When Code Replaces Scripture

Black Mirror, Technology and the Specter of Christianity

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In appreciation

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Abstract

This thesis analyzes 12 episodes from the dystopian science fiction anthology series, *Black Mirror* (2011-present). Episodes selected are those that, as argued in this text, depict the role of technology as replacing that of traditional religion, namely Christianity. The importance of looking at these episodes together becomes clear when considering contemporary debates around technology and our collective technological aims. The analysis of individual episodes forms a foundation for the reading of *Black Mirror* and its technology within the framework of Christian concepts. Episodes are compared to the Christian concepts they mirror, historical events and theological debates within Christianity, and contemporary trends and events relating to technology. Throughout the history of western civilization, Christian belief has played an important role in shaping cultural ideologies particularly conceptions of death, suffering, and humanity's place in the world; these ideas continue to penetrate cultural narratives today, despite declining self-recognition in the west as *religious*.

KEYWORDS: *Black Mirror*, science fiction, dystopian futures, technology, Christianity, Christian theology, history of Christianity

Resum

Aquesta tesi analitza el paper de la tecnologia en substitució del de la religió cristiana a través de 12 episodis de la sèrie de ciència-ficció *Black Mirror* (2011-present). La importància d'analitzar aquests episodis en conjunt es fa evident quan es consideren debats contemporanis entorn de la tecnologia i els nostres objectius tecnològics collectius. Es comparen els episodis amb conceptes cristians que reflecteixen, els esdeveniments històrics i els debats teològics del cristianisme i les tendències i esdeveniments contemporanis relacionats amb la tecnologia. Històricament, el cristianisme ha configurat la ideologia cultural d'occident, com les concepcions de la mort, el sofriment i el lloc de la humanitat al món; aquestes idees continuen penetrant en les narratives culturals actuals, tot i disminuir l'autoreconeixement d'Occident com a *religiós*.

PARAULES CLAU: *Black Mirror*, ciència-ficció, futurs distópics, tecnologia, cristianisme, teologia cristiana, història del cristianisme

Extended Abstract

This thesis analyzes 12 episodes from the dystopian science fiction anthology series, *Black Mirror* (2011-present). The episodes selected are those that, as argued in this text, depict the role of technology as replacing that of religion. The importance of looking at these episodes together becomes clear when considering contemporary debates around technology and our collective technological aims. The analysis of individual episodes form a foundation for the reading of *Black Mirror* and its technology within the framework of Christian concepts. To build this argument, the episodes are compared to one another, Christian concepts they mirror, historical events related to theological debates within Christianity, and contemporary trends and events relating to technology. Throughout the history of western civilization, Christian belief has played an important role in shaping cultural ideologies particularly conceptions of death, suffering, and humanity's place in the world.[1] It could be argued that Christian ideas continue to penetrate cultural narratives today, despite declining self-recognition in the west as *religious* or *spiritual*.

Christian concepts including the *afterlife*, *omniscience*, *vengeance*, *ostracism* and *eternal suffering* spring up in some of the least expected places within contemporary popular culture today.[2] *Black Mirror* takes on these concepts, among others, as detailed in this thesis. However, instead of the Christian God fulfilling or carrying out these religious notions, technology plays the role of God within the series, bringing these concepts to fruition—only feasible by technology's hand. Furthermore, Christianity has played a key role in social control throughout history; this research also considers the ways that technology mirrors other Christian concepts such as *devotion*, *piety*, *sacrifice* and *obedience*. *Black Mirror* depicts the materialization of all these concepts through imagined worlds, signaling the lingering traces of their origin.

Considered in three parts following on from the literature review, this thesis will first look at the God-like powers that technology brings to life within the episodes (Part II: What Technology and Christianity Offer). Next, this thesis will look at the requirements and social behavior solicited by these technologies (Part

[1]Throughout this text the capitalized *God* will be used to refer specifically to the biblical Christian deity, whereas *god* or *gods* will be used in instances where the concept of a deity in a more general sense is considered.

[2]For these reasons, this thesis will use Christian concepts instead of those from other religions, although it is possible that these comparisons could be made using other belief structures as the point of comparison. In addition, when considering a concept that is exclusive to a particular branch within Christianity (Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Christianity, etc.) the denominational reference will be given to clarify that it is a concept particular to a specific branch. Largely, the focus of this paper will be placed on Western Christian concepts specific to Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as the many denominations considered to fall within Protestant belief.

III: What Technology and Christianity Demand) and then the darker punishments these technologies carry out (Part IV: The Consequences of Transgression). These distinctions between the seemingly positive outcomes in Part II and the negative outcomes in Part IV can be tied together by the notion of social control in Part III. These contrasts between the three parts of the thesis allows us to see the referential relationships between technology in the series and Christian concepts more clearly. Each of the parts will consider four episodes of *Black Mirror*, highlighting the most significant concepts as related to the technology in the given episode and how that technology relates to a major Christian concept.

Collectively, the three primary parts (Parts II-IV) form a foundation for the reading of *Black Mirror* and its usage of technology within the framework of Christian concepts. Likewise, the importance of looking at these episodes together becomes clear as we consider contemporary debates around technology and our collective technological aims. This model of analysis—comparing the use of technology within *Black Mirror* to Christian concepts—allows for an interesting consideration of the larger role that technology has come to play within contemporary western culture, which is often much more complex than a simple tool. Likewise, it draws clearer lines between the Christian concepts and their modern-day specters.

KEYWORDS: *Black Mirror*, science fiction, dystopian futures, technology, Christianity, Christian theology, history of Christianity

Religions get lost as people do.

(Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 1954)

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Part I

Black Mirror, Technology, and Christianity

Part I: Introduction

This part, made up of three chapters, will lay the groundwork for the analysis in this research. The first chapter will introduce *Black Mirror*, some history on the show's producers Charlie Brooker and Annabel Jones, as well as brief summaries of some important sources that will be heavily relied on in the literature review sections within each chapter. The second chapter will build an argument for the framework of analysis used throughout the body of this thesis: the analysis of the technology portrayed in *Black Mirror* as mirroring Christian concepts. This argument will be built upon two key themes in other writing: the comparison of technology to religion, and the use of Christian ideas to analyze popular culture and art. The chapter will conclude with a brief section on how these two methods of analysis might come together, namely how Christianity and the technology within *Black Mirror* might be seen as a novel vantage point by which to analyze the series. Taken together, these first two chapters will act as a state of the art and literature review of this thesis. Lastly, the third chapter of this part of the thesis will consider the methodology used in the in depth analysis of the individual episodes of *Black Mirror* as they relate to themes within Christianity.

Taken together, these three chapters (Part I) set the groundwork for the three parts that follow, where individual *Black Mirror* episodes are analyzed in depth. This preliminary research will strengthen the deep analysis it precedes, building a foundation not only to look at *Black Mirror*, but also to consider the relationship the series demonstrates between the imagined technology it contains and the specters of Christianity that mirror those technologies. This background information, separately parsed out here in Part I, will come together in Parts II through IV.

Chapter 1

BLACK MIRROR, BROOKER & JONES, AND THE CRITICS

1.1 *Black Mirror* (2011-present)

Within their dark vision of the future in *Black Mirror* (2011-present), Charlie Brooker (creator and executive producer) and Annabel Jones (executive producer) highlight a number of ways that late capitalistic societies are already using technology, and how we might use it in the very near future. As an anthology series, each episode of *Black Mirror* tells a different story, independent from the others.[1] Instead of a traditional narrative arch, overlapping characters, and a singular world that hold most television shows together, the episodes of *Black Mirror* are connected by their overarching tone, message, genre, and subject matter. For that reason, the show lies somewhere between television and traditional cinema, though the executive producers consider each episode to be a stand-alone short film (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 12). The format of *Black Mirror* itself implicitly provides the rationalization to consider its overlapping themes when analyzing the series, as we look for insight into *Black Mirror*'s vision of our relationship with technology (more on methodology will be covered in depth in Chapter 3). In an interview with Channel 4, Brooker said that "it's a worried show, it's a show that's worried about today—even though it's often set in near futures, or sort of allegorical futures, it's really always about now, and what's going on now" (Channel 4, 2014).

The episodes of *Black Mirror* take place in a future between now and, as

[1] For clarity, from this point forward the word "series" will be used to refer to *Black Mirror* as a whole, while "season" will be used to refer to an individual year of the program, using the more neutral US term and the one used on Netflix (the current platform where *Black Mirror* can be streamed), in contrast to the UK convention of referring to an individual year of a show as a series.

Brooker put it, "10 minutes' time, if we're clumsy" (Brooker, 2011). The worlds created throughout the show can be described as dystopian futures, though some of the episodes could easily take place today. The overall message, as can be gleaned from the quotes above, is that the technologies we have, or will soon have, could bring with them grave consequences. For anyone who has seen the show, that is probably a serious understatement. I would argue that *Black Mirror* does not highlight the inherent dangers of technology itself, but instead the dangerous ways that we might put that technology to use, given our current trajectory and the ways that we already use it to relate to one another and ourselves. Throughout *Black Mirror*, we see slight variations from our everyday relationships with technology in a way that makes alarmingly clear the dangers of our current path.

1.2 Charlie Brooker & Annabel Jones

Before creating *Black Mirror*, Charlie Brooker had already made a name for himself in the worlds of print and online media, television, and radio. His prolific writing career prior to the series gives glimpses of ideas that are brought to fruition in *Black Mirror*. For instance, in his first drama series with Annabel Jones, *Dead Set*, the two decided to take an idea that could be very comedic—a zombie outbreak and the response of a fictional cast of *Big Brother*—and instead "play it straight" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 9). A similar mentality went into the ideas for *Black Mirror*, a terrorist blackmailing the Prime Minister of England into having sex with a pig sounds at first like a comedy, but as viewers of the series know, *The National Anthem* (2011) is anything but funny. However, the series has its comedic moments, albeit often dark, which are surely a continuation of Brooker's time as a satirical writer, especially for *The Guardian*.

He's published a number of books with collections of his work as a columnist: Screen Burn (2004), Dawn of the Dumb: Dispatches from the Idiotic Frontline (2007), The Hell of it All (2009), and I Can Make You Hate (2012). Other television shows that Brooker has been involved with include many in the world of satire and television criticism (including *Charlie Brooker's Screenwipe* and *Newswipe with Charlie Brooker*). Before writing for *The Guardian*, Brooker worked as a video game reviewer, columnist, and cartoonist for *PC Zone magazine*. Brooker openly identifies as an atheist, having contributed to *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas* (Sherine, 2009). However, in various interviews he has acknowledged his Quaker upbringing (Radio Times, 2016; Reynolds, 2019). Taken together, it seems that this career spanning technology, television, and satire could have only ever led to *Black Mirror*.

The series is often attributed to Brooker, as he is the credited creator of *Black Mirror*, and has writer, co-writer or story by credits on nearly all (22 of the 23) of

the episodes. However, Brooker always makes a point to share credit for the show with co-producer Annabel Jones.

> "Like any production, *Black Mirror* is a huge team effort. Never trust anyone who mentions auteur theory or discusses a film or TV show as though it's the work of one individual. Each *Black Mirror* film (and we insist on pretentiously considering them 'films') is the product of months of heavy lifting by literally hundreds of people. In this book you'll hear from just a few of them. A heartfelt thanks to every single person who's worked on the show, to my co-showrunner Annabel Jones who is too modest (not to mention illiterate) to write a foreword herself, and also to Jason for weaving this book together" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 7).

Considering the quote above, it seems appropriate to consider Annabel Jones and her role in *Black Mirror* alongside Brooker. Likewise, it seems appropriate to consider the themes, aims, and undertones of the series through the lens of pluralistic authorship, and not attributing them to any one person, notably Brooker.

Brooker and Jones first started working together on the *Wipe* franchise while Annabel Jones worked as managing director for the comedy label, Zeppotron, a TV production company owned by Endemol (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 9). In parallel to producing *Black Mirror*, the pair have founded two production companies: House of Tomorrow in 2014, and Broke and Bones in February 2020, the latter of which they own together splitting the shares of the company evenly (Kanter, 2020a; Kanter, 2020b).

1.3 Critical perspectives on *Black Mirror*

Four main sources will be used in the literature review regarding *Black Mirror*, and they will be briefly summarized here for reference. When appropriate, they will likewise be detailed within the individual chapters of this thesis in the sections referred to as "Critical and popular perspectives" on each episode discussed. Of course, when they exist, other academic sources will be referenced throughout this thesis in the most appropriate chapters—those covering the same episode or theme.

The first major reference for critical writing on *Black Mirror* will draw from the book *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory* (Cirucci and Vacker, 2018), as it is one of the three academic books published on the anthology series from a critical perspective, at least at the time of the publication of this thesis. The book covers many of the same episodes as this thesis, though usually from very different

perspectives. Published in 2018, the episodes discussed include only those from seasons one to three of *Black Mirror*. Season four is mentioned in the conclusion, having come out just prior to the publication of the book.

Similar to the aims of this thesis, the editors of *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory* attempt to give meaning to the series as a whole by analyzing it through critical media theory. Some chapters look at a single episode similar to other academic articles which discuss *Black Mirror*, but many focus on multiple episodes viewed through an overarching theme. The episode-focused approach is useful, especially when the show's creators see each episode as a short film; however, a more holistic view of the series allows for dialogue not only between the episodes and particular themes, but also between the episodes themselves, inevitably finding more complex conversations.

Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory is organized around six major themes that the editors group the show's concepts around: "human identity, surveillance culture, spectacle and hyperreality, aesthetics, technology and existence, and dystopian futures" (Cirucci and Vacker, 2018, "Key Themes," para. 11). Introducing the group of chapters on technology and existence, the editors articulate the role of technology not only in *Black Mirror*, but in our lives:

> "Technology is the host for human life, just as media is the host for human consciousness. Technology is never neutral, for when we extend technology out to create our environment, it in turn shapes us. We adapt to the environments we create, for better or worse. It is our many uses of media technologies in our metropolises that are the focus of many Black Mirror episodes, each offering insights into the fears and hopes for our technological existence" (Cirucci and Vacker, 2018, Technology and Existence, para. 2).

Many chapters of *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory* will be drawn upon individually when they cover episodes which correspond with those covered in this thesis, or when the themes considered cross over with the ones approached in this thesis. Within this book, episodes are referenced as such with quotation marks, however, as we will see further along in this section, there is an argument to be made for their consideration as separate films.

Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age (2019) is the second academic book published on the series. It covers episodes from the first through the fourth seasons of the show, including the interactive episode Bandersnatch (2018). The chapters follow the episodes in order of release date, and each text focuses on a single episode, unlike many of the texts seen in *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory* (2018) which instead focuses on themes, with authors often analyzing many episodes in a single text. However, when appropriate to the topic, the authors in *Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing*

the Side Effects of the Digital Age also make mention of additional episodes and their thematic relationships to the topic being discussed, though usually in support of a particular reading of the primary episode under consideration. The choice of following the episode release order seems logical given that this is how viewers are likely to have experienced *Black Mirror* themselves.

Writing about the episode *Be Right Back* in his chapter of *Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age* (2019), Schopp makes an important observation about the series as a whole which aligns with the tone of this thesis in some ways: "As a whole, then, the series suggests that confinement is everywhere, and largely because the means of surveillance have proliferated, because the potentials for control have as well, and because we willingly subject ourselves or our 'selves' to these new digital prisons" (p. 59).

As will become clear throughout this text, the idea that social control is exerted outside of traditional criminal justice settings with the series is integral to the role that both technology with *Black Mirror* and religion play in the control of society. Though Schopp does not discuss the latter, his notion that the technology of the series imprisons users, metaphorically or literally, combined with the fact that he references a number of the episodes which in this thesis are considered to depict more positive relationships to technology with the acquisition of God-like powers, shows that even at its most optimistic, the series has a dark undercurrent throughout.

Also writing in *Through the Black Mirror: Deconstructing the Side Effects of the Digital Age* (2019), Larson looks at the technology of *Black Mirror* through the framework of omniscience and touches on a number of bloggers who have briefly posited a connection:

> "*Black Mirror*'s fascination with omniscience-via-technology has led many in the pop culture blogosphere to argue that the series represents a post-religious dystopia, in which an 'inscrutable ancient god' has been replaced by a scientific one (Bassil-Mozorow, 2018), and the result is a 'digital hell' on earth (Berkowitz, 2018). In essence, the argument is that the transfer of omniscience from the divine to the human can only result in devastation—the stories represent an information age retelling of Adam and Eve's tasting of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, which ultimately leads to humanity's exile from Paradise. Blogger and United Methodist pastor Jeremy Smith, for example, has suggested the inevitable effect of *Black Mirror*'s memory recording technologies is a virtual 'end of faith,' and that 'in a world where certainty is idolized, faith and imagination suffer' (Smith, 2015). It is true that *Black Mirror* seems to intentionally avoid addressing religion directly; however, I argue that the series includes embedded

> religious symbols which make very profound statements about the role of faith in a technological world and, perhaps more importantly, point to the existence of a sovereign, inalterable, and knowable truth which is fastened to a universal morality" (p. 218).

Larson's text will be explored in depth in Chapter 14 when addressing *Crocodile*, but her analysis further supports a reading of *Black Mirror* through the lens of Christianity. Though her text ultimately looks at ideas of truth and "goodness" in a larger sense, not focusing on any single religion, her analysis surrounding the series and its depiction of people of faith will inform this text. Likewise, her conclusion that technology does not usurp faith, but instead points to a concept of sovereign truth is interesting:

> "[W]hen read through a moral philosophy which sees truth as corroborative, sovereign, and external to the self, Black Mirror does not represent a technological usurping of faith. Rather, it argues that omniscience-via-technology is just another method by which a sovereign truth might be encountered, and that such a technology only becomes a threat when a pursuit of 'goodness' is abandoned in favor of self-preservation and personal control" (p. 228).

The third academic book published on the anthology series, *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* (D. K. Johnson, 2020) reflects on every episode of *Black Mirror* individually, attempting to parse out the most important philosophical question the viewer is confronted with in each episode. This includes all episodes released as of the writing of the text, seasons one through five of *Black Mirror* as well as the Christmas special *White Christmas* and the choose your own adventure episode *Bandersnatch*. Later, the text addresses a few wider questions asked about the series in general. Many of the episodes are approached with moral questions about the actions of the characters or moral questions about the technology used in the series. A few of the chapters discuss religion in relation to the episodes, but at least in the cases where it is in the forefront, it is used as a reference for moral decision making and forgiveness (Bock et al., 2020). The chapter looking at *San Junipero* (Cook, 2020) likewise references the desire to live forever as relating to the Christian concept of an afterlife, but it does not draw much further comparison. Each episode analyzed in the thesis will consider the corresponding chapter in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* (D. K. Johnson, 2020) as part of the critical and popular perspectives on the episode.

One particularly compelling chapter from *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, "Death in *Black Mirror*: How Should We Deal with Our Mortality?" by Pérez and Genovesi (2020), touches on a number of episodes that will be considered in this thesis (*Be Right Back*, *San Junipero*, *The Entire History of You*,

Smithereens, and *USS Callister*) making clear that in many ways, the promises of religion and technology often relate to our fear of death, or our lack of ability to let go of those lost to death. Death is clearly one of the concepts at the heart of our willingness to turn to technology to replace religion. "When it comes to death, *Black Mirror* presents mortality as an ethical dilemma rooted in technology, asking if we should use technology to rewrite the rules of our existence—or if we should let technology permeate our existence" (p. 292). Within this book, episodes are referenced using italics, as they are considered as separate works (please see discussion in the following paragraph).

Finally, *Inside Black Mirror* (Brooker and Jones, 2018) will act as the third key reference source, and will be used as a crucial source in understanding the thinking behind the series, as the book is made up of interviews with the show creators with chapters on all the episodes of the show's first four seasons (or "series" as they are referred to in the book, as is the terminology in the UK for the episodes of a television program grouped by year). This book, having been written by Brooker and Jones, refers to each episode as a film, using italics, as in the previous source. For this reason, this thesis will take a similar approach to *Inside Black Mirror* (Brooker and Jones, 2018) and *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* (D. K. Johnson, 2020), using italics instead of quotation marks.

For popular opinions on the show, The Atlantic, n.d. (founded in 1857), an American multi-platform publication, will act as a key reference as they have covered each of the episodes of the entire anthology in depth. *The Atlantic* is widely considered among the top popular publications on literature, culture, current events, politics, and technology. Other popular sources, including *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and the online publication *Den of Geek*, will also be used, though an attempt has been made to only cite reputable online sources (no personal blogs, YouTube videos, etc.).

Chapter 2

CHRISTIANITY, TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

The three sections of this chapter will explain the foundation for the overarching argument of this thesis. First, Section 2.1 will consider comparisons that have been made between Christianity and technology as well as the roles that the two have played or do play within society. Next, Section 2.2 will consider the use of Christian teachings and theological concepts as an angle through which popular culture and art has been analyzed. These two ideas come together in Section 2.3 to form the basis for the structure of this thesis, namely that the technology seen in the series *Black Mirror* often mirrors both positive and negative Christian concepts.

2.1 Christianity and technology

Much has been written about the role that technology plays within contemporary culture, and its place within the *destiny* of humanity, or—according to the taste of the particular author—the history of humanity (Harari, 2014; Harari, 2016; Hayles, 1999; Mahon, 2018; Roden, 2015; Wertheim, 2000). In his book, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2016), Harari writes that one of humanity's aims is essentially to use technology to turn ourselves into gods—to make humans amortal—capable of dying, but only by tragic accident, and apart from such risk, able to live forever (2016, p. 54). Whether this objective is achieved, however, remains to be seen. Harari cites projects such as Google's subcompany Calico, or the Gilgamesh Project, whose stated aim is to solve death (2016).

Mahon instead delves into the science of CRISPR-Cas9 and gene editing as one of the most likely sites of our collective upgrade towards something super-human (2018, p. 78). Beyond everlasting life, technology offers the possibility

of other upgrades to humanity and our collective power, some of which overlap with notions of divinity (Harari, 2016). One such power would be omniscience, something big data clearly hopes to tackle sooner rather than later (among other things). Harari goes as far as to say that Dataism—the worship or prioritization of data over everything else, particularly over privacy—could easily become a techno-religion of the future (2016, p. 428).

Harari (2016) argues that the apparent connection between the attributes of deities and the characteristics we are aiming to acquire exists not because we are haunted by religious ideas, but instead because humans have always desired those god-like qualities. He suggests that our creation of gods with superhuman powers and immortality came because we wished for those things but were unable to fulfill them ourselves. In the past, humanity projected these desires onto the gods; within Christianity, the institution of the church decides who would have access to eternity, but now there is no need as technology might soon bring these dreams to realization (Harari, 2016). If these were the only types of worlds Brooker imagined in *Black Mirror*, it might be possible to disregard the connection between religion and technology in the series by analyzing it through Harari's ideas as articulated above.

Writing twenty years ago, Wertheim (2000) already understood the importance of cyberspace as a new space—one which many believe holds the key to everlasting life—a place in which humanity might finally overcome the physicality of the body. Her writing on the idea paves the way for an understanding of the role that technology might play in the actualization of biblical concepts today. This notion, that technology could, and more importantly would want to actualize the biblical concept of everlasting life, shows the relevance of Christian concepts within culture today, even when the makers of culture and technology do not recognize the roots from which their desires grow.

Ellwood's 1918 article, "Religion and Social Control" considers the role that religion has played as a mechanism for social control and its foundational role for all other types of social control: government, law, morals, etc. He considers the progression of religion from pre-animism through monotheism. His assertion that all social control references back to the role of religion in society further ties technology to religion in this way, as technology has come to play a crucial role in social control today. This link is made further evident through Ellwood's discussion of monotheism as the pinnacle of social ideals being promoted through religion:

> "True monotheism is reached only when the mind of man sees that there is but one universal existence from whence all things, including his own mind, have proceeded and of which they are a part. Monotheism, in other words, is the recognition of the infinite as God. [...] Thus

> under ethical theism the highest social values have been readily given a religious sanction, that is, universalized or projected into the universe. Hence social idealism has been stimulated by ethical monotheism as never before in the history of civilization" (p. 344-345).

This crucial understanding of social control and the role that religion has played in it, helps us to see the progression of systems of control, and allows us to imagine technology's place in such a lineage. However, much like Harari's views on the similarities between god-like characteristics and the aims of technology, the lineage of religion as the original means of social control does not seem to explain the connections we see in *Black Mirror* between the mechanisms of social control, particularly punishment, and their near mirroring of biblical notions. Lineage is too basic of a relationship between the two, their relationship goes deeper; biblical notions are inextricably entwined in many episodes where social control is addressed.

2.2 Christianity and culture

Christian ideas have been used as a framework for understanding and interpreting popular culture and art in various ways. Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1956) offers five approaches to the question of how Christians are meant to interact with culture, a question which does not find consensus in scripture. He concludes that, while neither outright rejection of culture or acceptance of it are appropriate, the exact approach could be debated without end. The question, it seems, of how Christ and culture *should* come together seems somewhat mute in regards to this research, as this thesis posits that Christianity has already permeated contemporary culture throughout the history of the Church. The question of Christianity's response to culture is not of particular interest to this investigation, instead the opposite phenomenon is central—the ways in which culture unconsciously draws upon Christian concepts even today.

In his book *Art in Action: Towards a Christian Aesthetic* (1980), Nicholas Wolterstoff articulates his understanding of art as a Christian and through the lens of Christian belief. Likewise, John W. Dixon, Jr. explores art as a means of expressing or articulating theology in his book *Art and the Theological Imagination* (1978).

More recently, Roland Boer's *Knockin' On Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture* (1999) offers a framework, through practical application, of how the Bible and popular culture can come together in a contemporary discussion. Decidedly more controversial than authors such as Wolterstoff or Dixon, Boer uses the Bible to interpret popular culture, but also uses cultural criticism to reread

the Bible. The author focuses primarily on the Old Testament, and cites psychoanalysis and Marxism as two of the major theoretical underpinnings of his investigation. He juxtaposes topics ranging from Hitchcock and biblical dismemberment to fast food and manna.

These varied approaches to Christian ideas, as they relate to culture and art, demonstrate that the question of how Christian ideas influence and relate to culture is not a new one. However, instead of intending to view culture through a Christian lens, as Wolterstoff or Dixon could be understood to, this thesis will instead take a decidedly external approach to the use of Christian concepts. Unlike many of the writers mentioned above, this thesis is not an attempt to reconcile art and Christianity. Much more in line with Boer, this thesis aims to take the Bible as a text within culture itself. However, unlike Boer, this text will not attempt to reread the Bible through culture, instead it aims to articulate a tension, a haunting, that popular culture and art cannot shake at times, especially when imagining our futures—a tension between the specter of Christianity and our contemporary world.

2.3 Christianity and *Black Mirror*

Although not overtly referencing religion, *Black Mirror* highlights questions regarding the god-like powers mentioned at the start of this chapter. Additionally, by looking at the show through the lens of Christian concepts, other parallels become clear. This thesis will demonstrate that we can also see overlapping themes with some of the darker realities of Christianity (including notions of just punishment, ostracism, and eternal suffering). Likewise, the characteristics fostered in technology's users within *Black Mirror* draw to mind Christian virtues. Taken together, we see the lingering specter of Christian thought, and many of its worst characteristics played out in some of the episodes of the series. These themes—of technology making humanity truly god-like, what it asks for in return for these god-like powers, and its potential to allow us to carry out the social constraints often found in religion—are not overt in all *Black Mirror* episodes, but there is a strong theme throughout many of the episodes that is hard to ignore.

However, while *Black Mirror* includes these "technology makes gods" manifestations (which will be considered in depth in Part II), it also has clear traces of other Christian concepts, like devotion, piety, eternal suffering, and divine punishment. These concepts will be broken down in this investigation into two further parts. The first will ask what religion—and technology in *Black Mirror*—ask for in return for these god-like powers (Part III), and more problematic possible futures where technology plays the role of moral enforcer when the demands from Part III are not met (Part IV). In other words, some episodes of *Black Mirror*

depict future worlds where it could be argued that technology allows for the manifestation of Christian concepts of divine punishment, ostracism, or eternal suffering. Brooker seems to be suggesting that the ghosts of Christianity are harder to shake than many would like to believe. Thus, this thesis will build the argument that the use of technology in the series mirrors religion, or at least its specter, as something which continues to influence culture and the technology of today and tomorrow—and above all as something we should be wary of in its potential to impact our trajectory.

This thesis argues that *Black Mirror* depicts technology as a sort of replacement of religion (specifically Christianity), not only in the role of the Christian God, but also in the role of the church as an institution. In Parts II through IV, specific episodes will be analyzed for their depiction of similarities between technology and notions of divinity (Part II), similarities in the demands that both Christianity and technology place on their flocks (Part III) as well as religion as a social enforcer (Part IV). Likewise, related current events will be drawn upon when appropriate to help to solidify the comparisons between the technology we see in these episodes of *Black Mirror* and the specter of religion that continues to inform western culture today.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

As explained at the close of the last chapter, the remainder of this thesis will be organized into three parts which will consider first what religion and technology offer (Part II), what they ask for in return (Part III), and what the consequences of transgression are (Part IV). This progression of ideas will consider various episodes of *Black Mirror*, focusing on the particular attribute that they exemplify in this overarching argument. The methodology for that analysis is based on ideas within semiotic analysis and socio-historical analysis theories. Following on from there, the justifications for grouping by theme, episode selection, and chapter structure are considered.

3.1 A semiotic and socio-historical analysis

Primarily, this thesis will approach Black Mirror using semiotic analysis, focusing on the details of the episodes and using the rich world of signs—both visual and verbal—within the series to analyze its content. By paying close attention to these details, the episodes themselves will come to represent more than just their surface meaning. In other words, details within the episodes will be used to connect the dots between the episodes themselves and the Christian concepts drawn upon to analyze them. While commenting on a brief scene in *The National Anthem*, Conley and Burroughs (2020) articulate a truth about the details in *Black Mirror* as a whole, emphasizing the importance of every detail included: “The clip is but a passing moment, easy to miss, and yet the series’ consistent reliance on minor-but-crucial details makes it hard to dismiss this blip as mere coincidence” (p. 4).

Largely, this thesis will take the approach that the artwork, in this case the episode, should speak for itself, as articulated in Roland Barthes’ seminal essay “The Death of the Author” (1967). However, in instances where intentions align with output, the thoughts and opinions of the show’s creator, Charlie Brooker,

and co-producer, Annabel Jones will be drawn upon for support of key ideas and themes within the series in general as well as within individual episodes. In other instances, opinions of actors, directors, and other key figures in the production of the episode might be drawn upon as well, though less frequently. This will occur most often when these figures specifically point out or discuss specific details themselves, noting their importance. Thus, these references will be used as supporting evidence for a reading, as opposed to groundbreaking shifts in how an episode might be understood.

Beyond the details within the episodes themselves, the social and historical context in which the episodes were written and created will play a role in their interpretation. This includes, as is argued throughout this thesis, the lingering specter of Christianity that haunts Western civilization today. For this reason, concepts from Christian teachings and history will be drawn upon alongside contemporary events and debates. This interweaving of past and present puts the two ideas side by side making clear the influence of Christian history and its teachings on the world we are building today through technological advancement. Without a complex discussion drawing upon methods from semiotic as well as socio-historical traditions, this thesis would not be able to bring together the rich details woven into the stories depicted in *Black Mirror* with the complex relationship we see between our present-day world and its Christian roots.

3.2 Grouping by themes

The television series *Black Mirror*, as mentioned earlier (Chapter 1), is an anthology series. Each episode is a closed story, and there is no overarching narrative to the show. However, themes of technology and dystopian futures carry over between all of them—that is to say, the show is not about any particular story. The stories themselves work to highlight troubling relationships we might soon have, or already have, with technology. However, it is important to note that the technology itself is not the villain either. The tragedy of the show is the troubling ways we come to use technology in the ways that we relate to ourselves and others. For these reasons, this thesis largely ignores the sequencing of the episodes in any chronological way, at least in regards to the structure of the analysis. The structure of Black Mirror is conducive to analysis-based groupings of themes instead of release date.

3.3 Episode selection

The selection of the 12 episodes to be considered is based on the overlapping concepts of technology and themes within Christianity. While it could be argued that others might also fit some of the themes discussed, the episodes chosen were seen to have the most compelling examples in regards to the specific themes. If other episodes also include similar themes, they are mentioned in the closing section of the chapter. Likewise, all episodes of the series are not included as this is not an in-depth reading of the show as a whole. Instead, it is a reading of the show through a particular lens, through which some episodes make a more compelling case than others. Finally, since the producers of *Black Mirror* are clear that the episodes are individual short films, the themes discussed in this thesis become a selection of works from a particular grouping. Much like films by an individual director, or books by an author might be analyzed, including those that make the case for a particular reading of one theme, as opposed to the entirety of a career.

