

The tension between Utopia and Dystopia under late capitalism: control, alienation and resistance in “Mr. Robot” and “Black Mirror”



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Giulia Bartolone

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Supervisor: Dr. Yasco Horsman

Second reader: Prof. Dr. Maria Boletsi

Abstract

By examining two of the most acclaimed and popular televisual productions recently released, *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015 - present) and *Black Mirror* (Channel 4/Netflix, 2011 - present), I wish to show up to what extent they portray the expansion of capitalism into the political, cultural and social dimensions of our Western contemporary reality as a phenomenon weakening our utopian sense of the future.

Drawing upon the field of social theory, I will argue that *Mr. Robot*, with its emphasis on the political and cultural domains, shows how mechanisms of control and manipulation responding to the logic of late capitalism and consumerism are influencing our ability to imagine a new and alternative system to the current one. In the case of *Black Mirror*, criticism towards late capitalism revolves around the use and abuse of new technologies, which implement the spiral of image addiction, the power of commodities, and cause a dramatic change in the way we perceive the boundaries between life and death. Throughout my analysis, I will refer to the utopian genre, and, specifically, its most recent variation of critical dystopia, with the aim of considering the tension and interaction between utopia and dystopia in the two TV series as a strategy, first, to raise awareness in the public about the most degrading aspects of our reality and, secondly, to reinvigorate a concept of utopia not as escapist thinking, but as a transformative impulse to change society and potentially overcome the cultural deadlock of capitalism.

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Introduction

Utopia in the 21st century: are we still able to dream?

In 2018, the moment when this thesis is being written, Western societies, or, I should say, the world in its totality, go through a period that is sometimes called late-capitalism. This is an era where the mechanisms of capitalism have expanded well beyond the economic and financial fields and have penetrated culture, politics, the social fabric itself. The “prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 36) has produced “social arrangements that condemn most of the world’s population to poverty and premature death, and subject even those who are very affluent to forms of alienation, repression, competition and separation which are incompatible with a fully human existence” (Levitas and Sargisson, *Utopia in Dark Times* 13).

One of the characteristics of this period is, according to Fredric Jameson, that it lacks a Utopian imagination. Indeed, Utopia intended as a force that allows human beings to go beyond present reality and to imagine alternative and better worlds, seems to have been compromised by the invisible but powerful hand of capital. Our consumeristic society makes us feel as though there is no other and better “paradise” (Moylan, *Scraps* 29) possible. We have the “luck” to be born in a period where all our needs can be fulfilled, new technologies have simplified what were once complicated or impossible activities, and if we are fed up with our daily routine we can just book the cheapest flight and travel wherever we desire. In such a socio-historical environment, the “radical call of Utopia” (Moylan 187) is deeply challenged.

The idea of the “atrophy” (Archaeologies 289) of the Utopian thought is well expressed by Jameson in an often-quoted statement where he argues that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (qtd. in Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* 2), and according to which there is a “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher’s emphasis) (2).

In my thesis, I would like to test Jameson’s statement by building the present work around a question that may spring to mind given the abovementioned conditions of the Utopian imagination: “are we still able to dream?”, or, “can we still imagine a society not dominated by consumerism and capitalism and, as a further step, believe in it and take action to make it a reality?”.

What I can anticipate is that Utopia as the “propensity to reach for a better life” (Levitas, *For Utopia* 27) is not dead. Indeed, Utopia is characterized by the capacity to adapt to radically different socio-historical contexts, and to “put forward made-to-measure solutions” (Vieira 19) in order to give voice to the deepest fears and expectations arising from each specific era. Utopia, thus, ramifies in several variations identified with “derivation neologisms” such as “eutopia, dystopia, alotopia, [...] heterotopia, ecotopia” (Vieira 3), just to name a few. The fascinating aspect about this process of adaption is that through the history of Utopia translated into different forms of narrative, we see nothing other than the history of man in relation to society.

For instance, if we consider our late-capitalistic society, we are witnessing a “dystopian turn” (Moylan, *Scraps* 147), both in literary and visual productions, that started in the late 1980s and continues nowadays. To give a few examples, let us think about Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), an emblematic novel of feminist critical dystopia that is still widely known and that has been adapted into a TV series in 2017; cyberpunk dystopias such as the film *Blade Runner* (1982), whose sequel has also been released in 2017; mass culture productions like *The Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), *Fight Club* (1999), adapted from Palahniuk’s homonymous novel, *Children of Men* (2006), *Her* (2013), and the iconic *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), all of them picture dystopian situations arising from a critique of specific elements of our postmodern and capitalistic world.

The reason why dystopia, or “the dark side of Utopia” (Baccolini and Moylan 1), is dominating the scene of cultural representations is that it allows for a better depiction and understanding of our “decidedly pessimistic times” (8), since it focuses on the most negative and bleak aspects of present reality by exaggerating them when they are translated into a narrative. Nevertheless, the scholar Lyman Tower Sargent has noticed how dystopian works like the ones previously mentioned contain both utopic and dystopic elements and suggested that they could be addressed as “critical dystopias”, to distinguish them from classical dystopias of the past. Indeed, these new dystopias often engage with a certain degree of hope and present utopian moments through an “implicit warning” (Fitting 156) in the narration about what could happen if the reader/spectator, as a citizen, continues to follow “terrible sociopolitical tendencies” (2) instead of acting and driving away from them.

As the title of my thesis suggests, I am interested in delving into dystopian representations of our contemporary society and to discover up to what extent utopic and dystopic elements interact with each other and what are the outcomes of such interaction. To proceed with that, I have chosen to analyse the concepts of utopia and dystopia in two recent televisual productions, namely *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015 - present) and *Black Mirror* (Channel 4/Netflix, 2011 - present), that have been successfully welcomed by both critics and public as two works belonging to what some media

theorists address as “Quality Television” (Pérez-Gómez 33). The reason why I have decided to focus my attention on the televisual form and, specifically, the most recent strand of Quality Television is that it is characterized by complex narratives, engaging plots and a deep exploration of characters that aim at stimulating and challenging the spectators’ thoughts in a way that other types of TV products do not. It is exactly the fact that “it enlightens, challenges, involves and confronts the viewers, it provokes thoughts” (34) that makes Quality TV particularly suitable to develop dystopian narrations, since the very purpose of dystopian strategies is also to involve the readers/spectators so that they can become aware and question specific aspects of their surrounding world that a given dystopian work portrays.

The first chapter of my thesis will be dedicated to introducing and explaining the definitions of Utopia that most suit the purpose of the present research and to delineating, thus, the theoretical framework that I will be using to analyse the two TV series earlier mentioned. In this first part of my writing, emphasis will be put on the social function of Utopia and on how its imaginative power can shift from the realm of fantasy and escapism to that of present reality and, hence, acquire a transformative potential. To do so, I will take into consideration the Marxist tradition, since it is based on a materialistic approach on society that focuses on the “forces of history” (Vieira 12) which enables some observations on the dynamics that can potentially lead to changes in the main assets of the capitalistic system.

In the second and third chapters, I will apply such theoretical framework to the analysis of *Mr. Robot* and *Black Mirror* to investigate how utopia and dystopia interact in the representation of contemporary society provided by the two TV series.

More specifically, in the second chapter I will draw the attention to *Mr. Robot* as an example of “narrative complexity” (Mittel 29) that casts a light on “culture-specific anxieties” (Limpár 3) stemming from life under late-capitalism and control societies. The tension between utopia and dystopia is evident in the series since, on the one hand, it clearly shows how the invisible but powerful influence of capitalism on politics and society has turned our world into a gloomy dystopian reality; on the other hand, a strong utopian impulse is displayed through the act of resistance undertaken by the protagonist, Elliot Alderson, even though his dream of a revolution seems to shatter against a system that has proved so far to be impact-resistant.

Further features of the late-capitalistic era will be dealt with in detail, as an essential part in the representation of present reality that is put forward in the TV series. The theories of the sociologist Fredric Jameson will be pivotal, since they describe postmodernism and late-capitalism as cultural phenomena that characterize our existence in its totality, and they put forward the “structural Impossibility” (Archaeologies 292) of Utopia in the postmodern context.

Moreover, Mark Fisher's observations on "capitalist realism" and Franco "Bifo" Berardi's notions of "semicapitalism" and "slow cancellation of the future" will be used to explain why, in *Mr. Robot* as well as in our reality, it has become extremely difficult not only to make a utopian dream concrete, but, mostly, to think about the future in utopian terms in the first place.

In the third chapter, *Black Mirror* will take the stage. In this TV series, I will focus my attention on the episodes "Nosedive" and "San Junipero", since they allow me to introduce further interesting and influencing theories that describe how late-capitalism has invaded our personal, intimate, and social spheres to keep on thriving and expanding. Specifically, I will argue that both episodes are set in a near future where new technologies have evolved to such an extent that it is possible to get access to and manipulate human mind and consciousness.

In "Nosedive", I will refer to Best & Kellner's notion of "interactive spectacle" – elaborated from Guy Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" – to show how current new technologies such as social networks are critically represented as a means empowering images, signs and appearance to the benefit of consumerism, and paralysing any spirit of protest or resistance. In fact, the protagonist, Lacie, is immersed into a virtual and controlled world that is almost completely detached from reality.

"San Junipero", instead, deals with a technological advancement that transhumanism defines as "mind-uploading" (Paura 24), namely the "transfer of human consciousness on an eternal and unbreakable digital support" (24), which displays a tangible tension between utopia and dystopia. Accordingly, through the story between the main characters, Yorkie and Kelly, the scenarios opened up by fields such as biomedical engineering and cybernetics shift from the "final utopia" (27) of defeating mortality to the most inhuman and dystopic condition where human consciousness is treated as any other technological device. Moreover, I will investigate up to what extent the transhumanist utopia as represented in "San Junipero" offers an effective critique of our own world.

As a final observation, I would like to spend some words on what drove me to write about this topic. This work stems from the same reason why I decided to attend the Master of Arts "Literature in Society. Europe and Beyond" in the first place. I believe that in our historical moment where we feel stuck in a "perpetual present" (*The Twin Sources of Realism* 28), literary and cultural productions can help us understand the problems causing anguish to individuals and communities in our times. Talking about the specific TV series I will examine, I think they strike the public not only for the indubitable quality of their production, but also for their ability to make us look inside ourselves and face those anxieties or thoughts that normally remain buried under the many stimuli to which we are daily exposed.

The beauty that I have found in learning about social theories regarding utopia and late-capitalism is that they provide the reader with a map to find his/her bearings in the extremely complex postmodern world, and to place events or sensations into a framework that can make sense of what is going on in our reality. What I wish for my thesis, then, is that it can be an interest reading for whoever feels like acquiring some conceptual tools to make his/her way through the saturated, but simultaneously empty, jungle of meanings that is our present.

Chapter 1

Defining Utopia

1.1 Utopia and literary form

1.1.1 Sargent's "social dreaming"

In the influential essay "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" published by the journal *Utopian Studies* in 1994, the scholar Lyman Tower Sargent defines the "broad, general phenomenon of utopianism as social dreaming", a term representing "the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (Sargent 3). This definition takes into account the deep bond of utopia with the social dimension and with the aspirations and fears of human beings concerning the world in which they would prefer to live, or, on the contrary, the reality they would want to avoid.

