Our Black, Imperfect Mirrors

Anthology series, in which each episode features a different plot and cast, are rarer on TV than regular drama serials—which is a pity. One anthology series, Tales of the Unexpected, ran in the UK from 1979 through 1988. I loved it. Written by Roald Dahl, the darkly comic and suspenseful plots always ended with sinister twists.

Tales of the Unexpected was one of the inspirations for Black Mirror, a similarly dark British anthology series that made its debut in 2011. In an interview with the UK’s Guardian, show runner Charlie Brooker explained the series’ philosophy and title:

If technology is a drug—and it does feel like a drug—then what, precisely, are the side-effects? This area—between delight and discomfort—is where Black Mirror, my new drama series, is set. The “black mirror” of the title is the one you’ll find on every wall, on every desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, or a smartphone.

The plot of the first episode of the second season, “Be Right Back,” is set in motion when Martha, a newly widowed art director, signs up for a service that enables the bereaved to continue conversing with a deceased loved one through emails, phone calls, texts, and social media posts. The deceased’s new, simulated communications are based on his old, real communications.

As is the case with William Gibson’s late-period novels, the advanced technologies in Black Mirror are plausibly within reach. Today’s machine-learning algorithms could improve to the point that they could passably simulate half of an ongoing conversation. Indeed, in August 2015, the BBC reported a modest step toward that goal: Portuguese developer Henrique Jorge has created ETER9, a program that analyzes your past Facebook posts and generates new ones in perpetuity.

The ephemeral nature of much of popular culture would soon render ETER9’s posts from beyond the grave out of date. Even if you did know about Alex from Target or Hot Mugshot Guy—to name two Internet memes of 2014—it’s likely that they’ve left your mind forever a year later.

What’s more, a machine-learning algorithm is limited by what it’s fed. My wife, Jan, and I talk so much in person—notably over the dinner table—that the messages we exchange over devices tend to be cursory reminders and notifications, such as “Peanut butter” or “ETA 6:10,” scant fodder for synthesizing a convincing collocutor. And if you happen to read my posts on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, you’ll learn little about my thoughts on politics, religion, or sex.

In “Be Right Back,” Martha goes on to upgrade the messaging service to take delivery of a walking, talking replica of her dead husband, Ash, who was unusually voluble and revealing online. Replicating me would require looking beyond what’s reflected in a black mirror.

Charles Day is Physics Today’s new editor-in-chief. The views he expresses in this column are his own and not those of either Physics Today or the American Institute of Physics.