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Love as a Risk-Averse Event; the Sanitization, Dichotomization, and Liberation of Romance in "Hang the DJ"

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"Hang the DJ" is the fourth episode of the fourth season of the science fiction series *Black Mirror* wherein the dating world is subjected to the signature thought-provoking lens for which the anthology is famed. In the episode couples are mechanically paired and unpaired by an authoritarian high-tech agency named The System which is ultimately revealed to be a highly advanced matchmaking app. It is my contention that the episode concomitantly reflects, reproduces, and destabilizes the dichotomization of love as either a disruptive "event" or a risk-averse form of intimacy. The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the episode heralds the emergence of a new romantic paradigm, love as a risk-averse "event", under techno-capitalist advances.

Keywords: risk-averse culture; health obsession; love as event; risk-averse romance; neoliberal conditioning; science fiction (SF)

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El amor como evento averso al riesgo: La sanitización, dicotomización y liberación del romance en "Hang the DJ"

"Hang the DJ" es el cuarto episodio de la cuarta temporada de la serie de ciencia ficción *Black Mirror*, en el que el mundo de las citas se somete a la característica lente provocadora por la que es conocida la antología. En el episodio, las parejas son emparejadas y separadas mecánicamente por una agencia autoritaria de alta tecnología llamada *El Sistema*, que finalmente se revela como una aplicación de emparejamiento altamente avanzada. Sostengo que el episodio refleja, reproduce y a la vez subvierte la dicotomización del amor en torno

al eje de un "evento" disruptivo o una forma de intimidad aversa al riesgo. El objetivo de este artículo es ilustrar cómo el episodio anuncia la emergencia de un nuevo paradigma romántico: el amor como un "evento" averso al riesgo, bajo los avances del tecnocapitalismo.

Palabras clave: cultura aversa al riesgo; obsesión por la salud; amor como evento; romance averso al riesgo; condicionamiento neoliberal; ciencia ficción (CF)

1. Introduction

Today, the injunction to "swipe right" functions less as a choice and more as an ideological reflex—an unconscious ritual that, like the "selfie" or the compulsive "like," stages our submission to the libidinal economy of digital capitalism. Algorithmic dating apps—Tinder and its countless algorithmic offsprings—are not just dating interfaces but an actualization of the fantasy of infinite romantic choices. As the classic SF film *Logan's Run* (1976) testifies, the Tinder age was sketched in our collective imagination long before it started. The pleasure-seeking citizens of the futuristic 'domed city' in the film have access to a holographic version of Tinder and by "swiping right" they can choose a desirable partner from a multitude of choices who have made themselves available on the holographic device. As Robert Tinnel correctly suggests, the interior design of the city resembles a shopping mall, and in its commodification of romantic partners the film speculates on the extension of the consumerist mentality into the romantic sphere (2005, 220). Today Tinder-style apps give users access to a multitude of choices, allowing them to sample potential partners in the same way as they might sample cheese or yogurt in a shopping mall. According to the philosopher Alain Badiou, this approach to romance has culminated in the stagnation of love in recent decades. Badiou specifically expresses contempt for the way dating websites/apps subtract magic and madness from love, the implication being that love is losing its disruptive force as an "event" that can reorder the very coordinates of our being. For Badiou, the emergence of "safety-first love" or "zero-risks love" is closely connected to the degradation of love to "only a variant of rampant hedonism and the wide range of possible enjoyments" in our age of consumerist permissiveness (2012, 6-8). As early as 1971 Jean Baudrillard critically exposed how the consumer society has created a market for eliciting and selling new 'sensations':

> You have to try everything, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of 'missing' something, some form of enjoyment or other. You never know whether a particular encounter, a particular experience (Christmas in the Canaries, eel in whisky, the Prado, LSD, Japanese-style love-making) will not elicit some 'sensations'. (81)

Baudrillard's perspective on this phenomenon is characterized by cynicism, yet his argument highlights the impact of consumer-capitalism in facilitating the individual's

access to a multitude of experiences and gratifications that previously were not widely accessible. It is as a by-product of this process that love is reduced to just another experience among the wide array of opportunities and experiences available for purchase and exploration that one should try not to "miss". Hence, today many people are more enthusiastic about succeeding in their careers and businesses, earning good money and enjoying what consumer-capitalism has to offer, rather than testing the destabilizing "event" of love, which might damage their productivity and prosperity. This trend has culminated in a refiguration of intimate relationships in accordance with the logic of consumerism. In a society that emphasizes personal choice and instant gratification, people evaluate relationships based on the satisfaction they provide, and individuals may be seen as disposable if they fail to fulfill the desired criteria (Bauman, 2014, 31).