3.4 Episode analysis

Each episode will be analyzed following a similar structure. First, a brief episode summary will be provided, followed by an overview of academic and popular analysis of the episode. Next, a detailed reading of the episode will consider specific elements from that episode which relate it to the Christian topics mirrored in the story. For example, the detailed reading of *San Junipero*, would focus on aspects of the episode which support a reading of the technology in the episode as being similar to the Christian idea of the afterlife. These details range from character analysis, plot details, dialogue, music, specific shots, or even transition choices between them. These filmic choices reflect important decisions made in the show's creation, and thus function as the tangible material of analysis. Throughout the in-depth reading, specific topics which support the reading of the episode will be elaborated on. These might include events in the history of Christianity, Christian theological ideas, Bible verses, or contemporary events (both related to Christianity and not). Each chapter will close with a brief conclusion and consideration of further research, or discussion of other episodes which could have been chosen to analyze based on the same religious concept.

Part II

What Technology and Christianity Offer

Part II: Introduction

As discussed at the start of the introduction, technology's important role within the future of humanity seems obvious, but how that relationship is playing out is widely discussed and disputed among historians and philosophers alike (Harari, 2014; Harari, 2016; Hayles, 1999; Mahon, 2018; Roden, 2015; Wertheim, 2000). As detailed earlier, one of Harari's predictions is that we will collectively aim to overcome death, and that it will be among the three important goals we set out for ourselves over the next century (Harari, 2014; Harari, 2016). He bases his thinking on research that is already being done to extend life combined with the ease by which we already permit the use of curative treatments as preventative ones (Harari, 2016, p. 60).

Likewise, Wertheim considers cyberspace and its relationship to Christian ideas. She writes:

> "...the cybernautic imagination is rapidly becoming a powerful force in its own right.... Yet, as I will suggest here, many of these fantasies are not new—in essence they are repackagings of age-old Christian visions in technological format" (2000, p. 21).

While considering Benedikt's *Cyberspace: First Steps* (1991) and Moravec's *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988) among other writing on cyberspace and its potential as a means of overcoming death, Wertheim explores the early thinking on how cyberspace might help us to overcome our mortality and asserts that these collective aims need to be explored as they could come to define the development and use of future technology (Wertheim, 2000, p. 43).

Harari takes the argument one step further in his assertion, writing that our collective aim to overcome death is not based on spiritual ideals (for instance, gods that are immortal or the notion of a heavenly afterlife), but instead he argues that we invented gods because it was *already* our desire to conquer death. We no longer need belief in deities because we are rapidly gaining the tools to overcome death ourselves (Harari, 2016). Thus, he argues that these concepts come from a common human desire, and although they seem to relate to one another (ideas about gods and our attempts towards god-like powers), this similarity is only due to their common root. This argument works when we think about positive concepts such as everlasting life or omniscience, but it runs into issues when it comes to concepts related to social control in Part III of this thesis, and the darker Christian concepts that will be considered in Part IV.[1]

[1] On an individual level, we do not want to be controlled or tortured, though it could be argued that certainly there are individuals who would want these powers of control and punishment for themselves to inflict on others.

We will first consider these positive religious concepts as they play out within *Black Mirror*, as a starting point to draw connections between the Christian concepts and the content of the show. In particular, We will start with the concept of death—dealing with grief and the loss of a loved one in *Be Right Back* (2013). Following the discussion of *Be Right Back*, we will consider the role that technology and Christianity play on the other side of the coin—life after death—looking at the episode *San Junipero* (2016) as it has been tied to ideas of heaven and an afterlife by both the show's creator and in academic discourse (Brooker and Jones, 2018; Drage, 2018; Constant, 2018).

Next, we will consider questions of omniscience, another of the aims that Harari (2016) sees as a goal of humanity. First we will look at individual omniscience in *The Entire History of You* (2011) where the grain technology allows users to exist outside of time. After that we will consider *Hang the DJ* (2017) and the god-like, omniscient power of big data. Harari (2016) describes dataism as a techno-religion of the future, suggesting that data and technology will help us make all our most important decisions.

The four episodes looked at in Part II (*Be Right Back*, *San Junipero*, *The Entire History of You*, and *Hang the DJ*) are, not coincidentally, the four most optimistic episodes of *Black Mirror*. Two, *San Junipero* and *Hang the DJ*, are love stories with happy endings, and Brooker, discusses them as such. "In a way, *Hang the DJ* is a companion piece to *San Junipero*. While I was writing it I was nervous about the light and playful comic tone, and thought some people might hate it. Yet it's turned out to be a lot of people's favourite episode" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 272).

The other two episodes, *Be Right Back* and *The Entire History of You* are more tragic love stories, both depictions of one partner losing the other, in albeit different ways. About *Be Right Back*, Brooker said: "The script felt like a bit of a risk, as it's a relatively small story about two people. It's mainly about Martha's emotional reaction to Ash's death, although there's still this high concept of the robot based on his online presence" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 64). Discussing, in contrast, *The Entire History of You* he suggests the loss as self-inflicted: "The moral, if there is one, is he shouldn't have gone looking for something that was only going to upset him. His wife loved him and there were secrets in the past, but he should have let them lie" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 56).

While other episodes sometimes look at couples, these four episodes offer some of the most intimate looks into love within the series. Their more optimistic outlooks mirror the optimistic views our society holds towards the power of technology in bringing us god-like powers, and the optimism that these abilities will make our lives better, even if that doesn't always turn out to be the case.

Chapter 4

DEALING WITH LOSS IN *BE RIGHT BACK* (2013)

— I'm sorry [crying]
— What happened?
— I dropped you. I'm sorry... it was just... it was... I'm sorry...
— Hey, it's alright, I'm fine. I'm not in that thing you know. I'm remote. I'm in the cloud.

Be Right Back (2013)[1] tells the story of Martha Powell (Hayley Atwell) and Ash Starmer (Domhnall Gleeson), and Martha's struggle to deal with Ash's unexpected death. The first scene shows the two in the car together, and we see their dynamic as a couple; they are presumably moving into Ash's childhood house in the countryside. The following day Ash returns their rental car, and never returns. Though we do not see the car accident, we can guess that it might have been caused by Ash's inability to put down his cell phone. The last time we see him, he's looking at it before pulling out of the driveway, and earlier scenes show him completely absorbed in social media—something that annoys Martha.

After Ash's death, Martha struggles to cope. A friend recommends she use a new technology that is in beta testing which would allow Martha to "speak" to Ash. The technology uses social media and other public posts online to mimic Ash's manner of writing and interacting. At first, Martha is outraged that her friend has signed her up, shouting "I don't care what it is! I don't want it! It's obscene to use his name! His name, for God's sake! It hurts!"

However, after finding out that she's pregnant, having conceived the baby during her last night with Ash, she decides to talk to the bot, unable to get ahold of her sister and having no one real to turn to. She's immediately hooked, and after

[1]Episode directed by Owen Harris, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Channel 4 on February 11, 2013.

a short time, she gives the system access to more material, making the bot even more accurate in its ability to mimic the real Ash. This enables voice conversations, and Martha starts to ignore friends and family, preferring her time with the bot. Eventually, the system suggests an experimental upgrade—a physical host for the bot, a tangible body made to look like Ash based on photos and videos. Ash-Bot tells Martha, "There's another level to this available, so to speak. Kind of experimental and I won't lie, it's not cheap."

Figure 4.1: Physical host - *Be Right Back* (2013)

Taking the leap, Martha orders the physical body for the bot, which comes in a box as a blank body that needs to be "activated" (Figure 4.1). At first, Martha is elated to have a physical copy of Ash to touch and to simply be around. However, his dependence on her and his differences from the real Ash start to become bothersome. After a few days with the physical bot, she realizes that the copy is not close enough to the real Ash. "You're just a performance of stuff that he performed without thinking, and it's not enough," she tells him. Years later, we see Martha with her daughter on her daughter's birthday. The girl asks if they can bring some cake up to the attic. Unable to destroy the bot, and unable to live with it, Martha has apparently stored him in the attic, allowing her daughter to play with him on weekends and special occasions.

4.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Be Right Back*

Having only picked up a wider audience in the US after the first two seasons of *Black Mirror* became available on Netflix in December of 2014, *The Atlantic* does not have a full review of *Be Right Back* written at its time of release. However, they do mention the episode in a review of *Black Mirror* as a whole, simply naming it "melanchology" (Sims, 2015).

Den of Geek writer Alec Bojalad hails the episode as *Black Mirror*'s best: "'Be Right Back' is the best episode of *Black Mirror* because it never loses sight of its humanity. It understands that all of this technology and change isn't the point. We are. The technology that we create and come to rely on reveals far more about us than almost anything else. [...] In 'Be Right Back,' we think we've found a way to buy more time—a way to defeat both death and fear so that love can live forever. We're wrong. Because we almost always are" (Bojalad, 2018).

Troullinou and d'Aquin (2018) write about *Be Right Back* in the framework of surveillance attempting to use the fictional stories in *Black Mirror* as jumping off points to facilitate discussions between computer and social sciences. They consider the technology first used by Martha which first emulates the way that Ash writes, and then mimics his actual voice. The authors argue that this technology is not so distant as it might seem.[2] They bring up practical questions surrounding privacy and hacking, as well as data laws after someone dies. This grounded discussion also relates to real instances of data laws and grief (though not specifically mentioned by the authors themselves), such as Facebook's policies on user data after death, memorial pages, and the halting of new posts on deceased users pages (Schofield, 2014).

Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) briefly discuss *Be Right Back* in the context of Baudrillard's theories, discussing Ash's copy they say that, "The story creepily parallels 'gizmo' as detailed in *Système des objets*. 'A gadget purport to be incredibly useful but that usually ends up crammed in a cupboard gathering dust or used once or twice a year'" ("Hyperreality as the Spectator," para. 2). They seem to miss the point that it is not that Ash's copy is a gizmo, but instead that his image is too painful for Martha, who mimics Ash's mother's behavior—having stored away all the pictures of Ash's dead brother, and later his father when he also passes away. The copy is up in the attic not because it lacks utility, but because seeing it brings pain and it is too personal to throw away.

H. A. Jones (2018) also writes about Baudrillard in relation to *Be Right Back*. However, she approaches the episode through the ethics of aesthetics, hyperreality,

[2]Some would say it is already here in the Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3 (GPT-3) technology.

and the concept of reification. She writes, "Martha does not want beauty in the present; she seeks a perfect(ed) replica of the past." ("Ash-Borgian Subjectivity," para. 2). Explaining the chain of emotions Martha goes through, and her behavior towards the physical Ash copy she explains:

> "Ash-borg lacks free will, and her behavior is not ethical. She transforms him from an object to a subject, but then she reifies him, changing him from a consciousness back to a thing-like object, which she can alternately talk to, copulate with, or consign to the attic. Expecting her interactions to occur with an 'authentic' subject rather than a hyperreal Ash ends up hurting Martha, who in turn dehumanizes and alienates Ash-borg" ("Ash-Borgian Subjectivity," para. 4).

Scolari (2018) sees *Be Right Back* as an example of Marshall McLuhan's theories on media, specifically the notion of reversal. This posits that media, when pushed to its limits, will actually reverse its original function—in this case, dealing with grief and the loss of a loved one. Scolari writes: "As every innovation has within it the seeds of its reversal, in 'Be Right Back,' a technology designed to help people overcome grief and loneliness keeps and evidences the vacuum produced by the disappearance of a loved one" (Be Right Back, para. 1). This idea that the technology does Martha no good in her process of grieving and moving on is highlighted by Brooker as well, a point which will be considered in more depth below (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 71).

Urzúa and Faure (2018) consider *Be Right Back* and the archive in the cloud as well as the concept of the "museification of life"—an obsession with archiving and thus making sense of our experiences. The authors write about the episode's key premise in this way: "we can question the forms in which the histories of those selves are being inscribed and reproduced within a community and in which ways intimacy, memories, and the act of remembering become a part of the cloud, which can be taken down and then give shape to absence, moreover to death's mourning" ("Memory Overdose," para. 6).

Schopp (2019) takes a different approach to the episode, suggesting that Martha is metaphorically imprisoned not by the loss of Ash, but instead by the imperfect version of him she creates:

> "Viewers might at first believe that Martha is simply imprisoned within her grief, her embrace of the replicant 'Ash' a byproduct of that emotion. Martha's grief does cripple her, and while her chosen method of healing initially helps, it's eventually thwarted because the potentials inherent in new technology (a living, breathing resurrection of her husband) suffer under the limitations of older technology

> (her husband's social media presence that remains incomplete). Importantly, however, the narrative also reveals that Martha has made herself a prisoner to this inadequate reproduction, both unable to destroy it and unable to be with it once she realizes that it is, as she says, 'just a performance of stuff that he [Ash] performed without thinking.' Martha's complicity in constructing her own confinement speaks to a central idea explored throughout the series: that technology can lure us into creating our own virtual prisons" (p. 57).

Schopp makes use of Foucault's writing on the panopticon, an angle many other writers have used to approach the series, though not this particular episode. However, he approaches it from an updated notion of the panopticon (making mention of the plethora of new names used to update the idea—superpanopticon, electronic panopticon, post-panopticon, and omnicon, to name a few) that accounts for complex spreading and multiplying of the model within culture in ways that Foucault could not have anticipated. Schopp considers the role that social media plays in our active role in our self-imprisonment positing that our participation is not only eager, but that we are also often seduced by the mechanisms of imprisonment themselves. Writing about futurists embrace of technology, he discusses the documentary *Transcendent Man* (2009) and author Ray Kurzweil's ideas and their relationship to religious ideas: "Kurzweil acknowledges the parallels to religious myth in his futurist assertions—for example, eternal life, bringing back the dead—but he insists that our technology will finally give us the tools to accomplish these longstanding human goals."

In his chapter, "*Be Right Back* and Rejecting Tragedy: Would You Bring Back Your Deceased Loved One?" (2020), Richards asks whether Martha should have created the duplicate version of Ash, having the choice. He even considers whether a more perfect duplicate of Ash could have salvaged the situation, to which he concludes that it could not. No duplicate of Ash will ever be Ash (as elaborated in his thought experiments about AshBot+ and his discussion of psychological continuity theory and theories of identity). By attempting to replace the original Ash with a duplicate, in order to avoid the pain of Ash's death, Martha inevitably causes herself more harm than good. The *we* formed in a loving relationship can not be replaced with an upgraded version (as articulated by Robert Nozick and explained in the text). Richards' perspective that in some ways the bot is a better version than the original is interesting, though it does not seem to matter, because most importantly, AshBot (as he is referred to in the chapter) is not the same person as Ash. At the end of his chapter, Richards touches on the idea of properly dealing with loss, and the doubling we see between Martha and Ash's mother in their inability to deal with loss in a healthy way.

While discussing death in *Black Mirror*, Pérez and Genovesi (2020) consider

Martha's dilemma and decision to attempt to keep her connection with Ash alive, even in the absence of the real Ash. They ask whether denying Ash's death is really helpful for Martha. "If we reexamine Martha and Ash, we could say that Martha is deferring Ash's death. She may have buried him, but in creating AshBot she effectively keeps Ash alive" (p. 296). Later they suggest that this decision weighs on Martha: "Martha was haunted by Ash's real absence and simulated presence" (p. 297). Finally, they conclude that somehow the results are mixed, AshBot was useful while at the same time somehow damaging for Martha's ability to heal.

> "Martha may hide Ash's copy in the attic and she may genuinely believe that his existence is wrong and she may be unable to let go of the real Ash's memory. But she chooses to keep the copy, which makes his presence meaningful in the sense that he seems to serve a purpose—to have Ash's biological daughter know her father, even if he's a simulated father" (p. 298).

Having considered these academic and popular perspectives on *Be Right Back*, the next section will focus on an in-depth reading of the episode in the context of Christian ideas surrounding loss and grief, and how these concepts relate to the technology we see in *Be Right Back*.

4.2 "And don't worry, it's not some crazy spiritual thing": a reading of *Be Right Back*

The following subsections will consider *Be Right Back* from a number of angles, drawing on the themes in the episode itself. First, this analysis will consider grief and loss drawing upon verses from the Bible, comparing and contrasting with details we see in the episode. Next, the concept of resurrection will be considered through the angle of what it means for reunion with the dead. Finally delving into the act of mourning, to consider the balance between letting go and holding on, the last subsection will consider Martha's inability to let go of Ash and her interaction with the bot in the framework of mediums. Instead of helping customers to move on, these performers often keep customers coming back for more, looking out for their own financial benefit instead of the well-being of the mourner. In this final subsection, the controversial Luka bot named Roman will also be looked at as a real-world example of technology similar to the system we see in the episode.[3]

[3] Luka is an artificial intelligence startup whose co-founder created a chat-bot using archived conversations she had with her friend Roman, who was struck by a car and died in 2015.

4.2.1 Grief and loss

The Bible tells Christians that they should not grieve in the same way as nonbelievers, since God will resurrect believers in heaven. Then, this hope in resurrection for loved ones works to subdue the immediate pain of their loss. The dead are not lost forever, since, if they were believers they will be in heaven with God, and thus, there is hope for reunion with them in the afterlife.

> "Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, NIV[4]).

Be Right Back is unarguably an episode about loss and grief. As we saw above, all the authors writing about this episode point to grief and loss as the main theme of the episode, each having a particular view on how the technology in the episodes helps or damages further in the face of loss, the context is clear. *Black Mirror* co-producer Annabel Jones articulates the theme of grief perfectly when she explained *Be Right Back*.

> "It's a story about love and grief in the 21st century. How do you mourn in the modern world where everyone is digitally present? We're no longer living in a world where there'd be a shoe box of old photos in the attic. Your dead husband's image and videos are still playing on Facebook and you can carry him around with you all the time. How do you let go in that scenario? If you're heartbroken, I totally understand the impulse to hide away and lose yourself in that. But Charlie's stories are so rich, it's not just about that. It's also about the disparity of our real selves and our 'online' selves" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 64).

We might draw parallels with the idea of belief in God and belief in technology in the episode. We see that technology gives Martha a way to experience time with Ash again, exactly because he was such a "heavy user" as Sarah explains when she first recommends the services to Martha at Ash's funeral. Since Ash was constantly using social media—something Martha was frequently annoyed with—she is given access to a simulation of time with him once again. However, it is the performative nature of Ash's posting, the lack of depth, which eventually brings Martha to reject the bot. Ash's use of the technology was not a faith in

[4] This thesis will exclusively use the New International Version of the Bible when referencing scripture passages (*New International Version*, 2011).

its ability to act as an archive of himself as a person, but instead as an arena for performance of wit and humor—one facet of Ash, certainly, but not the whole of who he was. Then, if Christianity teaches that believers should not grieve the dead without hope, and if the Bible speaks instead about resurrection and reunion in the face of loss, what might that look like?

4.2.2 Resurrection of the dead and reunion

Regarding resurrection of the dead, the Bible is clear that this will be a transformational experience, that the spiritual body, or the soul of the dead will be resurrected and renewed:

> "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, NIV).

While she talks to the bot after her first ultrasound, she drops her phone and has a panic attack, feeling like she's lost Ash all over again. He tells her: "Hey, it's alright, I'm fine. I'm not in that thing you know. I'm remote. I'm in the cloud." This idea of "the cloud" acts as a subtle metaphor for the idea of resurrection, since the suggestion of someone in the clouds brings an immediate vision of heaven. Likewise, the final incarnation of the physical bot in the episode seems to fit some of the Christian promise, the body is renewed, it is powerful and it is imperishable. At one point, we see the physical bot's hand get cut with glass, and he doesn't even bleed (Figure 4.2). However, the soul of Ash, if it exists, is clearly elsewhere. As Marth cries: "You're not enough of him!" Likewise she tells the bot: "Well, you aren't you, are you?" If this is not a true resurrection then, could it be a reunion in the way that Christians see for their future in heaven?

The question of being reunited with loved ones in heaven is often asked among Christians. Some wonder if they will be reunited with their loved ones in heaven and if they will recognize them upon arrival. A verse often pointed to regarding the latter is 2 Samuel 12:22-23 when David speaks of the death of his son: "He said, 'While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, 'Who knows whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead. Why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me'" (NIV). We can see that David clearly believes that he will be reunited with his son in the afterlife—"I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." Clearly, Martha is not living out an experience of heaven; unfortunately her time with the bot does not seem to fully mirror the Christian concepts the bot so clearly hopes to fulfill for its "administrator."

Figure 4.2: Imperishable bot - *Be Right Back* (2013)

As we have seen, Christian belief teaches that those we lose in this life can hope for resurrection in the next. This hope is often what gives believers the strength to cope with death and the ability to overcome grief. The Bible also seems to promise that we will be reunited with our loved ones after our own resurrection. Without such hope, one might look for other ways to be reunited with loved ones. Thus, if the real Ash were really "in the cloud" where the bot tells Martha it exists, maybe she could hope for a future reunion. Lead actress Hayley Atwell explained her feelings on the episode and why Martha might have chosen the path she did:

> "I still don't know how I feel about the idea of this resurrected android fiancé. It would be both horrendous and comforting, perhaps. It's an impossible situation and that's what makes it compelling. Martha's grief pushes her into taking actions I doubt she would ever have anticipated. At first she resists this 'grieving tool' and thinks it's sick and disrespectful. Then, alone in that house and in total despair, she becomes desperate for some sort of balm. Some contact with the dead to lessen her pain" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 71).

This idea of not being able to let go, of needing a balm to get us through will be considered in the next chapter through the idea of mediums and some technology that already exists today, similar to the chat-bot we see in *Be Right Back*.[5]

[5]The idea of resurrection will be explored further in the next chapter which analyzes the episode *San Junipero*.

4.2.3 Mourning, letting go, or holding on

The episode starts with Martha and Ash driving and singing “If I Can’t Have You” by The Bee Gees, a foreshadowing of the loss that Martha will soon face, and the debilitating grief she faces when Ash dies in a road accident the very next day. Likewise, it shows her inability to move on from Ash’s death: “If I can’t have you, I don’t want nobody baby” the song declares over and over again. We see that it is true for Martha; she cannot have Ash, the bot is not enough, and she seems to have never remarried—unable to really let go.

In Matthew 5:4 while Jesus preached to his disciples, he said “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (NIV). In *Be Right Back* we see Martha attempting to keep the process of true mourning at bay through the bot. Eventually, however, Martha realizes that the copy is not close enough to the real Ash, and that his presence is not what she thought it would be. In some ways, the copy helped her to come back from the initial loss, but in other ways her refusal to see that Ash was really gone made the problem worse. She tries to hold onto part of him, but in the end it does not help her to actually mourn and let go. Brooker explained his motivations for this inability to let go in *Be Right Back* saying, “For a while, I became obsessed with psychics who profess to communicate with someone’s dead relative. Because surely the relative, on some level, knows it isn’t really happening, but it’s like comfort eating. I can understand why you’d do it, but surely it can’t be helping” (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 71).

The Bible clearly warns believers away from such practices of trying to speak with the dead, instead encouraging Christians to look forward to reunion in the afterlife. When Martha’s friend Sarah, who also lost her partner, first tells Martha about the technology that would let her talk to Ash, she says: “I can sign you up to something that helps. It helped me. It will let you speak to him. I know he’s dead, but it wouldn’t work if he wasn’t. And don’t worry, it’s not some crazy spiritual thing.” By “some crazy spiritual thing” Sarah seems to be referring to just what Brooker articulated above, a way to speak to the dead through a psychic or medium. However, when we start to look at the two side by side, Sarah’s assertion that the bot is something different might not hold up.

In 1 Samuel 28 we see Saul, the first king of Israel, seek out a medium to speak to his recently deceased advisor Samuel, the prophet who anointed Saul as king. However, the Bible is clear on the use of mediums and other occult practices:

> “When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who

> consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord; because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you" (Deuteronomy 18:9-12, NIV).

If the practice actually makes you detestable to God, why would Saul do it? Feeling abandoned by God, and having lost Samuel to death, he sought out a medium to be able to communicate with Samuel and seek his advice. We know that Saul had previously cut off mediums and spiritualists from practicing (1 Samuel 28: 9). Clearly, in a moment of intense fear and desperation he sought out a recently deceased and trusted advisor. It is debated who the spirit is that appears and speaks to Saul when called upon through the medium (some believe it is Satan, others God or even Samuel). Regardless of who the spirit is, they do not bring good news:

> "Samuel said, 'Why do you consult me, now that the Lord has departed from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done what he predicted through me. The Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. Because you did not obey the Lord or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the Lord has done this to you today. The Lord will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines'" (1 Samuel 28: 16-19).

"Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me," the spirit tells Saul. In other words, "tomorrow brings death." This interaction with the spirit of Samuel marks the third time that Saul is rejected by God. We might look at Martha's situation and see a similar desperation. Likewise, we could see the bot as a trick, as sorcery or "some crazy spiritual thing" after all. The bot does not bring Martha any peace, and she probably would have been better off without it. It decreases her ability to truly mourn and let go, accepting the finality of death.

> "The additional information, that within twenty-four hours he and his sons would be dead, was no help at all to his morale. Indeed he would have been better without it. He did himself no good by doing what he had decreed to be unlawful. God's word stood and could not be altered. He should have believed it instead of thinking that by further consultation he could reverse its judgment. The Lord did not answer him, because there was no more to be said" (Baldwin, 1988, 175).

We are left with a scene depicting Martha many years in the future with her and Ash's daughter, who appears to be at least 10 years old. Much like Ash's mother at the start of the episode, Martha is unable to let go of her mementos of Ash (in this case the bot), yet likewise unable to accept it in her immediate surroundings. Instead, she stores him away in the attic, hardly able to look at him (Figure 4.3). This mirroring of Ash's mother and her storing away of images of Ash's dead brother and father shows us that technology, while it might attempt to ease our suffering of the loss of a loved one, it cannot bring reunion, instead it just brings false hope, much like the psychics and mediums discouraged in the Bible.

Figure 4.3: Stored in the attic - *Be Right Back* (2013)

Luka, an artificial intelligence startup, gives us a contemporary example of how technology could be used in a similar way to the episode, at least in the first iteration of Martha's interaction with Ash's copy, as a text-based bot (Newton, 2017). After the death of her close friend Roman Mazurenko, Kuyda, one of Luka's co-founders, decided to bring her friend back—real life inspired by fiction.

> "Kuyda saw the episode after Mazurenko died, and her feelings were mixed. Memorial bots—even the primitive ones that are possible using today's technology—seemed both inevitable and dangerous. 'It's definitely the future—I'm always for the future,' she said. 'But is it really what's beneficial for us? Is it letting go, by forcing you to actually feel everything? Or is it just having a dead person in your attic? Where is the line? Where are we? It screws with your brain.'

> [...] On May 24th, Kuyda announced the Roman bot's existence in a post on Facebook. Anyone who downloaded the Luka app could talk to it—in Russian or in English—by adding Roman. The bot offered a menu of buttons that users could press to learn about Mazurenko's career. Or they could write free-form messages and see how the bot responded. 'It's still a shadow of a person—but that wasn't possible just a year ago, and in the very close future we will be able to do a lot more,' Kuyda wrote" (Newton, 2017).

Many of Roman's friends loved interacting with the Roman bot, and his mother wrote "They continued Roman's life and saved ours" (Newton, 2017). However, much like Martha, Roman's father did not find the bot to be enough of his son: "'I have a technical education, and I know [the bot] is just a program,' he told me, through a translator. 'Yes, it has all of Roman's phrases, correspondences. But for now, it's hard—how to say it—it's hard to read a response from a program. Sometimes it answers incorrectly.'" (Newton, 2017).

While this real world example of the Roman bot was not monetized, we can see how easily it could be. The bot in *Be Right Back* tells Martha about the third level to the service, remarking "I won't lie, it's not cheap." Schopp (2019) also comments on the questionable ethics behind this kind of marketing, noting the specifically vulnerable moment that Martha is in when the bot suggests the upgrade:

> "At this moment, of course, Martha is very fragile too, reliant on a digitally reproduced voice to keep her stable. Their interactions here suggest a sophisticated telemarketing scheme, or the way software manufacturers will allow potential customers to try a product before purchasing it, only the process is exacerbated by the product itself exploiting the consumer's emotional vulnerability" (p. 64).

We see another moment when Martha's grief is mined for monetary gain. Just before she opens the initial email from the bot we see an email from The Book Merchants with suggested titles on grief. The email subject reads, "Martha, people in your position have bought the following." Inside the email she gets the message: "Martha Powell, we have recommendations for you!" She deletes the email in disgust. This grief mining is a common practice among psychics and mediums today, whether they admit it or not.

In his article titled "Man Who Gave Psychics $718,000 'Just Got Sucked In'" (2015), Michael Wilson recounts one such case that was being prosecuted at the time in New York City. The idea of getting sucked in by grief is not uncommon to anyone who has lost a loved one, especially one as close as Martha's. It is easy to

seek out something that could act as a "balm" as Atwell explained or "like comfort eating" as we saw Brooker explain it, but ultimately it just brings more pain.

4.3 Conclusion

In the analysis of *Be Right Back* through the lens of Christian ideas of grief, loss and resurrection, it becomes obvious that the bot in the episode does not live up to the Christian hope of resurrection because the bot is not really Ash, just an echo of him. Thus, this model fails to allow Martha to deal with her grief and move on. Instead, through further analysis, it became clear that the bot functions much more parasitically, with the company behind it functioning more like a psychic or a medium—falsely promising a way to talk to the dead, while also reaping the financial rewards of this false hope. As articulated above, the Bible warns against mediums and psychics in a quest for closure surrounding death, and Brooker likewise questioned the real ability to help the griever—both in the case of the psychic and the bot.

Other episodes dealing with death and loss might include *Smithereens* (2019) or *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too* (2019). However, *Smithereens* is more suited to a discussion of devotion, as will be discussed in Part III. *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too*, while mentioning the recent death of the two teenage girls' mother, the episode does not focus specifically on their grief. Instead, we see the younger sister redirecting the sense of loss, and her lack of friends into the "Ashley Too" bot she receives for her birthday. From there, a somewhat comic adventure unravels, having little to do with grief or loss.

In the next chapter we will look again at death, but from the perspective of the one dying, and the creation of a virtual afterlife in *San Junipero* with a full conscious copy of the dead, unlike the patchwork simulation of a person, as we saw here in *Be Right Back*. Martha's attempt to postpone her loss through the use of the bot mirrors biblical and contemporary examples of psychics and mediums, something we saw is ultimately not beneficial.

Chapter 5

EVERLASTING LIFE IN *SAN JUNIPERO* (2016)

— Scheduled to pass.
— Let's just call it dying.
— If you can call it dying.
— Uploaded to the cloud, sounds like heaven.
— I guess.

The story in *San Junipero* (2016)[1] follows Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis), who we first see timidly engaging with other young people in a bar called Tucker's in a beach town called San Junipero.[2] Her first night there she meets Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), who is trying to escape spending the rest of the night with a guy she had previously been involved with, Wes (Gavin Stenhouse). Kelly and Yorkie have a drink and dance, and afterwards Kelly propositions Yorkie. Yorkie turns her down, and runs off into the rain. The second time they see each other, a romance begins to develop, and they spend the night together. The next time Yorkie tries to find Kelly, she seems to have disappeared, but the bartender at Tucker's suggests she try the Quagmire. While running out of the club Yorkie runs into Wes, who tells her to "try a different time." So she does.

This is when it first starts to become clear that San Junipero is a virtual world that the elderly are allowed to visit for a rationed amount of time each week (usually 5 hours on a Saturday night)—"immersive nostalgia therapy." While visiting, they are young, and can presumably choose to spend their allotted hours in any time period they desire. In the episode we primarily see the 1980s, although we

[1]Episode directed by Owen Harris, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on October 21, 2016.

[2]*San Junipero* refers to the episode itself, while San Junipero refers to the simulated town within the episode.

also see brief switches to the 90s and the early 2000s (when Yorkie searches for Kelly). When people die, they have the choice to stay in San Junipero forever, an everlasting life of youth without death or aging; they can even turn off their pain sensors for a painless existence—at least in the physical sense. It could be called heaven on a server; it is certainly depicted that way.

Yorkie eventually finds Kelly and after a brief argument the two make up. Kelly confesses that she's dying and is scared to make real connections in San Junipero. Kelly's husband died two years earlier and he chose never to even try San Junipero, "There were things he believed and things he didn't believe in, and this place was one of them." Yorkie and Kelly decide to meet in person, and Kelly discovers that Yorkie is actually in a coma. She has been since her early 20s, following a car accident after a fight with her parents when she came out to them as gay. Yorkie's parents, who are deeply religious, refuse to allow her life to be ended, even though it is what Yorkie has made clear she wants. Instead of marrying the hospital attendant Greg (Raymond McAnally)—who Yorkie planned to legally marry in order to get around her family's control over her right to die—Yorkie and Kelly get married instead. Kelly gives Yorkie what she's been waiting for, the permission to pass over and live full time in San Junipero. Back in San Junipero the two celebrate, but when Yorkie asks Kelly to pass over too, they get into an argument. We learn that Kelly was married for 49 years, and her daughter died unexpectedly before San Junipero ever existed; her husband chose not to try San Junipero because he could not stand the thought of living on without their daughter. Kelly also plans to die without being uploaded, which she makes clear again to Yorkie during their fight. Eventually, however, Kelly does decide to pass over, and the two presumably live out eternity together in San Junipero.

