

Reality show and pop politics. Who holds power in the network society?

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Il saggio analizza il rapporto paradossale tra vecchi e nuovi media, con particolare riferimento a come questi ultimi trasformano la vita politica contemporanea e i modi di esercitare la democrazia. Muovendo dall'analisi della serie televisiva britannica *Black Mirror*, e in particolare analizzando la performance artistica messa in atto nel primo episodio all'interno di un format tipico del reality show, il saggio rileva gli effetti allarmanti che i nuovi media hanno sulle nostre vite, interrogandosi al contempo su chi davvero possa essere considerato oggi il detentore della capacità di esercitare il potere nella società in rete.

Investigating the paradoxical cooperation between multiple media platforms and their influence on public opinion, the paper describes contemporary technological, cultural, and social changes, with a particular attention to the ways of understanding and practising politics in the contemporary society of the spectacle. The essay focuses on *Black Mirror*, a British television anthology series that unveils the dark side of life and technology, to investigate the question concerning who holds power in the network society. Particularly, drawing upon the relationship between communication and power, the essay explores in detail the extreme artistic performance that gives life to the first episode of the series - *The National Anthem* - to shed light on how the logic of the reality show, typical of the contemporary pop politics, has contributed to exasperate the crisis of democracy.

Key Words: *Black Mirror*, media democracy, pop politics, performance

First broadcast on December 4, 2011 – airing in Italy on Sky Cinema from October 1 to 10, 2012 – *Black Mirror* unfolds through six episodes set in six different “realities”. These bitterly and grimly apply the metaphor of the mirror to home in on modern malaise. Playing on the format of the reality show, the series presents itself as a mirror that places us face to face with our own existence, forcing us to reflect on our lifestyles, emotions, relationships and ways of understanding and practising politics in the contemporary society of the spectacle. Calling into question the spaces and means of exercising power, the programme highlights not only how these have become the new agora, the virtual plaza, forum of the modern polis (Boccia Artieri, 2004), but also how they have contributed to the establishment of a “videocracy”: a system where images have replaced ideology (Meyer, 2002).

The series was conceived and produced for Endemol by Charlie Brooker, infamous creator of caustic works, such as the documentary programme *How TV Ruined Your Life* (BBC, 2001) and *Dead Set* (E4, 2008), a truculent and apocalyptic parody of *Big Brother*. In terms of format, *Black Mirror*, with a different cast and plot per episode (to date only seven have been produced, running little more than 40 minutes each), reflects a more general crisis of the canonical form of television seriality (Brembilla, Pescatore, 2014). Echoing the contemporary return to the brevity of the classic anthology series, entailing the self-conclusiveness and total independence of both episode and cast, *Black Mirror* inserts itself into a more enduring current that aims to give form to our contemporary fears. Particularly, drawing upon crime in its most grotesque and disturbing forms, in the series we are confronted with the “dark side” of contemporary technology and of what it has made or could make us, as individuals or as a collective, become.

From this perspective, *Black Mirror* could be considered a hybrid of *The Twilight Zone*, broadcast in three different periods of American television, and *Tales of the Unexpected*, a British series in 112 episodes first aired over the course of nine seasons, from 1979 to 1988. Both programmes successfully mixed thriller, horror and science fiction, captivating the public with their surprise endings. Developing through a play of literary-musical allusions, ranging from other contemporary television series (*Downton Abbey*, *Mad Men*) to postmodern authors (J.C. Ballard, G. Debord, J. Baudrillard, to name a few), the episodes evoke the solemn gait of technology, the addiction it causes and its disturbing effects on our lives, readapting old human fears to our times.