It is against this backdrop that figures like Badiou, Byung Chul Han, and Slavoj Žižek—nostalgic for variants of romance untouched by the neoliberal/consumerist mentality—call for a re-invention of love. For them, such a re-invention demands the rejection of emotional safety and comfort and the reintroduction of risk and adventure into the experience of love. What they miss, however, is the prospect of an overlap between risk/adventure and "zero-risks love" made viable through techno-capitalist advances. Why not a future where the techno-capitalist progress facilitates the inscription of risk/adventure into the very fabric of "zero-risks love"? This is precisely the future envisioned by "Hang the DJ" (2017), an episode of the speculative/science fiction (SF) anthology *Black Mirror* (2011-present).

Despite its notoriety for dark, techno-paranoiac plots and bleak endings, *Black Mirror* goes beyond being a set of cautionary tales against the consequences of unchecked techno-capitalism. Rather, it stands as a complicated cultural text that, to some extent, favors a certain techno-capitalist future at a sub-textual level. This is specifically reflected in the complicated stance that the series assumes toward the "posthuman", here defined as the technological augmentation of human capacities that reconfigures the normative understandings of what it means to be human. This stance ranges from a conservative opposition to "transhumanism" to the embracing of "digital posthumanism". In many episodes (e.g. "White Christmas", "The Entire History of You", and "Archangel") the tragic consequences of a transhumanist interface between human brain and sophisticated smart chips are framed through family dramas in order to bring home the threat that such a merger could bring to bear upon the traditional way of human life—embodied and symbolized by the institution of family. However, the series' ideological stance toward the digital cloning of consciousness—another posthuman derivative—is much less conservative.

In episodes such as "San Junipero" and "Striking Vipers", virtual reality is depicted as an emancipatory space where the 'digital posthumans' are liberated from the racial, sexual, and essentialist intolerance they faced in the real world or where they find the capacity to safely experiment with new racial identities and explore uncharted sexual territories. In "San Junipero" the digital clones of two closeted homosexual

women form an interracial couple within the digital space as a way of surmounting the religious, sexual, and racial barriers they faced in the real world and to compensate for the chances that reality denied to them. In "Striking Vipers" two African-American heterosexual men find themselves exploring uncharted sexual territories when they inhabit the bodies of a white woman and an Asian man in the virtual space of a game. The new gender/ethnic/sexual/racial identity they each adopt and explore in simulated reality leads them into an unforeseen zone of proximity with each other where they experience affects and intensities that would not have otherwise been available to them, to the extent that they lose their taste for sex in the meat space. Both episodes are romantic stories with happy endings, foregrounding the role that technology can play in advancing progressive cultural agendas such as the LGBT+ cause (Drage 2020, 51).

"Hang the DJ" shares many similarities with these two episodes as it is also a romantic story with a happy resolution which celebrates the role that technology can play in finding love and portrays "digital posthumanism" in a positive light. The episode takes place within a semi-oppressive environment where couples are mechanically paired and unpaired by a high-tech agency named The System. The System determines the duration of each date and the couples are informed how long they will remain together at the outset of their relationships. Our protagonists Amy (Georgina Campell) and Frank (Joe Cole) are paired up at the beginning of the episode and after several subsequent unsuccessful relationships are matched again. They develop deep emotions for each other and to escape separation at the hands of The System they rebel against it and—in a Truman Show–style move—climb a huge wall that separates their System-dominated reality from the beyond. The resolution comes as a surprise as we discover that the real Amy and Frank were using a dating App that was running a simulative experiment to determine their compatibility.