In mentioning both "dreams and nightmares", Sargent distances himself from the concept of "*perfection*" (Sargent's emphasis) that in the past was "freely used by scholars in defining utopia" (9), and turned into a "political weapon" by "opponents of utopianism" (9). The argument of the latter group of critics is mainly built on the "'self-evident" failure of [...] communism and totalitarianism" (Concept x) and on the collapse of the utopian projects that twentieth-century ideologies wished to implement. Such critics claim that the desire to actualize a perfect society is inherently a totalitarian plan, since it can be finalised only through "punitive methods of controlling behaviour which inexorably results in some form of police state" (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 138).

Sargent's definition reevaluates utopia as a "universal human phenomenon" (Sargent 3) that he names utopianism, and that includes "the story of those who had differing dreams and the conflicts among them, [...] (the) story of the fainthearted who were afraid to dream themselves and feared the dreams of others" (1). The clashes among people's dreams and the dangers that some ideas of better society may represent to groups of individuals in a given community have given birth to what has been called "the dark side of Utopia" (Baccolini and Moylan 1), namely dystopia, which focuses on aspects of reality, or tendencies that may dominate society in a near future, that pose a serious threat for either a minority or even the majority of the population, since they represents totally unfavourable conditions of living, a nightmare instead of a dream.

As Sargent also points out in his writing, utopianism is manifested in “three different forms”: utopian literature, communitarianism, which deals with the so-called intentional communities, and utopian social theory (Sargent 4). In what follows, I will concentrate on utopian literature, the commonly most known form in which social dreaming has been shaped in Western societies from the past centuries onwards. More specifically, I will describe how utopian and dystopian texts have developed throughout the twentieth century to arrive to the most recent variation of the so-called “critical dystopia” (9).

Later on, the attention will be drawn to utopian social theory, with an analysis that considers utopia as a social force. Both the characteristics of critical dystopia and the connection between utopia and social change will be essential in the examination of *Mr. Robot* and *Black Mirror* in the second and third chapters.

1.1.2 Utopia in the twentieth century: classic dystopias, critical utopias, critical dystopias

After having indicated utopian literature as a manifestation of what Sargent defines “social dreaming”, I would like to describe the tendencies in the utopian genre that took place in the twentieth century, since they will allow us to understand the most recent of them, critical dystopia, which has extended to the current century and is dominating the scene of mass culture.

The previous century is remembered, sorrowfully, for the horrors that occurred during the two World Wars, “nightmarish” (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 107) events that form the basis of the two masterpieces of classic dystopia, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949).

Both works are “based on the extrapolation of some existing trends” (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 109) in the reality of capitalism, but they target different aspects of such a reality. Huxley’s aim is to depict “the behavioural psychology of consumer society” (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 125) and the dangers of living in a world where “materialistic hedonism” (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 115) is unconditionally supported by the power of science and technology, whereas Orwell focuses on the political outcomes that an untamed technological development can bring about, such as the instauration of a totalitarian state that overuses control and violence to suppress any expression of individuality.

The theme of control is central in both dystopias. However, if in *1984* violence and psychological terror are the fundamental weapons to maintain the totalitarian social order, in *Brave New World* there is no need for violence, since the social “harmony” is guaranteed by the “manipulation of pleasure” (Claeys 118) and the regular use of *soma*, a “euphoric, narcotic, pleasantly hallucinant” (Huxley 46) drug that unburdens citizens of anxiety, pain and depression, with the result that the “very desire for freedom” (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 116) is lost.

Even if the comparison between these two milestones in Western literature is extremely fascinating and could have the length of a book, what is relevant for the purpose of this writing is addressing the adjective “classic” (Varsam 210) that defines such dystopias.

In some early definitions, classic or “canonical” (Moylan, *Scraps* 121) dystopias were considered to merely represent the “negation of utopia” (Claeys, *Three Variants* 15), an anti-utopic vision of society. Later studies provided a deeper examination on the concept of dystopia and rejected the identification of the term dystopic solely with anti-utopic. Accordingly, dystopias are situated in the “complex continuum that stretches between [...] Utopia and Anti-Utopia” (Moylan, *Scraps* 122).

If dystopia and anti-utopia were used in past decades almost interchangeably, it is because classic dystopias, in contrast to the most recent critical dystopias, are often closer to the anti-utopic edge. They present “bleak, depressing [texts] with little space for hope within the story” (Baccolini and Moylan 7), no alternative society to the present one is proposed in the text, and no direction to follow is indicated in order to avoid the dystopic outcome. Yet, they cannot be labelled as anti-utopic in the sense of being “directed *against* Utopia and utopian thought” (Moylan’s emphasis) (qtd. in Moylan 72) or of mocking and ridiculing “the socio-political project of humanity’s collective ability to produce the material conditions for the fulfilled existence of everyone” (131).

During the post-war period, the utopian genre undertakes a new turn, thanks to the wave of civil rights movements and the notable leverage of the New Left, with programs fostering a better distribution of wealth in support of the largest part of the population that has been increasingly penalized by the mechanisms of globalization.

It is an historical moment that seems to regain hope towards the future and towards the possibility to change the social system for the better. As Moylan puts it, “[u]topia rose, again, from the ashes of obscurity in the decades after World War II, [...] yearning for better lives in a world of peace” (Moylan, *Scraps* 67).

The works stemming from the optimistic mood of the period are the so called “critical utopias” (56), and it is no coincidence that they are written mostly by female authors. As a matter of fact, the social revolution of the 1960s and 70s also witnessed the birth of the Second Wave Feminism,

a “liberation movement” (67) that aimed at empowering the woman as an active subject in the public community, free to claim her rights to determine her future, to find a satisfying job and perform activities that would not relegate her to the domestic environment.

Critical utopias differ from the traditional ones following on from Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) in that they are characterized by a “self-reflexive” (88) attitude and reject the idea that a static model of utopian society can ever be achieved. Indeed, they perceive utopia as a “process” (83), and they avoid on purpose the technique of “narrative closure” (55) in order to “leave open questions” (55) and demand a critical stance on the part of the reader.

The utopian society offered by the author is still seen as a better system compared to the present one, but it is not perfect, nor flawless. The purpose is to create a sympathetic relation between the protagonist and the reader, so that when the former is “faced with the existential-political decision to make a commitment to the preservation or further development of utopia” (54-55), the latter is prompt to approach his/her present reality in the same critical and committed way.

One of the most iconic and representative examples of critical utopia is the novel by Marge Piercy *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976). In this novel, the protagonist, Connie, is made aware that the future utopian society that she gets to know through Luciente, a time-traveller character, is only one possible future. Indeed, Mattapoissett, the Utopia free from any type of gender, race or class discrimination, where individuals are encouraged to listen to their emotions and to work according to their desires and capabilities, has the same chances of happening as its dystopian counterpart, namely a society where capitalism and exploitation have triumphed. Connie, then, feels the responsibility to take action to make the utopia possible, and the decisions she has to make add to the critical position that is required from the reader.

With the advent of the Reagan administration in the 1980s and the promotion of a more right-wing and conservative politics, the socio-historical situation changed again and a new “dystopian turn” (Baccolini and Moylan 3) was, sadly, inaugurated. The feeling that the Western world was entering a new dystopic era was based on the fading of the main achievements reached during the social revolution of the 60s and 70s. The “measures of social wealth” (Moylan, *Scraps* 183) aimed at safeguarding workers and minorities were sacrificed in favour of the logic of the “free market” and of a “renewed capitalism [that] reached towards its own dream of total exploitation and administration of workers” (184).

The form of utopian writing that better represented, and still represents, the late-capitalistic period is the so called “critical dystopia” (Sargent 9). This term was firstly formulated by Sargent, who noticed how some works published from the 80s onwards, such as Piercy’s *He, She and It* (1991),

were “clearly both eutopias and dystopias” (7). The term “critical” is used here in the sense that defines critical utopias, since the new dystopias also feature a strong self-reflexivity, they “resist [...] closure” (189), and they involve the reader in a critical analysis towards his/her present society. In fact, authors of critical dystopias wish to stimulate agency in the reader, who is required to act in order to “escape [the] pessimistic future” (Baccolini and Moylan 7) portrayed in the dystopian narrative.

What is more, critical dystopias differ from the classical ones since they “refuse the anti-utopian temptation that lingers in every dystopian account” (7) and “open a space of contestation and opposition” (7) that replaces the “traditional subjugation” (7) of the protagonists in classical dystopias. An emblem of the latter pessimist and resigned attitude can be found in *1984* when the protagonist, Winston Smith, at the end of the novel, surrenders to the power of the Big Brother.

So far, I have explained how, in the twentieth century, utopia witnessed several variations that led to the rise of the recent critical dystopia. A deeper examination of the latter genre and its manifestations will be addressed in the following chapters dealing with *Mr. Robot* and *Black Mirror*.

In what immediately follows, I will consider a further element that played a pivotal role in the transformations of utopia as a genre, namely its encounter with science fiction.

1.1.3 The blurred boundaries between utopia and science fiction

The explanation on the evolution of utopian literature from the twentieth century up until our recent times would not be complete without some observations on the relevance that the genre of science fiction (SF) has acquired in the critique of contemporary social reality. Indeed, I share Peter Fitting’s vision according to which “it is impossible to study the utopias and dystopias of the past fifty years or more without acknowledging the central role of science fiction” (Fitting 135).

As discussed above, already in classic dystopias we can see how the element of scientific and technological advancement was contributing to build up the dystopian aspect of the narrative, since it was opening in people’s minds new horizons of fears and expectations that influenced the collective imagination of the future.

It is a “widely shared view” (Mouzakitis 1) that the idea of “progress”, followed by the inevitable impact that innovations in the fields of science and technology have on everyday life, began to be perceived as a fundamental player in socio-historical transformations at the dawn of Modernity. Hence, modern science fiction, with “its ability to reflect or express our hopes and fears about the

future, and more specifically to link those hopes and fears to science and technology” (Fitting 138), incorporated social themes that were, in past eras, a prerogative of utopian texts, namely what we have described earlier as “social dreaming”, the hopes, fears, dreams and nightmares experienced by individuals when reflecting on their present and imagining possible futures.

This mingling of SF with utopian themes brought, according to Fitting, a “new dimension to utopian writing” (138). First, it raised awareness on the fact that utopian visions entered the realm of real possibilities. This means that, due to the “infinite powers of reason” (Vieira 9), “it no longer made sense [...] to place the imaginary society on a remote island or in an unknown, inaccessible place” (10), as it was the case with traditional utopian texts like More’s *Utopia*. Thanks to progress, “the present could be changed” and utopian projects “could now be set in the future rather than [...] somewhere else” (Fitting 138).

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, modern science fiction cast a light on the “importance of science and technology [...] as a tool for social transformation” (139). Technology could be introduced in a narrative as an element impacting and influencing the social dimension, instead of being deployed merely as a device adding to the fantastical sphere of an adventure, travel or mystery fiction.

