



## Xenofeminism as Methodology in Film Studies: An Initial Exploration

**Abstract:** This paper seeks to initiate a discussion on whether xenofeminist theory can serve as a methodological tool for film studies, specifically through its core tenets: gender abolition, anti-naturalism, and technomaterialism. Xenofeminism challenges traditional gender roles and naturalistic determinism, urging us to reconsider their portrayal on screen. Technomaterialism challenges the idea that digital interactions are separate from the physical world by focusing on the material conditions of digital culture. I argue that integrating xenofeminism into film studies fosters nuanced understandings of gender, technology, and societal norms, enriching cinematic analysis. The paper also offers a technomaterialist reading of one of the Netflix's *Black Mirror* episodes, “Joan Is Awful.”

**Keywords:** xenofeminism, methodology of film studies, technomaterialism, *Black Mirror*

### Cyber, Glitch and Techno – Introductory Remarks on Contemporary Feminist Theories

The year 2024 marks the thirtieth anniversary of Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*,<sup>1</sup> which, alongside Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*,<sup>2</sup> redirected, as one might argue, the feminist philosophical deliberations for the decades to come. Both Braidotti's and Haraway's work has led theorists to consider identities as fluid phenomena, resisting categorizations and strict definitions. Braidotti uses the figure of the nomad as a metaphor to describe subjects who navigate and resist fixed identities and boundaries, whereas a cyberfeminist Haraway explores the metaphor of a cyborg as a hybrid of human and machine.

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1. Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

2. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” *Socialist Review* 15, no. 2 (1985), 65–108.

Her cyborg embodies transgression, existing in a space where distinctions are blurred and categories are fluid, let alone post-gender. Both thinkers offer a bold, yet rooted-in-the-everyday-experience change in the direction of the feminist consideration: binary structures of Western thought need to be deconstructed, and gender is a concept to reevaluate taking into account the empowering politics of situatedness and ever increasing influence of technopolitics. That stands in opposition to centuries-long depictions of the duality of gender, challenging dichotomies such as Jung's archetypes of the feminine and masculine, with their distinct features and personalities.<sup>3</sup> Jung's theory posits the existence of inherent psychological structures – the anima and animus – that personify the feminine qualities within men and the masculine qualities within women. This binary framework reinforces a rigid model of gendered traits. Similarly, Plato's Myth of the Androgyne from *Symposium*<sup>4</sup> presents a primordial vision of human beings as originally hermaphroditic entities split into two complementary halves, seeking their counterpart to become one. Jung's and Plato's concepts perpetuate the notion of gender as inherently dualistic and incomplete without its opposite. The emergence of voices that questioned this division paved the way for feminist discourse in the first quarter of the 21st century – the epoch of vibrant, radical and transgressive cyberfeminism-oriented movements attempting at creating an equitable digital world and adhering to the ever changing reality. Cornelia Sollfrank,<sup>5</sup> Anita Sarkeesian,<sup>6</sup> Legacy Russel,<sup>7</sup> and Amelia Winger Bearskin,<sup>8</sup> just to name a few, are all part of that change. They have been given little scholarly consideration so far, yet a clear pattern of shared concerns and projects curated by these technofeminist<sup>9</sup> figures emerges, reflecting their collective and

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3. Carl Gustav Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982).

4. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

5. A German researcher and artists who was one of the pioneers of Internet art in the 1990s.

6. A feminist media critic; she analysed the representation of women in the gaming industry and culture.

7. The founder of the term "glitch feminism"; her work explores the concept of the "glitch" as a means of disrupting normative identity categories. Legacy Russel, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020).

8. An artist and technologist whose work aims at ethical and community-friendly use of AI.

9. I use the term "technofeminism" instead of "cyberfeminism" to underline the broader technological terrain that these scholars and activists engage with, including information technology, industrial technology, biotechnology, and more, beyond just the digital landscape. Judy Wajcman, *Technofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004). There is a litany of definitions of "cyberfeminism," though, just one of them being "a critical engagement with new technologies and their entanglement with power structures and systemic oppression." Mia Consalvo,

individual commitment to leveraging technology for feminist advocacy and activism understood in a way broader sense. Their shared concerns and fields of interests could be summarized as follows: first and foremost, they operate at the intersection of technology and feminism, using digital tools to advance feminist causes and address identity building mechanisms; secondly, they pay special attention to marginalized groups, highlighting the need to construct equitable frameworks for them; thirdly, they aim at utilizing technology as an empowerment tool, and, lastly, they advocate for strengthening communities, valuing cooperation and solidarity.

