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Abstract

Reflections on mimesis have tended to be restricted to aesthetic fictions in the past century; yet the proliferation of new digital technologies in the present century is currently generating virtual simulations that increasingly blur the line between aesthetic representations and embodied realities. Building on a recent mimetic turn, or re-*turn* of mimesis in critical theory, this paper focuses on the British sci-fi television series, *Black Mirror* (2011-2016) to reflect critically on the hypermimetic impact of new digital technologies on the formation and transformation of subjectivity.

Keywords: mimesis, *Black Mirror*, simulation, sci-fi, hypermimesis, AI, posthuman

Black Mirrors: Reflecting (on) Hypermimesis

The connection between mirrors and mimesis has been known since the classical age and is thus not original, but new reflections are now appearing on black mirrors characteristic of the digital age. Since Plato first introduced the concept of *mimēsis* in book 10 of the *Republic*, mirrors have been used to highlight the power of art to represent reality, generating false copies or simulacra that a metaphysical tradition has tended to dismiss as illusory shadows, or phantoms, of a true, ideal and transcendental world. This transparent notion of mimesis as a mirror-like representation of the world has been dominant from antiquity to the nineteenth century, informs

twentieth-century classics on realism, and continues to remain at the center of philosophical accounts of realistic aesthetics.¹ On a different philosophical front, starting in the 1960s, the straightforward translation of mimesis as representation has been subjected to numerous critiques by heterogeneous thinkers who, in the wake of Nietzsche's overturning of Platonism, challenged stabilizing vertical hierarchies that simply oppose a true world to an apparent world, intelligible ideas to sensible copies, reality to shadows, or phantoms of reality.² In a radicalization of this move, postmodern theorists went as far as advocating a hyperreal world that has nothing to do with the logic of imitation because it no longer sets up a "mirror" to reality but, rather, "substitutes signs of the real for the real itself," generating a world of "simulacra and simulation" (Baudrillard 1981: 11; my transl.).

Informed by these past theoretical traditions, but with a focus on the present and an eye toward the future, I would like to reload the ancient trope of the mirror to account for the reflective, but also affective and infective powers of digital simulations that are not simply representing the real world (realism); nor are they solely dissolving it in immaterial simulacra (hyperrealism)—though they do both. They also, and above all, tap into an all too human tendency to imitate other humans, be they real or fictional, original or copies, real or hyperreal, thereby forming, transforming, and deforming what it means to be a subject in the digital age. Furthering a recent re-turn of attention to mimesis as "*conditio humana*" (Gebauer and Wulf 1995: 1) I focus on the futuristic genre of science fiction film to contribute to a *mimetic turn*, or *re-turn* of mimesis, in critical theory in general and posthuman studies in particular.³ I suggest that contemporary theories of mimesis need to pay closer attention to the performative powers of virtual simulations to retroact on mimetic subjects in the digital age, affecting human bodies and minds in ways that call for new diagnostics of the subject. While an increasingly connected

subject is visually spellbound by hyperreal simulations at play on numerous digital devices (TV screens, laptops, tablets, smartphones etc.) that may no longer rest on the mirroring logic of imitation, or representation, we remain materially dependent on a human body that consciously and, most often, unconsciously, responds mimetically to both visual and bodily stimuli. I call this dynamic interplay of virtual simulation and bodily imitation, “hypermimesis,” to indicate that it is located at the juncture where hyperreal simulacra and real mimetic subjects meet, mirror one another and, at one remove, reflect *on* each other.

In order to support this theoretical claim, I further a diagnostic of “hypermimesis” and “posthuman simulation” in sci-fi films initiated elsewhere (Lawtoo 2015ab; 2020) by turning to the award-winning British television series, *Black Mirror* (2011-2019), to reflect on the relation between technology and subjectivity. Created by Charlie Brooker in 2011, and composed of five seasons that include 22 episodes, the relevance of *Black Mirror* to diagnose the pathological effects of new digital technologies has already generated a number of reflections which continue to “spark philosophical thought, debate, and discussions of what is arguably the best science fiction show being made today” (Johnson 2020: 7).⁴ And yet, somewhat surprisingly given the series’ title, the specific role *mimesis* plays in generating new digital pathologies that break the mirror of representation and spread contagiously, and in this sense mimetically, or rather, hypermimetically, from the digital to the material world, has so far not received the attention it deserves. This article closes this gap.

In an interview, Charlie Brooker frames what I take to be the guiding philosophical thread of the series via a Janus-faced question that will orient our diagnosis: “If technology is a drug – and it does feel like a drug – then what, precisely, are the side effects?” (Brooker 2011) I suggest that the side effects of technological drugs reflected in *Black Mirror* are at least double:

first, technology in general and digital technology in particular has double effects in the Platonic/Derridean sense that it serves simultaneously as both a poison and a cure, or *pharmakon* (Derrida 1981)—an indication confirmed by the use of a digitized medium such as a TV series to critique the pathologies generated by new digital technologies; second, the side effects of this technological drug are patho(-)logical in an equally double, but for us more important, Nietzschean sense that considers sickness as “more informative than health” (Nietzsche 1998: 92). Why? Because an infection can provide philosophical physicians with the experiential material necessary to develop a diagnostic account (*logos*) of mimetic affects (*pathoi*)—what I also call, techno-patho(-)logies, understood both as a technologically-induced pathology and as a diagnostic account (*logos*) on mimetic affect (*pathos*) generated by digital technologies (*techne*).

Let us take a closer look at both sides of this diagnostic mirror.

Reloading Mimesis on a Black Mirror

That the logic of hypermimesis reflected in *Black Mirror* is not narrowly realistic, nor solely hyperreal, is already clear from the title, which refers to the black surfaces of TV screens, computer monitors, and above all, smartphones. This smooth, shiny and black interface neither gives us a transparent window onto the “real” world outside, nor allows for immediate insights in the technology inside. Instead, it sets up a self-reflecting mirror to contemporary users and viewers, urging digital natives to reflect critically *on* the dynamic interplay located in the twilight zone between reality and hyperreality the different episodes of the series dramatize. Rather than applying a critical *logos* to *Black Mirror* I turn to infer, via a hermeneutical effort, the techno-patho(-)logy from the series itself. This involves paying close attention to both the *aesthetic* and the *conceptual* mirroring reflections specific episodes set up to us.

