hasn't totally eschewed its grimy Britishness, though. It's more potent than ever in the race against time thriller 'Shut Up and Dance'" (Jeffrey 2016).

The broad use of different genres in the seasons three and four is a contrast to what we have seen in the first two seasons. National Anthem was a controversial episode in the UK and it could be too shocking for American audiences. As a response to this, when a user clicks on *Black Mirror* for the first time on Netflix's interface, the first episode it comes up is not National Anthem, as would be intuitive, since it is the first chapter of the first season. Instead, it jumps straight to Nosedive. If the user doesn't pay a lot of attention to the interface, *Black Mirror* will start then. Sure, one explanation for this is that *Black Mirror* became a Netflix Original

“officially” after season three, but it could also be a clever way to warm up the spectator to the content of the series.

The amount of money invested in *Black Mirror* also changed. Netflix has a global marketing machine, and because it exists inside the internet, it knows how to work it to create buzz. In my personal experience working with Netflix, I could see how much effort was put into creating versions in different languages that were uniformed. The idea of the enterprise is to launch its originals around the world as global products. It disrupts the notion of content created and seen in Hollywood first and then trickling down to the rest of the world. When we have people in China being able to binge-watch a series at the same time that viewers in Argentina, it changes the dynamic of the television industry. And that’s why Netflix is keen on investing so much to have their content translated to so many languages. But this strategy also concentrates a lot of power and control on Netflix’s hands instead of different agents pulverised all over the television market.

The marketing strategy is likewise massive. Netflix uses the same tropes linear television does; interviews, press tours, reviews and articles. But it also invests in doing a type of marketing for the internet environment. The posters created for season four, for example, not only reinforce the idea that each episode stands on its own, but are also easily shared on social media and the marketing of the series is done by their own fans. We will elaborate further on this seemingly more active role of viewers inside this new dynamic, but first, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone was satisfied with this abundance of resources being injected into the series.



Figure 1 - shareable poster of *Black Mirror Hang the DJ* episode. IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5710978/>

On a lengthy review on his Medium¹⁷ blog, Daniel Riesco, a fan of the series and television professional argued against the bigger budget. This review in special was selected for going in detail about how the new aesthetics of the series was changed. Riesco makes a case that the fact that Netflix made more money available for the series was not a good thing, as it made it look “overproduced and artificial” (Riesco 2017). For him, what makes *Black Mirror* stand out is its proximity with our reality, something that was lost on season three:

“Nosedive” presumably uses its “clean” visual to convey the falseness that the characters live in. “San Junipero” looks intentionally neon and exaggerated to convey a fantasy land. Got it. However, it does not for a moment feel like the world we live in, or any human world. It lacks grit. It’s hard to buy even the simulated world. (Riesco 2017).

Further along, the series supposedly has become too American. Riesco notices that “previously, we had one American protagonist, John Hamm’s character on ‘White Christmas’. Now, 4/6 protagonists are American” (Riesco 2017). He notices that many episodes, in special Nosedive, satirises the American way of life, but for this reason, they lack British humour. Riesco is of American origin and lives in Europe.

¹⁷ Medium is the name of a worldwide a blogging platform

For other fans, the idea that *Black Mirror* is catering more to them is a positive thing, however. In a review for Vice, critic Rod Bastanmehr admits that season three looks different:

We leave the strictly English confined of the first two seasons and enter the US (as well as other countries), under the eye select of American filmmakers. As a result, the textures of the new season feel uneven, with pace and style varying wildly - the washed out, de-saturated tones you'd recognize from English TV persist. [...] The granular pace of British drama is swapped at times for the fevered pitch of American edit (Bastanmehr 2016).

In his review, the American critic makes clear the differences between American and British television, and what was kept or diluted in the third season, but for him, this is a good thing. **By making the series broader, including global themes, its relevance is increased.** He makes this opinion clear by naming his article "How 'Black Mirror' Went from Being a Clever Show to a Televised Thinkpiece" (Bastanmehr 2016).

