Brave New World and *Black Mirror:* What They're Trying To Tell Us and Why We Should
Listen
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Abstract:

As dystopias become more popular in our culture, it's important we look beyond their sometimes upsetting or depressing portrayals of the future and understand what they're really trying to tell us and why we should listen. By comparing Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* and Charlie Brooker's 2011 Netflix series *Black Mirror*, we can see how the societies the authors lived in viewed certain issues like individuality, government control, and politics. Not only can we understand what these things meant in relation to the cultural climate they were being written in, but we see the topics as subjectively discussed by the author. Beyond that, we can observe that the authors are trying to warn their audience of the possible consequences of their flawed beliefs and actions by showing sort of "worse case scenario" situations through dystopias largely overtaken by technological advancements. That being said, these works have a specific message they're trying to send, but also include many subliminal messages that are often intentionally vague, allowing people to derive personal meaning. Furthermore, these dark dystopian worlds are often meant to instill fear into the readers and viewers, in hopes of going beyond personal interpretation and motivating the audience to reevaluate their own values and beliefs, as well as those of their society. All of this is done with the intention to spark change among readers and viewers to create more aware and globally active citizens who want to work to create a better world.

In the toxic climate of today's society, people are often willing to look anywhere for potential answers to the social, political, and economic crises they find themselves in. More often than not, people turn to literature for insight, and very well may find it. Whether it's the prophetic words of Confucian analects, or inspirational memoirs by TEDTalk speakers, people seem to find something to hold on to. However, not many people immediately think of the ominous sci-fi works of flawed utopian societies often referred to as "dystopias" when searching for answers. Or, if they do, they simply think of them as dark interpretations of the future created by disturbed writers trying to scare people. This is true to an extent, although it's evident that these writers are trying to do more than just scare people; they're trying to send a message. Dystopian writers, both modern and classic, use their perception of the social climate of their time to warn people of the possible catastrophic consequences of their current mindsets. They do this by illustrating futuristic societies centered around technological advances reflecting the values of the time and their interpretation of the potential trajectory. Given that the author's portrayal of dystopia is heavily subjective, it also allows the audience to personally interpret the text for themselves and reevaluate their personal beliefs and notions of their society. Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World* and Charlie Brooker's 2011 Netflix series *Black Mirror* are fantastic works that showcase these distinct dystopian characteristics in exemplary and effective ways. They, among others, are pointing out the flaws in our society based on the author's perception, warning us about the consequences if we don't address these flaws, and using emotional leverage to motivate change.

Before looking at what these works are trying to tell us, it's important to understand how they were created and what fed into their themes. *Brave New World* details a futuristic London where the government is all powerful and controls everything from your job to your thoughts.

This revolutionary piece came at the tipping point of culture for the 1930s. In *Facing the Music: What 1930s Pop Culture Can Teach Us About Our Own Hard Times*, the author details how in the absolute worst times in American history, "advances in technology gave a new reach to art and communication" (p. 2), and gave us many classic works of literature. These include *Gone With The Wind,* the songs of Duke Ellington, and novels from people like John Steinbeck, among others (Dickstein, 2009). Furthermore, many of the elements of the world Huxley depicts are derived from his criticism of an overly technology dependent society, such as the idea of *hypnopaedia*, which is essentially glorified brainwashing. Hamamra (2017) elaborates; "Huxley modifies well-known proverbs to create stylistic effects that highlight his criticism of an excessively technological society" (p. 13), giving us clear insight as to his point of view on technology in Great Depression America.

It's equally interesting to note the extent to which each author of the aforementioned classics did (or didn't) depict The Great Depression in their works. *Facing The Music* goes on to say, "among novelists and nonfiction writers, there was a split between those who put the Depression front and center... and those who responded more obliquely" (Dickstein, 2009, p. 3). It's evident Huxley was reacting to the Depression in his writing more subtly. He was reacting to a time on the verge of a technological revolution, a time of complete turmoil, where society was also making leaps at becoming more utopian to counteract the wars that bookended this period, as *Traveling to Modernism's Other Worlds* explains. Huxley chose to fight against the advancements made in WWI, against the development of atomic science, border control, and the failure of the league of nations, and show what might come of the world should people keep working towards something so unattainable (Peat, 2015).

