

## A Rhetorical Analysis of *Black Mirror*: Entertaining Reflections of Digital Technology's Darker Effects

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Since new digital technologies will undoubtedly change culture, the critique of these technologies in *Black Mirror* is highly applicable to American users living today. This essay will analyze four of the six episodes: *The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back* are concerned with digital technology's effects on interpersonal relationships, while *15 Million Merits* and *The Waldo Moment* illustrate how digital technology can be tools for social control. The message of *Black Mirror* contrasts with American users' positive perception of digital technology. Two theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are pertinent to *Be Right Back*: Social presence theory and electronic propinquity theory. Also relevant to *Black Mirror* is research on digital technology's negative effects on relationships, social media logic, and the culture industry's control of consumers. Though substantial research establishes digital technology's positive effects, this paper includes research only on negative effects. After reviewing rhetorical analysis, the discussion section establishes the creator's intended message and then separately examines each set of episodes. The first set of episodes effectively communicates the intended message by focusing on usage patterns instead of critiquing technology itself. The second set communicates the intended message to a limited extent, since the culture industry incorporates all resistance. Depicting how the culture industry works is the most effective rhetorical strategy given the constraints of being cultural products within the culture industry.

### Literature Review

Digital technology is pervasive in American society today. About 87 percent of American adults use the Internet, 90 percent own cell phones, and 58 percent own smartphones (Fox, Rainie, & Duggan, 2014). User perceptions are positive. 90 percent of Internet users say it has been good for them personally and 76 percent say it has been good for society (Fox, Rainie, & Duggan, 2014). Furthermore, 67 percent of Internet users say their online communication has strengthened family and friend relationships, whereas only 18 percent say the Internet weakens these relationships (Fox, Rainie, & Duggan, 2014). *Black Mirror* offers an important critique that opposes users' perceptions.

Two CMC theories are applicable to *Black Mirror*. Social presence theory claims communication media differ in the ability to transmit nonverbal communication. Fewer cue systems in communication media results in less warmth and involvement in users' experiences

with others (Walther, 2011). Electronic propinquity theory deals with how close a user feels to another when communicating through electronic media (Walther, 2011). Three factors increase electronic propinquity: greater bandwidth, higher levels of mutual directionality, and increased effectiveness of users' communication skills (Walther & Bazarova, 2008). Three factors decrease electronic propinquity: greater complexity of exchanged information, more rules users must conform to, and more perceived communication channels available to choose from (Walther & Bazarova, 2008). Complex interactions between these six variables help explain users' experiences of various communication mediums. For example, a user's skills can make communication through low-bandwidth mediums more satisfying, especially if users perceive no alternatives. Though the two theories discussed here do not constitute an exhaustive overview of CMC theories, they are the most relevant to *Black Mirror*.

In agreement with *Black Mirror*, some researchers argue mobile devices, the Internet, and social media sometimes disconnect users from each other. In the early days of the Internet, Sherry Turkle was optimistic that users would experiment with identity online, which would improve their life when they logged off and returned to the "real" world (Moyers, 2013). Turkle's optimism has waned because she claims users' attention is now divided between "the world of the people we're with" and the Internet (Moyers, 2013). In agreement, Rosen (2011) points out how mobile devices' power to constantly connect users in various locations "comes with a cost: the joy of being away from familiar places and discovering new ones unencumbered, the freedom of *disconnection*" (para. 15). Connecting to digital technology disconnects users from people around them and their immediate environment. Deresiewicz (2011) claims the ability to constantly connect to others through the Internet is ruining users' capacity for solitude. Solitude requires being comfortable while alone, but many users feel lonely and uncomfortable when disconnected from digital contact with others (Deresiewicz, 2011). However, researchers are not wholly pessimistic. Rosen (2011) calls for users to limit their use of digital technologies to a healthy level. In accordance, Turkle claims "there are certain ways we're using it [digital technology] that are not taking account of how misusing it, overusing it, can really threaten things that we care about" (Moyers, 2013). Thus, *how* people use digital technologies determine whether the effects are positive or negative.