This viewpoint is shared by other critics, but not only. Next, we will analyse two academic works realised in American universities, both in 2017, that use *Black Mirror* as an object of study.

First, a master thesis by a Justice Studies student on the university of Eastern Kentucky, who believes that "while the series was originally intended for a United Kingdom audience, its broader availability on Netflix [...] allows an analysis and commentary to be relevant to other countries" (Huber 2). This is interesting because, as seen, no television content is ever 100% confined to its domestic audience, even in pre-SVOD era. And especially the British TV had always had other markets in their horizon. So *Black Mirror* could never be completely intended for a United Kingdom audience only. However, as cited before, **its presence on Netflix allowed a broader access to it by audiences overseas. What Netflix did was connect spectators to content on a much more globalised scale.** Huber argues further that despite being a British television show, the themes explored by it are relevant in the US, as things such as the examples of surveillance present in *Black Mirror* are very in tune with privacy scandals such as the Snowden scandal¹⁸, and therefore are relatable to American audiences (Huber 38).

¹⁸ Edward Snowden is a former CIA employee who is known for leaking information about a worldwide surveillance scheme ran by the US government in 2013 (Burrough, Ellison, and Andrews 2014).

Alex Boren, an undergraduate student at Colorado Springs University agrees. In his paper “A Rhetorical Analysis of *Black Mirror*: Entertaining Reflections of Digital Technology’s Darker Effects”, he states the critique of technology within the series can be applied to American audiences and it is particularly poignant because “the message of *Black Mirror* contrasts with American users’ positive perception of technology (Boren 1). Moreover, he believes that some of the storylines are universally relatable, as “the themes in *Black Mirror* are highly applicable to anyone experiencing the technological advancements in the 21st century Western society” (Boren 17).

It is interesting to explore how much the series seemingly proximity with reality is what makes it resonates with many viewers. But furthermore, the fact that *Black Mirror* was being analysed as an academic object of the study in universities across the US meant it had definitely busted the UK bubble. Granted, this has happened before with many other programmes which conquered the audiences in the US, but if we go back to the interview with Daniel Kaluuya analysed in chapter two, we can infer just how much having *Black Mirror* on Netflix contributed for it to become a pop culture phenomenon. He was casted for a movie of an American director years after being on *Black Mirror* because its availability on Netflix made the show big in the US.

On an interest intake, a review in Australian Sidney Morning Herald states that having a break of optimism in season three makes the series stronger; advocating San Junipero is a powerful episode because “amid the mayhem and atrocities of *Black Mirror* that tender optimism is radical” (Mathieson 2016) and therefore lingers with the viewer.

Regardless of the different opinions concerning *Black Mirror*’s flip to Netflix Originals, all of them agree on two things: ***Black Mirror* is a British series and that is important for the content**, even if it has universal themes, **and it changed after season three** - whether or not the change was for better or worse.

If we go back to the framework laid in chapter one, and the concepts of Americanisation and Hollywoodisation, we can say that after season three *Black Mirror* had been successfully Hollywoodized: It had a bigger budget, and way more polished looks, talent available, and a substantial marketing machine behind it. The Americanisation, however, is patchier. There has been softening of tone and themes, catering to the American public in terms of casting, locations and storylines,

and in some episodes the nihilism has given place to optimism. To put in a nutshell, Netflix's version of *Black Mirror* has undergone a transformation that received mixed reactions, which mirrors the mixing of content styles inside the show.

***Black Mirror*, Global Audiences, and the Internet**

Netflix doesn't disclose audience figures, but we have had the aid of seeing how much *Black Mirror* penetrated different sectors of society in the US and the world to try to understand how much it has expanded its viewership as a part of Netflix. However, we do have some concrete numbers that can support the case of *Black Mirror* becoming a worldwide phenomenon after moving to SVOD.