While the plotline appears simple and satisfying, the narrative has an intricate (sub)structure with contrasting layers of meaning. The *dénouement*—from an ideological perspective—reestablishes and perpetuates the very "risk-averse" position that the episode seemed to be critical of in its main body. However, this ideological loop is not the ultimate horizon of the episode's meaning. It is my contention that, by staging a reconciliation between the dynamics of 'zero-risks love' and love with a capital L, the ending anticipates the technologically-mediated emergence of a new romantic paradigm.

In what follows I will first attempt to locate the coordinates of "risk-averse" culture/discourse within the bigger narrative of the neoliberal processes of subjectivization by drawing upon several cultural theorists. Next, I will proceed to disclose how the currently pervasive desire to codify and rationalize the intrinsic irrationality of love and passion is reflected and highlighted in the episode. Then, I will examine the episode's construction and celebration of love as an "event" through the protagonists' rebellious escape. Finally, I will discuss the ideological loop embedded in the resolution of the episode and draw my final conclusions.

2. Neoliberal Conditioning, the Last Man, and "Risk-Averse" Culture

Neoliberalism, either as a term or a conceptual framework, has become so capacious that it is losing its meaning (Cockayne, 2016, 74). Any analysis focused on the sociocultural implications of neoliberal governmentality, such as the present one, therefore must begin not only with a critical demystification of the term itself, but also with an examination of its meaning across cultural and economic practices.

The American thinker Stephen Shaviro situates neoliberalism at the intersection between a "specific mode of capitalist production (Marx)", and a "form of governmentality (Foucault)" and characterizes it through five main features: 1. The transfer of huge amounts of financial capital from the masses to the upper echelons of the business world—what is often described as the 'one percent'—through the influence of financial institutions; 2. The denationalization and commodification of public properties, resources and services; 3. "Primitive accumulation" which designates direct exploitation by "rent-seeking", "debt collection", and "outright expropriation"; 4. The economization of all aspects of life according to the so-called logic of the market; 5. The redefinition of human beings as what Michel Foucault calls "an entrepreneur of himself" who oversees his own "human capital" (Shaviro 2015, 45). In Shaviro's list, the economic side effects of neoliberalism come before its sociocultural ramifications, suggesting that the neoliberal process of subjectivation reflects a mutation in the economic base. However, the cultural and the economic have always maintained an intricate, interdependent relationship, and as Cockayne points out, neoliberalism "must be understood in terms of a new articulation of these emerging complex relationships" (2015, 74). It is in reference to this intimate relationship between the social and the economic that Michel Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978-79), states that neoliberal thought and subjectivity rest upon a new conceptualization of *homo economicus* as not a partner of exchange, but an entrepreneurial being:

> in neo-liberalism—and it does not hide this; it proclaims it—there is also a theory of homo economicus, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of homo economicus as partner of exchange with a homo economicus as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings. (234)

What Foucault identified in neoliberal thought and practice was a tendency toward the "economization of the social field", carried out through the extension and application of the market logic to "domains of behavior or conduct" that are located well beyond the market: "to marriage, the education of children, and criminality, for example" (268). Foucault's insight is significant as it draws attention to how, by constructing a cultural logic, neoliberalism goes beyond economic theory. As Patricia Ventura explains:

> the intent and policy of neoliberal government has the effect of structuring the way subjects think about the practices, techniques and rationalities used to govern them and which they use to govern themselves. Neoliberal government represents the population's wellbeing as intimately tied to individual's ability to make market principles the guiding values of their lives, to see themselves as products to create, sell, and optimize. (2017, 2)

