IS THERE A WAY OUT? PHYSICAL AND STRUCTURAL PROSTITUTION IN THE DYSTOPIAN WORLD OF *BLACK MIRROR*'S EPISODE "FIFTEEN MILLION MERITS"

Elsa Adán Hernández
Ana Virginia López Fuentes

University of Zaragoza, Spain

elsadan@unizar.es
avlfuentes@unizar.es

Received: May 31, 2023
Accepted: November 14, 2023

Abstract: This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the episode "Fifteen MillionMerits" (1x02), from the TV Series *Black Mirror* (2011), written by series creator Charlie Brooker and his wife Konnie Huq. By combining formal cinematic and narratological analysis, the main purpose of this article is to assess how the pornography business and prostitution affect the behavior of the people inhabiting the futurist dystopia displayed in this episode. The analysis focuses on the oppressive technologicalsystem of prostitution and mainstream pornography with the aim of assessing its role within our contemporary socio-cultural parameters. The female protagonist and three members of the jury ofa television contest are selected to explore these issues more deeply. The former embodies the harshness and soulless business of mainstream heteropatriarchal pornography and prostitution, whereas the latter structurally represents how this industry cunningly affects everyone the members of this community.
Keywords: Dystopia; Exploitation; Pornographication; Prostitution; Technology.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza en profundidad el episodio "Quince millones de méritos" (1x02), de la serie de televisión *Black Mirror* (2011). Combinando el análisis formal cinematográfico y narratológico, el objetivo principal de este artículo es evaluar cómo el negocio de la pornografía y la prostitución afectan al comportamiento de las personas que habitan la distopía futurista que se muestra en este episodio. El análisis se centra en ese sistema opresivo y tecnológico de la prostitución y la pornografía convencional, con el objetivo de evaluar su papel dentro de nuestros parámetros socioculturales contemporáneos. La protagonista femenina y tres miembros del jurado de un concurso de televisión son seleccionados para profundizar en estos temas. La primera encarna la dureza y el desalmado negocio de la prostitución y la pornografía heteropatriarcal convencional, mientras que los segundos representan cómo, estructuralmente, esta industria afecta sutilmente a todos los que pertenecen a esa comunidad.
Palabras clave: Distopía; Explotación; Pornografícación; Prostitución; Tecnología.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dystopic and often uncanny worlds presented in the TV series *Black Mirror* (2011) are carefully crafted to harshly criticize some of the most troublesome aspects of humanity, with a particular focus on the nefarious effects of digital developments. Now that we live in a hyper-technological era, this TV series intelligently satirizes our capitalist system, exposing how empathy, care, and love seem to be forgotten or totallymissing, having been replaced by an obsession with money and egotistic well-being. As Bailey Reutzel puts it, "technology has become the principal religion, the new unseen deity that is worshipped without critical thought. . . . We ignore the inequality it exacerbates, the fading out of art and literature to help us interact with humanity" (208-9). What is more, concerning dystopian representations, M. Keith Booker assumes that there is a "close connection between dystopian fiction and contemporary political reality" (19) and his thoughts are aligned with the idea that "the modern turn to dystopian fiction is largely attributable to perceived inadequacies in existing social and political systems" (20). This is something that lies at the thematic core of *Black Mirror*. All of these are precisely the problems exposed in the episode "Fifteen Million Merits" (1x02), where the spectator is plunged into an utterly dystopian, hyper- technological world. There, the inhabitants devote their lives to pedaling static bicycleswith the aim of earning enough "merits"—their digital currency—in order to improvetheir social status, hoping to someday join (and win) in a talent show that will (supposedly) grant them the freedom that they lack in such a restrictive system. The inhabitants of this society are taught to sacrifice themselves and work hard in order to escape that oppressive patriarchal system which uses different mechanisms, mainly prostitution, in order to keep them under control and surveillance. As a consequence, the exploitation of human beings is placed at the center of the episode, understood notonly as physical prostitution as is the case of the protagonist, Abi Khan (Jessica Brown Findlay), but also structural, exemplified through the way in which that dystopic societyis constructed and sustained. As Booker explains, this kind of "dystopian fictions provide fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable" (19). Ultimately, the message is that there is no way out of such a system. In relation to this, it is undeniable that, nowadays, porn culture is integrated in multiple spheres of our lives, and that pornography is consumed all aroundthe world. As can be deduced, the consumption of such materials has negative consequences that affect the way in which people perceive and understand sexual relationships, removing any kind of affective bonding and complexity; precisely the traits, as previously stated, that makes us human. As a result, the main purpose of thisarticle is to critically assess the digital laboring system as portrayed in this episode of the *Black Mirror* series, focusing on the different oppressive methods adopted by the system depending on gender. Thus, the focus will be placed on the different mechanisms used to exploit humans by analyzing the behavior of the female protagonist, Abi, and the three members of the jury—two males and one female—of the talent show, as far as the business of pornography and prostitution is concerned. Byclose reading this aspect both from the perspective of the female protagonist and the members of the jury, we will assess how subjugation through prostitution affects not only, and in