Similarly, Charlie Brooker, creator of *Black Mirror*, was directly reacting to our times now, where our lives are more consumed by technology, specifically social media, than ever before, just as Huxley's time was absorbed by the Great Depression and the technology that sprang out of it. His series is currently 4 seasons long, each containing 3-6 stand alone episodes portraying different futuristic societies, each with unique characters and storylines. Much like the 1950s series *The Twilight Zone*, to which *Black Mirror* has been endlessly compared, each episode has a distinct message. In this case, all of the messages center on a different aspect of life that technology or social media has amplified and the potential consequences; our online presence, social approval, public humiliation, politics, and so on. Regardless of the vastly different time periods these pieces were written in and the influences that contributed to them, they're both trying to do the same thing; first and foremost create a commentary about the social climate of the time.

One of the hallmarks of dystopias is that they're portrayals of "worst case scenario" situations, which can be further interpreted as a sort of satirical dialogue on the flaws in their society. Peat (2015) calls dystopias "the ultimate 'as if' realm" (p. 40), which is certainly true, however it's important to note that the writer is not trying to convey what society sees is wrong with themselves or the world but what the writer *themselves* sees is wrong with society or the world. Pieces concerning particular issues within a culture's belief system are heavily subjective to whoever is writing it and their experiences and interpretation of those socially accepted norms. This important distinction is part of what sets dystopias apart from other genres, these two works in particular, and it's equally important to examine the author's representations of societal factors to understand their point of view.

Individuality is one of the biggest themes throughout *Brave New World*, as the society

that Bernard, the main character, finds himself in, referred to as the World State, is centered

around the idea of "controlled individuality". Here, people are created, not born, out of chemical

processes that cause them to develop less or more depending on their predetermined social

status. In this way there is a man-made caste system ranking people based on the intelligence and

skills programmed into them which sorts them into either alpha, beta, gamma or epsilon classes.

This title is often paired with a "plus" or "minus"attached to further accentuate their place in the

social hierarchy. What's even more interesting is that those in charge don't even acknowledge

the idea of the existence of a true individual; the Director of one of the "Hatcheries," as they call

them, tells Bernard when he questions this idea, "Murder kills only the individual-and, after all,

what is an individual?" (Huxley, 1932, p.148). Looking at the 1930s, while there isn't exactly

this extent of control over human behavior and thoughts, there was definitely an emphasis on

class and knowing your place in society. This was the first time the world had faced a battle to

the extent of World War I, then just called The Great War, and most people were very keen to do

their part in the war effort. Huxley obviously took this to an extreme and brought in a lot of the

ideas of eugenics, but it's clear he saw rise in the rate of conformity among his fellow people.

In the context of *Black Mirror*, the first episode in the series is titled "Be Right Back,"

and discusses individuality in the scope of social media. The episode surrounds Ash and Martha,

a couple faced with tragedy when Ash is killed in a car accident. Martha tries and assuage her

loneliness by investing in an innovative technology aimed to replicate people's voice,

personality, and even their own body. The service takes the form of an life-like robot whose

words and actions are a synthesis of all the real person's social media posts and likes. This

pleases Martha to some extent, but things become tense when she realizes this Other Ash can't

conceptualize real emotion or physical pleasure. The basic idea in this episode is that nothing can replace or substitute a true individual, and it also heads warning about online dating and believing that the person you see on social media is, in fact, a full and accurate representation of that person. In an interview with *Fresh Air*, a news podcast, we can see where creator Charlie Brooker got this idea, and his perspective on social media in this context. In addition to shedding light on the fact that he is not, in fact, anti-technology, Brooker expresses that he specifically thinks, "we used to have several personalities, and we're encouraged to have one online" (Fresh Air, 2016). It is evident that he was trying to emphasize that the person we are pressured to be online is not actually who we are as an individual, and it might take face to face interaction with our online presence to understand that, as Martha figured out.

