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Paper Proposal "Climate Change: Views from the Humanities"

An Environmental Utopia: *Black Mirror* and the "Trouble with Wilderness"

BBC's science fiction series *Black Mirror*, a series of episodes internally connected only by their figuration of deeply disconcerting futures, has been a widely successful and global phenomenon. In my paper, I propose to read perhaps the most disturbing of these episodes, "Fifteen Million Merits," an episode that satirizes a whole series of contemporary phenomena, from the music provider Spotify's manner of advertising to the popular show *American Idol*. The brutal manner in which *Black Mirror* treats its protagonists and the world's they inhabit is more, I argue, than a satire of capitalism. In circumspect but nevertheless visible ways, it engages with the question of an environmental utopia, and what this might mean. In doing so, it relies and reinterprets the traditional glossing of the word "utopia" as "good place" and "no-place," with the latter term of the dyad also meaning "fictional place." However, as the final minutes of "Fifteen Million Merits" reveal, the no-place of an environmental utopia might very well be a "no-place for humans," an earth where humans refrain from any interaction with the environment at all, having locked their whole species in a concrete bunker that only provides simulacra of the natural environmental, but not the real thing. Thus, the episode inverts a dimension of ecocriticism that asserts that the best way of protecting the natural "wilderness" is to stay away from it altogether. In doing this, *Black Mirror* literalizes William Cronon's critique of "wilderness" in contemporary ecocritical discourse.

Ben Van Overmeire studied Germanic Languages and Literatures at the Free University of Brussels (VUB). He then came to the US funded by a scholarship of the Belgian American Education Foundation, and completed his MA-degree in Comparative Literature at Stony Brook University. Currently he is enrolled in the PhD-program in Literature at the University of California: San Diego, where he is finishing his dissertation on the interpretation of Zen Buddhist koans in the twentieth century.

I have viewed the sample video and I agree both to the above conference requirements and to allow my filmed talk to be posted to the conference website, as well as the conference's Vimeo and YouTube accounts.