

Black Mirror

San Junipero

(Series 3, Episode 4)

AS Component 2: Investigating media forms and products

A Level Component 2: Media forms and products in depth

Focus areas:

- Media language
- Representation
- Media industries
- Audiences

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- *Black Mirror* is a science fiction **anthology** TV show, created by Charlie Brooker and Annabelle Jones. Unlike many contemporary TV dramas that follow a long-form ‘**novelistic**’ format, *Black Mirror* recalls vintage anthology shows like *The Twilight Zone* or *Tales of the Unexpected*, with each episode acting as a standalone **TV movie**.
- The first two seasons (three episodes each) aired in the UK on Channel 4 in December 2011 and February 2013; in 2016 it moved to streaming platform Netflix for seasons three, four and five (each containing six episodes and a special).
- *Black Mirror* could be classified as ‘**speculative fiction**’ or ‘dystopian’ sci-fi, where specific elements of our contemporary world are exaggerated and distorted in a near-future setting. Each episode also uses conventions

of other genres, e.g. police procedural (*Smithereens*), horror (*The Black Museum*) or political satire (*The Waldo Effect*). The focus episode *San Junipero* could be classified as sci-fi romance.

- The ‘**showrunner**’ for all five series is journalist and comedy writer Charlie Brooker. He has collaborated with a range of other writers including his wife, Konnie Huq, and *Succession* creator Jesse Armstrong.
- The main theme of *Black Mirror* is the (usually unpleasant) effect of technology on human bodies and consciousness. Some have noted that the first two series were bleaker than the Netflix-produced seasons (including the focus episode) which has a lighter tone.
- *Black Mirror* was placed on many publications’ ‘Best TV of the 2010s’ lists and won an Emmy in 2012 for ‘Best TV Movie’. *San Junipero* won the Emmy for ‘Outstanding TV Movie’ and for ‘Outstanding Writing’ in 2016.

PART 1: STARTING POINTS – Media language

Consider the codes and conventions of media forms and products, including the processes through which media language develops as a genre.

Genres are ‘types’ of media product that present **codes and conventions** in a way that provides very specific **audience pleasures**. They are favoured by producers and institutions as they often represent a risk-free investment. Audiences (and creators) have a complex relationship with genres, involving a balance between familiar tropes and fresh elements that enable genres to evolve.

- *Black Mirror* is an anthology show, where each episode has a different cast, setting and plot. This means the show can be watched in any order, with each episode a standalone narrative.
- *San Junipero* could be classed as a sci-fi romance – but also as a ‘**period**’ piece as much of the action takes place in the 1980s and 90s, with appropriately detailed production design and music. It also has elements of 1980s teen movies like *Pretty in Pink*. Many older audiences would not only enjoy the plot but also the **nostalgia** for the different time periods.
- *San Junipero* has a notably more emotional and optimistic tone compared to the previous two series of *Black Mirror*, a deliberate decision by Brooker to counter criticism that the show had become ‘Americanised’ after its move to Netflix.
- The focus on a same-sex couple could also put the episode in the LGBTQ+ ‘coming-of-age’ genre such as *Moonlight* or *Blue is the Warmest Colour*. Critics praised the episode for avoiding the tragic ending that is conventional for same-sex romance narratives.

Some of the ‘speculative’ fiction conventions that *Black Mirror* uses are as follows:

- The **protagonists** are ordinary people trying to negotiate the impact of technology on their lives in the near future. This differs from ‘hard’ sci-fi like the *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* franchises that feature traditional heroes, spaceships, aliens

etc. (an exception to this is the *Black Mirror* episode *USS Callister* where many of the ‘space opera’ conventions are played for laughs or are subverted).

- In most episodes there is no clear **antagonist** – usually it is the technology itself that produces conflict with the main characters.
- The majority of the episodes follow the conventions of **dystopian** fiction – principally, the extrapolation of something recognisable from our contemporary reality (like social media approval in *Nosedive*) and its pessimistic impact on the lives of the characters.
- The **narrative** in dystopian fiction usually has an unhappy ending – *San Junipero* is unusual for *Black Mirror* in that it shows the more hopeful (though nonetheless problematic) aspects to virtual reality technology and ends on an optimistic note.
- *Black Mirror* has been applauded by critics for re-introducing the anthology format. Successful shows that have also adopted this structure are *American Horror Story* and *Solos*. You could consider how this format offers different audience pleasures (e.g. narrative resolution and closure) compared to other long form TV dramas.

Consider the processes through which meanings are established through intertextuality.