Social media logic refers to "the norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies . . . underpinning [social media] dynamics" (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 2). The three elements of social media logic that are pertinent to *Black Mirror* share a common thread: the empowerment of users exists within the confines of institutional power. First, *datafication* refers to quantifying users' information and behaviors into data (Van Dijck & Poell 2013). While datafication allows users to connect, platform owners maintain control by determining what to quantify and how to do so, thereby steering users' activity (Van Dijck & Poell 2013). Second, *programmability* refers to two-way traffic: programmers create algorithms and interfaces that influence users' experiences; users contribute content and exploit or defy a site's programming (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). For example, YouTube provides the opportunity for users to upload their own content. However, Youtube's rating and ranking systems, as well as how it filters uploads, control what is produced and how it gets displayed (Van Dijck, 2009). Third, *popularity* refers to how social media sites allow people and trending topics to become popular. Though public discourse usually emphasizes this democratic element of social media, Van Dijck and Poell (2013) point out that

social networking sites define popularity—e.g., Retweets on Twitter or the number of “likes” and “friends” on Facebook. Popularity mechanisms are integrated into preexisting mass media structures, such as media moguls scouting for talent on YouTube to enhance their rating systems and boost their power (Van Dijck, 2009). *Black Mirror* will illustrate these three elements of social media logic.

How the culture industry operates is pertinent to *15 Million Merits* and *The Waldo Moment*. According to Horkheimer and Adorno (2011), the culture industry—those who control the production of culture—manipulates and controls consumers through the control of cultural products. A person can earn money only by conforming to the culture industry: “Anyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011, p. 106). Marcuse claims mass media and advertising provide a means of social control by creating false needs in consumers and then satisfying those needs (Murray, 2013). Within the culture industry, Marcuse claims any new language is evaluated in terms of a public language that predetermines the direction of consumers’ thought processes (Murray, 2013). Consumers are not allowed to think resistance is possible. Furthermore, amusement and entertainment are tools of social control. Amusement implies compliance with the system, a means of escaping the idea of resisting the culture industry. Entertainment is a means to help workers cope with a mechanized labor process. By fusing culture and entertainment, the culture industry debases culture and intellectualizes amusement (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). *Black Mirror* provides an entertaining illustration of how the culture industry functions.

## Methodology

Rhetorical analysis is the methodology for this paper. The themes in *Black Mirror* are highly applicable to anyone experiencing the technological advancements in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western society. Rhetorical analysis provides a means to evaluate if the episodes effectively communicate the creator’s intended critique of digital technology.

Rhetoric is intentional communication using symbols meant to persuade the audience or help them understand the author’s perspective (Foss, 2004). Rhetorical analysis interprets symbolic acts within artifacts to understand rhetorical processes (Foss, 2004). Artifacts—i.e., texts—are the objects of criticism in rhetorical analysis (Foss, 2004). Symbols—both verbal and visual—are important because they determine how effectively the author communicates the intended message (Foss, 2004). Symbols can be unintended by the sender and still interpreted by the reader (Foss, 2004). Instead of attempting to cover all possible readings of an artifact, rhetorical analysis includes arguments that make statements about the artifact’s messages (Foss, 2004). The purpose of analyzing symbols is to understand rhetorical processes in the artifact (Foss, 2004). Furthermore, historical context is important in rhetorical analysis (Rybacki & Rybacki, 1990). The first season of *Black Mirror* began broadcasting in December 2011 and the second season began broadcasting in February 2013. The series debuted when social media sites, smartphones, and the ubiquity of mass media were well established. The show’s message was pertinent then, is pertinent today, and will become increasingly pertinent as current technological trends unfold. The researcher used coding to analyze the four episodes of *Black Mirror*. In *The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back*, the researcher coded how people use digital technology when it has a

negative impact on interpersonal relationships. In *Be Right Back*, the codes pertained to how communication mediums in *Be Right Back* relate to social presence theory and electronic propinquity theory. In *15 Million Merits* and *The Waldo Moment*, the researcher coded for when digital technology empowers users and when it subjugates users to institutional power, in addition to social media logic.