This essay will exclusively analyse the first episode, *The National Anthem*: forty-four minutes of a condensed succession of events, which give rise to a tragicomic political thriller. Among the themes that the episode develops, this essay will shed light on: the effects of technology, particularly media, on our perception, behaviour and relationships (Couldry, 2003); its influence on our privacy, on the modern distinction between private and public (Papacharissi, 2010); the self-referential spectacle, akin to the simulacrum that represents only itself (Baudrillard, 2006); the emptying of the moral-pedagogical value of the theatrical performance (Chouliaraki, 2012); the entirely postmodern transgression of the drama based on irony, the apocalypse without ideological reference that, as in the Bakhtinian carnival, upsets the world, mocking the dissolution of politics through its very trivialization (Žižek, 2005).

Focusing on how the episode reveals the “dark mirror” of an empty collective memory before which we find ourselves amidst the masses, delighting in exhibiting our own experiences in exchange of “Likes” and “Retweets”, this essay explores its irreverent critique of the modern world of communication. Particularly, it will investigate how this apocalyptic denounce of the effects of socio-political mediatisation addresses the question concerning who holds power in the network society.

The media must not see

I will start the analysis introducing the reader to the impending plot, which through a series of twists, keeps the spectator glued to the screen.

The opening scene of the pilot episode presents the bedroom in which the English Prime Minister, Michael Callow (played by Rory Kinnear), sleeps beside his wife. The ringing of a telephone, actually two, interrupts their rest: a mobile phone followed immediately by the landline. Communication technology immediately bursts into the scene and, likewise, into the private life of the Prime Minister, waking him with terrible news: Princess Susannah (Lydia Wilson), Duchess of Beaumont and dearly loved member of the royal family, has been kidnapped.

Black screen with white text reading The National Anthem, followed by a close up of a double screen – a computer and a television – transmitting the anguished face of the princess. Tied to a chair, the ecologist monarch, beloved by the Facebook community, addresses the Prime Minister, stressing that her life is in his hands. She thus advances the incredibly peculiar request of her kidnapper: in order for her to return safely, the Prime Minister must have sexual relations with a pig. Live, on all channels of British television. A joke? The bitter smile of the Prime Minister crosses the embarrassed gazes of his onlookers. Confusion and disgust pervade the “control room”. Ten full seconds of astonished silence amplify the sense of general bewilderment: from the incredulous Prime Minister to the hesitant presidential staff (in fact, there is no protocol for this kind of situation), of the same public – ourselves – who, through the screen, participate in the dreamlike scene. And yet it is crude reality, tailor-made to surprise and floor everyone from the beginning. The event, which will force the Prime Minister to face a shocking dilemma, appears so surreal that his first reaction, and perhaps the only one possible, is the inability to process information. Even the public has difficulty digesting the unusual request. How then, can the kidnapper’s eccentric request be dealt with?

The Prime Minister, as expected, is duly opposed and does everything in his power to avoid scandal and capture the abductor before the expiry of the ultimatum. He orders that the news not reach the people and organizes an urgent rescue mission to be carried out in the building where the princess is believed to be kept. Meanwhile, his assistant busies himself with the creation of a false video for broadcast. He therefore attempts to exert power in the modern Weberian sense, as the monopoly of the use, or the threat of the use, of physical force. But the exercise of such power presumes that the authority is recognized

as legitimate and that the tools in its possession are effective. This, in fact, does not occur in the upside down yet realistic world of Black Mirror. The social reality surrounding the Prime Minister reveals itself to be more akin to anarchy than to the British parliamentary monarchy. The media has already gained the upper hand: the video of the ransom request has been uploaded on YouTube and, despite being online for only nine minutes, has been viewed and downloaded by 50,000 British citizens.

The mechanism of uncontrollably accessible information has been triggered and Callow's initial declaration – "All of this exists only in this room!" – reveals itself to be absolutely ridiculous. Even the censorship attempt through a D-notice (official order sent by the government instructing the media to not publish or broadcast information considered a threat to national security) fails. Although the English media initially agree to not report the news, it quickly reaches foreign information channels via rampant Likes and squawking Tweets, provoking its outbreak. It is therefore inevitable that the English media report it. Consequently, the Prime Minister's statement "The media must not see" immediately degenerates into a resounding "Fucking Internet!".

