

Beyond Heteronormativity: An Interrogation of Homosocial Desire in Science Fiction

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Science Fiction (SF) is known to imagine transgressive representations through its extrapolatory potential. It is a (sub)genre of Speculative Fiction and has arguably been ‘ahead of its time’ ever since its inception. The model on which SF develops is a concoction of science and technology (ever-evolving in nature), real or imaginative, in a plausible setting. With the magnitude of advancement in technology and science, it has become possible to have virtual experiences which give a “real” life effect. Besides, any work of art produced in a specific era, more often than not, reflects the society in the given time. More than ever, the use of online technology has become pertinent during the global pandemic whilst we face the lockdown. The society has drawn itself towards different forms of virtual experiences, from online gaming to online streaming. Taking into consideration an episode viz. “Striking Vipers” (from Netflix’s *Black Mirror*) combines the narrative of online streaming and gaming, this paper aims to interrogate the space provided by SF to explore the unexplored, that is, look beyond the notion of heteronormativity.

“The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion” (Haraway “A Cyborg Manifesto”). Over the years, online streaming has gained raging popularity across the world. Both recorded, and live broadcast of content has become accessible to the viewers on their devices with viable internet connections. From the plethora of available streaming websites, the viewers are spoilt for choice. However, in recent years, Netflix has topped the charts of streaming services, offering original content as well as distributing additional content. The subscribers can choose from the ambit of series, shows, movies, documentaries, etc. This paper aims to study an episode from one of the most celebrated series, viz. *Black Mirror*, a Science Fiction (SF) television series created by Charlie Brooker. Initially, the series of standalone episodes ran on television for two years (2011-13), before Netflix purchased it in 2015. Thereafter, the series has had five successful seasons with different episodes and a movie of the same moniker.

The show revolves around the impact of modern technology on human society, analysing repercussions of scientific and technological advancements, often depicting its dark side. The title of the series called *Black Mirror* perhaps highlights the idea that it is meant to reflect the cataclysmic elements of a technologically advanced society. Darko Suvin in *Metamorphosis of Science*

Fiction (1979) states that SF is “not only a reflection of reality but also on reality” (10). Incidentally, this SF series intends to disseminate the same. Moreover, as SF develops on the real or imagined science and/or technology set in a plausible context, it always tends to be in a state of flux. For the principles of science and/or technology are ever-evolving and allow the speculation to take flight. In other words, something that is a subject of wild speculation in our empirical world may become, due to advancement in science and technology, a real subject in years to come (Lama 108).

For instance, a couple of decades back, advanced technological devices like computers or mobile phones were not in existence; likewise, who would have thought of an online streaming technology like Netflix? In contemporary society, such advancements become inspiration and motif for SF, shaped by the interaction of “estrangement and cognition” underlined by Suvin. Interestingly, SF has been ahead of its time ever since its inception and has been known to explore all possible aspects of the society, normative and/or alternative. However, it has also been noted that “SF has traditionally been better at imagining machines and their conjunctions than it has been at imagining bodies and their possible relationships” (Pearson 150). Keeping the same in consideration, this paper aims to assess and examine the space beyond the normative representation of bodies, identities, and desires. In order to do so, episode one of the fifth season of *Black Mirror* will be studied to interrogate the idea of homosocial desire in SF. Firstly, an attempt will be made to discuss the idea of homosocial desire and secondly, an extension of the same discussion will be made in conjunction with SF, that is, the idea of homosocial desire in SF will be delineated. It must be noted that homosocial is not equivalent to homosexual; the former happens to be a neologism derived from the latter. In the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick noted in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985):

It describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual,” and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual.” In fact, it is applied to such activities as “male bonding,” which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality. To draw the “homosocial” back into the orbit of “desire,” of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted. (1-2)

Additionally, when we talk about the depiction of bodies, identities, and desires in SF, the result mostly oscillates amidst the “normative” orbit. Even if one

dares to talk about the portrayal of alternative forms, one may stretch one's imagination and/or understanding to the extent of looking at "alternative" sexualities in the same old binary, homosexual as opposed to the "normative" heterosexual. Moreover, categorisation is as dangerous and as misleading as profiling, for not all homosocial bonds are homosexual relations and vice versa, that is, "homosexual activity can be either supportive of or oppositional to homosocial bonding" (Sedgwick 6). This understanding needs to be revised in order to provide space to a more nuanced understanding of bodies, identities, and desires. Queer theory provides a novel and more inclusive scope for the much-needed re-evaluation. "In science fiction, the body (whether human or other) is a tabula rasa, capable of multiple and contradictory readings" (Wheeler 210).