- The 1980s and 1990s settings for *San Junipero* contain a wealth of intertextual references to American culture from the period. Kelly’s costume in the 1987 segment was specifically inspired by ‘Control’-era Janet Jackson.
- The music used in the nightclub Tuckers evokes the historical period, but also underscores the central romance (e.g. *Heart and Soul* by T’Pau) and the main concept of existing in a computer-generated virtual reality (e.g. *Living In A Box*).
- The different movies that are playing at the San Junipero cinema are also period-specific but also link to the themes of the narrative, e.g. *The Lost Boys* whose tagline is ‘Sleep all day. Party all night. Never grow up. Never grow old’!

- Shots of other ‘vintage’ technology like Pac-Man and Top Speed arcade games and different models of TV sets also help to establish a sense of time and place but also offer suggestions that perhaps this environment is an escape from the ‘real’ world.

Theoretical approach: Narratology – Todorov

- Consider how *San Junipero* fits into Todorov’s five step **narrative structure**, and how it also plays with it.
- The **equilibrium**: the first scene shows Yorkie going to the nightclub, yet the ‘twist’ is that this is an artificial virtual reality, and the ‘normal life’ of the character is lying in a hospital, paralysed after a car accident. The equilibrium can also be the ‘reveal’.
- The **disruption**: for the characters, this is their meeting in the first scene followed by ‘losing’ each other in different time periods. However, for the audience, the disruption could be the revelation that San Junipero is not a real place at all.
- There are **enigma codes** associated with each of the episode’s genre ingredients – e.g. the ‘will-they-won’t-they?’ narrative of a conventional romance and the questions raised by the apparent time-travelling element from sci-fi and how it is possible.

Consider how the combination of elements of media language influence meaning.

Visual codes:

- **Codes of clothing**: compare the costumes worn by Yorkie and Kelly in the different time periods. How does Yorkie’s costume convey her awkwardness and lack of confidence? How does Kelly’s costume do the opposite? (Particularly in the way it references strong female pop stars like Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson.) Notably, Yorkie’s costume does not change throughout the narrative – to reflect on this you may want to consider the ‘nerd makeover’ trope often seen in teen movies like *The Breakfast Club*.
- **Gesture and expression**: despite being science fiction, the initial flirting and evolving relationship are played **naturalistically**, and

with an authenticity that has been praised by LGBTQ+ audiences.

- **Iconography and setting**: consider how the use of sets, props, costumes, and music evoke the historical periods featured in the virtual environment. These challenge our expectations of a science fiction show. Compare to the scenes set in the real world: how does the *mise-en-scene* establish scenes as taking place in a near-future world of advanced technology?

Technical codes: Audio codes

Dialogue:

- There is an authentic and compelling tone to the dialogue between Yorkie and Kelly that is both flirtatious (“*I’m regarding you*”) and wary.
- When the ‘real world’ is revealed, there is a notable absence of ‘tech-heavy’ terminology that would be usual for the science fiction genre – this keeps the emphasis on the emotional core of the narrative.

Music:

- The music used in each time period has two functions: to establish the period setting (from 1987 to 2002), but also to underscore the emotional and thematic content. You may wish to look at the lyrics to *Heaven Is a Place on Earth* by Belinda Carlisle, *Fake* by Alexander O’Neal or *Living in a Box* by Living in a Box – consider how these songs contribute to our understanding of the characters’ lives.

Consider how genre conventions are socially and historically relative, dynamic and can be used in a hybrid way (A Level only).

- The same-sex romance reflects the changes to social norms that have taken place in the late 20th and 21st centuries.
- Notably, the romance has a happy ending – a departure from films and TV featuring LGBTQ+ characters, where often the characters are ‘punished’ for their sexuality with a tragic finale. You may wish to investigate this convention further by watching *The Celluloid Closet*, a documentary film that examines portrayals of homosexuality in Hollywood films.

Theoretical approach: Genre – Steve Neale

- Neale says that though genres may be seen as being limited by familiar **tropes**, they are also marked by difference, variation, and change. Science fiction and romance have a recognisable array of conventions that produce audience pleasures. From narrative ingredients like the use of advanced technology and virtual reality (sci-fi genre) to the ‘feel-good’ response created by watching two characters fall in love despite significant obstacles (romance).
- However, Neale would say they also need to display something original to set them apart from other examples. Evolution is essential to sustain a genre, and *San Junipero* does this by introducing elements that could be seen as nostalgic (associated with period dramas set in a recent history) and making the romance a same-sex love affair (distinguishing it from other, heteronormative sci-fi love stories like *The Time Traveller’s Wife*).

PART 2: STARTING POINTS – Representation

Consider how representations may invoke discourses and ideologies and position audiences (A Level only).

- Brooker said the first draft of the script had a heterosexual romance at its centre, but he decided to change this to a same-sex relationship as a comment on the acceptability of LGBTQ+ relationships (including gay marriage) in the 1980s and 1990s.
- The episode was warmly received by the LGBTQ+ community, especially as the sexuality of the characters is not portrayed as problematic; the love between Yorkie and Kelly has numerous obstacles, but their sexuality is not one of them.
- Actor Mackenzie Davis (Yorkie) said “*I could never have anticipated what a healthy, biracial gay love story – in which neither character dies – could mean to those who had experienced a dearth of positive depictions of their identities.*”
- The revelation that, in actuality, the relationship is between two elderly women also challenges stereotypes of this age group.