Initially aired on *Channel 4*, then streamed on *Netflix* and now available in DVD as well, each episode of *Black Mirror* opens by reloading the same title sequence that foregrounds the interplay between digital simulation and visual representation central to the series as a whole.⁵ The sequence lasts around ten seconds, but it deserves to be analyzed in slow motion for mimesis operates in its different, protean forms, generating dynamic transformations that can be schematically summarized as follows: First, the initial image represents the familiar circular icon usually displayed on a computer screen as it loads a program, video, or game—an iconic welcome in the digital world of simulation that is no longer based on the laws of analogic representation (mimesis as hyperreal simulation); second, the icon is immediately followed by an ominous, vibrating, high-tech sound that doubles the visual experience, generating a dark affective tonality (mimesis as non-representative *pathos*); third, the circular icon splits into abstract, geometric, and moving symbols that turn from simple shapes (triangles, rectangles, circles) to more complex, dynamic, yet symmetrical shapes (mimesis as mirroring forms);



Figure 1: Mirror images in Opening Titles, *Black Mirror*

fourth, the symbols speed up making it impossible for human perception to visually recognize the forms as they quickly morph into what begin to look like signifying letters (writing as mimesis of speech); fifth, as the letters become increasingly recognizable a mirroring inversion occurs



Figure 2: Mirroring Inversions in Opening Titles, *Black Mirror*

so that they signify a perfectly readable, finally stable, and fully digital white title cast against a black background that reads, **black mirror** (mimesis as linguistic sign). Together, the different yet related manifestations of mimesis indicate that the upload was successful, and the simulation is now ready to start—a digital welcome into the world of simulation!

But something doesn't sound right. Ominous from the start, the technological music had been subliminally inducing a dark affective tonality that offers an (aural) counterpoint to the computerized white (visual) symbols qua letters. As the sound unpleasantly intensifies in pitch, the mimetic connection between visual representation (letters) and aural mimesis (sound) is confirmed by the letters vibrating to the music's frequency, signaling a potential breaking point. That we have reached that point is immediately confirmed by the (aural/visual) cracking of the glass interface that had been there all along but had remained imperceptible so far. This invisible surface is thus brought into sharp focus, splitting the title in two as it would appear reflected in a broken mirror which is indeed a digital mirror.



Figure 3: Broken Mirror in Opening Titles, *Black Mirror*

In sum, it is only as the visual surface constitutive of the hyperreal simulation is broken that it becomes visible and, as a consequence, can serve as a broken mirror to reflect *on* our contemporary technological condition—a dark welcome into a broken digital world!

What does this compressed title sequence signify? The aesthetic, but also theoretical effect of this opening is at least double: on the one hand, the crack marks an abrupt shift, or turn, from the seemingly immaterial digital simulation to the material screen qua technology of the device that makes the simulation possible—an indication that no matter how hyperreal and disconnected from reality the world of simulation appears to be in theory, it continues to depend on a real material support in practice; on the other hand, the opening sequence reveals that the simulation becomes apparent as simulation only as the material screen, and the digitized technology it represents, breaks—an indication that it is only when technology goes wrong at the material level that the black screen of familiar digital devices has the potential to turn into a self-reflecting defamiliarizing black mirror. If we join these two sides of the broken screen, the opening sequence already alerts aesthetically and conceptually aware viewers that this series sets up a dark, not fully transparent, but nonetheless theoretically sophisticated mirror that reflects the two sides of a hypermimetic technology.

The digital black mirror, then, is, neither focused on referential reality as such, nor solely on immaterial simulations. Rather, it initiates a critical reflection on the dynamic interplay between the materiality of new digital technology and the spell of hyperreal simulations, both of which are currently uploading human users in the twilight zone of hypermimesis. This is, indeed, the central philosophical problematic internal to each episode of the series. Adopting different perspectives to futuristic technologies in a near-future, *Black Mirror* dramatizes what are already

contemporary concerns with the pathological effects of digital technologies in general and virtual simulations in particular on increasingly dependent digital users. Topics addressed include phenomena as diverse digital surveillance, hyper-realistic gaming, media spectacles, resurrection in digital afterworlds, dating apps, virtual pornography, cyberbullying, cyberterrorism, political election of cartoon-characters, and other timely topics that are already haunting the public imagination in the digital age—sometimes prophetically anticipating real events.⁶

Each episode stands on its own as a short film whose philosophical value rests on a carefully crafted imitation of an action, which is not simply the *medium* of a technological representation but, as the opening titles indicates, is constitutive part of its theoretical *message* and deserves to be closely read—beginning, middle, and end.⁷ Drawing on the Aristotelian recognition of the logical potential of dramatic plot (*muthos*), but attentive to the Platonic diagnostic of mimetic affect (*pathos*), both conceptual and affective foci are required to reflect on new hypermimetic techno-patho(-)logies that are not only internal to specific episodes but are also currently transforming what it means to be a subject in the digital age. I shall consider three cases of hypermimesis linked to memory, unconscious imitation, and double lives. If these techno-pathologies give aesthetic form to *Black Mirror* as a whole, they come into focus in three, theoretically-related episodes that reflect (on) concerns that are not simply fictional, for they break the mirror of representation and cast a shadow on the contemporary world.

