Teaching Note

Black Dreams, Electric Mirror: Cross-Cultural Teaching of State Terrorism and Legitimized Violence

S. M. Rodriguez[1]

Abstract

Sci-fi has the power to open dialogue because its alternate world-building enables students to feel far enough from reality to discuss social problems unreservedly. In this essay, I review an assignment I developed using *Black Mirror* and *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams* that present episodes in which militarized policing, segregation, and genocide occur with the consent and complicity of populations convinced that these measures enable their safety. Paralleling U.S. carceralism, the fictional communities have been inundated with media and political advertising for greater segregation but have themselves never experienced the criminalized violence that justifies widespread state harms. Through a generative dialogue engaging the media, a discussion question, and the concept of state terrorism, students move to observe their positionality and critically assess state violence. Therefore, I recommend this teaching tool for any critical instructors—especially minoritized professors teaching primarily White classrooms—to inspire a stimulating dialogue in service of connection-making and peacemaking in the classroom.

Keywords

critical criminology, sci-fi, state terrorism, dystopia, antiviolence, peacemaking

As a Black, queer, and trans scholar teaching critical criminology and sociology of violence to predominantly White, cis, and straight students, I use popular media to facilitate cross-cultural conversations and sociological critiques of our society. This allows for us to see how, even though we share a society, we can have drastically divergent views of the processes of policing, segregation through criminalization, and warmaking.

Teaching horror and dystopia has also, importantly, served as a humanizing tool: Long Island students get to release some of their anxieties around being taught by a non-White person for (usually) the first time. They have been inundated by messages that White is the color of objectivity and expertise and that everyone labeled as *other* has an agenda. This complicates teaching sociology as it relates to crime, policing, and prisons

because our society has sharply delineated the Black from the "Blue," the "radical" from the reasonable. In "Peacemaking in the Classroom," Hal Pepinsky (2006) positions warmaking and peacemaking as intentional and attitudinal attributes that prevail in criminology classes. Pedagogical peacemaking focuses on how to encourage students to let their guard down and "make relationships warmer and most secure," whereas "warmaking focuses on

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[1]London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Corresponding Author:
S. M. Rodriguez, Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science, Pankhurst House, Clement Inn, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: s.rodriguez9@lse.ac.uk

how to identify, subdue, isolate, and convert personal enemies" (Pepinsky 2006:428). This rings especially true in criminology, when moralistic initiative often drives both student registration and the mission of teaching about "criminal" deviance, modifying "criminal behavior," or how to correct and discipline others.

PEACEMAKING CRIMINOLOGY THROUGH POPULAR MEDIA

There is a long history of teaching social problems, politics, and conflict through popular media in sociology classrooms (Greenberg 1975; Hall and Lucal 1999; Livingston 2004; Milstead et al. 1974). Asking students to immerse themselves intentionally in selected media alongside theory can permit them to "'experience' situations that are uncommon in their daily lives" (Collett, Kelly and Sobolewski 2010) and apply critical sociological and criminological thinking (Howes 2017). Although this experience is not firsthand and embodied, the student ability to connect with a fictional character can help their perspective broaden beyond the limits of their own experience and worldviews. Indeed, this is a goal of critical thinking in criminology, which can inform students' ethical sensibilities (Howes 2017). Similarly, peacemaking criminology imagines a humanist ethic explicitly belongs in the classroom (Wozniak 2000).

The field of criminology has grown to value using media and popular culture to teach about state technologies, ethics, and violence (Birch-Baley 2012; Hubner, Leaning, and Manning 2015). However, certain genres—particularly science fiction—have been neglected (Laz 2020). In its alternate worldmaking, science fiction has the ability to "estrange" students, allowing them to emotionally divest in an unfamiliar society while often wrestling with at least some familiar situational and ethical concerns (Laz 2020). For example, Sami Schalk (2018:17) argues that the dystopian thriller *The Girl with All the Gifts* "provides a particularly interesting and important avenue for interrogating the social construction and mutual constitution of…systems of privilege and oppression," especially (dis)ability, race, and gender. Similarly, social thrillers such as *Get Out* (2017) have been used in classrooms to effectively discuss racism and White privilege (Wolf 2017). Therefore, these neglected genres have been found to aid analysis of many important vectors of power in our society.