In *Brave New World*, another one of the tactics employed in the World State to erase individuality is the use of the sleep-hypnosis technique *hypnopaedia*. In this method of brainwashing, phrases and ideas are played over and over to infants, children, and teenagers as they sleep to the point that they actually become their belief system, and which they uphold steadfastly. These *hypnopaedic* rhymes are everything from lies about other groups of people to phrases about the contentment of one caste with their lower position in society. *A Foucauldian Reading of Huxley's* Brave New World explains *hypnopaedia* as creating, "a population of slaves that love their servitude" (Hamamra, 2017, p. 14). This technique basically formulates peoples' thoughts for them, or at least guarantees they'll all adhere to the same ideology, which more or less prevents backlash against the omnipotent government. Moreover, one of the echoing rhymes throughout the book is "everyone belongs to everyone else," encompassing the ideals of this society, which proves to drive some mad.

A large theme of *Brave New World* is the contrast of London, where the story mostly takes place, and "The Reservation"; a primitive village that exists and operates outside the World State, but is used as a form of entertainment to the citizens of the world, while also showing them where they came from and "the horror." This is done largely by documenting the experience of John, one of the "savages" that lives on the reservation, as he is brought by Bernard with his mother, Linda, into London, and how he is shocked by what he sees. Completely appalled, he leads a protest (later joined by Bernard) and is sent to a remote island where he lives in a lighthouse for the rest of his life. A few weeks after living there, he realizes he is being watched by news reporters and other people and simply can't it anymore, eventually committing suicide. This final act is an attempt on John's part to have control of *something* in his life, since he doesn't control his own thoughts or lifestyle when living in the World State.

Looking at the 1930s and the role of government in post WWI era America, it's almost no surprise that Huxley took such a radical interpretation of this idea in his writing. Peat (2015) details the advancements in atomic science and mechanized weaponry made since the first world war, and the failure of the League of Nations, which was taken as a huge indicator of political unrest in the world. Surrounded by war propaganda and the government's continual attempts at convincing people to think everything was fine, Huxley is taking it to an extreme to show what might come of this sort of government control. Specifically with the introduction of nuclear warfare to the playing field, many people were asking themselves, "What's next? Government mind control?", and Huxley gives them what they asked for. Needless to say this depiction of government scared people, and helped Huxley get his point across.

In a similar way, in *Black Mirror*, Brooker takes the idea of government control and relates it to war mentality and the hand politics has in war, and how it dehumanizes the victims.

In the episode "Men Against Fire", a soldier named Stripe goes into a war ridden country that has been completely destroyed, in search of "roaches", mutant humanoids they're sent to kill. After taking out two of them, Stripe starts feeling guilty, despite the praise from his squadron. Only after sleepless nights and endless nightmares does he discover that all soldiers have been implanted with a MASS, an LED device that makes it so all the foreign people they encounter appear as these threatening creatures, making them easier to kill. More than that, Stripe learns he's actually part of a global eugenics program, trying to "protect the bloodline" of humanity. This episode speaks to the conspiracy of government brainwashing, and lends some insight as to Brooker's feeling on the involvement of politics in war, and the ability to overpower the humanitarian aspect of mindless killing. The themes present could also be extended to notions about discrimination and social stereotypes, and the idea of *hynopaedia*, where prejudice and preconceived notions are programmed into peoples' brains, much like the MASS does. It also speaks to the idea of "otherness" and the definition of "savages", also prevalent in Huxley's writing.

The character of John is very interesting, as he walks the line between the two "worlds" presented in *Brave New World*; the World State, specifically London, and the reservation, where he was born and lived all of his life with his mother, who originally lived in London. The portrayal of the reservation and "the savages", as they referred to the indigenous people living there, is very crude to the people of the world state, but is more like normal life for us. On this reservation, the people live in normal family units and embrace these relationships, women have children by natural childbirth, people grow old naturally and often die of disease, and there is no conditioning or *hypnopaedia* of any sort. This is in contrast to the World State, where children are quite literally made in test tubes and conditioned throughout their lives to never get sick and

never show signs of aging, and treat all mentions of "mothers" or "families" as equivalent to profanities. In many ways the "savages" seem to be modeled after Native Americans, but in combination with other traditions of more primitive peoples, including animal and human sacrifice and self-flagellation as forms of religious discipline.