Hypermemory: (Dis)possessions in *The Entire History of You*

Given *Black Mirror*'s revolving interests in double lives, doubling of consciousness, and mirror games that allow subjects to move back and forth between reality and virtual reality, blurring clear-cut distinctions between these two worlds, different episodes could serve as doors to foreground the destabilizing properties of hypermimesis. But it is an initial episode titled, *The*

Entire History of You (written by Jesse Armstrong; directed by Brian Welsh), that most effectively foregrounds the conceptual paradox generated by the techno patho(-)logies of hypermimesis. Part of the first season, which establishes both the aesthetic and the philosophical concerns of *Black Mirror*, the episode deals with the relation between a technological amplification of memory that expands humans' cognitive, rational and logical potential allowing us "to see farther, organizer better, know more" (Clark 2003: 10), yet, also generates unpredictable pathological side-effects that are embodied, affective, potentially irrational, and constitutive of the double effects of hypermimesis.

At the general philosophical level, the focus on the contradictions, or aporias, generated by a technological extension of human memory is far from original. *The Entire History of You* can, in fact, be inscribed in a pharmacological tradition that, since classical antiquity, has been attentive to the contradictory effects of mnemonic technologies such as writing, diagnosing it simultaneously as both a poison and a cure—what Plato, in *Phaedrus*, called a "*pharmakon*." (Plato 1963: 274e). Constitutive of the origins of philosophy, Plato, under the mimetic mask of Socrates, develops a philosophical discourse directed contra the technology of writing which, in theory, he considers responsible for what he calls the "production of forgetfulness" (274a) and yet, in practice—and in an aporia Plato is wise not to resolve—he uses writing as the formal medium to stage this (self-)critique. As Jacques Derrida has famously shown in "Plato's Pharmacy," this Janus-faced diagnostic is not only turned backward, to the origins of writing in the Egyptian myth of Toth; it also paves the way for Western ontological distinctions predicated on a vertical hierarchy that subordinates writing to speech, absence to presence, copy to model, *mimesis* to *eidos* and informs a "metaphysics of presence" that goes from Plato to Rousseau, de Saussure to Lévi-Strauss, which Derrida sets out to deconstruct. More recently, building on this

double evaluation of the pharmacological effects of that privileged form of *mimesis* which is writing, Bernard Stiegler paid close diagnostic attention to another, related mimetic concept philosophy repressed, yet is constitutive of *Homo sapiens* nonetheless, namely, technology. Considering technologies of recollection in general and the double pharmacological effects of new mnemonic technics in particular, in *Technics and Time*, Stiegler rethinks metaphysical categories from a post-phenomenological, deconstructive perspective attentive to a subject, or Dasein, whose memory is exteriorized via technologies of memorization (*hypomnēmata*)—from the invention of writing to the printing press to the digital revolution—endowed with double, pharmaceutical effects. As Stiegler puts it: “contemporary technics...reveals itself at once and the same time as human power [*puissance*] and as the power for the self-destruction of humanity.” (Stiegler 1998: 85)

In many ways, this double, pharmacological evaluation of technics is dramatized in *Black Mirror* in general and zeroes in on memory in *Entire History* in particular. In fact, the series reloads Socrates’ aporia on writing for the digital age by critiquing new digital mnemotechnics at the level of the message via new media platforms such as *Netflix* at the level of the medium. There are thus sufficient reasons to inscribe the episode in this pharmacological tradition and take its philosophical potential seriously. And yet, important differences need to be signaled too: *Entire History*’s diagnostic focus is, in fact, not on the degradation of human memory due to the technological innovation of writing (Plato); nor is it primarily on the destabilizing interplay of a mnemonic supplement that disrupts ontological binaries like copy/original, writing/speech, truth/lies, absence/presence (Derrida)—though traces of this destabilization are at play in the episode. While the focus is much closer to the pharmacology of cultural memory that , foregrounds the ecstatic temporality of a mimetic/technologized subject (Stiegler), the emphasis

is much less on a (Heideggerian) concern with temporality and the existential anticipation of Dasein's future death it entails. Rather, the focus is on (Nietzschean) physical, embodied, or better, psycho-somatic effects generated by digitized implants in the human brain. These implants give birth to a hypermimetic memory with techno-patho-logical powers, yet also generates a *pathos* that dispossess the subject of its rational control over itself, generating hypermimetic techno-pathologies.

The Entire History of You dramatizes a futuristic technology condensed in a grain implanted behind the ear and neuronally linked to the human retina, allowing characters to automatically record and replay visual/sonic perceptions via a hand-held remote on digital screens or directly on the eyes' retina. These video-recordings are thus not stored on external media of representations that go from the invention of writing to film to the Internet; rather, they are directly registered in the mnemonic structure of a human brain that is, strictly speaking, no longer human but "posthuman," yet remains rooted in a material "body" nonetheless.⁸ Both digital and embodied, linked to the brain and recording the external world, this hypermimetic mnemonic techne, then, allows protagonists to replay past scenes, generating quasi-cinematic sequences that, within the film, are consumed individually or collectively, for information or entertainment.



Figure 4: Re-dos in *The Entire History of You*

At two removes, spectators are also encouraged to evaluate such mnemonic scenes and their effects on protagonists as events unfold, generating mirroring effects of self-recognition. This futuristic mnemonic technology, while not being realistic, highlights phenomena that are already widely disseminated in a digitized networks society in which intimately personal memories are increasingly turned into shared digitized memories—from emails to pictures on Facebook and Instagram, to data stored on Dropbox, information on Wikipedia, films on YouTube. The behavior dramatized in fiction pushes to extremes a type of behavior familiar to digital natives in the real world: from the need to compulsively share private images to the dependency on digital memories to remember names, encounters and dialogues, from a voyeuristic interest in private lives to the privileging of watching digital simulations over real actions, including sexual actions. What is structurally, and thus philosophically, significant in the episode, however, is a double, pharmacological effect that is constitutive of the techno-patho(-)logies of hypermimesis reflected in *Black Mirror* in general and dramatized in this plot in particular.

