

MISCELLANY

Research

San Junipero: The Postmodern Dream of Immortality and the End of Utopia

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Abstract. This article analyses 'San Junipero', an episode of the popular television series Black Mirror, from the perspective of Utopian Studies and the History of Science. This particular episode deals with the issue of immortality and the desideratum for a manmade paradise. In my view 'San Junipero' offers an opportunity to observe how new developing technologies present in contemporary popular culture and how they are linked with the atavistic human desire for immortality and return to the prelapsarian Eden. In this article, I make use of sporadic evidence concerning the 'nature' of San Junipero and its 'miraculous technology' and attempt to examine how this utopian fantasy encapsulates modern anxieties revolving around the replacement of our corporeal lives by virtual ones. As a point of further discourse this article also considers how new technology challenges our very character as human beings while simultaneously our utopian dreams appear to regress into the realm of the personal.

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San Junipero, the fourth episode of the third season of the popular sci-fi series *Black Mirror* concludes with the following scene: a woman stands on the beach bathed in sunlight. She turns and looks somewhere behind the camera. The angle widens to allow us to view another female figure moving towards her, ultimately joining her. The two heroines then stand happy in a characterless, indiscernible environment full of sun, and blue waves. The characterless environment has a name, *San Junipero*, a small Californian sea resort town. Or, more accurately, it is a simulation of the perfect Californian beach-town. As for the two heroines, what they are is much more complicated.

The first protagonist is tall, blonde, in her mid-twenties, and is named Yorkie. The second, Kelly, is young, African American and filled with joie de vivre. We first meet Yorkie and Kelly at what appears to be a 1980s dance party. Yorkie is uncomfortable and out of place. Kelly, by contrast, is enjoying herself, is well acquainted with the barman, and is being pursued by a former lover. As the plot unfurls, we learn that our episode's young and beautiful heroines are in reality avatars of two much older women that connect to the simulation of *San Junipero*

for a few hours every weekend. Kelly's motivations in visiting San Junipero err on the side of hedonic. She avoids forming long and meaningful relationships with other visitors or the 'locals.' Yorkie, however, assesses whether this virtual paradise is a suitable afterlife for her. Their different approaches to San Junipero reflect the divergent aims of the visitors and the inhabitants of the city. San Junipero is peopled by two types of residents: a) deceased individuals who have uploaded their consciousness and reside in this paradise eternally and b) old and infirm people who visit every weekend for a few hours as part of a regime of 'nostalgia therapy'; the latest treatment for anxiety and memory loss developed by this world's geriatric research. The episode is focused on the love between the two heroines and the obstacles they must overcome in order to be together. However, in a subtle way this 'love story' with its telenovela elements is linked with the ethical issues that arise with the conquest of immortality as well as the complications caused by the dominant religious doctrines about afterlife and the fear that our species faces with regards to the unknown territory of 'eternity.'

The 'pulp technology' of immortality appears to play a primary role in these fantasies of mind upload as a path to immortality.¹ The idea, of course, is quite old. The conceptual genesis of indefinite life extension through technology is attributed to a 1971 article by the biogerontologist George M. Martin. Today, works of science fiction and futurists frequently return to this idea, emphasizing its viability.² Yet, it must be emphasized that there is significant divergence from Martin's first description and the current pulp and pop iterations of mind-uploading in mass media and collective hopes and fears. For Martin and other gerontologists, technologies like cryonics and mind-uploading were seen as potential tools in our species' struggle against aging and death that were worthy of further research and funding.³ The initial idea was adopted by neuroscientists and computer programmers and engineers who occupied themselves with the practical aspects of this technology, pointing out the difficulty of uploading a human brain and how our current hardware is far from capable of achieving this task. This 'pessimism,' however, has not deterred science fiction writers like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, as early as in the 1960s, to imagine worlds where this technology exists. Writers like William Gibson in *Neuromancer* (1984), then popularized the idea, making it part of the mainstream culture. Hence, *Black Mirror's* 'San Junipero' is not unique in tackling this issue but it is different from previous examples in its diminished focus on the technology itself and increased attention to the ethical consequences and problems that may arise from its use—thereby asking whether this technology's existence changes our very human nature. Unlike contemporary futurists such as Max Moore, Robin Hanson and Ray Kurzweil who, who impatiently await the coming of singularity and humankind's liberation from its

¹ M. Bould, S. Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (2011).