### Harraway's Disobedient Daughters - Xenofeminism in Theoretical Framework

The *Xenofeminist Manifesto*<sup>10</sup> by the Laboria Cuboniks collective, with Helen Hester as a contributing member, laid the groundwork for theoretical expansion in contemporary feminist discourse. In the opening part of her book, Hester calls xenofeminism (XF) a “bricolage, synthesizing cyberfeminism, posthumanism, accelerationism, neorationalism, materialist feminism, and so on.”<sup>11</sup> This hybridization of approaches allows for a project that adapts to the ever-changing reality and current political conditions. Hester explores three basic pillars of the theory: technomaterialism, anti-naturalism, and gender abolition. (I will explore each of them both as theories that could be applied to everyday challenges and, further, as methodological tools to analyse cultural artefacts.) Further, she expands the concept of xenofeminist futurities, which involves developing “visions of the future that are based upon neither the prescription nor the proscription of human biological reproduction.”<sup>12</sup> Hester claims that technology should be an activist tool. XF emphasizes the tangible, physical aspects of interactions in digital cultures. This means examining the actual hardware, infrastructure, and human elements involved, rather than just the virtual aspects. There is a common misconception that digital interactions and the production of digital content are detached from

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“Cyberfeminism,” *Encyclopedia of New Media* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 108. Hence I argue these terms could be used interchangeably as well.

10. Laboria Cuboniks, “Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation,” <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/> (24.06.2024).

11. Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 1.

12. Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 4.

the physical world, existing in an ethereal space. Technomaterialism challenges this notion. The goal is to anchor digital culture within its physical infrastructure and recognize the material conditions and physical realities of its users and producers. Hester observes that technologies may, but are not always, beneficial, as they are often constrained by social relations. This issue concerns not only society's digital presence, such as social media use, but also how devices and processes are designed and appropriated. Hester draws heavily from Shulamith Firestone's radical manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex*.<sup>13</sup> Both scholars argue that technologies need to serve as social phenomena and undergo transformation so that they do not operate as tools of control. "It is in this spirit that xenofeminism seeks to balance attentiveness to the differential impact technologies can have upon women, queer, and gender non-conforming individuals, with a critical openness to the (constrained but genuine) potential of technologies."<sup>14</sup> That attentiveness may, of course, concern a wider spectrum of struggles and challenges of daily existence. Design oftentimes overlooks the specific needs of different users, particularly women and children. Cars, for instance, are primarily designed with the average male physique in mind, which compromises the safety of women and children in the event of a car accident<sup>15</sup>; furniture size and design in public places do not fit the needs of children; hormonal reproduction aids burden female bodies, although they serve both men and women, etc. This thought can be developed further by considering, for example, how the physical extent of technological intrusion also concerns the very practical commodification and exploitation of human experience through the collection of private data and other forms of privacy intrusion. In many respects the distorted privacy of reproduction stays in the center of Hester's deliberations while discussing XF's principle of anti-naturalism. Following in Firestone's footsteps, she observes that pregnancy is a temporal deformation of the body in the sake of prolonging the existence of species, and it sometimes comes at great cost of pain and health risks.<sup>16</sup> Hester critiques the acceptance of natural laws, arguing that

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13. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Women's Press, 1970).

14. Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 11.

15. Caroline Criado Perez, "The deadly truth about a world built for men – from stab vests to car crashes," *The Guardian*, 23 February 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/feb/23/truth-world-built-for-men-car-crashes> (24.07.2024).

16. While Firestone focuses on bodily repercussions of pregnancy and motherhood (and the need to reclaim liberty and autonomy in that regard) it is worth mentioning another voice from the 1970s discussing motherhood as a social construct – Adrienne Rich in