the most obvious and literal way, Abi, but also structurally, and in a moreintriguing way, the three members of the jury and the apparently victorious male character, "Bing" (Daniel Kaluuya). This episode presents the stark reality of a society oppressed by digital media, highlighting the intricacies of a neoliberal society that advocates the marketisation of bodies.

Thus, in the following sections, we will delve deeply into the analysis of concrete scenes of this episode with a double and complementary aim. On the one hand,this article assesses how this story stands clearly as a critique of the pornographic business and the degradation of the women who are, on many occasions, involuntarily swallowed by this monstrous industry. On the other hand, at the same time and at a parallel structural level, the analysis will unravel how this prostitution system is also exerted over society at large as a means of surveillance and subjugation. This is exemplified by the portrayal of the three members of the jury and their behavior, all of which represent how such a tyrannical, digitally controlled world is tied to the patriarchal system as portrayed in this episode. When analyzed all together, these two points complement and further emphasize the main message transmitted through the episode.

2. TECHNOLOGY INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OUR SCOPE

Technology is constantly present in our everyday lives. In this regard, narratives related to socio-technical futures are already part of the technological imaginary of contemporary society (Miller and Bennett 599). According to Simon Gottschalk, many types of human encounters are mediated by technology, a recent change that implies a partial loss of what made us human, thus minimizing physical, emotional, and social contact (23). As Donna Haraway already proclaimed in the last decade of the twentieth century, the world has been transformed so that "[m]odern states, multinational corporations, military power, welfare state apparatuses, satellite systems, political processes, fabrication of our imaginations, labor-control systems, medical constructions of our bodies, commercial pornography, the international division of labour, and religious evangelism depend intimately upon electronics" (165). Essentially, technology now governs the lives of human beings. People are exposed todifferent kinds of technological devices and interconnections daily and nowadays, in Western societies, it is virtually impossible to be detached from their influence. Science fiction films such as *Total Recall* (Len Wiseman, 2012), *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013) and *Autómata* (Gabe Ibáñez, 2015), and TV series like *Fringe* (J. J. Abrams, Alex Kurtzman& Roberto Orci 2008), *Ex Machina* (Alex Garland, 2014), *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014) or *Mr. Robot* (Sam Esmail, 2015) have structured their narrativesaround the topic of technological overdependence, and *Black Mirror* (2011) is also an example of this.

The overuse of technology can make humans too dependent on certain devices and lead to a loss of contact, which is a fundamental feature of humanity. Gottschalk coined the term "terminal" referring to "all those network and internet-enabled devicesthat take us online and enable us to interact with others" (1). Thus, the "terminal self" refers to the ways of experiencing the self and the social world, and, on the other hand,the ways

of perceiving and interacting with others that characterize Western societies today. Humans have transformed "their perceptions of reality, their experiences of self,and their relations with others" (Gottschalk I) in their constant connections with the terminal, to the point that, as Haraway claimed, "machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (152). Recent technological advances and development of the terminals are described by Gottschalk:

> [The terminal] is increasingly oriented toward predictions, and will soon be capableof producing its own narratives, and without humans' intervention. In other words, the terminal might soon reverse the often-used model whereby a technician (human being) uses technique (creativity, skills, knowledge, scripts) to operate a technic (a tool) with which s/he transforms the environment. In this case, the technic (the terminal) uses and produces technique (creativity, skills, knowledge, scripts) to interact with and transform technicians (human beings). (23)