² G. M. Martin, 'Brief Proposal on Immortality: An Interim Solution', 14 (2) *Perspect Biol Med.* (1971), 339.

³ P. Nicholls, *The Science in Science Fiction* (Knopf 1983); N. Vitamore, D. Barranco, 'Persistence of Long-Term Memory in Vitrified and Revived *Caenorhabditis elegans*', 18 *Rejuvenation Research* (2015).

biological constraints, Science Fiction works of the last decades have adopted a more nuanced view, one that acts as a dystopian counter to the triumphant tone adopted by supporters of mind uploading and the singularity.

The 'Utopian' Character of San Junipero

Despite *'San Junipero's'* dark undertones, its creators have described it as a utopia. Hence, it is important to understand the 'utopian' character of the episode. *Black Mirror* has acquired a cult following due to its concern with the negative/dystopian consequences of technology in our lives. As an anthology the series has explored our obsession with the popularity of our carefully cropped social media presence, the horrific implications of the use of virtual reality technology in judicial punishment or modern warfare, and the dehumanizing results of matchmaking algorithms. By tackling these issues, the series has established a dark tone that contests utopian narratives of technology due to humanity's inability to utilize it in a moderate and ethical way. However, Charlie Brooker, the creator and chief producer of the series, tried to disrupt this established pattern in *'San Junipero.'* According to his statements *'San Junipero'* was intended to be a hopeful story with a happy ending.⁴ In this way *'San Junipero'* was designed as a utopia. But what type of utopia?

Originally, the word utopia described an ideal society, a better society with improved social and political organizations. Based on this rather skeletal definition San Junipero hardly qualifies as utopia. Instead, it is presented as a playground for adults, or, to be more accurate, as a hedonistic memory lane for the elderly, infirmed and deceased. It seems to have no social or political structure, serving only as the background for the personal fantasies and adventures of its inhabitants. The secondary role that the environment plays in this paradise is evident by the choice visitors are given to change its time period. However, this temporal flexibility is not extended to the town's geography or topography. Moreover, the few glimpses of the town offered through the episode, reveal a townscape absent any of the visible landmarks that commonly serve as the focal point of many utopian cities. As for *'San Junipero's'* Californian setting, initially it seems to have been chosen solely for its agreeable weather and telegenic beaches that evoke a carefree Californian lifestyle. However, the choice of the town's name may suggest a closer relationship with early Californian utopian communities.

Junipero Serra (1713-1784), who the city is ostensibly named for, was a Catalan Franciscan friar who founded many missions in California. Serra's recent canonization in 2015 raised the issue of mistreatment and forced Christianization of California's indigenous population by his hands, tarnishing his traditionally benevolent reputation as a civilizer and protector of indigenous peoples. Potentially, the ambiguity of Serra's reputation is reflected in the ambivalent the

⁴ Mallet, W. (Nov 3 2016). *Charlie Brooker Says the New Season of 'Black Mirror' Is All About Gaming.* Retrieved from <http://www.vice.com>

utopian character of San Junipero. Serra's positive legacy in many parts of California was rooted in the quasi-utopian missions he founded across the state, where the Franciscans taught the Amerindians to farm and offered them 'protection.' The lore surrounding these missions, and Serra specifically, is evident in the number of streets and schools named after him. In any case, as Kelly says to Yorkie when they first meet: San Junipero is a party-town and nothing suggests that it was designed to be anything more. This, however, reveals another issue; this simulated paradise is operated and probably designed by a private corporation. Its parameters and designs may have been made according to their customers' demands, but the horizon of expectations for this paradise was from its very beginning limited and most probably is destined to remain that way.