First, we have information from the source itself; Netflix. The platform released a promotional banner with some information about the most watched original shows of 2017 worldwide, as seen in figure six. The information is vague and of course we have to take into consideration the company is disclosing whatever it finds appropriate, without providing much context on the methods used to put together the numbers.



Figure 4 - Netflix press release, 11 Dec 2017, www.media.netflix.com/de/press-releases/2017-on-netflix-a-year-in-bingeing

Using a lot of the vocabulary that is being consolidated as a part of SVOD, as we can see, the banner places *Black Mirror* as one of the most watched shows of 2017.

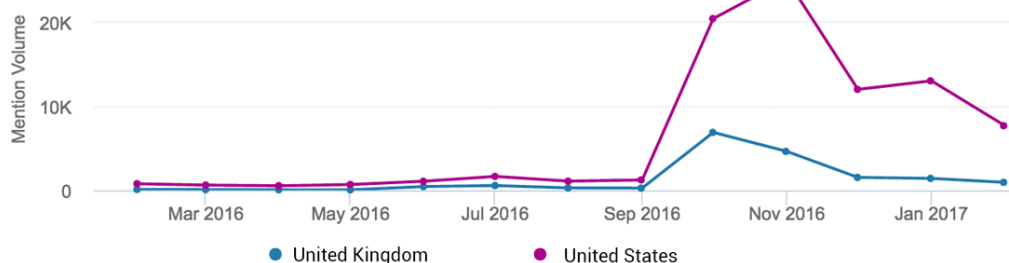
It is interesting to see American and English speaking content still dominate the lists. But further along, as being a child of the Internet and a part of it, SVOD is involved is something called distracted viewing.

As touched upon, spectators no longer gather around one device to collectively watch television. Rather, everyone has their own device, and looks for very personally curated content, which makes the television experience much more individualised on one side. **But instead of sharing the experience with someone sitting on the same couch, viewers today look for peers who rejoice the same interest in the great wide web** (Strangelove 135).

Through the use of hashtags in social media viewers take it to the Internet to comment and express their reactions to televisual content on real time, and engage in online conversations about it. We have seen on chapter three Netflix inserts itself of this conversation, and also uses social media as a platform of content marketing. **Social viewing is a big part of the SVOD experience, and platforms take it seriously** (Strangelove 135).

On the graph below we can see the mentions of *Black Mirror* on Twitter leaping after the release of season three on Twitter - with a big difference between US and UK users. Of course the USA having a much larger population also has more Twitter users, but it is interesting to observe a British show elicit this much online buzz in America. This monitoring is not available for previous years – but in the UK we have the audience figures mentioned in chapter two.

Mentions of TV show Black Mirror on social media



Social data analysis via Brandwatch | 10% of total | 1 Feb 2016 - 19 Feb 2017

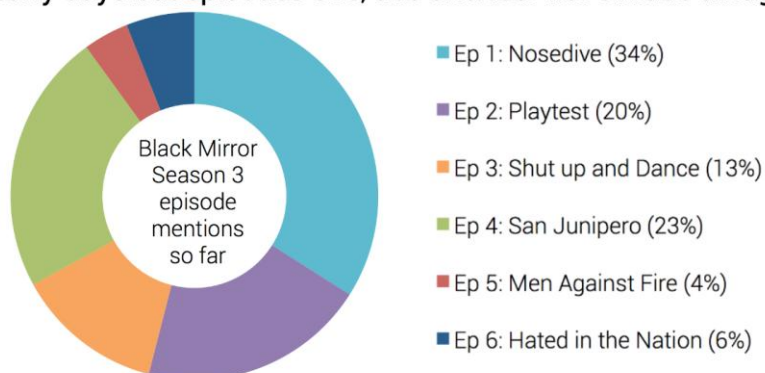
Figure 5 - Brandwatch - <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-black-mirror-expression-time/>