the pregnancy without conscious intervention is not a phenomenon to be celebrated. She contends that romanticizing gestation and labour is akin to romanticising physical dangers. XF conceptualizes “the body as a potential site for feminist technopolitical intervention” and frames “nature and the natural as a space for contestation.”<sup>17</sup> According to Hester, the glorification of nature has little to offer, and she asserts that biology should not be seen as deterministic. The conservative and corporate interests embedded in biomedical manipulations also fail to provide a viable solution. Instead, Hester advocates for viewing nature as a terrain for emancipatory politics, emphasizing the need for its transformation to achieve reproductive justice. From the commitment to an anti-naturalist approach arises the final postulate: gender abolition. XF does not deny the existence of sexes; women and men possess distinct asymmetrical biological features. However, the development of complex birth control methods has subjected women to discrimination. Hester argues that the category “women” is inadequate and should be broadened to acknowledge “various embodied differences (and the manner in which such differences have been culturally exploited).”<sup>18</sup> XF contends that various traits, including those associated with gender, race, and able-bodiedness, are burdened with social stigma. “The struggle must continue until currently gendered and racialized characteristics are no more a basis of discrimination than the color of one’s eyes or whether one has freckles.”<sup>19</sup> Hester emphasizes that she does not advocate for the eradication of gender; rather, she aims to dismantle the binary understanding and abolish gender through its proliferation. She argues that social order should not be anchored in a gender matrix, as this perpetuates hurtful and limiting social ramifications. Broadening the spectrum of identities and multiplying “the dropdown menu,” as Hester describes it, does not seem to resolve the issue. Indeed, the multiplicity of identities introduces new challenges, as, for example, language<sup>20</sup> and legal systems struggle to keep pace with these changes, inevitably leaving some needs unmet. In a longer run, XF offers refusal to accept any gender system, as it will

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the “Motherhood and Daughterhood” essay (1976) highlights that the experience of motherhood (and daughterhood) has been distorted by the patriarchal hierarchies and advocates for restoring a more authentic bond between mothers and daughters.

17. Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 19.

18. Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 24.

19. Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 30.

20. I refer here to the challenges associated with languages evolving towards greater inclusivity, which presents difficulties, for example, in inflected languages, as well as issues related to the broadening of lexicons.

devoid it of any explanatory and arbitrary power. Hester draws upon Lee Edelman's<sup>21</sup> discussion of the figure of the Child, which represents the horizon of politics, imagination, and potential beneficiaries of the future. Societies that laud this figure tend to support traditional binary family models, as these are perceived as necessary for reproduction. Additionally, environmental activism often elevates prospective future generations as the primary recipients of sacrifices, efforts, and actions. Hester extends this argument, critiquing ecofeminism for linking women to childbirth and, by extension, nurture, thus portraying them as more concerned with ecological issues. This mythologization of motherhood, and its association with the "Mother Earth" concept, is reductive and grounded "in a very particular image of dichotomized reproductive bodies."<sup>22</sup> Hester aligns more closely with the concept of the kin: rather than being bound by biological and heteronormative frameworks, xenofeminist kinship embraces a more inclusive and diverse understanding of familial relationships. This includes chosen families, non-biological connections, and other forms of social bonds that expand traditional definitions of kinship. Hester extensively elaborates on xenofeminist technologies; however, as I do not wish to summarize her book, I will not delve into her discussions on specific technological solutions aligned with the xenofeminist project. It is crucial to highlight the general idea she supports: repurposing existing tools and (re)claiming control over one's reproductive health. One example she discusses is the Del-Em, a menstrual extraction device.<sup>23</sup> Hester views the Del-Em as an empowering tool that enables women to reclaim control over their reproductive health and challenge the medical establishment. She appreciates its roots in collective knowledge-sharing within feminist health groups. The Del-Em represents a critique of the medicalization of women's bodies – while acknowledging the potential risks, Hester argues that the broader implications for medical autonomy are significant. Overall, she sees it as a symbol of feminist resistance and the reappropriation of reproductive health technologies, which lies at the core of xenofeminist philosophy.

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21. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

22. Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 39.

23. Emerged in the 1970s, Del-Em was designed to suction the entire menstruation at once using a syringe and a tube, which would put an end to painful and long menstrual cramps.