Offering popular visual media with applied theorization in the classroom has also been found to help students reevaluate their interpretations of media that they had viewed independently prior to the course (Atherton 2013). When I apply a *methodology of connection* (Rodriguez 2019) to my pedagogy, I actively question the teaching devices available that may advance my goal of connecting student histories to structural causes of experiential and aspirational difference. That is, I intentionally question how I can connect experience to data, to theory, to my students' realities, and to the collective social conscience of the classroom. I ask students to connect to the *other*. This is particularly critical as someone who never attended a private school but teaches at one; someone queer from an Afro-Latinx and Black immigrant family but teaching and learning with intergenerationally local students from affluent and predominantly White towns within Long Island who have chosen to attend a private, midsized, regional university. As a sci-fi, thriller, and fantasy enthusiast, I quickly turned to two innovative anthology series that question violence and securitization in dystopian societies: *Black Mirror* (Netflix) and *Electric Dreams* (U.K. Channel Four or U.S. Prime Video).

I regularly used this assignment in Introduction to Criminology, a course that consistently overenrolled beyond its maximum of 36 students. I asked students to watch the shows at home and specified that they should be somewhere that feels safe and relatively private because of displays of violence and sexuality. They then are expected to complete a blog post and engage in in-class discussions. Lastly, I encouraged them to follow with an extra credit reflection essay that refines their thoughts and demonstrates their skills with written synthesis. Rather than evaluate the mandatory elements for a grade, I avoid the potentially coercive and disciplinary elements of grading (Alonso Bejarano and Soderling 2021) and instead give students points for completing the assignment in its entirety and engaging genuinely and analytically (Pepinsky 2006). This aids the peacemaking process and raises the potential that even "law'n'order proponents begin to declare genuine interest" in peace and social justice (Pepinsky 2013:331). As experienced by Hal Pepinsky (2013:331) and written in "Peacemaking Criminology," I also benefited from the alternative grading process for contentious subjects and "certainly learned new ways to talk about peacemaking that students respected enough to hear regardless of whether they agreed."

By the midpoint of the semester, when I use this assignment, students have read that the maintenance of the criminal justice system relies on four

prominent mythmakers in society (Kappeler and Potter 2017). The first—the government—controls the process of criminalization and handpicks certain crimes on which to publish data. Second, the media circulates messaging on crime filtered disproportionately through a racialized and classist lens (Bhatia, Poynting, and Tufail 2018; Brewer and Heitzeg 2008). Next, the elite fund the government and the media to downplay the number of crimes and extent of damage caused by the most privileged in society (Beirne and Messerschmidt 2014; Hamm 2006). Lastly, our own families and immediate social groups condition us to accept a version of reality determined by our social locations: our socioeconomic statuses, races, immigrant statuses, genders and sexualities, and so on (Kappeler and Potter 2017).

Through this sociological understanding, the course disrupts the assumption that *violence* (or crime) narrowly describes an interpersonal act disproportionately engaged in by marginalized people. This disruption can be very difficult for students, who—even when open-minded—are inclined to pathologize poor people and people of color and therefore try and fix "their" particular cultural maladies. Instead, I point to structural forms of violence implicated in a breadth of harms. The farthest reaching harms, of course, require the farthest systemic access: the more expansive the capacity of a harm-doer, the more pervasive the possible damage (Beirne and Messerschmidt 2014). This implicates the political and corporate elite, who can mobilize violence workers to protect material resources and political economic investments (Seigel 2018). Therefore, I construct a curriculum that leads students to look at the role of the state in creating, modeling, and maintaining violence. To take this structural perspective, we must fix our attention to the state's tactics to legitimize and launder the harmful actions done to preserve nationalism and statehood (Blakeley 2012). We need to understand the ideology that protects the state's ability to legitimate its own violence.

BLACK MIRROR MEETS *ELECTRIC DREAMS*: THE MEDIA

Black Mirror's "Men Against Fire" (Verbruggen 2016) delivers an episode set in a highly technological society at war. The thriller follows a soldier named Stripe who has received a tech implant that supports his success and efficiency as a warrior. The implant, called a MASS, replays the slow-motion dream (or memory) of his beautiful lover; it

offers conscious and subconscious, perception- and emotion-based modifications that lead to physiological advantages. The soldiers' task is to exterminate "roaches"—mutated humans who spread diseases and terrorize civil townships without remorse. This "terrorism" has a palpable feel: Citizens are fearful of attacks, children are disoriented, townspeople want to feel secure. The initial call that summons the troops? *Stolen food from a pantry and a cooler that has been stripped for parts.* At the beginning of the episode, the viewer sees roaches in the same way that Stripe does: snarling, translucent-white creatures with jagged teeth and soggy skin. However, they are being sheltered in a human home by a man (*home-grown terrorist?*) keen to protect them.