Meanwhile, the kidnapper discovers the plan of the fake video. Having warned that any attempt to alter the film-ransom with "special effects" would result in extreme consequences for the safety of the captured princess, he responds by sending one of Susannah's fingers to an English television station. The story emerges and suddenly public opinion swings against Callow. As if that were not enough, the rescue mission, to be carried out in the building where she is believed to be kept, is thwarted. The site reveals itself to be a lure ("the proxy from which the video was uploaded could be anywhere", admit the intelligence experts) and a reporter is injured during the operation. Callow loses even more consent.

Thus it becomes suddenly evident that the sovereign does not reign and, likewise, the Prime Minister does not govern. Or rather, in order to continue (deceiving himself of) doing so, he must submit to the kidnapper's request which, as will be seen, is aimed at revealing the emptiness of power. Taking advantage of the media, the "terrorist" - immediately thought to be Islamic by public opinion, due to the relationship between Islam and pigs, or indirectly fearing that the princess risks decapitation - undresses the king, forcing him to behave like a jester before the stunned amusement of his "subjects".

The power of the sovereign as the final legitimation of the law thus vanishes. If the English and French revolutions against absolutism profoundly changed the bases of the exertion of such power, the electronic revolution, which has led to mass media and to the new "means of self-communication of the masses" (Castells, 2009) appears to have definitely dissolved it. On the one hand, in contemporary society, forms of power different from politics have prevailed (first and foremost, economic and media power); on the other hand, the traditional tool of action for the exercising of sovereign-state power has failed: that of force, which in extreme cases is expressed through war.

To understand how Brooker calls into question the spaces and methods of exercising power, it is useful to refer both to the relationship Castells (2009) identifies between "communication and power" and, especially, to the distinction among the different forms of power in the global network society. The Catalan sociologist moves from the premise that

it is the networks themselves that hold power today. And specifically, it is held by those actors and networks of actors who, thanks to their position within the social structure, hold the power of creating networks – what is considered to be the supreme form of power in the network society. Furthermore, within networks, Castells (2009, p. 46) ascribes greater power to the “programmers – those who are able to constitute, programme/reprogramme networks in light of the aims assigned within the network”, and to “the switchers” – those who have control over the connection points among the various strategic networks (media, political leadership, military and security, etc.).”

Moving from these grounds, we can now follow the plot of the episode and ask ourselves the initial question concerning who holds power in the network society.

Performing power through excitement and horror

All attempts to censor the news and free the princess having failed, the Prime Minister has no choice but to prepare himself for his torturous ordeal, now hailed by the happy crowd. In fact, if at first the majority of the public considered the request disgusting, expressing solidarity with the Prime Minister, the amputation of the princess' finger swayed public opinion in the opposite direction (previously 25%, now 85% of citizens repute the Prime Minister's sacrifice to be inevitable). Callow's brief humiliation and suffering is deemed irrelevant in comparison with Susannah's real pain. Informed that neither he nor his family would be protected in the case of refusal, our hero can do nothing but fulfil the mission. What once seemed impossible has now become chilling reality.

The entire population positions itself before its screens, eagerly awaiting the obscene spectacle that Callow is forced to carry out. Given what we have just seen unfold, the institutional announcement inviting the public not to watch the trivial “performance” and declaring the recording or storing of images of the event a criminal act reveals itself to be ridiculous. The public first appears incredulous, excited, yet quickly becomes disgusted. But, the TVs stay on through the carnivalesque staging that sees the spectators' morale transform from excitement and disbelief to horror and sadness.

But the true plot twist of *The National Anthem* concerns the finding of the unharmed princess roaming the streets and the discovery that the finger belonged to the kidnapper. Moreover, we learn that Susannah was released half an hour before the expiry of the ultimatum, yet no one realized since all roads were empty, the entire nation distracted by the television programme. It thus emerges that the crime was planned and committed by an artist, perhaps with the intention of making a declaration or perhaps of using the Prime Minister's sex tape as material for his performance, which concludes with his own suicide as the “spectacle” is broadcast.