As mentioned above, in this paper episode one of the fifth season of *Black Mirror* will be taken into consideration. The episode, like all the other episodes, is a standalone episode with no reference and/or connection with any other episode of the series. On June 5, 2019, the episode was released on Netflix, titled "Striking Vipers" written by Charlie Brooker and directed by Owen Harris. It lays bare the nuances of desire, homosocial desire, per se. The plot underlines a homosocial bond between two old friends (Danny Parker and Karl Houghton) over a virtual reality fighting game. However, the story turns out to be much more convoluted as it proceeds further.

Owing to the rules of virtual reality, one undergoes a simulated experience which may or may not be an expression of reality. Also, one witness's physical presence is simulated in a virtual environment which may involve a certain degree of sensory experience. The term, if closely looked at, is an oxymoron where virtual is something which is not factual and exists only in essence or effect as opposed to reality which exists in actuality. Interestingly, the term 'Science Fiction' also gives a similar effect; further, as quoted in the epigraph of this paper, Science Fiction and social reality is separated by an optical illusion. That optical illusion, in the aforementioned episode, seems to be provided by the *novum*. As defined by Darko Suvin, a *novum* is an innovation which is scientifically plausible, validated by the logic of cognitive estrangement, that is, a new thing "deviating from author's implied reader's norm of reality" (63-64).

Albeit, the idea of haptic sensation in virtual reality may possibly have been a *novum* a few decades back, perhaps when a queer cyberpunk novel like Melissa Scott's *Trouble and her Friends* (1994) was published. Scott's novel underlines the story of Cerise, Trouble's ex-partner, who virtually consummates with another woman (Silk) on the internet where the woman in the virtual body

turns out to be a teenage boy in real life. But, in 2019, a virtual reality video game where the players can feel physical sensations is not quite an innovation. In that situation, what can be considered the *novum* possibly? Well, the answer lies in the experiences of the virtual body in the virtual reality game when seen through the lens of queer theory. The two friends take two virtual bodies, Danny and Karl play as Lance (a virtual male form) and Roxette (a virtual female form). Betwixt the fight, the virtual bodies are consumed by erotic desire, surprisingly fulfilling for two straight men. As both snap back to the realisation, they mutually switch off the game, seeking a valid explanation.

The virtual bodies happen to exhibit their emotions in the virtual reality game where Danny and Karl project an alternative (virtual) desire. However, the show takes a step ahead by extrapolating bodies, identities and desires instead of the players' empirical reality altogether. In other words, the technology, that is, the virtual reality game itself becomes a mode of deviating Danny and Karl from their "norm of reality." The show builds over the idea of reality and hyperreality, interrogating possibilities beyond the rigidity of corporeality. As stated above, according to Pat Wheeler, in SF the bodies (human or other) are capable of multiple readings and representations. In SF, "protagonists can 'perform' gender, they can be male or female, they can be neuters, have no definable sexual category, be intersexed or switch between genders" (210).

Here, the protagonists, after coming into terms with the discovery of homoerotic desire in the virtual reality game, continue to live double life. Before the discovery, both the men were already in committed relations with women outside the game, which they continue to maintain while playing the game simultaneously. This calls attention to the notion of infidelity for Karl and Danny when they continue their liaison in the name of male bonding while their partners remain unaware of the same. However, the connection of desire between them remains completely virtual, which makes the matter more complex than it sounds. Any argument to be made in order to defend or refute the notion of infidelity would require deep thought, for one has to think of the regulations of virtual bodies which technically do not exist and prevail only due to technological intervention. The line of thought is interesting but beyond the scope of this paper, for it aligns with the principles of ethics and may be discussed under the banner of human ethics and technology. After all, the consummation remains limited to the virtual bodies.

Further, the obvious thought strikes the two of them as their respective real-life relations begin to deteriorate. They ponder upon the possibility of homosexuality and try to confirm facts. As soon as they attempt to act upon it, they realise that it is not working; they do not experience what they felt in the

virtual world. This provides the characters as well as the viewers to explore what lies beyond heteronormativity. Another point which needs to be noted is that Karl tries to replicate the experience with the same combination of virtual bodies with other players but fails. It is his bond with Danny which makes the experience what it is, which is why this paper looks at homosocial desire, the bonding between two people of the same sex, not necessarily homosexual. SF provides a space to bloom “the potential unbrokenness of continuum” between homosocial and homosexual: a continuum which remains disrupted in the society, as noted by Eve Sedgwick (1-2).

In toto, both of them are seen craving for physical gratification beyond the virtual reality game, but the desire remains limited towards people of the opposite sex, and they practically never act upon it. In addition, the two do not display any signs of homoeroticism in their real bodies. This is where the nuanced idea of bodies, identities, and desires come to the surface. To recapitulate, two men who happen to be the best of friends bond over a virtual reality fighting game where they take virtual bodies (Lance and Roxette), end up being consumed by erotic desire and failing to understand the situation, they try to recreate the experience in real life to check for an alternative possibility of sexuality but all in vain.