The next two figures break down the mentions per episode in season three and season four, considering Twitter and Reddit users worldwide. In both seasons

episodes like Nosedive, San Junipero and USS Callister, notoriously known from diverting from the line previously established by *Black Mirror* in the first two seasons:

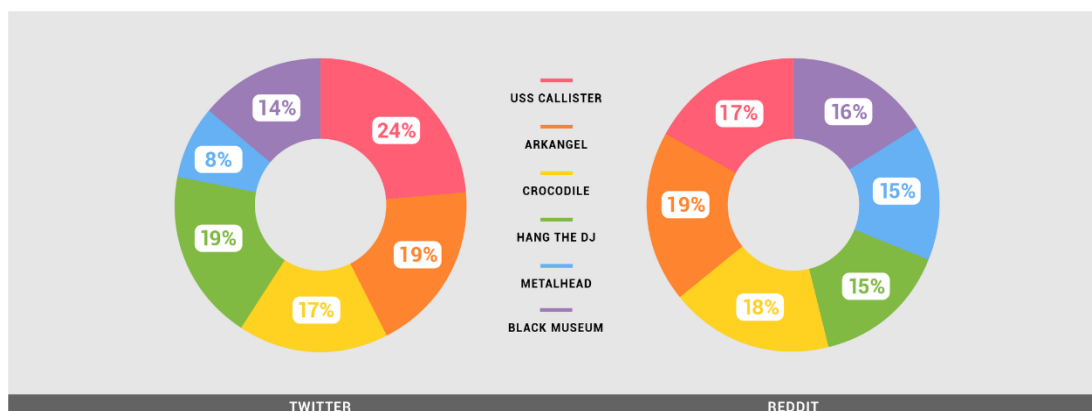
Black Mirror Season 3

It's early days but episodes one, two and four have made a huge impact



Data from 13,387 episode-related tweets | 20 October - 23 October 2016

Figure 6 - BrandWatch - <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-black-mirror-season-three-social-data-review/>



Black Mirror across Twitter and Reddit

People on the Black Mirror subreddit seem more likely to have reached episode 6 than tweeters

MENTIONS OF BLACK MIRROR FROM TWITTER + MENTIONS FROM BLACK MIRROR SUBREDDIT | 29 DEC 2017 - 1 JAN 2018 | @BW_REACT

Figure 7 - BrandWatch - <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/react-black-mirror-season-4/>

Despite not being so in tune with the series' Britishness, these episodes resonated a lot with the public, indicating perhaps that not only availability was the sole factor on *Black Mirror's* popularity but also its new content formula.

But the series really did become a pop culture staple by the proximity fans saw in it with reality. A curious phenomenon is that the series started existing beside itself; people were describing disturbing and curious events connected to technology in the real world as a something "so *Black Mirror*", a phenomenon recounted by the BrandWatch American marketing institute, interested in uncovering "how the name

of a TV show became an everyday expression” (Joyce 2017). It cites users comparing reality to events that happen on the show online:

Our system found around 650 mentions of “like Black Mirror” (excluding mentions like “shows like Black Mirror”, “I like Black Mirror” etc.), many of which were comments on news stories that described the elements as reminiscent of an episode or theme explored in the show. [...] “Black Mirror” is a rare but fascinating example of a TV show name turned into a commonly used comparative phrase, that can be applied to almost every aspect of our lives. It feels important. Beyond being a fun pop cultural reference, the connotations of “Black Mirror” as a term are unsettling and dark. It’s a descriptive term used to call out situations where technology seems to have gone too far and, if we ever needed language to describe that feeling, now seems like the ideal time (Joyce 2017).

