# New wine in old wineskins: mass society, spectacularization and new technologies in *Black Mirror*

## *Vinho novo em odres velhos: sociedade de massa, espetacularização e novas tecnologias em* Black Mirror

■ A N D R E Z A   A L M E I D A   D O S   S A N T O S[a]

Universidade de São Paulo, Graduate Program in Communication Sciences. São Paulo – SP, Brazil

## ABSTRACT

This text is a critical review of the book *Isso (não) é muito Black Mirror*, released by André Lemos in 2018. The author discusses how, despite touching important themes to Communication – such as media society, digital media, social networks, issues of the body, surveillance and other technologies – the television series only touches on crucial issues of the last century. Even without denying the importance of the topics discussed, the book critiques the outdated approaches of *Black Mirror*, which are nowhere near able to glimpse the current problems and challenges of contemporary times. Behind a perspective that apparently speaks of the future, what we have, in reality, are new technologies being presented in old clothes.
**Keywords:** *Black Mirror*, new technologies, media society

[a] PhD candidate in Communication Sciences, School of Communication and Arts at Universidade de São Paulo. CAPES Fellow. Researcher of Center for Telenovela Studies (ECA/USP) and member of Ibero-American Observatory of Television Fiction (Obitel). Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6628-8340. E-mail: andrezapas@usp.br

## RESUMO

O texto trata-se de uma resenha crítica do livro *Isso (não) é muito Black Mirror*, lançado por André Lemos, em 2018. Nele o autor discute como, apesar de tocar em temas caros à comunicação – como sociedade midiática, mídias digitais, redes sociais, as questões do corpo, da vigilância e demais tecnologias – a série apenas tangencia questões cruciais do século passado. Mesmo que sem negar a importância dos temas discutidos, o livro faz uma crítica às abordagens já ultrapassadas de *Black Mirror*, que nem de longe conseguem vislumbrar os atuais problemas e desafios da contemporaneidade. Por trás de uma perspectiva que aparentemente fala do futuro, o que se tem, na realidade, são novas tecnologias sendo apresentadas com roupagens velhas.
**Palavras-chave:** *Black Mirror*, novas tecnologias, sociedade midiática

# R

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF the popularity of a worldwide media product to discuss issues related to contemporary culture in its communicational, technological and cultural aspects can prove to be an interesting exercise of analysis of the challenges of today's digital culture; as well as an invitation to go beyond what our objects seem to reveal. This is exactly what offers the book *Isso (não) é muito Black Mirror*, released in 2018, by André Lemos. Taking the British science fiction series *Black Mirror* as an object of reflection, Lemos poses an interesting question: behind a supposedly futuristic approach – which seeks to shed light on obscure themes and negative consequences of the new technologies – what we really have is an outdated reading, incapable of accounting for the current scenario unveiled by the digital turn and its social and technological developments, once it is still anchored by criticism of mass culture and issues relating to the techno-scientific society of the last century.

The science fiction series *Black Mirror*, created by Charlie Brooker and shown until the book's release in four seasons[1], is a British television successful product, which brings to the center of the discussion the dark side of modern society, particularly regarding the consequences of information technologies for life in society. Because of its noir script and pessimistic and dystopian tone – which explores the dangers of contemporary technologies and ambiguous feelings about scientific and technological development – the series has provoked debates that highlight its innovative character.

Deconstructing the idea that *Black Mirror* speaks of a future is, therefore, the greatest challenge of the book, whose central argument is that the series only touches on crucial issues of the first two decades of the 20th century, talking more about the recent past than about the future, and pointing with deficiencies, and even certain superficiality, to the current problems. To this end, the book is divided into four chapters – each one dedicated to the analysis of a season in the series. In essay language and easy to read, but with analytical and theoretical content, the work highlights relevant topics for communication research in the digital scenario, in addition to offering an overview of the limits and potentialities of the themes covered by the series. Each episode is analyzed separately, but having in common the research of how information and communication technologies are approached in their social relations.