An example of a work showing the effects of progress on society and the way human beings react to scientific development is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), a novel which is “often held to be the founding text of the genre of science fiction” (Claeys, *The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell* 110). In the well-known plot, the monstrous creature brought to life by Victor Frankenstein, and the way such creature unsettles Victor’s life, metaphorically “speaks to deep fears and desires that lie at the heart of our responses to biological science” (Turney). A more recent example, that will be analysed in the third chapter of the thesis, is the TV series *Black Mirror*, which revolves around the representation of a near-future society whose habits, social and working interactions, and life values have undergone a significant change due to the capitulation of reality to technology.

A scholar that has theoretically clarified the link of science fiction with the social and anthropological dimension is Darko Suvin. In 1972, he formulated a definition according to which SF is the “*literature of cognitive estrangement* (Suvin 372) [...] *whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment*” (Suvin’s emphasis) (375). The “presence and interaction” (375) of the two elements of estrangement and cognition qualify SF as a genre where “imagination [is] a means to understand the tendencies in reality” (375). The “attitude of estrangement” is one of “confronting a set normative system [...] with a point of view or glance implying a new set of norms” (374), whereas the “cognition” implies “a reflecting *of* but also *on*

reality, [...] a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment" (377).

According to such a definition, Suvin refers to utopia as a sub-genre of SF and names the former "sociological fictions or social-science-fiction" (381). Whether we consider utopia in terms of Suvin's definition or we favour other theories that interpret SF as a manifestation of utopian literature, what is sure is that the two genres, both acknowledging the relevance of science and technology in influencing social change, are critical of contemporary society. Indeed, they both are "kindred forms of "estranged" writing" (Moylan, *Scraps* 76) that "defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*" (Jameson's emphasis) (*Archaeologies* 286).

As we will see when analysing *Black Mirror*, this discussion on utopia and SF will be useful to understand the modalities in which the series moves a critique towards the relationship between individuals, society and new technologies.

In what immediately follows, I will move into the realm of utopian social theory by developing on utopia considering its social function, its role as a force that drives the evolution of human beings in a given society. This is another essential aspect that enables the examination on how, both in *Mr. Robot* and *Black Mirror*, the utopian imagination can be shaped by the very socio-historical conditions informing the reality where the characters live, and on the extent to which utopia may be weakened or empowered by such conditions.

1.2 Utopian social theory

1.2.1 The rehabilitation of utopia after the "end of utopia"

The rise of critical dystopias and utopias in the second half of the twentieth century coincided with a return of interest in utopian thought in social theory. Whereas Utopianism has been used mainly in a pejorative sense because of its unrealizability, or in later authors because of their links to totalitarianism, the period following the 20th century also saw a new appreciation of utopianism, precisely because of its fantasmatic nature.

The concepts of "perfection" and "impossibility" appears with persistence in utopia's definitions. For instance, if we look up into *The Oxford English Dictionary*, utopia is defined as "[a] plan for or vision of an ideal society, place, or state of existence, *esp.* one that is impossible to realize; a fantasy, a dream", or "[a] real place which is perceived or imagined as perfect" ("Utopia").

On the one hand, the identification of utopia with perfection renders any individual who dreams for a better life and an alternative world “hopelessly unrealistic, or worse, actively dangerous” (Concept 1); on the other hand, the equation between Communism and Utopia, the “discourse of Anglo-American news coverage” (For Utopia 30) around the collapse of the Soviet Union as “the end of utopia” (30), hinders any commitment to the utopian thought, which is doomed to be seen as either anachronistic, unrealizable or apologetic towards passed dictatorships.

From the end of the Cold War onwards, utopian scholars have worked to rehabilitate the concept of utopia and formulate new definitions that could lift the essence of utopia up from the ashes of the horrific events that left a tragic mark throughout the twentieth century. Since the aim of my thesis is to investigate how utopia and society are embedded, it is exactly those definitions that take into account the social relevance of imagination and hope at the core of utopia that will be useful for my analysis.

In particular, the process of reevaluation of utopia is informed by a de-ideologized reading of Marx’s theories on capitalism. If his political premonition of reaching a dictatorship of the proletariat has turned out to be unrealizable and can hardly be supported nowadays, his elaborations on the forces of History and on the problematics of capital are, now more than ever, topical and functional to any speculation over the nature of a possible future system.

Sargent’s definition of utopianism as social dreaming that I explained earlier surely responds to the desire of rehabilitating utopia from a far too ideologized meaning. Together with Sargent, and among the sociologists that favour a Marxist approach in their analysis of utopia and society, Ruth Levitas, in her *The Concept of Utopia*, elaborates largely on the ideas of Ernst Bloch, a Marxist thinker who tried, I would say successfully, to integrate utopia into Marxist theories.

As a matter of fact, the strand of “traditional” Marxism, the one directly linked and corresponding to the theories of Marx and Engels, has always strongly criticized utopia as an obstacle to the process of History that would lead to the proletarian revolution and a post-capitalistic world. This view of utopia “in terms of its negative function of obstructing the revolution” (Concept 117) was based on the idea that the fantasies and hopes of man alone could not fulfil social transformation and was, consequently, incompatible with Marx’s theory of historical materialism. In what follows, we will discover how Bloch was able to bring together utopia and Marxism in a cohesive discourse and why his conclusions are useful for the current academic debate.

1.2.2 Utopian goals: the “education of desire” and the “transcendence of alienation”

The definition of utopia provided by Ruth Levitas is “the expression of the desire for a better way of living” (Utopia in Dark Times 13), “the expression of what is missing, of the experience of lack in any given society or culture” (For Utopia 26). The key term is that of desire, that inner force that makes us “construct[ing] imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality” (Concept 1).

Following Bloch and his milestone work *The Principle of Hope*, however, desire alone does not equate utopia, since the imaginative flow that is the essence of “day-dreams, fairy-tales, myths, travellers’ tales” (Educated Hope 13) runs the risk of remaining only “escapist fantasy” (Concept 1) if action is not taken to make those dreams facing reality. The difference between escapism and utopia, and the role of “wishful images” (100) – all the shapes that dreams and desires can take – in the process of realization of utopia, are explained through a pivotal distinction at the heart of Bloch’s work, that I will now unfold.

Since the aim of utopia is the “transcendence of alienation” (127), to live according to rhythms dictated by human needs and not by the ever-increasing speed of capital and production, Bloch distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopia, between “those dreams of a better life that constitute possibilities and those that do not” (103). It is important to notice that abstract and concrete utopia are not unrelated categories, but they represent different stages of the so called “anticipatory consciousness” (101), of the subject’s awareness of his/her condition in the world and of his/her commitment to change the degrading aspects of reality.

Abstract utopia, or “Not-Yet-Conscious” (101), corresponds to the abovementioned “wishful images”, to all those dreams arising from the imagination of human beings and allowing them to “venture beyond [...] reality” (101). They are shaped in an endless number forms, in any thought where the human mind is engaged with the fantastic and is “embodying “dreams of a better life”” (14).

In order to be projected in the future and avoid being an exercise of escapism or “a mode of living with alienation” (qtd. in Levitas, For Utopia 29), abstract utopia needs to transform itself into concrete utopia, or “Not-Yet-Become”, a “category which applies to material reality” (Concept 101).

It is through the concrete momentum that utopian dreams start to have a “transformative function” (Mouzakitis) (104), they become involved into present reality and enter the realm of “real possibilities” (102). In this context, a utopian vision needs to meet certain condition of possibilities

to be actualized in the future, or, at least, to contribute meaningfully to pave the way to the utopic project.

But how can the utopian imagination transform itself into a plausible and realistic asset for the near future without losing its peculiarity of outreaching the present and create something purely “New” (qtd. in Levitas, Concept 105)?

Bloch finds the answer to this question in the “cultural surplus” (106). He believes that culture as a whole, its different manifestations such as music, literature, art, philosophy and architecture among others, has the potential to “outlast the conditions that give rise to them” (105). Even by acknowledging the fact that cultural productions are necessarily born from the historical present in which they are elaborated, Bloch states that culture possesses a “surplus”, namely some anticipatory elements where the utopian vision lies. At the light of this, culture has an essential role in transcending alienation and achieving the ultimate goal of happiness, human dignity and freedom; it is an active player that fosters the “inspiration to social transformation” (129).

The distinction between abstract and concrete utopia can also be understood as a distinction between respectively desire and hope. Whereas desire is guided by the unrestrained flow of imagination, hope is engaged with reality and “reaches towards a transformed future” (Educated Hope 14). Accordingly, the engine that sets concrete utopia in motion is the notion of “docta spes” or “educated hope” (17): for a vision to become a project, for imagination to become transformation, an individual needs to “learn” how to desire, to orientate his/her aspirations on the basis of a feeling of “lack”, of “what is missing” (For Utopia 26) in present reality to become “fully in possession of (his/her) own humanity” (Concept 141). Only through the “educative aspect” (141) of hope, the “immaturity” (Educated Hope 15) of abstract utopia will be “gradually replaced by the concrete, allowing anticipation to dominate compensation” (Concept 141).

The most remarkable feature of all Bloch’s theorization of utopia responds to his willingness to “rehabilitate utopia *within Marxism* as a neglected Marxist category” (Levitas’ emphasis) (Educated Hope 14). By identifying different moments in the utopian expression that lead to the final phase of concrete utopia, Bloch reintroduce utopia in the process of becoming as intended by Marxism, it becomes an “aspect of reality” (Concept 108), an element that participates in the development of History, and no longer a fantastic vision that does not respond to possibilities in the real world.

Following Bloch’s reasoning, Levitas builds her arguments “in terms of function” (117) when trying to explain the development of the concept of utopia in late-capitalism. Specifically, she claims that the functions of utopia are threefold and correspond to compensation, criticism and change.

The first function of compensation equals Bloch's abstract utopia and the attitude of escapism. It occurs when we abandon ourselves to fantasies and dreams that could temporarily distance us from the difficulties of reality, or when we dream about a fortunate event that could allow us to live the most privileged and easy lifestyle possible. This type of dreaming "is not accompanied by a will to change anything, [...] it often involves not so much a transformed future, but a future where the world remains as it is except for the dreamer's changed place in it" (Educated Hope 15).

With utopia functioning as criticism, a further step is taken towards the recognition that "the present is unsatisfactorily" (For Utopia 28) and needs to be changed, but taking such a stance does not directly "lead to [...] the realm of transformative praxis" (Moynan, Scraps 86). Indeed, criticism usually is to be found "at the level of social and political theory" (86), it can be articulated in thoughtful debates, but the risk of remaining merely an intellectual practice is a tangible one.

It is through the function of change that all the dreams, observations and projects involving the aspects of society that need to be modified can turn into a reality. In this momentum, criticism and the "deep human desire for a totally better way of living" (87) meet the forces of agency, and Utopia can enter the realm where transformation can take place, the future.

The liberation movements and the social uprisings in the 1960s and 70s are an emblematic example of utopia as "catalyzing change" (Utopia in Dark Times 14). The awareness that civil rights were to be granted in the same way to all the American population was followed by public demonstrations and by the creations of several associations that worked actively to accomplish people's dreams of freedom and equality. Even if the abuses against minorities and the dispossessed are never far behind, what are nowadays daily realities such as the possibility for women to build a career, or for Afro-American citizens to attend the same schools as European Americans, are the "wishful images" of a not so distant past, an abstract utopia become concrete.