In another curious online phenomenon, some users took it to Twitter to suggest plots for new *Black Mirror* episodes, all under a humorous tone that recollects small everyday tragedies. The marketing of the show feeds off itself. Social media enables creating buzz around it. One journalist reporting the *Black Mirror* pitch ideas surge, tried to weigh in on what could have made it possible, concluding that “*Black Mirror* is one of the most discussed Netflix shows as of late, partly because the ideas behind it are mind boggling but also kind of possible. Often times watching a series as such can lead to further ‘what ifs’ on the subject matter” (Fitzmaurice 2018).

It is natural that, after the buzz over season three, there was a lot of expectation for season four. And if we recollect what has been said about Netflix’s business model and its use of data, it is notable that every decision behind season four was backed by a copious amount of information on viewers’ behaviour. Anything ranging from cast to run time, and any content risk taking was a controlled experiment. **By the time it was producing season four, Netflix had in its hands data about how viewers worldwide saw seasons one and two - the grittiest in terms of content and format, and how they reacted to the innovations in season three.**

Some critics have deemed season four “divisive”, citing the deepening of the anthology feel of the series as one of the possible reasons of this, but also, the fact that storylines had gotten more personal:

The responses to “Arkangel” seem to vary greatly based on whether or not you’re a parent (especially if you’re the parent of a teenage girl), while some *Star Trek* diehards are ticked off about “USS Callister” and its vision of fandom¹⁹ run amok. Of course, that’s not to say that nonparents who dislike “Arkangel” are wrong or Captain Kirk fans hating on “USS Callister” are in

¹⁹ “Fandom” is a term used to describe a community of fans.

any way invalid. It's just a reminder that people see *Black Mirror* through the lens of their own experience. Who we are greatly influences our response from episode to episode, in a way that's unique for series television (Tallerico 2018).

Regardless, it is certain that by the final release of season four, *Black Mirror* had become a global series. Shooting scenes all over the world, with a diverse cast of different origins, that had broadened its content and format and was a phenomenon on the Internet. So naturally there was a lot of expectation surrounding a possible fifth season. After all, Netflix's commissioning of twelve episodes was over, and any further content would depend on a new contract.

The Future of Black Mirror

True to form, the announcement of the fifth season was done on the Internet, more specifically on Netflix's official Twitter account, on March 5th, 2018. So far, there was no further information in terms of release date, neither details of content, casting or crew. The only confirmation is the series had begun shooting, in the town of Croydon, England - which means for sure UK will continue to function as location (Sandwell 2018).

However, there has been tremendous speculation around it already. Brooker has hinted in the past he is fond of the idea of having six episodes in a *Black Mirror* season, which can be indication that the number would be maintained (Sandwell 2018). It's hard to imagine how much more the series could push the envelope, but it seems stretching the genre variation between episodes is a winning bet, so it's likely that will continue. **Whatever season five brings in terms of content and format, we can be sure every decision will be backed by all the information Netflix has gathered on the viewing habits of their subscribers.**

Regardless, in a curious phenomenon very intrinsic to the digital age, some are already taking to the Internet to make their own suggestions of what season five could touch upon. Specialised website Mashable dedicated an entire post to new technologies that have just arrived in our real world they would like to see featured in *Black Mirror*, including 3D printing and universal translators (Foreman 2018), reinforcing how much viewers like the programme's ability to relate to events close to everyone's reality.

On a more personal and incisive intake, Guardian critic Stuart Heritage dedicated a whole article to what he would like to see in the new season, urging Brooker to take advantage of the fact that the series is an anthology to amplify its emotional spectrum:

I want series five to experiment further. *Black Mirror* will never be a people-pleaser, but I'd argue that the horror would hit a lot harder if there was a little more humanity in the mix. You need to give us something before you snatch it away from us. Too often, *Black Mirror* just snatches from the outset, so we don't know what we're missing. Brooker has the entire colour spectrum to play with. Hopefully in series five he'll stop splashing around in grey (Heritage 2018).