## Discussion

### *The Creator's Intended Message*

*Black Mirror* explores possible negative effects of new digital technologies. The “black mirror” of the title refers to the screens on televisions, smartphones, and other devices when they are turned off (Brooker, 2011). Charlie Brooker (2011), the show’s creator, asks, “If technology is a drug—and it does feel like a drug—then what, precisely, are the side-effects?” (para. 7). The show is not meant to be a fair representation of both technology’s good and bad effects. Rather, the show focuses on the negative side effects. Brooker also claims the shows are “much less a critique of technology than of what you could potentially do with technology, or what technology could potentially do to you if you haven’t really thought through the consequences” (Berriman, 2013). Instead of critiquing technology in itself, Brooker attempts to explore what people can potentially do with digital technology—*how* people use it—and the ensuing negative effects.

### The Entire History of You *and* Be Right Back

*The Entire History of You* centers on the marriage of Liam and Fiona Foxwell. Their society is identical to current Western society except for one technology: brain implants. These devices are implanted behind the ear and record all experiences through users’ eyes. Users can scroll through their memories and view them on their contacts or on screens. In the beginning of the episode, Liam catches a plane back home from a job interview to attend a house party with Fiona. One of the party members, Jonas, recently broke up with his fiancé and says he sometimes watches Redoes (recorded memories) of sex with previous girlfriends. Liam dislikes this because he senses a history between Fiona and Jonas. After arriving home, Liam persuades Fiona to admit she previously dated Jonas. Though Fiona reassures Liam that it’s over, he drinks throughout the night and analyzes Redoes of Fiona and Jonas at the party. Liam is still drunk in the morning and drives to Jonas’ house to make him erase all memories of Fiona. Jonas puts the memories on a screen so Liam can see him erase them. Liam notices an image with Fiona in front of the painting that hangs above their bed. He returns home and gets Fiona admit she had an affair with Jonas. The couple gets divorced and the episode ends with Liam cutting out his brain implant (Armstrong & Welsh, 2011).

The episode demonstrates potential benefits of a technology like brain implants. A woman at the house party works in brain development and claims, “Half the organic memories you have are junk—just not trustworthy” (Anderson & Welsh, 2011). Brain implants provide the ability to have a reliable memory of the past, which can be useful in court cases, debates over who said what, or for reliving previous experiences. In the same way some employers check potential

employees' Facebook accounts, the company that interview Liam interviews requires employees to do extensive Redoes (Anderson & Welsh, 2011). Indeed, Brooker (2011) conceives brain implants as an improved form of the Facebook timeline. Brain implants could also help airport security scan a traveler's past week for any suspicious activity (Anderson & Welsh, 2011). However, these last two benefits of brain implants come with a cost: increasing intrusions on personal privacy.

The episode clearly demonstrates how misuse and overuse of brain implants leads to negative effects. An advertisement for a brand of brain implants states, "memory is for living" (Anderson & Welsh, 2011). The ad casts brain implants in a positive light. However, always having access to memories allows people to live in the past instead of the present, much like always having access to the Internet or social media disconnects users from their immediate environment (Rosen, 2011). For example, one scene shows Fiona and Liam having passionate sex. Then the shot switches to Fiona on her side and Liam behind her. They both have grey eyes, which means they are watching a memory of passionate sex on their contacts while having dispassionate sex (Anderson & Welsh, 2011). Turkle warns how the misuse and overuse of technology "can really threaten things that we care about" (Moyers, 2013). Liam misuses and overuses the brain implants, eventually leading to Liam and Fiona's divorce. Viewers may interpret Liam's discovery of the affair as positive. However, the benefit becomes a problem. Instead of enjoying what he has, Liam obsesses over the past and is unable to forgive Fiona (Anderson & Welsh, 2011). Liam's decision to cut out his brain implant symbolizes his realization that the benefits of brain implants are not worth the costs.