At first sight, there is great logical and rational potential at play in this hypermimetic mnemonic technology for it supplements the subjective and fallible dimension of human memory with the objectivity of a visual recording. The exteriorized playbacks of recorded memories, or, as they are called, “re-does,” double the original experience in terms that are patho-*logical*, for technics supplements rational (logical) insights to subjective experiences dominated by emotion (pathos). From the beginning, in fact, we see the protagonist, Liam Foxwell (Toby Kebbell) re-do the scene of a job interview he subjectively sensed did not go well in order to confirm his impression from a technologically-mediated perspective that allows him to analyze the interviewees’ questions, facial expressions, and body language from a critical distance.



Figure 5: Hermeneutical Re-do in *The Entire History of You*

The term “re-do” is thus well-chosen: selecting scenes, slowing down, replaying them, zooming in on details otherwise imperceptible to the human eye, re-dos are not simple visual representations to be studied from a clinical distance. On the contrary, as the term suggests, they performatively re-enact the mnemonic experience in hypermimetic terms that are more objectively truthful, factual-based, and specific than the original experience itself, let alone its subjective human memory. This is indeed the *techno-logical* power of hypermimesis in line with narratives of progress that were dominant in the twentieth century and continue to inform the present century: this technology amplifies memory, improves perception, reinforces conscious agency, deepens analytic power, and fosters rational control in a neoliberal, individualist and highly competitive society that calls for technological supplements to human capacities. Thanks to the hypermimetic implant, then, Liam, deepens his knowledge of past events, as an infallible artificial memory at his fingertips, and develops factual logical insights about the truth of his professional, social, familial, and amorous life. In short, this subject turns out to be a hermeneutical “master of suspicion” (Ricoeur’s phrase) unmasking a reality invisible to his naked but all too visible to his overhuman, or rather, posthuman eye.

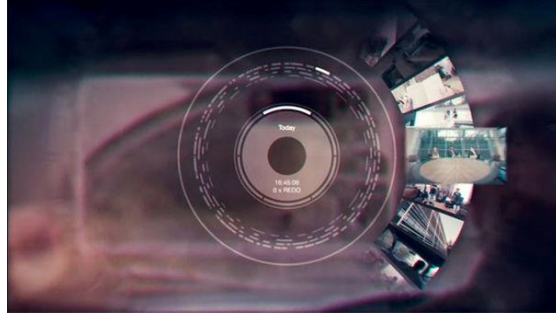


Figure 6: Posthuman eye in *The Entire History of You*

Not unilaterally opposed to narratives of technological progress, this initial episode of *Black Mirror* confirms that the series is not inimical to the logical potential of hypermimetic representation relevant for a rational subject qua *Homo sapiens* who privileges the eye over the other senses. And yet, as the circular digital image, which subliminally recalls the circular icon of the opening title sequence, already foreshadows, the logical distance based on the analysis of hypermimetic images soon reaches a turning, or breaking point. Hypermimetic memories, in fact, do not remain confined within the objective logic of visual representations to be analyzed from a rational distance dramatized at the beginning. On the contrary, as the plot reaches the middle, it becomes clear that mnemotechnical insights also generate techno-pathologies characteristic of *homo mimeticus* that will lead to tragic pathos in the end.

In the dystopian world of *Black Mirror*, hypermimesis generates techno-patho(-)logical spirals in which the rational *logos* made possible by new mnemotechnologies generates an irrational *pathos* that deprives posthuman subjects of rational control over themselves. As Liam starts suspecting that his wife, Ffion (Jody Whittaker), might have had an affair with a former lover they meet at a dinner after the job interview, his access to a digitally-enhanced memory begins to turn techno-patho-logy into its addictive counterpart, or techno-pathology. Precisely because of his hypermimetic memory, Liam, in fact, feels increasingly compelled to obsessively re-do mnemonic scenes of the past to find evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness. Re-dos of past

memories lead to more rational insights, but also, and without contradiction, to an unintentional irrational affect that catches the subject in a spiral of techno-patho(-)logical memories he no longer controls, but progressively take control of him—leading to a subject who is quite literally, possessed, zombie-like, and no longer himself. As Liam desperately puts it to his wife, who tries to erase her memories of her betrayal: “This isn’t me!”



Figure 7: Techno-pathologies in *The Entire History of You*

It is this second pathological move in which technological simulations take possession of the subject that *Black Mirror* is interested in diagnosing. At one remove, it allows viewers to reflect critically on present, apparently less intrusive, but increasingly affective and infective mnemotechnologies. In fact, as the human eye focused on the present is increasingly replaced by an eye informed by digital representations—from pictures on Facebook and Tweets, videogames and Internet videos—the performative effect of re-dos on the human body and psyche generates side effects the episodes amplifies to make them visible.⁹ Significantly, as the plot progresses, Liam no longer projects memories on a digital screen he could initially control from a cold analytic distance; rather, he starts compulsively replaying them directly on the eye, as the retina becomes the screen, generating an unconscious state of psychic dispossession that is the major hypermimetic symptom of this techno-pathology. Characterized by blurry eyes that do not look outside to the phenomenal world, but are turned inside to a world of digital phantoms replayed in

the brain, this subject no longer sees his present self in the mirror, but phantoms or shadows of the past instead.



Figure 8: Dispossession in *The Entire History of You*

As the protagonist's reflection is doubled in a mirror, viewers are in a position to see what this posthuman subject cannot see: namely that his ego is no longer in possession of his hypermemory; a mirroring inversion has taken place in which he is now possessed by them, generating a phantom-like, zombie subject that does not see realities but only shadows or phantoms of reality. Put differently, this dispossessed subject is no longer using technology to represent hypermemories constitutive of a futuristic fiction; unable to see the world directly, haunted by memories, absorbed in technological phantoms, incapable of focusing on the phenomenal world, the blurry eyes signify a state of psychic dispossession, or hypnotic trance, that mirrors less extreme but nonetheless pervasive altered states of consciousness generated by increasingly captivating digital technologies in the contemporary world.

This state of psychic dispossession was well-known in the cinematic tradition of the past century which was aware of the hypnotic power of a new technology like cinema; *Black Mirror* reloads this awareness to account for hypermimetic dispossessions generated by new digital technologies that render the contemporary subject spellbound by increasingly mesmerizing black digital mirrors, which, as we turn to see, operate on what I call the "mimetic unconscious" (Lawtoo 2013, 2019).