At this point of the discourse, we have enough elements to explain the problematic of Utopia within late-capitalism and postmodernity. Following what has been said so far, for utopia to shift from fantasy to reality, it is necessary to think about the future as a realm of possibilities, and to orientate our agency towards the achievement of such possible future system. In Levitas' words, "the transformative potential of Utopia depends on locating it in the future" (Utopia in Dark Times 14), but are we able to imagine a future where a credible system other than capitalism can be established?

Taking into consideration the "dominance of the dystopian mode" (14) in current cultural productions – that we defined as a variation of utopia and not merely an anti-utopic manifestation – one can argue that an attitude of hope regarding the possibility for human kind to improve its

situation is preserved, but it is not shown in dystopian narratives what an alternative system could look like and how individuals can become the agents of a real change. Hence, Levitas' concern is that "Utopia has retreated from being a potential catalyst of change to being merely a bearer of consolation or a vehicle of criticism" (14).

Utopia cannot find a positioning in the future not because of a "failure of imagination" (15) on the part of individuals, but more due to the very conditions that are innate in capitalism and postmodernity. In the following chapter, we will expand the latter statement by analysing how our dystopic reality and the utopian impulse are represented in the TV series *Mr. Robot*. I will focus on the aspects of alienation, agency and imagination previously mentioned and I will define more in details the concept of postmodernity and late-capitalism through the landmark theories of Fredric Jameson.

Chapter 2

Utopia and dystopia in “Mr. Robot”

2.1 Utopian imagination in the century that has lost the future

The observations on the development of utopia under late-capitalism made in the previous chapter, by focusing in particular on Ernst Bloch and Ruth Levitas, led us to acknowledge that, nowadays, the utopian thought can hardly move from its abstract to its concrete phase, meaning that utopia holds merely a compensatory function and represents a moment of escapism from reality because of the endemic characteristics of our contemporary postmodern and late-capitalistic society.

It is not that in this era human beings have lost the ability to imagine and fantasize about the future; it is, on the contrary, that the very idea of future has been deprived of all its meaning. Late-capitalism is the era of “perpetual present” (*The Twin Sources of Realism* 28), or better, an era where “the very distinction between past and present is breaking down” (*Ghosts of My Life*) and where “cultural time has folded back on itself” (*Ghosts of My Life*). As Mark Fisher notices, “the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion. It doesn’t feel like the future” (*Ghosts of My Life*).

The latter concept that Franco “Bifo” Berardi defines “slow cancellation of the future” (*After the Future* 13) is deeply entrenched with the change that culture and temporality have undergone under the conditions of late-capitalism, broadly theorized by the sociologist Fredric Jameson.

According to Jameson, our postmodern condition is characterized by the dynamics of capital penetrating every aspect of life, from the intimate sphere of the subject and his/her perception of the self, to all the interactions in the social world. Postmodernism, thus, is not understood as a “style among many others available” (*Postmodernism* 46), but as the “cultural dominant of the logic of late-capitalism” (46).

One of the essential features of this condition of postmodernity is the “weakening (or crisis) of historicity” (6), which has been brought about mainly by the power of consumerism and people’s overexposure to “signs and images” (*Reification* 139), and which results in the blurring of past, present and future into the “timeless era” (*Ghosts of My Life*) of late-capitalism.

Drawing on the theories of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, Jameson explains that the omnipresence of images as a constitutive element of contemporary society has mutated the way reality is perceived. Reality is not grasped anymore through representation, where a sign refers to the “depth of meaning” (Baudrillard 5) and is the “visible and intelligible mediation of the Real”

(5); conversely, in our “era of simulation” (2), a process of “substituting the signs of the real for the real” (2) is in place.

In a world where images have dethroned Reality, past, present and future fall victims of the simulacrum, namely the “uninterrupted circuit without reference” (6), where “the subject has lost its capacity actively [...] to organize its past and future into coherent experience” (Postmodernism 25). Indeed, the past is not a “referent” (18) anymore, but a “vast collection of images” (18), that has lost its role as “retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future” (18).

The “omnipresence and the omnipotence of the image” (Reification 139) has influenced not only the relation between man and time, but also the role of culture within society, by causing an “explosion” (Postmodernism 48) of the cultural realm.

In precapitalistic societies, culture had always maintained a status of “semiautonomy” (48), a qualitative uniqueness that did not respond to the quantitative logic of the “the practical word of the existent” (48). In the phase of consumer capitalism, however, culture has been the object of a “phenomenon of reification” (Reification 131), it has been “fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system” (140), meaning that “it no longer has any qualitative value in itself, but only insofar as it can be “used”” (138).

It is crucial to stress that this process of commodification did not result in a “dissolution” (Postmodernism 48) of the cultural realm, but in “an expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and yet untheorized sense” (48).

In this sense, the “explosion” of culture conceals the emptiness that derives from the lack of a culture able to express meaning beyond the logic of consumerism. We have the illusion that postmodern life is filled with culture, but what actually surrounds us to an overwhelming point is the “cultural industry” (Greene), which has “assign[ed] all cultural objects [...] a monetary value” (Capitalist Realism 4). Culture as the source of the New, as a moment of “rupture” (Ghosts of My Life) that defines the peculiarity of each socio-historical period and articulates the different moments of the existential growth of human kind has been compromised by the “massive Being of capital” (Postmodernism 49).

Given that “the past is dead” (Jameson, Archaeologies 287) and culture has been deteriorated by the capital, Jameson argues that the future has become “unthinkable” (288), that “our incapacity to imagine the future” (289) results in “our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself” (289).

Indeed, the subject is “trapped within the present” (Moylan, *Scraps* 94) and prevented from envisioning images that “get beyond [our] cultural and ideological horizons” (92).

Nevertheless, we will see later on that what appears to be a total dismissal of the possibility to imagine and express Utopia in the present socio-historical moment, can be read, on the contrary, as a way to reinforce and preserve the essence of Utopia as a unique instrument to “keep alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one” (90).

The previously cited scholars Mark Fisher and Franco “Bifo” Berardi have published some works that interestingly add to Jameson’s idea that the future seems to have lost its utopian vocation under the totalizing condition of late-capitalism. Fisher reflects on the impossibility to think about the future as a new era that could overcome capitalism by using the term “capitalist realism”, which expresses “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (*Capitalist Realism* 2).

By referring to Jameson’s theories on postmodernism and the dynamics of capital – whose main points I earlier explained –, Fisher favours a focus on the concept of “sterility” (3), which underpins the content of recent visual productions as well as the political discourse of the present century. He argues that the recurrence of this image of sterility is to be understood “metaphorically” as the “anxiety” caused by the “morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen” (3).

By the same token, Berardi supports the idea of the vanishing of a utopian approach to the future through the concept of “slow cancellation of the future” (*After the Future* 13). He starts from the assumption that the idea of the future “is not natural” and has “come to an end” (*Decommission*) with the crisis that occurred in the 1970s, mainly the energy one, that produced the awareness that “progress” and “growth cannot be infinite” (*Decommission*). Just like Fisher emphasises the image of sterility, Berardi elaborates his writing around the main theme of “exhaustion”, which is the outcome of the expansion of capitalism based on the “hyperexploitation of the human mind” (*Decommission*) as well as of the environment. It is an ontological exhaustion that has taken the place of our “expectation of a progressive expansive future” (*Decommission*).

In what follows, I will select and analyse some scenes of *Mr. Robot* to examine up to what extent the theories on utopia and the fading of the sense of the future so far explained can be traced in the way the TV series represents our consumeristic and late-capitalistic reality.

Indeed, the works of Jameson, Fisher and Berardi and *Mr. Robot* raise a same question, namely how political art is possible, how the status quo can be upset to bring about a social and political change. In trying to answer this question, I will argue that the series succeeds in depicting a dystopia, but it struggles in representing a utopian dimension. That is why I will look at *Mr. Robot*, first, as a

depiction of control society, and the “cultural pathologies” (O'Donnell vii) that it evokes in the character of Elliot; secondly, I will show how the series discloses the failure of the revolution.

2.2 “How do we know if we are in control?”: alienation and “culture-specific anxieties” in *Mr. Robot's* dystopian side

A concept that holds a paramount position in *Mr. Robot* is that of control. Control is constantly mentioned throughout the first two seasons, and it is at the core of the psychological fight of the protagonist, Elliot Alderson, with himself and with society. Specifically, through the development of Elliot's character, I argue that *Mr. Robot* moves a critique towards our contemporary society by showing how the latter instils in us the illusionary belief that we have control over our lives, but what really happens is that we are subjected to a control ““continuous and without limit” (G. Deleuze 6), we live in a reality where “for the individual, monitored freedom is the only kind there is” (Committee).

This critique has been theorized by Deleuze, who described the capitalistic era as a form of *societies of control*. In this type of society, the expansion of capital and monetary logic into the domains of everyday life is a strong conceptual base, but to explain how late-capitalism is different from the previous era of Fordism, Deleuze describes the contemporary “relations of control” (Lazzarato 179) as “new techniques of power” (179) which rely on “the brain's power to affect and become affected, which is mediated and enriched by technology” (180).

As a result of the invasion of the mind, of a process of expansion where capitalism has turned “inward” (Hassan 300) into the cultural and social dimensions, the psychological sphere of individuals has been deeply influenced to the point which it is possible to indicate the birth of new “culture-specific anxieties” (Limpár 3), that can be investigated through an analysis of Elliot's character.

In fact, Elliot, a gifted computer savvy who is both a hacker and an engineer for a cybersecurity company, suffers from dissociative identity disorder and “cultural pathologies” (O'Donnell vii) such as clinical depression, social anxiety, paranoia and schizophrenia. The term “cultural” here indicates that these mental diseases originate within “pressures and forces that include [...] global capitalism, and the formation of identity under postmodernity” (VII).

A significant scene in which the “cultural” aspect of Elliot's mental instability appears is in season 1 episode 1, when Elliot is attending a session with his psychologists Krista Gordon. In this scene, Krista is pointing out how Elliot is “angry at everyone” (“eps1.0_hellofriend.mov” 00:11:22), she

is trying to make Elliot talk about his “anger issues” (00:11:19) in order to let what she calls “the pain underneath” (00:11:34) come to the surface, so that such pain can be addressed and, hopefully, overcome with the right therapy. Here is Elliot’s voice over in reply to a question Krista asks him:

Krista: What is it about society that disappoints you so much?

Elliot: Oh, I don't know. Is it that we collectively thought Steve Jobs was a great man, even when we knew he made billions off the backs of children? Or maybe it's that it feels like all our heroes are counterfeit. The world itself is just one big hoax. Spamming each other with our burning commentary of bullshit masquerading as insight. Our social media faking as intimacy. Or is it that we voted for this? Not with our rigged elections, but with our things, our property, our money. I'm not saying anything new. We all know why we do this, not because *Hunger Games* books make us happy, but because we wanna be sedated. Because it's painful not to pretend, because we're cowards. Fuck society. (00:11:40-00:12:40).

