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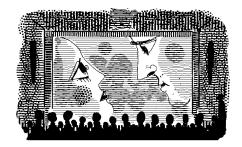
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SHADOW PLAY by Martha Bayles



The Most Dangerous Enemy They Can Find

aple Street, USA. LATE SUMmer. A tree-lined little world of front-porch gliders, barbecues, the laughter of children, and the bell of an ice-cream vendor. At the sound of a roar and a flash of light, it will be precisely 6:43 p.m... the last calm and reflective moment before the monsters came." These opening lines from the Season One episode "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," spoken in the sandpapery baritone of host Rod Serling, capture perfectly the juxtaposition of comforting normalcy and discomfiting strangeness found in the classic CBS-TV series, The Twilight Zone.

Also present is irony, because the tale that ensues is not about hideous space aliens invading but about small, unsettling eventslights switching on and off, cars starting and stopping-sowing fear, suspicion, and discord among neighbors. Only at the end, when Maple Street's civil tranquility has plunged into a full-blown riot, do the aliens appear: two calm, rational humanoids, dialing up discord on a laptop-sized console. One of them says, "Understand the procedure now? Just stop a few of their machines, their radios and telephones and lawnmowers, throw them into darkness for a few hours, and then sit back and watch the pattern." The other asks, "The pattern is always the same?" The first replies with the moral of the story: "With few variations. They pick the most dangerous enemy they can find, and it's themselves."

When these particular sowers of discord sail off in a flying saucer, it is clear they are space aliens. But they could have been earthlings. In March 1960, when this episode premiered, the KGB's first chief directorate was already six years and millions of rubles

into a disinformation campaign aimed at stirring distrust between the United States and its allies, and stoking conflict between Americans of different races, religions, and creeds. Serling was more concerned about such things than many in Hollywood. A

Discussed in this essay:

The Twilight Zone, created by Rod Serling. CBS Television

Black Mirror, created by Charlie Brooker. Netflix

decorated veteran of World War II, he was a liberal democrat in the classic sense, who never sympathized with Communism and who, given the constraints imposed by the network and overly cautious advertisers, expressed his loathing for totalitarianism as fully as he could.

Twilight Zone for the Digital Age

cited as a precursor to Black Mirror, one of the cleverest, trendiest series currently emanating from the burgeoning behemoth known as Netflix. Created by Charlie Brooker, a British writer who specializes in parodying the follies and excesses of British and American media, Black Mirror resembles The Twilight Zone in certain respects. Both are "anthology" series, telling a different self-contained story in each episode. Both are

dominated by a gifted writer who works collegially but is clearly the auteur. Both rely on plot twists of the sort identified by Aristotle as *peripeteia* (reversal) and *anagnorisis* (recognition). And both will be seen by future historians as emblematic of a "golden age of television."

But while The Twilight Zone dealt with the anxieties of mid-20th-century America, Black Mirror deals with the disruption and paranoia associated with 21st-century digital technology. Many have called it "a Twilight Zone for the digital age." But here, too, there is a notable similarity. Like the best episodes of The Twilight Zone, the best episodes of Black Mirror do not just plunk us down in a weird dystopian landscape; they provide just enough moral guidance to lead us through that landscape. Too much moral guidance, and we feel condescended to—the abiding flaw in many Twilight Zone episodes. Too little moral guidance, and we feel abandoned—especially in the swamps of early 21st-century pop culture, where morality is scorned, immorality glorified, and amorality taken as sophistication.

A prime example of Black Mirror's sure but subtle guidance is "White Bear," an episode from the second season that begins with a young woman named Victoria (Lenora Crichlow) waking up alone and distraught in a rundown housing complex. Venturing outside, she calls to strangers watching from the windows, "Hello? Can you help me? Do you know who I am? I can't remember who I am!" But rather than help, the strangers behave as voyeurs, recording her distress on their smartphones. More voyeurs appear as Victoria is pursued, rescued, threatened, and betrayed by two other people she vaguely recognizes. Eventually, amid disturbing mental flashbacks, she realizes that this whole or-





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deal has been staged to punish her for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of a small girl.