In line with Ventura, cultural theorist Mari Ruti indicates that Foucault uses the term *homo economicus* specifically in reference to how far we have come in "view[ing] the individual as a miniature economic enterprise and human life as a process of perfecting the effectiveness of this enterprise through various projects of self-development" (2018, 2). Consequently, for instance, the neoliberal subject regards academic education or learning a set of skills as a way to increase their marketability in the job market or considers leading a healthy lifestyle a strategy to remain an efficient member of the workforce for a longer period. That is why Ruti considers health-obsession as a symptom of the dominance of the neoliberal mode of subjectivity. According to Ruti, the neoliberal discursive regime does not idolize health out of compassion, rather it wants to ensure that we are efficient enough to participate in the life of the economy and "work harder, faster, longer, and better" (9). This is in line with Mark Fisher's characterization of neoliberalism as a "paternalism without the Father". According to Fisher, "late capitalism articulates many of its injunctions via an appeal to health" so that we are in the presence of a "paternalism without the Father" where "it is not that smoking is 'wrong', it is that it will lead to our failing to lead long and enjoyable lives" (2010, 73). This is one reason why today we find a diverse range of self-tracking apps and devices on the market designed to encourage users to pursue better self-knowledge and a healthy lifestyle through the constant surveillance of a wide range of data, ranging from the number of steps taken to calories burnt and the hours slept. As Ajana observes, the veneration of number-based self-analysis is not simply driven by technological affordances, but it is symptomatic of a larger "epistemological and ontological shift" toward the neoliberal ethos. A significant motivation for pursuing self-monitoring practices, as Ajana argues by drawing on Lupton, "is that they offer ways to deal with risk and uncertainty, particularly at a time when choices are difficult to make in the face of surplus supplies, the dissolution of traditional security nets such as the postwar welfare state, and the diminished influence of meaning-giving institutions like the church and the family in Western societies" (2017, 9).

It is along these lines that Byung-Chul Han compares the neoliberal subject to the Nietzschean Last Man[1] insofar as they absolutize and fetishize "health" as the prerequisite for "happiness": "one honors health. 'We invented happiness,' say the last human beings, and they blink" (2017, 19). Slavoj Žižek similarly hypothesizes that it

[1] In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche uses the term Last Man to describe the antithesis of his theorized Übermensch/overman. The Last Man is the archetypal sterile being empty of creative imagination and unwilling to take risks, satisfied with simply living and enjoying himself.

is only today that we can truly perceive the contours of the Nietzschean Last Man as narcissistic "Self-Fulfillment" has been utterly combined with asceticism for health (2006, 102). He traces this trend in a wide range of contemporary market products and practices deprived of their harmful properties:

> In today's market we find a whole range of products deprived of their harmful properties. Coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol [...] so it goes on. What about virtual sex as sex without sex, the Colin Powell doctrine of warfare with no casualties (on our side, of course) as warfare without warfare, the contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration as politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multiculturalism as an experience of Other deprived of its Otherness (2006b, 60).

Badiou similarly perceives a connection between "warfare with no casualties" or "zero dead" wars and "zero-risks love". In line with sociologists such as Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman, he perceives an analogy between the "No commitment to you" that finance capitalism tells the average worker and the "No commitment on my part" the "lover" tells his or her partner as they move in a world where relationships are made and unmade in the name of risk-free consumerism (2012, 7). Bauman also suggests that under the conditions of liquid modernity, the emphasis on individual desires and self-interest often takes precedence over emotional intimacy and mutual care. The instability and fluidity of "liquid love" can lead to emotional detachment as the fear of vulnerability and the need for self-protection may result in shallow and superficial emotional connections (2014, 35).

We should read Badiou and Bauman's assertions alongside the similarities that Han perceives between Brazilian waxing, smart phones, and love. According to Han what connects the removal of body hair to G Flex surfaces by LG and love is a longing for "smoothness" that characterizes our age (2014).[2] Similar to how we crave to protect the smooth surface of our bodies and smart phones from scratches we strive to shield the "smoothness" of our mental health from injury. For Han "an excess of positivity" (positivity principle) dominates all spheres of life today (2015, 13), including its most intimate aspects such as love: today we avoid falling in love as "this falling is too *negative*, indeed it's an injury that should be avoided" (2015,13; emphasis added). Health-oriented hedonism as such constitutes the substance of what I refer to as "risk-averse discourse/culture". "Zero-risks love" is only a variant of this prevailing discursive constellation and therefore I will refer to it mainly as "risks-averse romance" throughout this article.

[2] G Flex has a special self-healing coating; any scratches that it might get will disappear after a short time.