In this way, terminals ultimately minimize human capacities as they could diminish certain abilities related to memory, emotions, and reasoning. As a result, when human beings "entrust the work of remembering to the terminal, they renounce the human functions that have traditionally been mobilized in the exercise of remembering" (37). Gottschalk also introduces the idea of "digital apparatus," which he describes as "a nascent social system that is organized, powered, and expanded by computer technology" and considers the terminal as "just a mobile node of this apparatus" (6). Itis "user-friendly, silent, symbolic, and rapidly mutating" and, in addition, "offers users near-perfect personalization and customized validation" (18). The power of the digital apparatus belongs to those who control its means of interaction and surveillance. *Black Mirror* revolves around the topic of technology overuse and overdependence in contemporary society. As will be introduced in the next section, the use of technology is intrinsic to pornography consumption. In this sense, the episode selected for this article relates both topics in the same direction: to provide a representation of the porn-tech market and its inherent subjugation of women.

3. WOMEN AND THE PORNOGRAPHY BUSINESS: PAST AND PRESENT

As is widely known, the business of pornography and prostitution has been a matter of debate for a long time, acquiring greater relevance during the past few decades. Moreover, because of the socio-political and cultural context we live in, it seems more pertinent than ever to throw some light over it. Historically, the link between pornography, female rights and morality was revived during the second wave of feminism that took place in the late 1960s and 1970s. One of the most controversial andrelevant aspects was the so-called sex wars, well established in the 1980s, "renew[ing]interest in pornographic politics, formal conventions and trade practices" (Frederickson304). This led to the establishment of two opposing currents, presumably based on historical and

philosophical reasons. Anti-censorship feminists were in favor of the freedistribution of pornography and of exploring sexuality with consent on the consideration that they offered potentially liberating aspects for women. In contrast, anti-pornography feminists categorically rejected pornography as it was inevitably tiedto a heteropatriarchal society, and therefore, to a male-dominated world.[1] Essentially, both positions differ their emphasis on the implications of sexual relationships and theirsocial consequences. Anti-censorship feminists fight for complete freedom and equality, with the recognition of female sexual pleasure at the core of their arguments.

In opposition, from the perspective of anti-pornography feminists, sex is tied to emotions and the existing industry only perpetuates women's subordination to men.[2] Here it is important to highlight, as Ingrid Ryberg points out, that this episode in the history of feminism is quintessential in order to understand its relevance both in its historical context and today. As she makes clear, it positively altered the different pointsof view on the feminist and queer pornographic industry (142). Yet, already in the 1980s some critics already claimed that these two radically opposed paradigms were essentialist: "we must reject both the radical-feminist view that patriarchy has stolen our essentially emotional female sexuality and the libertarian-feminist view that sexual repression has denied women erotic pleasure" (Ferguson 110). As could be expected, the emergence of some new ideas running between the two extremes progressively gained force, primarily trying to assess certain adverse outcomes:

> One of the unfortunate results of the porn wars was the fixing of an antiporn camp versus a sex-positive/pro-porn camp. On one side, a capital P 'Pornography' was a visual embodiment of patriarchy and violence against women. On the other, Porn wasdefended as 'speech,' or as a form that should not be foreclosed because it might someday be transformed into a vehicle for women's erotic expression. The nuances andcomplexities of actual lowercase 'pornographies' were lost in the middle. (Taormino et al. 14-15)

The ultimate concern arising from this heated debate is a close examination of the waysin which women, sex and pornography were and are still articulated. More specifically,the focus on female agency and sexual freedom is extremely important to assess if, byany means, it could be possible to disarm the long-established phallocentric hierarchy and ideology prevailing in this industry. As Analía Iglesias and Martha Zein remark, pornography can be said to act as an abstraction that extends beyond fiction, and is nothing but the representation of a concept, based on historical and gender-based violence and stereotypes (59). As a consequence, this would lead to perturbing misrepresentations of sexual relations that are repeated in our contemporary culture, partly (perhaps voluntarily) ignoring that nothing portrayed in them is real. Hence, among its multiple negative consequences, the consumption of mainstream pornography provokes an inability to distinguish these crude fictions from reality, thusfacilitating the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes. Here, Andrea Dworkin makesan important point when she remarks that "the word *pornography* does not mean 'writing about sex' or 'depictions of the erotic' or 'depictions of sexual acts' or 'depictions of nude bodies' or 'sexual

representations' or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores" (200). As she further explains, "contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word's root meaning:the graphic depiction of vile whores, or, in our language, sluts, . . . cunts" (200). As canbe inferred from this definition, pornography is ruled by power relations, with women always under male dominance.