5.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *San Junipero*

San Junipero received critical acclaim, and it is a favorite among many *Black Mirror* fans, as well as critics. The episode took home two Emmy Awards in 2017: for Outstanding Television Movie and Outstanding Writing for a Limited Series, Movie, or Dramatic Special. Many see it as a stand-out episode, partially for its optimism in a season that took *Black Mirror* to an arguably even darker place than the previous two. David Sims from *The Atlantic* praised the episode, and compared it to *Be Right Back*, also directed by Owen Smith:

> "It may have stood out because its tone was so radically different—this is the one story in which the implications of future technology are somewhat bright, and I was all the more relieved for it. The

> episode was directed by Owen Smith, who helmed ‘Be Right Back,’ a season—two entry that was similarly pitched with a more low-key, emotional tone” (Sims, 2017).

Timpane and McBee (2017) discuss *San Junipero* in the Journal of Palliative Medicine, considering the themes of palliative care, as well as the episode’s stance towards the right-to-die movement:

> “Although the focus of the episode is the love story and Kelly’s ultimate decision, other relevant palliative care themes abound. Autonomy, preservation of self, and the meaningful embrace of time are key motifs. The episode is clearly biased in favor of the right-to-die movement. Both women choose the time and place they will die as well as how they will spend their afterlife. This is portrayed as a dignified, pain-free, and logical choice. Yorkie and her nurse Greg even plan to get married to bypass state law so that Yorkie’s ‘conservative’ parents cannot prevent her from choosing how and when she will die” (p. 1045).

Cirucci (2018) considers *San Junipero* in her chapter analyzing gender performativity within *Black Mirror*, and her reading of the chapter is less positive than others. She suggests throughout her text that women in the series are shown to be examples of cases in which technology goes wrong. Her critique of *San Junipero* might be harsher yet:

> “Thus, for most of the episode, and beyond the overarching theme of uploading oneself to San Junipero, the women are never shown actually using new, digital tools. Instead, the episode relies heavily on the assumed appeal of gazing upon lesbian lovers—residents are shown as constantly partying and having sex. The residents are also portrayed as being obsessed with living in the past, perhaps a fitting setting for two women and limited technologies compared to other *Black Mirror* episodes” (San Junipero, para. 2).

Instead of seeing *San Junipero* as an escape from heterosexual assumptions and as a way of re-writing a past in which such a relationship could not have taken place, Cirucci posits that the pairing is a way to get more viewers because of some sort of appeal of lesbian lovers.

In her more positive reading of *San Junipero*, Drage (2018) considers the space of San Junipero in the episode to act as a heterotopian graveyard (in the Foucauldian sense), and though we do not take our analysis in the same direction, her consideration of *San Junipero* as depicting a sort of afterlife gives foundation to

the reading of the episode in this way. She focuses her reading on the episode as a positive potential for rewriting a past and a culture which, in the real 1980s, would not have been open to a relationship like the one we see between Kelly and Yorkie. She writes:

> "Kelly and Yorkie's time in San Junipero manifests itself in the present as the experience of real-world satisfaction at being able to embody the past differently. Their time spent in the nursing home and the hospital is thus enriched by the opportunity offered by San Junipero to do all that they would have liked to do on Earth but never had the chance. These other pasts, where everything was 'up for grabs,' as Kelly reminds Yorkie, is the basis for their ever-after in San Junipero" ("San Junipero," VR, and Heterotopia, para. 14).

Further, Drage considers the non-productive space of San Junipero to be important, considering the queered, unproductive time within San Junipero to be crucial to the happy ending: "The episode not only constitutes an exception to Black Mirror's unapologetic message of doom and gloom but made queer happiness the condition for that exception" (para. 1). Later elaborating on the normative assumptions about reproductive potential being an important part of purpose and productivity, and the break with traditional deaths of LGBTQI+ characters in films:

> "They offer Yorkie and Kelly the possibility to transcend the limits of heteronormative immortality and pursue a non-reproductive and queer immortality. The first burial ground is a familiar vision of a North American cemetery in a neatly kept field lined with identical graves. In one of the closing scenes, Kelly's body, encased in her coffin, is being gently lowered by an invisible force into the rectangular pit. This is the kind of silver screen cemetery that queer viewers are all too familiar with: gay, bisexual, and trans characters in films and on television usually end up here before the end of the film. But the brevity of the scene, coupled with the fact that there are no visible mourners, makes the segment as upbeat as is possible for a burial scene, directing the viewer's attention toward the imminence of Kelly's future" ("San Junipero," VR, and Heterotopia, para. 8).

While analyzing *Black Mirror* though the filter of Jean Baudrillard's theory, Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) discuss the artificial nature of San Junipero, viewing the site as an "obsession for nostalgia" ("Symbolic and Media Terrorism," para. 8). They view the supposed afterlife as empty and illusory. "In a

sense, they are deciding whether or not to trade death and mortality for an eternity of youth that relies on the unconsciousness of an imagined hyperreal world. For this reason, heaven is not a place on Earth but solely in the characters' imagination, located in the hyperreal of electronic data stored in TCKR" ("Symbolic and Media Terrorism," para. 9).

Constant (2018) writes about *San Junipero*, drawing on Foucault's concept of the heterotopia. Unlike Drage (2018), however, Constant looks at the dynamic between heterotopian and utopian spaces in the episode and how the symbol of the mirror comes to play a role in their relationship. "San Junipero is the extraordinary utopia in answer to the heterotopia of the retirement or rest home—and the mirror connects them" (Utopia and Heterotopia, para. 6). However, later she posits that both places might actually be heterotopias, or that it might be a virtual *todos*. As to the symbolism of the mirror throughout the episode, Constant writes: "The mirror represents the technology of San Junipero and the symbolism of the mirror throughout this episode is poignant" (The Mirror, para. 3). She briefly considers the question of whether the technology in the episode is emancipatory or disciplinary, asking who owns these servers that host San Junipero, and what is their ultimate purpose, a point that will be taken up in the discussion below on indulgences.

Daraiseh and Booker (2019) discuss the soundtrack and other significant cultural references throughout the episode as a way to consider both the clues to the false nature of San Junipero as a virtual space, but also as a means of understanding the cultural significance of these details. They conclude that even with everything that has passed since the 1980s, we are unable to imagine a more humane virtual heaven outside of a capitalist system. The authors posit that, "the references to music, film, and television in the episode can also be seen to be metafictional, suggesting the sort of heavily mediated environment in which we all live" (p. 156). Asking the questions surrounding the ethics of San Junipero, the authors inquire: who can access it, and does it have to do with money? Likewise, they discuss the Quagmire as a darker twin to Tucker's, something we will look at in further detail below. Finally, they ask whether the simulated reality in San Junipero is really shared, or if it is unique to each user (thus the characters only think they are interacting with others, instead it might be their individualized ideal, i.e. Kelly only comes back because that is what Yorkie most wants, and she is only there in Yorkie's version of San Junipero).

Through writing about *Be Right Back*, Schopp (2019) makes a number of references to *San Junipero* in his chapter "Making Room for Our Personal Posthuman Prisons: Black Mirror's 'Be Right Back'" (2019), writing that "the virtual world available to those who are ill or who choose to be uploaded there when they die is essentially a digital coffin" (p. 59). Later comparing the bot in *Be Right Back* with the digitally uploaded copies of Yorkie and Kelly, he reemphasizes the

idea of a digital coffin, but determines that while there is a relationship between the two episodes and the idea of resurrection, the depiction of the bot in *Be Right Back* is more problematic, as was proposed in this thesis in the previous chapter.

> "'Ash' exemplifies one possible posthuman future, albeit an intermediary step. But 'Ash' is much like the digital world of 'San Junipero'—little more than a walking coffin, a repository to house a social media self that, in this case, remains stagnant, static, and incomplete. In fact 'Ash' is even more problematic because in 'San Junipero' when Yorkie (Mackenzie Davis) and Kelly (Gugu Mbatha-Raw) decide to pass eternally into the digital space, they have chosen to do so, and they do so as complete digital versions of their living selves" (p. 66).

In his chapter "*San Junipero* and the Digital Afterlife: Could Heaven be a Place on Earth?", Cook (2020) asks whether we should want to go into a place like San Junipero if offered the choice. He considers why we might want an afterlife (for the sense of justice (with good and bad actions finally matching their consequences), for a sense of purpose (given our seemingly insignificant time on Earth compared to the time span of the universe), or simply to avoid being dead. He finds all of these motivations to not hold up, at least in the context of *San Junipero*. He also discusses how a never-ending afterlife would likely lead to a lack of purpose, positing that the finite nature of life is what gives our actions and choices meaning. His problematic equation of child rearing as giving purpose is a stark contrast to Drage's (2018) discussion of non-reproductive and queer immortality we saw above.

> "This doesn't bode well for Kelly and Yorkie's supposed happy ending. We say 'till death do us part' in our wedding vows because we know, roughly, how long it will take for death to part us. Furthermore, we are anchored together by real world commitments like sharing responsibilities and raising children, and even this fails to hold together many marriages. But if we extend human life by, say 10,000 years, in a world where people want for nothing and could never reproduce, could we really expect people to make the same commitments to one another? Would relationships last?" (p. 116).

Unlike Drage (2018) who considers the non-productive space to be important, Cook sees San Junipero's infinite future as problematic specifically for its lack of purpose. Likewise, he suggests that without fear or pain and death, we would lose concepts like self-sacrifice and would likely lose the ties necessary to carry out

meaningful relationships. His analysis will be a useful reference point regarding motivation for an afterlife, but he approaches the topic from a much broader sense than will be considered in this chapter.

In their chapter on the cookie and consciousness transfer technology within *Black Mirror*, Gamez and Johnson (2020), consider the example of *San Junipero* and ask whether this would really be an afterlife, given that, "The San Junipero simulation could contain a copy of a customer's consciousness, but the future experiences of this copied consciousness would be as alien to the original person as a plaster cast reproduction of their feet" (p. 279). Thus, they seem to suggest that even if the technology could duplicate consciousness, it would not really count as an extension of life, since the original (real) person would not be the one living these experiences. Following on from Gamez and Johnson, Gardner and Sloane (2020) ask whether your cookie is you, and posit that many philosophers would conclude it is not. They consider in detail "the soul theory," the psychological theory, the physical theory, and a "no-self" view as ways to determine if your digital clone would be you or not (p. 289). Regarding *San Junipero* and the "no-self" view, they write:

> "This view is both good news and bad news for Yorkie. The bad news is that she does not survive having her mind uploaded to San Junipero. She could not survive such a process because there was never a Yorkie in the first place; all that existed was a bundle of closely associated mental states. The good news, however, is that when Yorkie's body died, her essence was not destroyed. She had no self that could be destroyed; indeed, on Parfit's view, none of us do" (Gardner and Sloane, 2020, p. 289).

While this question of whether the Yorkie whose body dies and whose essence lives on in San Junipero is the original Yorkie is interesting from a philosophical viewpoint, this investigation is more interested in the question of where these desires to live on come from, and how their attempts to live on in a digital afterlife mirror Christian concepts of heaven.

Pérez and Genovesi (2020) write about *San Junipero* in their chapter on death in *Black Mirror*, and they ask whether Yorkie and Kelly are deferring their deaths by uploading their consciousnesses to San Junipero (p. 296). However, when discussing the meaning of death they write:

> "Indeed, Kelly and Yorkie both recognize that San Junipero is an absurd virtual reality devoid of meaning. After all, the program can be altered and there's nothing in San Junipero that could threaten them—they can't die, they can't get hurt, they won't age, and they don't really have to do anything because nothing they do matters. Yet, they

> choose it anyway, and this is what makes San Junipero so philosophically interesting. The episode holds its mirror to society and questions prolonging life through technology, suggesting that life might become unnatural and meaningless (if you believe that dying makes living meaningful and that technology is unnatural). But San Junipero also suggests that the only meaning we can really find in our existence and in our death is the meaning we create. Kelly and Yorkie choose to spend eternity in San Junipero, not with their former loved ones and family members, but with each other. Thus San Junipero, and by extension Kelly and Yorkie's lives and deaths, becomes meaningful; their continued existence in San Junipero isn't something they have to do and it's not something they were told to do—it's something they chose to do" (p. 298).

We will return to this idea of meaning and death, as well as the notion of choice, later in this chapter when we discuss universal reconciliation in the following section.

5.2 "Who can even make sense of forever?": a reading of *San Junipero*

Following on from the discussion of resurrection in the previous chapter on *Be Right Back*, this analysis of *San Junipero* will consider the digital afterlife the episode depicts, a much closer match to the Christian concept of resurrection, as we will see. In the following subsections, we will consider *San Junipero* and the idea of a virtual afterlife depicted within the show. First, it will be compared to the Christian belief of resurrection to heaven, and we will look in particular at the controversial idea of universal reconciliation.

After looking at the parallels between the afterlife shown on screen in *San Junipero* and the one described in the biblical texts, we will also consider some history regarding the Church. The messy relationship between money and salvation has plagued Christianity and caused schisms among its denominations, specifically the Catholic belief in indulgences and the prosperity gospel preached by some Protestants today.

5.2.1 Universal reconciliation and heaven for all

The comparison of San Junipero to heaven is brought up in the episode itself, with one of the main characters, Kelly, sarcastically saying, "Uploaded to the cloud, sounds like heaven" while discussing the upcoming, scheduled death of

the episode's other leading lady, Yorkie. Likewise, the song "Heaven is a Place on Earth" by Belinda Carlisle plays both at the start and end of *San Junipero* bookending a story about a technological heaven. Brooker even conceived of *San Junipero* from a similar angle saying: "I'd been obsessed with doing a story about the afterlife" (Brooker and Jones, 2018). So, it seems clear that San Junipero is an afterlife of sorts, but the question is how it relates to the Christian concept of the afterlife.

Christianity teaches that heaven is a place where those who have died will be renewed, given new immortal bodies—that in resurrection, the faithful will defeat death. Thus, the biblical concept of an afterlife is further emphasized through Yorkie's broken and old physical body and her transcendence of that body in San Junipero. This concept of transcending the physical body is also something discussed by Wertheim in her description of the potential of cyberspace, which she posits has the possibility to eliminate bias because, among other things, the "ageing body is hidden from view behind the screen" (2000, p. 25).

We can read throughout 1 Corinthians 15 about this notion of the renewal of the body—the transformation of the body in our life after death. We are told that death will be conquered and that after death we will be remade to be imperishable, immortal, and strong:

> "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory'" (1 Corinthians 15:51-54, NIV).

This biblical parallel to a heavenly afterlife, then, seems to be a possible reading, among others, when we consider *San Junipero*. Obviously though, there are many details of the episode that contradict traditional Christian teaching, but by their contrast these details highlight the connection between the Christian concept of heaven and the one on screen. As we saw in the literature review section above, other authors have focused more closely on the same-sex relationship depicted between Yorkie and Kelly. The episode itself tells us this does not usually mesh with Christian belief through the reaction of Yorkie's religious parents to her choice to come out to them, and then their subsequent rejection of her wishes to pass over. Greg explains to Kelly: "Anyhow, Yorkie's family, they're big-time religious, and they will not sign."

Likewise, the question brought up by Pérez and Genovesi (2020) in their chapter on death in *Black Mirror*—regarding the meaning of death and whether eliminating death exposes the meaningless of life—is an important one (p. 298). It is something that Christianity resolved through the teaching that only those who lived according to God's will, following his teachings, and spreading his message, would be the ones that gain access to heaven. Thus, by creating a criteria for entrance, Christianity eliminated the idea that eternal life after death negates the life that we live while alive, or the idea that life is somehow absurd or meaningless.

One controversial theological concept we might consider in relation to the episode, which could resolve some of the discrepancies between the typical view of resurrection within Christianity and the afterlife we see in *San Junipero*, is the idea of universal reconciliation. In stark contrast to the more traditional theories on ideas of heaven and hell within Christianity, universal reconciliation posits that eventually all of God's creation will reconcile with him, and thus enter into the Kingdom of God, i.e. heaven.

One way to think about universal reconciliation is the idea that after death, God will give every person infinite chances and infinite time to accept his love. Thus, many believe that with the knowledge of his existence, and the infinite opportunity to accept his forgiveness and love, no one would choose to stay outside of God's kingdom. Even if some would, however, this notion that Heaven is open to all—regardless of the life they lived on Earth and regardless of their beliefs in life—is the part of the concept that clearly parallels with the afterlife we see in *San Junipero*. When given the chance to see what a digital afterlife could be like, even those who are initially hesitant like Kelly, presumably decide to stay. If given the chance to "escape death" many would like to do so—as we saw in the discussion of potential motivations for wanting an afterlife as discussed by Cook (2020) at the start of this chapter.

In the closing scene of the episode, we see a long cross fade between the experienced reality of the residents of San Junipero, and their tangible resting place—as files on a server (Figure 5.1). Others writing on *Black Mirror* have questioned whether this scene suggests that a corporation owns the technology which makes San Junipero possible (Constant, 2018; Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol, 2018). Now, we will reconsider the question of whether the afterlife we see in *San Junipero* is really for everyone, this time based on external criteria, namely money.

5.2.2 Indulgences

It is not hard to see small glimpses of how money might affect the virtual heaven depicted in *San Junipero*. We might only be seeing a naive perspective of this "heaven on a server" in the episode itself. The two main characters are both in

Figure 5.1: Closing scene - *San Junipero* (2016)

seemingly affluent care facilities, Yorkie in a hospital, and Kelly in an elderly care facility. Likewise, the parts of the real world that we see are clean and, in some ways, luxurious. Finally, we see that the servers hosting San Junipero and its residents are owned by a big company, TCKR Systems (Figure 5.2). Though the episode does not make clear all of the details of the mechanisms that make San Junipero possible, Constant (2018) briefly considers the possibility that they could hold more sinister secrets below the surface:

Figure 5.2: TCKR Systems - *San Junipero* (2016)

> "...New ethical questions arise regarding surveillance in this new type of space—could San Junipero be a new 'panopticon?' Perhaps

> Brooker offers one clue: in the last scene of the episode in the server room (the mirror), both Kelly and Yorkie's discs are stamped with the letters 'TCKR': could this indicate that San Junipero is the product of a private corporation?" (p. 575).

Might the rich be the only ones who can afford to enter the digital afterlife we see on the screen? Wertheim considers the issue of money and privilege while writing about cyberspace as a possible space for life after death:

> "Just as the New Jerusalem is open to all who follow the way of Christ, so cyberspace is open to anyone who can afford a personal computer and a monthly Internet access fee. [...] The problem is that, unlike Heaven, access to cyberspace depends on access to technologies that for vast swathes of the world population remain firmly out of reach" (Wertheim, 2000, p. 25).

We might then consider a parallel between the technology of a digital afterlife in the episode and the abuse of indulgences within the Catholic church, which famously led to the Protestant Reformation in the early 16th century. The belief in indulgences still exists today within the Catholic Church, and Catholics can still be issued indulgences to be used for themselves or in the name of others to avoid time spent in purgatory (Moorman, 2017). Martin Luther saw abuse in the system, with clergy *selling* indulgences, giving those who are able to purchase salvation a means of avoiding true penance (Russell, 2017).

Thus, it is easy to see how money could play a factor in the realistic ability to live out a virtual afterlife in San Junipero, and how this buying of eternal life could bring with it the same issues seen in the 16th century surrounding the purchase of indulgences. Taken together then, there is an argument to be made that *San Junipero* does not demonstrate an example of universal reconciliation, not because nonbelievers are exempt, but instead because having enough money to pay for the service might be a barrier or entry.

5.2.3 The prosperity gospel

For a modern-day example of how money and salvation come together, we will now turn to the prosperity gospel within the context of the United States. Generally speaking, the belief posits that those who do good and donate money to religious causes will be blessed by God with health and wealth. This belief is often preached by televangelists, and it is taken to heart by millions of Americans (2018).

Once again, we see money coming into the equation when it comes to faith and the physical body, but this time related to our time here on Earth. Not tied to one

particular denomination within Christianity, the prosperity gospel instead is tied together through a common message: "God desires to bless you" as discussed by Bowler in her book, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2018, p.6). The prosperity gospel has been heavily criticized as a means of exploiting the poor into donating money which goes to the enrichment of select church leaders, but supporters of the movement say that these church leaders should also be blessed by God and that their wealth is merely a reflection of that blessing.

In 2019, the BBC ran a story about one such American family, Larry and Darcy Fardette, that believed in the prosperity gospel, and over a number of years gave over $20,000 to various televangelists (Baker, 2019). The general scam run by these televangelist preachers is to ask their viewers to give a "seed," of a particular amount, usually a few hundred dollars at a time. They tell their audience that this seed will flourish and bring them wealth.

> "Televangelist Todd Coontz has a well-worn routine: he dresses in a suit, pulls out a Bible and urges viewers to pledge a very specific amount of money. 'Don't delay, don't delay,' he urges, calmly but emphatically. It sounds simple, absurdly so, but Coontz knows his audience extremely well. He broadcasts on Christian cable channels, often late into the night, drawing in viewers who lack financial literacy and are desperate for change. [...] Crucially, he always refers to the money as a 'seed'—a $273 seed, a $333 seed, a 'turnaround' seed, depending on the broadcast. If viewers 'plant' one, the amount will come back to them, multiplied, he says. It is an investment in their faith and their future" (Baker, 2019).

Believing that the money would go to good works, the couple gave their seeds, and interpreted small positive experiences as a reflection of the financial blessing promised by the preachers they watched, so they kept giving. A number of years later when their daughter needed an expensive medical procedure the family could not afford, they tried to contact the preachers to ask for the help that they desperately needed. To their surprise, their requests were rejected by every preacher they contacted, being told that it would be against their policy—"Our ministry mandate prevents us from helping you" (Baker, 2019). Finally, the couple started investigating and discovered the truth, that these preachers were getting rich from the donations themselves, that the money did not go to good works at all. Unable to help their daughter, it destroyed their relationship with her. This story is one that represents countless families drawn in by the fraud of the prosperity gospel. After sewing their seeds, they are told that if it does not work, it is due to lack of faith or sinful behavior—in other words, it is their own fault that God did not choose to bless them.

Figure 5.3: Quagmire - *San Junipero* (2016)

The question of financial wealth and its connection to faith might hold parallels to the world we see in *San Junipero*, especially if TCKR is a profitable company with a wide reach, as it seems to be. By promising eternal life in San Junipero, they offer a product, you buy a seed. However, what you reap with it is up to you. We saw that many "locals" in the episode end up in places like the Quagmire, a club where anything goes, and everyone is looking for some way to feel something. In the scene where Yorkie looks for Kelly, she goes to the Quagmire and finds Wes (Figure 5.3). Later, when Yorkie and Kelly discuss the idea of staying, Kelly makes clear her view: "You wanna spend forever somewhere nothing matters? End up like Wes? All those lost fucks at the Quagmire trying anything to feel something, go ahead. But I'm out. I'm gone." So, we see a glimmer of the truth that there is not always a happy ending in San Junipero. Afraid to die, but unable to sow the seed of contentment in a digital afterlife, many residents of San Junipero are desperate to find meaning and "feel something." Timpane and McBee (2017) discuss the Quagmire as well from a similar vantage point:

> "Although most of San Junipero is depicted as a joy-filled, guilt-free existence, there is a darker side. The 'Quagmire' nightclub offers a nefarious alternative to the almost innocent culture of San Junipero with leather-clad denizens in one room and an ongoing cage fight in the other. The brief but haunting scene suggests that eternal life for some might feel purposeless, an endless existential crisis leading to more and more extreme behaviors to feel something" (p. 1045).

Daraiseh and Booker (2019) take the analogy further, comparing the Quagmire to hell, and seemingly arguing the same point, that the afterlife is essentially what

you make of it:

> "The obvious implication is that, if Tucker's is a vision of heaven as a place on earth, the Quagmire is a vision of hell. On the other hand, those who frequent the Quagmire do so of their own free will, even if it comes from the desperation of those who have failed to find solace in any other way, even in virtuality. Among other things, the Quagmire thus serves as a reminder that it is not a simple matter to provide a perfect environment in which everyone can be happy" (p. 158).

We see other ways that the technology's promise only goes so far. If it is what you make it to be, and it seems that most of the characters carry over their insecurities and fears from life—overcoming them in San Junipero is just as hard as overcoming them in their earthly life (one character mutters to himself under his breath "idiot" when he strikes out with Yorkie at the start of the episode). Much like the promise of a return on investment in the prosperity gospel, San Junipero offers an idea of eternity where you find your own meaning and happiness, presumably by living out things you could not in life. But what happens when it does not deliver? Neither TCKR or the prosperity gospel offer a satisfactory answer.

In both cases, with the sale of indulgences in the Catholic Church in the early 16th century and the belief in the prosperity gospel today, we see how easy it is for money and greed to seep into Christian doctrine. Likewise, we can see parallels once again with the exploitation of desperate people as compared to the discussion in the last chapter on *Be Right Back*. Much like the mediums who swindle money from those desperate to speak to their deceased loved ones, the enrichment of the few religious leaders of the prosperity gospel at the expense of the poor or the selling of indulgences in the 16th century shows how both death and hope can be used to exploit those in need.

5.3 Conclusion

After looking at the ways that San Junipero might mirror Christian concept of an afterlife and resurrection, the notion of universal reconciliation helped us to see how the two ideas might come to fit nicely together, heaven for everyone. Next, we looked at the darker ramification that money might bring into the equation, though this problematic issue is only hinted at in the episode itself. This metaphor in the episode of a digital afterlife is clear, however, as we will see in later chapters of this thesis, in the world of *Black Mirror*, these digital versions of a person can sometimes coexist with the original, making them a duplicate instead of a

continuation of the individual. This might lead to the question of whether San Junipero is truly an escape from death for the original, or if the differentiation between the two really matters.

Other episodes that explore life after physical death in *Black Mirror* is *Black Museum* (2017) where we see technology that allows one consciousness to be embedded alongside another after death. Thus, the dead literally live inside your head. Alternatively, *USS Callister* (2017) shows a group of digital duplicates escaping their captive and presumably living a never-ending alternate digital life, separate from their original one. Other episodes that explore the cookie idea (as a separate double) include *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too* (2019) and *White Christmas* (2014) where digital consciousness is first introduced into the series. However, the digital versions we see in *San Junipero* never overlap with original, as is the case with the final three episodes mentioned. However, in the context of a conversation about resurrection and an afterlife through technology in *Black Mirror*, *San Junipero* was the obvious choice.

Chapter 6

OUTSIDE OF TIME IN *THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF YOU* (2011)

— It was years ago!
— Not for him.

The Entire History of You (2011)[1] follows Liam (Toby Kebbell), a young lawyer and new father, as he spirals out of control in a fit of jealousy. After attending a dinner party with his wife, Ffion (Jodie Whittaker), and a group of her old friends, Liam starts to have suspicions about his wife's behavior towards Jonas (Tom Cullen), an old friend of hers that he has not met before.

The story takes place in a world where nearly everyone has an implant that archives their experiences of sight and sound. The Grain technology allows users to re-watch or, as the characters call it, "re-do" experiences, and also to delete footage at will. They can watch individually through an interface in their eyes, or externally casting the memories onto any screen. Grain users have become accustomed to the idea that their memories, while somehow private in an individual sense, are not private from government agencies or employers doing audits—this role of the Grain is not questioned in this regard directly. This widely used technology allows employers to monitor workers, airport security to screen travelers, and husbands to play detective.

Pouring over footage in a drunken stupor, Liam analyzes every look, every laugh, even background images, using lip reading technology, and image enhancement to find support for his suspicions. After drunkenly confronting Jonas and forcing him to delete footage of his wife, Liam discovers that not only were Jonas and Ffion together before she and Liam met, but she also slept with Jonas 18

[1]Episode directed by Brian Welsh, written by Jesse Armstrong. First aired on Channel 4 on December 18, 2011.

Figure 6.1: Confronting Ffion - *The Entire History of You* (2011)

months before, around the time she conceived her daughter. Following the revelation of Ffion's infidelity, Liam is determined to find out if Jodie, their daughter, is really his. After confronting Ffion in a heart-wrenching scene where viewers are forced into the depths of the couple's despair, Liam forces her to show him the footage of the affair (which took place in the very room they have the confrontation, the couple's bedroom) (Figure 6.1). The closing scene shows Liam re-doing happy moments with his wife and daughter, re-living them over and over before he finally decides to tear out the Grain implant in his bathroom, where the screen goes to black.

6.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *The Entire History of You*

The Entire History of You has been written about widely both in popular and academic contexts. The rights to the story were even bought by Robert Downey Jr. to potentially turn the episode into a longer film (Wortham, 2015). Lambie (2011) described the episode and its technology as convincing:

> "As is often the case in science fiction, *The Entire History of You* explores the pitfalls of future technology. Given our current appetite for sharing carefully selected chunks of our personal lives on the Internet, the idea of people in the future recording and sharing memories

> isn't too much of a stretch, and the way the episode depicts it is quite convincing, and extremely eerie."

Later in his review he also makes an important point about a detail which will be drawn upon later in this chapter: "It's not clear, you could argue, why Ffion didn't delete the parts of her memory in which Jonas appeared (it's made clear elsewhere in the episode that it's possible to do this)—it's likely, I suppose, that she cherished those memories too much to get rid of them" (Lambie, 2011). Ffion's choice to save the footage is an important detail which will be explored in the next section as part of the in-depth analysis.

Blackwell's (2018) analysis of *The Entire History of You* considers the Grain technology in the episode as the modern panopticon, referencing both Foucault's discussion of the concept as well as Bentham's original writing on the design. He also discusses the concept of lateral surveillance where surveillance does not take place only through an overarching government or powerful entity, but also with individuals surveilling one another. He differentiates the ideas this way: "[W]hile Foucault's conceptualization focuses on surveillance that is unidirectional (from guard to inmate), the panopticon in 'The Entire History of You' is multidirectional, allowing anyone with access to the technology to take on the 'guard' role even as they are positioned as 'inmates'" (The Grain as Surveillance Tool, para. 3).

Blackwell also discusses the obsessive behavior we see in Liam and its relationship to Tanne van Bree's notion of "Digital Hyperthymesia" in which digital aids to our memory allow us to dwell on the past in a way that we wouldn't with a more imperfect memory. Especially in relationships, this behavior can become increasingly detrimental. "Not only can the 'watcher' role promote feelings of surveillance addiction, but it also erodes trust. Like a prison guard, one's trust of the surveilled is minimal, and skepticism becomes the operative mode" (Blackwell, 2018, The Role of Watcher, para. 4). Most importantly for this investigation is Blackwell's discussion of the role of the "watched" and why, even in a panopticon such as the one in the episode, people would still commit deviant acts:

> "[T]he episode reflects a kind of surveillance that is less like Bentham's panoptic prison and more like the eyes of an omniscient and omnipresent God. Under such all-encompassing supervision, even the seemingly faithful follower, fully cognizant of God's attentive gaze, still sins. The Christian Bible itself acknowledges the inevitability of this fate, claiming 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.' In this sense, Ffi is a victim of her own human nature; however, one could also argue that the standard Ffi is pressured to conform to is above even that of God because while God is a singular entity with

> a set standard, Ffi is subjected to an immeasurable number of 'watchers,' each with his/her own standards." (Blackwell, 2018, The Role of Watched, para. 2).

This comparison of the technology to God's omniscience is incredibly relevant to this research, as we will consider in further detail below. Interestingly, Blackwell does not address the fact that memories can be deleted. Ffion kept the recording of her time with Jonas not because she *had* to, but instead because she *wanted* to. Thus, the memory of Ffion's infidelity is important enough to her that she would keep it and risk her husband finding out about the affair.

Writing on *Black Mirror* and surveillance, Troullinou and d'Aquin (2018) consider *The Entire History of You* in their dialogue on the practicality of the technology within the series. In this regard, they posit that such technology might not be so distant when we think about the widespread practice of "life logging"—when wearable technology is used to record large parts of an individual's activity (think go cams, or even dashcams). They point out that in some places the use of such technology is already required by auto insurance companies, and in other instances their use provides discounts on insurance rates (Troullinou and d'Aquin, 2018, The Entire History of You, para. 2-3). With such practices becoming more and more common, it is easy to see how widespread self-recording could become the norm (even if it isn't embedded technology as we see in *The Entire History of You*).

Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) write about *The Entire History of You* through the lens of Baudrillard's theories. They suggest the Grain should be a deterrent to antisocial behavior much like surveillance cameras would: "Baudrillard would describe this type of surveillance in terms of deterrence—the cameras physically prevent shoppers in a mall from stealing merchandise without having the need to be monitored constantly" ("Hyperreality as the Spectator," para. 13). They fail to point out, however, that in the case of Ffion, the Grain technology does not deter marital infidelity.

Scolari (2018) makes use of Marshall McLuhan's theories on media, and closely looks at how *The Entire History of You* demonstrates McLuhan's four basic principles of media. First he looks at what the new media enhances (memory capabilities); second, what it makes obsolete (other means of memory recall, and memory archiving, such as photo albums, etc.); third, what it retrieves (the author suggests the Grain holds similar functions to the slide projector, thus bringing back the same functionality); and fourth, the reversal potential (the potential for users to live permanently in the past through re-dos). Scolari writes:

> "the combination of the grain and the intraocular recording/projection device—may end up turning that past into a permanent and tragic

> present. The 'redo' function of the grain (that allows the memories to be revisited) generates an inspiring reflection on the construction of the self that goes beyond the problems related to the management of personal memories in a digital advanced society" (The Entire History of You, para. 1).

