

“The Monstrous in our Techno-Social World”

***Black Mirror* Season 6. Produced by Charlie Brooker and Annabelle Jones. Netflix, 2023.**

The sixth season of the technologically-dystopian anthology series, *Black Mirror*, was released on Netflix on June 15, 2023. The five new episodes, or *films* as producers Charlie Brooker and Annabelle Jones prefer to call them, were the first offerings of *Black Mirror* to appear on our respective “black mirrors” since before the start of the global pandemic. In the latest installment of eerie reflections about how technology saturates and shapes our social worlds, the showrunners both provide vintage *Black Mirror* and a new trajectory of what is possible for the series, even to the point of ostensibly breaking some of their own rules.

A number of features make this season feel like a classic expression of *Black Mirror*. Most notably, the show remains timely and prescient in its social commentary on technology. With respect to prescience, *Joan is Awful* begins season 6 addressing concerns central to the Hollywood strikes of 2023 that corporations would replace actors and writers with artificial intelligence. The film does so by imagining a Netflix-esque streaming service called Streamberry that produces tailored content about its users with celebrity avatars reenacting the user’s day in the worst possible light to “drive engagement.” The season also features some recurring actors from earlier seasons (e.g., Wunmi Mosaku, Monica Dolan), as well as multiple easter eggs that help connect the new season with the rest of the series.

At the same time, season 6 is the most *unlike* any other season of the show. The reason is because *Mazey Day* and *Demon 79*, the final two films, together introduce the series to monsters and the supernatural for the very first time. Unlike *Playtest* (S3.E2), the monstrous elements in these episodes are not part of a computer-generated simulation or virtual reality, but that transgresses the basic metaphysics of the show. As Brooker has described *Black Mirror* in the past, it is like a modern version of *Twilight Zone* that replaces the supernatural with the technological.¹ Even as such a claim attempts to establish *Black Mirror* as *a-theological*, it does so by making an explicit theological association, reflecting how, for many, technology has supplanted the supernatural and filled in the gap that it left behind. This orientation towards the series suffuses the volume that I co-edited, *Theology and Black Mirror*,² which covers the first five seasons of the show. Even the season opener reestablishes this same connection in *Joan is Awful*, when the CEO of Streamberry, Mona Javadi (Leila Farzad), says about the “quamputer” that creates the fictive levels for their user-based show, “We barely know how it works, it’s basically *magic*” (emphasis added). Yet, season 6 goes beyond this and fully introduces the supernatural into the series, adding a new wrinkle, I contend, to the show’s commentary on technology.

Black Mirror has chosen to engage the monstrous and the supernatural under the umbrella of its new horror-themed branding of “Red Mirror.” *Demon 79* is explicitly labeled as “a Red Mirror film,” but *Mazey Day* does not have the same branding. Brooker has addressed how he oscillated back and forth on whether to use it for *Mazey Day*, and decided that he

¹ Sam Wollaston, “Charlie Brooker: ‘Happy? I Have My Moments,’” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2019. Accessed December 13, 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jun/01/charlie-brooker-interview-annabelle-jones-black-mirror>

² Amber Bowen and John Anthony Dunne (eds.), *Theology and Black Mirror*, Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Academic, 2022).

preferred to leave it off to preserve the twist ending.³ In *Mazey Day* a team of paparazzi try to hunt down a famous actress named Mazey (Clara Rugaard), who has been missing from the spotlight for several weeks after a hit and run has left her rattled and has (presumably) led her to substance abuse. Viewers realize later through a flashback, however, that she drove into a werewolf, whose saliva entered her bloodstream through a fresh cut on her finger when she stopped to check on it, and so she has been ravaged by the recent full moon. When the encroaching paparazzi find her chained to a bed at a private retreat center, she transforms into a werewolf and begins a violent rampage that leaves only one member of the paparazzi left to “shoot” her and capture her on camera. *Demon 79*, then, is a story about a young woman named Nida (Anjana Vasan), who stumbles upon an enchanted talisman (engraved with the familiar y-shaped symbol from *Bandersnatch*) that summons a demon in the guise of a 1970s pop star from Boney M. named Gaap (Paapa Essiedu), who promises the complete annihilation of the world if Nida does not commit three ritual murders within the allotted timeframe. After Nida is unable to kill her third and final target – the ascending politician, Michael Smart (David Shields), who will one day usher in a techno-fascistic regime – an apocalyptic catastrophe ensues and the credits roll.