What is more, perhaps the most troublesome aspect of present-day representations of sexual practices is, as some critics note (Dines 2010, Iglesias and Zein 2018, McNair 2002), that our culture has undergone a process known as "pornographication" (McNair 1996, 2002), that is to say, the "cross-over of pornography from the private to the public sphere" (McNair, "From Porn to Chic" 55). In other words, everything in our mainstream culture is sexualized. Overtly pornographic material is set right in front of our eyes, only a mouse-click away. As explained in the previous section, the control remains in the hands of those who ultimately interact with what they find on the net, heavily depending on certain digital devices disregarding what is purely and intrinsically human. Due to the extremely easy accessibility to the Internet and mainstream pornography on a vast number of websites, people—and especially contemporary youths—can effortlessly find a lot of incomplete "information," based on heterosexist canons. As Gail Dines makes clear, "internet porn is mainstream" (xviii). In the same vein, Feona Atwood explains that "the sexualizationof the media since then [the 1970s] suggests that we live in a culture which is open about sex and which is characterised by widespread sexual literacy" (xix), something proved right in the episode under analysis. As she further develops, "media representations of sex are often very conservative, promoting sex as a way for women to please men, and presenting men with a view of male sexuality as a macho display which is nevertheless anxiety ridden" (xix). Therefore, bearing all these ideas in mind,the following section provides a close reading of certain scenes and shots ofthe episode of the *Black Mirror* TV series in order to assess how this contemporary issue is portrayed through the lens of the female protagonist and the three members of the jury.

4. EXPLORING *BLACK MIRROR*'S "FIFTEEN MILLION MERITS"

"Fifteen Million Merits" (1x02) represents a futuristic dystopia that raises awareness about the detrimental effects of contemporary lifestyles, such as excessive consumerism, slavery, disrespect for the human body, and overdependence on technology. This episode depicts the consequences of these negative practices througha poor technological lifestyle dependent on an artificial Earth. Inhabitants that live in this dystopia are forced to cycle on exercise bikes so that they can earn currency called"merits." In particular, the episode tells the story of Bing, who convinces Abi to participate in a talent show to become a famous singer. She unwittingly becomes a pornstar. To start with, it is important to make clear that pornography, as Dines explains,

> tells stories about the world, but these stories are of the most intimate nature, as they areabout sexuality and sexual relationships . . . seep[ing] into the very core of their sexual identity. To suggest otherwise would be to see sex as just a biological urge, removed from the social context, within which it is developed,

understood, and enacted in the realworld. (xxii-xxiii)

In other words, and as she clarifies later on, "no biological urge exists in a pure form devoid of cultural meaning or expression" (xxiii), and this is precisely what is shown in this episode. From now on, through an analysis of relevant scenes and shots related to the topic of this article, the heteropatriarchal society that governs this dystopiais analyzed with the aim of showing the way it perpetuates the omnipresent and prevailing chauvinism in the porn industry. The ultimate aim is to highlight the everlasting formulaic character of pornography, as Dworkin's definition and further explanation make clear. As Hardy explains, "as a genre, pornography has always been characterized by a marked genderasymmetry in its circuit of communication" (qtd. in Atwood 5). To arrive at such a readingof the audio-visual products, it is necessary to start with a formal analysis of the episode (Bordwell 2006, Barsam and Monahan 2010) that will help to acknowledge this perpetuation of the pornographic business from the main character's perspective and also from the jury's perspective.

4.1 Disentangling the pornographic business through Abi's submissive role

The following shot (**fig. 1**) presents the moment when Bing sees Abi for the first time. Bing suddenly becomes of secondary importance when, by means of shallow focus, his figure blurs into the background of the image, whereas Abi is in sharp focuson the right-hand side. This shot (10:52) draws the viewer's attention to the female protagonist, highlighting her key role in the episode. At the same time, the blurred image of Bing in the background is part of the process of humanization of the characterwhich seemed to be exclusively engaged in a digital existence. Until this moment, Bing's only duties were similar to those of robots. Now, he has found, in his own words "one thing I ever came close to anything real" (54:03).