*Be Right Back* starts on a rainy night where Ash and Martha, a romantic couple, are driving a rental van to their new home in the countryside. Ash is clearly addicted to his smartphone and social media, putting the phone down only when Martha demands it. In the morning, Ash leaves to return the rental van and dies in an accident. At the funeral, Martha's friend Sarah recommends a computer program that analyzes Ash's social media history and uses an algorithm to create a digital form of Ash that Martha can instant message. Sarah signs Martha up against her will. Martha eventually tries it when she finds out she's pregnant. Martha quickly becomes hooked and gives the program access to audio and video records, allowing her to talk with digital Ash over the phone. Then Martha goes further, ordering a robot that looks and acts like Ash. After spending a few days with the robot, she decides she cannot live with him (Brooker & Harris, 2013).

Ash disconnects from his environment when connecting to social media. During the first night, Martha asks Ash what he wants for dinner. Ash is on his smartphone and fails to respond, so Martha asks, "do you mind having your [soup] out of a shoe?" (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Ash replies with a disinterested "Mm-hmm" (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Ash's obsession with social media disconnects him from Martha (Rosen, 2011; Moyers, 2013). The couple originally planned to return the rental van together, but Martha gets an assignment for work. When Martha tells Ash about her assignment, he says, "I'll drive all the way there: alone. Pick the car up: alone. Drive all the way back: alone" (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Ash dreads being alone (Deresiewicz, 2011). Ash's fear of being alone could have caused him to text while driving. In the first scene where the couple drives the van to their house, Martha orders Ash to put his phone

in the glove box. When Ash gets in the rental van to return it, he pulls the phone out of his pocket and begins using it instead of putting it in the glove box (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Though the episode does not show the crash, it implies Ash's phone usage caused the accident.

Martha's relationship with the digital Ash progresses through communication mediums with increasing bandwidth. Martha first chats with digital Ash in a text-only computer application (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Next, Martha allows the computer program access to Ash's voice records and videos so she can talk with digital Ash over the phone—a form of communication with increased bandwidth (Walther & Bazarova, 2008). Martha becomes dissatisfied and moves to the third option: a robot that looks and acts like Ash (Brooker & Harris, 2013). The robot has more cues and even greater bandwidth, which increases the social presence of Ash and temporarily satisfies Martha (Walther, 2011). Martha is ultimately dissatisfied and tells the robot, "You're just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking and it's not enough" (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Martha's dissatisfaction with the robot, which is ironically more present with Martha than Ash was when he was alive, symbolizes how "presence" through social media is ultimately unsatisfying. While still alive, Ash recounts how his mom moved photos of deceased family members to the attic. The last scene of the episode shows robot Ash in the attic (Brooker & Harris, 2013). Robot Ash's placement in the attic symbolizes how the robot, and social media in general, is nothing more than a glorified picture. The episode argues social media cannot produce meaningful representations of people.

*The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back* make viewers question digital technology's effects on relationships. The focus on *how* characters use the brain implant and how their usage alters its effects prompts viewers to reflect on how they use technology. *Be Right Back* provides a mirror to viewers' social media usage. According to the episode, excessive use of social media keeps people disconnected and is not a satisfactory alternative for the absence of another. These two episodes focus on how using technology in certain ways produces negative effects. The episodes' rhetoric prompts viewers to question their *usage* of digital technology by illustrating possible (or current?) negative effects, which is more effective than critiquing technology in itself.

### 15 Million Merits *and* The Waldo Moment

*15 Million Merits* takes place in a futuristic society where people live underground and earn merits (money) by pedaling bikes that power ubiquitous television screens. All workers' personal rooms have screens for walls. The main television show is called *Hot Shot*, a parody of *American Idol* that promises workers a shot at fame if they can purchase the entry ticket for 15 million merits. The main character Bing hears another worker named Abi singing in the bathroom. He says her voice is the most real thing he has heard and buys her a ticket to *Hot Shot*. Bing accompanies Abi to *Hot Shot*, hoping she will become a famous singer. However, the judges are not interested in her voice. Rather, they want to make her a star on *Wraith Babes*, a porn show that puts "the hottest girls in the nastiest situations" (Brooker, Huq, & Lyn, 2011). Security drags Bing away, leaving Abi at the mercy of the judges' persuasion and the crowd's cheers. The crowd consists of people's "Doubles"—avatars that resemble Nintendo Mii's—on a screen behind the judges. Abi agrees with the judges' request. Bing plots revenge, buying another ticket to *Hot Shot*. Once on the show, he puts a glass shard to his throat, forcing everyone to listen to

his impassioned speech against the system they all live in. The judges respond by offering him a television spot to rant against the system. Like Abi, Bing falls to the judges' persuasion and the crowd's cheers. The episode ends with one of Bing's broadcasts, showing his integration into the system (Brooker et. al., 2011).