## XF's Potential Application in Film Analysis - Questions to Ponder Upon

Feminist film studies have evolved significantly over the years, with psychoanalytic and racial/postcolonial approaches emerging as two primary pillars. In her seminal essay,<sup>24</sup> Laura Mulvey contends that classical Hollywood cinema is crafted to appeal to a heterosexual male audience, positioning women as objects of male desire. Conversely, Jane Gaines<sup>25</sup> critiques the dominance of psychoanalysis in feminist film studies, arguing that it upholds a white feminist perspective and fails to account for other forms of oppression beyond patriarchy. While Mulvey politicizes the act of looking as an exercise of power,<sup>26</sup> Gaines emphasizes the importance of acknowledging various axes of oppression rooted in social, historical, and racial contexts. Columpar further expands on this by noting naturalists' tendency to use visual cues to establish taxonomic boundaries, pointing out that this scopic regime supported both colonialist and anthropological practices in the nineteenth century by maintaining the distance necessary for colonial and discursive authority.<sup>27</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony<sup>28</sup> underscores cinema's role in visualizing and inscribing race, highlighting the significance of fictional narrative films within "ethnographic cinema." These films often depict an ahistorical realm where subjects lack individual voices and are reduced to the status of the Other, thereby primitivizing them. According to Kaplan,<sup>29</sup> the Western audience is subjected to an "imperial gaze" that limits their understanding of cultural differences and reinforces their dominant position.

The above being the 20th century concepts do not account for technology. Cyberfeminism, though, has gradually, yet slowly, made its way into film analysis. There is an emerging body of work and curated festivals that specifically

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24. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 6–18.

25. Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *Cultural Critique* 4 (1986), 59–79.

26. Corinn Columpar, "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, no. 1/2 (2002), 25–44.

27. Columpar, "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory," 34.

28. Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

29. E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

focus on the theorization, critique, and utilization of cyberspace and related audiovisual communication mediums. This area of study examines how women artists, in particular, engage with the internet and new media technologies. It has been explored in experimental films, short films, documentaries, as well as niche and amateur or semi-amateur productions.<sup>30</sup> What I seek to initiate is a discussion on whether xenofeminist theory can serve as a methodological tool for film studies,<sup>31</sup> specifically through its core tenets: technomaterialism, gender abolition, and anti-naturalism. XF as a methodological tool or a theoretical basis for analysis and interpretation may explore the potential impacts and implications of a society devoid of traditional gender constructs and power dynamics, and the role of technology in such transformations. As described above, XF is predicated on three foundational principles: gender abolition, anti-naturalism, and technomaterialism. These principles provide a radical rethinking of societal structures and norms, challenging the conventional biological determinism that underpins gender roles and relations. A key question posed by gender abolition is: What would happen in a realm devoid of gender, gender systems, gender relations, and gender power structures? Would such a reality be dystopian or utopian? This question challenges us to consider the societal implications of erasing conventional gender identities and roles. What if one (or both) of the conventional genders were removed from the equation? The potential to build communities and societies not reliant on biological determinism opens up new avenues for imagining social organization and identity. Anti-naturalism in xenofeminism rejects the idea that natural biological differences should dictate societal roles and structures; this

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30. "Cyberfeminism on film," <https://www.chutecoop.com/cyberfeminism-on-film> (8.08.2024).

31. My decision to focus on film studies, rather than literary studies, is driven by the methodological overlap between the two disciplines, such as narrative or thematic criticism, and their shared concern with text analysis, written or visual. I believe that a xenofeminist approach, which I apply in film studies, could be also effective in literary analysis. It comes as no surprise that it could be particularly fruitful in examining science fiction literature. Works like Olivia Butler's *Kindred*, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* exemplify the potential for xenofeminist critique within literary studies. (I do believe, though, that the analysis may go beyond the science-fiction genre.) However, I chose to begin with film studies as I see significant potential in analysing the film industry as a whole through the lens of the xenofeminist approach. For instance, the use of AI is an increasingly influential factor in various aspects of film production, and discussions of gender representation tend to be more dynamic and prominent in the realm of film compared to literature. Xenofeminist approaches are already present in visual arts – analysing film in that regard seems to be a necessary next step.

perspective prompts us to envision a society in which the stigmas and connotations associated with motherhood do not exist. How would reproduction and kinship be reconceptualized in such a context? The notion of reproduction not being a burdensome risk for women is central to this inquiry, raising questions about alternative reproductive methods and the potential for technology to assist in these processes. Can technology (and, *ipso facto*, our future) be genderless, as proposed by theorists like Hester? Can it undergo a transformation that liberates non-cisgender individuals and women? Do we, as societies and individuals, genuinely realize the extent of algorithmisation and the influence of overarching technology on our lives, along with the profound consequences it has on privacy, familial relations, psychological well-being, personal finance, and other critical aspects of human existence? This perspective may invite us to consider how technology can reshape social norms, support the construction of more inclusive societies, and potentially have a liberating power that enhances well-being on multiple levels. This framework, which advocates for regaining control through technological change, can be integrated into broader discussions on communal healing, self-care, the establishment of safety, etc. I pose, hence, a basic research question: how can this show on screen? It prompts an analysis of whether speculative fiction, as an umbrella genre that explores alternative and speculative futures, is the only suitable material for xenofeminist critique, or whether other genres can also be examined through this framework. How do film narratives, the execution of the *mise-en-scène*, plot developments and situationedness represent these questions and dilemmas?