Through this voice over, directed only to the spectator, Elliot is responding to Krista’s psychological approach with a social and political approach. This means that the explanation Elliot gives for his anger does not refer to his personal or intimate life, he does not talk about any event or relationship that may have a role in causing his depression and may be the starting point to carry out a psychological analysis. Instead, he unloads his deepest emotions regarding the current social and political situation. He refers to our world as “a big hoax” to underline his view of society as complicit with and resigned to capitalism. He harshly criticizes not only the exploitative logic of capitalism itself, but mostly the hypocrisy and complacency of people towards such logic. People who, instead of looking for new forms or reaction, bear with a disappointing world by keeping their minds “sedated”. When Elliot says “Fuck society” he makes clear his unwillingness to accept and be part of a system based on injustices and hypocrisy, even though for him “it’s painful not to pretend” to be happy as the majority of the population, and painful to self-exclude from the social world.

Despite Elliot esteems Krista’s good heart and her genuine effort to make him feel better, his rejection of Krista’s role as psychoanalyst reflects a criticism moved towards psychoanalysis that denounces the latter’s implementation of the “deleterious psychological effects of late-capitalism” (Brayton 67). Accordingly, scholars such as Deleuze & Guattari have pinpointed how the approach of psychoanalysis that dominates the neoliberal context excludes the socio-economic conditions in which an individual lives from the process of understanding and treating his/her pathologies and, instead, analyses the latter as a “fundamentally biological affliction, treatable with a dizzying array

of fashionable drugs” (68). In such a view, psychoanalysis considers the life rhythms of capitalism as normal and as ill any individual who tries to escape capitalist dynamics.

Given the fact that Elliot reads his discontent and suffering as a consequence of our political and social situation, the psychological therapy he has to follow with Krista is not helping him find a solution to his depression. In the light of this, the presence in the series of Mr. Robot, Elliot’s doppelgänger, is pivotal since it not only offers the spectators an insightful look at Elliot’s beliefs and desires, but, on the level of the story, it also provides Elliot with an alternative to the unsuccessful therapy he is undertaking with Krista.

In fact, Mr. Robot is presented, at the beginning of season 1, as a mysterious man who suggests Elliot that a political act can liberate him from his depression. Specifically, he offers Elliot the possibility to concretely destabilize the financial and economic power on which capitalism is based through a plan which assumes the traits of a utopian project to “save the world” (“eps1.0_hellofriend.mov” 00:18:39) from capitalism.

In a remarkable scene in season 1 episode 1, Mr. Robot and Elliot meet in Coney Island and the former starts to unravel the plan that will drive the chain of events in the series. When explaining the plan, Mr. Robot shows an uncanny capacity to give voice to the nature of Elliot’s *malaise*, he seems to achieve the goal that Krista was not able to reach, namely to provide Elliot with a satisfactory explanation and a solution to his depression. Here is the exchange between Elliot and Mr. Robot:

Mr. Robot: You're here because you sense something's wrong with the world. Something you can't explain. But, you know it controls you and everyone you care about. [...] Money. Money hasn't been real since we got off the gold standard. It's become virtual. Software, the operating system of our world. And, Elliot, we are on the verge of taking down this virtual reality. Think about it. What if you could take down one conglomerate? A conglomerate so deeply entrenched in the world's economy that "too big to fail" doesn't even come close to describing it? [...] What if I told you that this conglomerate just so happens to own 70% of the global consumer credit industry, huh? If we hit their data center just right we could systematically format all the servers, including backup.

Elliot: That would erase...

Mr. Robot: All the debt we owe them. Every record of every credit card, loan, and mortgage would be wiped clean. It'd be impossible to reinforce outdated paper records. It'd all be gone. The single, biggest incident of wealth redistribution in history (“eps1.0_hellofriend.mov” 00:43:23 – 00:45:05).

The description given by Mr. Robot reflects Jameson's analysis of late-capitalism as a totalizing system that "controls you and everyone you care about" and responds only to the movements of capital, exchange rates and the unpredictable floating of liquid money. In such a context, also defined by Berardi "semicapitalism", which is "based on the interconnection of information technology and the production of economic value" (Decommission), every man is bonded to and identified by numerical data showing what he owns, what he spends and what he owes, in other words his identity is relevant to society mostly in economic terms. The preponderance of the "virtual reality", of digital control over the real world and the real economy is what Elliot "sense(s) is wrong with the world". In order to defy a system based not anymore on ethical values or ideologies but on a "business ontology" (Capitalist Realism 17), a plan needs to be elaborated where this virtual reality is destabilized, with the result of erasing debts and releasing man from the financial yoke. Hence, Mr Robot and Elliot's utopian dream is to overcome capitalism by undermining its financial heart, in the hope of giving birth to "the single, biggest incident of wealth redistribution in history".

Following again Jameson, this dream can be considered a "negative" (qtd. in Moylan 90) moment of Utopia, aimed at "neutralizing what blocks freedom" (qtd. in Moylan 95).

In order to break down the engine of the capitalistic machine, so that our society can be "finally free" ("eps1.9_zer0-day.avi" 00:16:54) and "awake" (00:16:57), Elliot, with the help of Mr. Robot, creates "fsociety", a group of hackers joining together with the aim of organizing and executing Elliot's plan, which entails, as the first and major goal, a hack attack against E(vil) Corp, whose data are protected by the cybersecurity agency Elliot works for.

If we look at the way *fsociety* works to put the plan into practice, its members look very much like a small utopian community. They meet secretly in an abandoned arcade in Coney Island, where they passionately discuss about Elliot's project and put their mastery of information technology at the service of a common utopian desire to significantly change their world. With their agency directed against a hegemonic and oppressive system, they embody, in season 1, the figure of the "ethical hacker", who wishes to disclose a utopian potential by using knowledge of information technology to support "ethical claims" such as "freedom, free speech, privacy, the individual [...]" (Coleman and Golub 256).

Beyond the ones I have analysed so far, season 1 and 2 feature several scenes where Elliot gives us his insights on how control affects society. For instance, in season 1 episode 2, he is attending a session with Krista and he reflects on control through a voiceover:

“How do we know if we are in control? That we are not making the best of what comes at us and that’s it. We’re constantly being asked to pick between two... options. Like your two paintings in the waiting room; or Coke and Pepsi? McDonald’s or Burger King? Hyundai or Honda? It’s all part of the same blur, right? Just out of the focus enough. It’s the illusion of choice. [...] If our only option is Blue Cross or Blue Shield, what the fuck is the difference? In fact, aren’t they... Aren’t they the same? No, man, our choices are prepaid for us a long time ago” (“eps1.1_ones-and-zeroes.mpeg” 00:34:21 – 00:35:35).

Elliot is referring to the fact that capitalism thrives on giving people the illusion of having control, of exercising the right for freedom by making plenty of choices every day. However, the alternatives we are given are fake, there is no choice we can make that is beyond the system of capitalism, everything we choose is within the system. It is evident, also, how this voice over refers to the power of the “invisible hand” (“eps1.0_hellofriend.mov” 00:18:46) of capitalism, which represents Deleuze’s idea on marketing as the “center or the “soul” of the corporation” (G. Deleuze 6). Indeed, the fake alternatives Elliot is talking about confirm the fact that “the operation of markets is now the instrument of social control” (6).

In season 2, control is analysed in its psychological and intimate dimension, since the season is mainly focused on Elliot’s struggle with himself to undertake a “process of detoxification to weaken the influence of Mr. Robot” (Greene). In episode 3, Elliot is having a conversation with a prison warden, Ray:

Ray: Control is about as real as a one-legged unicorn taking a leak at the end of a double rainbow. [...] The all thing (life) is a fall. [...] a perpetual state of grasping in the dark. It’s not about getting up, it’s about stumbling, stumbling in the right direction. It’s the only true way to move forward (“eps2.1_k3rnel-pan1c.ksd” 00:59:06 – 00:59:54).

Here, again, the theme is that of the illusion of control, but it shifts from a socio-economic critique to a more existential discourse. Following Ray’s reasoning, as long as we are stuck in the one-dimensional sameness of capitalism, we cannot give a real turn to our life, or choose a life path that fulfil our personal desires, but we can only “stumble in the right direction”. The “perpetual state of grasping in the dark” echoes Jameson’s concept of “perpetual present”, of a condition where the idea of future as progress of civilization, as a reaching towards something genuinely new that is metaphorically a moment of “getting up”, is replaced by a continuous “stumbling”.

Through these examples, I have addressed the dystopic side of *Mr. Robot* by analysing the effects that the late-capitalistic condition has on the human being. First, “culture-specific anxieties” resulting from the “exploitative mode of production” (Brayton 71) of our social and working

system, and, secondly, the illusion that we have control over our life and are living it to the fullest, are an “extrapolation” (Sargent 8) of the most negative aspects of our reality, aimed at stirring the consciences of the public and stimulate a critical view on the world surrounding us. What is more, *Mr. Robot* is built upon “formal strategies” (Baccolini and Moylan 5) that characterize the dystopian genre. Elliot holds an “ex-centric” (7) position that allows him to present an “experience of alienation and resistance” (5) constituting the “counter-narrative” (5) opposed to the “narrative of the hegemonic order” (5). His intolerance of the living conditions under the dominant system of capitalism makes him a tormented character, but not a resigned one, since he channels his anger and dissatisfaction towards society into hope and into the utopian project of saving the world. This glimmer of hope and the high level of “self-awareness and introspection” (Fitting, *Unmasking the Real* 163) that informs Elliot’s resistance confirm the traits of critical dystopia in the narration.

Nevertheless, although season 1 broadly depicts the dystopian aspects of control society and Elliot’s utopian impulse of resisting the system, it leaves open the question whether such utopian impulse – corresponding to Jameson’s “negative” phase of Utopia –, will be translated into a “positive”, concrete Utopia or not. Indeed, season 1 ends with the 5/9 attack on E(vil) Corp being successfully executed by *fsociety*, but also with Elliot being perplexed about the outcome of the hack and, mostly, about people’s reaction to it.

In what follows, I will show how season 2 delves into the aftermath of the hack attack, and specifically, how it questions the viability of the utopian revolution that *fsociety* was hoping to start.

2.3 “So, this is what a revolution looks like”: Utopia and agency in *Mr. Robot*

After the 5/9 attack in the conclusive episode of season 1, season 2 opens with a new question: “now what?”. When the data system of E(vil) Corp has been finally severely compromised and the government is struggling to cope with a hack attack that has no precedent in history, the next step on *fsociety*’s agenda is to start a revolution that can enable the creation of a new and more equal society, but is it a concretely viable utopia?

If, as we have seen earlier, *Mr. Robot* is capable of giving a “negative” dystopian depiction of late capitalism, I wish to argue, now, that it struggles with including a utopian dimension. In fact, season 2, by unravelling the difficulties encountered by *fsociety*’s hackers in changing the world after the hack, shows the failure of the utopian revolution.

An anticipation of the sense of failure dominating season 2 is given at the end of season 1, in episode 10, through a scene that explains Elliot’s first reaction to the hack. In this scene, Elliot

enters the offices of E(vil) Corp to look for Tyrell Wellick, who has inexplicably disappeared after the hack. In a voiceover Elliot says:

“So, this is what a revolution looks like. People in expensive clothing running around? Not how I pictured it” (“eps1.9_zer0-day.avi” 00:14:20 – 00:14:28).