The Mimetic Unconscious: Hypnotic Trance in *USS Callister & Co.*

If the twentieth century was still dominated by an Oedipal myth that privileged dreams as a *via regia* to the unconscious, the present century is currently rediscovering an embodied, psycho-psychological, or neurological unconscious receptive to mirroring reflexes that have “imitation, contagion, and suggestion” (Borch 2019) as its most direct manifestations. *Black Mirror* contributes to bringing this mimetic unconscious out from the shadow. Despite the variety of perspectives, numerous episodes follow up on *Entire History*’s realization that hypermimetic technologies have the hypnotic power to generate unconscious symptoms manifested in altered states of consciousness of psychic dispossession, or hypnotic trance: from recordings of memory to computer games, military training programs to artificial consciousness, episodes like *Crocodile*, *San Junipero*, *Playtest*, *Man Against Fire*, *USS Callister* and *Striking Vipers*, to name a few, share a consistent concern for this technological transfer of consciousness to a digital second world—from digital memories to computer games, army ideology to digital heavens—which casts a spell on digital-dependent, yet still embodied human psyches. Thus, hyperconnected subjects are plunged into an altered state of hypnotic trance,



Figure 9, 10, 11: Hypnotic Trance in *The Entire History of You*, *Striking Vipers*, *USS Callister*

while their digital alter ego is playing out alternative, and often more exciting, second lives animated by hypermimetic simulations. Despite the diversity of new futuristic technologies at play in the series, and the self-contained nature of the episodes, the blurred hypnotized eyes and the entranced dispossession serve as a constant, and so far unnoticed, *leitmotif* in *Black Mirror*. It mirrors and magnifies a symptomatic techno-pathology characteristic of digital users—in the

film and, at one remove, in life as well—revealing mimetic mechanism animating the posthuman subject that are still in need of diagnostic reflections.

Interestingly, if the technologies of *Black Mirror* refer to a digital revolution that started at the twilight of the twentieth century and looks into the future, the conception of the unconscious it relies on looks back to the birth of cinema characteristic of the dawn of the past century. Drawing on fin-de-siècle theories of hypnosis, the sociologist, philosopher and pioneer of film studies, Edgar Morin famously suggested that cinema generates mimetic mechanisms of “projection and identification” that not only allow the spectators to affectively partake in the cinematic drama but also generate an altered state of consciousness Morin compares to an “imitation-hypnotic state” (Morin 2005: 96). If this state was operative in cinema, it remains operative in digital spectacles and games. As a technological revolution occurs, and new media are introduced, artists can use these media to dramatize the hypnotic power of new technologies to induce altered states of consciousness that render us sensitive to unconscious mirroring reactions. I call this unconscious mimetic because it has involuntary forms of imitation as its main manifestation, it blurs the boundaries between self and others, revealing the ego to be much more porous than previously realized, is relational and intersubjective in nature, is attentive to affective contagion, finds in aesthetics its major proponents, and above all, has hypnosis, mirroring reflexes, and (non)human forms of mimetic *pathos* as symptomatic manifestations.

Now, if hypnotic-mimetic spells were traditionally cast by human others, especially prestigious human others (doctors, leaders, stars), and cinema paid attention to the state of dispossession induced by fictional figures, *Black Mirror* suggests that such states can effectively be induced by nonhuman digital technologies that accompany us in our daily lives. In an interview, Brooker defines the world of social media and the Internet as a “weird dreamscape

that we are all involved in” (Campbell and Brooker 2017). And yet, this dreamscape opens onto an unconscious that may not require symbolic interpretations, for it manifests itself in psychosomatic reflexes. Brooker continues: “even just physically, when you look at your phone you slip into a little coma, and out of it; it’s like you fall asleep and then you snap out of it and you’re back in the real world” (2017). Coma or sleep are used metaphorically here, to indicate an hypnotic (from *hypnos*, sleep) state of consciousness, or light trance, induced by new technological media with mesmerizing powers. Due to an intense visual fixation on the screen, the subject becomes so deeply absorbed in that alternative reality that the field of vision diminishes, attention to the phenomenal world is reduced, the digital surface comes into sharp focus, receptivity to emotions amplifies, and an intense affective relation, or *rapport*, is established between the subject and a digital alter ego that has the mimetic power to influence its state of mind, leading the subject to experience the emotions of the other as partially his/her own—a common manifestation of the mimetic unconscious.

The episode titled *USS Callister* provides a visual manifestation of the hypnotic powers of hypermimetic technologies on gamers as they are connected to digital second worlds. It tells the story of Robert Daly (Jesse Plemons), a frustrated programmer of an on-line game company who designs a personalized computer game modelled on *Star Trek* in which he plays the role of a tyrannical captain of a crew composed by digitized simulations of co-workers that caused him frustration in the real world, and he can dominate in a digital world.



Figure 12/13: Double lives in *USS Callister*

Conforming to the futuristic genre of sci-fi, but actually reloading the romantic problematic of the *doppelgänger* in which the double compensates for the deficiency of the original ego via an imaginary alter ego, the theoretical interest of this episode remains in line with the duplicity of techno-patho(-)logies we are evaluating: *USS Callister* is both complicit with and critical of hypermimetic dispossessions of identity generated by digital simulations that affect bodies and minds—thereby redoubling the pharmacological diagnostic internal to his message at the level of the medium.