Considering this enhanced memory potential and the archiving of memory, Urzúa and Faure (2018) analyze *The Entire History of You* and the characters' obsession with re-dos or rewatching of archival footage and how this affects their sense of self.

Jenkins (2019) explores the idea of enhanced memory within *The Entire History of You*, concluding that the problem is not the technology, but instead the problems we bring alone with our progress, the human problems. "[T]his may be the core message of 'Entire History': the Grain does not make us more or less human; humanity is not 'perfected' through the introduction of new communication technologies. Rather, 'old troubles' catch up with us" (p. 46-47). He compares the episode to two other examples of enhanced memory, Steve Mann's use of wearable computers in the mid-90s and the science fiction film *Strange Days* (1995) where human experiences are recorded, shared and sold. By looking at the three examples, he explores ideas of obsession, pornography, agency, and control, considering the problematic portrayal of both Hallam's stolen-to-order grain, and Liam's behavior towards Ffion, "Liam becomes progressively more abusive and intrusive. In the end, he is driven less by jealousy than by misogyny—the desire to possess Ffion, to control her body, her memories, her secrets, as fully his property (just like the 'Pervs' who gouged Hallam)" (p. 51).

Though writing primarily about *Crocodile* (2017), Larson (2019) discusses *The Entire History of You* in the context of omniscience to suggest that the problem is not the power of omniscience itself, but instead the human element—a self-serving perspective, unable to see objective truth:

> "In its often-foreboding critique of human interactions with technology, *Black Mirror* is clear to argue that omniscience-via-technology is largely flawed if the truth-seeker is not perceptive enough to work through appetitive, self-serving influences in order to see the truth objectively. In 'The Entire History of You' for example, Liam and his wife (Jodie Whittaker) share a common memory of inviting Liam's social rival home for a nightcap, yet their interpretations of the motive behind that act are starkly different. Liam believes that his wife wanted to extend the invitation; his wife believes that Liam was the one who wanted it" (p. 223).

In their chapter on *The Entire History of You* in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections* (2020), Balke and Engelen focus on the idea that the Grain technology in the episode would erode trust, disqualify the ability to shape your own life story, and create obsessive behavior. Their analysis focuses on the breakdown in societal norms and relationships, founded on trust and some amount of role-playing. Their conclusion is that the technology would be detrimental to society, and that social media, and the surveillance state already limit some of our freedom and ability to maintain privacy.

In their reflection on death in *Black Mirror*, Pérez and Genovesi (2020) consider *The Entire History of You*, even though no real death occurs in the episode. They consider Liam's removal of his Grain to be a metaphorical death of his relationship with his wife Ffion, erroneously positing that without his grain he will have no memories of her. Instead, it seems that he would simply no longer be able to obsess over those memories by constantly replaying them, as he did throughout the episode. However, their discussion of the episode remains valid, because even though he is not erasing her permanently from his memory, he is deleting his high-quality recordings of their life together. This is his attempt to move on and stop dwelling on the past, learning this lesson the hard way by losing everything over an obsession.

6.2 "I'm just happier now": a reading of *The Entire History of You*

Three themes in the episode relate to Christian concepts, though as we will see, all fall short of their aims of being God-like when applied to humans. The first subsection below will look at omniscience—in this case, individual omniscience as we see played out in *The Entire History of You*. The second will look at forgiveness in the context of omniscience, showing the stark contrast we see between the idea of an all-knowing yet all-merciful God when applied to imperfect human realities. The final subsection will look at the idea of living outside of time, and how the idea of a collapsed past and present has detrimental consequences when applied to the individual.

6.2.1 Individual omniscience

In the Bible, God is described as all-knowing, or omniscient. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:13, NIV). Technology, at least within *The Entire History of You*, promises to give humans the same om-

niscience, at least in an individual sense (a perfect memory archive of our every experience).

Black Mirror co-producer Annabel Jones discusses the Grain as something they hope viewers might actually want, or at least see as something that people could want: “Any technology that we have in the films has to be something that people would embrace, and want and welcome in their lives. Because if they don’t, it feels like you are forcing something on someone that they won’t want to engage with, or that they won’t believe” (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 52-53). She continues considering one tangible example of why we might want individual omniscience: “but maybe even more satisfying than that would be the ability to record your child’s birthday party, to be in the moment, without holding up a camera between you and them” (p. 53). This idea, that the Grain is a logical extension of technology we already use to comprehensively document our lives, is clear. We already record everything, “pics or it didn’t happen” as is often thrown around on social media; pictures and footage become proof of not only the events of our lives, but become proof of our very existence.

The characters themselves give us compelling reasons to want the Grain. One of Ffion’s friends at the party, Colleen, explains, “You know half the organic memories you have are junk. Just not trustworthy. [...] With half the population, you can implant false memories just by asking leading questions in therapy.” Another reason comes up later in the episode when Liam attacks Jonas. When Hallam, the only “grainless” character we see, tries to call the police to stop the attack, they will not send help because she cannot provide footage of the attack: “I don’t have a Grain feed to show you, I don’t have a Grain” she pleads, but no help comes. Thus, the Grain would be useful in witness testimony and instances of crime. We also see the idea of crime being prevented in a scene where Liam goes through airport security; by providing his Grain footage he is able to quickly go through airport security. One final reason, aside from memory accuracy and security, would be the joy that recalling fond memories would seemingly bring—not just of moments we might normally document, like a child’s birthday party, but also smaller moments we might not think to document, like our last moments with an sick relative, or even memories of a pet that has died. At the end of the episode, we see Liam recalling happy memories, though as is obvious from the context, some instances of re-living might not bring joy, as will be explored in the final subsection of this analysis. Memory, the Grain advertisement in the taxi tells us, “is for living.”

We can see that while the Grain might be desirable, offering us a glimpse of a god-like power, it also has its downsides. Larson (2019) proposes that this quest for truth sends Liam into madness: “The need to discover the truth—to see it with one’s own eyes—ultimately stirs Liam into madness and brings about the destruction of his marriage. [...] the need to see the truth for one’s self destroys

the relationship that the technology had been intended to protect" (p. 218). As pointed out by Troullinou and d'Aquin (2018), "[t]his growing dependence on big data might then result in disregarding their potential risks" (The Different Looks of Surveillance, para 4). We will now turn to two of those risks.

6.2.2 The burden of a perfect memory

God, while depicted in the Bible as all-knowing, is also seen as forgiving in a complete way: "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Hebrews 8:12, NIV). We see the same sentiment repeated throughout the Bible (Micah 7:19, Hebrews 10:17, Revelation 12:10). We might ask how this dual vision of God is possible, all-knowing, forgiving and able to forget our sins. Can he really forgive and forget? Is this a metaphorical forgetting? In an interview on the question, theologian John Piper (chancellor at Bethlehem College & Seminary) suggests that it is not a forgetting so much as a "not calling to mind" in our judgment. He also touches on whether we should forgive and forget our own sins (Piper, 2013).

We see in *The Entire History of You* that perfect memories can easily lead to knowledge of situations that would be hard to forgive, especially if you can never forget them. Being imperfect humans, we do not have the capacity to simultaneously be all-knowing and simultaneously completely forgiving, as Liam's situation shows. Blackwell (2018) also discussed the burden of knowing in his text on *The Entire History of You*.

> "In the role of 'watcher,' having access to the ostensibly perfect memory of a technology like the grain can have psychologically crippling consequences. This is most evident in Liam's behavior, starting with the opening scene of the episode. Leaving from a job interview, Liam immediately begins watching re-dos of the interview, visibly disheartened by what he sees. Later that night, he is shown playing the footage again for his wife and expressing his disappointment as he fixates on minor details that he is convinced signal impending rejection. As described earlier, he takes this same approach with the Ffi and Jonas situation, watching re-do after re-do of the dinner party and poring over the minutiae of their interactions. In both cases, it seems Liam is unable to focus on the present due to his obsession with looking back" (Blackwell, 2018, The Role of Watcher, para. 1).

During an initial confrontation about Jonas, we learn that Liam has been jealous in the past—"the Dan stuff." It seems that the Grain technology, at least in the case of Liam, amplifies and feeds other issues, in particular jealousy. Other

characters are shown to be obsessed with re-dos in their own way. Jonas' sexual promiscuity is enhanced by the technology, even when he was engaged to be married he could not stay loyal to her. "She's upstairs, waiting to have sex with me, and I'm downstairs watching some re-do of some night I've picked up somebody else. [...] And I'm fucking pulling myself off!" Likewise, another friend at the party is obsessed with the imperfect details from a five-star hotel he stayed in. "I've paid good money to have perfect details. Now, I've got that shitty carpet for the rest of my life" he complains. "Only if you keep looking at it, mate" another replies. Each person then, seems to get lost in their own obsessions with the technology.

Liam's ability to forgive is also hindered by the fact that Ffion chose to keep the memory of her infidelity with Jonas, as we see that Grain memories *can* be deleted. During his appraisal they ask Liam about any deletions: "there's no major deletions this quarter?" He responds, "No, no, everything's well within parameters." Not only do employers have access to recordings, they also are aware of deletions, which might raise questions regarding the motives of such deletions. Likewise, we see Liam force Jonas to delete his memories of Ffion during the attack at Jonas' house. Ffion herself claims to have deleted the footage, not wanting to show Liam her betrayal.

— [Ffion] I deleted it. I wanted it to go away, I wiped the whole thing.
— [Liam] Did you?
— [Ffion] Yeah.
— [Liam] So it's just a blank gap in your timeline?
— [Ffion] Yeah.
— [Liam] Show me that then.

Saying she needs to find it, Ffion attempts to delete the footage in the moment via the inner eye interface, but Liam catches her. "No! No deleting it, not now!" he screams at her. Ffions lies make forgiveness harder, and her choice to save the footage and not actually delete it is a further betrayal. It means that Ffion's value of the footage outweighed the risk of her husband finding out about it. And, since past and present are collapsed through reliving of footage, Ffion's choice to keep the footage means that she wants to keep Jonas in her present (as we will discuss further in the following subsection). It is hard to forgive someone who does not demonstrate remorse in their behavior. Ephesians 4:32 tells Christians, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (NIV), but we see that with individual omniscience, this forgiveness becomes impossible.

A final interesting detail on the point of forgiveness and the burden of a perfect memory comes at the beginning of the episode during Liam's appraisal at his law

firm when one of his bosses asks him if he is okay with retrospective parenting cases.

— [Appraiser 1] A new area we're getting lots of play in, and your office could be at the center for, is litigation in retrospective parenting cases.
— [Liam] Retrospective?
— [Appraiser 2] Bobby sues Mum and Dad for insufficient attention, leading to lack of confidence, leading to damages against earnings.
— [Liam] Right, and we're okay, the firm's okay with that ethically and morally?
— [Appraiser 1] Yep.

We see that forgiveness is essentially something that will be non-existent in a future where children have the Grain technology from birth, something Liam's own daughter has. But receiving forgiveness is just as important as being able to offer it, and in a world where parents can be sued for not giving their children enough attention, we see a situation where big business has the power to litigate culpability.

6.2.3 Re-living outside of time

We see many examples of the characters "watching re-dos" or talking about re-living re-do moments because they are better than the present. At one point we even see Ffion and Liam having sex, both re-doing a more exciting time together in parallel. This re-living is a way of collapsing past and present, collapsing time (Figure 6.2).

One theory used to explain God's omniscience, Arminianism, accounts for human free will by positing that God himself is outside of time. Simply put, the theory suggests that if all is preordained (as Calvinists, the other leading viewpoint suggests), free will is not really possible. Instead, Arminianism posits that by being outside of time, God can simultaneously know everything, while still leaving human free will intact. Elements of this debate within theology will be brought up again in the next chapter. However, the important detail, that to be both omniscient and allow for free will within his creation, God must be outside of time itself, seeing our existence in time as a singular event, one that he can intervene in at any moment throughout all of time, at exactly the same moment.

This idea of being outside of time, however, is not precisely accurate in the case of *The Entire History of You*, though the metaphor breaks down not because of the individual omniscience, but precisely because as humans we are not outside of time, even if individual omniscience might give the illusion of such power through the collapse of time with the Grain technology. As we see, when characters re-do past experiences, time continues to pass in the present. Though the

Figure 6.2: Sex re-do - *The Entire History of You* (2011)

Grain collapses past and present, instead of really being outside of time, the characters forgo the present for the experiences of the past, choosing nostalgia over reality. Another way the metaphor falls short is that in Arminianism, God is able to intervene at every moment in time, because he is intervening from outside of it; he sees it as one complete event, as explained above.

The characters in the episode are not able to intervene in the past, instead they are only able to relive it, not change it. These issues highlight the ways that having a singular God-like power would, instead of making life better, likely make it worse. Just as individual omniscience makes forgiveness nearly impossible, it also makes living in the present potentially boring (in comparison to more exciting pasts), unnecessary to actively engage with (since it can be re-done later if you so choose) or impossible (since re-dos superseded the present, making it impossible to experience).

This idea of boredom in response to the Grain is event in a number of characters' behavior, from Liam and Ffion having sex while watching an older, more exciting sexual experience together, or Jonas, preferring to re-do old flings instead of being with his fiancée, presumably highlighting the idea of the monotony that can come with the present when the past is a treasure trove of experiences that you can relive with the push of a button. The notion of lack of engagement with the present was brought up by Jenkins (2019) in his text on *The Entire History of You* where he both describes an example of the disassociation from the present and explains the rationale:

> "The social interactions at the cocktail party are staged so as to convey this same sense of 'continuous partial attention,' a term coined by Linda Stone (n.d.) to describe how people interact in today's mobile communication environment. Here, the characters look at each other through glassy eyes; their eyelines are often slightly askew. Close-ups focus our attention on gestures and expressions that are overlooked by the other guests, suggesting the miscues which surface amongst people who do not fully engage the first time around since they can always 're-do' the party later" (p. 47).

Finally, the impossibility of experiencing the present when the past succeeds is ever-present in the episode, but most obvious when we look at the final scene of the episode where Liam is re-doing moments with his wife and daughter, attempting to escape the reality that they have left. The final scene of the episode shows Liam re-doing happier moments with Ffion and their baby, re-living but not living (Figures 6.3 and 6.4). Clearly tortured by his inability to really live in that time, and recognizing the limitations of living in the past, Liam cuts out his Grain. We do not know for sure what happens to Liam, but we can presume that without the Grain amplifying his obsessions, he might be happier, just as Hallam was.

Figure 6.3: Re-living the past - *The Entire History of You* (2011)

At the start of the episode at the dinner party scene in the midst of a discussion about re-dos we are introduced to a character, Hallam, who had her Grain gouged out and stolen. She says "I'm just happier now" about her choice to "go grainless",

Figure 6.4: Tortured by the past - *The Entire History of You* (2011)

not getting it replaced after the attack. This foreshadowing leads us to think about why someone might be happier without the Grain, just as we are being convinced of why we should want one. The juxtaposition of these two viewpoints is what makes the technology so engaging, we can see how it would make us God-like but also how it might drive us insane, all in the same instant.

6.3 Conclusion

As we saw in this chapter, omniscience, while a desirable trait in many ways, could bring with it some problems when humans are given a perfect recall of their past. Ideas of individual omniscience, the burden of a perfect memory, and the problematic potential to live outside of time have highlighted themes within *The Entire History of You*, and helped frame this story of tragic love through a more complex understanding of what God-like omniscience might bring with it. The next chapter will once again consider omniscience, but instead of humans wielding the power, we see big data as the omniscient being, guiding the characters in their quest for love in *Hang the DJ* (2017).

Other episodes that touch on omniscience, aside from *Hang the DJ*, might include *USS Callister* (2017) with its depiction of a God-like ruler of a virtual world—though this episode is best understood in a conversation on obedience (Chapter 11). Likewise, the way that knowledge is used to force the hand of characters in *Shut Up and Dance* (2016) alludes to all-knowing internet vigilantes,

but their knowledge is not the complete omniscience we see in the two episodes considered in this thesis, it is instead just advanced information gathering.

Another episode also relevant to the theme of forgiveness in the context of technology, as touched upon in this chapter, might be *Smithereens* (2019) where the main character seeks personal forgiveness for an accident. However, the episode fits better with a discussion of devotion in Chapter 8. *The Entire History of You* offers insight into what individual omniscience could mean in the context of human fallibility in a way that other episodes could not have done.

Chapter 7

OMNISCIENT ALGORITHMS IN *HANG THE DJ* (2017)

— [DEVICE] Congratulations, Amy. Your ultimate match has been identified. Your pairing day is tomorrow.
— Ultimate as in “the one”?
— [DEVICE] That is correct.

Hang the DJ (2017)[1] follows two young twenty-somethings, Amy (Georgina Campbell) and Frank (Joe Cole), as they follow a system to find their “ultimate match”—a system that boasts a 99.8% success rate. Presumably inside a dating center, the site is specifically meant to allow participants to find their match, equipped with everything they need—including temporary housing. An algorithm, or coach as it is referred to in the episode, pairs off matches for specific amounts of time, using these temporary relationships to collect data in order to identify each user’s ideal match. The two, Amy and Frank, are paired off for a brief encounter, leaving both wanting more.

After being paired off for relationships of various lengths with others using the system, Amy and Frank are paired with one another for a second time, and they agree not to check the designated length of their relationship as decided by the algorithm—information which users are free to access and usually do. When Frank decides he must know how long he has left with Amy, and checks the countdown timer alone, his “one sided-observation” leads to a re-calibration of the relationship length—a drastically shortened time together. They will have just 20 hours from what should have been five more years, and the relationship ends with a fight between the two about the broken promise (Figure 7.1).

[1]Episode directed by Tim V. Patten, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on December 29, 2017.

Figure 7.1: Re-calibration - *Hang the DJ* (2017)

Once again, the two are assigned new relationships, and eventually both are told that their ultimate match has been identified—and that they have not previously met the person with whom they will be matched. When they are given the chance to say goodbye to each other at the same restaurant of their first pairing, they decide that they do not want an ultimate match, but each other. They try to escape the dating complex, and it is revealed that they are not inside a center at all, but a simulation. The scene depicts the two scaling a wall into the heavens, and then they are just in darkness (Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2: Wall into the heavens - *Hang the DJ* (2017)

Thus, their rebellion was an anticipated, desired response—a test. One simulation of 1000 runs on this particular couple; in 998 of those simulations they

choose to escape together—thus the 99.8% success rate they are told the system has achieved. The episode ends with the two meeting in real life, having received the same near perfect match on a dating app.

7.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Hang the DJ*

Popular responses to *Hang the DJ* were generally positive, with most commenting on the more positive ending as a differentiating factor, much like the case of *San Junipero*, as we saw in Chapter 5. Writing for *The Atlantic*, Sophie Gilbert (2017) explained:

> "I enjoyed 'Hang the DJ' a lot, although it sagged a little in the middle, like *Black Mirror* episodes tend to do. But the twist in the end turned a sweet-love-story-slash-Tinder-fable into something more intriguing, and the way the chapter hinted at a larger conspiracy throughout was masterfully structured. [...] 'Hang the DJ' has a happy ending, at least by *Black Mirror* standards—Frank and Amy seem destined to be together. But the twist leaves you pondering the ethics of creating a thousand digital people, only to erase them after they've fulfilled their purpose. It's a heartwarming episode with a sting in its tail" (December 30, 2017).

The conclusion of *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory* (2018) makes mention of season four, as it was released shortly before publication, and the authors comment briefly on *Hang the DJ*: "Season four of Black Mirror offers some future optimism in the episode 'Hang the DJ,' where big data is shown to produce [emphasis added] true love via a computer dating system that merges Tinder and Match.com" (Conclusion, para. 3). While a somewhat naive reading of the episode, the authors distill some key points into a brief statement. It illustrates a trust in technology, especially big data, to bring us truth and to be our omniscient guide, making things easier without having to weigh options ourselves. Likewise, it subtly points to the creation of truth, using the word "produce," as opposed to the finding of it, alluding to the ways that practices in the era of surveillance capitalism[2] nudges our behavior—slowly making us into the people the algorithms

[2]Surveillance capitalism is a widespread practice brought on by the indiscriminate use of big data in our everyday lives, especially as consumers. By surveilling our spending habits, companies are able to hyper-target ads, convince potential consumers into buying, and even nudge beliefs through suggested content. This chapter considers the more positive aspects of surveillance capitalism, and the next chapter will consider some of the more negative consequences.

want us to be, not necessarily acting as an unbiased tool for decision making. The concept of surveillance capitalism will be explored in depth below.

Power (2019) is skeptical of the notion that *Hang the DJ*, and by extension the comparable episode *San Junipero*, are really portrayals of a happy ending:

> "Both episodes are nonetheless indicative of the kind of depthless, eternal present, that Fredric Jameson identified as a salient feature of postmodernism, itself the cultural imprimatur of late capitalism (1991, p. 6), "San Junipero" in its knowing resuscitation of filmic depictions of the 1980s and 'Hang the DJ' in its self-conscious engagement with onscreen depictions of relationships. Moreover, both episodes depict simulacra where the future is foreclosed: capitalist multinationals having figured out in each how to monetise the afterlife. That 'Hang the DJ' concludes on a hopeful note instead is, I will argue, highly debatable and assumes that the versions of Amy and Frank it closes on are in fact real, and not a series of zeros and ones in a further simulation. Or, if they are real instead, that they have become wholly pliant to not just technology, but the soulless corporations that create it" (p. 234).

This idea of pliability will be important for the analysis below. Power also considers *Hang the DJ* through the vantage point of the "homogeneity of popular culture" as discussed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. He makes comparisons between details of the episode and films which it mirrors; these comparisons range from *Annie Hall* (1977) to *Blade Runner* (1982), from *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998) to *Vanilla Sky* (2001). By drawing upon these examples, Power demonstrates the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer in a tangible format, pointing to the knowing way that the episode mirrors other films and television series:

> "Some four decades before Jameson wrote on postmodernism, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer detected marked similarities in the way culture was being used in both the US and Nazi Germany, which as Jewish émigrés they had fled. Noting the homogeneity of popular culture ('culture now imposes the same stamp on everything'), Adorno and Horkheimer posited that the 'culture industry' was through repetition eroding all spontaneity and mollifying the masses into passivity in the interests of capitalist ideology (1944, p. 120). The film industry, they argued, was aptly titled, for it foregrounded the medium's subordination to commerce ('they call themselves industries; and when their directors' incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed' [1944, p. 121]) and

> in its propensity for repetition promulgated capitalist ideology in an endless loop" (p. 235).

In their chapter titled "*Hang the DJ* and Digital Dating: Should We Use Computers to Help Us Find Mates?", Cleary and Pigliucci (2020) use stoicism and existentialism as frameworks to ask if we should use dating coaches and dating apps to find love, like the main characters of the episode do. They conclude under both frameworks that a dating app misses the point of finding love—the importance of trusting our own judgment and the embracing of the uncertainty that is inherent in relationships. They seem to miss the point, or at least do not extrapolate in their discussion, that the dating app is just one way that data is analyzed to make decisions for us, or to recommend choices—shortcutting our own judgment. This thesis will take up this question of the larger ways that data can be and is used in the real world in order to analyze this episode.

Writing about "cookie" technology within *Black Mirror*, Gardner and Sloane (2020) ask questions about whether the dating app is even humane, remarking on the role that the cookie technology, or something like it, plays in the simulations, of which we have seen one of 1000.

> "In the service of finding the perfect mate, the system creates, then destroys, two thousand seemingly conscious beings. Clearly, these replicas (whether they're technically 'cookies' or not) are not 'the same' as the real Frank and Amy, since the former can be destroyed without any harm coming to the latter. But we might also fret over the casual way this digital data—which appears to us as perfectly conscious and rational throughout the episode—could be so unceremoniously done away with" (p. 287).

This reading of the episode not only asks whether the use of our data for financial gain is ethical, but whether this behavior could be taken to the extreme, in a situation where we are literally duplicated, manipulated, and discarded. Whether algorithms are finding us the perfect product or our perfect match, our data (and by extension, we) simply become the raw materials in the quest for profit. This darker reading of the episode aligns with the discussion of *Smithereens* in the next chapter, in which we will explore some overlapping concepts, especially surveillance capitalism.

7.2 “It’s so much simpler when it’s all mapped out”: a reading of *Hang the DJ*

The world we see in *Hang the DJ* is one where big data is all-knowing, at least to the extent that the predictive algorithms can anticipate, or quite possibly sway, our decisions. Open Theism offers a model for this particular model of omniscience, one where God knows all possible futures in an open sense, and where true free will is presumably possible. Option paralysis and decision fatigue help us to understand why we might be predictable to an omniscient God or to the algorithms that we saw mimic the omniscience of Open Theism.

However, Zuboff’s (2019) conception of surveillance capitalism shows us how big data is actually making our decisions for us, slowly nudging us towards the consumers they want us to be. This complication, where algorithms not only seek to foresee decisions, but instead start to influence them, calls into question the idea that omniscience in the form of technology could allow for free will in the same way that a model of Open Theism suggests.

7.2.1 Open Theism

Christianity ascribes many positive characteristics to its God: an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent creator of the world. “He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit” (Psalm 147:4-5, NIV). This assertion that the Christian God is omniscient, while foundational and seemingly straightforward, has caused widespread debate between religious scholars and students of theology. There are two general theories within the debate, Calvinism and Arminianism. Put simply, Calvinists believe that the only logical way for God to be all-knowing is for him to have preordained all of history, in other words and quite crudely put, there are those who have been elected to be saved, and those who have not—the damned; they argue, however, that this preordained history does not exclude free will.

On the other side of the argument, Arminianists, believing that the Calvinist model lacks the notion of *true* free will, instead advocate for a model of God outside of time as a possible means to reconcile the combination of an all-knowing God and true free will, as we saw in the last chapter.[3] In this way, God knows all because for him it is all happening all at the same time, since he is outside of time; the idea of an all-knowing God and free will can co-exist. However, in the late

[3]Writing on this tension of ideas, Walls and Dongell (2013) explain that the question of God’s foreknowledge is an important one among believers. It will also play an important role in this thesis, as the debate will inform a number of the episodes analyzed. With the centrality of these concepts in mind, Walls and Dongell write:

20th and early 21st century, a third theory came into the spotlight, with a view of God as all knowing, but in a different sort of way (Beilby and Eddy., 2001). The new theory, Open Theism, has been so controversial that academics writing about it have been shunned from their Christian universities (Smith, 2018). What could be so controversial about the theory?

Open Theism, put simply, is a belief system that views God as all-knowing in an "open" sense. Instead of knowing everything in the more classical view of omniscience, God knows both everything that has *already* happened (in a certain, closed sense) and those things that have *not yet* happened in an open sense (i.e. God knows what could happen, including every possibility and the fullness of the consequences of each possibility). The grand biblical plan is fixed or *known*, but there still remains possibility for openness, for free will.

> "Reality in other words, is composed of both settled and open aspects. Since God knows all of reality perfectly, this view holds that he knows the possible aspects as possible and knows the settled aspects as settled" (Boyd, 2001, p. 14).

The basic principle is that when we come to a choice and make it, God knows beforehand the likelihood of our choosing any of the options; thus we do not surprise God with our free will, but he does not choose our actions for us either. Once we make each choice, the likelihood of our future choices changes; we follow a different part of the spider web of knowledge, and his knowledge of our path updates, if you will. A technical term for this would be "decision tree" or "probability tree." Put simply, one could argue that open theists believe that God has hacked our habits and choices—God as the ultimate collector of big data.

That being said, does the reverse hold true? Is big data god-like in some way? With knowledge of our past purchasing and viewing histories, companies like Google, Amazon, and Facebook individually target users with personalized ads or customized search results. Later, based on the ads you click on, or the things you go on to purchase, you will see different ads the next time you are viewing. Cookies, online tracking, and device fingerprinting even mean that companies have the ability to track user habits between devices. That means that Amazon's "*Recommended for you*" is all-knowing in the Open Theism sense—the past is

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"Most of us hesitate to admit that the Bible is not perfectly clear on all counts. Many of us worry that any hedging along these lines may weaken our witness in the world and open up floodgates of doubt for the weak, or that disagreement may tempt some of us to excuse sinful behavior by blaming an imagined defect in Scripture. These are worthy fears, but they can be effectively countered. And the mere presence of these fears is not sufficient ground for ignoring the troubling realities of diverse and incongruent interpretation." (2013, The Question of Clarity, para. 2).

known and closed, but future choices are infinite, though with probable odds based on past behavior.

This strangely similar model makes clear just one way that technology has begun to tangibly stand in for religion in the world today. With click-through rates and adaptive targeting working to get us all to spend more money, we see just one way that our shift away from religion in the West manifests itself in the worship of other things. And our consumer behavior is the tip of the iceberg in the near-future dystopia anthology series *Black Mirror*. As we see in *Hang the DJ*, algorithms can even tell us who we will probably love. However, there is a darker view of this predictive technology, one that posits that these algorithms are not simply predicting our behavior, but that they are actively influencing it. Before looking at these darker possibilities however, we will first look at why we might want this kind of omniscient algorithm predicting our behavior and helping us make choices.

7.2.2 Option paralysis and decision fatigue

In a world full of options, we can easily become overwhelmed when it comes to the amount of decisions we need to make on a daily basis. This idea is something that the characters in *Hang the DJ* reference themselves (using the term "option paralysis").

— [Amy] Must have been mental before the system.
— [Frank] How do you mean?
— [Amy] Well, people had to do the whole relationship thing themselves, work out who they wanna be with.
— [Frank] Hmm. Option paralysis. So many choices, you end up not knowing which one you want.
— [Amy] Yeah, exactly, and if things seem shitty, they'd have to figure out whether they wanted to break up with someone.
— [Frank] How to break up with someone. Fuckin' hell.
— [Amy] Just a nightmare.
— [Frank] It's not like when it's all mapped out.
— [Amy] God, no. It's so much simpler when it's all mapped out.

As Cleary and Pigliucci (2020) point out in their chapter on *Hang the DJ*, it might be easier just to give into a system that makes decisions for us, it certainly takes the anxiety out of it. They, however, suggest that to make our own decisions, according to Stoicism, is a way to "to refine our ability to arrive at correct judgments, because this leads to a fulfilling life" (p. 170). However, what happens

in a world where we have not only unlimited options in love (through online dating), but also unlimited options in products (online shopping), unlimited options in friends (social media), unlimited options in entertainment (streaming services, etc.)? The answer that we seem to have come to as a society is allowing technology to streamline our decision making processes by recommending things that we choose from, with fewer real options (something we will explore more below in the section about surveillance capitalism). This outsourcing of decision making comes from a place of fatigue, being overwhelmed by our options. It would be, and often is, much easier to be guided in our decisions.

Writing about decision fatigue, (a somewhat similar phenomenon to option paralysis as discussed in the episode) *The New York Times Magazine* writer John Tierney (2011) posits:

> "Decision fatigue helps explain why ordinarily sensible people get angry at colleagues and families, splurge on clothes, buy junk food at the supermarket and can't resist the dealer's offer to rustproof their new car. No matter how rational and high-minded you try to be, you can't make decision after decision without paying a biological price. It's different from ordinary physical fatigue—you're not consciously aware of being tired—but you're low on mental energy. The more choices you make throughout the day, the harder each one becomes for your brain, and eventually it looks for shortcuts."

So, while option paralysis is the idea that with overwhelming amounts of options, we are unable to make a choice, decision fatigue is the idea that when forced to make many decisions throughout the day, we will often look for shortcuts in the way we make those choices due to the mental fatigue that constant decision-making can provoke. The two ways that these shortcuts manifest, Tierney (2011) suggests, is either in reckless behavior or none at all. Thus, the two ideas, option paralysis and decision fatigue, are intrinsically connected.

Seen from the perspective of *Hang the DJ*, the characters actually seem to suggest a third option, outsourcing. The idea that choosing which relationship to be in yourself is too complicated and messy, shows the naive side of our growing dependence on algorithms. In the sense of compatibility, we might think that an algorithm could make a better choice for us than we might with far less information to base our decisions on. Thus, we prefer the idea that vast amounts of information can find tangible, actionable truths, even if that is an illusion. Writing about our worship of data, describing it as a new techno-religion, Harari (2016) explained data's power over us:

> "The most interesting emerging religion is Dataism, which venerates neither God nor man—it worships data. [...] Dataism inverts the tra-

> ditional pyramid of learning. Hitherto, data was seen as only the first step in a long chain of intellectual activity. Humans were supposed to distil data into information, information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom. However, Dataists believe that humans can no longer cope with the immense flows of data, hence they cannot distill data into information, let alone into knowledge or wisdom. The work of processing data should therefore be entrusted to electronic algorithms, whose capacity far exceeds that of the human brain. In practice, this means that Dataists are sceptical about human knowledge and wisdom, and prefer to put their trust in Big Data and computer algorithms" (p. 427-429).

Thus, we can see the enormous power that data holds, both in our everyday lives when it comes to outsourcing our decision making, but also on a macro-scale, where human knowledge and wisdom are replaced by algorithms that we do not fully understand. This shift in power leads to our discussion of omniscient data in the context of capitalism.

Returning to the idea brought up in the literature review section at the start of this chapter, we can see how in many ways, outsourcing to an algorithm is putting faith in a calculation that could just as easily represent the creation of truth as opposed to the finding of it. In other words, how are we supposed to know if the choice that a dating app, or dating coach like the one depicted in the episode, is giving us non-biased matches? How could this translate to ideas outside of love?