In the realm of film production, xenofeminist principles can be applied to various aspects such as computer-assisted translation in localization,<sup>32</sup> the casting of non-binary and other-gendered actors, and the use of Artificial Intelligence at all levels of movie production. How do these practices align with the postulates of the xenofeminist manifesto? For instance, the inclusion of non-binary and other-gendered actors challenges traditional gender and/or sexuality representations and promotes greater inclusivity. On the other hand, streaming platforms have commodified that inclusivity and LGBTQ+ content, transforming it into an easily algorithmized category designed to attract younger, liberal-oriented viewers. The use of AI and technology in film

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32. The complexities of localization play a pivotal role in the globalization of content production, necessitating a better understanding of the processes, rules, and values that define contemporary localization practices.

production can also be analysed, assessing how these tools can disrupt traditional gender norms and support a more equitable production environment. By questioning the necessity of gender constructs, rejecting naturalistic determinism, and embracing the transformative power of technology, xenofeminism may offer a radical rethinking of societal norms and structures as portrayed on screen and applied in the movie industry. What I argue is that XF, a frivolous daughter of cyberfeminism, if you will, marches into the mainstream film. The method I propose is a hybridized and inclusive approach, yet this amalgamation does not dilute it as a scholarly tool; rather, it enhances its relevance and applicability to the complex, interdisciplinary problems faced today, which are reflected by onscreen productions, and that, in turn, influences societal attitudes towards these problems. The questions raised here invite further exploration and discussion, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of this theoretical framework. With these questions in mind, I turn to introducing<sup>33</sup> a proposed technomaterialist reading of a mainstream production.

### Joan Is... Aware?

On a closer inspection, there certainly is an abundance of examples of possible xenofeminist readings in the contemporary film with regards to themes, narratives and cinematography. In contemporary television, Netflix's *Black Mirror* stands as a bold commentary on the potential of radical intervention of modern societies. The episode that exemplifies a critique of technology while also showcasing liberation through climactic awakening is "Joan is Awful."<sup>34</sup> The protagonist, Joan, works as a middle-management executive at a tech company in the probably near-future, somewhere in the Anthropocene era-like setting. She discovers that her average life is being dramatized in a new streaming series called *Joan Is Awful*. The series, produced by the fictional streaming service Streamberry uses deepfake technology to recreate her every move, starring Salma Hayek as Joan. As episodes reveal her personal

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33. The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth analysis of selected titles; however, various mainstream (and other) productions can be examined through a xenofeminist lens. The following list is merely a starting point: *Annihilation* (2018), the *Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003), *Raised by Wolves* (2020–2022), *Black Mirror*'s "Nosedive" (2016), *The Circle* (2017), and *The Pod Generation* (2023).

34. *Black Mirror*, "Joan Is Awful," season 6, episode 1, dir. Ally Pankiw, Netflix.

secrets and unflattering moments, Joan faces harsh criticism from her closest circle and her employer. Determined to stop the invasion of her privacy, Joan teams up with a lawyer to confront Streamberry. They uncover that the company's terms of service allow for the exploitation of users' personal data for entertainment purposes.

Joan's middle-class life characterized by a mundane job and a general sense of dissatisfaction, while good in many respects, is marked by typical human flaws. These imperfections are amplified and distorted, which turns her existence into a televised spectacle. This portrayal leads to Joan being harshly judged and ostracized by viewers, reflecting the contemporary culture of online hate and the exploitation of individuals for entertainment and profit. In one of the opening sequences of the episodes, Joan is forced to fire an employee who indirectly works to limit the company's carbon footprint. Although she feels very uncomfortable in this position and one cannot see cruelty in her actions (she just tries to fulfil her duties), later the episode of "Joan Is Awful" twists the scene, making her a corporate villain. The choice of Joan as the protagonist is significant; it underscores how female imperfections are often exploited by high-tech companies to generate clicks and engagement. Streamberry finally openly admits that the "Is Awful" title is used to generate hate, fitting into the modern hate culture where negativity and outrage drive viewership and profits.<sup>35</sup> It is also underscored that Joan was selected for this peculiar project due to her ordinariness and lack of distinction. When she hears this, the viewer may notice how deeply hurt she is. A technomaterialist approach would also highlight this, emphasizing that the algorithmisation of digital presence still concerns humans and profoundly affects their psychological well-being. The cynical use of technology to exploit and commodify personal experience highlights the ethical issues surrounding privacy and consent in the digital age. On a different note, Joan's therapy sessions suggest a sense of operating on autopilot, feeling like a secondary character in her own life. This not only foreshadows the show's narrative – where she discovers she is merely a televised version of an original Joan – but also reflects the broader