A bitter happy ending closes the episode: one year later, Princess Susannah has recovered from the kidnapping and is expecting a baby, the political image of Callow, willing to sacrifice his own dignity, has earned him public consent, the “performance” of the

artist/demiurge, magnified by the media and immortalized through the web, has been viewed by 1.3 million spectators.

Aside from the artist, everyone seems to have survived the traumatic experience; but, not without consequences: the Prime Minister has been humiliated and has forever damaged his relationship with his wife – who, moreover, had warned him since the beginning, stating, “I know how people are. We love being humiliated. We can’t help but love it.”

Let us now return to the question concerning the power holders in the network society. Following Castell's elaboration of the equivalence between communication and power, we can identify the artist as the power holder. He alone was able to generate symbolic value – through the announcement of the spectacle – and therefore to reprogramme the networks. He activated the network's switch in his favour, generating, spreading, and conditioning the discourses which frame human action. This refers both to that of the public and that of the Prime Minister, whose performance revealed itself to be unavoidable precisely because of the sudden shift in public opinion. The artist was the source of the signs leading to the construction of sense in the minds of the people. And, since it is in large part the sharing of meaning, of sense, which determines action and frames the human mind (Westen, 2007), he alone can be the source of social power.

Through his performance, the artist demonstrated the impossibility of exercising institutional power for the resolution of “state affairs”. He proved the impracticality of censorship in the age of mass self-communication and ridiculed the government's plans to falsify the video-ransom and to track him down. His aims were reached through a twofold movement. From a strategic point of view, the artist ridiculed the legitimation of institutional power itself, showing how this is by now subjected to a system (mass media, social network, public opinion, party) that recognizes the leader as such only if he is able to fulfil the performance-mission demanded at the moment. In this case, having sex with a pig. From a tactical point of view, the artist conquers the global space of communication flows by operating in a local space that escapes identification (the proxy from which the video was uploaded on YouTube). In so doing, he reveals the limits of control in the network society and short-circuits the government's strategy – all through the irony and irreverence typical of hacker aesthetics. This implies knowledge of technical tools and awareness, shared with the hacker community, of the stereotypes and “conventional” collective imagination it aims to undermine (Mondelo González, Cuadrado Alvarado, Sánchez Trigo, 2013)

The artist inserts his performance into the reality show format, thus subverting the reality-television genre, understood as a “supergenre” or “omnivorous supergenre”, engulfing all others and reducing them to a daily spectacle centred on the “banality of good” (Taggi, 1999, p. 68). Thus, he satirically and transgressively references the reality format typical of “pop politics” (Mazzoleni & Sfardini, 2009), such as *The People's Candidate* (Argentina) or *American Candidate* (USA), in which ten unknown candidates face off in a televised competition, each attempting to prove that he or she has the qualities to become the next president of the republic. And doing so, he exposes how the management and legitimation of power in the society of the spectacle passes through the

image of the leader and the centrality of his body, as well as his private life, intimate experience, and emotions (Barisione, 2006).

From this perspective, *The National Anthem* does not focus on “pop politics” as a potential “civic resource” within this “subtle citizenship” of post-modern characteristics, able to reconcile the spectator-consumer-citizen with politics. On the contrary, the entire series exposes how society’s transformation towards increasingly commercial forms of communication is synonymous with political corruption.