Also, it must be noted that amidst the virtual reality game, when the two characters consummate, they have virtual bodies of a man and a woman, which makes it a heterosexual encounter. Whereas, beyond the game, they are cisgender men, which technically makes their virtual experience homosexual in nature. Furthermore, any possibility of homosexuality is ruled out when the two try to consummate as an experiment in the real world. Given their circumstances, if they were to have the same experience in the real world too, then perhaps one could have thought of possible bisexuality, but evidently, that does not happen.

While this seems as complicated as it appears when one watches the show, the idea that is brought home underlines the fact that gender, sex, desire, identity, and body are complex ideas. It cannot be limited to binaries of black and white: it is about time to explore the grey. As the episode reaches its climax when the two decide to meet and confirm facts, the meeting leads to an altercation where they end up beating each other. Interestingly, the adrenaline rush does not lead to anything close to what they had experienced during a similar intense fight in the game. On the contrary, they get arrested for getting into an ugly fight. What follows next is equally intriguing as Theo (Danny’s wife) comes to her husband’s rescue and on her request, Danny confesses the truth. The episode concludes with a mutual agreement between Danny and

Theo where the former can continue to play *Striking Vipers* with Karl while still being married to and being in love with Theo in real life.

While the notion of the homosocial bond is being discussed, the activity which binds the bond also needs to be scrutinised to understand the working of the relationship shared by Danny and Karl. It must be noted that the two middle-aged men bond over hypermasculine fighting (virtual reality) video games where the virtual bodies are built to perfection. Danny, who otherwise suffers from a knee ailment, finds himself in the virile body of Lance (male virtual avatar), capable of participating in extreme physical activities. And Karl takes up the avatar of Roxette (female virtual body), extremely attractive and young. Initially, when the two have a conversation about their experience, they seem to be visibly disturbed. While they fail to fathom what goes around, the possibility of a “wish fulfilment” situation can be taken into consideration. From the vantage point of the patriarchal society, there must exist an ideal situation of compulsory heterosexuality, seeking refuge from the societal expectations, the two find an expression of their repressed desires in the virtual reality. But, the bottom line is that the desire is not necessarily homosexual; the interpretation is open to the viewers as their relation remains fluid stimulated by homosocial bonding.

Besides, this highlights the idea of performativity discussed by Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* (2004) where she mentions that gender is a kind of performance where one is acting in a concert organised by the society. In other words, gender is a construction maintained by various social factors. One can define and understand one’s identity only to a certain extent regulated by the definitions given by the social constructs. It is a kind of “doing” or a performance by an individual who is negotiating between the possibilities defined by society (7). She further advocates that if this “doing” is dependent on what is done to an individual, how can one possibly have a sense of their gender? Therefore, do desires really originate in one’s personhood? Is one really the author of their body, gender and desire? Posing such thought-provoking questions, she appeals to “undo” gender norms (1).

Evidently, in “*Striking Vipers*” both Danny and Karl are performing in the virtual bodies of Lance and Roxette but the question is, are they not performing beyond the virtual reality? The virtual reality provides them with the potential to tear down the rigid walls of fixed identity. However, the performance lasts only in the virtual reality game. As soon as they get back to reality, they get back to “perform” their identities as Danny and Karl, cisgender heterosexual men. “Indeed, stories which are sympathetic to homosexuality do not necessarily involve any sort of unsettling of a heteronormative regime; at the same time, stories which interrogate alternative possibilities for sexual-social structures

are not necessarily sympathetic to alternative sexualities” (Pearson 150). This happens to be one of the most intriguing things about “Striking Vipers” where the viewers never get a concrete insight to the characters’ sense of desire as the characters themselves are exploring possibilities of the same. As the ending remains open, the viewers come into terms with the nuances of bodies and desires where the notion of performativity holds water.

The potential of SF to imagine transgressive representations and interrogate possible alternatives pose a challenge to both constructivists (who hold a belief that the expression of human desire, identity, and sex is acquired from society and culture) and essentialists (who are of the opinion that human desire, identity and sex is innate). By default, SF offers endless opportunities to study, question and explore myriad possibilities, only limited by logic of extrapolation and imagination aided by the effect of “cognitive estrangement.” When aided by queer theory, SF has the potential to transcend the liminality of fixed identities as queer theory opposes all claims of rigidity. “Science fiction’s task, often, is to make visible to us the unthinking assumptions that limit human potentiality; epistemologies of sexuality are just as blinding and just as important to the construction of any future society as are epistemologies of science” (Pearson 157). Moreover, SF is capable of depicting and commenting on social issues, questioning the obvious and deconstructing the norm in order to provide space to the concerns otherwise pushed to the periphery. In that light, the SF series examined in this paper aimed at reflecting the dark (read hidden) characteristics of society in the light of modern technology. The episode, more specifically, manages to initiate a discourse on myriad possibilities which exist beyond the heteronormative sphere.

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