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35. Streamberry branding and visuals are deceptively similar to Netflix, which produces the show. *Black Mirror* illustrates a broader and rising trend where media narratives feature corporations as central elements employing self-referential irony. These narratives frequently critique the commodification of various aspects of life, highlighting the ability of corporations to market and sell nearly anything. An example of this trend is the film *Barbie* (2023), which, while focusing on themes of empowerment and feminism, also engages with the commercial aspects of its production.

thematic message. Joan symbolizes individuals, particularly women, who are subjugated by advanced technological systems and structures. Despite having a seemingly satisfactory life with a good job, a secure home, and a relationship, she does not find fulfilment in this societal corsage.

As technology ruins Joan's life on multiple levels, she becomes increasingly desperate and reckless, driven by a sense of having nothing left to lose. The show employs exaggerated black comedy elements and embraces absurdity in its storytelling, which underscores Joan's radical actions and her profound desperation. One of the most striking scenes illustrates this: Joan, in an attempt to get Salma Hayek's attention, dresses as a cheerleader with a penis drawn on her forehead and defecates in a church during a wedding. The obscenity of the scene underscores its radicality; it is a visceral, physical rebellion against the dehumanizing forces controlling her life. This act of defiance signifies a turning point, as Joan takes matters literally into her own hands. This grotesque and absurd act prompts Hayek to consult her lawyer. The lawyer informs her that Streamberry can legally use her likeness in such a manner because she has licensed it to them, demonstrating the pervasive and insidious control the company exerts over individuals' identities. That also poses questions about the future of film industry jobs: the role of an actor, their artistic input into creating a role, the unlimited power over somebody's image to simulate a real person, tricking viewers into believing they see a human being instead of AI generated content, etc. Determined to reclaim agency over her image and career, Hayek meets with Joan, and together they plot to destroy the quantum computer. In the climactic finale, Joan and her counterpart, Source Joan, physically destroy it. This act of violence is a symbolic reclaiming of their narrative and autonomy, as they regain control over the story of their lives.

Central to the narrative is the concept of a "quantum computer" – a perfect, yet sinister AI invention that creates a simulated reality. In this constructed world, there is always a source person, like Joan, whose life is being manipulated. The agents within this simulated reality are unaware of their roles, adding a layer of complexity meant to dilute reality, diffuse responsibility, and divert focus away from the physicality of human experience and the actual harm being caused. This convoluted scheme is designed to obscure the boundaries between reality and simulation, making it difficult to pinpoint accountability and comprehend the true extent of the damage inflicted on individuals like Joan.

The episode concludes with a poignant resolution. In the source reality, Source Joan and Annie Murphy, the actress who portrays her in the series,