The individualistic character of San Junipero serves the love story, which ends with a literal 'happily ever after.' Yet, the fact that this fantasy is presented as a utopia raises questions about the meaning of the word and the evolution of its definition and manifestations. It is a garden of earthly delights for individuals or a classical paradise similar to the Fortunate Islands where a few blessed individuals were enjoy immortality amongst a temperate climate and abundant fruits.⁵ San Junipero is an updated version of this paradise—a playground in a virtual environment designed to accommodate the needs and wishes of the avatars that log into it. In this way, the 'utopia' that Brooker refers to is nothing more than a video game where people adopted their desired avatars. Still, this simplistic paradise seems to be an accurate reflection of contemporary utopian hopes, encapsulating our waning interest in the commons and increased interest in more individualistic aspirations such as personal happiness and fulfillment.

Homo Virtualis, Cyborgs and Immortality

The rejection of older narratives and radical visions of social transformation, however, does not mean that the paradise of '*San Junipero*' is completely alien to utopia, or worse dystopian. Rather, utopianism, in its broader sense, has many expressions. Ernst Bloch traces in every culture and religion of the world, a memory or a dream of a better world that has haunted our desires for millennia, forcing us to systematically scrutinize our present condition by comparing it with a not yet realized ideal.⁶ Yet, in San Junipero, humanity's struggle for a better world and the always present 'not-yet' that forces our critical gaze to seek novel solutions and paradigms for social and political ills is absent. Instead, the focus of the episode is on the two heroines' relationship and, in my view, this is not just a convention of the plot or a restraint placed by the medium or format. The concern of the writers with the personal relationship and welfare of the heroines is not as narrow as it may appear. Rather, it encapsulates the form of contemporary utopian desire and how this utopian dream has shaped the public perception of scientific research in the fields of informatics and cryonics. The focus now is immortality, a very private and

⁵ F. Manuel and F. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 76.

⁶ E. Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford, 2000), p. 158

very old dream—a dream that 21st century technology is going to make a reality, according to futurists like Robin Hanson.⁷

This lead us to the concept of mind uploading as presented in Martin’s article where it was seen as a remedy against the ultimate disease of death. ‘*San Junipero*’ offers us the opportunity to observe how these hypothetical technologies were either inspired, appropriated, or popularized by Science Fiction. Since the disappearance of Fountain of Youth myths from our culture, science has come to be viewed as the only mechanism for immortality. The first technology that seems to have been inspired by pulp science fiction and was suggested as a salve for death was cryonics.⁸ Robert Ettinger, a mathematician, founded the cryonics movement with his book *The Prospect of Immortality* (1962). Ettinger was quite clear about the inspiration SF stories and the work of Jean Rostand in cryopreservation, had over his idea of deep freezing bodies. Ettinger, who was also the founder and president of the Cryonics Institute, saw cryopreservation as a technique through which humans could buy time until science has advanced enough to cure all diseases and thereby unlocking the secrets of immortality. Ettinger’s view in the utility of this method is clearly expressed by his obituary where his son, Dan Ettinger, noted that his father will someday have a second chance because his body was frozen.⁹ Today, cryonics is a staple of our immortality fantasies. The movement has magazines such as the *Long Life: Longevity through Technology* (a bi-monthly magazine published by the American Cryonics Society) and has attracted research funding from the US government and private customers. Interestingly, California is one of the major hubs of cryonics companies and societies. It is also the hub of the transhumanist movement, and is associated with transhumanist centres like F. M. Esfandiary, known as FM 2030, organized by and around a circle of intellectuals. These futurists searched for a way to evolve humanity through technological and scientific achievements in order to overcome our biological limitations. Max More, who in the 90s was among the most vocal proponents of the movement, is considered the inventor of the term transhumanism. In a series of articles More delineated the movement’s ideology as one of personal, undeterred advancement based on reason, intelligence and critical thought.¹⁰ According to some of its critics, transhumanism is nothing more than a combination of Nietzsche’s philosophy, libertarianism and neoliberalism, whose scientific basis was/is at best questionable—founded on Science Fiction and not hard science.¹¹ The choice of California, then, as a setting may echo the contemporary transhumanist movement, whose aspirations San Junipero’s simulation and brain emulated avatars appear to realize.

⁷ R. Hanson, *The Age of Em: Work, Love, and Life when Robots Rule the Earth* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 158-9.

⁸ P. Nicholls, *The Science in Science Fiction* (Knopf 1983).