Workers are required to be entertained. A screen is in front of each bike machine, incorporating entertainment into the working process. The system amuses workers to manufacture compliance (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). Workers can choose what to watch, including *Wraith Babes*, *Hot Shot*, a game show titled *Botherguts*, and their Double biking down a virtual path (Brooker et. al., 2011). The different channels provide the illusion of choice: all content is preprogrammed (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). A person can resist the system by skipping or muting advertisements, but this costs merits. For example, Bing is playing a video game in his room when an advertisement for Abi's debut on *Wraith Babes* pops up. Bing attempts to skip the advertisement, but he cannot pay the fee to do so because he is bankrupt from buying Abi's ticket. He then attempts to close his eyes. The screens turn red and demand him to "resume viewing," playing a loud, high frequency tone until he opens his eyes. Bing then attempts to leave his room, but the door is disabled during commercials (Brooker et. al., 2011). Bing can either refuse to work for the system or skip advertisements, but not both. Resistance to the culture industry is impossible (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011).

Social media logic is applicable to *Hot Shot*. *Hot Shot* is a hybrid of mass media and social media. Viewers watch the show on a screen, but their Doubles are in the crowd behind the judges. The crowd also surrounds viewers on the three walls (Brooker et. al., 2011). Datafication allows Doubles to mimic the viewers' movements in real-time (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). An advertisement claims *Hot Shot* empowers viewers: "You decide the victors, you control their fates, you make the call—on *Hot Shot*" (Brooker et. al., 2011). However, the interactive show defines popularity in a way that benefits the culture industry (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). The crowd's ability to exploit or defy the show's programming is minimal. Viewers can influence whether or not the contestants will accept the judges' offers, but the judges choose the contestants and the winners (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). In addition, the crowd is not autonomous, but responds to the judges' prompts (Brooker et. al., 2011). *Hot Shot* appears to connect and empower users, but instead confines them within institutional power.

*15 Million Merits* symbolizes the culture industry's incorporation of all resistance. Abi's voice is the only real thing Bing has heard, but she is silenced for her sexuality. On *Wraith Babes*, Abi is drugged and passive while a man suggestively sticks his thumb into her mouth (Brooker et. al., 2011). This symbolizes the silencing of her voice and her use as a sexual object. In Bing's speech on *Hot Shot*, he says, "All we know is fake fodder and buying shit. It's how we speak to each other, how we express ourselves—is buying shit" (Brooker et. al., 2011). The culture industry views contestants as fodder to entertain the masses. Workers can express themselves only through buying virtual accessories for their Doubles—an artificial need the culture industry manufactured (Murray, 2013). Bing's speech is unsuccessful because the judges and the crowd evaluate it in terms of a public language that predetermines the direction of consumers' thought processes (Murray, 2013). For example, Judge Hope claims, "I like your stuff . . . authenticity is in woefully short supply" (Brooker et. al., 2011). The judges see Bing's speech only as "stuff"

and view his authenticity as a commodity within the logic of supply and demand. During Bing's television show broadcast, a viewer buys a glass shard for his Double identical to the glass shard Bing used on *Hot Shot* (Brooker et. al., 2011). The thumb in Abi's mouth and Bing's glass shard being sold as a commodity symbolize how the culture industry effectively integrates all resistance.

*The Waldo Moment* centers on Waldo, a CGI blue bear controlled by comedian Jamie Sulter. Waldo has a spot on a late-night comedy show. When the season ends, the production company enters Waldo into a political race against Conservative Liam Monroe, making a comedy show out of Waldo's campaign. Jamie and Waldo's crew drive around in a van with a large screen for Waldo, popping up at political gatherings and making jokes about Monroe. In the middle of the race, Waldo participates in a question session with the other candidates, entertaining the crowd with crude jokes and providing a heated critique of the political system. An official of The Agency from Washington, D.C., speaks privately to Jamie and his producer, persuading them to use Waldo as a political weapon. The next day, Jamie quits because he realizes Waldo is becoming part of a corrupt system. Jamie ends economically destitute and homeless, whereas Waldo becomes a successful global political product (Brooker & Higgins, 2013).