When a "roach" sabotages the protagonist's implant with an electromagnetic pulse, Stripe begins to see that they are human. Although he is able to fervently kill two in his early mission, he later begins to hesitate in combat. Stripe inevitably realizes that the technology has manipulated his sense of reality, quite literally altering what he sees. Distraught, he realizes that he has been ruthlessly murdering regular people who have been navigating the repercussions of state-led labeling. Ultimately, when faced with the choice to have his memory and implant reset or go to prison, he chooses the former and eventually rises in military rank.

In the second assigned material—"Safe and Sound" (Taylor 2018)—a naïve teenager migrates with her cynical mother to a society that construes her home as a hotbed of terrorism, full of uncivilized people who hate technology. The backdrop of the bizarre, futuristic society, at all times, displays media-driven messaging about terrorism and violence that is fomenting underground. Although no one has ever witnessed a violent event of the kind that they're made to fear, they are always aware of the omnipresent and ever-growing crime trend. The theme—"fear sells"—is understood as the motivating factor of state-corporate collaboration.

The girl, Foster, begins to attend high school with cool, comfortable urbanites who have never left their anxious, safety-driven region. When stopped and searched at a futuristic version of metal detectors at the school, the teenager decides to sign up for a safety device called a Dex, which has a "Hear Gel" that would stay on her body and track her biometrics and actions 24/7. Through the device, a customer service/state agent contacts Foster and assures her that he is always available to her. The agent manipulates her into believing that

there is a terrorist conspiracy that her mother and all non-Dex students are in on and that she must carry out a bombing attempt to facilitate the state in apprehending her terrorist mother. An obvious setup to get Foster to engage in an act of attempted terrorism, the techno-government twists the event to advertise a successfully thwarted terrorist event. The young girl is upheld as a symbol of the bravery of would-be terrorists who ultimately defect and work with the state.

BLACK DREAMS/*ELECTRIC MIRROR*: GUIDING STUDENT ANALYSIS

The two episodes, alongside each other, offer a glimpse into the technologically facilitated bombardment of messaging that supports labeling, surveillance, segregation, and violence. They allow me to teach the logic of criminalization and the utility of fear in perpetuating segregationist and militarized politics. Rather than pursue the obvious route and discuss genocide, I actually prefer to guide the conversation to the mundane realities in which my students live. Although they, in the privileged bubble of a highly segregated region, have never experienced robbery, murder, or the crimes of "stranger-danger," they strongly support the surveillance of the "other" and regimes of segregation (through imprisonment and racialized housing and schooling policies). They willingly sign up to bolster surveillance knowing that they aren't society's "roaches" and that even when obviously engaging in criminalized activity, they are not the target of the state's violence. The seduction of this warmaking, in fact, becomes part of why the field of criminology has experienced an explosion of student enrollment. As I regularly surveyed students on why they register for criminology on the first day of class, roughly 60 percent cited their aims to join the police and FBI or enjoyment of television that centers fictionalized violence and apprehending the terrorist, criminals, and predators.

The two-part conversation that follows revolves around a simple question: What factors block our recognition of state terrorism? Students must first blog their initial synthesis on the course's Blackboard, which is ungraded but visible to others who have uploaded. The blog's only purpose is to ensure that they've individually engaged in the assignment and necessary reflection and are prepared for discussion. They then share their thoughts and perspectives in class, in small group and then collective conversation. Within each response to this question, everyone must retrace definitions of

political and state violence, state terrorism, and the role of mythmaking in the legitimization of this violence. The guidelines state that students must answer the question while referencing the shows, the textbook (Kappeler and Potter 2017) and assigned article (Blakeley 2012), and our actual society. The parallels drawn to "real life" must be concrete and explicit.