3. 'System' Dating and Risk-Averse Romance

The overall design of The System's environment resembles a futuristic prison where the couples appear as inmates subjugated to limitless dates. The System assumes the role of a Big Brother who regulates and monitors the activities of the inhabitants of this semi-totalitarian environment. However, the residents are ideologically conditioned to appreciate the approach and the workings of The System: In their first night together Frank and Amy reflect on the chaos of pre-System dating, lamenting its unpredictability and agreeing that dating must have been "mental" before The System. According to them dating before The System was haunted with possibilities of trauma, anxiety, and too many discomforts, but now, because of it, dating is free from all its past harmful properties. The sentiments they voice are typical of the longing for the "smoothness" that marks the current "risk-averse" climate. To follow in Žižek's footsteps, is not the state of dating and relationships under the hegemony of The System a concrete rendition of 'dating without dating' or 'relationship without relationship'? That is to say, similar to the way in which decaffeinated coffee is divested of its damaging substance, here dating and relationships are divested of their harmful properties (i.e. trauma or anxiety). The System embodies a radicalized risk-averse ideology insofar as it strives to deprive the romantic encounter of the integral negative excess which constitutes its substance. When two people bring their eccentricities, personal histories, doubts, desires, insecurities, etc. into a zone of intimate over-proximity, 'unpleasantries' are bound to be generated. It is precisely in such terms that, as Han suggests, love with a capital L is considered unhealthy today and is thus being sanitized into "a formula for enjoyment" (2017, 3). In other words, the infiltration of the pragmatist tenor of risk-averse culture into our intimate lives causes us "to formulate our relationships, to trade extreme passions for pleasant enjoyment" (Ruti 2018, xxv).

This pragmatism discernibly runs through the workings of The System: within The System's environment, an artificially intelligent circular tablet named "Coach" instructs and regulates the pairing of the couples and decides the patterns of their relationships. The pairing place for all the couples is the restaurant of a mall-like building named "Hub". The restaurant is filled at every corner with security guards responsible for monitoring the pairings in order to prevent any form of conduct outside the preordained pattern. The regulation is so tense that Frank and Amy are dubious about whether they are allowed to taste each other's food or not and, only after several stealthy glances at the security guard standing near them does Frank venture to taste Amy's pasta (which is met by a stern look from another security agent standing nearby). Such heavy security measures coupled with the fact that the couple do not even get to choose their food (what they ate was previously established by the Coach) inject a rigid proceduralism into an experience which is ostensibly spontaneous and romantic. This atmosphere of constraint is further reinforced once the couple checks the "expiry date" for their relationship before leaving for a numbered house. The term "expiry date" evokes blatant associations with contracts and contract making such that—to

the consent of all the involved parties—the date is openly made to resemble a business meeting for sealing a contract. The scene nudges the viewer toward confronting the uncanny resemblances between the realization of a fully risk-averse courtship and the rituals of arranged marriages.

In spite of the presence of the guards and the solemn aura that the *mise-en-scène* imparts, the casualness of the acting by Joe Cole (Frank) and Georgina Campbell (Amy) eases the viewer into feeling this is all natural—accepting The System's world as ordinary, even familiar. The Coach's voice, eerily reminiscent of an Uber notification, reinforces this familiarity by drawing on the banality of app-driven life. Furthermore, when Frank and Amy are escorted by automated golf carts to their System-assigned house, they pass rows of identical suburban dwellings—the visual repetition evokes a sense of algorithmic standardization. These audiovisual cues collectively underscore the ritualized, mechanical nature of courtship within the System, where dating is reduced to a sterile loop of dinner, sex, and sleep, governed by a logic of contracts and compliance rather than spontaneity or passion.

This sterile romantic atmosphere, however, is initially portrayed as an evolutionary step toward solving the dilemma of dating. In a neoliberal fashion, The System primarily optimizes matching by transforming its users into entrepreneurs who are to make smart emotional investments: since couples are mandatorily paired and unpaired by The System and, since they know the duration of their relationships, they can calculate the amount of emotional investment appropriate for each one. The episode speculates on the radical outcome of this process, specifically through one of Amy's partners, Lenny, who credits himself with being well-acquainted with the procedure of The System's dating. The dull proportions of the routine-based and ritualized relationship that Lenny establishes with Amy are epitomized in their machinic love making and lack of meaningful communication. Therefore, in its overall reflection of the contours of the risk-averse romance the episode juxtaposes a momentary celebration of its positive aspects (i.e., the conversation between Amy and Frank) with an extensive foregrounding of the dull proportions of its excesses.