Contrary to almost all other readings on the series, the author opens space for the discussion of issues that currently challenge us, and shed light on the need to reflect on a world increasingly crossed by the media and its technological infrastructures. In this sense, in an opposite direction

[1] After the book's release in 2018, Netflix debuted – in June 2019 – the fifth season of the series, initially with only three episodes. The expectation is that a sixth season will be released in 2020 (Coral, 2019).

that considers to be *so Black Mirror* everything that offers us similarities between life and the series, what the book reveals is how our contemporary society is not so *Black Mirror*. After all, the issues raised in the series do not necessarily do justice to the current challenges faced by a society marked by the advanced stage of mediatization, in which the foundations of our social world are deeply related to the media (Couldry & Hepp, 2016).

In the first chapter, Lemos discusses how the first season is fundamental to give the series a pessimistic tone, followed by all the others. There is no happy ending in *Black Mirror*. The omen immediately announces that bad things are happening, and they are based on the permanent use of screens. The three episodes of the season are marked by dilemmas of a massive society – from alienating labor and class division to a society of media spectacle. Even when approaching futuristic themes – such as the implantation of a mnemonic technology to record people's lives -, the debate proposed by the episode refers to an optics of the past, in which the visual memory typical of the 20th century persists. The device is futuristic, but the episode's view of memory is not able to help thinking about the sign of digital tracks and the performance of algorithms in large information systems.

Thus, still focused on technomedia formats and outdated paradigms – even when it supposedly addresses issues related to digital media and contemporary phenomena, the first season relates more to an old discussion on themes of the last century – such as the power of mediatized images, voyeurism and the spectacularization of the grotesque – than about our much more nuanced, conflicting and complex contemporary societies. Despite the appearance of novelty, the approach given to communication technologies in the season reinforces an old discourse: the denunciation of a society of consumption and spectacle, as well as the centrality of the mass media. These factors make the author consider that the first three episodes of the series do not help to think of emerging issues, nor questions of a near future that faces the challenges of digital culture.

In the second chapter, Lemos reinforces his argument that the series keeps the old treatment and the obsolete language, even when presenting new technologies in its plots. According to the author, keeping a critical theoretical-epistemological framework of the society of the spectacle, mass culture and trivialization of the politician, the second season remains marked by its attachment to issues of the last century and a pessimistic perspective, with no happy ending. The emphasis given to themes such as the society of the spectacle, the reality show and the mediatization of violence, maintain the series fixed in the past.

Thus, still focused on a common critique of the alienation, manipulation and techno-scientific vigilance of a society of mass communication, industrialism and panoptic vigilance, the season cannot envision a future based on the problems of contemporary cyberculture already identified.

In the third chapter, Lemos highlights how *Black Mirror* begins to flirt with a discussion closer to the present, although without settling the main dilemmas of today. Also keeping the exploration of themes such as social networks, manipulation of minds, cyborgs and systems of social reputation, this season opens up, however, to discussions more affectionate to today's reality, which only happens when the series moves away from themes that were specific of the culture, society, communication and technology in the 20th century – such as alienation, work, spectacle and panoptic surveillance. Despite this, the treatment and references to the problems presented in the series made Lemos understand that it remains hostage to the worldviews and technological and scientific criticism of the past, even though its last episode had waved to problems of contemporary culture, by addressing issues such as the polarization of debates on social networks, central and distributed government surveillance, the lack of security of systems in the face of the possibility of hacker attacks, the manipulation of electronic systems, games with drastic consequences and the issue of the environment in the new biological phase of the planet – the Anthropocene.

Finally, in the fourth and last chapter, the author observes that the series loses the opportunity to have a current debate on contemporary problems or the future of data surveillance. Keeping the record of the past, and just touching on current problems, to analyze the fourth season – which promised to be more anchored in current issues – allowed the author to conclude his thesis that the series is far from any futuristic or contemporary perspective. By bringing up the themes of memory, surveillance and mediated social relations without adding any new thematic or dramatic force, Lemos (2018) observes a continuity of the series in its negative view on the impacts of communication and information technologies on society: "With this fourth season, we can say that Black Mirror is definitely a collection of stories with a futuristic appearance, but with a framework of criticism to the technological society typical of the 20th century" (p. 119).