celebrate their victory as friends, even though they are under house arrest. This final scene highlights the personal cost of their rebellion but also underscores the sense of empowerment and liberation they achieve. Source Joan starts a coffee shop, fulfilling a dream she once shared with her therapist. This return to a simpler, non-technological endeavour emphasizes themes of sisterhood, communal living, and the value of old-school, tangible pursuits. The characters' journey from exploitation and despair to empowerment and fulfilment serves as a powerful critique of the impact of technology on personal autonomy and the importance of human connection and authenticity. Technomaterialism manifests in a literal sense as media directly embody Joan's experiences, with digital culture forcibly entering her life and mimicking her in every possible way; Joan effectively becomes the "physical infrastructure," as Hester would put it. The ridiculousness of the whole situation, yet somehow its disturbing closeness to modern human experience, and the inability to act in a reasonable way pushes Joan to the point where she no longer cares about the outcome; as if she was pushed to the extreme beyond which there is no acceptable reality. Overall, the narrative of "Joan Is Awful" challenges viewers to reflect on the ethical implications of surveillance, data privacy, and the commodification of individual lives for entertainment. It underscores the need for stronger ethical standards and regulatory measures to protect individuals from the invasive reach of technology companies. The story suggests those measures will not come by themselves; quite the opposite – complex agreements tech companies "sign" with their users work against the latter and protect only the powerful players. The only solution, the show creators seem to suggest, is bold rebellion and enforcing transformative actions – disrupting the system, altering the dynamics to empower the underprivileged and leveraging technology to their advantage. In my reading of this *Black Mirror* episode I refer to techno-materialism, xenofeminism as a critique of technology both as a liberating force and a tool of exploitation, and the concept of the body as something malleable, flexible, and open to transformation through technology. The episode critiques how individuals are increasingly defined and shaped by their digital presence and virtual simulations. From a xenofeminist perspective, this is a critique of the way technology and the digital world are often used to enforce normative standards of behaviour and appearance, especially around gender. The climactic destruction of the quantum computer by Joan and Source Joan can be viewed as a radical act of feminist rebellion, in line with xenofeminist ideals.

## Coda

In exploring the applicability of xenofeminism as a methodological framework within film studies, I aimed to shed light on how this far-reaching and transformative theory might enrich the reading of movies. I have considered how the principles of gender abolition, anti-naturalism, and technomaterialism can provide insights into the portrayal and critique of societal structures and technological influences in film. Xenofeminism, with its emphasis on the transformative potential of technology and its challenge to traditional gender and naturalistic frameworks, offers a provocative lens through which to view filmic narratives and aesthetics. By envisioning a world where traditional gender roles and naturalistic determinism are contested and redefined, XF encourages us to question how these dynamics are represented on screen and how they might be reimaged.

The concept of gender abolition poses a fundamental challenge to the binary understanding of gender, inviting us to consider how films depict and engage with gender constructs. In a world envisioned by XF, where gender is no longer a rigid binary but a spectrum or even an obsolescent concept, film analysis can explore how narratives and characterizations reflect or resist these possibilities. Anti-naturalism within XF further complicates the portrayal of biological determinism in film. By rejecting the notion that natural differences should dictate social roles and structures, XF calls us to interrogate how films perpetuate or challenge the romanticisation of biological processes, such as reproduction. In the context of film studies, this could mean analysing how films portray motherhood, reproductive technologies, and the ways in which these elements are either constrained by or liberated from traditional biological and cultural expectations.

Technomaterialism, as articulated by Hester, underscores the importance of grounding digital and technological experiences within their material contexts. In film analysis, this principle invites viewers and critics to consider not only the narrative and aesthetic implications of technology but also its physical and infrastructural dimensions. Films that depict technological advancements, digital interfaces, or virtual realities can be analysed through XF's technomaterialist lens to uncover how these representations reflect or challenge the material conditions and social implications of technology. The practical application of XF to contemporary titles, such as "Joan is Awful," illustrates the framework's potential for revealing new dimensions of critique. The discussed episode touches upon the commodification and surveillance inherent

in modern technological solutions, reflecting the xenofeminist concern with the ethical implications of technology and its impact on personal autonomy. The narrative's exploration of privacy invasion and data exploitation aligns with XF's focus on technomaterialism, emphasizing the need to understand technology not as a disembodied force but as a material and social phenomenon that physically affects human lives. Moreover, the episode's depiction of Joan's struggle against a system that exploits her personal data and dehumanizes her underscores XF's critique of traditional power structures and the potential for technology to either reinforce or disrupt these dynamics. The radical, absurdist actions taken by Joan reflect a xenofeminist spirit of rebellion against oppressive systems, highlighting the transformative potential of reclaiming control over one's narrative and identity.

By integrating xenofeminism into film studies, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of how films engage with issues of gender, technology, and societal norms. This approach not only enriches our analysis of filmic texts but also contributes to broader discussions about the role of cinema in shaping and reflecting cultural attitudes towards these issues. XF's interdisciplinary nature, combining elements of cyberfeminism, posthumanism, and technomaterialism, offers an adaptable framework for examining film and media. Future research in this area could further explore how xenofeminism intersects with other theoretical frameworks and how its principles can be applied to a wider range of film genres and contexts, which both reflect and influence our evolving relationship with technology and identity.

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## Filmography

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