It is a curious phenomenon to see viewers pitching in and trying to steer the control of where the series would go. ***Black Mirror* has become such a pop culture phenomenon, and so connected to Internet and social media, it could be a theme of one of its episodes.** Everyone will have to wait to see what season five reserves, but *Black Mirror* is now branching out to other types of medium, proving it has established itself as a cultural powerhouse. Brooker and Annabel Jones²⁰ have closed a deal with British Publisher Penguin Random house, on a book about the behind the scenes of *Black Mirror* scheduled to be released on November 2018. On the official PRH website, the publication is described as followed:

What becomes of humanity when it's fed into the jaws of a hungry new digital machine? Discover the world of *Black Mirror* in this immersive, illustrated, oral history. This first official book logs the entire *Black Mirror* journey, from its origins in creator Charlie Brooker's mind to its current status as one of the biggest cult TV shows to emerge from the UK. Alongside a collection of astonishing behind-the-scenes imagery and ephemera, Brooker and producer Annabel Jones will detail the creative genesis, inspiration, and thought process behind each film for the first time, while key actors, directors and other creative talents relive their own involvement (Penguin Random House - Retrieved 2018).

The publisher also closed a deal to publish *Black Mirror* novels - stories that follow the series' premise and feel but are exclusively literary (Barnett 2017). Charlie Brooker will not be writing those; for the first volume authors Cory Doctorow, Claire North and Sylvain Neuvel have been confirmed. Both Doctorow and Neuvel are Canadian; North is British.

Furthermore, the series, specifically the episode Fifteen Million Merits, was the object of an installation hosted by The Barbican Centre in London, in an exhibit

²⁰ Annabel Jones is Charlie Brooker's creative collaborator and *Black Mirror* executive producer (Gilbert 2017)

about science-fiction (Fuster 2017). *Black Mirror* started to stand on its own, exist outside of television and truly become a brand, a staple.

The Future of SVOD

New medium is very important for televisual content and capable of powerful transformations in the industry. With new technological advancements every day, it's hard to tell if SVOD is a long lasting business. Either way, it already has shaken the way television and film work to the core, blurring the lines between cinema and television, industries that have always been co-dependent but have been treated as dichotomous for a long time (Sim 189) – *Black Mirror* is a great example of that with its feature-length episodes. And so far, it hasn't given any signs of going away, with original content kicking off in other platforms, with successes of originals such as *Handmaid's Tale*²¹ and *Goliath*²². For Netflix, new originals are being strongly produced outside of the Hollywood bubble, as more globalised content seems to be a successful formula. Traditional studios and broadcasts are now racing to compete, and some main producers like Disney have announced to be working on their own SVOD platform to provide their content (Lang 2018).

This proves the idea that relying on second hand content is a fragile bet and Netflix made the right move by moving on to production. Also, it shows that what could happen in the near future really is anyone's guess.

Inside the UK, the media industry has experienced a major shift with viewers turning into SVOD more than ever, consolidating the services within a market known for its rigidity and preference for linear television. In 2018, "for the first time, the number of Brits who subscribe to streaming platforms has exceeded those who pay for traditional satellite and cable services, according to UK media regulator Ofcom" (Riley 2018).

This push has been triggered by two major points: the fact that younger people are relying on the Internet as the primary source for televisual content, as previously discussed, and the demand for exclusive and original content, a bet made by Netflix that completely changed the game (Riley 2018).

²¹ *Handmaid's Tale* is a Hulu original production released in 2017 and winner of several important awards, including the Emmys and the Golden Globes

²² *Goliath* is a Prime Video original production released in 2016. It has one Golden Globe award for Best Actor in a Television Series Drama

The side effects of this whirlwind in the industry are still to come. But we can see side effects in this new way of producing coming up now. For instance, we see a slight return to the studio system, a business model that prevailed in Hollywood until the 1950s, in which actors and actresses were studios employees and had very little liberty when it came to choosing which projects to work on (Anderson 6). Performers today do have a lot of mobility, but Netflix's cast is treated and seen as their team, as seen on joint press tours taken by cast members of different Netflix Originals together (Asilo 2017), which is not a phenomenon as strong in linear television.