This does not mean that the themes covered in the series are not important or worrying. The central point developed throughout the book is that the emphasis on a massive and spectacle culture distances the series from a perspective of the future, as well as reveals the absence of problems that really refer to digital culture.

Launched with three episodes that basically talked about mass society and spectacle, the repetition of themes and approaches throughout all seasons

suggests that the episodes only updated discussions. Even the introduction of artifacts that do not yet exist – which left some critics and authors with a mistaken perception that the series spoke of the near future – has not been able to mitigate the problems and discussions of a time that is now gone. This cautious look by the author on the series allowed him to identify in its plot not a portrait of the present, nor a dystopia of a future network society, as advocated by some, but a return to the technologies and processes of the previous century.

Ultimately, reflecting on *Black Mirror* has enabled Lemos to develop a critical thinking about the challenges brought by digital culture and its social, cultural and political reconfigurations. As the author observes, the 21st century and the digital turn have imposed new rules of sociability and sensitivity in a world increasingly challenged by the mass media and digital networks. In this scenario where, in the one hand, the challenges of political culture necessarily involve a broader discussion about the influences of the digital environment – which includes discussions about filter bubble, data mining for political marketing and post-truth – debates on ethical, institutional and governance issues, concerning algorithms and data collection, also become necessary and fruitful[2].

So, if data and metadata have become a regular currency for us, ordinary citizens, to pay for communication services (Van Dijck, 2014), to reflect on the role of social networks, for example, in the formation of bubbles, in the constitution of a fragmented subjectivity, requires an understanding of the social and political dimension that goes beyond binary schemes, and that restrict the media to the manipulation of humans with docile bodies and empty minds. Precisely for this reason, in pointing out the series' deficiencies in terms of discussions about the challenges and problems of current digital culture, Lemos nods to the urgency of reflecting on the social character of these transformations, whose analyses cannot be restricted to theories and approaches of the last century.

More important, therefore, than the ambiguous feelings that *Black Mirror* has aroused about the consequences of scientific and technological development – much resulting from the exploitation of our dependence on these *black mirrors* – are, perhaps, the paths to overcome the limits that are placed on us: the return to humanism, the multidisciplinary approach and the possibility of bringing the humanities to the center of technological development (Harari, 2016; Hartley, 2017). After all, if the social is built from and through technologically mediated communication processes and infrastructures (Couldry & Hepp, 2016), understanding the way the media is present in everyday life is an urgent challenge. Perhaps we will be able to break the barriers that still surround us today and prevent us from seeing the dilemmas and challenges of contemporary times. M

[2] Such phenomena point to a broad network of action – technical, informational, mediatic – which covers the issues of journalism, sociability, forms of social conversation, algorithm agencies and even the structures of massive and post-massive media (Lemos, 2018).

## REFERENCES

Coral, G. (2019). O que esperar da 6ª temporada de *Black Mirror*. *Observatório do Cinema*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/2JLxijA

Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2016). *The mediated construction of reality*. Cambridge, England: Polity Press.

Harari, Y. N. (2016). *Homo Deus: Uma breve história do amanhã*. São Paulo, SP: Companhia das Letras.

Hartley, S. (2017). *The fuzzy and the techie: Why the liberal arts will rule the digital world*. Boston, MA: Houghton Miffin.

Lemos, A. (2018). *Isso (não) é muito Black Mirror: Passado, presente e futuro das tecnologias de comunicação e informação*. Salvador, BA: Edufba.

Van Djick, J. (2014). Datafication, dataism and dataveillance: Big Data between scientific paradigm and ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, *12*(2), 197-208. doi: 10.24908/ss.v12i2.4776