⁹ ‘Body of Cryonic Pioneer Robert Ettinger Frozen’, *The Telegraph* (26 July 2011).

¹⁰ J. Raulerson, ‘Singularities: Technoculture, Transhumanism, and Science Fiction in the 21st Century’, 45 *Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies* (2003).

¹¹ E. Graham, ‘Nietzsche Gets a Modem: Transhumanism and the Technological Sublime’, 16 (1) *Literature and Technology* (2002), 65- 80.

The heroines and the San Junipero's virtual paradise represent the pinnacle of the transhumanist movement's aspirations. The deceased inhabitants as well as the 'tourists' both have transcended their human nature, becoming what contemporary futurists have described as 'homo virtualis'. This corresponds to the transhumanist evolution in which we are liberated from the prosthesis of our material bodies, transferring our consciousness to the virtual/digital realm of the internet. But, in my view, *'San Junipero's'* heroines are much closer to Donna Haraway's definition of cyborgs--¹²creatures that have severed their links and relations with the real world, achieving an individuation that frees them from the constructed labels of the 'real' world and as a result from the racism and oppression that they were subjected to in it. The heroines form an interracial, homosexual couple which constitutes a transgressive and revolutionary act enabled by their 'cyborg nature', and their rejection of the clear-cut categories that western civilization imposed on humanity for centuries. Yorkie and Kelly, inhabit a virtual paradise that is far from innocent, as Yorkie's visit to Quagmire—a sex club frequented by both tourists and locals—proves. The symbolism of this place is hard to ignore. It is a garden of earthly delights rendered in similar dark colours as the homonymous painting by Hieronymus Bosch. Bosch's image is a place of mindless carnality, the outcome of a world where no God and only a morality of fear and retribution exists. The imagery, and realization by Yorkie of Kelly's hedonic lifestyle, shatters any illusions that Yorkie or the audience, may have about the character of this virtual paradise. It is a pleasure-land designed to offer an exodus from the misery of real life, a refuge where infirmed and elderly citizens can revisit their golden years.

Moreover, the transgressive nature of both heroines is underlined by the fact that they are expelled from, or have decided to sever their connections with, their families. Yorkie has been disowned by her religious conservative family after coming out. Meanwhile Kelly has lost her daughter before entering *'San Junipero's'* simulation. Her husband decided not to enter the simulation in the hope of an afterlife, where he could be reunited with his daughter, exists. Kelly must choose whether to gamble on an improbable afterlife where her 'nuclear' family could be reunited, or to stay with Yorkie in San Junipero for 'eternity'. Her final choice to ignore the promise she had previously given to her husband, and thus negating the established natural 'order,' is a disruptive act of rebellion. Kelly and Yorkie don't care about entering an edenic world. San Junipero for them is just the background. No meaningful relationship with other characters is seen on screen. Instead, the few other characters operate like video game NPCs minimally advancing the plot through expository dialogue. The only other character that is somewhat developed in the episode is Wes, another visitor in San Junipero. Wes pursues Kelly, claiming that he is in love with her. She rejects him, saying that she does not want anything serious, only attachment-free fun—showing her reluctance to join this virtual community. Throughout the episode the only meaningful relationship is that of the

¹² D. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1984).

two heroines, reflecting Haraway's observation in her *Cyborg Manifesto* that cyborgs are wary of holism, but needy of connection.¹³

The similarities of these figures with Haraway's definition of a cyborg are striking. The 19th and early 20th century technological utopianism, however, with its vision of a rational society where technological innovations and scientifically organized production act to solve society's ills, seems to have been transformed. The celebratory tone of late 19th century technological utopianism was gradually abandoned by science fiction narrative, which was partly the result of the appropriation of the technology of the digital and information revolutions of the 50s and 60s. Similarly, *'San Junipero'* while initially seeming to describe a utopian community, comes to reveal a much darker vision built around the questionable desirability of this virtual paradise and the 'gift' of immortality that it offers.