As it happens, the actual crimes were committed by Victoria's boyfriend, who killed himself in prison. But because Victoria willingly recorded the crimes on her smartphone, she must now suffer through the same ordeal daily, and have her memory of it purged nightly, in a surreal hybrid of prison and reality TV named "White Bear Justice Park," after the victim's white teddy bear. As for the voyeurs, they are visitors to the park: upright citizens, secure in their righteousness and innocence, who have paid for the pleasure of witnessing and recording the torment of a woman found guilty of having witnessed and recorded the torment of a child.

Needless to say, neither this nor any other episode of Black Mirror ends, as The Twilight Zone typically did, with the auteur appearing on camera in a debonair suit, holding a cigarette and delivering a short lecture to make sure the audience gets the point. That is not Brooker's style. On the contrary, he started out as an obscure but savagely funny blogger attacking everything crass, trendy, shallow, and twee in British media, from the tabloids to the BBC. He claims to have quit blogging when reality TV became so ridiculous it could no longer be ridiculed. But that is not quite accurate, because he continued his mockery, first as a columnist for the Guardian, and then as the host of his own TV program, Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe, on BBC Four. Other programs followed, and today Brooker is a successful snorkeler in the swamps he once sought to drain.

Brave New Entertainment World

ET ONLY AN EXPERIENCED SNORKELER could have created a series as brilliant as Black Mirror. Consider my favorite episode: "15 Million Merits," a love story set in a futuristic society where electricity is generated by thousands of young people forced to pedal all day, every day, on stationary bicycles. To distract these wretched helots, each bicycle has its own giant screen offering an array of entertainment channels, each more vulgar and garish than the last. Similar screens line the cubicles where the helots retire after their shifts, and it soon becomes evident that any helot who refuses to watch pays a stiff price in the currency of the place, counted as "merits."

The refuser in question is Bing (Daniel Kaluuya), a gloomy young fellow who hates everything on the giant screens, especially

the hyperactive softcore porn show called WraithBabes. Bing's mood is lightened when he meets Abi (Jessica Brown Findlay), a lovely young woman he overhears singing the old Irma Thomas tune, "Anyone Who Knows What Love Is." Smitten with unselfish love, Bing decides that Abi's talent is a possible escape route for her, if not for him, and spends his 15 million merits to buy her an audition with Hot Shot, a talent contest presided over by an exceedingly creepy panel of judges. When Abi's pure, soulful performance wins applause not only from the audience of onscreen avatars representing the helots in their cubicles, but also from the judges, Bing rejoices.

But then he despairs, because in the manner of pop music producers everywhere, the judges swiftly turn the sweet honey of Abi's eroticism into the slime of commercialized sex. When Abi pops up on Bing's screen as a "WraithBabe" simulating fellatio, Bing's despair turns to rage. He shatters the screen, hides the longest, sharpest shard under his mattress, and then goes to work racking up another 15 million merits to buy his own Hot Shot audition. When onstage at last with the creepy judges, he pulls out the glass shard and threatens to cut his own throat if the judges refuse to heed his denunciation of them and their whole benighted system for turning people into "fake fodder" and reducing "wonder" to "nothing."

Minus the f-bombs, this tirade would not be out of place in *The Twilight Zone*. Indeed, Serling would likely appreciate Bing's denunciation of the debasing effects of crude commercialism. Serling might also relish the twist that follows. Instead of ending on a high note of righteous anger, "15 Million Merits" continues with the judges acting creepier than ever. "That was without a doubt the most heartfelt thing I've seen on this stage since *Hot Shot* began!" exclaims one. "You're right," gushes another, "authenticity is in woefully short supply." And before you can say "Herbert Marcuse," Bing is being offered his own show.

Not surprisingly, since his show consists of holding that same shard to his throat week after week, and delivering the same threats and denunciations, Bing's rage, like Abi's sex appeal, soon becomes tacky and meaningless. The judges, and the system, have won. Or have they? The final scene shows Bing in a spacious, luxurious cubicle whose iMax-sized screens display not *WraithBabes* but a restful panorama of treetops, clouds, and birds; while in the background we hear Abi singing "Anyone Who Knows What Love Is."