7.2.3 The usurpation of human sovereignty

In her book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Zuboff (2019) takes up some of the ideas from the start of this section. However, instead of comparing all-knowing algorithms to the concept of Open Theism, Zuboff writes about the phenomenon she calls surveillance capitalism—the unseen force behind these algorithms and recommendations that seem all-knowing or god-like. This driving force not only leads to the seemingly magical ability that technology has to predict our behavior, but also to change that behavior to correspond to the highest bidder—as the saying goes, "money makes the world go 'round." Our loss of self-determination, Zuboff posits, will be due to our data being used in opaque ways, which are not for our benefit:

> "Surveillance capitalism operates through unprecedented asymmetries in knowledge and power that accrues knowledge. Surveillance capitalists know everything about us, whereas their operations are designed to be unknowable to us. They accumulate vast domains of new

> knowledge from us, but not for us. They predict our futures for the sake of others' gain, not ours" (p. 11).

While she recognizes the positive potential that our new world offers, she largely worries that these little short-term perks will blind us to the long-term loss of autonomy we will be faced with: "We celebrate the networked world for the many ways it enriches our capabilities and prospects, but it has birthed whole new territories of anxiety, danger, and violence" (p. 4).

Thus, the difference between Open Theism—that can foresee likelihood of choice in an open sense while leaving the possibility for *real* free will—and the model of the algorithm is that the latter informs us in advance of our choice what our most probable behavior will be. This tangible foretelling often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, usurping *true* free will at the same time as it enables companies and those with enough financial resources to actually guide and suggest our future actions. As a result, it nudges us into decisions we might not have made, were it not for the algorithms' premonitions.

We see an oddly similar idea in the Bible—contrasting, or at least complicating, the idea of free will—the notion that God is the one directing our paths in some way, guiding our decisions, giving us a nudge: "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9, NIV). We could compare this to the role that technology has come to play in guiding our behavior as well. Technology, through the collection of data, can tell us what we want, can predict what we will do, and can even nudge us towards things we might not have sought out on our own.

In his chapter on *Smithereens* in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, D'Amato (2020) also references Zuboff's (2019) book. D'Amato considers the darker angle of surveillance capitalism, as we will also do in Part III of this thesis, when we arrive at the theme of what technology asks in return for its services. Suffice it to say, that there is a darker side to technology that can tell us what we want before we even know it, one that asks for our undivided attention, but more on that in the next chapter.

In their article published in the journal *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Conley and Burroughs (2020), while writing about the illusion of autonomy in another episode, *Bandersnatch* (2018), posit that the choose-your-own-adventure format of the episode works to demonstrate our lack of real autonomy, writing, "[T]hat appears to be Brooker's point, to arouse in viewers an awareness of the systems that both offer and undermine the illusion of choice" (p. 10). A few lines later they continue, "The critique extends to all social media and the accumulation of data under digital capitalism: our information is being stored, processed, and sold for corporate targeting—all packaged in the perilous promises of self-authoring and digital liberation" (p. 10). This critique of technology's power to

simultaneously offer the idea of endless options, while at the same time limiting real choice reflects Zuboff's ideas about surveillance capitalism and the changes to behavior that data mining and user profiling can accomplish—subconsciously altering our behavior towards companies' preferred choices for us, little by little the only possible choices. Though Conley and Burroughs were writing about a group of episodes other than *Hang the DJ*, their analysis fits with the ideas discussed in this section.

So, if Open Theism suggests that this view of God actually leaves room for true free will, yet this model of predictive algorithms in the era of surveillance capitalism actually narrows our choices and even has the potential to alter our behavior, compounded by the idea that we willingly outsource our choices, maybe free will becomes an illusion. Do we really have choices? How could we not when we live in a world of seemingly limitless options? As we have seen, maybe our path is not as "open" as it seems to be.

7.3 Conclusion

We can see then, how the omniscient Christian God, especially as he is conceived of in Open Theism, is not such a distant concept when compared to the algorithm controlling the dating system in *Hang the DJ*. Both know what has come before, and while not completely certain, both can make increasingly accurate assumptions about the future. *Black Mirror* depicts our willingness to put our full faith in data, our desire for all-knowing technology to solve our problems, and our readiness to concede privacy for ease in decision-making. Harari (2016) takes the leap to suggest Dataism might one day be, as he calls it, a techno-religion. Similarly, as we saw in Chapter 2, Wertheim discusses the fantasy of omniscience in relation to cyberspace asking again "just who will have access to these resources?" showing us the possibility for exclusion that this worship of data might hold (2000, p. 29). As we saw in our discussion of surveillance capitalism, while trusting in data might seem to offer ease through outsourcing our decision-making, it has led to a world where algorithms are not simply suggesting things we might want, but instead influencing our behavior and nudging our decisions towards corporate interests. This puts corporations as the real client—we are simply the raw material for sale.

We could equally consider the all-knowing algorithms in other *Black Mirror* episodes including *Fifteen Million Merits* (2011) or *Nosedive* (2016). Likewise, we can see the all-knowing attribute brought down to an individual level with perfect memory archives in *Arkangel* (2017) or *The Entire History of You* (2011), as discussed in the previous chapter. Likewise, the demonstration of a lack of autonomy in relation to technology—as seen the discussion above surrounding

surveillance capitalism—has been explored by authors using other episodes (including *Bandersnatch*, *Smithereens*, and *The Waldo Moment*); this thesis will return to this angle regarding the role of surveillance capitalism in the discussion of *Smithereens* in Chapter 8.

Part III

What Technology and Christianity Demand

Part III: Introduction

In contrast to what both Christianity and technology offer, as covered in Part II, Part III will consider what technology and Christianity ask for in return for the benefits they provide. Put simply, what they demand of their followers. The Christian concepts in Part III will explore the ways that Christianity and religion in general has worked as a means of social control throughout history. These concepts include: devotion, piety, sacrifice, and obedience. These values, or virtues, seen as the hallmarks of a good Christian, become mechanisms of control in the hands of technology. In an odd way, the technology in these episodes of *Black Mirror* starts to take a turn further away from reality as characters are asked to be virtuous and devout. In some instances this seems to just be addiction, but who is to say that religious devotion does not also bring out addictive tendencies?

Devotion is a key requisite in religious faith; piety is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; the concept of self-sacrifice is central to the Christian message, mirroring Christ himself; and obedience is a topic considered extensively throughout the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. So, why is the technology in *Black Mirror* asking for these virtues from users as well? As mentioned above, some of these virtues could be written off as addictive instead of devotional. Others, like piety, seem more complicated and less likely to come as a demand from technology. Likewise, self-sacrifice and obedience are hardly virtues that technology demands of us. It is more likely that we demand them from our technology, as theoretically, technology is a tool that works for us. In his article, "Religion and Social Control," Ellwood (1918) makes clear his view that actually, all forms of social control reference back to religion. So, if as *Black Mirror* posits, technology will soon be enforcing or coercing moral virtues, this power of social control actually references back to the original form of social control, religion. Interestingly, any virtues could be emphasized or taken up by technology. Yet we see again that Christian specters, in these chapters through notions of virtues, become central to understanding *Black Mirror*.

The four episodes in Part III, like the four in Part II, hold certain things in common. Unlike the first grouping, the episodes in Part III do not offer the same optimism, instead they all look at what happens to ordinary people when things go wrong with technology. Held captive by these demands from technology, we see the characters struggling to break free from them, ultimately becoming consumed by them. In *Smithereens* (2019) we see two characters attempting to break their devotion to technology by means of other non-tech based devotional rituals, trading one devotion for another. In *Nosedive* (2016) we see Lacie's struggle with piety and the social constraints of a literal pastel world where no one speaks their mind and is afraid to offend. The main character in *Playtest* (2016) is actually sacrificed to the progress of technology. Finally, we see mandatory obedience to

“an asshole god” who tortures those who question his authority in *USS Callister* (2017).

Chapter 8

DEVOTION IN *SMITHEREENS* (2019)

— I heard that you make these things that way. Addictive. So that you can't take your eyes off them. Well, job done. Bit of user feedback for you there. Maybe factor that into your next update. [sniffs]
— I'm so sorry about your girl. Truly. I'm, uh... It wasn't supposed to be like this. Our whole platform, I swear to God. It was... like, it was one thing when I started it and then it just... I don't know, it just became this whole other fucking thing. I mean, it got there by degrees, you know, they said... "Bill, you gotta keep optimizing, you gotta keep people engaged." Until it was more like a crack pipe.

Smithereens[1] follows a hostage situation in which a cab service employee, Chris (Andrew Scott), kidnaps a tech company employee, Jaden (Damson Idris).[2] Chris does so in order to gain leverage to speak to the company's CEO Billy Bauer (Topher Grace). Having accidentally kidnapped a lowly intern instead of a company executive as he had planned, Chris has a nail-biting standoff with British police as Smithereen employees rush to determine his motives.

Eventually he accomplishes his goal—to speak to the CEO of Smithereen. While telling Bauer the story of a car accident in which his fiancée died, he reveals why he was so obsessed with speaking to the CEO. Chris had been driving home with his fiancée one evening, and glanced at a notification on his phone, leading him to cause an accident. Both his fiancée and the other driver died, but since the other driver had alcohol in his system, he was blamed instead of Chris. No one knew the real story, that the accident was caused by Chris' inability to put down

[1]Episode directed by James Hawes, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on June 5, 2019.

[2]*Smithereens* refers to the episode itself, while Smithereen is the name of the tech company central to the plot of the episode.

his cell phone, even while driving.

He talks to the CEO about how addictive the drug-like notifications are and asks if the technology was intentionally designed that way. Having said what he needed to, the driver tells the young employee to get out of the car, planning to commit suicide, which is clear through him saying "Today is my last day" to himself over and over in the episode. The young intern tries to talk to the kidnapper out of shooting himself, telling him the car accident wasn't his fault. The two struggle over the gun and the sniper team shoots; it is unclear what happens next.

8.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Smithereens*

Smithereens, being one of the most recent episodes to be released, has less written about it academically than other *Black Mirror* episodes. In terms of reviews, the response from critics has been mixed. David Sims of *The Atlantic* called it season 5's "only definite flop," going on to say: "'Smithereens' is a tale of two totally adrift people unable to continue living in an interconnected world. That feeling of helplessness is a fine starting point for a *Black Mirror* episode, but it shouldn't be the grand finale" (2019). More sympathetic to the episode, *Den of Geek* writer Chris Longo viewed the episode as extremely relevant:

> "Though not solely limited to the technology itself, Black Mirror fans have been conditioned to look for narrative twists. It's Charlie Brooker's best magic trick, one he uses to deploy themes and ideas that fit the wider scope of the Black Mirror universe. You can feel the threat of it beating like a pulse throughout 'Smithereens.' Only here, Brooker pulls the rug on us to tell a human story refreshingly relevant to our current era. The episode's only crime-other than stalking, kidnapping, and extortion-is its story is too self-contained to fully realize the potential of the ideas it starts to unpack" (2019).

In his chapter "*Smithereens* and the Economy of Attention: Are We All Dopamine Addicts?" (2020), D'Amato has a number of important insights into the episode, some of which relate to concepts we will cover in this chapter, or that are covered in other chapters. He looks briefly at how surveillance capitalism came to be, tracing it back to *The New York Sun* and its advertising strategy—selling their paper for less than it cost to produce, but gaining such a large public that people wanted to buy ad space within the paper—as explained by Tim Wu in his book *The Attention Merchants* (2016). D'Amato describes Chris' call as a confession: "Chris demands Billy's attention to make a confession" (p. 251), and he talks about the attention that these technologies seek as a demand: "attention demanded by digital capitalists" (p. 254); two points that support the

concepts which will be explored within this chapter. Later,D'Amato touches on the psychological and physiological elements that go into our dopamine addiction to social media and notifications that draw our attention to our phones.

In their chapter on death in *Black Mirror*, Pérez and Genovesi (2020) suggest that Chris is deferring death in his quest to confess to Billy Bauer. Likewise they see that Chris is haunted by the death of his fiancée: "even though Chris's (sic) fiancée is dead, her presence is constantly felt by Chris, not just through his guilt but by the fact that he lived" (p. 297). They ask whether the real question in the episode is not the danger of transhumanism, and our connection to technology, but instead our reaction to such technology. Their comments make clear that Brooker does not see the problem as a technological one, but a human one:

> "as in the ending of *Smithereens*, it has desensitized us to the point that we're no longer bothered by the daily horrors that plague our world. We just see the notification on our phone of another horrendous event and move on. From this perspective, transhumanism has perhaps made us less human" (p. 296).

In his article on *Smithereens*, Goh (2020) writes from a media theory perspective, using both Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* as well as Agamben's reading of the Foucautian concept in his work "What is an Apparatus?" (2006). The concept of the apparatus, as read by Agamben, is useful in the discussion of religion and technology—especially their parallels and their potential reading in the context of one another.[3] Though not covered by Goh, it is clear that when considering Agamben's (2006) reading of Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* we can see that there could be clear lines drawn between institutions like religion and

[3]We can see that Agamben traces Foucault's notion of the apparatus back to Hegel's thoughts on positive religion, later defining his own definition of the apparatus, Agamben links the concept to technology explicitly:

> "According to Hyppolite, 'destiny' and 'positivity' are two key concepts in Hegel's thought. In particular, the term 'positivity' finds in Hegel its proper place in the opposition between 'natural religion' and 'positive religion.' While natural religion is concerned with the immediate and general relation of human reason with the divine, positive or historical religion encopasses the set of beliefs, rules, and rites that in a certain society and at a certain historical moment are externally imposed on individuals. 'A positive religion,' Hegel writes in a passage cited by Hyppolite, 'implies feelings that are more or less impressed through constraint on souls; these are actions that are the effect of command and the result of obedience and are accomplished without direct interest.' Hyppolite shows how the opposition between nature and positivity corresponds, in this sense, to the dialectics of freedom and obligation, as well as of reason and history. In a passage that could not have failed to provoke Foucault's curiosity, because it in a way presages the notion of apparatus" (Agamben, 2009, p. 4-5).

apparatuses like technology. However, this particular angle will not be taken in this analysis of the text, though it does hold parallels to the final subsection of the analysis on *Smithereens* below.

8.2 "This is my last day": a reading of *Smithereens*

Throughout *Smithereens* there are a number of repetitive behaviors, both relating to technology and not. We see that in many instances, these repeated acts have a devotional aspect to them. Likewise, we also see devotional behavior through retreat in the episode. Sometimes through retreat into the repetitive acts mentioned above, but also physical retreat. These ideas of repetition and retreat will be compared with continuous prayer in Eastern Orthodox Christianity and also with Desert Fathers (and Desert Mothers), a group of early Christians who lived in hermitic isolation. Chris' one goal in the episode, to speak to Smithereen CEO, Billy Bauer, will be considered alongside the Catholic sacraments of confession and last rites. Finally, the role of Smithereen as a company will be considered, in its clear rise to power above the state, and also in the role that it plays among individuals, becoming the modern day church.

8.2.1 Repetition and retreat as devotion

In the opening scene of the episode, we see Chris in his car, listening to a meditative audio guide (Figure 8.1). Later, when he is on hold during the hostage situation, he keeps repeating something to himself, but the people on the line can't hear what he's saying: "This is my last day." We also know that Chris used to perform another type of repetitive behavior, "my phone was glued to my hand. I was the whole cliché, you know, first thing I saw in the morning, last thing I saw at night." These repetitive acts show our devotion to the object of the behavior. First,

"Further expanding the already large class of Foucauldian apparatuses, I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and-why not-language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses-one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face" (Agamben, 2009, p. 14).

Chris was willing to give in to the demands of technology, constant and repetitive attention. Then, he gets a devotional act to replace it.

Figure 8.1: Chris' meditation - *Smithereens* (2019)

> "Hesychasm is the name that is given to the 'body of traditional teaching—partly written, but mainly oral' that 'grew up around the Jesus Prayer' but the name also refers to a broader tradition of inner prayer (Ware 1966: 31). [...] While the heights of hesychasm are usually said to be open to all who devote themselves to pure prayer of the heart, it has traditionally been associated with a monastic lifestyle" (C. D. L. Johnson, 2010, p. 15).

The Jesus Prayer, or sometimes called simply *The Prayer*, is a short prayer, said over and over, meant to evoke the name of Christ, and as a way to bring the person praying into closer union with God: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." It is considered by Eastern Catholics to be the manner by which to fulfill the Apostle Paul's message to the Thessalonians when he tells them to pray without ceasing, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-20, NSV).

> "The Jesus Prayer is considered to be one of the most dominant and widespread forms of prayer in Orthodox Christianity for both clergy and laypersons (Gillet 1987: 21; Hausherr 1978: iv). As well as spreading from an Orthodox monastic setting to an Orthodox lay setting, it has reached many other Christian denominations and into other traditions and worldviews outside Christianity" (Johnson, 2010, p. 5).

While discussing appropriation and the use of the Jesus Prayer in contexts outside of monastic settings and especially outside of Eastern Catholicism, Johnson touches on the idea that many emerging/emergent churches are interested in reinvigorating Christianity through practices such as the Jesus Prayer, specifically for its spiritual characteristics. He considers Marco Pallis' views on the comparisons between Buddhist practices of meditation and the Jesus Prayer, specifically that Pallis sees the Jesus Prayer as a practice that could be the "yoga" of Christianity:

> "He considers hesychasm a 'form of Christian yoga' (91) that 'is accessible and appropriate to every baptised person as such' (92). 'Seeing that the Jesus Prayer belongs historically to Eastern Christianity', he says 'it may be asked by some whether its transplantation to the West at this late hour would be entirely appropriate'" (C. D. L. Johnson, 2010, 76).

This issue of appropriation and recontextualization of religious practices to become more utilitarian is considered again when he discusses Smith's ideas on why many in the West turn to Eastern practices: "'What people today seem to want is not morals and belief, not even new morals and a new belief. They want a practical discipline that will transform them'" (C. D. L. Johnson, 2010, 76).

As we can see, Chris' repetition of the phrase "This is my last day" somehow relates to the utility discussed above in the context of the Jesus Prayer. Chris uses the repetition of the phrase to focus, to calm himself, and to remind himself both of the urgency of his mission and that it has nearly come to a close. By transitioning his devotional practices from obsessing over his phone to his practice of saying his mantra, Chris shows the link between the two repetitive behaviors. They both ask for his full attention, and he needs a tangible practice to replace the old habit.

Another example we see of this kind of repetitive behavior is the mother from Chris' grief support group who tries to enter into her daughter's account every day at the same time. Her daughter committed suicide and the mother believes that her account to another social media website, Persona, might hold answers. Every 24 hours she can make three wrong guesses before she is locked out again. Her repetitive behavior reinforces that idea that technology demands these repetitive, devotional acts, and in the case of the grieving mother, on a very precise timed loop.

When we first see Billy Bauer, his eyes are closed, just as Chris' were the first time that he appeared on screen as the opening frame (Figure 8.2). Bauer likewise seeks to disconnect, and he does so with another practice. Closely connected to the mantra-like practice which Chris makes use of, Bauer's relates more to the physical retreat from society. His appearance is monk-like, or even Christ-like, and his silent retreat is in the desert (Figure 8.3).

Figure 8.2: Bauer's silent retreat - *Smithereens* (2019)

The story of the Temptation of Jesus comes up in three of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. These gospels say that following his baptism, Christ wandered in the wilderness of the desert for 40 days without food while the devil tried to tempt him.

> "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him" (Mark 1:10-13, NIV).

> "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone''" (Luke 4:1-4, NIV).

These verses are often pointed to as inspiration for spiritual fasting as well as spiritual retreats within the Christian tradition (Scherrer, 2009). These concepts along with isolation and silent meditation, mirrored by Smithereen CEO Billy Bauer, can be seen in Christian history in the Desert Fathers (and Desert Mothers), a group of early Christians who lived in isolation in the desert as a form of sacrifice (Burton-Christie, 1993). The practice of *Hesychasm* originated with the Desert

Figure 8.3: Bauer's Christ-like appearance - *Smithereens* (2019)

Fathers and is closely linked to the practice of the Jesus Prayer, as discussed above. This need for silence and retreat into the desert reinforces the parallels we see between Billy Bauer and religious hermits and monks.

Later in the episode, Billy Bauer makes a joke about having access to "God-mode," meaning that he can enter into the Smithereen system through the platform's back-end and access all the information about every user—God-like in both omniscience and power. The earlier comparison of Bauer to a Christ-like figure is furthered by this seemingly innocuous comment, but it also shows the power he holds in the new struggle between state and private enterprise, particularly big tech companies, a theme which will be explored in the final subsection of this analysis.

These overlapping models of retreat and continuous prayer show us the parallels between Chris and Billy. We see both characters attempting to disconnect from technology, something we see happening right now among real users. The trend is widespread enough that tech companies are integrating tools into their services to help users keep track of their daily usage and set limits for themselves. Apple, for instance, released their "Screen Time" app in 2018, allowing users to set themselves limits on individual apps to help with addictive behavior and overuse (Mickle, 2018). These companies, it seems, realize that having created these addictive models, if they are not seen to be the solution they will be perceived as the problem. Thus, they co-opt retreat into their model, offering the solution to the problem they created and keeping their users further dependent on their services.

8.2.2 Confession and last rites

Chris' confession to Billy (who in the episode mirrors a monk, priest, or Christ-like figure as we saw in the previous subsection) mirrors the act of confession within the Catholic tradition. Chris, convinced that he no longer wants to "be here anymore" confesses the true story of his fiancée's death and the car crash which caused it. His addiction to social media, and the constant checking of his phone, led Christopher to take his eyes off the road while driving and cause an accident which caused the death of his fiancée and the driver of the other vehicle, a man who was driving drunk, and inevitably blamed for the accident. Chris never told anyone that the accident was really his fault until he talks to Billy. This revelation seems like a last confession, something he feels he needs to do before he dies, as he plans to do that day. He says he just wants Billy to listen, nothing else.

— [Chris] I want you to listen to me!
— [Billy] I'm listening. Let's just not... blow up, okay? Let's just, you know, be calm and you'll just kind of tell me what it is that you want.
— [Chris] I just told you. I want you to listen to me. Just fucking listen to me.
— [Billy] I'm listening. There's no one else here. Okay, Chris? It's just... it's you and me. You have my attention.

Defining the sacrament of confession, or penance, the Vatican states:

> "In the sacrament of penance the faithful who confess their sins to a legitimate minister, are sorry for them, and intend to reform themselves obtain from God through the absolution imparted by the same minister forgiveness for the sins they have committed after baptism and, at the same, time are reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by sinning" (Catholic Church, 1983).

Penance also plays an important role in the last rites that, when possible, Catholics receive at the end of their life: "Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life 'the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland' or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage" (Catholic Church, 1992, 1525). The sacrament of penance is thought of in three parts, commonly explained as: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. The first being a statement of remorse for one's sins, the second the listing of those sins, and the third usually prayers to be said as penance.

Thus, we see that for the Catholic tradition, confession is a ritualized act, carried out under very specific conditions. Other Christian traditions also acknowledge the importance of confession, but its practice is not as strictly defined. For

instance, in the Lutheran Church confession can be done privately with the pastor, but the third step of penance is not included. One simply expresses remorse, confesses their sins, and is absolved.

Thus, we might say that Chris' confession to Billy is more in line with a Lutheran confession.

Billy fails twice to take Chris' confession. After Chris finishes telling the story of the car accident Billy responds with "talking points" from his team:

— [Billy] I hear you.

— [Chris] What?

— [Billy] I said... "I hear you."

— [Chris] Of course you fucking hear me.

— [Billy] You sound like you're in a lot of pain.

— [Chris] Oh, Jesus fucking Christ! Speak like a fucking human being! You said you hear me so fucking hear me.

— [Billy] I'm sorry. Okay? I'm sorry. They gave me bullshit advice. Fucking talking points.

Finally, he strikes an honest note, "I'm so sorry about your girl. Truly. I'm, uh... It wasn't supposed to be like this. Our whole platform, I swear to God. It was... like, it was one thing when I started it and then it just... I don't know, it just became this whole other fucking thing." He quickly slips into his own self absorption, complaining about his situation at Smithereen as a "bullshit front man," and it is clearly not the response that Chris hoped for. Once Billy starts lamenting the internal Smithereen struggles—his lack of real control over the company and its addictive characteristics—Chris loses patience saying, "Shut up. I don't give a fuck what you do now. Beat yourself up or fucking run a victory lap, I don't care. I just wanted to say my piece. I'm gonna go now." Thus, Billy ultimately fails to play the role of confessor, or pastor, in the metaphorical taking of confession with Chris. He does, however, grant Chris a favor, getting the log-in details to the grieving mother Chris met, who tries her daughter's password over and over in an attempt to find answers. Jaden, the Smithereen employee that Chris kidnapped, ultimately offers Chris absolution when he tells him "it's okay" after Chris' apology for kidnapping him. He goes on to tell him about his uncle's suicide and how it impacted his family. Jaden makes clear, "You don't have to do this!" just before he tries to take the gun from Chris to prevent his death. Instead, police shoot, interpreting the interaction as a struggle.

8.2.3 Holding the reins of control

The balance of power between the Church and the state is a struggle that has defined much of the history of Western Europe as well as the United States, especially throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. However, another shift is taking place today. Power is swiftly moving from the state to the multinational. As D'Amato (2020) points out when writing about *Smithereens*, the employees at the company know more about what is going on than the FBI or the police. D'Amato sums it up nicely:

"At one point, Billy Bauer commands his lackeys at Smithereen to just hang up on the FBI agent—'Cut agent FBI douchebag off'—clearly indicating that he is the one with the real power. This shows a glimpse of the strong opposition between state authority's and private companies' knowledge and leverage in the age of digital technologies, and of how the latter is affirming its supremacy. The episode indicates quite clearly that who really has power over people is who controls the systems they are using; indeed, Billy Bauer can operate undisturbed in what he calls 'God mode' to find Chris's number, bypassing security and privacy layers built into Smithereen's systems" (255).

An even earlier moment in the episode where this shift in power becomes obvious is the information-sharing phone call we see between Smithereen Chief Operating Officer Penelope Wu (Ruibo Qian) and the British police, facilitated through the FBI. Smithereen staff are always one step ahead of the police. Her information-sharing session with the hostage negotiator and chief superintendent shows the immense power that the company has even compared to the police in a country that is part of information sharing among the Five Eyes (FVEY).[4] Yet, even with that amount of collective power, they are seemingly powerless in comparison to Smithereen:

— [Penelope] Yes, hi, this is Penelope Wu from Smithereen. With me is Don from legal and Shonelle from analytics.
— [David] Uh, David Gilkes, negotiator.
— [CS Linda Grace] Listen, Ms. Wu, we've identified the suspect.
— [Penelope] Christopher Michael Gillhaney, former school teacher, thirty-three years old. He has a Smithereen profile.
— [Linda] Right.
— [Penelope] So first off, Christopher's on hold but we are able to listen into his end of the line so we'll share live feed of that with you guys.
— [Linda] Yeah. That's useful.

[4]Five Eyes (FVEY) is a group of five incredibly powerful countries that have information-sharing agreements. The group includes Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

— [Penelope] In addition, we figure we could share the data we have on him to assist negotiations at your end, but first, perhaps you could share with us your perception of what he's doing.
— [Linda] Probably extortion, whether it's targeted at your company is something we don't...
— [Penelope] Oh, it's targeted.
— [Linda] Sorry?
— [Penelope] We're looking into who Christopher is. Group-wise we'd slot him into high intellect, low income.
— [David] Often angry people.
— [Penelope] Right, well, we checked to see if he'd ever expressed hostile sentiments towards Smithereen as an entity but nothing shows up on his social. In fact, there's been nothing there at all for some time. His whole account is dormant.
— [Linda] I don't see how this is relevant.
— [Penelope] But then we checked in with the Hitcher guys.
— [Linda] Right.
— [Penelope] So the cab that picked Jaden up is registered to an Omar Masimbalu. And a name like that, I think you'll agree, does not exactly match Mr. Gillhaney.
— [Linda] No.
— [Penelope] Turns out it was a compromised account. People trade them on the dark web. Seems likely Chris got a hold of it that way. You appreciate what I'm saying.
— [Linda] He's been covering his tracks.
— [Penelope] Uh-huh. So we asked Hitcher to share his account activity and it seems for weeks, he'd been only accepting jobs specifically outside the Smithereen London address. Just parked up each day waiting until he got a job from someone inside the building. This... This is a whole plan he's had going on here. I mean, this is sophisticated criminal behavior. I find it hard to believe he's never raised red flags before.
— [Linda] His record's totally clean. I mean, he was the victim in...
— [Penelope] The auto accident in 2015. He lost his fiancée in that crash. Were you aware of that?
— [Linda] No. But you are.
— [Penelope] There were historical posts inside his network, condolences, memorials, and that's when Chris disengages, in fact, not interacting with friends even though he's expressing grief.
— [Linda] You've done your homework.

The long excerpt of dialogue shows repeated moments where staff at Smithereen are better equipped to gather information than the British police, who think they have accomplished a great deal by confirming Chris' identity. Not only does

Smithereen know who he is, they know all about him, and have also been able to liaise with the company Hitcher confirming further details about his account as a driver, even finding some explanation for his motives in wanting to talk to Bauer—the loss of his fiancée in the car crash he was in years earlier. They uncovered all this information in the time it took British police to confirm Chris' name.

Not only does the technology company have the real power in relation to the state, we have seen that it also holds power over the individual as well. The reverence and devotional behavior towards technology we saw in the previous subsections carries over into our relationship with tech companies in general. Thus, the technology itself creates the conditions under which it is revered. The dangers of this shift are clear, when private businesses come to hold all the power, there is little oversight. The power that Smithereen holds is not an exaggeration, actually, it mirrors many social media companies today, particularly Facebook.

In her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (2019), Zuboff writes about Facebook Cofounder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his assertion that Facebook could act as the solution to our changing world:

> "He envisions a totalizing instrumentarian order—he calls it the new global 'church'—that will connect the world's people to 'something greater than ourselves.' It will be Facebook, he says, that will address problems that are civilizational in scale and scope, building 'long-term infrastructure to bring humanity together' and keeping people safe with 'artificial intelligence' that quickly understands 'what is happening across our community.' [...] Zuckerberg imagines machine intelligence that can 'identify risks that nobody would have flagged at all, including terrorists planning attacks using private channels, people bullying someone too afraid to report it themselves, and other issues both local and global'" (p. 515).

Zuboff calls this takeover by surveillance capitalists a coup from above: "[i]t is a form of tyranny that feeds on people but is not of the people. In a surreal paradox, this coup is celebrated as 'personalization' although it defiles, ignores, overrides, and displaces everything about you and me that is personal" (p. 513). As we can see, this shift in power is something that is happening before our very eyes. Zuckerberg's use of the term "church" to refer to the powerful role Facebook could play in the world is no accident. As articulated in the opening section of Part III of this thesis, religion played the role of the first real consolidation of social control, as posited by Ellwood (1918). It is no wonder that the newest power should refer to itself using the language of the first. Obviously Zuckerberg meant

this comparison to be a positive one, but it is all the more evidence that the specter of religion lives on in the technology of today, and the infrastructure that surrounds it.

8.3 Conclusion

By considering the concept of devotion as it relates to Smithereens, this analysis was able to consider the concept from various angles as related to details from the episode itself. First, ideas of continuous prayer and religious retreat were compared to Chris' repetition of "this is my last day" and Bauer's tech detox. Likewise, Chris' need to confess his culpability in what really happened in the car accident that killed his fiancée resembles notions of confession and last rites, and is especially fitting when we know that Chris plans to kill himself when it is all over. He is asking Bauer to play the role of priest in the sacrament of last rites, though, as articulated above, Bauer fails in this role. Finally, the struggle between Church and state has become a struggle between state and private enterprise—with big tech CEOs like Bauer holding all the power and the state prostrating itself to the new heavy-hitter.

Other episodes with themes of devotion might include *Fifteen Million Merits* (2011), *Nosedive* (2016), or *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too* (2019). *Nosedive*, however, is more appropriate for the next chapter with a discussion on a particular type of devotional act, piety. Likewise, the devotion in *Fifteen Million Merits* and *Rachel, Jack and Ashley Too* are both examples of personal devotion having little to do with technology, and much more to do with personal relationships. For these reasons, *Smithereens* was the clear choice for a discussion on devotion, as articulated throughout this chapter.

Chapter 9

PIETY IN *NOSEDIVE* (2016)

— I'm sorry, it won't let me book it without the correct ranking.
— But it's so close.
— There's just nothing I can do.
— Christ, I mean, surely.
— I'm gonna have to ask you to moderate your language there.
— Sorry. It's just... I'm maid of honor. I cannot miss this wedding.
— And I am so sorry about that.
— Can you call the supervisor?
— I cannot do that.
— Can you just call the supervisor?
— I cannot do that.
— Call the fucking supervisor!
— Okay, that's profanity. We're zero tolerance on profanity.
— I'm sorry. It's just...
— I have to serve the next customer.
— No, no, no, no.
— Can you step away, ma'am?
— God, just fucking help me!