Though Waldo seems to be outside the political system, he is integrated into the larger culture industry. After a video of the question session goes viral on YouTube, Facebook groups call for Waldo to form a national party (Brooker & Higgins, 2013). Waldo gains popularity through social media's popularity mechanisms (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Citizens' use of popularity mechanisms ends up benefiting the culture industry when The Agency turns Waldo into a "global political entertainment product" (Brooker & Higgins, 2013). After Jamie quits acting as Waldo, he is pictured sleeping on the streets (Brooker & Higgins, 2011). Jamie's resistance to Waldo and the culture industry led him to economic impotence (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). Jamie then watches Waldo promise "change" and "hope" on a public television. The slogan appears in red, white, and blue, symbolizing President Obama's use of the words "change" and "hope" in his candidacy (Brooker & Higgins, 2011). This ties the message to a real-world example and implies all political slogans—even ones from CGI blue bears—are products.

Waldo's appeal is his power to amuse. During the question session, Monroe asks, "What is this [Waldo] for? And why do we waste our time with animated trivialities like him [Waldo]?" (Brooker & Higgins, 2013). People waste their time with Waldo because his jokes provide a catharsis for citizens to deal with the corrupt political system. Entertainment is a coping mechanism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). Waldo responds to Monroe's intellectual questions with jokes: "You look less human than I do and I'm a made-up bear with a turquoise cock" (Brooker & Higgins, 2013). The crowd laughs. In addition to jokes, Waldo critiques the political system: "Stuff has got to change. No one trusts you lot. You don't give a shit about anything outside of your bubble" (Brooker & Higgins, 2013). The crowd cheers and claps, but Waldo's criticism is merely the intellectualization of amusement (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). Instead of providing an alternative, Waldo is a part of the culture industry that amuses citizens into compliance.



*15 Million Merits* and *The Waldo Moment* give a cynical view of what culture can become, or perhaps what it already is. The elements of social media logic favor the culture industry in *Hot Shot* and popularity mechanisms increase Waldo's fame so he can pacify citizens with amusement (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Abi, Bing, and Waldo's incorporation into the culture industry highlight the impossibility of resistance and the illusion of alternatives. This rhetoric implies even *Black Mirror* is a part of the culture industry, providing intellectualized amusement to help people cope (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2011). Since all mass-produced artifacts that critique the culture industry become a part of the system, the best an artifact can do is reveal its own incorporation. Though *Black Mirror* is a part of the culture industry instead of an alternative, its rhetoric is successful in making viewers aware of its own incorporation.

This paper is limited to four episodes from *Black Mirror*. Each episode is full of symbolism and deserves greater attention than this paper gives them. Analyzing the episodes separately would be helpful in understanding the precise extent *Black Mirror* applies to current Western society. Future research can also examine *Black Mirror* as a whole, including the new episodes being released in the third season.

## Conclusion

*Black Mirror* is an important message for anyone living in current Western society. The recent creation, expansion, and proliferation of new technologies will change culture. Despite widespread optimism among American users, some scholars raise concerns of the possible negative effects of these technologies. How citizens use these technologies will be a large factor in determining whether society changes for better or for worse. *The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back* effectively draw attention to how certain ways of using technology can result in negative effects. Though *The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back* may help viewers become more aware of technology's negative effects, they cannot stop the production and advertisement of new technologies. *15 Million Merits* and *The Waldo Moment* explicitly demonstrate how the culture industry integrates all resistance and amuses consumers into compliance. According to its own message, *Black Mirror* is merely another form of intellectualized amusement that cannot effectively critique or provide an alternative to the culture industry. Rather than being an alternative to the culture industry, *Black Mirror* is simply an entertaining reflection of digital technology's darker effects for viewers to enjoy.

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