The major change when it comes to production has been obviously what *Black Mirror* is an example of; the possibility of innovating with content, format, and niche programming, putting the spotlight in content coming from other parts of the world and investing in diverse shows that doesn't necessarily follow under Hollywood's umbrella. We do have to keep in mind however, *Black Mirror* is still an English-speaking series from a first world country, and the same worldwide success might more difficult to achieve for shows spoken in other languages and/or produced outside of the US-Europe axis. And even when it comes to content, we have seen how much *Black Mirror* changed and adapted its formula to appeal to global audiences. So what could be said about shows that really come from the outskirts of the media industry? How much does SVOD helps regional content have the global centre stage, and how much does it wash out in the process of doing so? Some say that "in cultural terms, globalisation inevitably involves the dilution of national cultures" (Green 23). But hasn't the television industry, in the UK and elsewhere, always aimed to be global in the first place?

CONCLUSION

Throughout this master's thesis, we have studied the trajectory of *Black Mirror* as a case study in hopes to understand whether or not streaming services do offer more opportunities for niche and progressive content, coming from outside of the Hollywood bubble, to thrive in the international television market. **The answer to that question remains inconclusive.**

As seen, we are going through a time of irreversible transformation inside the show business. The changes television is going through have defined its identity and function. Television in the 20th century was characterised by the state and market's firm control of where and when programmes could be viewed (Strangelove 234). With the arrival of streaming services, there was a lot of rearranging. The market started operating under a logic somewhat freed from audience figures' restraint, looking to produce diversified programming in an attempt to lure in more subscribers.

***Black Mirror* is a great example of how much streaming services act as platform for regional programming.** Launched by Channel 4, it was, in essence, a science fiction show that fit well into a tradition of bleak dystopian stories about the future. With the framework proposed in chapter one, we tried grouping a number of characteristics that, along the years, seem to be associated with the idea of "Britishness" and analysing *Black Mirror* through these lenses we found out that it checked the boxes for British science fiction.

The production conditions in the UK, as well as its historical context, bred a very unique regionalised television style, especially when it comes to science-fiction. In the UK, this genre focuses on ideas rather than sophisticated special effects to convey a message. As a consequence of PBS' heavy influence on Britain's television landscape, there was more room for experimenting outside the pressure of a widely commercial television, and for this reason, British sci-fi was a lot bleaker and controversial than the shows coming from Hollywood.

When it comes to style, Britain's idiosyncrasies also had influence on the content produced on the television. Arising from the country's very traditional theatre scene, British television drama has always been very reliant on acting and *Mise-en-Scène*, and cutting played a minor role, which drove the editing pace to be slower.

Regardless, American media and science fiction have always had a big part in influencing the content produced inside the UK. The two markets were always interconnected, with many British shows being sold and remade for the American public. Entering the US market has always been a goal for British television executives, who saw their own market being extensively influenced by American content, especially after political decisions diminished the role of PBS and stimulated television to operate under free market logic.

Black Mirror emerged at a time when linear television was suffering with the eroding of its audiences, and the world population started to realise they could access televisual content on Internet for lower prices - if paying at all. The rise of piracy around the world was a sign that market needed to change in order to keep up with viewers' demand for more control over the content they could watch.

In this environment, SVOD emerged as a response to linear television, providing viewers with access to content they could view when and how they wanted. As subscribers paid a fee for the service, it meant they were also paying for the content produced. For this reason, there was a change in mentality; instead of looking to make universal programming, capable of attracting large audiences, SVOD needed to diversify its catalogue as much as possible, fishing subscribers with niche content.

For this reason, there is a high hope SVOD can be revolutionary in the sense it disrupts the traditional television market, offering the spectator autonomy over the programming, and investing in content that is considered high quality and progressive. If there is no advertising attached to it, SVOD can play around a lot more with controversial and diverse themes and also take the investments out of Hollywood and elsewhere.