Nosedive[1] follows Lacie (Bryce Dallas Howard), a young woman living in a world where social media and "likes" have turned into a five-star ranking system. It is no longer just photos and posts that are ranked, but every personal interaction—like rating an Uber driver, but for everything you do, and not just on the job. The technology is not just confined to users' smartphones, but it also shows up in their field of vision, constantly displaying their ranking for all to see—made possible by contact lenses or some kind of implants, a detail not fully

[1]Episode directed by Joe Wright, story by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on October 21, 2016.

explained. Lacie is a 4.2, but she has goals of attaining 4.5 status as a "prime influencer"—a bump in her score would provide her a discount in a housing development she wants to live in, but cannot really afford. She has to move out of her current apartment, where she lives with her younger brother because their lease is up, and someone new will be buying it.

Lacie's quest to attain 4.5 status gets just the boost her point-coach, Hansen (Demetri Goritsas), tells her she would need to reach her goal in time to move into her new apartment—an old friend asks her to be her maid of honor. The wedding for Lacie's childhood friend Naomi (Alice Eve) and Paul (Alan Ritchson)—both 4.8s—will be an event with tons of "quality people." Lacie's quest to get to the wedding, however, is thwarted at every turn: an altercation with her brother and a disgruntled cab driver lower Lacie's score below 4.2. When her flight gets canceled and she gets into an argument with the airport staff, her score starts to spiral downward, with security putting her on double damage as punishment for swearing—meaning any negative interactions will bring her score down even further.

Determined to get to the event at any cost, Lacie rents a car, but with her new lowered score, an old model is all she can get. When it runs out of power, she cannot charge it since the car's connection is too old and there is no adapter. Resorting to hitchhiking, she meets Susan (Cherry Jones) a long-haul truck driver who is a 1.4—essentially a social outcast. Susan tells Lacie that there is more to live for than a score, but Lacie is not able to heed the advice. Since Susan is not going as far as Lacie needs, she continues on her journey, catching a ride with a group of sci-fi fans on their way to a convention. While with the group, pretending to be another fan of the same TV show, Lacie gets a call from Naomi telling her not to bother coming anymore—"Don't come, I don't want you here. I don't know what's up with you, but I cannot have a 2.6 at my wedding." Naomi admits she only invited Lacie because it played well to have her there, a "genuine" childhood connection, but now that Lacie's number is too low, it is not worth the damage it will do to Naomi's reputation; it no longer plays well. The two acknowledge that for both of them the invitation was a numbers game, they were both interested in how it would positively affect their scores. Lacie tells Naomi that she's coming anyway, she is "getting those votes."

A woman on a mission, Lacie finally makes it to the wedding in the middle of the reception in a muddied dress and somewhat drunk (Figure 9.1). She succeeds in giving her maid of honor speech, albeit a more honest version than the one we see her practicing earlier in the episode. She is arrested and taken to jail where her contact lenses showing people's scores are taken out. In the final cathartic scene we see Lacie share escalating insults with a fellow prisoner, both seem happy to find someone they can be genuinely themselves with, someone with whom they do not have to act the part of a perfect pastel citizen.

Figure 9.1: Maid of honor speech - *Nosedive* (2016)

9.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Nosedive*

Commentators often make note of the visual elements of the created world in *Nosedive*, particularly poignant in the way the pastels often juxtapose dystopian realities made possible by the technology in the episode. Gilbert (2016) gave it mixed reviews, writing: “The lush, calming visuals of ‘Nosedive’ clash nicely with the mounting anxiety, and Howard’s performance is terrific—she conveys Lacie’s inner frustration while grinning cheerfully through it. But the episode loses some of its power once Lacie’s slide begins. For one thing, it’s about 15 minutes too long...” She concludes, “The ending, which sees Lacie robbed of her phone and arrested, trading insults happily with a fellow prisoner across the hall, felt too cute to me, although it was more of an optimistic conclusion than Black Mirror usually delivers.”

In her text exploring gender roles within *Black Mirror*, Cirucci (2018) considers *Nosedive* and its portrayal of Lacie as a vapid woman obsessed with her social standing. She writes:

> “[I]t is Lacie’s very obsession with acceptance that is also her downfall. She has tried too hard, wanted social acceptance too much, and her acts eventually put her in jail. Even Susan’s story, the low-rated truck driver from whom Lacie reluctantly accepts a ride, is meant to link a low social rating—1.4—with a failure to perform the women’s work of taking care of her dying husband” (Nosedive, para. 4).

Cirucci fails to see the way that both characters mentioned in the excerpt above find peace and happiness in their rebellion. They break with the assumptions about how they should act and instead find joy and freedom in breaking with those very stereotypes of femininity that Cirucci alludes to. Lacie is clearly miserable trying to maintain her social ranking, and Susan puts into words what Lacie at that point in the story is unwilling to face: social status and being liked does not bring you joy, no matter how easily it might bring you material comfort (the latter being particularly emphasized throughout the episode).

In their chapter on *Nosedive*, Allard-Huver and Escurignan (2018) take up this more subtle understanding of the episode, recognizing that the final scene of the episode is not a failure:

> “This arrest symbolizes death, a social and digital death materialized by the forced withdrawal of her contact lens. However, this death opens a door for different relationships, less shallow, more open, cruder, and ultimately more honest. Paradoxically, it is only when Lacie reaches a ‘real’ prison, with glass windows reminding the panopticon logic, that she is able to free herself and to practice parrhesia in its most basic form” (”Interveillance,” para. 2).

Their interpretation of the episodes centers on the idea of social media functioning as Bentham’s panopticon. Further, they consider the shift in the episode from self promotion to self surveillance, and how truth telling becomes a risky but ultimately honorable path to take. Notably, Allard-Huver and Escurignan (2018) discuss the guide that Lacie goes to and how he advises her in her aim to get a 4.5 rating. This research will return to this guide, or branding coach, in our analysis of Lacie’s dual quest (the non-tangible quest to get the 4.5 rating and the quest to physically get to Naomi’s wedding to accomplish the first).

In their chapter “Why Black Mirror Was Really Written by Jean Baudrillard: A Philosophical Interpretation of Charlie Brooker’s Series” in *Black Mirror and Critical Media Theory*, Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) discuss *Nosedive* in the context of Baudrillard’s views on American culture. They write:

> “It also has a clear reminiscence to Baudrillard’s quote: ‘Americans may have no identity, but they do have wonderful teeth.’ In other words, for Western culture, it is important to show off a well-put-together image by displaying the main character Lacie’s fake enthusiasm toward others about her own life while she simply pretends she is living a perfect life rather than a realistic one” (“Symbolic and Media Terrorism,” para. 6).

When considering *Black Mirror* through the lens of Debord's concept "the society of the spectacle" Berns (2018) writes, "Appearance and surface are vital: You must turn yourself into a spectacle (of happiness, of richness)—never mind your true condition or feelings. Whether one is actually in better shape than his or her peers is irrelevant; it is only the appearance of having more that matters" (The Horror of the Spectacle, para. 6). Continuing, he writes, "For Debord, the spectacle is not images on a screen but a social relation among people that has been mediated. He argues that the spectacle dynamically alters human relationships" (The Horror of the Spectacle, para. 7). This description perfectly sums up the world we see in *Nosedive*, and Berns agrees. Also viewing the episode's portrayal of a shift on social media from communication to self obsession, Scolari (2018) writes: "In this context, 'social' media are transformed into 'me' media" (Nosedive, para. 1).

Thomas and Rajan (2018) analyze *Nosedive* using Baudrillard's theories on simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality. Unlike many theorists writing about the episode, the authors do not view the final scene as emancipatory in a realistic way. Explaining the false sense of escaping hyperreality and simulation that the episode depicts, they write:

> "All of the characters, who are resisting and existing outside of the hyperreal, problematically implant an idea of being outside of the simulation. Thus, Lacie's emancipation and ability to see simulation for what it is is not an epiphany of dystopian reality or a transcendence of simulation, but simulation itself. Though the viewer seems to experience a certain vicarious liberation from simulation, when Lacie screams insults and swears at her neighboring prisoner, her newfound freedom merely feeds the myth. Baudrillard reminds us that simulation is not something that is so easily overcome or rectified" ("Illusion of Resistance," para. 11).

Their critical analysis of the episode reminds readers that *Black Mirror* is entertainment, and that media has a hard time being critical of itself in a way that can really expose its flaws—in this case, it is hard for *Nosedive* to tell a story about resisting hyperreality when the medium of television holds the same critical issues.

In their article "Ease and Ethics of User Profiling in Black Mirror" (2018), Pandit and Lewis discuss user profiling while discussing *Nosedive*. They consider the current state of user profiling, how the rating system in the episode works, and how the two might realistically come together with disastrous results:

> "User profiling is one of the more controversial technologies that has become the focal point of discussions regarding personal data and pri-

> vacy. Its applications provide a greater measure of personalisation and convenience to the users. At the same time any misuse, intentional or otherwise, has consequences that polarises social debates against the technology itself" (Pandit and Lewis, 2018, p. 1577).

Though the financial relationship between the rating system in *Nosedive* is only cursorily explored in the episode itself, Pandit and Lewis explore explicit examples of how the two might come together, using "F-social" to stand in for a fictional social media company that might combine facial recognition and user profiling: "A restaurant sends in facial pictures of its customers to F-social to get a metric of the amount of purchasing power they possess and how likely they are to splurge" (p. 1579). This sort of real-world user profiling would simply match the ways that this profiling is already happening online (as seen in Chapter 7 in our discussion on *Hang the DJ* and the new paradigm of surveillance capitalism as an omniscient power).

Redmond (2019) explores the pastel world of *Nosedive*, focusing on the rating system alongside social media as contrasted with the tangible muted world the characters live in. He explores the ways that the self-monitoring and self-management the characters engage in is reflected in their seemingly utopian community: "The pastelisation, of course, suggests a modern utopia while immediately undermining such a vision by its sensorial nausea. Dystopia is the current that runs through the river of utopia in this episode" (p. 113). Highlighting the sense of false civility, he writes: "All the augmented characters in 'Nosedive' practise this regime of respectability: the vanilla selfie—the incorporation of politeness, manners, heightened civility—defines almost everyone who takes part in this new ratings-based economy" (p. 118). His reading of the episode ends with an exploration of Lacie's rejection of this notion of respectability discourse, starting with the exchange at the airport (also highlighted in the dialogue at the start of this chapter), and ending with the breakdown at the wedding. He suggests that Netflix itself mimics the metrics-focused algorithms seen throughout the episode itself, and questions their model of planned obsolescence.

In their chapter, "*Nosedive* and the Anxieties of Social Media: Is the Future Already Here?" , Urueña and Melikyan (2020) compare the technology in *Nosedive* with existing technology and point-based programs in China.[2] They also consider the performative nature of social media, the masks we wear, or the falseness

[2]The translation into English of the Chinese name for the government developed point-based program is simply "Social Credit System." It is a national system which assesses reputation, and it is set to be rolled out in 2020. "Beijing has said it will introduce in 2020 its own social credit system that is expected to give and take away privileges based on spending habits, online and real-world behavior, and social relationships. Foreign travel, speedy internet, school access, and social benefits could all be granted or denied based on a person's score" (Mozur, 2018).

of the self we show online. While they briefly touch on the question of whether performing "good" behavior equates to actual good intention while being monitored, they do not go into the topic in great detail (as we will later in this chapter). They also ask whether a communally (democratic) rule as to what is considered good or bad behavior runs the risks of further marginalizing those in the minority of any given behavior. Also, they touch on mob-rule online and how this can carry over to have real-world consequences.

As we have seen, the particular behavior patterns of politeness and civility mirror the pastel world depicted in *Nosedive*. Likewise, themes of falsity run through the episode, as described by a number of the authors writing on the episode. The anxieties of social media and acceptance run deep, as we will see in the analysis below.

9.2 "That's how the fucking world works": a reading of *Nosedive*

This section will look at the ramifications that a technological rating system like the one we see in *Nosedive* could have as compared to notions of piety. The first subsection will look at biblical passages differentiating between being good and appearing to be good and how that differentiation seems to play out in *Nosedive*. The second subsection will look at real-world cases similar to the technology in the episode, while looking at two approaches to altering behavior similar to the examples of the episode: shaming as a social phenomenon and influencer culture (in this case Christian influencers) and the relationship of these examples to social control. Finally, the last subsection will draw parallels between Lacie's journey to get to the wedding and the pious act of the pilgrimage within the history of Christianity.

9.2.1 Being good, or appearing to be good

Socially acceptable, polite behavior is reinforced by the five-star rating system we see in *Nosedive*. If you are civil, talk about the right things and avoid being crude, annoying or vulgar, you are usually rewarded with positive feedback. However, there is a great difference between being good and appearing to be good. When discussing *Nosedive*, Berns (2018) lays bare the issue writing "is it truly possible to know whether people are nice to you because they want to improve their ratings or because it is their true nature? In addition, does it really matter?" Redmond (2019), refers to the behavior as "audit culture," and "respectful politics," suggesting that these codes of civility are already part of our digital life through

social media:

> “Lacie wants to blend in while being noticed—acting as the lightning rod for the inherent contradiction of neoliberal and gendered conformity and aspiration: she wants to be the same but different, better. ‘Nosedive’ taps into the envy and longing for status that the corporatised social media elicit, foster and, seemingly paradoxically, deny” (p. 117).

Other academics writing about *Nosedive*, as discussed in the literature review section of this chapter, have approached this idea though the lens of social policing and self-surveillance—many pointing to the idea of the panopticon. However, Christianity made use of the idea of an all-seeing judge long before modern culture and surveillance culture did. God has been the all-seeing judge of humanity throughout Christianity, a reason to stay in line. The Bible tells Christians they should act in righteousness not for the sake of looking good to others, and should not boast of their righteous behavior because doing so would be doing good for the wrong reasons:

> “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6: 1-4, NIV).

In *Nosedive* we see a world where this teaching is turned on its head, everyone is performing piety exactly for the rewards it brings. Likewise, the criteria for being good is also flipped on its head, instead of giving to the needy, we see a world where consumerism and display of wealth is the socially acceptable behavior. Lacie’s transformation is a transgression as well. She does not find that acting with piety or civility should be done so for its own sake. Instead, she discovers that allowing such mechanisms (religion or the technology in the episode) to dictate one’s behavior is a betrayal of the honest externalizations of our inner feelings. Shouting insults then, is bad by both standards of correct behavior (Christianity’s and the society we see in *Nosedive*), but for Lacie it becomes a freeing act. Berns (2018) sees the last scene of the episode as the only genuine act that Lacie performs (“Nosedive”: A Mediated World View, para. 9).

We see that this convergence of unacceptable behavior in the use of vulgar language play out early on in the airport scene as well, in the dialogue used to open this chapter. Interestingly, the airport assistant first scolds Lacie for her use of “Christ” as an interjection:

— [Lacie] Christ, I mean, surely.
— [Airport assistant] I’m gonna have to ask you to moderate your language there.

The Bible is clear that the Lord’s name should not be taken in vain, and many Christians believe this to mean the very use seen in this episode which the airport assistant takes initial offense to. This strange merging of socially unacceptable, as seen in the using of the Lord’s name in vain, shows a clear example of the specter of Christian belief in the world we see on screen.

9.2.2 Influencer culture and shaming

As we see Lacie navigate the pastel world of the episode, it at first seems that everyone is happy, somewhat sedated, but content. Likewise, it seems that everyone lives this way. However, viewers soon discover that you must have a certain ranking to live in a particular neighborhood, work at a particular company, or even enter a building—dipping below the threshold has serious consequences. For example, after a breakup between a couple at Lacie’s office, one of the two is exiled, receiving negative feedback to every interaction because coworkers are taking the ex-partner’s side:

— [Lacie] What happened?
— [Ted] Him and Gordon split up.
— [Lacie] Oh. Poor Ches.
— [Ted] No, no, no, we’re all on Gordon’s side.
— [Lacie] Sure! Obviously.
— [Ted] Ches is kissing ass. Trying to scrape himself back. Of course, if it drops below two-five, then it’s bye-bye. [phone beeps]

We later see the exiled co-worker, Chester (Kadiff Kirwan), trying to get into their office building, but since he has dipped below the allowable level to enter, he can no longer go to work. Not only can others ganging up on one individual tank their score and alter lives, as we can see in Chester’s case, but it also becomes clear that unless you join in, you might be exiled as well. Lacie herself was influenced by the conversation with Ted, pressured into treating Chester like an outsider by others at her office. As seen in the dialogue above, she was initially sympathetic to him, but quickly changed her behavior to fall in line, worried about Chester’s rating affecting her own.

A social rating system like the one in *Nosedive* actually exists in China, as a number of authors have commented on in their writing about the episode (Scolari, 2018; Urueña and Melikyan, 2020; Redmond, 2019). Gilbert (2016a), however, brings up another real-world example, an app called Peeple, which would allow you to rank real-world interaction transforming the private into public. Shortly after the app was announced though, there was public backlash against the project, and its developers were forced to "pare back" their ambitions, as Gilbert put it. Writing about this idea of agreeableness, she compares the episode to the novel *The Giver* (1993), and suggests that the ending of the episode was too predictable:

> "The idea that a society where everyone is forced to be pleasant and agreeable all the time becomes a nightmare underpins Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, where 'sameness' gets rid of emotional and physical pain but also eradicates individualism and free will. So the parts of 'Nosedive' where Lacie learns to embrace being honest (thanks to the assistance of a grizzled truck driver ex machina played by Cherry Jones) felt far more predictable than the scenes that imagine how future societies could punish people simply for being unpleasant."

A final example of real-world pressure to act a certain way happened during the near worldwide lockdown in the first part of 2020 due to COVID-19. The BBC published a story advising people on "Coronavirus: How to go for a walk safely, without getting shamed" (Cheung, 2020). The article details and names the new phenomenon,—"quarantine shaming"—with people uploading pictures of others not following social distancing guidelines and some even going as far as to say that those breaking the rules deserved to get sick. It even had a hashtag—#COVIDIOTS.

The article explains the psychology behind the shaming behavior this way: "Social psychologists say that shaming plays a significant role in enforcing social norms—especially at a time when norms are rapidly changing as a result of coronavirus" (Cheung, 2020). Thus, shame can play an important role in social control, especially in the era of a world mediated by the internet. Minor acts can become "viral" in no time, so people learn to fall in line if they do not want to be publicly shamed. We see this idea of group shaming in the wedding scene of Nosedive, where guests en masse send the lowest scores possible to Lacie, with her score on display for all to see.

In the Bible, shame is a common theme in punishment for sin throughout the Old Testament (Obadiah 8-10, Psalm 35:26, Malachi 2:9, Isaiah 26:5, Jeremiah 15:9, Isaiah 25:11). In contrast, the notion of leading by example, or believers being an illustration of their faith, seems to be the message of the New Testament (Hebrews 13:7, 1 Peter 5:3, 1 Timothy 4:12, Titus 1:7, Philippians 3:17), as will now be explored in contrast to shaming.

As we saw above in the discussion of Allard-Huver and Escurignan's (2018) text on *Nosedive*, influencer culture, or self-branding as they call it in their chapter, is a key part of the society we see portrayed in *Nosedive*. Though the authors considered the futuristic version portrayed in the episode to be distant from reality, it is actually not so far from the truth, at least when we consider the impact that influencers have on the behavior of their audiences and the financial perks that come with millions of followers. Pay according to video views (for example on YouTube) provides a financial incentive to self-promote and to finesse one's social image. Likewise, sponsorship and free products to test and promote are common industry practices, with brands often seeing influencer pull as more effective than traditional advertising.

This influencer model has not skipped over contemporary Christian culture, and there are many well-known Christian influencers telling their audiences which products to buy (Christian music, Christian books, and other Christian products), alongside advice about how to live a pious lifestyle while performing such behavior themselves for all to see.

Three of the most-followed Instagram accounts of Christian influencers are Joel Osteen, Steven Furtick, and Tim Tebow. The first two are American pastors and the third is an American baseball player. What do they all have in common? They hock their own products. Joel Osteen sells books; Steven Furtick sells everything from music to books and DVDs of sermons; and Tim Tebow sells branded clothes. They all post motivational content, and live their pious lifestyles for the world to see.

Just like any other influencers, Christian influencers use social media for the monetary benefits it brings. However, by performing their faith they are doing exactly what scripture tells them not to. Furthermore, they are playing into a model which holds money and financial gain at its center, using platforms and marketing strategies that rely on models of surveillance capitalism (as discussed in the previous chapter). Both Christian and non-Christian influencers play a role in the social control of society, whether they realize it or not. Thus, a dual model of shame and leading by example to coerce pious behavior functions within *Nosedive*, within contemporary internet practices, and within biblical texts.

9.2.3 A modern pilgrimage

One iconic act often associated with piety is the Christian pilgrimage, a journey to sites of religious significance, to relics, or to other objects seen as holy. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1997) explains two meanings of the pilgrimage. First, the literal journey to a holy place, and then the concept of being a foreigner, a "stranger" on Earth, as the New Testament often describes Christians:

> "Generally, journeys to holy places undertaken for motives of devotion in order to obtain supernatural help or as penance or thanksgiving. However, the word for pilgrim meant a 'resident alien', and the notion that Christians were 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth' (Heb. 11:13), whose true citizenship was in heaven (Phil. 3:20; cf. Eph. 2:19, Heb. 13:14), is one firmly rooted in the NT and further developed in the Epistle to Diognetus (5-6, esp. 5:5) and in some early ascetic writers. [...] Meanwhile the idea of pilgrimage to special holy places had developed. The practice is common to most higher religions, e.g. Hinduism (Benares) and Islam (Mecca) and is due to the natural desire of people to visit the places where their great heroes have lived and died and to the deep-seated conviction that certain localities are particularly favored by the godhead. In Christianity the fact of the Incarnation is sufficient explanation for the early custom of visiting the places consecrated by the presence of Christ.[...] [T]he growing veneration of saints and images soon added many others, the most famous being Santiago de Compostela" (p. 1288).

When we see Lacie's epic and painful journey to reach Naomi's wedding—the aim of the journey being "self improvement" via a tangible journey to reach a sort of holy grail of influential people who can make Lacie's dreams a reality—it is hard not to draw comparisons to the idea of a pilgrimage.

Within the history of Christianity, physical pilgrimages have gone in and out of fashion. In the 14th century, there were written guides for pilgrims offering practical advice, such as the "14th-century pilgrim's travel guide" held by the British Library (British Library, n.d.). Much like Lacie's coach or status guide, the text offers practical tips. Pilgrim's Guide to Compostela offers advice on where to find safe drinking water, the types of people travelers might encounter along the way, among other things. Lacie's guide offers tangible advice as well, on who to interact with and how her interactions will affect her goal of gaining 4.5 status and moving into a luxury apartment complex. Likewise, there are modern guides for the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, (more commonly the Camino de Santiago or the Way of Saint James) which leads to the shrine of Saint James the Great and continues to be one of the most famous Christian pilgrimages today. Its modern popularity is largely due to a push by the Spanish government in the 90s towards a revival of the route. Many still complete the pilgrimage for religious reasons, but increasingly, people make the voyage to escape modern life or for the physical challenge of the journey.

The pilgrimage, in a romantic sense, as it is often seen now, is focused just as much on the journey itself as it is on reaching the location where a specific church or holy artifact sits. This journey of self-discovery is clearly seen in Lacie's jour-

ney as well. The trip itself starts out as a means to an end, but actually becomes a process of learning and self-understanding. At one point in her journey, Lacie crosses paths in a public restroom with a group going on a modern pilgrimage of their own. These fans of a science fiction series seem to be going to a gathering not dissimilar to Comic-Con, an annual comic and sci-fi convention. When she tries to hitch a ride, bluffing her way onto their bus, the sci-fi fans quickly realize that Lacie is not one of their own, kicking her off their bus and forcing her to continue on foot. Redmond considers the various depictions of women throughout the episode highlighting these fellow travelers as models of resistance alongside Susan, the truck driver:

> "'Nosedive' does offer us a complex set of gender roles. Naomi appears on the screen in a bikini, in a dressing gown, not overly sexualised but a girly, commodified blonde bombshell figure. Susan is a denim-clad trucker with a husky voice, while the female fans of Sea of Tranquillity are bitchy and besotted. We see different versions of femininity, then, in the episode, paving the way for what will become Lacie's resistance to and rejection of her ratings training" (p. 120).

Figure 9.2: Closing scene - *Nosedive* (2016)

Ultimately Lacie does not find happiness in the illusive 4.5 rating, but instead in the freedom to express her true thoughts and feelings. The whole process unfolds throughout her pilgrimage and culminates in her wedding speech. By the time she gets to the cell she is kept in after being arrested, we realize that her

journey—and all of her experiences and hurdles along the way—expose the false aims that initially fuelled Lacie's trip (Figure 9.2). Thus, the relic or symbol of God is instead superseded by a more modern and spiritual understanding of the pilgrimage as an act of piety, or in Lacie's case, a rejection of it.

9.3 Conclusion

Piety, as seen in *Nosedive*, manifests itself on a number of levels throughout the episode. First, this text explored the biblical differentiation between our visible acts of piety, and our non-visible ones, concluding that being good and appearing to be good are not the same thing. Showy gestures of piety are discouraged in the Bible, though we see the exact opposite in *Nosedive*, where public behavior is judged, scored, and displayed constantly. In Lacie's world, being good takes second place to appearing to be good, and as we saw, the criteria for good is shifted in the episode from a biblical understanding of righteousness to one of superficial behavior. The directing of pious or socially desirable behavior can be accomplished through both shame and the use of influence, seen both in the contrasting ideas between Old Testament and New Testament texts, as well as contemporary practices of both models. Finally, Lacie's journey acts as a modern pilgrimage: her aim is to get to a specific location revered by her belief structure, and she hopes it will bring her favor. However, the journey itself and the breaking with social norms actually frees Lacie from the culture that aims to control her.

Other episodes that might explore concepts of piety include *Fifteen Million Merits* (2011) for its depiction of a society of workers who follow the status quo and do what is expected of them, also following the examples set by influencers, albeit of a different form. Likewise, shame is used as a means of punishment in the episode as well. Other episodes that use shame as punishment for unpious behavior might include *Shut Up and Dance* (2016) or even *Hated in the Nation* (2016) where online shaming is depicted as holding the potential to escalate into threats of violence.

Chapter 10

SACRIFICE IN *PLAYTEST* (2016)

— What happened?
— His phone rang.
— You didn't take it off him?
— Yes, but...
— The signals interfere.
— I know. I switched it off. Maybe he did something while I was out of the room. An oversight. Won't happen again. The incoming signal must have interfered with the upload sequence. Every synapse in his brain lit up at once. Then went dead. Like that.

Playtest[1] (2016) is the horror-themed episode of season 3 of *Black Mirror*. It tells the story of Cooper (Wyatt Russell), a young American on an adventure around the world. Throughout the first part of the episode we see his phone ringing, notifying him that his mother is calling. He continuously ignores the calls, replying with an autoresponse message. While in London, Cooper uses a dating app and meets up with a tech journalist, Sonja (Hannah John-Kamen). After spending the night with her, Cooper's phone rings again and he ignores the call. He explains to Sonja that his father died of Alzheimer's and after caring for him in his final days, Cooper felt compelled, "to get away and make, you know, all the memories I can, while I can."

Later that afternoon, while trying to take money from an ATM, Cooper discovers that his card has been used for fraudulent payments, and has been deactivated. With no ticket home and no money, Cooper calls Sonja to ask for help. Using an app for odd jobs, the two find a listing for a video game playtest for the company SaitoGemu which pays more than any of the other listings. Sonja tells Cooper that

[1]Episode directed by Dan Trachtenberg, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on October 21, 2016.

if he could get a picture of the technology itself, the photograph would be worth even more than the amount the company is paying participants.

Cooper arrives at the testing site, and the testing coordinator Katie (Wunmi Mosaku) explains that there will be a simple medical procedure in order to run the playtest—a small implant called a "mushroom"—to run their new technology. She describes it as beyond virtual reality (VR), "more like layers on top of reality." Initially, Cooper seems a bit skeptical of the implant, but she calms his nerves: "It's no more invasive than having your ears pierced." She makes a point to ask for his cellphone and to turn it off. When Katie leaves the room, however, Cooper turns the phone back on and takes a picture, sending it to Sonja. He then gets the "mushroom" inserted. Right afterwards, his phone rings. In reality, the story ends here.

Unbeknownst to viewers, the next 34 minutes of the episode do not really take place; presumably though, it is what Cooper experiences. The multi-layered sequences of the episode show Cooper first testing a simple Whac-A-Mole game, then a new immersive horror game. After seeing that Cooper has had a good experience with the Whac-A-Mole game, Katie suggests that Cooper meet the company's CEO, Shou (Ken Yamamura), and test out another game they are developing with the same technology—a horror game.

While in his office, they run the test. In the haunted house simulated by the game, Cooper faces increasingly terrifying fears: spiders, a childhood bully, Sonja's betrayal, and eventually he loses his mind, unable to remember anything—his greatest fear. He wakes up from the game, which apparently only lasted one second, and we see Cooper fly home, only to discover that his mother has Alzheimer's, and has forgotten who he is. This too is a layer of unreality.

Cooper died almost immediately after the "mushroom" was implanted. His phone, which he had turned back on moments before Katie put in the implant, rang, lighting up his entire brain at once and then killing him. Presumably, all that we see happening the first time around is what Cooper experiences in the .04 seconds that he was alive after the activation of the technology. The last scene is a conversation between Katie and Shou regarding the incident, included at the start of this chapter. The phone call came from his mom.

10.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Playtest*

Among critics, *Playtest* has been on the receiving end of a range of opinion, some viewing it as a stand out episode, while others suggesting it left something to be desired. Giving the episode a mixed review, Sims (2016) concludes that: "[e]ven if it's an intentionally simple ending, it feels a little forced, blunting the tragedy of Cooper's death." Writing more recently, and with a much more positive stance

on the episode, Bojalad (2020) considers the episode to be one of *Black Mirror*'s best: "Though it all may be happening in Cooper's head, the monsters created by Framestore are no less real to the viewer. That makes 'Playtest' something truly unique in the *Black Mirror* canon. This is the one installment of the show's 22's entries that is undeniably, unapologetically horror."

Academically, a number of writers have approached the episode from a wide variety of angles. Cirucci (2018) briefly mentions *Playtest* in the context of gender roles within *Black Mirror*, and she ultimately blames Cooper's mother for his untimely death:

> "His death came so quickly because, although warned, he brought his cell phone with him. While the initial mistake is his, the real killer was his mother, who had been trying to reach him by phone for some time. Because she called him three seconds into his test run, she kills him. Thus, it is really her use, although indirect, of technology for performative acts of emotional labor, that highlights a simple, yet deadly, dark side of technology" (Playtest, para. 1).

In his text on *Black Mirror*, Scolari (2018) looks at *Playtest* as an example of Marshall McLuhan's notion of reversal in relation to media, where media pushed to its limits will actually fulfill the opposite role of its original purpose. In his discussion, we also see mention of the phone call leading to Cooper's death, but instead in the context of reversal.

> "Moving in the borderland between virtual reality, perception, and memory, this episode pushes to the extremes a series of devices originally designed to create immersive entertainment experiences. 'Playtest' also shows how any basic communication device, such as a phone, could possibly mutate itself into a disrupting element that could change the life (and death) of a character" (Playtest, para. 2).

Writing about *Playtest* in the context of Baudrillard's theories, Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) consider the idea of image oversaturation and the game as a reflection of authentic experience in a supposedly safe environment.

Flisfeder (2018) considers *Playtest* through the lens of the sublime. Specifically looking at Fredric Jameson's articulation of the hysterical sublime, he writes: "High tech paranoia, according to Jameson, now occupies the place formerly held in modernity by the awe and fear of nature" (The Sublime Object, para. 4). He goes on to elaborate: "For Jameson, the hysterical, technological sublime figures as a force of human creation, which is presented as the inevitable force of our

destruction; and it is perhaps because technology is, in fact, very much a symbol of human historical and social development that its terror has become all the more enervating" (The Sublime Object, para. 4). This articulate description fits perfectly to the fears we see in many episodes of *Black Mirror*, but *Playtest* fits the bill better than any other for its genre and content.

Vacker and Espelie (2018) discuss *Playtest* among other episodes looking at first the idea of the black mirror throughout history, and then the contrasting white of hot media. They consider the overpowering white, especially the screen, to be an overbearing presence, which overwhelms. Likewise, they see the perspective within *Black Mirror* as a focus on hot media—our attempt to locate ourselves as the center of the universe, or better said, ignoring that we are not. Specifically regarding *Playtest*, they wrote: "While testing a video game on a chip implanted in his brain, Cooper is accidentally killed by an electronic media malfunction triggered by a call from his mother. As Saito Gemu's Katie explains: 'Every synapse of his brain lit up at once, then went dead—like that'" ("'Playtest' and," para. 1). This lighting up of the synapses, they suggest, is mirrored by the oppressive white space in which Cooper is taking part in the game trial.

