Black Mirror Season 5: The elephants in the room

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Black Mirror is a British science fiction anthology television series now in its fifth season. It was originally aired on British television's Channel 4 in 2011. Netflix purchased the program in 2015. Twenty-two episodes in all have been released.

The central theme of the series, one of the most watched of the past decade, is the supposed dark side of technological development.

Over the past decade or so in particular, the advanced development and penetration of the Internet and related technologies have affected every aspect of social and personal life in most of the world. This is both profound and obvious. It's what everyone talks about.

Far from introducing unmitigated social progress, however, much less heaven on earth, the technological transformations have taken place alongside a massive increase in social inequality the world over, endless wars, increased rates of "deaths of despair," the rise of the fascist mass shooter and the $100-billion man, the wholesale destruction of decent, secure jobs and the virtually universal increased exploitation of labor.

In some spheres, including the integration of the state and tech companies into a massive global spying and censorship network, etc., innovation has been deeply entwined with social and political reaction. It has also, in its own manner, led to an increase in social inequality, producing the vast fortunes of Gates, Bezos, Zuckerberg, executives at Google, Apple and other tech firms.

Black Mirror proposes to look at the unwanted "side-effects" of modern technology, as show creator Charlie Brooker has put it.

But which socio-technological developments come in for artistic exploration by Brooker and company in the latest season, and how profoundly? Is there anything here that rises to the occasion and provides genuine insight into why technology has such a "dark side"?

Season 5 has three episodes. Episode one, "Striking Vipers," is the tale of two male friends in their 30s (played by Anthony Mackie and Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) who secretly explore their romantic feelings for one another by playing a highly realistic virtual reality game in which one of them is a woman. Hmm.

In the third episode, "Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too," a lonely teenage girl (Angourie Rice) becomes friends with a robotic toy based on her favorite (and discontented) pop singer (Miley Cyrus). Well …

If this sounds insubstantial and miles away from critical social realities, it is. These two episodes are unreal, grasp the current situation badly and are largely embarrassing to watch. The subjects and treatment are conventional, and, in any event, not truly a critique of technology at all.

In episode two, which is somewhat more substantial, a desperate Hitcher (i.e., Uber) driver, Chris Gilhaney (Andrew Scott), takes hostage an employee from the London headquarters of social media giant Smithereens (i.e., Facebook). What has caused the driver to resort to such drastic measures? His only demand is the ability to speak to the young CEO of Smithereens, Billy Bowers (Topher Grace), on the phone. A police standoff ensues in London while someone is sent to interrupt Bowers, ironically, in the middle of a ten-day "silent vacation" alone in a glass hut in the remote Utah desert, with no phone or Internet access.

When Bowers is finally reached by phone, we learn the driver's secret: he was at fault in a car accident that killed his fiancée and another driver. He had been distracted by the Smithereens app on his phone and drove into incoming traffic. The other driver who died was drunk and took the blame. Gilhaney begs Bowers to stop making social media so addictive that "you

can't take your eyes off it."

During the standoff, Smithereens executives prove to be far more adept than the police at putting together the facts of the case, using their own internal tools that can track social media activity in real time. They quickly determine the driver's identity based on his phone, and then search through his social media posts to try to determine his motives. They even use his phone's microphone to spy on him in real time. In the end they are directing the authorities. This element has the ring of truth.

However, even though this might sound oppositional, "Smithereens" comes down on the side of the police and the tech companies and the benefits of their using these tools to solve crimes! We're left with a pro-police, pro-spying argument.

Also, Bowers is portrayed very sympathetically. He's an upstanding citizen who really cares about people. He just happens to be a tech billionaire. He doesn't get the severe scrutiny that a stand-in for Mark Zuckerberg deserves.

Care and money have obviously gone into the production of *Black Mirror*. The biggest problem doesn't lie with the look of the series, or with the actors, but its avoidance of key issues related to the development *under capitalism* of technology and science. The latter have their own logic, as Leon Trotsky explained in "Radio, Science, Technique and Society" (1926), "the logic of the cognition of nature and the mastering of it" in the interests of humanity. But, Trotsky pointed out, "technique and science develop not in a vacuum but in human society, which consists of classes" and the "ruling class, the possessing class, controls technique." *Black Mirror* stumbles on this *minor* matter.

Concretely, the series refuses to tackle a number of the contemporary elephants in the room, which are (1) the vast spying and censorship carried out by governments and facilitated by the tech companies and (2) the role played by various technologies in helping to create the "gig economy" and the "Amazonization" of the workplace. This evasiveness helps not only to make the stories less interesting and dramatic, but the world they take place in less believable, less recognizable.

It's a commentary on the current state of television and culture that the "number one show" devoted to unease about technological developments is so conformist and sidesteps the most troubling issues. There is great interest in these problems. There is a general sense that they're of burning importance. But it's impossible to make sense of them without taking a critical look at society as a whole, and *Black Mirror* is not able to do that.