The dystopian undertones may be the result of the series' general character that questions the way humans use technology, usually depriving it from realizing its utopian potential. But in this case technology is almost absent for the story. The utopian setting of the virtual paradise has a retro 80s style and in the few scenes where we see the heroines in their true 'real' form the technology is miniaturized and barely seen. The small size of the gadgets obscures their capabilities. The non-intrusive nature of the technology serves to emphasize how far removed our current technology is from that present in the episode. While we are currently far from technology of this kind, futurists and transhumanists appear optimistic that market forces will someday provoke their development. Still as a 2007 report by the Oxford Institute for the Future of Humanity has underlined WBE specific fields--largescale neuroscience, physical handling of large amounts of tissue banks, achieving high scanning volumes, measuring functional information from the images, automated identification of cell types, synapses, connectivity and parameters—have limited practical applications to other industries and as a result have limited research funding.¹⁴

Another glimpse of this reality's futuristic technology is displayed through Kelly's visit to the hospital where Yorkie's body is paralyzed. There Yorkie is able to communicate with the medical staff through a novel device, which enables her to have limited contact with her environment despite her condition. Through this technology she is able to express her desire to be euthanized and permanently join San Junipero. The shallow treatment of the technology's construction is a recurrent short-coming of *Black Mirror*. In general the show focuses heavily on social consequences of technology and tends to avoid any explanation of how these semi-miraculous technologies came to exist. This especially true of *'San Junipero.'* A virtual eternal life would have caused significant debates in any society, especially in relation to religious teachings regarding the afterlife. However, the piece of

¹³ D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991).

¹⁴ A. Sandberg, N. Bostrom, *Whole Brain Emulation (A Roadmap)*, Technical Report (2008), Oxford University.

history we are given is that in its original incarnation *San Junipero* was a form of nostalgia therapy—used to treat anxiety and dementia by triggering and unearthing past memories through music, old pictures, videos and personal items.¹⁵ Yet we do not learn how the capabilities of this virtual technology evolved to accommodate a ‘permanent population.’ The only thing we learn is that living older people are limited to five hours every weekend while younger people are not permitted to visit. Once more, *Black Mirror* offers us a glimpse of the dystopian potentials of technology and the propensity of humanity to abuse it. Such a shallow treatment of the how these technologies function, though somewhat expected or excusable in a television series, extends beyond *Black Mirror*, pervading the whole transhumanist movement. Transhumanism seems to be more inspired by Science Fiction than by actual research in the fields of neuroscience and informatics. For all the enthusiastic TEDx appearances of Kurzweil and Morrow who predict that the singularity and WBE technology will be achieved within the next 30 or 50 years, there are neuroscientists like Kenneth D. Miller and Sten Linnarsson who explain the difficulty and complexity of mapping the human brain. This latter group of scholars delineates how far we are from fulfilling the promises of cryonics or brain mapping, emphasizing that the advertisement of such technologies is misleading, unethical and false.

A much wider critique of contemporary utopian hopes is nested within this expert challenge to the transhumanists and futurism movements. The retro paradise of *San Junipero* with its promise of eternal life and endless hedonism presents as an enticing alternative to a bleak world. The life contained within it, is safe (it has no setting for pain) but is also vacant of meaning. Additionally, the program has multiple time settings—Yorkie is encouraged to search for Kelly in the 90s and early 2000s—yet there does not appear to be a setting for the present or future. The backwards looking nature of the program, while partly justified by its use as a form of nostalgia therapy, betrays another trend in contemporary utopian thought. The decline of 20th century grand narratives combined with pessimistic projections for humanity’s future have led to an affinity for a ‘safe’ past. The neoliberal individualistic ideas of transhumanists offer only personal fulfilment, lacking a more comprehensive social vision. Their imagined upgrade to the human species through science, reason and technology is mute when it comes to larger social structures. Conquering longevity or immortality will not provide answers to the pressing issues slated for humanity’s future. Hence, the retro style of ‘*San Junipero*’ is not simply nostalgia but reflective of a failure of current utopian visions to design future divorced from the artefacts of the past. Brookes claimed that he wished to create an episode with a utopian content. However, the writers of *Black Mirror* were not able to write a completely futuristic utopia. As Bloch warned seven decades ago in his *The Principle of Hope* (1954), the most debilitating condition that can befall humanity is an inability to imagine a different society. ‘*San Junipero*’ demonstrates an inability to imagine a positive future void of cynicism. Rather, the only