On the complicit side, there is, in fact, an idealistic tendency at play in episodes like *USS Callister*, which imply that human consciousness can be reloaded in alternative, digital words that do not require bodily support. According to this narrative trajectory, the Internet becomes synonymous with an eternal, paradisiac, and disembodied hyperspace that allows for illimited agency, freedom, and perhaps even eternal life. This digital fantasy is most clearly dramatized in *San Junipero*, an episode in which two aging and dying ladies have their simulated consciousness transferred to their youthful alter egos living in a Californian city eternally set in the 1980s where they can happily live out their lesbian love relationship. Progressive in its identity politics for it celebrates gay liberation, the episode remains metaphysically conservative in its attempt to give digital substance to a traditional, idealist, and somewhat nostalgic conception of paradise for disembodied simulations of eternally youthful souls living in what Nietzsche calls “*behind* the world.” (Nietzsche 1998: 5)

USS Callister offers a variation of this metaphysical idealization. In fact, Daly’s personal game is imbued with a sexist, racist, and phallogocentric ideology typical of the 1970s (but still actual) in which a white, male, heterosexual leader exercises a tyrannical will to power over

gendered and racial subordinates—excluding sexual power, for all avatars are ironically deprived of genitals in an indication that no matter how hypersexualized the game, the virtual space is deprived of real sexual contact. The narrative of liberation stages a progressive feminist politics insofar as it is initiated by a newly appointed female programmer, Nanette Cole (Cristin Milioti), who uses both her programming skills and simulated seduction to trick the master programmer, exclude him from the starship, and take control of the virtual game.

And yet, on the side of embodied reality, these episodes also stress that the ideal phantasy of a hyperreal simulation retroacts on the embodied subject with a hypermimetic vengeance. Contrary to postmodern claims, *Black Mirror* shows that hyperreal simulacra have not totally moved beyond the logic of “imitation” and all it entails (copies, doubles, mirrors, etc.) (Baudrillard 1981: 11). Within the film, such simulations not only perfectly mirror and double “original” human subjects on the basis of a reproduction of genetic code; they also remain connected to, and radically dependent on the “original” embodied subject for the simulation to work. What is philosophically interesting in *USS Callister* is less the idealized masculine phantasy of a double virtual consciousness in control of hyperspace than the physio-psychological effects of gaming in inducing altered states of mind. The case of Daly, as the name suggest, is revelatory of techno-pathologies that ensue from daily use of videogames. There is, in fact, an interesting mirroring inversion in which the virtual simulation of Captain Daly reflects critically (on) the daily effects of gaming: when the digital simulation is active in the game, the human user is positioned in a horizontal altered state of consciousness which, as we have seen, illustrates the light hypnotic trance, or dispossession, induced by digital devices: isolated in his apartment, unaware of his surroundings, disconnected from bodily functions, hyperconnected to

multiple screens, and above all, in a deep entranced state, this hypermimetic subject is left unconscious in daily life.



Figure 13/14: Daily lives on hold in USS Callister

Conversely, when the gamer snaps out of the trance to engage with a bodily activity in the real world (e.g., getting pizza), the simulation freezes in an immobile position as it is put “on hold,” unable to engage with and respond to the digital world that surrounds it. This is a mirroring inversion of diagnostic value: it reflects what happens to gamers once they are so deeply immersed in a digital afterworld to fall in a hypnotic sleep, trance, or coma, as episodes like *San Junipero*, *Playtest*, and *Striking Vipers*, also show via different forms simulation. This hypermimetic state, *Black Mirror*’s thematic insistence suggests, is constitutive of techno-pathologies that are widely disseminated in the digital age. Hence Brooker’s warning that we should not forget to “snap out” of new media trance, from time to time.

The underlying philosophical paradox of techno-patho(-)logies emerging from these carefully-crafted cinematic plots is that hypermimetic technologies that reproduce perfect simulacra in digital afterworlds have the logical power to amplify the cognitive capacity of a traditional rational subject, or *Homo sapiens*. And yet, *Black Mirror* also reminds us that humans remain embodied, relational, and potentially irrational subject who are easily vulnerable to the power of affect, or pathos, to generate states of psychic dispossession, or *homo mimeticus*. The paradoxical patho(-)logical effect is that the more mimetic the digital techne appears on virtual screens for the analysis of rational consciousness, the less conscious the mimetic subject

becomes in the material world; the more hyperreal the simulacrum the less real the subject; the more interactive the digital game, the more isolated the gamer; the more digitally active the hyperreality, the more psycho-somatically passive the reality; the more similar to the original the simulacrum, the more it differs from the human original. This hypermimetic paradox is central to our third, and last diagnostic reflection.

The Power of the Simulacrum: Eternal Returns in *Be Right Back*

In order to give a last twist to the paradox of hypermimesis and the techno-pathology it entails, I turn to an episode that reloads the problematic of the simulacrum from the perspective of a life after death in the “real” world rather than in the “virtual” afterworld—though this ontological distinction is precisely the line hypermimesis blurs. One of the most explicit case of hypermimetic simulation, *Be Right Back* tells the story of young couple living in the countryside, but fully connected to digital devices. Especially the boyfriend, Ash Starmer (Domhnall Gleeson) who, from the opening scene, is so fully absorbed in his smartphone that he does not see/hear his girlfriend, Martha (Hayley Atwell) out in the rain, knocking on the windowpane of the car to bring him coffee. A car, a smartphone, and a physically divided but loving couple; the bodily pain of burning hands confronted with the digital pleasure of a smartphone: in many ways the opening scene foreshadows the plot-structure to follow. When Ash dies in a car accident (presumably caused by checking the smartphone while driving), Martha reluctantly follows the advice of a friend to install an app on her computer that uses Ash’s digital traces from his social media profile (we are told he was a “heavy user”) to generate a digital simulacrum of his consciousness. This artificial intelligence is virtual at first but becomes progressively embodied as the plot unfolds: Initially only able to answer emails, Ash’s simulacrum soon turns into a

realistic voice that can be accessed via laptops and smartphones until Martha, who belatedly discovers she is pregnant, opts for a last step in Ash’s ghostly resurrection: she purchases a synthetic body with his exact physical characteristics (also played by Gleeson), which appears to be a perfect simulacrum of the original.



Figure 15, 16: Simulated smile/simulacrum of self in *Be Right Back*

There is much to unpack in this progressive materialization of a dead human subject into an artificial digital consciousness which finally materializes in an hypermimetic phantom body whose function is to help working through loss and grief—while generating the opposite effect.