Here, Elliot makes explicit his perplexity about the scenario after the hack. I find the image of “people in expensive clothing running around” emblematic. It represents how the structure of multinational capitalism has taken the hit of the hack, but it is still alive. People who work for corporations, those people who take advantage from the unequal distribution of wealth of globalization, are momentarily unsettled by the hack – that is why they are “running around” –, but they are not willing to give up their lifestyle and social status, symbolized by the “expensive clothing”. This image suggests that, beyond the confusion of the moment, the cultural and social reality responding to the logic of capitalism has remained the same, and that no utopian revolution is actually happening.

Elliot’s doubts about the success of the revolution are well expressed also in season 2 episode 10, in a scene where he is in a car driving by a desert street at night. All stores have shut down due to the 5/9 attack and the city, instead of looking revived and spreading the new energy that is supposed to come from an ongoing revolution, looks like a ghost city. In a voice over he thinks:

“Is this the future I was fighting for? The system is hung, frozen in limbo. Did we lose the fight? Maybe wars aren’t meant to be win, maybe they’re meant to be continuous” (“eps2.8_hidden-pr0cess.axx” 00:16:10-00:16:34).

First of all, his impression is, again, that the system has not been totally defeated nor overcome through the hack, but that it is “frozen in limbo”, an expression that conveys both the idea that the system has survived and that the world is not entering a new era, but it is stuck in an a timeless “limbo” zone. Secondly, Elliot seems to realize that an epochal socio-economic change like the one he hopes for cannot be brought about with one single and great act or one plan, however elaborated it is. I read his reflection that “wars [...] are meant to be continuous” as the awareness that for a better world to rise, where one is really free and not – consciously or unconsciously – manipulated by the system, one needs to be in a continuous state of alert and with an awake mind to recognise the effects of control society on him/herself, so to be in a position to fight back and resist any manipulation.

The sense of failure of the revolution and of its utopian vocation is also depicted in the dramatic change in the relationship between Elliot and his alternate personality, Mr. Robot, taking place in season 2. Their changed relationship represents how the revolution is at a deadlock point, and how

Elliot is no longer positively embracing Mr. Robot as the source of his utopian impulse and his strength to carry on with his plan. In fact, the season opens with Elliot dealing with the unsettling situation of having been incarcerated – even though this is explicitly disclosed to the spectator only in the second half of the season – due to some evidence proving that he has hacked Krista’s ex-partner.

In prison, Elliot is disconnected from the virtual reality, he has no digital devices or Internet connection, and he constantly struggles with Mr. Robot to keep him away and ignore his influence. There is a restless fight between the two personalities, where Mr. Robot tries by all means to impose himself on Elliot like he used to do. For example, in episode 1, Mr robot says to Elliot:

“We can’t stay here (in prison), there is more work to be done, our revolution needs a leader. [...] I am not to be gotten rid of.” ("eps2.0_unm4sk-pt1.tc" 00:14:55-00:15:17).

In the same episode, Mr robot restates his idea by saying:

“I’m not some tumor to be excised, do you (Elliot) understand? The opposite, I’m the organ vital to your existence.” (00:28:56-00:29:03).

Elliot, however, is not willing to let Mr. Robot regain control over his persona, and that is why he starts writing a daily journal to keep track of his mind activities and look at Mr. Robot in a lucid and detached way. But, since this trick has not always proven effective, Elliot decides, in episode 3, to take a strong dose of Adderall, in the hope of eliminating Mr. Robot for good. Indeed, before taking the drug, Elliot addresses Mr. Robot and says:

“This is your fault, all of it. Now it’s time to get rid of you.” ("eps2.1_k3rnel-pan1c.ksd" 00:14:40-00:14:51).

We can see how Elliot is treating his alternate personality as a sick and dangerous influence on his mental health. By doing so, Elliot is not only suppressing Mr. Robot, but, mainly, all the aspects that the latter represented in season 1, namely the liberation from and the solution to his depression through their utopian project of saving the world.

If Elliot seems to have given up his resistance to the system and he struggles to recognize the world after the 5/9 hack as his Utopia coming true, I argue that it is because his plan lacked the “positive” step of cognitive mapping, which requires a totally new way of grasping the world and culture itself. As I earlier explained, culture is what has always given mankind the perception of growing, of developing in existential terms. The feeling, in Elliot, that no real revolution is actually happening

after the hack mirrors the cultural *impasse* that has stopped the linear development of historic time and stuck us in a “perpetual present” (The Twin Sources of Realism 28), where the future as “newness” and “ever-progressing development” (Fisher, Ghosts of My Life) can no longer be conceived.

The lack of a cultural momentum that sets a real utopian revolution in motion is particularly evident in how masses reacted to the attack. Instead of organizing demonstrations in order to spread meaningful contents and build a new cultural sensibility, people join *fsociety* guided by a fanatical enthusiasm and in order to pour out, in the form of populist slogans, their feelings of dissatisfaction, unhappiness and anger. This type of populist reactions takes place when Darlene is left in charge of the post-attack situation because of Elliot being in prison. Specifically, she has to proceed with the part of Elliot’s plan that follows the 5/9 hack, and she is in direct contact with the people who decide to join *fsociety*.

To give an example, in season 2 episode 1, a scene starts where there is a party going on in the house of an E(vil)Corp Executive that Darlene has occupied. The atmosphere is joyful and victorious, since a group of revolutionaries has just carried out the symbolic mission of castrating the *Charging Bull* sculpture at Wall Street. At one point, a guy takes a selfie together with the mutilated part of the sculpture and the rest of the group. Darlene is extremely disappointed by this act and has to take charge of the situation. She addresses the group and makes a speech which is high-sounding but poor in content, with over-used sentences like: “We are in a war and we are on the losing side of it... We have been on our knees for too long, and it’s time to stand up...” (“eps2.0_unm4sk-pt1.tc” 00:31:46 – 00:32:48).

After this speech, Darlene speaks with the hacker Mobley:

Mobley: What you are saying, I mean, you sounded like George W. Bush, for crying out loud.

Darlene: Give me some credit! Speech is bullshit but it works, rails them up.

Mobley: To what end, though? Sawing off balls, making protest signs... We were more than that, we accomplished something, we took them down.

Darlene: Then why does it feel like they’re still winning? That what we did made it worse, not better? You know I’m right, we didn’t finish them off, that’s all there is to it. People everywhere came up to support us. Right now, they need to know we haven’t given up, that we meant what we said about changing the world (“eps2.0_unm4sk-pt1.tc” 00:33:30 – 00:34:26).

In this passage, Darlene has the feeling that the forces of capitalism, like E(vil) Corp, are “still winning” because, beyond the shock of the climatic event represented by the hack, *fsociety* has not

been able to start a revolution involving a utopian vision, an image of the future. More than the objectionable acts of the masses, like mutilating the *Charging Bull*, she is worried about her and *fsociety*'s motivation. She wants to make people trust her fight and let them know that “we (*fsociety*) meant what we said about changing the world”. When Darlene says “what we did make it worse”, I believe that she fears that the scenario opened up by the hack will become one in the endless parade of images that form part of the history of capitalism. Indeed, the controlled system of images on which consumer capitalism is based has the power to annihilate revolutionary messages by absorbing them with the aim of emptying such messages and making them harmless for the status quo. Darlene knows that the hackers “didn’t finish them (E(vil) Corp) off” and that they will have to do more if they want to “take down this virtual reality” (“eps1.0_hellofriend.mov” 00:44:01), which means that they will have to engage in a fight in cultural terms.

What I have explained earlier in this chapter about the difficulty of giving birth to a new socio-economic system that would lead us into the future not just in terms of temporality, but of new era and of “rupture” with the past and present, discloses “another way of understanding the concept of critical dystopia: as a work that rejects false utopian solutions to the dystopia of the present” (164). It is not only with a single act of rebellion, with a moment of “negative Utopia” such as the 5/9 hack that we overcome the dystopian present, we need a cultural awakening that can be the basis of a “positive” Utopia, or a concrete utopia, so that the future may recover from its “slow cancellation”.

Chapter 3:

Imagining the future in “Black Mirror”

3.1 Introducing *Black Mirror*

In this final chapter, I will take as object of examination another TV series, *Black Mirror*, a well-received work that has gained a primary position in the realm of contemporary mass culture. Like *Mr. Robot*, *Black Mirror* aims at criticizing how late-capitalism has invaded the social and personal dimension of the subject and influenced its idea of future, but it differs from *Mr. Robot* in the way such criticism is carried out. The anthological structure of *Black Mirror*, where each episode unfolds around a specific plot and stars different characters, allows for a representation of a broader range of situations in which the mechanisms of consumer capitalism manifest themselves. As a consequence, there is an alternation between utopian and dystopian elements according to the critical points that a specific episode wishes to raise. Yet, despite the different plots, a single thread underpins all the episodes and functions as a common denominator, namely the influence of new technologies in social and personal relations, and the blurring between the real and the virtual world.

In representing the impact of new technologies in nowadays' society, *Black Mirror* adopts science-fictional and dystopian strategies, meaning that it shows near-future scenarios in which the “worst tendencies” (Sculos) of our present are developed. More specifically, *Black mirror* features what Darko Suvin has described as “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin 372), a technique which aims at prompting a critical reflection on present reality on the part of the spectator. Indeed, the “imaginative framework” (375) that constructs *Black Mirror* is not one that “escapes [...] into a closed collateral world indifferent toward cognitive possibilities” (375), as in the fantasy genre or fairy tales, but it is an “alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (375) that requires from the public a “cognitive approach” (375), since the representation of such alternative world “tend[s] toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment” (377).

Bearing in mind these observations, I will analyse two episodes of *Black Mirror*, “Nosedive” and “San Junipero”, where, following the characteristics of what has been earlier described as critical dystopia, the boundaries between dystopia and utopia are particularly ambiguous and blurred. What is more, I would like, in this chapter, to expand and deepen the description of contemporary late-

capitalism that has been provided so far by introducing some influential social theories which lend themselves to the examination of the two selected episodes.

In the light of this, firstly, I will examine “Nosedive” by referring to Guy Debord’s theory of the Society of the Spectacle to show how the dystopian imagery of the episode aims at criticizing the “image addiction” (Bukatman 10) through which control and manipulation are exercised in the context of consumer capitalism. Secondly, the notion of transhumanism will be applied to “San Junipero”, to discover whether scientific and technological advancement as a means to achieve an “enhancement of the human body” (Paura 23) and the “final utopia” (27) of immortality opens up utopian alternatives to our current social organization or not.

3.2 “Nosedive”: new technologies in the contemporary “spectacle”

A scene that tellingly presents to the spectator the world of “Nosedive” shows the protagonist, Lacie, going out to have breakfast at a cafeteria. Whenever she sees or interacts with someone, a circle appears next to the person’s face together with his/her name and a score from 1 to 5. This is possible because Lacie, like all the population, is required, as a governmental measure, to have eye implants that transform the real world into a “computer-mediated” (Best and Kellner 149) reality. What we also see in the scene is that people can instantly “rate” each other after every interaction through their mobile phones, since the latter are connected to the same technological system linked to the eye implants. Indeed, “Nosedive” society is organized and controlled through a “rating” system, which is inspired by the logic of today’s social networks.