Fig. 1. Bing's blurred image in the background creates a contrast with the sharp image of Abi in the foreground front.

The way in which she is portrayed, that is, by distorting her image as a grown-up woman through a process of infantilization, addresses one of the most troublesome aspects of the previously mentioned notion of pornographication. Broadly speaking, the features of any female actress involved in this kind of materials are closely related to those of an innocent child, as for instance, angelic and beautiful faces or waxed intimate body parts, which directly respond to the current hypersexualized porn culture. Abi's facial features, then, contribute to this process, which are emphasized in the scene with her sweet facial expression, her fringe, and blue eyes. As Sara Bragg and David Buckingham highlight, this "reflect[s] much broader anxieties about the changing nature of childhood in contemporary societies: children are seen to be growing up to soon, they are being sexualized and their childhood is being destroyed through, amongst other things, their access to sexual knowledge" (129). Moreover, when focusing on the idea of gender asymmetry, as Iglesias and Zein explain, women have abruptly changed from a time in which they knew nothing and did not even experience sexual pleasure toa time in which we are supposed to be born as porn stars (105).

Like the users of the terminals described by Gottschalk, humans in "Fifteen Million Merits" have voluntarily surrendered their decision-making and cognitive activities to the digital devices controlled by the screens that constantly surroundthem. Human beings are "terminal selves" since, in the words of Gottschalk, they "do not live an alienated existence only because they have lost control over the conditions under which they must labor, but also because they have lost control over the codes with which they must interact and participate in society" (18). Abi becomes the main point of contact between Bing and reality since she conveys his nostalgia for having and living something real. He persuades her to participate in the talent show called "Hot Shot" and offers to pay her entry, arguing that nothing is real, even if her voice actually is:

> BING. That's all just stuff. It's stuff, it's confetti, it's…You've got something real. What better to spend it on it?
> ABI. You hear me sing in a toilet. Is that real?
> BING. More than anything that has happened all year.

A remarkable moment in the episode in relation to the reifying and enslavement of the human body is the moment when Abi participates in "Hot Shot" (29:08-39:00). Before her performance, she is forced to drink a compliance cup (Cuppliance) which clouds her reason and judgment, and conditions her freedom of choice. In her words, it makesher feel "everything's a bit wider apart." The camera focuses on her and how her bodylanguage changes. For the first time, she is unsure about what is happening around her;she is confused about what is real and what is fictional. Thus, this scene mirrors how mainstream culture is constantly sexualized by blurring the barriers between fact and fiction, working as a clear example of the concept of "pornographication" (McNair 1996, 2002) explained before. The compliance cup has sexual implications as it cloudsAbi's reason and conditions her acceptance of the job as a porn star. Going a step further, this scene addresses what Brain Mcnair describes as a cross-over of explicit sexual content

and the constant sexualization of mainstream cultures from the private into the public sphere (55).

Fig. 2. Close-up shot of Abi's frightened face.

Indeed, in relation to the power of the gaze and the gender asymmetry previously mentioned, one of Laura Mulvey's main ideas exposed in her seminal work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1999), can be useful to understand what happens here. She explains that the female image has been used in films so as to maintain the dominant patriarchal order. The female image, in this case Abi's, is constantly looked at in order to maintain the system as it is thought to be correct, both by the members of the jury and all the spectators of the TV show. Thus, Abi feels constantly scrutinised by different realms of society. Thereby, Abi sings and is acclaimed by the virtual audience (avatars) and by the three judges: Hope, Charity, and Wraith. However, their intention from the beginning is no other than using Abi's attractiveness and angelic beauty. After her performance, they offer her a role as a porn actress. The framing displays multiple close-up shots of Abi's face that show her reaction towards this unexpected turn of events (**fig. 2**). Herface is illuminated by the light of the spotlights; she is framed standing in the middle of the stage moving her hands nervously and looking around but finds no more than empty spaces and screens—as if she were trapped in a cage (**fig. 3**). Close-ups combined with full shots of Abi's character show that she is frightened and oppressed.Her decision is conditioned by society; the avatars, who are real people enclosed in their living boxes, encourage her to accept the post. Social consensus supports the creation of a system of annulment of freedoms in almost the entire set of dystopias presented by *Black Mirror* (Pintor 130). Her attitude allows us to understand that she isbeing conducted into this business by means of treachery and false promises. Here Abi has been completely deceivedand pushed into an unexpected world in which she did not wish to enter, keeping her from her dream of becoming a famous singer.