¹⁵ F. Jameson, ‘Nostalgia for the Present’ in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992).

conceptual options appear to be dystopian or a utopia that has regressed into the past or the personal. In the end the paradise is not San Junipero but Yorkie and Kelly's relationship. Cultural critics like Fredrik Jameson have questioned the modern prevalence of nostalgia. According to Jameson late capitalism is rife with postmodern nostalgia which manifests in a pastiche that imitates past styles but is devoid of value. '*San Junipero*,' with its retro nostalgia, is for Jameson a 'blank parody'. Moreover, the pastiche displayed by '*San Junipero*' is divorced from any meaningful categorizations of utopia taught by Classical and Judeo-Christian theology and philosophy. The barriers of past, present and future, with the varying promises of Apocalyptic disaster and Kingdom on Earth, are abandoned for a simultaneity of past memories and future hopes. Our heroines are indifferent to the history they've retreated into precisely because it is a manufactured past derived solely from fashion magazines and old billboards. No real consideration is given to the events and social architecture of the simulated period. Furthermore, Yorkie's awkwardness during her first visits to San Junipero suggests that even the nostalgia that the visitors bathe themselves in is fake. The users of San Junipero are not revisiting their past selves. Instead they generate ideal versions of themselves similar to modern social media profiles.

Conclusions

The utopian vision of '*San Junipero*' represents nothing but the achievement of immortality and eternal youth, the two most fundamental and selfish human desires. Past utopian genres offered similar ideal worlds peopled by immortal inhabitants. The sources of this immortality in previous iterations, however, were supernatural. Fountains of youth, or magical lands created by Gods to house a few elect—brave heroes or the resurrected Just—are probably the earliest versions of utopian/paradisiacal lands. The modern definition of utopia, which emerged in the sixteenth century, denied these metaphysical dreams, focusing instead on communal visions of an improved social and political organization. The immortal heroes of ancient lore gave to mortal citizens occupied with practical issues, such as advancements in nutrition, healthcare, justice, and equality. The re-ascendance of personal immortality in contemporary utopian narratives, such as '*San Junipero*,' displays how an individualistic paradigm has come to dominate our age. Additionally, it links our modern quest for immortality, despite the much-advertised belief in science and reason, to a metaphysical origin. Ultimately, the postmodern utopia of immortality is only superficially linked to the technological utopianism of the past century and its focus on futuristic sciences. Instead it is closer to the wildest dreams of Science fiction's, and completely divorced from real scientific concepts and technologies. Even if brain emulation technology is our best chance of achieving immortality and even if some neuroscientists are willing to explore this idea, the position of this vision in our contemporary media and public debates is more the result of pulp science and collective anxieties concerning the impact of technology in our lives, and less a sign of its imminent realization.¹⁶ '*San*

¹⁶ K. D. Miller, *Will you Ever Be Able to Upload Your Brain?* (The New York Times 2015).

Junipero' demonstrates how ingrained these futuristic technologies are within our cultural moment, and how they entice through solving our fear of death. Utopias and Science Fiction express broad social and cultural anxieties and hopes, especially those which have been widely disseminated through pulp science. This miraculous and potentially dangerous science promises to deliver eternal life and youth, but it also brings disturbing costs—costs which haunt contemporary collective consciousness and literature. Ultimately, *'San Junipero'* is unsettling because of its happy ending. A couple enjoying their bond for all eternity seems the definition of a dream come true. But can we weather an eternity removed from the mortality so fundamentally characteristic of our species? If so, will we still be humans? And how logical is this dream that rejects our natural limitations? Perhaps we should pause to remember the religious origins of the promise of immortality, new purposefully hidden behind pulp science, and reflect the apocalyptic of John the Apostle who warns:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

John 3:2

Though an immortal paradise has been promised to us before, it is framed with the caveat that we will eschew our humanity upon entering it. The restored Eden of *'San Junipero,'* inhabited by genderless, ageless, cyborgs who ignore past categorizations and typologies, may be a fulfilled Promise of a kind. However, the inhabitants of this cyberspace won't be humans and this eternal Paradise will have robbed us from both past and future, history and utopia.

Faculty of History