Murray (2019) explores the layered reality seen in the episode, noting its relationship to the film Inception (2010). Her analysis takes into account debates and issues within the gaming industry itself, pointing to details within the episode to argue that Brooker is aware of the current state of the industry. Likewise, she highlights examples of other "Easter eggs" in the episode which allude to real games. Her focus throughout the article is on the expression of cultural anxieties surrounding video games and technology in general, and how these anxieties relate to memory, time, and entertainment. Her analysis of the final scene will be considered in the last subsection of the analysis below.

In her chapter on *Playtest* in *Black Mirror and Philosophy: Dark Reflections*, Benn (2020) considers the role of VR in the episode, whether it seems different or beyond other means of storytelling (books, movies, video games, etc.) because it is novel, or because it really is irrefutably different due to its particular characteristics. She also considers Cooper's thrill-seeking behavior:

> "On the flight from the US, Cooper reassures the little girl next to him by comparing the turbulence to being on a rollercoaster: a classic way in which humans seek the adrenaline rush that comes from doing stuff that feels, just a little bit, like we might die. He even runs with the bulls in Pamplona, a cliché of thrill-seeking behavior. These activities all have two key features: they are safe (except maybe the bulls) and they eventually end. As Shou says: 'You get scared. You jump. Afterwards, you feel good. You glow.' Not just because of the adrenaline rush but 'mostly because you are still alive.' However,

> both of these features come into question in *Playtest* and for the very same reason: both what makes us safe and what brings a horror experience to an end is the existence of a sharp line between what is real and what is constructed as part of the experience. And it is this line that gets erased bit by bit in *Playtest*" (p. 95-96).

After discussing the many game references and the repeated reassurance that the game is safe—because it is just that, a game—she considers perception versus reality, and how our brains can be tricked. Following this, Benn considers the question of pain and experience, and concludes that pain in particular is one of the instances when experience is fact, whether simulated or not (p. 96-97). Last, she asks the question of whether we might be in a simulation ourselves. While she briefly discusses the fact that almost none of what Cooper experiences in the episode was real, she spends a great deal of time analyzing the perception of the VR horror game that Cooper supposedly enters in the episode. At least to the analysis in this thesis, it does not seem particularly important whether the games in the episode seem real or not once we know that none of it really happened, a point which will be picked up later in this chapter.

Although, not writing about *Playtest*, the theme of sacrifice comes up in the analysis of another *Black Mirror* episode, so it will be considered here. Ungureanu (2015) writes on *The National Anthem* from the perspective of sacrifice, drawing on Baudrillard's interpretation of terrorism alongside Benjamin's writing on the aestheticization of violence. Ungureanu concludes that Callow's gesture of self-sacrifice is self interested; he instead looks to the artist/terrorist's suicide as the more sincere self-sacrifice in the episode, one that acts as "a symbolic unmasking of the spell of power in the technological age." Of interest to this thesis in general Ungureanu writes:

> "Church attendance and a belief in God have significantly declined, particularly in Europe, yet experiences of sacrifice—traditionally embedded in religious practice and ritual—have maintained their relevance even for steadfast atheists like Brooker. Sacrifice remains at the centre of a number of fundamental phenomena in the secular age" (p. 27).

When writing about themes of love within *Black Mirror*, Price (2020) considers the episode *The National Anthem* and Callow's decision to sacrifice himself, or at least his dignity, to save the princess. He writes:

> "Three characters appear to know what love is, [...] although as with anything in Black Mirror (and life), the narrative complicates things.

> The first is Prime Minister Michael Callow from The National Anthem. Callow faces a perverse choice: either he fornicates on national television with a pig, or else terrorists will kill a princess. Callow struggles with the dead-end choices and finally chooses to save the princess—a seeming self-sacrifice done in the name of love" (p. 308).

It is interesting to read *The National Anthem* through the lens of self-sacrifice, and while the two authors disagree on the way that self-sacrifice plays out in the episode, their analysis relates to the reading of sacrifice in *Playtest* as articulated in the following section.

10.2 "Put him with the others": a reading of *Playtest*

This section will consider the role of sacrifice in *Playtest* from three vantage points. First, it will look at self-sacrifice for a righteous cause, focusing particularly on the historical example of soldiers during the crusades and their dual interest in money and piety. This will be compared to medical testing, in both the similarities to this dual self-interest as well as the risks that both examples inherently hold. The following subsection will consider our trust in technology and why this might not be the most wisely placed trust, given evidence of psychological testing carried out on unknowing users. Finally, this text will consider the concept of human sacrifice as it is presented in the Bible. This final subsection will shed light on the two previous topics, asking whether self-sacrifice made in the context of a lack of information is self-sacrifice at all. It will also bring to light the ambiguity that sacrificial notions hold, and bring into question who this model benefits.

10.2.1 Self-sacrifice for a cause

Within the history of Christianity, one of the most infamous instances of large-scale self-sacrifice was the crusades, a series of military expeditions from Western Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean. Starting in 1095, they first aimed to take back the Holy Land from Islam and then attempted to stop the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. These wars were fought by crusaders, who shared a lot of parallels with pilgrims (Cross, 1997, p. 435-437). Introducing his book, *Crusaders: The Epic History of the Wars for the Holy Lands*, medieval historian D. Jones explains the crusades and the idea of crusaders in this way:

> "The crusades: the wars fought by Christian-led, papal-sanctioned armies against the perceived enemies of Christ and the Church of

> Rome during the Middle Ages. Its [this book's] title, Crusaders, reflects both its theme and its approach. For a long time during the Middle Ages there was no single word to describe 'the crusade' as we have today come to think of them since: a series of eight or nine major expeditions from Western Europe to the Holy Land, supplemented by a series of other, tangentially connected wars fought from the sunbaked cities of the North African coast to the frozen forests of the Baltic region. Yet from the earliest days of the phenomenon there certainly was a word for those who participated. The men and women who took part in these penitential wars in the hope of spiritual salvation were known in Latin as crucesignati—those signed with the cross. In that sense, then, the idea of the crusader preceded the idea of the crusades" (D. Jones, 2019b, Introduction, para. 9).

Soldiers of the Holy Wars throughout the Middle Ages were often funded as mercenaries, receiving economic compensation for their role in the crusades. This dual motivation, of profit and piety, is summed up by D. Jones in an article for *History Extra*, "The official website for BBC History Magazine, BBC History Revealed and BBC World Histories Magazine" where he wrote:

> "[T]hroughout its history, crusading was founded on doublethink. The truth was that, just as those men who called the crusades managed to square Christ's peaceable teachings with the idea of waging wars of conquest in his name, so too were they quietly relaxed about the prospect of crusaders going off to fight as penitent pilgrims while still hoping to come home with their pockets full, as well as their souls cleansed. In the decades before the crusades began, several western writers noted that Christian warriors thought about their personal wealth at least as much as their spiritual health" (D. Jones, 2019a).

He makes clear, however, that not everyone who entered into the Crusades came out on top: "Of course, not all crusaders got rich. Many who joined the First Crusade were maimed, killed or bankrupted themselves due to the expense of the journey. Yet there were a significant number of others who did very well out of the enterprise" (Jones, 2019b). Thus, we see it was a bit of a gamble, but certainly a win-win situation, should one make it out alive and with financial compensation afterwards. In addition to the above motivations, should things go wrong, soldiers believed that their involvement would also bring them spiritual wealth: "Crusaders were encouraged by the grant of indulgences and by the status of martyr in the event of death" (Cross, 1997, p. 435).

Some parallels could be drawn between the mentality of the soldiers entering into the Holy Wars with this dual goal in mind, and participants in paid medical testing trials. Some, certainly, do these trials for altruistic reasons, but often there is a similar doublethink to the one described by Jones. Compensation for such medical trials are not going to make you rich in one go, but they are a fairly sure way to make money. Thus, as a means of income, it could be seen as altruistic, and at the same time it holds the possibility of great personal risk and, although more rare than in the case of the crusades, the possibility of death.

Clearly, the same comparison could be made to Cooper's choice to join the playtest in the episode. He is clearly motivated financially, and much like any product trial—or more aptly medical trial, since the test requires an implant—there is always a possibility that things could go wrong. We see, however, a willingness, an eagerness even, to be served up for the cause. In this case, the cause is the advancement of technology. Cooper is seen throughout the episode as an avid gamer, and when he sees the listing for the game trial, he jumps at the chance to be a tester. One crucial scene, where Katie and Cooper discuss the nondisclosure form that he must sign to participate, sees Katie downplay the risks:

— [Cooper] Okay, so I'm guessing this says, like, I agree to have my kidneys harvested?
— [Katie] Actually, it's a pretty standard NDA-disclaimer thing.
— [Cooper] Okay.
— [Katie] It's important that you realize there is a small medical procedure involved.
— [Cooper] Sorry, for a game?
— [Katie] Nothing permanent and we don't harvest your kidneys, I promise.
— [Cooper] Okay.
— [Katie] It's no more invasive than having your ears pierced.
— [Cooper reading from the contract] "Confidential information, brain downloads the game, duration, termination..." Um... The signature page... Where do I sign?

After Katie goes to get the final page, Cooper turns his phone back on to take a photograph of the proprietary technology. Sonja mentioned to him that a picture of it would be worth much more than the actual trial will pay. When Katie returns, she continues to explain how the implant will work:

— [Katie] What we're working on is an interactive augmented reality system.
— [Cooper] Like VR?
— [Katie] More like layers on top of reality.
— [Cooper] Oh. Okay. Um... [beeping]
— [Cooper] What's that?

— [Katie] We call this a mushroom.
— [Cooper] Like Mario Brothers?
— [Katie] If you like.
— [Cooper] You’re qualified to do this, right?
— [Katie] I haven’t killed anyone yet. May I?
— [Cooper] Yeah. [laughs][drilling sound]
— [Katie] All done.
— [Cooper] That was it?
— [Katie] See, I told you I’m good. No, don’t worry, it’s not permanent.
— [Cooper] Um... Okay. What is this, like, some kind of memory test or something like that?
— [Katie] You’ll find out.
— [Cooper] Oh, okay.
— [Katie] You might feel a slight twinge as it initializes.
— [Cooper] Oh, okay.
— [Katie] Commencing at 5:38.

Figure 10.1: Mushroom - *Playtest* (2016)

Throughout the scene we see Cooper repeatedly agree, even when Katie straps his head into the chair and pulls out a machine that will insert the “mushroom” into the base of his neck to interface with his brain (Figure 10.1). Whether Cooper is simply joking with Katie when he asks if she is qualified to do the implant or he has real doubts in the moment is unclear. However, Katie’s reaction, especially on a second viewing, is somehow sinister—“I haven’t killed anyone yet.” For someone who hasn’t killed anyone during the trials, she certainly reacts very casually

to his death, leading to the question of whether we can really trust her initial assurance that the insertion is "no more invasive than having your ears pierced." It is possible that Katie is skirting the truth, the *insertion* is not invasive, she has not killed anyone *during* the insertion. In any case, her words are suspect.

10.2.2 Trust in technology

The ubiquity of terms and conditions throughout all types of technology means that we often sign away our rights without a second thought. Much like Cooper, we are eager to get to the good stuff, not wanting to be bogged down by the legalese. Thus, we often scroll through terms and conditions without even a glance at information that contractually defines our relationships with technology and the use of our data in ways that are not made readily understandable. In the episode Cooper hardly glances at the contract, reading aloud "'Confidential information, brain downloads the game, duration, termination...' Um... The signature page... Where do I sign?" He might be nervous that he is about to breach the very contract he is reading from, or he might just be too trusting.

The contractual relationships we enter into with technology companies on a regular basis often stipulate that there is no recourse when things go wrong, and worse, users might be unaware of the full damage that could ensue. In 2014, Facebook was involved in a scandal regarding their understanding of what is covered by their blanket user consent. *The New York Times* reported that, "for one week in January 2012, it [Facebook] had altered the number of positive and negative posts in the news feeds of 689,003 randomly selected users to see what effect the changes had on the tone of the posts the recipients then wrote" (Goel, 2014). Clearly, there are some ethical concerns with this type of behavior, especially given the results. "The researchers found that moods were contagious. The people who saw more positive posts responded by writing more positive posts. Similarly, seeing more negative content prompted the viewers to be more negative in their own posts" (Goel, 2014). It is unclear how damaging this could have been for the users involved and what long-term mental health effects it could have provoked.

Normal academic research of this type is done with explicit consent, but when we sign away our rights with blanket consent forms that are now the status quo for almost all big companies and social media conglomerates, we lose the right to know what is even being tested out on us. Most of these A/B testing trials are for innocuous details, but given that we have given blanket consent the moment we scrolled to the end and clicked "accept," we will probably never know the extent of the experiments regularly being carried out on us.

Brooker himself first imagined the idea for the *Playtest* as a very parsed-back version where the Whac-A-Mole sequence goes wrong and drives participants crazy. The main character acts as a lab-rat and is subjected to something irre-

versible, yet, the company continues to experiment on countless other test subjects:

> “Somebody answers an advert, then goes to test an augmented reality Whac-A-Mole system. He whacks the moles and gets better and better at it. The moles get faster and faster—and then they can’t switch it off. So everywhere he looks in his life these little cartoon moles pop up and he has to keep whacking them. If he stops, they fill his whole field of vision. If he sleeps, he wakes up and there’s thousands of moles. He goes mad, and they have to tie his hands down. Then they just go ‘Put him with the others,’ and they move him into this big room full of people who are all tied to gurneys, screaming and seeing moles” (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 150).

Figure 10.2: Closing scene - *Playtest* (2016)

The line, “put him with the others” stayed in the final episode, but only inside of the story going on inside of Cooper’s head. Instead, when he actually dies, Katie and Shou just discuss, in Japanese and without much interest aside from the technicality of how he died and his final words while his body is zipped up into a body bag (Figure 10.2).

— [Shou] What happened?
— [Katie] His phone rang.
— [Shou] You didn’t take it off him?
— [Katie] Yes, but...
— [Shou] The signals interfere.

— [Katie] I know. I switched it off. Maybe he did something while I was out of the room. An oversight. Won't happen again. The incoming signal must have interfered with the upload sequence. Every synapse in his brain lit up at once. Then went dead. Like that.
— [Shou] You said he shouted something. What was it?
— [Katie] "Mom."
— [Shou] Make a note of that.
— [Katie] Yes.

Though they do not say, "put him with the others" we can understand that Cooper's death is probably not an anomaly. The unemotional reaction of both Katie and Shou makes clear that they saw Cooper as no more than a subject of their experimental trials, probably one casualty of many.

10.2.3 Human sacrifice

Throughout the Old Testament of the Bible, human sacrifice is condemned and forbidden as strictly against God's will—often called out as a pagan practice.

"There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you" (Deuteronomy 18: 10-12, NIV).

However, early on in the Bible we see a conflicting story, where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, though ultimately he does not have to go through with it (Genesis 22, NIV). It is called a test, "After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you'" (Genesis 22: 1-2, NIV).

This conflicting account of sacrifice is confusing. Is human sacrifice acceptable, but only if God demands it? Even if God ultimately stopped Abraham, his request seems to not equate with other passages of scripture, and even if it was a test, it is not clear that the test was about Abraham's willingness to participate in human sacrifice or not (and that such practice is condemned by God). Instead it was a test of his willingness to trust in God's plan. Thus, the test is not meant to show that human sacrifice is wrong in any way, but actually to show that Abraham, although in the end he does not have to, was willing to sacrifice his son if God demanded it. How is this any different from the followers of the pagan religions who believed that their gods called for such sacrifices?

This conflicting message carries over into the New Testament where God actually sacrifices his own Son, Christ (John 3:16, Romans 5:8, Acts 2:23). In the case of God's sacrifice of Christ, one could argue that it is not human sacrifice, and instead martyrdom, thus not active killing, but instead acceptance of death done by others. Later, Christian martyrdom is held up as an example of true faith—an example of those who would be rewarded in the next life for their sacrifice:

> "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years" (Revelation 20: 4-6, NIV).

While the book of Revelation is often regarded as metaphor, the message seems clear. Those who follow Christ, and particularly those who die spreading his message, will be blessed. One might conclude, then, that sacrifice of life and the question of whether it is good or bad is solely determined by the faith that you are following. Though updated to martyrdom in the New Testament, the Old Testament seems to tell us that human sacrifice is evil in the context of pagan religions, but not Christianity, should God ask for such a sacrifice. In the case of Christ, God—being all powerful and in control of all things—could have intervened to stop it, as Christ prayed he might. However, he did not (thus his choice to allow Christ to be killed is as good as an active hand in his death).[2] "God chose to effect his great plan of salvation through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of his only Son" (Elwell and Yarbrough, 2013, p. 26). The story of Christ asking to be spared, known as Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane, is present in three of the four gospels (Matthew 26:36-45, Mark 14:32-41, Luke 22: 39-45). This leaves us with a complicated view of human sacrifice and martyrdom in the Bible. Does it really just depend on which faith you follow to determine which kind of sacrifice—and under what circumstances—is acceptable? Is this relativistic idea applicable in some way to *Playtest*?

[2]This thesis does not aim to challenge the necessity of Christ's death in the grand narrative of salvation as a key belief in Christian thought. It instead aims to point out the conflicting message its portrayal creates in an understanding of God's nature.

Figure 10.3: Fear him - *Playtest* (2016)

In *Playtest*, we see Shou, the CEO of the SaitoGemu, only briefly. Once in Cooper's internal experiences, and again at the very end of the episode after Cooper has died. In some ways, Shou is portrayed as the God of the gaming industry—with a number of shots of his face on the cover of a magazine which warns readers to "fear him" (Figure 10.3). He leads from the top, and his seeming indifference to Cooper's death gives us a glimmer of the way the company might function. Murray (2019) explores Shou and Katie's callous response to Cooper's death at the end of the episode:

> "Consider the centrality of Katie and Shou Saito, who embody the 'move fast and break things' ethos of the games industry, and the tech world more generally. [...] In the outermost level, Cooper has suffered profound brain overstimulation and death within a fraction of a second. His eyes are rolled up into his head, and there's blood coming from his nose. Shou Saito is debriefing with Katie, asking her what happened. He reprimands her for not taking the phone from him, and she assures him it is an 'oversight' which 'won't happen again'. Katie is consumed with keeping her job, and Shou is preoccupied with the technical failure of the experiment; neither seem bothered by Cooper's brain synapses having been fatally overstimulated. This displays a ruthless utilitarianism and goal-orientation toward technological progress, one that is morally disconnected from ethical concerns" (p. 133).

Brooker and Wyatt Russel (the actor who played Cooper) see the episode's ending leaving room for interpretation. Though Cooper's physical body has died,

they both see the possibility that Cooper is still living out his nightmare inside of the microchip somehow. In an interview Russel posited the idea:

> "In my mind, Cooper's dead in real life, zipped up in the body bag. But does his consciousness live on in some other digital realm? Does he have this hellish existence for eternity, where he has to live out the rest of time inside his constant anxieties and fears? This chip inside his head might allow his consciousness to live on in some way, in an everlasting hell. Which is an absolutely terrifying thought" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 159).

In response to the idea, Brooker said "I like to think that too" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 159). This idea of eternal suffering will be considered in a later chapter in Part IV in the discussion of Men Against Fire, but the idea is an interesting one in relation to *Playtest* as well. Thus, the sacrifice of Cooper could be seen as even more problematic than those we saw at the start of this section with the Crusaders and medical testing participants. Cooper, while he might think he is helping to forward the goals of technology, might ultimately be damned to eternal suffering because of the negligence of a company with a God complex that he probably should not have trusted to begin with.

Cooper's death—the most profound horror of the episode—seems so barbaric because Cooper so openly trusted SaitoGemu, believing Katie when she calmed his nerves and believing that "playing games is good" as Shou tells him in the game sequence in Cooper's head. He also tells Cooper that horror games are fun, specifically because afterwards you feel good "mostly because you are still alive."

10.3 Conclusion

Cooper's willingness to participate in the games testing holds a similar doublethink as crusaders or medical testing participants. He wants the monetary gain, but he's also interested in gaming, and willing to have the double benefit of experiencing the progress of gaming technology while at the same time making money to get home. He's invested in the cause, you could say. He is also incredibly trusting, especially when it is revealed there is a medical procedure involved in the playtest. This physical intervention into his body obviously comes with inherent risks, much like any medical testing trial.

Furthermore, our willingness to trust in big companies, who often require users to click "accept" to dense consent forms, is something we should be wary of. We see that technology asks for sacrifice from its users, both in *Black Mirror* and in the real world in the case of Facebook's controversial psychological testing

on unknowing users. This is mirrored in the examples of medical testing and the Crusades where scientific advancement and Christianity ask followers to sacrifice themselves for the cause. In the case of technology, Facebook and SaitoGemu show us that tech companies are not as open about the real risks. Cooper might have survived if he had been a bit more aware of the trust he was so easily placing in SaitoGemu. Finally, sacrifice as a concept was explored in the Bible, particularly human sacrifice and martyrdom. Is Cooper's death human sacrifice on par with pagan offerings, or is his death part of necessary progress, part of the salvation narrative of technology? It seems that question comes down to perspective. Clearly as a company, SaitoGemu sees it as the latter, but viewers might not agree.

As mentioned in the literature review section above, another episode that explores sacrifice is *The National Anthem* (2011). Here, the British Prime Minister sacrifices his own image for the sake of rescuing Princess Susannah from a kidnapper who demands he have sex with a pig on live television. Ultimately, his sacrifice was not really necessary, since Susannah was released before the Prime Minister was actually scheduled to commit the act. Likewise, the artist/terrorist's suicide could be viewed as a self-sacrifice as well (Ungureanu, 2015).

Chapter 11

OBEDIENCE IN *USS CALLISTER* (2017)

— I am your captain. An order is an order.
— Then go fuck yourself. Sir.
— OK. So we're doing it this way.
— [scoffs] [mocking] Are you gonna throw a fireball?
— [snaps fingers]
— [muffled gasps] [thuds] [muffled sounds]
— Oh, dear. You can't see. You can't breathe. Unpleasant, isn't it?
— [muffled groaning]
— Do you submit? You won't die, you know. No one dies in here unless I want them to. I can keep you like this forever if I feel like it. Forever gasping for breath with a mouth that isn't there. Do you submit?
— [muffled agreement]
— Good girl.

In *USS Callister*[1], we see two sides to the main character, Robert Daly (Jesse Plemons)—lead programmer and co-founder of Callister Inc, creator of the multiplayer online game, *Infinity*.[2] In the first scene of the episode, he seems likeable and outgoing while in his simulated world, but later in reality, he is timid and self-conscious. He seems unable to make connections with his co-workers and those around him, often wishing to be the more assertive self we saw at the start of the episode. We soon discover, however, that he is malicious and cruel in the

[1]Episode directed by Toby Haynes, written by William Bridges & Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on December 29, 2017.

[2]*USS Callister* refers to the episode itself, while USS *Callister* refers to the name of the vessel in Daly's modded version of the game *Infinity*.

simulated world he has created, and he is quick to punish the duplicates of his co-workers that he has brought into existence within his private game world. The first scene can be read in a new light when we understand that their cheerful embrace of Daly is a reflection of their fear and not their admiration. Alarmingly, these duplicates are not simple simulations of the co-workers that he has grievances with, they are sentient digital clones made from the DNA of the originals—a process that Daly himself has perfected in his home work space.

Shortly after a new employee, Nanette Cole (Cristin Milioti), is added to his team at work, he collects her DNA from a coffee cup and adds her to his game. Presumably he wants to take out his anger towards her because she became distant after another co-worker Shania (Michaela Coel) warns her not to get too close to Daly since he can get "a bit starey." When Nanette's duplicate wakes up in the game, she learns the hard way what Daly is like if the duplicates do not submit to his will. In a horrific vision of Daly's omnipotence, we see him snap his fingers and take away Nanette's entire face. She cannot breathe, speak, or die, as we see from Daly's commentary (the dialogue from the scene is that which opens this chapter).

Deciding that Daly must be taken down, Nanette inspires the group to find the courage to fight back against their captor, remarking that "Daly's smart, but he's not a god. He's a coder. He is fallible." Using a bit of blackmail against the real Nanette and her duplicate's knowledge of the system update that is due to take place in a few days, the crew come up with a plan to end their suffering under Daly's toxic rule. They initially believe that by flying through the wormhole in the game that they will be erased as rogue code. They hope that by blackmailing the real Nanette into stealing their DNA samples, Daly will be unable to recreate them and continue in his torturous ways. The crew survives the wormhole and is able to escape into the open internet, while trapping Daly in an update that overwrites the game while he is still inside it, simultaneously killing him in real life.

11.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *USS Callister*

USS Callister has received numerous awards and praise, including four Prime Time Emmy Awards in 2018, notably including the award for "Outstanding Television Movie" (Emmy Awards, 2018). The reception of the episode in popular sources was mixed, some seeing the storyline and critical message muddled by plot holes and too many metaphors (Oller, 2017), while others regarded it as a critique of toxic masculinity. "Plemons's character isn't just a send-up of certain kind of intolerant fanboy, or a symbol of how we enact our darker impulses

online (that old Black Mirror chestnut), but a sharp attack on an entire genre of male-driven narrative" (Saunders, 2017).

Hantke (2019) also takes up the theme of toxic masculinity in his text "Dethroning the King of Space: Toxic White Masculinity and the Revised Adventure Narrative in 'USS Callister'", comparing Daly to a "petty tyrant" who "ultimately fails to defeat a mutiny among his creations" (p. 194). Drawing on the theme of the adventure narrative, and the concept of a pocket universe, Hantke explores the social reckoning of 2017 revealing widespread misconduct among high-profile men in many sectors as context for the episode's portrayal of toxic masculinity. He does not name the #MeToo movement specifically, but alludes to it in his discussion. This text will explore the same context in further detail in the final subsection of the analysis of *USS Callister*. Hantke, after articulating the shift seen in the episode, away from white toxic masculinity in the form of Robert Daly, and toward the new captain of the group, Nanette, points to the exchange the crew has with the first person they come across in their new frontier as one which indicates that the work is not yet done. "Clearly, we learn, not everything is great on the digital frontier; part of the further adventures of the crew of the USS *Callister* will be to encounter and fight other toxic white males" (p. 198). The player, calling himself "King of Space" threatens the crew with violence, albeit as a much less omniponent player than Daly represented, his attitude of hostility represents the reality that even after taking down one "asshole god" (as Daly is referred to in the episode), there are others ready to take his place. Thus, Hantke suggests that the episode does not take the revolution far enough, indicating that the economic dimension of neoliberal economies should be addressed concluding that:

> "Without exploring the link between economics and the realms of the psychological, social, and political, however, the risk remains that, in Lorde's words, even a successful coup displacing toxic white masculinity may only 'temporarily ... beat [the master] at his own game, but ... will never enable us to bring about genuine change' (1979)" (p. 203).

In their chapter, "*USS Callister* and Non-Player Characters: How Should We Act in Video Games?" (2020), Hamer and Gubka write about the relationship between the player of the game world, Daly, and his interaction with Non-Player Characters (NPCs, in this case the characters he creates from the DNA of his co-workers). They first ask the question whether these NPCs should be considered people, stating that if they are, there is clearly a problem with Daly's violent behavior towards them. Following on from there, they consider the flip-side. What if the NPCs in the episode are not people? Would this change the perception of Daly's behavior towards them? In the end, they decide that his behavior in the

game reveals something about who he is outside of the game, and his desires outside of the game (to punish his co-workers). They go on to argue that the idea of behavior in the context of games reflecting something of one's genuine self might force video game users to question their own behavior within video games, and whether these in-game behaviors could influence their real-world actions and desires. They do not wish to suggest a link between video games and violence, but instead consider it a call for gamers to be careful of the behaviors that they are practicing.

While discussing cookie and consciousness transfer technology within *Black Mirror*, Gamez and Johnson (2020), look at *USS Callister* even though the episode does not actually depict the copying of consciousness, but instead implies that a person's consciousness could be extracted from their DNA. In any case, the duplicates in the episode seem to be conscious, and if that is the case, they authors suggest that their torture, in the case that this technology were to become real, would be wrong.

> "If ethics is closely tied to consciousness, then copied consciousnesses should have the same rights as people. Torturing a physical person and torturing a copy of that person's consciousness should be the same crime. The governments in the *Black Mirror* multiverse seem to be catching on to this.[...] The ethical issues surrounding artificial consciousness would be fairly clear cut if we knew whether or not a system was conscious. In *White Christmas* and *USS Callister* the consciousness technology is presented as real, so we believe that the digital persons portrayed are conscious and that their torture and imprisonment are wrong. However, as we have seen, consciousness cannot be determined through an artificial system's behavior, and the current science of consciousness is a long way from discovering the relationship between physical and conscious states. For the foreseeable future there is likely to be considerable ambiguity about whether artificial systems really are conscious" (Gamez and Johnson, 2020, p. 279).

Approaching the question of cookies and duplicates from another angle, Gardner and Sloane (2020) ask whether your cookie is you. In regards to *USS Callister*, little is specifically said regarding the episode, but the implications of the discussion are clear: for the authors, the duplicates are not the same people as the originals. However, they indicate that if these duplicates are conscious, the ramifications are horrifying. The ambiguity, they conclude, seems to offer cover for immoral behavior:

> “Perhaps it is the uncertainty of whether cookies really are conscious replicas of people that enables certain *Black Mirror* characters to rationalize their behavior. Just as it might be unclear to us what it is like to be a cookie, so it might be unclear to some of the human characters in *Black Mirror*—or just unclear enough to give them plausible deniability. In this way, *Black Mirror* tells a familiar story about people who fail to empathize with others—in this case, cookies—who are different from them. And with that failure we can empathize” (p. 290).

Pérez and Genovesi (2020), when looking at *USS Callister*, instead focus on the death of the duplicate James Walton’s son, Tommy, and they question *Black Mirror*’s stance of death throughout the series:

> “We can ask how we should restore our relationships with lost loved ones. Should we forget them or replace them? Should we try to end our own pain and guilt? Should we mourn? If so, how do we prevent grief from taking over our life? Is *Black Mirror* suggesting that technology can help us in some meaningful way?” (p. 294-295).

As to the question of treatment of duplicates, though not writing directly about *USS Callister*, and instead discussing the theme of love throughout the series, Price (2020) writes:

> “In relation to replicated people the shows say, in one instance, that we do owe robots what is good for their flourishing—unless, of course, we are content to see the machine suffer for eternity in an attic or as a personal assistant/slave. Alternately, we could take Matthew’s position that code cannot suffer, and so any appearance that the machine suffers is, as Martha calls it, ‘a performance.’ We could go further and say that the machine’s suffering is for the common good, since the machine’s suffering improves the lives of people, and is therefore just. And if we say that machines exist to serve people, and that they can only flourish in their roles when they are made to serve, then the best way to love a machine is to enslave it” (p. 306-307).

As we can see, the various vantage points on digital duplicates are nearly endless, some suggesting that their abuse is on par with abuse of real people, while others seem less convinced. In any case, it seems clear that Daly’s torment of the duplicates is meant to feel real to viewers, and this thesis takes the perspective, as put forth by Hamer and Gubka (2020) that Daly’s behavior towards the duplicates is reflective of his genuine self and unfulfilled desires outside of the game. Likewise, his behavior is an obvious example of toxic masculinity, as articulated by both popular and academic sources (Saunders, 2017; Hantke, 2019).

11.2 “Like I said, he’s an asshole god”: a reading of *USS Callister*

This section will consider *USS Callister* through a number of angles of analysis related to ideas of obedience in the context of an omnipotent god. First, we will consider Robert Daly’s role as a god-like ruler within the video game where he keeps his digitally duplicated co-workers. The power over the duplicates that the game gives him brings out his true personality, and as the characters themselves describe him, “he’s an asshole god.” Building on from there, we will look at the role of obedience and disobedience in the episode, particularly in response to an all-powerful Daly. Finally, we will discuss the notion of killing God and the exposing of toxic masculinity seen today through the #MeToo movement.

11.2.1 Dystheism and mini gods of technology

The episode’s first three scenes set the stage for Daly’s god-like role in his modded version of *Infinity*, the video game he created—a version modeled on his favorite TV show, Space Fleet. Daly and the crew of the USS *Callister* have an encounter with the enemy, and Daly makes the brave (and ultimately correct) choice, his crew praise him, and everything seems perfect—a joyful crew and a fearless leader. Next, we see the real Daly at work, with the same co-workers, only in the real world they are not very nice to him. The third scene shows Daly back in the game world, and this time things are not so wonderful. Having felt inadequate at work with the real Walton (Jimmi Simpson), Daly takes out his aggression torturing the double for the real Walton’s actions.

— [Daly] You... are pathetic, Walton. What are you?
— [Walton gasping]
— [Daly] What’s that?
— [Walton inhales] Pathetic.

Daly proceeds to use Walton as a foot rest, further humiliating him (Figure 11.1). The idyllic world we saw in the opening scene comes into a new light when we see what Daly does to get the obedience he wants from the doubles in the game. Little by little, we discover that Daly holds the power to do literally anything in his game world. From making characters into hideous beasts, changing their physiology, and the ultimate power over life and death, Robert Daly has created a world where all he has to do is snap his fingers and he can re-materialize a person in front of himself. Additionally, it seems that all the other characters in the world are duplicates of co-workers he has taken issues with. Thus, he is the all-powerful

Figure 11.1: Walton as a foot rest - *USS Callister* (2017)

god of this world, and he takes out his aggression on digital duplicates of those who have slighted him in the real world—he is omnipotent and cruel.