- Though both characters *do* physically die by the end, spiritually they remain together for eternity (driving into a literal sunset, in a reference to *Thelma and Louise*). This subverts the common portrayal of LGBTQ+ relationships as doomed or tragic.

The effect of social and cultural context on representations.

Representations of gender and sexuality:

- Brooker has said he deliberately wanted to create more female and non-heteronormative characters in *Black Mirror* after realising the first season focused on straight male protagonists.
- He said that it is “*powerfully resonant*” that same-sex relationships would have been condemned in 1987 and some of the other time periods. Adding to this was the context of Donald Trump winning the US presidential election. Trump is a right-wing politician, who vocally condemns liberal and progressive ideas, especially ideas regarding gender and sexuality. His appointment was widely feared by members of LGBTQ+ communities.
- The fact that this is an inter-racial relationship between two elderly women, one of whom is physically disabled, also challenges more stereotypical representations of these social groups.
- The episode’s double Emmy and BAFTA wins were welcomed as a cultural shift towards more positive attitudes towards same-sex relationships.
- The portrayal of more extreme alternative sexualities seen in the Quagmire fetish club are less positive, representing these characters as ‘lost souls’.

Theoretical approaches: Feminist theory – bell hooks (pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins)

- bell hooks identifies **patriarchal** power as a major problem in society. She says patriarchy victimises both women and men, forcing them into stereotypical roles, and punishing them if they do not conform to these roles.

- *San Junipero* challenges this view by portraying a 'heaven on earth' where the female LGBTQ+ characters are free to interact, flirt, have sex and fall in love without the disapproval or persecution of patriarchal society.

Theoretical approaches: Gender performativity – Judith Butler

- Butler asserts that gender is not a fixed, biologically determined characteristic, but rather a fluid **social construct**. She suggests people 'perform' a gender role composed of clothes, hair/make-up, posture, and other behaviours.
- It's interesting that though 'anything is possible' in the virtual environment, both the main characters choose to remain female.
- Another *Black Mirror* episode that you may wish to consider is *Striking Vipers* which more explicitly explores the performance and fluidity of gender and sexual identities.

Theoretical approaches: Identity theory – David Gauntlett

- Gauntlett asserts that audiences actively borrow from media texts to help construct their identity: **"a narrative of the self"**. These are not stable, they are **fluid**, depending on the media text and characters being consumed.
- Long form **multi-protagonist** dramas offer audiences a range of different characters for audiences to identify with. *Black Mirror* departs from this, as each of the episodes is self-contained, usually focusing on one or two main characters.
- Nonetheless, *San Junipero* has been widely acclaimed by critics and by the LGBTQ+ community for showing a healthy, optimistic portrayal of a same-sex relationship, the result of which has had a very positive effect on queer viewers' sexual identity. Kelly's shift from a heterosexual marriage (and motherhood) to a LGBTQ+ relationship with Yorkie also suggests a fluid nature to sexuality.

PART 3: STARTING POINTS – Media industries

Consider the processes of production, distribution and circulation by organisations, groups, and individuals in a global context.

- *Black Mirror* was created by Charlie Brooker and producer Annabelle Jones. The first season was produced by Zeppotron (a division of Dutch media company Endemol Shine) for Channel 4.
- Brooker was inspired by the intimate relationships people were developing with digital technology. He wanted to explore what an extrapolation of these relationships might mean for the individual and society. Read this interview with Brooker for more on this theme: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/dec/01/charlie-brooker-dark-side-gadget-addiction-black-mirror>
- After two seasons it was announced *Black Mirror* would become a **co-production** with a US institution.
- In 2014, Netflix bought exclusive US distribution rights, and later won a bidding war to produce the show. Initially, this was to be a co-production with Channel 4, but after issues regarding budget and creative freedom, Brooker and Jones opted to work exclusively with Netflix. In 2015, the streaming channel commissioned 12 new episodes (which would become seasons three and four).
- Due to the global reach of Netflix, by 2016 *Black Mirror* was available in 80 territories.
- In 2020, Brooker and Jones formed Broke and Bones production company to continue making *Black Mirror* for distribution by Netflix.

Consider the significance of economic factors to media industries and their products.

- After the first two seasons, Channel 4 cited **budgetary restraints** as a reason for delaying the commissioning of a third season. The search for a co-production partner led to a bidding war in the USA, which Netflix won by committing to producing another ten episodes.