The episodes seem to denounce how television, with its strategy of spectacularization, has aligned political communication and the modalities of collecting and maintaining popular consensus with a “pop” logic. TV imposes its rules on politics, spectacularizing information and confusing political information with the entertainment industry: from “entertainment” to “politainment”, today’s public affairs aim to obtain consensus on the basis of amusement and humour. The same media logics do nothing to spare the promulgation and visibility of the private: the emotions and intimacy of family and private life become the preferred themes through which politicians, participating in talk and reality shows in the guise of television personalities and guests, exhibit themselves (Thompson, 1995). We need only think of Vladimir Luxuria’s performances on *Isola dei famosi* (2008), of Alessandra Mussolini’s commentaries for the daily column of *Big Brother* (2009), of Emanuele Filiberto di Savoia competing in *Dancing with the Stars* (2009), or even the ex-Alitalia employee, Daniela Martani, first competing in *Big Brother* and *The Farm*, then awaiting proposals for political candidacy.

Going back to the question concerning the power holders in the network society, we can see how, adopting the reality show format, the artist primarily criticizes the ambivalence of the leader-politician’s human side: a factor that brings him close to the people and contemporaneously exposes him (Aslama, Pantti, 2006). Only he can resolve the issue considered by many an act of terrorism. But not by applying the violent force decided in the secret halls, rather, through self-humiliation on live television. This ambivalence becomes explicit at the end of the incident: the mortifying performance increases the popularity of the leader, while his private life is irreparably destroyed. But is this not, after all, the narrative and emotional strategy of reality shows such as *Big Brother*? The more one humiliates oneself, the more one becomes famous. In fact, the princess is a hostage to be saved at all costs, more for her being a celebrity than for her belonging to the royal family.

And yet, a deeper analysis of the unfolding of events and the accompanying aesthetic narration, seems to reveal that the author does not really recognize the artist as the power holder. The tailor-orchestrated is, in fact, aimed at denouncing the “narcotising dysfunction” of a “pop politics” that liquefies democracy, emptying it of political participation, now reduced to a sterile emotional dimension (Kellener, 2003). But it is also true that *The National Anthem* presents us with the triumph of the Debordian simulacra, where the spectacle does not represent the real but rather itself, through a process of total aestheticization of the private and public spheres, put to use by a diffused power that not even the artist manages to foresee or control. Beyond the artist and the use he is able to make of the media, naively understood as the “fourth estate”, technology appears to be at

the levers of power – technology understood as *tékhnè*: art, technique and spectacle, elements which construct reality – pervading life and enslaving all those who come into contact with them, thus provoking a collective decline of the critical consciousness of a country.

Continuously redefined and called into question, in a society that sees even us as “networks in connection with a world of networks” (Castells, 2009, p. 171), power here appears to be exercised by a new form of subjectivity, similar to what Latour (2010) theorized as the “network-actor”. More than in the hands of the artist/programmer, who uses the performance as a tool of counterpower to denounce the void surrounding the governing elite, the levers of power seem to dissolve in the compulsive mechanism of a system which grinds emotions and human lives without any reference of sense.

The moment the artist commits suicide, it becomes clear – as Castells (2009, p. 52) highlights – that “networks develop their own contradictory programmes, while people search to give meaning to their own sources of fear and hope”. What is, therefore, the sense of this extreme artistic performance? Before the desolating void of public spaces and individual consciousness, perhaps even the artist realizes that he has lost control, finding himself thus (like the Prime Minister and the public) trapped in the uncontrollable mechanisms of a system which places everything and the opposite of everything on the same level. Thus we discover that even an art, initially experienced as a tool for denunciation and rebellion, reduces itself to a dark and pessimistic reflection of a system in which we are accomplices, if merely for the fact that we are unable to divert our gaze from the “black mirrors” with which we surround ourselves.

The spectacle of the upside down world

Highlighting new media’s ability to engage people in unprecedented forms of public self-presentation, Rifkin (2009, p. 555) states: “while in the twentieth century most of us were in the audience, in the twenty-first century, thanks to YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, the blogosphere, etc. we are all on stage, under the spotlights”. On the contrary, perfectly illustrating how the potential of global connectedness, made possible by new media, has transformed the world into a new *theatrum mundi*, the director of the episode seems to total challenge what Rifkin terms as our “empathy civilization”. Thus, he decries how being in front of the screen (rather than in the screen), spending a large part of our days within virtual worlds where we enact our performances, no longer has any moralizing force, if not that of spectatorial self-expression.