Fig. 3. Abi's full shot representing her trapped in the middle of the stage.

Abi ultimately decides to accept this dehumanizing proposal, discarding her dream of becoming a professional singer on condition that she is granted freedom. What she doesnot know is what the future holds for her, that is, direct access to the hell of sexual exploitation, pornography, and prostitution. As a result, this scene encapsulates the wayin which Gail Dines explains the differences between real-world emotional-sexual relationships and the misrepresentation offered by the porn industry. As she makes clear, pornography is nothing but "a parallel universe where the complexity of humans, the multiple pleasures of life, and the deep connections that nourish and sustain us vanish. In their place are blow jobs, erect penises, shaved vulvae, surgically enhanced breasts, distended nuances, and a limitless supply of semen" (xvi). Abi's new lifeis encapsulated in this universe, and her suffering is constantly portrayed in the numerous porn scenes in which the character is exhibited after the contest. She looks completely out of herself, frustrated, angry and totally controlled by men.

In *Pornland: How Pornhas Hijacked our Sexuality* (2010), Dines explains that the answers to the many questions that arise in relation to the implications of porn in today's minds are found in the culture that we all live in: "Porn is not something that stands outside us: it is deeply embedded in our structures, identities, relationships. This did not happen overnight, and there is a story to tell about how we got to the point that mainstream Internet porn has become so hateful and cruel" (xxix). Evidently, the fact that certain assumptions are tied to cultural beliefs, directly points to gender roles, and more concretely, to the passive role that women have historically adopted in relation to pornography. What is more, the vast majority of women do not feel comfortable with pornography: "It is not only that pornography is simply what the male partner invariably chooses, but rather that there are too many specific problems with it and too few ways of resolving them" (Wilson-Kovacs 156). This idea is portrayed in the episode, later on, when back in his living box, Bing is forced to watch a commercial about herbeloved Abi being prostituted. The scene begins with Abi sitting on a white sofa with a short white

dress in a totally white room, which alludes to her virginal image and angelic face. She has a white bow on her head to highlight that she is considered a gift—that is to say, a passive object—for the man who is coming directly to her wearing black clothes. She does not move her head and waits passively.

The literal frame continues with a combination of high-angle shots focused on Abi from an implicitly male gaze, to convey her anxiety and sense of inferiority experienced. This proves that, even if she herself has not consumed pornography, she has internalized the way she should behave in order to please the consumers because of the cultural background. This proves that she is "profoundly affected by it because images, representations, and messages of porn are now delivered to women via pop culture" (Dines 100). The following shot asserts men's superiority in accordance with our cultural system (**fig. 4**). The framing displays Abi's discomfort while the man comes to her and starts pushing his thumb into her mouth and exclaims "open your mouth. Open. Take it in", which highlights her suffering expression. As Dines puts it: "men in porn are depicted as soulless, unfeeling, amoral life-support systems for erect penises who are entitled to use women in any way they want" (xxiv). In fact, focusingon blow jobs, the hand of the man represents what is just about to happen —presumably,the next scene would be a close up of Abi's face while doing a blow job—, even thoughnothing has happened yet. Her face can only be seen as a reflection in the digital apparatus that controls everything in this world: the screen. The use of multiple screensand reflections of Abi's face which even obstruct our view of her facial expression at some points succeeds to transmit a sense of nervousness, concern, and tension to the audience, but also to the main protagonist, Bing, who ends up breaking one of the screens. On top of that, the multiplying image refers to the mechanical copy-paste system usually employed while filming pornographic scenes: always focusing on the same kind of actions, stereotyped gender-based roles and close-ups of the actress' face and sexual organs.

Fig. 4. Abi's suffering expression through the use of multiple screens.