The disturbing element of such a system, what characterizes the dystopian “exacerbation” (Fisher, Capitalist Realism) of social networks and virtual platforms as we know them, is that there is no possibility of disconnection, the distinction between real and virtual no longer exists. Indeed, the “score” of an individual is not inscribed in a virtual platform which is a cyberspace different from the real world, but it defines his/her being entirely, and determines his/her status both socially and economically.

The mechanisms underpinning “Nosedive” society can be fruitfully examined by referring to Guy Debord’s “Society of the Spectacle”, a social theory which has informed analyses of consumerism and capitalism stemming from the Marxist tradition, such as those by Jameson and his wide studies on postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) or Paul Virilio’s *The Vision Machine* (1994).

The spectacle is a concept that describes how “commodity rul[es] over all lived experience” (Debord 26). In the spectacle, “the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible” (26). Despite relying on the power of the image as a substitute for the real world, “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 12). Such a definition stems from the Marxist approach that underpins the study of Debord. Indeed, he takes into account the mode of production of capitalism to argue that the spectacle is the result of the power of images used to influence production, our need for commodities, our social expectations. It is in this sense that images are not a static collection, but they actively create the spectacle, which, in turn, influences to the core our social reality, so that it “appears [...] society itself” (12).

Published in 1967, Debord’s masterpiece is a reflection of that post-war historical moment that witnessed the dawn of consumer capitalism, the rise of advertising, mass media, of the Suburban way of living promising “a life of luxury and happiness [...] open to all” (Best and Kellner 140), where the individual, or “Spectator”, is “the passive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission and conformity” (142).

By applying this theory to “Nosedive”, I will argue that the episode depicts “a more advanced stage of the spectacle, [...] *the interactive spectacle*”, which involves “novel forms of seduction and domination” (144). In his description of the earliest stage of capitalism, Marx had already noticed how the mechanisms of capital were able to influence the personal and social sphere of individuals. He talked about a “transformation of *being into having*”, according to which the “need for the other is reduced to acquisitive individualism” (Best and Kellner 134). By elaborating on Marx’s concept, Debord argues that, in the society of the spectacle, we are witnessing the “further reduction” of *having into appearing*”, where “the material object gives way to its semiotic representation”, so that “it is the *appearance* of the commodity that is more decisive than its actual “use value”” (134).

In the spectacle of Debord’s era “the media and technology were seen as powerful control mechanisms keeping individuals numb, fragmented and docile, watching and consuming, rather than acting and doing” (144). In the interactive spectacle, the dominant of control remains essential, but it is shaped around the specificities of today’s new technologies, which are based on a more active participation of the subject in the spectacle.

The increasing active attitude of the Spectator in the interactive spectacle is detectable in different scenes throughout “Nosedive”, particularly the ones related to Lacie’s desire to buy a luxury apartment, a desire in line with what the “rating” system promote as the image of the successful and happy individual.

For instance, a scene is worth analysing where Lacie is having a meeting with a consultant from “Reputelligent” to discuss about the best strategy to undertake in order to boost her score to 4.5. Indeed, only with such a score, Lacie will have a chance to afford the apartment of her dreams. After commenting on her “rep [stands for “reputation”] report analysis” and her “sphere of influence”, the consultant arrives at the conclusion that to hit 4.5 Lacie needs a “boost”, or “up votes from quality people” (“Nosedive” 00:11:48-00:13:23).

In this quite hilarious scene, ratings and scores are analysed exactly like the monetary figures in someone’s bank account. By the same token, Lacie’s invitation to the wedding of Naomi, a childhood friend who is now extremely popular and high-rated, also acquires a mere economic value and is seen by Lacie as a good opportunity to boost her score.

The invitation to the wedding was itself the outcome of a strategic post shared by Lacie picturing “Mr. Rags”, a puppet that the two girls made together when they were little girls. Far from genuinely wanting to hear from Naomi, recalling their common past and maybe recreate a friendship bond, Lacie wants exclusively to attract Naomi’s attention in order to get high-rated, and hopefully increase her overall score to buy the apartment. These dynamics mirror one of the biggest transformations brought about by late-capitalism, namely the “reduction of human lives to both exchange values and audience ratings” (Brayton 78). In other words, Lacie’s post, as well as her meeting with the consultant, show how one’s personal life in “Nosedive” becomes meaningful mainly in economic terms.

Not only the very nature of Lacie’s dream is an outcome of the logic of commodity, but also the commitment, perseverance and dedication that she shows in her attempt to enhance her score reflects how consumerism pushes on the ideas of “empowerment and destiny” (146) to give the subject the illusion of being free and self-determined, when, actually, all its actions and desires are manipulated through the spectacle and fuel the “commercial interests” (152) of capitalism.

Unlike the spectacle of Debord’s era, where the Spectator was “passively consuming television or film images in the solitude of [his/her] own subjectivity” (152), in the interactive spectacle the subjectivity has “implode[d] into an ever denser technological network” (Best and Kellner 145), so that an individual’s life is itself the spectacle.

The element that marks the new stage of capitalism that, by examining the episode, I have identified in the interactive spectacle, lies in the increased participation of the subject in the spectacle. “Nosedive” dystopian narration warns the public about the possible dangerous consequences of the “pervasive domination” (Bukatman 23) of the “nexus commodity/addiction/control” (38). This nexus refers to a transformation of the spectacle that Debord could not predict when he was writing his work and that has been caused by the peculiarity of today’s new technologies, mainly

the advent of social networks. Debord uncannily described, for example, how television and advertising had permeated and influenced, at a subtle and unconscious level, the fabric of society like never before. But in his description, the spectator was still distinct from the contemplated object, and, consequently, conserved a certain, although very feeble, degree of autonomy towards the spectacle. Nowadays, this distinction does not exist anymore. The spectator has been replaced by the performer. We are ourselves participating in the production of images and implementing the mechanism of the spectacle. This new active behaviour conceals the fact that we are being controlled and manipulated in an unprecedented radical way. In fact, as the episode shows, the social and economic system pushes on the addictive effect of new technologies, on people's need to conform to the standards of society and not to be excluded to keep control and protect the status quo or, in the case of a private business, to increase profit.

The dystopian narration of "Nosedive" displays a world so entangled in the interactive spectacle that no one has utopian dreams anymore, and utopian thinking as transformative force seems paralysed. However, according to the features of critical dystopia, the end of the episode leaves space for hope. After a cycle of events that reach a climax in Lacie's arrest during Naomi's wedding, Lacie is incarcerated and her eye implants are removed as a punishment measure. Instead of restricting her freedom, being in jail has the opposite effect of connecting Lacie again to real life. In fact, close to the end, a scene where she stares with wonder at the fine dust suspended in the ambient air metaphorically indicates her liberation from the "pervasive domination" (Bukatman 23) that characterizes the interactive spectacle.

The development of Lacie's story encourages us, as spectators, to critically examine and be aware of the modalities in which we can be manipulated, and, consequently, to rethink our daily approach to technology. This "*critical* look at the present" (Fitting, *Unmasking the Real* 163) (Fitting's emphasis) informing the episode paves the way for a "rediscovered [...] utopian vocation" (Archaeologies 289) that necessarily makes us face what restricts our freedom and our autonomous thinking, a process which is fundamental if we wish to contrast the effects of capitalism on our personal and cultural sphere, and to manage to imagine a real New system.

3.3 The dream of the "final utopia": transhumanism and cyberbodies in "San Junipero"

If "Nosedive" displays a form of dystopian imagination in which new technologies promote the accumulation of capital, as Best & Kellner put it in their description of Debord, the episode "San

Junipero” shows how technological advancement has also reinvigorated utopian visions that are related to the empowerment of the body or the “ultimate dream of humanity” (Marks 196) to live eternally as a “post-biological” (Gaggioli, Vettorello and Riva 76) or cyborg entity. A “cultural and philosophic movement” (Paura 23) that addresses the purposes and modalities of the realization of such utopia is transhumanism.

The *raison d'être* of transhumanism is to “affirm the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities” (qtd. in More and Vita-More). The aim of this movement is, thus, to provide human beings with an “improved body free from disease and aging” (Paura 25), and to invest in fields such as biotechnology, genetic engineering and cybernetics to work on “radical life extension” (24) and the “quest for immortality” (24).

Even if all transhumanists value the role of science and technology as a main asset (Ferrando 28), they have different positions concerning the preservation of the physical body, also called “biological hardware” (Paura 23), as distinct from the “software, i.e. our consciousness” (25). For instance, a branch of transhumanism aims at reaching the so-called point of Singularity, which occurs when “machines are more intelligent than humans, and fully implement their artificial general intelligence (AGI)” (Forrester). The main supporter of this current is Raymond Kurzweil, an inventor, computer scientist and Google’s Director of Engineering since 2012. Singularity believers, guided by Kurzweil’s prediction that a new era witnessing the “total fusion between humans and artificial intelligences” (Paura 25) is near, are ready to leave behind their physical body and extend their life eternally through the mind-uploading, namely “the transfer of human consciousness on an eternal and unbreakable digital support” (24).

If we look at “San Junipero”, the TCKR system is developed to allow the uploading of individuals’ minds who are close to facing death into a party city of breath-taking beauty called San Junipero, which is a cyberspace, a ““pure information space populated by a range of cybernetic automatons or data constructs, which provide the operator with a high degree of vividness and total sensory immersion in the artificial environment” (Featherstone and Burrows 3). This cyber world is the setting of a romance between the two young protagonists, Yorkie and Kelly.

For more than half of the episode, the world beyond San Junipero, the real world, is not shown to the spectator and, therefore, we do not see what the actual bodily existences of Yorkie and Kelly look like. Through their conversations, what we get to know is that Kelly has cancer and only a few months to live, whereas we learn very little about Yorkie, who is quite ambiguous when talking about her life. However, we can tell that she thinks of San Junipero as a big life improvement.

Indeed, in a scene where she is talking with Kelly about the decision of the latter's husband not to try San Junipero even once before dying, Yorkie cannot understand why someone would refuse such a chance. Referring to Kelly, she says: "Without this place, I never would've met someone like you. [...] You... would not have got me at all. At all. [...] if we *really* met, you wouldn't like me" ("San Junipero" 00:36:50-00:37:20).

A significant scene where we understand the meaning of Yorkie's abovementioned affirmation takes place in the real world, when Kelly is going to visit Yorkie. Here, "the mirror starts to crack and reveal what's really going on" (Brooker and Mbatha-Raw), since we see that in real life they are both two old women, and that Yorkie is quadriplegic and confined to a hospital bed. When Kelly is talking with Greg, Yorkie's nurse, we discover that Yorkie has ended up quadriplegic at the young age of 21. At that time, she came out to her parents and, after being rejected by them, she got in her car and had a serious accident. It is clear, at this point, why for Yorkie, San Junipero represents a "big deal, [...] the biggest deal" ("San Junipero" 00:42:18). For her, San Junipero is the ultimate dream of a better life, the opportunity to enjoy life sensations once again. Indeed, after her "passing over", the term used to indicate the moment when a subject's body dies, but his/her mind is permanently uploaded to San Junipero, emphasis is put on Yorkie's rediscovered bodily perception. In a scene where she is sitting on the beach, we are presented with some close-up frames of her touching the sand and blissfully feeling the breeze ("San Junipero" 00:47:03-00:47:49). Moreover, during a discussion with Kelly, she makes her enthusiasm towards that cyberspace explicit. "Look at it! [...] Touch it! [...] This is real!", she says ("San Junipero" 00:50:33-00:50:45).