I assign Ruth Blakeley's article "State Violence as State Terrorism" (2012), which inspires many questions about what constitutes state terrorism and the utility of the concept. Although it is a difficult piece for many undergraduates, I believe it to be an essential text in Introduction to Criminology. The key conceptual puzzle lies in questioning the viability of *state terrorism*, given the state's monopoly on legitimate violence. Is it possible? Blakeley argues yes, and the majority of students come to agree. Is it common? Students disagree. Is it inevitable? Occasionally, but rarely, students may conclude that it is, following the more anarchic logic that states are inherently violent. Most interestingly: Can we look at the same social or political event with drastically different lenses? Indeed, more often than not.

Blakeley (2012) argues that state terrorism mirrors non-state terrorism in nearly every way: It is the enactment of violence on a specific target, on behalf of the state, intended to inspire a fear that can be utilized to control the behavior of ae larger group. However, this is exactly the objective of the criminal justice principle that we call *general deterrence*: a normalized ideology of state violence, where the state punishes individuals—often publicly—with the aim of denouncing a form of behavior. In publicly arresting a person on suspicion of X behavior and detaining that person in the well-known institutional depravity of Riker's Island, the state communicates to the general public that it finds X behavior intolerable. When the state disproportionately rounds up innocent, indigent Black and Latino men for pretrial detention, what does it communicate and to whom? Is this state terrorism?

Blakeley (2012) argues that what differentiates state terrorism from non-state terrorism is precisely what makes it controversial to assert that any state terrorism exists at all: the violence used against the targeted individual (or community) must be *illegal*. As the state determines legality or legitimacy from illegality or illegitimacy and as mythmakers work in tandem to support, justify, or cast doubt on the intentionally harmful actions of the state, the allegation of state terrorism becomes more difficult to

make. In class, we run through several examples that demonstrate exactly how nebulous "terrorism" can be, especially when we remove the label from a particular racialized ethno-religious group and apply it to those the society has labeled "the good guys." However, through discussion, we can also identify to whom those guys are meant to be good. Occasionally, through self-reported victimizations by state violence that inevitably come out in class, we can also see how those who are racialized, queer, and/or low income disproportionately experience terror and therefore more often argue that "terror" is a useful lens for violence orchestrated by state forces.

With the episodes, we open conversation with forms of violence that would be considered unlawful even under the framework of "legitimate" violence. Students agree that the orchestration of a terrorist attack, using a child to apprehend suspects who have not "earned" their criminal labels (*Electric Dreams*), and a genocidal war project to annihilate people constructed as harmful for their genetic makeup (*Black Mirror*) are illegal engagements, even for states. I guide students to consider international conventions or domestic laws that evidence the illegitimacy of these actions. We then discuss the actual factors that block the recognition for the protagonists, the supporting characters, and then the general communities presented. They may point to the MASS, the Dex, the backdrop of advertisements against terrorism, the peace and prosperity in Safe and Sound, or the inverse in "Men Against Fire," the war-torn township plagued with scarcity.

The technological innovation, the media, the threat of disruption to peace, and imagined or real scarcity all lead characters to complicity with or justification of state terrorism. Notably, if students realize that the civilians in "Men Against Fire" don't have a MASS implant, they are able to question the power of mythmaking. The fictional communities actually see that their armies are slaughtering people but are inundated with messaging around how these "others" are deadly, a label that transforms and dehumanizes the people as effectively as the MASS does. Perhaps they cannot kill "roaches" themselves, but they are complicit in the killing inasmuch as they believe it will bring them comfort or safety. In class, students have reflected on which technologies in society help create figurative monsters out of people and how such technologies lead to the acceptance of mass removal by incarceration and death by police and military killings. At times, students trace each

other's arguments about the fictional townspeople who call in the troops for stolen cooler parts alongside their growing interest in the American cultural debate about "Karens"—White women who call the police to enact potentially deadly violence on people of color for minor inconveniences. As such, the conversation was not limited to the assigned materials but, rather, integrated perspectives that Generation Z students develop using social media platforms such as TikTok.

For another added dimension, students can also think through the positions of the characters who knew all along about the state terrorism and were implicated in continuing the projects. In the cases of these shows, the answer aligns very well with our course texts, which stress the role of authority and institutionalization in the circulation of crime myths (Kappeler and Potter 2017). In *Electric Dreams*, this implicated the government agents who manipulated Foster by communicating through the Hear Gel. In *Black Mirror*, this included the military psychologist. In both, we see the percolation of institutional otherizing into community members' assumptions, rumors, and anxieties about crime. Students typically analyze these dynamics with enthusiasm, especially when allowed to bring up aspects of the shows that intrigued them.