4.2 The role of the jury to perpetuate the system

Following the analysis of the evolution suffered by the female protagonist in the episode, this section looks at the role of the jury, which is of paramount importance to understanding today's global and successful marketing of pornography. The jury represents a more privileged social class, something that can be inferred by their position in the contests but also by the clothes that they are wearing (**fig. 5**). In the artificial building where Abi and Bing live, most of the people wear simple clothes, mostly the same grey uniforms to work while riding their bikes. This coordinated outfit represents their low social status. On the other side, there is the Jury with its shiny, colorful and elegant clothes. The citizens' appearance establishes a metaphorical border aimed at reinforcing the superiority of the jury towards the candidates. Moreover, "citizens" are not only using uniforms, they are almost look-alike avatars, lost in a mass of people that serves only as background for the jury. This border is primarily about power, it uses difference to assert control over lower social classes. What is more, thesepeople are not really interested, and even less concerned, about what eventually happens to Abi, but they are only worried about making money out of their business, which is exactly, as Dines points out, "what turns these people [pornographers] on" (xvi). In the same vein, as Iglesias and Zein remark, nowadays there may be greater portrayals of diverse bodies and corporeal pleasures out of the so-called heteropatriarchal and heterosexist standards, but they do not have a disruptive effect yet, since the giant industry carries on with its overbearing empire (90). When Abi enters the stage, the jury's selfless faces demonstrate how they are not interested in her performance but only in glancing at her physical appearance (**fig. 5**). She is considered an object from which to make profit. In relation to this concern, in her essay on visual pleasure, Mulvey exposes the notion of scopophilic desire as a form of pleasure arising from the act of "looking itself" (835).

Fig. 5. The jury in "Hot Shot."

Mulvey points out that Freud "associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (835). This idea can be easily applied to the way in which one of the male members of the Jury, Wraith, starts by asking Abi if she would mind lifting her top to check her breasts, turning her into the main object of scrutiny. This makes Abi confused and starts to look around her in order to find a possible way out from the stage. In this sense, as many feminists claim, "men are socialized by the culture into a specific type of masculinity that makesporn both normal and pleasurable. If we take seriously the notion that we are all culturalbeings, then we need to think about the ways that boys become men and how this process creates a consumer base for porn that is degrading to women" (Dines 59). Wraith degrades Abi from the very first minute she enters the stage. Hope and Charity,the other two members of the jury, encourage Abi to sing. At first, they seem to be taking sides with Abi, but later on both of them pressure her to enter Wraith's porn program called Wraith Babes. As previously explained, porn is inevitably embedded inour culture, as demonstrated in the episode through the attitude of the male members ofthe jury, who seem to be appreciated by the public while acting in ways intended to shame, humiliate, and belittle Abi. This voyeuristic aspect of the jury—very much connected with the pornographic business—recalls Mulvey's association of voyeurism with sadism. If, as Mulvey explains, sadism is "a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat" (840), it can be stated that in this episode the three members of the jury (and, by extension, the spectators of the TV show) are in control of the situation. More specifically, the female member of the jury is a clear example of this. While her facial expression seems to be sympathetic to Abi at some points, she ends up pushing her to become a porn star. This demonstrates that, as McNair explains, "while the market for mediated sex, and porn in particular, continuedto be dominated by materials produced for and consumed by men, pornographication was a trend in which women were increasingly prominent both as producers and consumers" ("From Porn to Chic" 65). Thus, here, the focus is not exclusively on what men are doing to women, but, equally worrisome, what women are doing to themselves.

5. CONCLUSION

The complex intricacies of the pornography business in the socio-cultural context of the twenty-first century and the way in which it is inevitably tied to the digital era have been exposed in this analysis. By providing a detailed explanation of the different shots and scenes of "Fifteen Million Merits," this article has attempted to disentangle the oppressive and patriarchal mechanisms that govern that futuristic dystopia, concluding that this process of pornographication affects everyone belonging to a specific system or society, as it permeates into the multiple spheres of different societies. The episode emphasizes the issue of pornography and thedangers of the overuse of technology, which are pressing matters in contemporary society, and therefore, they should be worth dealing with in academia and out of it. Gottschalk, in the same way as "Fifteen Million Merits," alerts us of the possibility of a dystopian future composed of inert human beings—"terminal

selves"—that do not live but just survive in a technologically oppressed world. Moreover, the porn-tech market and its inherent subjugation of women is just a direct consequence of the contemporary overuse of the terminal and the still prevailing gendered economic structure that rules today's world, highlighting, as the episode does, the oppressing asymmetry existing between genders. As a result, this episode remains one of *Black Mirror*'s most powerful explorations of such institutionalized patriarchal power.