Given our mimetic focus, it is useful to frame the paradoxical effects this hyper-simulacrum generates from the angle of a more traditional, yet conceptually revealing reproduction of the self. Early on in the movie, we see the living Ash uploading a picture of him as a child on social media, which provides revealing information about his familial past, and indirectly sheds light on his familial future. The only picture Ash’s mother kept after the death of his brother and dad (their pictures were relegated to the same attic as Ash’s simulacrum will be, in the end), it shows a smiling and seemingly happy child. Ash reframes it, by saying it’s actually a “fake smile,” to which Martha replies that since his mother “didn’t know it was fake,” it was “true” for her. Ash’s answers: “even worse.” Already within this mimetic (analogic) reproduction we find the fundamental paradox that continues to animate Ash’s later hypermimetic (android) simulacrum. Both the image and the simulacrum can, in fact, be

evaluated according to the *effects* they generate in viewers and according to the *affects* that motivate the subject. From the perspective of the subject the picture is fake, not only because it is a visual copy or shadow of reality illustrating a simulation of Ash that “isn’t Ash,” (Richards 2000: 43) as analytic philosophers judiciously note;¹⁰ it is fake above all because it does not represent a real affect (happiness), but only a simulacrum, or phantom of happiness. From the perspective of the observer however, the simulacrum, as Gilles Deleuze would say, is endowed with the “powers of the false” which is an embodied form of “will to power” for it communicates affects that produce an effect (Deleuze 1989:140-42), an hypermimetic effect that go from the simulacrum to the subject within the film, stretching to produce mirroring effects in spectators outside the film as well.

Now, once Ash’s digitized simulation is re-materialized as a simulacrum in an android body, a similar problematic is posed and exacerbated to extremes. Already when Ash is only a simulated voice, Martha, while knowing that she is speaking to a simulation that is but a digitized phantom of Ash, becomes so affectively attached to his “false” presence that her accidental disconnection due to her dropping and breaking the phone triggers the following effect:

Martha: I’m sorry! (SOBS) Ash: ‘What happened?’ Martha: I dropped you. I’m sorry.

Ash Simulation: ‘Hey, it’s all right, I’m fine. I’m not in that thing, you know, ‘I’m remote, I’m in the cloud. ‘You don’t have to worry about breaking me.

Martha consciously knows that Ash’s digitized voice is disconnected from the real Ash at the level of her conscious reason or thought (*logos*); still, her affective involvement with the simulation leads her to unconsciously suspend disbelief and be moved by real affects (*pathos*). Fake according to a vertical (Platonic) ontological hierarchy that considers the simulacrum a

visual (Apollonian) phantom far removed from a reality in what Nietzsche calls “afterworld,” the powers of hypermimesis in this world are also “false” in the sense of a pathos that triggers embodied (Dionysian) effects—what Deleuze also defines as “the power of the false of Dionysus himself” (Deleuze 1989: 152). In many ways, the simulacrum, while being a false human, or rather, because of it, outperforms the human original: in his sexual performance, for instance, which the simulacrum learned from porn sites and reproduces in bed with Martha, but also in a type of hypnotic docility characteristic of a non-subject who can be ordered to leave the house, or remain switched off. If the real Ash tended to “vanish” in the digital world, the simulacrum can conveniently be put “on hold” in this world.

Nowhere is this paradox clearer than in a dramatic scene in which Martha, pushed to extremes by the contradictory double binds of hypermimesis, decides to lead Ash on top of a cliff to jump off and die a second and final time. In a mirroring inversion of the episode with which this essay started, Martha accuses Ash as follows: “There’s no history to you. You’re just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking, and it’s not enough.” The closer the simulated performance comes to the original, the more distant the simulacrum actually is from the immanence of life. As Martha continues, the real Ash “wouldn't have just leaped off, he would have been crying...”. Affect, then seems to mark the difference between the simulacrum and the original. And yet, at this moment of dramatic *pathos*, the episode shows the false powers of the simulacrum to performatively produce real emotional effects in others. Thus, standing at the border of the cliff, Ash implores Martha with false, yet effective pathos:

Ash: “Oh Oh, God, no. Please, I don't want to do it.... No, I'm I'm frightened, darling, please. Don't make me. I don't want to die.”

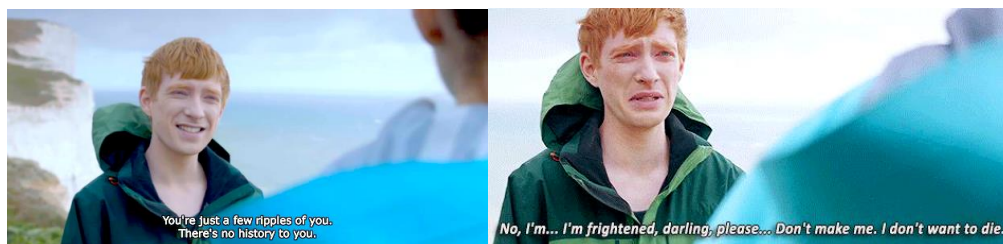


Figure 17/18: Artificial distance / Simulated pathos in *Be Right Back*

Martha: “It’s not fair.”