The artist manages to guarantee the obscene act, endorsed by public opinion, therefore raising it to the only possible source of legitimation of power, making it the true “new national anthem”. But an anthem that is emptied of any symbolic reference, that has no memory and does not solicit any form of moral redemption, that is unable to either give us goosebumps or move us. The theatrical performance produced on live television, for a public that finds itself united in contemplation of the screen in tragic silence, is emptied of

every bit of moral-pedagogic value. The Aristotelian concept of the tragedy as a form that imitates an important and finished act, inspiring pity and terror (Nussbaum, 1997), dissolves in the broadest aesthetic system staged by the technological circuit of mass production.

Taken together, the different episodes of Black Mirror show us how the communicative structure of theatre considered the “space of appearance” necessary for the civic education of the “cosmo-polis” (Silverstone, 2007) loses its ability to keep us engaged with our neighbours and reduces itself to emotional self-expression, privileging the dominion of the “private, ordinary, quotidian” (Turner, 2010, p. 22). The stage set by the convergence of different media platforms, which in turn rearticulate the narrative forms of the story (be these journalistic or television show style), is no longer able to catalyse our imaginations and stimulate empathetic identification.

In fact, with whom should we empathize? With the artist who staged the show and then took his life? With the hero-victim who accepts self-humiliation? With his wife who commands dignity? With the innocent princess? Or perhaps with the very public who, like us, finds itself contemplating “the new national anthem” played out on the screen?

We must admit that the only possible empathetic identification is precisely with the latter, with the common people who suddenly and easily change opinion and are subject to the voyeuristic fascination of the screen. Nevertheless, using the format of the reality show to unmask psychosocial dimensions and glue us to the screen, the artist makes us co-producers of his performance, participants of the psychodrama, directors of the action, lead characters and, at the same time, judges of the spectacle on air (Demaria, Grosso, Spaziante, 2002).

Empathetic identification, which in the Aristotelian connotation of theatre makes solidarity possible, here becomes sceptical. Suffocated by our cynical hyper-individualism, our pity toward the victim (be this embodied in the figure of the princess, the Prime Minister, his wife or the artist himself) is reduced to mere Rortian (1989) irony, understood as an ambivalent political form typical of the neoliberal spirit of Capitalism.

Perfectly in line with an era that Chouliaraki (2012) defines as “post-humanitarian”, the theatrical structure applied by Black Mirror breaks with that modern conception which presupposed a clear separation between the actors on stage and those who observe them, based on the Enlightenment idea of a virtue cultivated through centuries-old institutions (Arendt, 1994; Boltanski, 1999). Rather, over recent years, the mutations of technology, the market and, most of all, politics have modelled a social imagination in which civic will is incapable of going beyond the promise of pleasant forms of consumption (Bauman, 2007). The moralizing force, exercised by the communicative structure of a theatre that mixes emotions and judgements, cedes its place “to a mirror-like structure, where the encounter with the other is reduced to a self-reflection that is often narcissistic” (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 27).

From this perspective, the episode bitterly and ruthlessly condemns the transformation of power – shifting from the monarch’s throne to the seat of the government to the technicolor armchair of the reality show. It also decries the emptying of politics and, particularly, that of the concept of democracy. The target of Brooker’s satire appears to be

constituted precisely by the demos, perhaps because the moment politics gravitates toward the sphere of consensual behaviour, it is the public (citizens, consumers, spectators) who decide, directly or indirectly, on “public affairs”. Given that democracy is considered a political regime characterized by the government’s ability to respond to the preferences of its citizens, judged as politically equal (Dahl, 1998), it risks reducing itself to procedure and majority rule, in other words, “the rule based on which collective decisions – binding for the entire group – are those approved at least by the majority of those who are entitled to make decisions” (Bobbio, 1995, p.5).