4. The Ending

In the SF series *Upload* (2020-present), the viewer encounters a near future where, similar to rideshare apps, users rate each other's romantic performance on a five-star scale. Nitely has replaced Tinder in this future and receiving a low rating reduces users' chances of being matched with desirable partners. Furthermore, body cams (referred to as "protection") are used for documenting sexual consent and, as a conversation between the heroine (Nora) and her Nitely 'hook-up' suggests, extending things beyond a one-night-stand is frowned upon in this speculative society. However, in *Upload* this cold romantic ambience is counterbalanced by the love between Nora and the 'uploaded' protagonist Nathan, which embodies the customary unpleasantries associated with romance. On the surface, the deep devotion between Frank and Amy and their final

revolt seem to offer a similar counterbalance in "Hang the DJ", but closer investigation unravels the ideological fault-lines that the episode leaves behind.

After The System separates Frank and Amy for a second time, and following a string of unrewarding relationships, the hero and the heroine resolve to rebel against The System. Rebellion against the Big Brother at first appears as a risky task and positions the protagonists in a dire situation. However, once they reject the authority and the efficiency of The System and implement their escape plan, the stern-looking security agents make no attempt to stop them. The initiation of this rebellious act transforms the guards into impotent cardboard figures incapable of performing any meaningful action. The scene is cinematographically tailored to draw parallels between the enactment of the escape plan and the pressing of the 'pause button' while playing a video game: the guards and the whole restaurant go on pause, as if Frank and Amy are inside a video game. This scene reinforces our reading of The System as ideology embodied; it speaks to the idea that, despite its grounding power, ideology has a fragile or virtual character. It can exert power over subjects in so far as they do not question its naturalness and measure everything against its value system. The moment the subjects recognize its obfuscation of reality it loses all its grounding power. While at the outset dating according to the rituals of The System seemed the most natural and reasonable thing in the world to Frank and Amy, their serious questioning of its efficacy and rationality lead to its ultimate collapse before them. Not only do they unfetter themselves from its ideological grip but their passionate rebellion for love engenders the very excess of desire that The System suppressed in favor of a smooth and risk-free algorithm for finding the most compatible partner. Thus, the episode constructs and celebrates the 'event' of love as a subversion of the dominant 'risk-averse' ideological climate.

In the next scene—reminiscent of *Logan's Run* (1976), *The Truman Show* (1999), and *Maze Runner* (2009)—Frank and Amy are climbing a wall. However, unlike in these films, they do not find themselves in a new world on the other side of the wall. As they are climbing the wall, drops of gold slips right through their fingers and the virtual matrix collapses. As the resolution of the episode reveals, the engenderment of an excess of desire (love as 'event') was The System's *raison d'être*. The *dénouement* of the episode is accompanied by the shocking revelation that the whole story was happening inside a simulated reality created by a dating app. Apparently, the real Amy and Frank were using a very high-tech app whose algorithm considered a passionate revolt against all odds as the prerequisite for determining the most compatible partner for its users. So, a virtual reality is staged to test how far the digital clones of the users are willing to go. The Hollywood-style reunion of the couple in the real world in the last scene signals the efficacy of techno-capitalist optimization. Contrary to the customary *Black Mirror* storylines, in "Hang the DJ" the advance of technology is framed as a positive and humane force. The System celebrates risk taking as the ultimate sign of true love and accepts its traumatic properties as an unavoidable part of its constitutive substance. However, the ending of the episode also produces an ideological loop which is obfuscated

by its Hollywoodian aura and "happy ending" effect: it reproduces and perpetuates the kind of risk-averse discourse that seemed to be the episode's main target of critique.

Although The System and the app constitute one entity, let us temporarily separate them from each other for the sake of clarity: Does not this high-tech app perform the precise ideological function that The System performs, that is, cleansing love and relationships of their traumatic properties? Do not the real Amy and Frank resemble their digital clones at the outset of the episode? One can easily imagine a parallel scenario where on their first night together the real Frank and Amy lament dating before the 'app': "things must have been 'mental' before 'the app'[…] Too many choices, total option paralysis. Too many variables. Too many unpleasantries if things go wrong" ("Hang the DJ", 00:15:43-00:15:59*).* Using the app implies that they are attempting to shield themselves from the same set of traumas, anxieties, and possible failures that their digital clones were grateful to be avoiding early in the episode. It is at this juncture that we can perceive that the episode does not endorse the 'reinvention' of love (as 'event') but makes critical gestures toward its evolution under technological progression. In its obfuscation of the episode's overall stance toward love, the ending neutralizes the opposition between the two extremes of risk-averse intimacy and hardcore love. To put it in more precise terms, the episode reflects the sterility of a fully risk-averse approach to love in its first half, constructs and celebrates the 'event' of love in its second half, undermines it in its resolution and, by virtue of this undermining, reconciles these two contrasting positions. Metaphorically, the happy ending signals this reconciliation. Thus, it imagines a new romantic paradigm: love as a risk-averse "event".