By creating such a stark contrast between these two societies, Huxley emphasizes this idea of "otherness", and the characters throughout the book accentuate it with their disgusted comments about the ways of the "savages". In addition, the reservation is literally used as a vacation destination very similar to a zoo, where people from the World State can travel to observe the way the native people live. By showing the citizens where they came from, and how "horrible" the "savages'" beliefs and lifestyle are, the government is further brainwashing their citizens and discouraging deviation from the strict social norm. Huxley uses John as a parallel to the audience, and a sort of "voice of reason". Bernard also plays the role of the "voice of reason", as he sees past much of the conditioning and brainwashing of this society to the motivations of the World Controllers that dictate this empire, empathizing with the reader, but is still a victim of the government in several ways. On the other hand, John is much more of a representation of the readers' reaction to this world and their values since he is a true outsider like we are, once again emphasizing the "otherness" and separation of him and the "savages".

As mentioned, the World Controllers are the people, almost exclusively men, in charge of the dictating the World State, and their role brings up interesting ideas about political figureheads and the throws of power in the 1930s. Most notably mentioned in *Brave New World* is Mustafa Mond, the resident World Controller that Bernard dealt with later on in the book after having to explain himself for taking part in a revolt. Peat (2015) details that in one of Huxley's other well known books, *Eyeless in Gaza*, he comments that he was skeptical about, "men with

well-thought out plans for the world" (p. 364). He reiterates this in the roles of the Word

Controllers in *Brave New World*, detailing the worst consequences of handing over such absolute

political power to a few individuals (Huxley, 2010). Seeing as the post-WWI world was held

nearly exclusively in the hands of a select few, it's clear that Huxley is insinuating that these

individuals simply have too much control, and perhaps that part of the reason the world was in

such chaos, and was *in* the Great Depression in the first place was because of their decisions, or

lack thereof.

Another interesting aspect of the World State that Huxley depicts is the man the citizens

credit to the creation of their society, a man only ever referred to as "Our Ford". Upon further

investigation, it's clear Huxley is directly referencing Henry Ford, whose empire, Ford Motors,

was taking off while *Brave New World* was being written, as Hamamra (2017), tells us.

Furthermore, in a conversation with Mustafa Mond, it is mentioned that the world as they know

it was created in 632 A.F.: 632 After Ford, with 0 A.F. being 1908, when the Model T was

invented. This places the book in the year 2540, according to our calendar. Not only was the

motor industry booming in the 1930s, but the assembly line was also taking off, increasing

production like never before. In the same way, the people of *Brave New World* are created in an

assembly-like fashion, no different from the Model T.

Black Mirror has a lot of political connotations, with a few episodes specifically focusing

in on the role of political figureheads in relation to technology. Considering we live in a time of

highly incapable politicians in positions of power, it was almost guaranteed that Brooker would

choose to comment on it in some way. In an episode in the first season, "National Anthem," the

British Prime Minister is blackmailed into committing a disturbing and heinous crime on

national television in exchange for his daughter to be released from captivity by her kidnappers.

The episode surrounds the power of social media interacting with politics, as the ransom video was posted on Youtube and shared thousands of times despite efforts to take it down. In spite of the constant arguing of government officials and ever-growing discussion on media platforms, the Prime Minister goes through with it, only to discover that the Princess was released thirty minutes before his heinous act, and that the kidnaper was a performance artist trying to make a point; people were too busy watching the Prime Minister on TV or their phones to realize the princess had been released. Not only does this speak to our generation's "strange appetite for sort of public humiliation" (*Fresh Air*, 2016), as Brooker calls it, but it speaks volumes about his awareness of this and the need to point it out.