Conversely, Kelly's character is more critical of that cyberspace and she draws the spectator's attention to some points regarding the ethical and philosophical side of cyber technologies in implementing the transhumanist dream of immortality.

Before meeting Yorkie, Kelly was determined to die naturally and without "passing over" to San Junipero. Contrary to Yorkie, she does not perceive San Junipero as the "final utopia" (Paura 24), the occasion to live an eternal young life, but she sees the TCKR system more as an entertainment, a place where she could temporarily enjoy the pleasures of having again a young body. In a scene where Kelly is arguing with Yorkie about her decision to not "passing over", the former focuses on the consequences that the idea of eternity may have on their conditions of living. "You wanna spend forever somewhere nothing matters?" ("San Junipero" 00:53:35), Kelly says, underlining her worries that living in San Junipero would be senseless. The point Kelly is making here reflects a criticism that has been moved to the utopia of transhumanism, namely that immortality erase the meaning of life as understood by "Heidegger's concept of "being-towards-death" (Paura 26).

According to this vision, life is meaningful only in “learning to die” (26), and, hence, an immortal life would lose all the purposes of human existence.

Despite the fact that the episode provides a critical approach to the utopia of transhumanism, in the *finale*, Kelly’s ethical and philosophical concerns are outweighed by the most irrational and distinctive of human feelings, love, since she decides that, “all things considered”, she is ready to live “the rest of it” (00:57:22-00:57:40) and join Yorkie eternally in San Junipero. In a bittersweet atmosphere distant from a bleak ending, which is a sort of narrative trope in *Black Mirror*, Yorkie and Kelly celebrate their “triumphant” deaths (Brooker and Mbatha-Raw) by driving along San Junipero’s ocean to the note of the famous 80s song “Heaven is a Place on Earth”.

In the light of how the story of “San Junipero” develops, the mind-uploading is represented in a way that shares the utopian vision of Singularity believers. Arguably, the episode shows a side of technological advancement which plays a benevolent role for humanity, specifically it grants the opportunity of an existence lived to its fullest to people whose bodies have become a prison or a burden. All this was unthinkable in pre-technologic eras, where a “permanent body utopia” (Sargent 10) could only be achievable in the realm of the fantastic or with the characters “going through an almost incredible rite of passage” (10).

“San Junipero”, then, portrays a future where new technologies, particularly information technology and cybernetics, make it possible to pass from the most abstract of utopia, that of eternal youth and immortality, to a concrete utopia.

Nevertheless, if we turn to the social dimension of utopia, its “transformative” (Levitas and Sargisson, *Utopia in Dark Times* 14) function as a source to imagine new and alternative worlds is very little, if not at all, taken into consideration. By relying on Suvin’s notion of science fiction and utopia, I argue that “San Junipero” is closer to a fantasy story rather than to a utopian writing, since it lacks an effective critical dimension, a reflection on the social world, on the “author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 375). In fact, the city of San Junipero appears, like in the fantasy genre, a “collateral world” (375), meaning that it is “parallel” (Bukatman 12) to the real social world, it is not influenced, nor it influences, the socio-historical context in which it has been elaborated through scientific and technological research.

By providing a narration of cyber bodies and cyber realities from a viewpoint restricted to biological and ethical issues, “San Junipero” misses the opportunity to move a critique on the way both society and single individuals are reacting to the path breaking scenarios promoted by transhumanism.

Cyborgs and cybernetics are getting day by day, innovation after innovation, closer to our everyday reality and increasingly far from the realm of pure imagination and fantasy. Indeed, it has been

broadly analysed in the academia the massive change that cybernetics has brought about in the “historical, [...] ontological” (Ferrando 28), and social dimension of human beings. Beyond opening scenarios of after-life, “post-human” and “post-biological” (Marturano and Bellucci 76) bodies, cybernetics has caused a profound transformation in our realm of mortality, and in the field of communication. To provide just an example of these studies, the postmodern and social-feminist author Donna Haraway, in her “Cyborg Manifesto”, introduces the formulation of “cultural cyborg” (qtd. in Gunkel 334) by arguing that the technological advancement related to cybernetics has challenged the very basis of Western traditional humanism, since “the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (Haraway 32).

In other words, “San Junipero”, despite providing the spectators with a profound and fascinating story mingling new technologies, after-life imagery, love, and space-time boundaries, did not take into consideration those elements and theories that could have provided a critical view on how cybernetics is influencing our visions of possible future social worlds.

Conclusions

In the present dissertation, I have shown that *Mr. Robot* and *Black Mirror* are two works where the tension between utopia and dystopia is essential to offer a critical representation of our late capitalistic reality that aims at making the spectators question such reality and interrogate themselves on the possibility of imagining a future where a new system free from the dehumanizing aspects of capitalism can be implemented. This type of fictional narration corresponds to what has been defined, according to the utopian genre, critical dystopia, the most recent variation of utopia characterized, precisely, by the presence in the story of both a dystopian critique of the surrounding world and a – more or less explicit – utopian impulse to change society for the better.

After casting a light, through the works of Ernst Bloch and Ruth Levitas, on the fundamental difference between the two phases of the utopian impulse, namely abstract utopia and concrete utopia, and on how utopia can pass from being escapist thinking to being a critical and, finally, a transformative social force, I have proceeded with the analysis of *Mr. Robot* to argue that the series successfully creates a dystopian narration that warns the public about the loss of a utopian sense of the future that is caused not by our incapacity to dream and fantasize about the future, but by the very conditions of postmodernism and late capitalism in which we live. The scholars Jameson, Fisher and “Bifo” Berardi, by stressing different aspects of life under late capitalism, all examine the latter as a system expanding its purely monetary logic to the political, social and cultural domains. The autonomy of these spheres, that guaranteed in past eras a progression of mankind in historical and existential terms, has been deeply compromised and replaced by one single view of progress that responds to profit and consumerism, with the result that we are currently stuck in a “timeless era” where imagining and lay the foundations for a new system that may go beyond the all-encompassing capitalistic one is a difficult, if not impossible endeavour.

Mr. Robot has translated this social theory on our contemporary reality to screenplay. Through the story of Elliot Alderson, it depicts a dystopian world where our minds and choices are constantly controlled and manipulated, and the logic of capitalism has invaded so profoundly our personal and social life that mental conditions such as clinical depression, paranoia and schizophrenia have become culture-specific anxieties.

A glimmer of hope is also present in the narration thanks to Elliot’s dream to start a revolution and give birth to a new and fairer society through a massive hack attack against the financial power of capitalism. However, I have argued that, if the series successfully portrays the dystopian aspects of our reality, it struggles with depicting a utopian dimension, since season 2 shows how Elliot’s

revolution fails due to the lack of a viable alternative to financial capitalism that could start a new cultural era, and to the extremist fanaticism with which the masses reacted to the 5/9 hack.

In the third chapter, I have moved to *Black Mirror*, specifically to the episodes “Nosedive” and “San Junipero” to introduce the element of new technologies in the critique of late capitalism. “Nosedive” is built on an exaggeration of today’s use of social networks. It portrays a reality organized socially and economically through an advanced virtual platform that screens off the real world and cancels the separation between Real and Virtual, so that people live in a virtual reality without possibility of disconnection. By reflecting on an article by Best & Kellner, I have argued that the episode represents our society as an “interactive spectacle”, an evolution of the Debordian “society of the spectacle”. In fact, “Nosedive” denounces how capitalism and consumerism have built a society functioning on the power of images and on the promotion of *appearance* over *being* to control people and increase profit by invading the social and personal spheres of individuals. The fictional reality of “Nosedive” mirrors how, under late capitalism, new technologies are used to exploit human beings’ need to be liked and socially accepted and to disconnect them from their real needs to avoid any act of resistance against the hegemonic system and to benumb their ability to dream about a new and different future.

In “San Junipero”, on the contrary, I have noticed that the critical dimension typical of the utopian/dystopian narration is less visible and effective, especially if compared with the insightful critique that both “Nosedive” and *Mr. Robot* bring about. The episode unfolds the transhumanist dream of investing in scientific and technological research to empower our body with the aim of living eternally or, like the branch of Singularity believers envisions, of going beyond our bodily condition by uploading human consciousness into an unbreakable digital device. The critique of transhumanism is carried out by narrating a romance between the two main characters, Yorkie and Kelly, set in the cyber reality of the idyllic location of San Junipero. The two girls experience and think of San Junipero in different ways, an element that leads the public to consider the ethical or philosophical dilemmas that transhumanism poses to the human condition.

However, since the majority of the episode is not set in the real world, and, consequently, it does not investigate how the themes of transhumanism affect society, I have argued that “San Junipero” looks closer to a fantasy story rather than a utopian one, meaning that it has missed the opportunity to provide a critical viewpoint on how the notions of cyborg and cybernetics have impacted society and our collective perception of life and death.

In the light of this journey through *Mr. Robot* and *Black Mirror*, I believe that providing an effective critique of our contemporary world means necessarily to bring things to the surface that we would rather ignore or relegate to the back of our minds. Works like the two series analysed show how

no fictional dystopic scenario is, nowadays, utterly unrealistic or far from our present, and that for a positive utopian thinking to arise we need, individually and collectively, to be fully aware of this. It is not comforting to be reminded that we are living in dark times, and I am quite sure that, after watching an episode of *Mr. Robot* or *Black Mirror*, no one would feel like facing the world with the biggest smile on his/her face. But the purpose, here, is not to reassure the public. If we are attracted to such series it is, partly, because of the thrill in knowing that the dystopic contexts that are portrayed are only “10 minutes away” (Stubbs 9:00), unless something is done to change the current situation.

Mr. Robot's failed revolution is essential to make us confront the unpleasant fact that some acts of resistance in the last few years – let us think about the Occupy Wall Street movement – have been either repressed by the hegemonic forces of the system or their messages have been lost in a loud but inconclusive populist wave. Therefore, the series suggests that the goal to develop a utopian alternative consisting of a cultural and social rebirth is still to be achieved. In a similar manner, *Black Mirror* tries to awaken a utopian spirit and catalyse a change by showing us that we are losing sight of our degree of responsibility for particular dystopic tendencies in our society, in this case related to new technologies. In this regard, a concept recurring in most of Charlie Brooker's (*Black Mirror*'s creator) interviews is that “the villain is never technology” (Channel 4 3:49), but humans and the controversial use they make of it.

The task and the force of utopia and dystopia is to help us acknowledge, especially in dark times, who or what the “villain” that threatens our cultural progress and human dignity is. Surprisingly (or not), it may end up being ourselves.

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