No Market for Souls

AS BING SOLD HIS SOUL? OR IS THIS what he wanted all along? Serling would have relished the question, because he added a similar twist to the ending to "Patterns," the teleplay—first performed live on *Kraft Television Theater* in 1956 and released as a feature film the following year—that launched his career. In "Patterns," a man of integrity summons the courage to denounce the inhumanity of a system (a mighty conglomerate) with the power to make or break him, only to have his act of courage result in an offer to purchase his soul for a higher price than it would previously have fetched.

Thanks to "Patterns," Serling, too, got his own show. But according to Joel Engel, the author of the well-regarded Rod Serling: The Dreams and the Nightmares of Life in the Twilight Zone (1989), he never had to sell his soul. On the contrary, Engel describes Serling's

hour-long and ninety-minute original scripts [as]...some of the best moments of television's so-called "Golden Age." That they've withstood the years without seeming painfully dated is a testament to their author's insights into human nature, which he recognized as immutable even as he appealed to the better angels of our nature. All of Rod Serling's work—all of it—was built on a foundation of morality. There was right, there was wrong, and the twilight zone between them was the place where choices were made.

It is a measure of today's cultural debasement that it is almost impossible to use this kind of language when writing about a TV series. Did Charlie Brooker sell his soul to make Black Mirror? Only the envious would say such a thing, and even then, the word "soul" would be shrouded in irony. To read some of Brooker's youthful ravings, not all of them funny, is to encounter a mind so cynical, even nihilistic, that anyone who talks about souls, human nature, or morality would be instantly shredded by barbed insults and buried under heaps of stinking opprobrium.

Unhappily, this side of Brooker emerges in "Black Museum," Black Mirror's Season Four finale, released in December. A young woman called Nish (Letitia Wright) stops in the middle of a desert to recharge her electric car, and while waiting wanders into a shabby roadside attraction called the Black Museum. There she meets the proprietor, a sinister fellow named Rolo (Douglas Hodge), who gradually

reveals to her the horrors of the place, which as he explains, is devoted to unusual "criminological artifacts."

I watched this episode with a sinking heart, for three reasons. First, it is full of horror movie clichés, which are boring. Second, it is even more full of allusions to other Black Mirror episodes, which is even more boring. And third, it provides zero moral guidance. Of all the exhibits in Rolo's museum, the cruelest is a computer-generated avatar of a man who was executed in the electric chair for a sadistic crime. Like the voyeurs in "White Bear," Nish is invited to experience the pleasure of pulling the lever herself and watching the man writhe in agony. She refuses, because the man, who was wrongly convicted, is her father. At this point the lack of moral guidance becomes glaring, because rather than express revulsion at Rolo's invitation to sadism, Nish becomes an even bigger sadist, rigging the system so that Rolo will writhe in agony for eternity.

If Brooker is trying to ramp up the intensity, there are better ways. One would be to step outside his Anglo-centric bubble. Perhaps because of Serling's wartime experience, his antennae extended far beyond the borders of the United States. As stated in the little lecture he delivered after "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," Serling understood that "The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices, to be found only in the minds of men." Brooker understands well enough in his own comfort zone. But if he needs some new ideas to discomfit his audience, he need only read an article or two about the surveillance state now controlling the lives of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in China's far western province of Xinjiang.

In a 2016 panel discussion at the British Film Institute, Brooker offered this profane but cogent observation: someone who "shit in front of a primary school...ten times" may become "a cult hero," but after that "the story just repeated.... Once you've shat in front of one primary school, you're just doing bigger shits in front of bigger schools." He has a point: it is futile to fight cultural outrage with cultural outrage. The first three seasons of Black Mirror show this wisdom in action. But in the fourth, it seems to have gotten lost. Black Mirror makes us think long and hard about the presumed blessings of disruptive technologies from social media to augmented reality, hacking to online dating, big data to artificial intelligence. But to continue in that vein, its creator needs to grow up a little.



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