- Lucy Pyke, producer for Netflix, said the move would ensure that *Black Mirror* would be “bigger and better” and more international than the first two seasons (which were based in the UK).
- You may wish to consider the differences in style and tone between the first two (UK-produced) seasons and the more recent ones (produced by Netflix in US and set in a range of different countries).

Theoretical approaches – Cultural industries: Hesmondhalgh

- One of Hesmondhalgh’s key ideas is that the radical potential of the internet has been limited by the domination of large cultural institutions (which are increasingly indivisible for technology giants like Google, Apple, and Amazon).
- In contrast to this, Netflix (and other web-based streaming services) invest vast sums of money in their productions, and yet leave almost all creative control to the showrunners. This has led to a **diverse** range of products, unafraid to take risks and ‘push the envelope’ of what makes successful TV.
- Another of Hesmondhalgh’s assertions is that cultural industries are different to other manufacturers. Media texts are purchased usually just once, and then continually re-used rather than wearing out and having to be replaced. This means IP (intellectual property) and the range of products using it must be sold (and re-sold in different forms) very carefully to maintain a profit. This leads to heavy investment in familiar products (including stars) and less experimentation.
- As Netflix is subscription-based, it means it is free from some of these constraints. It still needs to make entertaining shows that engage with a range of audiences, but unlike TV channels using a **commercial model** (where funding is dependent on advertising), they have more opportunity for experimentation. *Black Mirror* is a good example of a show that explores challenging themes without the pressure of drawing a huge audience.

Consider recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation and the impact of digitally convergent media platforms (A Level only).

- Due to its global reach on a digital streaming platform, *Black Mirror* has extended its audience beyond the UK (and US) into over 80 different territories.
- In addition, the *Black Mirror* brand has been extended into a number of **webisodes** produced by Netflix Polska and América Latina in collaboration with some of Poland and South America’s most popular YouTubers. This extends the audience reach and may attract more viewers to watch the full seasons and episodes on Netflix.

PART 4: STARTING POINTS – Audiences

How media products target, attract, reach, address and potentially construct audiences.

- The theme of how technology has an impact on individuals and society particularly targets those who already have an intimate relationship with their devices.
- The dystopian nature of these relationships, and the way they can potentially warp human bodies and consciousness would also appeal to viewers who are cynical and suspicious about technology.
- With the focus episode, there is also a clear market for LGBTQ+ audiences; the hopeful finale would be especially appealing.
- The global reach of the show and distribution by a trusted streaming service like Netflix may also attract new audiences for whom a show like this is a new experience.
- Charlie Brooker is a well-known comedy writer, journalist and broadcaster, and the fact he is the showrunner would target audiences who already enjoy his brand of caustic, cynical but also emotional content.

Theoretical approaches: Reception theory – Stuart Hall

Hall asserts that individual audience members will interpret media texts in different ways according to their established **values and beliefs**. He believed there were three modes of ‘reception’, where audiences **decode** what they consume.

- **Dominant/intended meaning** – the audience accepts the intended meanings and ideology of the text’s producers. In the case of *Black Mirror*, this would be viewers who already find the implications of our dependence on technology problematic. With *San Junipero* particularly, an LGBTQ+ audience would appreciate the heart-warming ‘against the odds’ romance.
- **Negotiated meaning** – the audience accepts some of the intended meanings but rejects others. Some viewers may enjoy the romantic element but will be more suspicious of this episode’s hopeful view of an afterlife inside virtual reality (e.g. ‘What happens if the servers are turned off?’).
- **Oppositional meaning** – the audience reject the intended meaning and instead formulate their own interpretation. Viewers who were fans of the UK-based first two seasons – which were far darker in tone – may interpret the Netflix-produced seasons as too sanitised and ‘Americanised’.
- Having said that, *San Junipero* has created a passionate fan group, especially amongst LGBTQ+ audiences. There are regular posts from fans on Twitter and other social media, even many years after the episode was first released. Many have created **fan art** and **‘femslash-fiction’** that honour the characters and extends their story beyond the original narrative: in the virtual world of *San Junipero* anything is possible, and fans have imagined Yorkie and Kelly in other historical settings or interacting with LGBTQ+ characters from other films/TV.
- The spin-off **webisodes** in Poland and South America were written and directed by YouTubers, who could be considered **‘prosumers’** – fans who have created their own professional standard versions of the show’s themes, distributed via each creator’s YouTube channel. However, these were still commissioned by Netflix, with the intention of using them to market the series in these territories.

Theoretical approaches: Fandom – Henry Jenkins

- Jenkins asserts that fandom is a deeply personal and **creative relationship** with media products. He believes that genre films and TV in particular can unite marginalised people, and even be appropriated for political purposes (e.g. the use of the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* by Hong Kong democratic protestors).
- As an anthology show – with standalone episodes instead of a multi-strand, ongoing narrative – it is less likely that audiences would identify with a particular character and their ongoing arc.