On a deeper level, by imagining this new romantic paradigm, the episode addresses the conflict between *jouissance* and pleasure—insofar as it is related to the romantic experience— which Žižek identifies as the impasse of today's consumerism:

> What Lacan calls *jouissance* (enjoyment) is a deadly excess beyond pleasure, which is by definition moderate. We thus have two extremes: on the one hand the enlightened hedonist who carefully calculates his pleasures to prolong his fun and avoid getting hurt, on the other the *jouisseur propre*, ready to consummate his very existence in the deadly excess of enjoyment – or, in the terms of our society, on the one hand the consumerist calculating his pleasures, well protected from all kinds of harassments and other health threats, on the other the drug addict or smoker bent on self-destruction. Enjoyment is what serves nothing, and the great effort of today's hedonist-utilitarian "permissive" society is to tame and exploit this un(ac)countable excess into the field of (ac)counting. (2014)

The episode thus imagines a VR-mediated taming of the un(ac)countable excess of the "event" of love into the accountable field of pleasurable experiences. From virtual porn to immersive 3D games, today the tech market strives to commodify jouissance in a risk-free format through advancing VR/AR/XR technologies. This is one reason why a fundamental fantasy of contemporary Speculative Fiction is a future (post)human

generation that resides (semi)permanently in virtual space as digital beings—e.g. *Free Guy* (2021), *Ready Player One* (2018). Apart from voicing collective escapist desires and highlighting our deep attachment to cyberspace, this fantasy performs two interrelated functions: 1) It provides a defamiliarized rendition of the contemporary appropriation of the virtual space as a safe zone for taming the un(ac)countable excess into the field of (ac)counting—e.g. virtual communities such as *Second Life* and immersive 3D gaming; 2) It extrapolates the merger between the "risk-averse" culture and techno-capitalist progress toward its radical/logical conclusion in the future.

5. Conclusion

The complexity of human desire and the intricate psychic wiring in every individual—not to mention the murkiness of intersubjectivity—make it very difficult for algorithms to calculate who or what we desire, as we ourselves are not sure of what or who we desire in the first place. Therefore, in spite of their algorithmic promises, today dating apps and websites mainly function as a third party which merely contributes to the process of dating and finding a desirable partner. Along these lines "Hang the DJ" stands as a fantasy in which the virtual third party has evolved to the level of a system capable of measuring, testing, and exploring our inner twisted desires and determining the ultimate romantic partner for us. Furthermore, the unpredictable nature of love as an "event" makes it very dependent on chance as many people might go through life without finding the chance to experience it. In this regard, "Hang the DJ", on some level, is a narrative about a technologically-mediated democratization of access to this experience. Therefore, in contrast to figures such as Badiou, Han, and Žižek, instead of remaining nostalgic for the past and endeavoring to reinvent love as an "event" in its traditional form, the episode encourages us to think about the possible evolutionary trajectories that romantic experience might take in the future. With the anticipated advances in artificial intelligence, human-computer interface, digitalization etc., in the not-so-distant future we might find ourselves on the verge of a technological as well as ontological/epistemological revolution. The possible emergence of a posthuman race whose conception of the human has been radically redefined is to be accompanied by new modes of thinking, feeling, and being. Overall, "Hang the DJ" invites us to speculate and embrace the new romantic paradigms and possibilities that this evolutionary process may bring. Not only may the present existing dichotomy between love as "event" and "risks-averse romance" become a false dichotomy for the future (post)human generations, but a VR-mediated actualization of new capacities in the process of 'digital posthuman' becoming could serve as a milestone for a complete departure from the existing modes of romance.

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