As the director unveils, the advancement of democracy has obliged the political elites to operate through vernacular forms and languages and in contexts where popular consensus has become essential for the making of political decisions: a fact that is not without deep consequences. On the one hand, the concatenation of events giving rise to the episode in question leads us back to Pasolini’s (1994) condemnation of the “anthropological mutation” of a population dazed by television, what Sartori (2007) defines as *homo videns*, the last link of human evolution. *Homo videns* is a new species raised in front of the screen, in particular, in front of TV, which Sartori considers “a perverse divinity, a demiurge capable of cloning individuals in its own image and semblance” (2007, p. 36), an “anthropogenic” tool which changes the nature of man and atrophies his faculty of understanding. Rather than informing us to become aware citizens, participants of the management of the *res publica*, the pure and simple act of seeing offered by the media does nothing to benefit democracy. In line with Sartori, *Black Mirror*’s author seems to criticize *homo videns*’ being neither right nor left-wing. His salient feature is that of lacking any opinion. And opinion is the salt of democracy. Attributing exaggerated clout to the image of the leader, privileging emotions over reason and arbitrarily using surveys, “pop politics” destroys public opinion (Street 2001, 2004).

On the other hand, the episode seems to celebrate the triumph of the Debordian simulacrum, where the whole society is reduced to an empty spectacle that does not represent the real but rather itself. The process of “reduction to the spectacle”, within which all the characters of *Black Mirror* unconsciously fluctuate, leads us to acknowledge, with Debord (1970, p. 49), that in so far as “an economic sector which directly shapes a growing multitude of image-objects,” the spectacle “is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by image.”

It is worth noting that the collective euphoria, preceding the performance, gives way to gloom, silence, confusion and, finally, distress. The moment the Prime Minister begins his ordeal, we find ourselves orphans of everything, even of our own humanity. We are both vulnerable victims and unaware predators of a spectacle that proposes no revolutionary breath, nor any minimal renewal of values. In a totally postmodern transgression, the episode closes with a return to status quo, as if to ratify what Baudrillard (1996) defined as the “perfect crime”, the “premature resolution” of the world through the cloning of reality and extermination of the real on the part of its double.

The performance to which the Prime Minister subjects himself assumes the appearance of an authentic criminal act. It represents the killing, the elimination, the annulment of reality (and of its complementary illusions) as the symbolic organization of the world at the

hands of television. Black Mirror's apocalyptic vision of the upside down world – a world where things, facts and phenomena, are forced to inscribe themselves in the thousands of mirrors along whose horizons not only has the real disappeared, but also its image –, highlights how through the proliferation of screens and images of current hyper-media society, “reality has been chased away by reality”. We remain unable to trace any constellation of sense among the dispersed fragments of the real. “It is as if things had swallowed their own mirror, and then become transparent to themselves – writes Baudrillard (1996, p. 44) – totally present to themselves, in their visibility, in their virtuality, in their perfect transcription.”

Constructed on the absence of great narrations and any reference to universal values, the rhetorical structure of Black Mirror seems to affirm that the theatricalization of “hyper-modernity” does not contribute to the formation, but rather to the disappearance of new collectivities. In Virilio's words (1994, p. 23): “today nothing remains but the screen and the cathode ray tube, with the shadows and the ghosts of a community on the verge of disappearing”.

To conclude, we can assume that, by showing that the king is naked and by downgrading him to the level of jester, the artist forces us to participate in a spectacle that tragically derides itself. In the permanent carnival of Black Mirror, the satirical disdain for symbols of power, culminating in the Prime Minister's humiliation, is not aimed at any rebellion. The sacrificial ritual of the demiurge, like that of his artistic “tool” whose sufferance becomes spectacle, self-consumes into a pure defence of the innocent and the powerless against power, without offering any promise or alternative political vision.

Nota biografica

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