Mazey Day and *Demon 79* certainly take *Black Mirror* into a new register, but they nevertheless retain their commentary on technology. In particular, these episodes ask viewers to reflect on what constitutes the monstrous and the demonic in our tech age. In *Mazey Day*, what is monstrous is not the woman who becomes a werewolf (or even the roommate sensitive to garlic that I suggest is secretly a vampire), but rather the paparazzi who voraciously try to capitalize on Mazey’s misery, using the technology of their cameras with utter insatiability. Viewers are primed for this interpretation in the opening sequence when Bo (Zazie Beetz) captures compromising images of an actor at a remote motel, who cries out “F—ing animal!” as she drives away. Similarly, the titular demon in *Demon 79* is not Gaap, but the politician who abuses his power to control society, as we see through images of the robo-dogs from *Metalhead* (S4.E5) in a montage of a futuristic vision of his political accomplishments, which leads Nida to declare, “He’s f—ing Satan!” In some ways the dynamic present in these episodes is similar to how *Black Mirror* has compared tech developers to deities in *USS Callister* (S4.E1) and *Smithereens* (S5.E2),⁴ though making a comparison to the supernatural through juxtaposition with actual paranormal figures takes this to a new level.

In the light of the monstrous and the demonic in season 6, two additional themes emerge regarding technology that add cohesion to all five episodes. The first theme pertains to the monstrous way that technology is deployed to commodify tragedy for our collective media consumption. In addition to *Joan is Awful* and *Mazey Day*, this theme is prominent in *Loch Henry*. Biting the hand that feeds even deeper than *Joan is Awful*, *Loch Henry* interrogates Netflix’s popularization of true crime documentaries. The film is a tragic story about a documentarian named Davis (Samuel Blenkin) who discovers that the torturous murders that led to his hometown’s financial hardships were actually perpetuated by his parents. As it tells this story, the film draws attention to the corporations, producers, and local industries that benefit

³ Harrison Brocklehurst, “Black Mirror’s Charlie Brooker Has Explained Why Mazey Day Wasn’t Classed As Red Mirror,” *The Tab*, June 28, 2023. Accessed December 14, 2023. <https://thetab.com/uk/2023/06/28/black-mirrors-charlie-brooker-has-explained-why-mazey-day-wasnt-classed-as-red-mirror-314724>

⁴ Cf., e.g., John Anthony Dunne, “*Smithereens* as Technological Theodicy: Addiction, Emergence, and Resistance,” in *Theology and Black Mirror*, ed. Amber Bowen and John Anthony Dunne, Theology, Religion, and Pop Culture (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Academic, 2022), 81–97.

from turning real-life suffering into binge-worthy media. Davis originally intended to make a documentary with his girlfriend Pia (Myha'la Herrold) about an “egg guy” who protects endangered eggs, a story Davis says will feature “the last holdout against the commodification of nature,” which stands as a sad and ironic contrast to the “successful” film he made in the end.

The second additional theme that emerges is how our technological environment untethers us from our basic humanity. This is further portrayed in the third film of the season, *Beyond the Sea*, which is set in an alternate version of 1969. The film showcases two astronauts, David Ross (Josh Hartnett) and Cliff Stanfield (Aaron Paul), who interface with life on earth through lifelike replicas while their natural bodies travel in space on a mission testing the limits of life and survivability. Tragically, David loses his family and his replica in a brutal homicide enacted by a gang decrying the “unnatural” life the astronaut is living. With David left deeply depressed, they arrange to alternate using Cliff’s remaining replica so that David can enjoy some fresh air and his hobby of painting. Due to mounting suspicion and jealousy, Cliff eventually rescinds the privilege from him, leading David to murder Cliff’s family so that the two of them are on equal footing for the remainder of their multi-year mission in space. Viewers may interpret the ending differently (i.e., perhaps the “blood” on the walls was red paint mixed with linseed oil, given the focus on the latter), but the monstrous nature of human cruelty here coheres with the twist of *Loch Henry*, and sets up the transition to proper monsters in the remaining two films.

What invites this kind of integrated interpretation further is the fact that the season incorporates *prospective* easter eggs, rather than merely *retrospective* ones. Prospective easter eggs are seen most notably in *Joan is Awful*, when Joan (Annie Murphy) and Krish (Avi Nash) scroll through film options on Streamberry, discussing the documentary *Loch Henry* and also passing over a documentary about Michael Smart, the politician from the last film of the season, *Demon 79*. Similarly, at the BAFTA awards ceremony in *Loch Henry*, we hear about a documentary called, *Suffer the Children: The Tippley Pedophile Ring*, which is another true crime documentary about the fictional town of Tippley from *Demon 79*. Folding the story of *Demon 79* into the commodification of tragedy seen in both *Joan is Awful* and *Loch Henry* further underscores this integrative theme. These prospective easter eggs, therefore, help to reinforce the cohesion of season 6’s common themes—something not previously attained in *Black Mirror* given its anthology style.

Black Mirror season 6, then, reflects back to viewers the monstrous and demonic powers at work in our present technological society. Rather than *demythologizing Black Mirror*’s new supernatural elements, I contend that the new season has the effect of *remythologizing* the supernatural framework within which technology now operates.

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