The study has been carried out by providing a close-reading of specific scenes and shots that helped to address the main objective of the article. The aim has been to focus on its narrative development in relation to the topic of pornography and prostitution, all the time coupling it with the analysis of the multiple audio-visual strategies used to tell the story. As has been demonstrated, not only is the female character physically and degradingly exploited by the heteropatriarchal system, but also, and more cunningly, such a system is perpetuated by those situated in an upper position. In this regard, the role of the jury becomes especially remarkable, among which there is a female character whose position is strongly internalized, showing thereis no escape from the systematic process of pornographication. In this way, the process of creation of sexual identity and the organization of sexual life is in constant relation to the consumption of sexual resources in contemporary society (Wilson-Kovacs 147). The terminal has been key to promote this porn consumption in the episode in which the "digital apparatus," such as the digital wall screens, have been a resource that forces everyone, no matter their interests, gender or preferences, to consume mainstream porn. Because of this, illuminating the inextricable link between technology and pornography might be one of the aims of this specific *Black Mirror* episode, thus laying bare some layers of the complex structure of the globalized and technological society in which all of us inhabit.

6. REFERENCES

ATTWOOD, FEONA. *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2009.

BOOKER, M. KEITH. *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature*: *Fiction as Social Criticism*. Green Press, 1994.

DINES, GAIL. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality.* Beacon Press, 2010.

BARSAM, RICHARD, and DAVE MONAHAN. *Looking at Movies.* 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.

BORDWELL, DAVID. *The Way Hollywood Tells It*. University of California, 2006.

DUGGAN, LISA, and NAN HUNTER. *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture.* Routledge, 1995.

DWORKIN, ANDREA. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women.* TheWomen's Press, 1981.

FERGUSON, ANN. "Sex War: The Debate between Radical and Libertarian Feminists." *Signs,* vol. 10, no .1, 1984, pp. 106-12.

FREDERICKSON, KATHLEEN. "Victorian Pornography and the Laws of Genre." *Literature Compass,* vol. 8, no .5, 2011, pp. 304-12.

GOTTSCHALK, SIMON. *The Terminal Self: Everyday Life in Hypermodern Times*.

Routledge, 2018.

HARAWAY, DONNA. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Free Association, 1991.

IGLESIAS, ANALÍA, and MARTHA ZEIN. *Lo que esconde el agujero: El porno en tiempos obscenos.* Catarata, 2018.

MCNAIR, BRIAN. "From Porn to Chic to Porn Fear: The Return of the Repressed?" *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, edited by Feona Attwood, I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2009, pp. 55-73.

———. *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture.* Arnold, 1996.

———. *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire.* Routledge, 2002.

MILLER, CLARK A., and IRA BENNETT. "Thinking Longer Term about Technology: Is There Value in Science Fiction-Inspired Approaches to Constructing Futures?" *Science and Public Policy*, vol. 35, no. 8, 2008, pp. 597-606.

MULVEY, LAURA. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introduction Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 833-44.

PINTOR, IVÁN. "Capital de la emoción, emociones del capital. Continuidad y supervivencia iconográfica de los gestos de sumisión y privación de libertad en *Black Mirror*." *Millars. Espai I Història,* vol. 2, no. 45, 2018, pp. 115-46.

REUTZEL, BAILEY. "MONEY OVER MEANING: Tech Is Winning Minds but Not Hearts." *Extraordinary Partnerships: How the Arts and Humanities are Transforming America,* edited by Christine Henseler, Lever Press, 2020.

RYBERG, INGRID. "'Every time we fuck, we win': The Public Sphere of Queer, Feminist, and Lesbian Porn as a (Safe) Space for Sexual Empowerment." *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure,* edited by Tristan Taormino et al., The Feminist Press, 2013, pp. 140-54.

TAORMINO, TRISTÁN, et al., editors. *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*. The Feminist Press, 2013.

WILSON-KOVACS, DANA. "Some Texts Do It Better: Women, Sexually Explicit Texts and the Everyday." *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, edited by Feona Attwood. I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2009, pp. 147-63.