When we move into more grounded analyses of our own realities, student judgment diverges. I guide the conversation away from the fantasy episodes by offering my own experience being stopped and frisked or experiencing pretext stops—an unfailingly "surprising" confession for students who believe that only those who "deserve" harm (Black, poor men or other, "criminal elements" of society without a PhD) experience injustice. I ask if these mundane aspects of our everyday society can constitute "state terrorism"—as neither are constitutional practices and both enact targeted violence on individuals to communicate to larger groups who may identify with those victimized. Importantly, the fear that the state creates, be it the lights on a police car that has been tailing a Black person or the worry that they may plant drugs on you during a frisk, is both instrumental and political. The question becomes: What must happen for either instance to amount to state terrorism? Must one be killed from the aftermath of a pretext stop, like Sandra Bland, or choked out during a stop and frisk? Does detention constitute violence? Is the psychological damage of constant and discriminatory surveillance violent enough? Or rather than the severity of violence in a particular interaction,

can the mere repetition, the state of consistent worry due to living with so many named examples of other individuals, reveal that I wasn't the target even when I was stopped but rather a member of the representative group? Perhaps these distinctions matter less in the real world than they do in theory.

Altogether, I leave students with the option of exploring the debate further by examining other criminal justice operations for extra credit in a reflection essay. I offer two staple examples, with a rotating third. The first, the bombing of the MOVE home and headquarters in Philadelphia, 1985, is a significant recent event that, in five years of teaching the course, none of my White students had heard of—despite the recognition by students of color. The lives of six adults and five children and 65 homes of predominantly Black people were taken by the police who used two bombs and 10,000 rounds of ammunition to execute arrest warrants for the group. Labeled terrorists for their political messaging of communalism, racial justice, and animal sovereignty, MOVE allows for a very interesting argument in class on whether the "public nuisance" deserves the same constitutional rights as those who are "politically correct" in their activism. The other staple example is the operation of Homan Square in Chicago, a Chicago PD black site that has detained 3,500 Americans for minor transgressions without regular access to lawyers, family members, or phone calls (Ackerman and Stafford 2015).

Importantly, I offer no "final judgment" on the answer. There isn't a hard *yes* or *no* in my class, no true or false determination that will make or break their grades. There is only consideration, connection, and new possibilities opened by dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This assignment, although designed in an in-person Introduction to Criminology class, can also be applied in other settings and related fields. It translates easily to an online class because most components are already asynchronous. An instructor could modify the small group discussions so that they occur asynchronously over the course of a few days or hold the discussion synchronously via Zoom and use breakout rooms for the small group deliberations. Because it was developed for a criminology program embedded in a sociology department, the assignment translates to other common sociological courses, such as those focused on human rights, technology, conflict, urban society, or media. It would also be exceedingly useful in criminal justice programs, where questions of

peacemaking, justice, and ethics need to be centered explicitly for those desiring to enter justice and violence work (Barton et al. 2010; Howes 2017; Pepinsky 2013).

When using dystopian fantasy, instructors must provide tools to apply critical thinking to conversation. However, of equal import, we must become active listeners. Ask fewer questions, do not overdetermine the conversation, and instead, reflect student thought back to them for a generative, dialectal process. Given the many layers of power that enter the classroom (disability, gender, racial, and ethnic difference), it is important that we facilitate the necessary shifts to create a safer space for those who face compounded, structural vulnerabilities. However, considering how these dynamics may interact with the power imbalance of professor-student, we need tools to support students in dropping their guards and readiness to attack, such as a reconsidered grading process. Instructors should consider how to collectively contribute to the project of peacemaking, which I argue here that sci-fi and fantasy may have an important role to play.

Dystopian fantasy provides the perfect *in* for cross-cultural connection-making in the classroom. Students, who often are prepared for warmaking in the class, are disarmed by the applicability of sci-fi's messaging to the world that we share. Although it can be incredibly difficult for racially and economically privileged students to connect with professors from different backgrounds, I have found that *Black Mirror* and *Electric Dreams* offer an opportunity to consider "Black dreams" as a form of peacemaking and an "electric mirror" able to jolt us into groundbreaking self-reflection.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

S. M. Rodriguez is assistant professor of gender, rights, and human rights at the London School of Economics and Political Science. They are a sociologist and critical criminologist who questions justice paradigms, penal abolition, and antiviolence practices among racialized, disabled, and queer people.