However, while all of this is true, SVOD brings a lot of downsides to the television market as well. It might not be linked to advertising in the traditional sense, but there is advertising that can be slipped in, being more successfully targeted and subtle to an unaware viewer. At the same time that SVOD pushes for a market more focused

on viewers, away from the stiffened institutions that controlled television, it also concentrates power.

What SVOD does is to reduce the agents involved in television production and distribution. Let's take *Black Mirror's* case: In Channel 4, it was produced by Endemol, broadcasted by Channel 4, and distributed by other companies around the world. With Netflix, the broadcasting and distributing become responsibility of just one company, and actors and actresses are part of Netflix's cast. Not to mention, that even though SVOD is still subject to scrutiny, regulators do not play such a strong role in this diluted, global television landscape (Dowell 2018).

So Netflix is globalising its content, investing money in different parts of the world, but it's also concentrating all of it for itself, in one uniformed platform.

And when talking about content, the rise of SVOD has also two sides. It is true there is more room for niche programming; *Black Mirror*, as is, might have never had such a big chance at the international central stage if it didn't have VOD to back it up. But regardless, it has changed its content and format to appeal to a broader audience. The difference is, there were still episodes very close to the series' first essence thrown in the mix.

So how revolutionary is the globalisation promoted by SVOD really? *Black Mirror* did become a global phenomenon, but how much of its essence did it sacrifice in this process? After all, what Charlie Brooker did was nothing new; *Doctor Who* leaped to conquer the US, as well as other shows that went as far as having their own American version. ***Black Mirror* innovated by mixing all things in one season, something that was made particularly possible by the fact that the series is an anthology - and perhaps that is why this specific quality of it feels stretched in the last two seasons.**

I came into this research hoping to prove that SVOD represents a good thing for the future of television: More chances for diversified programming - coming from all over the world, and talking about different things in different ways. But I have seen this might not necessarily be the case. There is a certain level of pasteurisation that comes with this kind of globalised content. Furthermore, while SVOD might represent chances for content produced all over the world this change will probably be slow. English speaking, Hollywood content, is still dominant.

If we think about the amount of control SVOD have over their viewers, and how much the thought of having incredibly detailed data on the habits of their consumers, as well as the hidden advertising addition, it's curious to realise *Black Mirror's* theme of surveillance, control, and technology going perhaps a bit too far fits very well with the debates around what SVOD can represent for the future.

The future of SVOD, as the Internet, is uncertain. Being a new medium, there is still regulation and adjustments to come. The rise of new technologies could completely change the path we are heading towards. But it has, of right now, altered the market and made a lasting impression.

In the United Kingdom, the tendency is that the market will slowly soften itself. Younger generations are already turning to the Internet to watch televisual content, so PBS' strength is being more and more undermined. In a somewhat recent statement, Ofcom has declared that "the current model of commercial public service broadcasting is no longer sustainable" (Ofcom 2008). With a discussion about license fee coming up in the next years, it's possible we will see a change in the much regulated television market in the UK.

With Britons more prone to pay for subscription to SVOD programming, it's likely the broadcasting industry might lose a share of the revenue it checks in for the domestic market (Riley 2018).

Black Mirror explored and stretched a tradition of dystopian science-fiction bred by production conditions and historical context in the UK. This flair made it unique, and with the help of SVOD it conquered something that has been inherent to British Television as much as its realistic grittiness; the desire to take over other markets, especially the US. It lost some of its essence in the process - but decided to take an unknown road by mixing both tropes known to be typically British and American.

The future might be unknown, but *Black Mirror's* story sums up very well the moment we are facing in the television market, and the role the UK has in this new, globalised, personalised and connect televisual world, offering a glimpse of what the next years might look like for television making inside the UK and all over the world.

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