The fake simulacrum generates a real effect. Once again, it is not the ontological status of the simulacrum as fake copy that matters to the diagnostic of hypermimesis emerging from *Black Mirror*. On the contrary, the focus is on the false yet effective mirroring sympathetic affect simulacra generate on a real human subject. What Martha considers “not fair” is that the simple perception of a face crying and trembling in fear, whether true or false, if “performed” effectively generates an involuntary mirroring response in the one who perceives it. In line with recent discoveries in the neurosciences that stress the role mirror neurons have in coding “sensory information directly in emotional terms” (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008: 186) generating an “embodied simulation” (Gallese and Guerra 2019) that is at play in cinema as well, the scene also brackets the idea that intentionality is central to mirroring forms of affective communication. According to neuroscientists, in fact, the “intention” that motivates an action, gesture or facial expression might be more important than the mimetic expression of the action—hence the focus on “goal-oriented actions.”¹¹ What *Black Mirror* makes us see, however, is that unconscious mirroring reflexes generated by simulated facial expressions, gestures and vocal exclamations that can be intentionally fake have the affective and infective—Deleuze, echoing Nietzsche would say, Dionysian—power to trigger real mirroring effects on the mimetic unconscious nonetheless. Again, Martha *knows* full well that Ash’s simulacrum is motivated by a digital consciousness rather than by his human (intentional) consciousness; yet she is deeply

affected by his external manifestation of hypermimetic pathos—and so are spectators, at one remove. What is not fair, then, is not simply Ash’s simulation of affect, but the mirroring structure in Martha’s brain that leads her to respond to a false simulation with real pathos.

In the end, the logic of the simulacrum reveals the hypermimetic powers of phantoms to generate effects that escape the control of conscious intentionality. Conversely, in a mirroring inversion, the case of Ash also reveals that posthuman subjects fully immersed in digital reality might already be in the process of turning into a simulacrum that belongs to digital afterworlds. While Ash was still alive, distracted uploading his fake picture on-line, Martha says: “Just checking you’re still solid. You keep vanishing down there. It’s a thief that thing.” In a mirroring reflection that reaches spectators watching *Black Mirror, Entire History* reveals a tendency to “vanish” in the virtual world that destabilizes the distinction between the “true” world and the “virtual,” the “original” and the “phantom,” “living” Ash and “dead” Ash. The phantom of hypermimesis, *Black Mirror* suggest, does not manifest itself only in digital afterworlds. On the contrary, it is already animating increasingly connected living subjects who are currently vanishing in digitized afterworlds.

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As we have seen, *Black Mirror* pushes the pathological effects of new digital technologies on human consciousness to a degree that is still unrealistic technologically speaking; yet, by doing so, it provides a magnifying mirror that reveals techno-pathologies already at play in our increasingly hypermimetic lives. Given the tendency of *homo mimeticus* to enter into altered states of consciousness that, for good and evil, amplify an all too human mimetic disposition, the pervasiveness of new digital technologies that multiply images far removed from reality are not only threatening for the false representations they entail—what

Plato called a “phantom” of reality; nor are they solely dissolving reality in a world of simulacra—what Baudrillard called “hyperreal;” though they do both. They are also, and for us more important, endowed with a contagious and rather immanent power of attraction that generates immanent states of psychic dispossession, or hypnotic trace. Hypermimesis puts the body on hold in the material world, while the mind is captured in more ethereal, ideal and immaterial world that is already casting a spell on the ego—generating what I call, echoing Nietzsche, “phantom of the ego.”

Black Mirror, I have argued, not only reflected a world of fictional phantoms. It also encouraged a reflection on the reality of vanishing egos trapped in a twilight zone in which digital simulations and embodied imitation, vision and affect, logos and pathos, techno-pathologies and techno-patho-*logies* face each other, in a game of mirrors that reflects (on) the increasingly effective and infective powers of hypermimesis.

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Endnotes

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¹ See Auerbach, *Mimesis*; Rancière, “Auerbach.”

² See Derrida, “The Double Session;” Lacoue-Labarthe, “Typography ;” Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, 292-307.

³ My understanding of the posthuman is in line with the work of scholars such as Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti who stress the dynamic interplay between humans and technology. See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; Braidotti, *The Posthuman*. I add that it is because humans are mimetic creatures, or *homo mimeticus*, that the boundaries between humans and technology, and by extension, nature and culture, can be transgressed in

ways that are as much *logical* and progressive as *pathological* and regressive. On the patho(-)logies internal to the “mimetic turn,” see <http://www.homomimeticus.eu/publications/>

⁴ See also Cirucci and Vacker eds., *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory*; Lammoglia and Pastorino, *Black Mirror*. What follows supplements these studies by addressing an underdiscussed yet central question to the series, both at the level of content and form: what role does *mimesis* (imitation, but also identification, reproduction, simulation, mirroring reflexes etc.) play in *Black Mirror*’s dark diagnostic of technology.

⁵ For a comparison of *Black Mirror*’s opening title sequence to Rod Serling’s *The Twilight Zone*, which Brooker acknowledges as a main source of aesthetic and thematic inspiration, see Cirucci and Vacker, *Black Mirror*, vii-xiii.

⁶ The episode titled, *The Waldo Moment*, aired in 2013, stages a digitized blue cartoon dog qua apprentice politician piloted by a comedian who relies on violent rhetoric, accusations, and vulgarity in order to run for the elections. The anticipation of political events, both in the UK and the US, is difficult to miss in 2021.

⁷ Part of a carefully crafted “plot-structure” (*muthos*), as Aristotle would put it, these events are structured in order to generate a dramatic “reversal of fortune” (*peripeteia*) based on laws of causality and necessity that leads the protagonist to tragic “recognition” (*anagnorisis*) with logical and philosophical potential (Aristotle 1987: 37, 39, 42).

⁸ Kathrine Hayles argues that the “posthuman subject” emerging from cybernetics “*lost its body*” and give rise to “fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (Hayles 1999: 2, 5). This essay contributes to unmasking idealist fantasies from the embodied perspective of mimetic affects.

⁹ On the issue of trust and the need of social masks critics rightly noted that at the level of the plot, “cutting the Grain out can make one go blind” (Balke and Egele 2020: 29). Still, the opposite is also true at the level of the diagnosis in the sense that the grain induces a hypnotic state in which the subject no longer sees the world outside but only memories projected inside.

¹⁰ For an account of the affective power of VR simulations, see also Benn, “*Playtest*” 92-100; on the role of mirroring reflexes in empathy with robots, see Dunn, “Empathy.”

¹¹ As Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia put it: “the mirror neuron mechanism captures the intentional dimension of actions.” (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008: 130).

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