In another episode of *Black Mirror*, "The Waldo Moment," a CGI bear controlled by a crude comedian ends up running for office, first as a joke to make fun of politicians, but then seriously. The show echos some of the previous themes in the show and in *Brave New World* of mind control, by using this cartoon to represent authority in a more palatable way, and also brings up the idea of artificiality in political candidates. This is only so relevant of a topic, as the politics in America today are nearly comical, without the use of CGI. In the same interview with *Fresh Air* (2016), Brooker comments on the presidential race of 2016, predicting Donald Trump as the next U.S. President, which he was unfortunately right about. Specifically in this example, we can use these dystopian representations as a warning about what might happen, should we continue acting and thinking in the ways we do. Admittedly, "The Waldo Moment" wasn't the most extreme or 'dystopian' of *Black Mirror* episodes, but, arguably, that makes it even scarier.

In and through all these examples, Charlie Brooker and Aldous Huxley, along with the rest of their dystopian colleagues are sending us a clear message. They're telling us to change our societies before it's 'too late', but doing it an unconventional way and ultimately leaving it

open to interpretation. As Peat (2015) suggests, "[Dystopian novels] do more than just respond to a moment of historical uncertainty, they question both the world of which they are a part of and the possible the worlds reaching out from it" (p.44), forcing us to look at the potential trajectory of our world. While other pieces use hope and inspiration to motivate change, dystopian works are characterized by dark and sometimes disturbing representations of the future that scare people to their very core. Furthermore, they don't rely on happy endings or messages of faith or compassion to get their point across. Fear has been proven a much stronger and more motivating, but not more important, emotion than say, inspiration or empathy, as it's a visceral reaction that reverts us back to a more primitive, survivalist state. Many people will tell you they feel their "fight or flight" response kick in when watching certain episodes of *Black Mirror*, and not without reason. The same could be said about many of the more upsetting dystopian novels that also tend to be the most revered, notably George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four,* Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451,* and yes, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. The hope with these works is that the alternate realities they're portraying will be enough to force the reader to reevaluate not only their own beliefs, but the preconceived notions of their society at large to work towards a solution.

In this way, another one of the novelties of dystopias is the fact that they're open to interpretation by the reader, and the author intentionally makes the point of each book or episode vague so the viewers can project their own experiences on to it and start to look for a possible solution. In this way we, as the audience, are presented with a sort of crisis, which Peat (2015) calls, "the line between the dystopias and our own reality" (p.42). This presentation of a personal crossroads is one of the reasons I'm constantly fascinated by dystopias; I interpret the messages slightly different each time, and my interpretation might change over the course of my life and

experiences. In addition, my takeaway from one episode of *Black Mirror* or another dystopian work could be vastly different from someone else's, because the creators leave enough blank spaces and questions to be asked that each member of the audience is compelled to draw their own conclusions.

Often times dystopias highlight one particularly poignant part of society, forcing the audience to evaluate both their views and opinions on the subject matter, but also their culture's perspective. Besides those mentioned here we also see subjects like nuclear weaponry, climate change, the importance of literature and the arts, and *Black Mirror* specifically tackles bystanding, social approval, online anonymity, and the power of memory, among others. This is done with the intention that people will start changing their own thoughts and behaviors to try and avoid the kind of catastrophic (though dramatized) worlds predicted and move towards a more compassionate and conscious one. In the end, dystopias have the same end goal as anything trying to motivate change; to promote a better and more sustainable world for the sake of present and future generations. They just do it in a different, and arguably more effective, way than most TV shows or books.

As our lives become more overtaken by technology, crude politics, concerning climate changes, and the omniscient craving for social approval, the world presented in works like *Black Mirror* and *Brave New World* don't seem quite so far off. That being said, we certainly have time to turn things around before we get to that point of total chaos, but sometimes motivating that change takes some terrifyingly real content. By doing this, the authors are not only magnifying issues like individuality, government control, and political figureheads, but they're illustrating their views on the subjects, which helps us understand them in the context of when they're written. Though it may not always seem like it, creators like Charlie Brooker and Aldous Huxley

are trying to help us achieve the goal of a better world through their dystopian representations of the potential future. They're essentially giving us tools, or at least motivators, to seriously looks at our own notions about these and other issues, and examine them in the context of the greater society. This is all in the hope of shifting mentalities and being proactive to create a better community for everyone, an idea that can be captured in a quote from John seen all throughout the book; "O brave new world, with such people in it, let's start again."

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