"For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on Earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:16 NIV). The God of the Christian Bible also created everything, and everything was created for his pleasure and to glorify his name. "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being" (Revelation 4:11, NIV). In Christianity, this vision of God as being all-powerful and worthy of praise is usually accompanied by a view of God as all-loving as well—benevolent and with compassion for his creation. However, there are those who see it differently.

Dystheism is the belief that, while there is a god, it is not necessarily good. In fact, it might even be evil. Writing about famous literary figures in his book *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism* (2011), Schweizer defines a dystheist as "a believer in an unpredictable, ambivalent 'trickster god'" explaining that in the case of the author about which he was writing "his case against God is based on persistent doubts about the true nature of God's moral character and on the suspicion that God harbors both good and evil tendencies" (p. 222). Likewise, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Bullivant and Ruse, 2013) explains misotheism (the hatred of God) clarifying that this hatred is not atheism, since by hating God, one must believe in his existence:

> "Many authors, including Philip Pullman, Peter Shaffer, Elie Wiesel, Rebecca West, and Anatole France do not deny the existence of God, but they take issue with the moral character of God. Their works

> frame God as a murderous tyrant, a bumbling idiot, an indifferent enigma, a tottering senile, or a malevolent bully. Since these works posit God (or gods) as the antagonist, they are by definition not atheistic. To be sure, any of the authors mentioned above could be identified as blasphemous. But this is precisely the point: blasphemy is not the same as atheism" (p. 684).

While not a widespread view of God among Christians, there are those who point to the Old Testament to show that God can be vengeful, angry, and full of rage. However, many Christians would argue that this behavior is a justified reaction to sin and evil. Clearly, there is a divide between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, a vast difference in character which has led many Christians to question how one can reconcile the two.

A number of doctrines have been used to explain the apparent differences seen. The first is called *progressive revelation*, the idea that as the Bible was written, more and more was revealed about the character of God (Elwell and Yarbrough, 2013). In other words, the New Testament offers a more complete revelation of God and his character, however, proponents of the doctrine believe that this should not discount the God of the Old Testament, but instead shed light on the complete narrative: "Many times parts of the Bible that were written earlier become clearer in light of what was written later" (Elwell and Yarbrough, 2013, p. 146). This brings us to the second concept used to explain the differences between God in the Old and New Testaments—the notion that the Bible is a grand narrative, or a cohesive narrative. This doctrine suggests that it is inappropriate to view any act of God outside of the complete narrative.

What about Daly? Are we seeing him out of the full context of his true self? His behavior inside of the game and outside of it are very different. Outside of the game he is polite, quiet, and timid. Inside it however, he is malicious, cruel, and at times murderous. As we saw in the literature review at the start of this chapter, Hamer and Gubka (2020) believe that regardless of whether the duplicates are truly conscious, Daly's behavior towards them in the game reveals something crucial about him, something that transcends both spaces—a glimpse at who he *really* is. It seems that even if he does not act out these desires in the real world, his cruelty is only prevented by the consequences he might face for such behavior against real people; so he tortures the duplicates, seemingly without consequence.

11.2.2 Obedience and disobedience

Inside the game, Daly has come to expect complete obedience, and if the crew does not follow his orders and play along with the Space Fleet narrative, he tortures them. The crew are used to obeying his orders, and they often understand

that their "real" selves must have done something to upset Daly in the real world based on the in-game retaliation he carries out. When Nanette first arrives they explain "He controls everything. He does shit to make us cooperate," but she is unable to accept their advice to obey. We see similar advice to obey the Christian God: "Observe what the Lord your God requires: Walk in obedience to him, and keep his decrees and commands, his laws and regulations, as written in the Law of Moses. Do this so that you may prosper in all you do and wherever you go" (1 Kings 2:3, NIV).

Running down the corridor of the USS *Callister*, Nanette's in-game double tries to escape, but there is nowhere to go. She gets to the end of the corridor just to de-materialize and re-materialize back in the control room. This is her first interaction with Captain Daly, and he tries to explain to her that she should just play along, it will make it all easier. But, she resists.

— [Daly] I am your captain. An order is an order.
— [Nanette] Then go fuck yourself. Sir.
— [Daly] OK. So we're doing it this way.
— [Nanette] [scoffs] [mocking] Are you gonna throw a fireball?
— [Daly] [snaps fingers]
— [Nanette] [muffled gasps] [thuds][muffled sounds]
— [Daly] Oh, dear. You can't see. You can't breathe. Unpleasant, isn't it?
— [Nanette] [muffled groaning]
— [Daly] Do you submit? You won't die, you know. No one dies in here unless I want them to. I can keep you like this forever if I feel like it. Forever gasping for breath with a mouth that isn't there. Do you submit?
— [Nanette] [muffled agreement]
— [Daly] Good girl.

During the dialogue above, we see Daly snap his fingers and erase Nanette's face. She no longer has a nose or a mouth, and has no way to breathe (Figure 11.2). "'If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honor my name,' says the Lord Almighty, 'I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honor me'" (Malachi 2:2, NIV). Nanette's dishonor and disobedience of Daly brings his wrath, and ultimately her obedience. She starts to play along, just as the other crew members do. Or at least she seems to.

However, when Nanette sees the extent of Daly's cruelty and his complete control over the world, she decides that they must fight back somehow.

— [Nanette] Stealing my pussy is a red fucking line. We are gonna get this bastard!

Figure 11.2: No way to breathe - *USS Callister* (2017)

— [Walton] No.
— [Nanette] Yeah.
— [Walton] We've tried a million times. No way out.
— [Nanette] Walton. Come on, Walton.
— [Walton] Like I said, he's an asshole god.
— [Nanette] Mnh-mnh. Daly's smart, but he's not a god. He's a coder. He is fallible.

Finding a loophole in the way that Daly has cordoned off his modded version of Infinity, the doubles decide to blackmail the real Nanette into helping them to exploit a flaw in Daly's home system. His computer will connect for a brief window of time to the larger internet during the update of the game being released on Christmas Eve out in the real world. The real Nanette will help them buy some time to make their getaway, while also stealing the DNA Daly used to make the doubles in the first place—ensuring he will not be able to start the cycle over again and create more digital duplicates. They do not realize, however, when they escape they also kill Daly. His rogue code is deleted while he is trapped inside.

11.2.3 Killing God

Towards the end of the episode, when Daly is chasing after the mutinous crew in a second spacecraft, he bellows at them over the intercoms "If you thought what happened to you in the past was bad, that was nothing! What I'm going to do to you is going to be goddamn fucking biblical! I'm literally going to turn your insides out. But I'll keep you alive in tiny little jars and there you'll stay until I'm bored of you." The crew, deciding they have no reason to continue listening to the

invective, decide to simply cut communication with their shrieking captor as they continue on with their escape.

Circumventing Daly, and making use of the wormhole generated by the update package, the crew traps their tormentor in his modded version of the game. Moreover, since they connected to the internet for their escape, the larger Infinity system sees his modded home version as "rogue code" and deletes it—trapping Daly in the game and killing him in the real world. Outsmarted by his co-workers, we see the model of toxic masculinity taken down by a woman's ingenuity. But does the life of a real person outweigh the digital duplicates in some way? Did Daly really get what he deserved?

In his book, *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism* (2011), Schweizer considers, among other concepts, deicide—the killing, or killer of a god. Writing about the famous dictum "God is dead," he considers Nietzsche's original intent and visceral hatred of God as having been stripped away from the popular understanding of Nietzsche's words. "It has become something of a commonplace to consider Nietzsche's dictum 'God is dead' as less an expression of active deicide than as a reflection of the fact that scientific advances and rapid technological developments had already killed God. [...] However, this view disregards the visceral hatred for the concept of the divine that inspired Nietzsche's tirades" (p. 57). He continues, explaining that this erroneous reading of Nietzsche allowed for the founding of a new theological perspective where the proponents of the viewpoint

> "... took the premise that God is already dead as the starting point for their own theological speculations. Taking God's death for granted, they attempted to construct a new, forward-looking theology on the basis of Christology, that is, a religious position that favors a Christ-centered religious ethic. [...] It must be one of the greatest ironies in the history of ideas that Nietzsche's misotheism, particularly his loathing of Christ, gave rise to a theological school that not only circumvented misotheism entirely, but emphasized Christology above conventional Trinitarianism" (p. 57-58).

Thus, the killing of God does not always have the consequences we might initially anticipate, and killing God might just be the act that starts a whole movement, or countermovement.

As we saw in the literature review section of this chapter, Hantke (2019) discusses USS Callister in the context of toxic masculinity. Although he does not name the #MeToo movement specifically or consider its use of technology as a key proponent in its success, he does provide an argument for the episode to be

read within such a context.[3] Furthermore, Hantke believes that the elimination of Daly—at least as a metaphor—is necessary to further the idea of eliminating toxic white masculinity, and that the episode does not go far enough, asking whether Walton should also have been eliminated, not just his digital duplicate:

> "While Daly's vegetative state has eliminated him from Callister Inc., female employees like Nanette must still contend with the company's CEO—humanized by his care for his offspring, also suspiciously male—roaming the hallways looking for sexual adventure. It is difficult to tell whether this is an oversight on the part of the writers, as the episode loses track of the real world in its final few scenes, or whether it is a deliberately construed irony, aligning the imperfections of the real world (Walton) with those of the digital one (Gamer691)" (p. 198).

The #MeToo movement could be described as a collective reckoning for powerful men who abused their influence by sexually harassing or assaulting those with less power—those who would be less likely to be believed. It was also a collective awakening to the prevalence of such widespread abuse of power: victims finally saw that they did not need to suffer in silence, they were not alone, they would be heard. Writing for *The New York Times*, Salam (2018) described the pivotal shift, one year later in early October:

> "One year ago today, The New York Times published a landmark investigation about how Harvey Weinstein had for decades paid off sexual harassment accusers. Culturally, the article hit like a meteor, drastically altering the landscape around how sexual misconduct is perceived, sending the #MeToo hashtag viral and, in turn, triggering an avalanche of accusations against powerful men. It wasn't long before #MeToo wasn't just a turn of phrase—it was a movement."

[3]"Released on December 29, 2017, 'USS Callister,' together with the entire fourth season of the show, enters the cultural sphere well into an extended media cycle devoted to the indictment of white male sexual transgressors, all of them celebrities from the world of film and television. Viewers of the show would have been exposed to a series of revelations about sexual misconduct [...] While *Black Mirror*'s production schedule preceded all of these events, with show runner Charlie Brooker '[writing the episode] before the U.S. election, and [filming] it in January' (Strause, 2018), the zeitgeist had most definitely been primed [...] If the chronology of historical events precludes a reading of 'USS Callister' as a direct response to this media cycle—post-production tinkering aside—then the cycle itself would provide an immediately obvious context for the episode by the time of its release. In the context of this ongoing debate, the episode lays out an easily readable allegory celebrating efforts to indict Daly as the embodiment of white male tyranny and replace him with Nanette Cole" (Hantke, 2019, p. 195).

Social media has played a huge role in the power of the #MeToo movement, which has focused on exposing sexual predators, especially those in the workplace. The irony of the fact that social media is also often the site of toxic masculinity makes the use of technology in the movement all the more powerful. Likewise, as we saw in Hantke's (2019) discussion of the episode, multiplayer online games are also a site of this toxic behavior, as alluded to in his footnote on the Gamergate scandal (p. 198). #GamerGate was an online campaign meant to silence critique of sexism within the video game industry which began in 2014.[4]

#MeToo showed that taking down these god-like titans of industry could be done—David could beat Goliath, metaphorically speaking. Some of the worst offenders (including Harvey Weinstein, Larry Nassar, and Bill Cosby) were repeat offenders with decades-long histories of assault (Carlsen et al., 2018; Rummler, 2020). Yet, until the accusations went public, victims were too afraid to speak out about their experiences. Of course, these are just a few of the most high-profile cases. Predators were called out at every level of society.

Hantke (2019) points to Daly's sense of entitlement as part of the equation of toxic masculinity:

> "The triviality of some of the offenses for which Daly has punished co-workers by turning them into digital hostages speaks less to his sensitivity and more to a sense of entitlement—what could it be that exempts him from the small annoyances the rest of us must tolerate as a matter of daily life? Given that his apartment is lavish, a sign of the salary he commands, it is clear that he feels more marginalized and put upon than he really is. The psychological and economic realities within the character are out of sync" (p. 197-198).

The abuse of power seen in the #MeToo movement is often carried out under a similar sense of entitlement. The abuse is predicated on the understanding that victims will not be believed, due to their lower social standing or lack of power. Thus, their compliance is obtained through similar means to what we saw in the episode, albeit in a less superhuman sense. The power wielded by these titans of industry made them believe that they were untouchable, until mutiny arrived.

However, as we saw with the case of Nietzsche, killing God does not necessarily eliminate the problem. The episode also left us with an acknowledgement that killing one god might just leave a king behind. Immediately following their

[4] "The term #GamerGate was popularized on the social media service over the past two months after an actor, Adam Baldwin, used it to describe what he and others viewed as corruption among journalists who cover the game industry. People using the term have been criticizing popular game sites for running articles and opinion columns sympathetic to feminist critics of the industry, denouncing them as 'social justice warriors'" (Wingfield, 2014).

escape, the crew is confronted with a gamer who calls himself the "king of space" and threatens their ship with violence.

The repercussions of the #MeToo movement came as well: "'The backlash comes from a minority, but the minority has a lot of power,' Muller said. [...] Activists like her have been publicly accused of waging a 'witch hunt' targeting men. Surveys show that an increasing number of men say they now feel uncomfortable mentoring women and that both men and women reported being more reluctant to hire attractive women" (Kottasová, 2019). As Hantke (2019) concludes in his text: "Without exploring the link between economics and the realms of the psychological, social, and political, however, the risk remains that, in Lorde's words, even a successful coup displacing toxic white masculinity may only 'temporarily ... beat [the master] at his own game, but ... will never enable us to bring about genuine change' (1979)" (p. 203).

11.3 Conclusion

As we saw throughout the analysis of *USS Callister*, technology in the episode has given Robert Daly infinite god-like powers to force compliance from the digital duplicates he brings into his modified game, and he is an evil god. As we saw, though not a widespread idea among practicing Christians, there are those who question whether the Christian God is really good (dystheism). Likewise, there are those who hate him (misotheism). As articulated, the two concepts should not be confused with atheism, because both necessitate a belief in God. Thus, we see an idea of an omnipotent God who is not good, much like Daly in his pocket universe. With his power, Daly can demand obedience; he can make his crew do whatever he wants. But his lack of any real kindness provokes the crew to mutiny and disobedience—and ultimately leads to Daly's death.

The concept of killing God, deicide, and the history of the theological movement unintentionally spawned by Nietzsche's famous dictum "God is dead," demonstrates that killing God does not always have the finality that we might anticipate. We saw that the crew of the USS *Callister* was met with further toxic masculinity immediately after escaping their "asshole god." Taking down sexual predators and exposing toxic masculinity has been seen in recent years particularly through the #MeToo movement, where seemingly all-powerful CEOs, politicians and even comedians have been brought before the court of public opinion for their actions (and sometimes also brought before real courts for illegal behavior). However, it is clear that larger societal issues remain. The problem of toxic masculinity has not been solved by metaphorically killing a few gods of industry, and it has provoked backlash that could have lasting effects for women in the workplace.

Other *Black Mirror* episodes which relate to the idea of obedience include

Arkangel (2017), with a representation of oppressive parenting; *Nosedive* (2016), as we saw in Chapter 9, depicting piety forcefully thrust upon the five-star rating system's users, many of them obedient without question; or *Shut Up and Dance* (2016), which shows a teenager blackmailed into obedience by a group of anonymous hackers. However, *USS Callister*'s representation of a god-like figure who can force obedience from his digital creations has allowed for a more complex discussion of power, obedience, and ultimately disobedience. Likewise, this transition towards disobedience works as a segue to the next part of this thesis (Part IV), which discusses the consequences of transgression.

Part IV

The Consequences of Transgression

Part IV: Introduction

Part IV will focus on the role that technology plays within Black Mirror as a moral enforcer, specifically considering the overlap between technology and Christianity on topics of public punishment, ostracism, judgment by an all-seeing God, and eternal suffering. These concepts, seemingly borrowed from Christianity, play out within *Black Mirror* highlighting the parallels between these Christian ideas and themes of justice and punishment within the series.

In *Black Mirror*, technology as a means of social control is most evident in this group of episodes, which consider what happens when people transgress laws, rules, or norms. Charles Ellwood, in his 1918 article published in *The Scientific Monthly*, argued that religion is the root of all other means of social control. In other words, the original upon which all the others are built: government, law, and morals. Whether technology, in the case of *Black Mirror*, highlights either the physical manifestation of religious ideas, or if it instead seeks to replace religion with technology as a mechanism of control is unclear. Certainly, Ellwood would see it as the latter, that technology is a tool by which to enact social control, as birthed by religion.

Harari (2016), as we saw earlier however, seems to suggest that we might instead begin to think of techno-religions as something that will come to somehow replace religion, at least in where we place our trust or confidence of belief (as he considers Dataism, etc.). Either way, it is clear that religion holds a great deal of power in its abilities as a mechanism for social control, whether technology makes tangible Christian concepts, or whether it supplants religion completely. In either scenario, technology throughout the series acts as a mechanism of social control, especially through punishment for transgression.

When viewed in isolation, the episodes in Part IV might seem to simply depict a future where punishment is taken just a few steps further than what we see today. It is not so hard to imagine these scenarios taking place in real life should such technology become available. After all, the death penalty is still widely used within the United States, and public executions in Europe were still taking place less than 100 years ago (Bessel, 2015).

However, as we saw earlier in the discussion of Ellwood (1918), we can consider that really any form of social control (government, law, and morals) all reference back to the original and most powerful—religion. In his optimism, Ellwood envisioned a future where humanitarian concepts would take over theological ones within monotheistic religions to bring about a universal and humanitarian-based religion which would maintain social cohesion while avoiding the often retrogressive tendencies of religion in Western Civilization (1918, p. 348). Clearly, *Black Mirror* does not hold the same optimism.

To understand technology as a mechanism of social control or a moral en-

forcer, we must first understand religion in the same way. While many of the biblical references used throughout the following chapters are drawn from the Old Testament, questions regarding punishment, torture, and execution are still widely debated issues within Christianity today, as is the question of rehabilitation and reconciliation (Snyder, 2000; Durrant and Poppelwell, 2017; McConville, 2003). These themes seem to be interpreted more on an individual basis instead of a sweeping denominational one, though the Catholic Church has recently redefined their stance on the issue of the death penalty, which has gone back and forth since the mid-20th century (Holy See Press Office, 2018).

That being said, it is important to acknowledge the emphasis on the Old Testament writings within this part of the thesis, while acknowledging that many Christians believe they should be read in the context of the New Testament (as briefly discussed in Chapter 11, the notion of progressive revelation). Even with this consideration, as stated above, there seems to be no clear consensus on many issues surrounding punishment even when we reconsider the Old Testament read through the lens of the New Testament.

Writing about shame, social control, and criminal justice within *Black Mirror*, Joy (2019) considers a number of episodes which will be discussed in Part IV of the thesis. Although writing about the episode *Shut Up and Dance* (2016), his analysis is equally applicable:

> "From the opening episode of Black Mirror (2011-) in which a fictional British Prime Minister (Rory Kinnear) is coerced into having sex with a pig on national television, the anthology series has rarely shied away from presenting audiences with characters who are publicly shamed. In 'White Bear' (02.02), for example, Victoria Skillane (Lenora Crichlow) is paraded through the streets in a Perspex box as a punishment for her role in the kidnapping and murder of a child. In the series one-off Christmas special 'White Christmas' (02.07), retinal implants allow individuals to easily identify and subsequently ostracise Matt (Jon Hamm)—a voyeur who secretly records a sexual encounter between two strangers. [...] In these and several other episodes, creator Charlie Brooker and producer Annabel Jones exploit the generic conventions of science fiction, inviting audiences to contemplate a series of moral and ethical questions prompted by the use of shame and stigma as tools for social control and, in many cases, criminal justice" (p. 138).

The four episodes analyzed in Part IV all look at criminal behavior, or in one instance, behavior that goes against sworn duties (as is the case within *Men Against Fire*). The others all look at persecutory cases where heinous acts take

place (not small social improprieties like we saw in Part III with *Nosedive* or accidents as we saw in *Smithereens*). As with the episodes in Part II and Part III of this thesis, the episodes in Part IV encompass small details that bring their content closer to these Christian concepts than simple coincidence. These details, a mob member shouting “burn in hell” or the notion that *justice* on Christmas is particularly satisfying, highlight the minute details that could be used to justify the reading of these episodes as more than just coincidentally similar to Christian concepts. The following four chapters will consider the *Black Mirror* episodes: *White Bear* (2013) and its depiction of the theme park of justice and cyclical public punishment, *White Christmas* (2014) with a reading of the punishment in the episode as technological ostracism; *Crocodile* (2017) where the main character chooses self-preservation over good in the face of all-seeing technology; and *Men Against Fire* (2016) where never-ending torture is used to coerce a soldier into the continued killing of innocent people.

Chapter 12

PUBLIC PUNISHMENT IN *WHITE BEAR* (2013)

— [news coverage] The jury was not convinced by Skillane's story and neither was the judge, who labeled her a uniquely wicked and poisonous individual. "You were an enthusiastic spectator to Jemima's suffering. You actively reveled in her anguish" he said... adding her punishment would be proportionate and considered. By hanging himself in his cell, many believe Iain Rannoch evaded justice. The public mood is now focused on ensuring his accomplice can't do the same. Patrick Lacey, UKN.
— [wailing]
— Oh, don't start crying. Crocodile tears are making me sick!
— [audience] Murderer! Murderer!

White Bear[1] follows one day in the life of Victoria Skillane (Lenora Crichlow). Presumably after a failed suicide attempt, Victoria wakes up in a house she does not recognize, without any recollection of who she is, or any of the specifics of her life. However, she quickly realizes that she has found herself in a world of chaos and violence. She comes to discover that a radio signal transmitted through cellular phones has made a large portion of the population docile and only interested in recording the actions of others on their mobile devices. Most alarmingly however, those not affected by the radio signal have fallen into two different groups: those who are seizing the opportunity to take advantage of others (through torturing and killing), and those who do not wish to harm others but instead are preyed upon (it is suggested that they are more mentally vulnerable).

Throughout her attempt to flee the situation, Skillane witnesses horrific things, and is nearly murdered a number of times. Finally, she and her newfound guide,

[1] Episode directed by Carl Tibbets, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Channel 4 on February 18, 2013.

Jem (Tuppence Middleton), arrive at the radio tower Jem plans to burn down, and Skillane is forced to shoot at one of the attackers pursuing them. At this pivotal moment, in full theatrical revelation, the viewer (along with Skillane herself) discovers that everything in the episode up until that point has been a highly fabricated fiction—a daily punishment for Skillane's role in the murder of a small girl. Skillane is shown the details of the murder, along with the audience (both the viewers of the episode, and those of the spectacle itself). Finally, she is taken to be harassed publicly and then to have her memory erased—an event that is extremely painful and happens daily. During the credits we find out that her punishment is marketed and attended as a sort of theme park of justice—the White Bear Justice Park—, where the public can come to participate and witness Skillane's fate.[2]

Skillane's memory is erased every evening, and she is forced to live the same terrifying day over and over as punishment for her crimes. For most of each day, she doesn't know who she is, or even what she has done. In the episode they mention that Skillane's boyfriend "evaded justice" by killing himself—as detailed in the dialogue from the episode used as the opening of this chapter. Thus, death is not enough; instead what is desired is public punishment and public shaming—the lure of the stocks, pillories, and public executions. But alarmingly, we see that it does not matter whether she remembers committing the crime or whether she feels sorrow for what she has done when she discovers it—it is not about penance or rehabilitation, it is about punishment and retribution.

12.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *White Bear*

Many reviews of the episode focus, quite rightly, on the idea that the entire first part of the episode is a false reality, building up to the big reveal (Lambie, 2013; Parker, 2013). In his online review for *HuffPost*, Parker went so far as to describe the first 45 minutes as "basically the worst thing [Brooker has] ever written," adding "which, you come to realise, is the whole point." The hypnotized world we see at the start of the episode sets the stage for the real story, revealed in the last few minutes of the episode. Many academic authors also focused on the final reveal in *White Bear*, though from a number of distinct vantage points (including feminist, Baudrillardian, and Foulcaudian lenses).

Cirucci (2018) writes about *White Bear* in her discussion on gender roles and feminine performativity within Black Mirror. She considers Skillane's role as one of carrying the emotional burden though psychological torture as opposed to physical torture. She attributes this role as stemming from her femaleness as seen in society. Thus, posits Cirucci, technology in the episode forces Skillane to play

[2] *White Bear* refers to the episode itself, while White Bear Justice Park refers to the "amusement" park depicted in the episode.

this role, to perform the gendered assumption that emotion is women's work. She writes:

> "Interestingly, Iain committed suicide in his cell before his trial, escaping his punishment. Victoria, on the other hand, must not only be perpetually tortured, like Sisyphus, but she must also act as an archetype for performative notions of gendered labor" (White Bear, para. 3).

Cirucci's mention of perpetual torture is interesting, though might relate better to our discussions in the chapter on *Men Against Fire*. This element of perpetual torture is of course present in the episode, but the clear role of the spectacle and its public nature will instead be the focus of this chapter's reading of the episode.

When discussing *White Bear*, Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) consider the filming in the theme park by looking at Baudrillard theory. They believe Baudrillard would have seen the incessant filming as a reflection of the fact that the screen has replaced reality itself. As we know, the filming was not part of the people actually being mesmerized, but instead the constant filming depicts the archiving of a theme park-like experience, a day visitors do not want to forget.

Vacker and Espelie (2018) discuss *White Bear* and the scene in which Skillane is taken through the jeering crowds after it is revealed that they are in a park where she is being tortured. This scene, they note, makes use of oppressive lighting, which, as explained in other chapters of this thesis, reflects the terror that this light can symbolize, as opposed to light as a illuminating, clarifying symbol.

> "Later, in a vehicle reminiscent of the pope-mobile, Victoria is paraded around in a clear shell with bright white fluorescent lights beaming down on her. Meanwhile, jeering mobs toss tomatoes and other items at her, fully aglow. After her memory of the event is painfully erased, she unknowingly begins the scenario for a new set of visitors. Ultimately, Victoria is trapped and tortured under the relentless lights, sites of terror and torture as interactive entertainment, where Orwell meets Disney in what appears to be a theme park theocracy" (White Bear, para. 1).

This description of the vehicle as visually similar to a pope-mobile is an interesting one, and will be returned to later in this chapter when the scene is discussed in the context of public punishment.

Alleyne (2018), approaching *White Bear* through a Foulcaudian lense, asks questions about power, cruel and unusual punishment, and criminal justice. Focusing on the punishment of Skillane and the Justice Park itself, Alleyne explains:

> "The Park itself is a privatized space of hyper-mediated theatrical public performance in which groups of prison guards, like troops [sic] of actors at historical American sites, engage partially lobotomized convicts in elaborate armed charades designed to inflict the violence of the original crimes onto the bodies and into the minds of the convicted" (Unbearable Burden, para. 5).

Also focusing on the *White Bear* Justice Park, Scolari (2018) writes: "[W]hen pushed to extremes, an amusement park designed for family recreation could be transformed into a participatory and sadistic punishment center" (White Bear, para. 2).

Alleyne asks whether Skillane's punishment fits the crime. Furthermore, his text focuses on questions of race as well as gender, pointing out the actresses' father's work as a black rights activist in 1960s London. Of the show's creators he writes:

> "They ask us to interrogate the internal contradictions of a Western liberalism born of Enlightenment ideals which claims rehabilitation, recuperation, and a restorative humanism in theory and yet which readily reproduces exceptional spaces wherein colonial-era disciplinary practices and the racialized, gendered, and prejudicial ideologies linked to them still flourish" (Conclusion, para. 1).

Differences in treatment within the criminal justice system are not relegated to our past, nor are they simply possible futures, Alleyne argues. They are a reflection of our present, a present where "Black and Brown populations continue to be incarcerated in massive numbers, in which the courts of southern states continue to disproportionately deliver death sentences to racially marginalized convicts, and in which our elected leaders flirt with torture and police brutality with a wink and a nudge" (Conclusion, para. 1). These important questions on race and gender within criminal justice will not be specifically considered in this text, but the undertones of Christianity's continued influence on criminal justice law, as considered later in this chapter, brings with it the clear marginalization of the other.

Another discussion brought up by Alleyne (2018) is his consideration of the character Baxter (Michael Smiley): "This character, Baxter, is written as a middle-aged white male, a prison warden who oversees Victoria's public penance with the authority of a Bible-thumping proselytizer and a hint of artful mischief that would instill pride in the Marquis de Sade" (Neoliberal Vigilante (In)justice, para. 2). A few paragraphs later, he again considers Baxter using biblical language:

> "Baxter plays both potential savior and rescuer to Victoria in much of the narrative, only to turn around midway through the charade to become essentially her chief tormenter and final executioner. I argue 'executioner' here because clearly, after repeated cycles of torture (seventeen days and counting), Victoria's faculties could only lead to her final cognitive and also subjective death" (Neoliberal Vigilante (In)justice, para. 6).

Petrovic (2019) also focuses on the *White Bear* Justice Park and Baxter's role, reading the episode through Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek. Writing about the episode's critique of the prison industrial complex, the question of proportionality of the punishment, and public pleasure in watching Victoria suffer, Petrovic describes Baxter as "an immoral official who is sanctioned by the state, and operating as an agent of repression, to maintain his hold on power" (p. 76).

In their text on *White Bear*, Simpson and Lay (2020), much like Alleyne (2018), consider whether Skillane's punishment is justified, or if the punishment goes too far. They eventually determine that the perpetual punishment is not proportional to her part in the murder of Jemima Sykes. They consider the punishment from both Kantian and Hegelian moral perspectives, while later going on to consider briefly the question of whether the Victoria being punished is even the same one who committed the crime (and if psychological continuity theory can shed light on the question of just punishment). Finally, the authors consider the spectacle and its role in the choice of punishment in the episode—in other words, the enjoyment factor of it all. They decide that this seems to be the key element; yet, the fact that park goers enjoy inflicting torture on Skillane with the same indifference which Skillane herself was guilty of through her role in the murder, shows that, according to the authors, justice is not served, and worse, park goers become equally guilty.

12.2 "How do you like it now? How do you like it!": a reading of *White Bear*

While analyzing the specific details seen in *White Bear*, first we will look first at the Old Testament concept of justice, "an eye for an eye." Following on from this idea, we will look at comparisons between the public punishment in the White Bear Justice Park and colonial punishment on stocks and pillories, as well as Catholic ideas of public penance. Finally, we will look at how Christian ideas have played, and continue to play, a significant role within the formation of laws and notions of criminal justice today.

12.2.1 An eye for an eye, Old Testament justice

Many of the elements throughout the White Bear Justice Park mirror elements from Skillane and Rannoch's crime. The mindless mobs videotaping without intervening, the idea that the maniacal pursuers prey on the weak and vulnerable (as was Jemima, the young girl that the couple murdered), and the forest as a key location in the torture. The park designers clearly meant for justice to take on a retributive format, "an eye for an eye."

Alleyne (2018) as well as Simpson and Lay (2020) make comparisons to the biblical concept of an eye for an eye. Alleyne (2018) refers to "an eye for an eye" justice in the context of the spectators recording of Skillane: "In a purposefully ironic twist, these voyeurs eagerly video-record the events, zealously consuming Victoria's suffering and proving the society's preference for an Old Testament-styled Biblical law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, for a pound of Shakespearean flesh" (Internment and Lobotomy, para. 4). While Simpson and Lay (2020) make use of the comparison in the context of proportionality:

> "Retributive systems like Kant's and Hegel's also rely upon a principle of proportionality between crime and punishment, what the ancient Babylonian king Hammurabi called the lex talionis, or law (lex) of retaliation (talio). The most famous of these? 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' Today the legal system doesn't always follow this rule exactly; we don't punish rapists by raping them, for example. But generally we think that the severity of a just punishment must reflect, and certainly must not be in excess of, the severity of the original crime" (p. 52).

Looking at the Bible itself, these notions of retributive justice appear throughout the Old Testament. Furthermore, we see that this notion of justice is not about penance, but instead a warning to others that they will meet the same fate, should they break the law.

> "The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deuteronomy 19: 20-21, NIV).

> "Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury" (Leviticus 24: 19-20, NIV).

Then, this "eye for an eye" punishment structure, not meant as an opportunity for redemption, is instead meant to act as a form of public control, a warning to others. In the case of *White Bear*, it also acts as a means of perpetual torture in this life, presumably because it will not be carried out in the next, as religion teaches.[3] This detail is also supported by the notion that suicide is depicted as a means of evading justice within the episode.

A discussion of retributive justice would not be complete without a consideration of capital punishment, especially given that Skillane, as posited by Alleyne (2018), is likely to eventually die from the perpetual torture. The first book of the Bible lays the groundwork for the concepts of capital punishment. "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind" (Genesis 9:6, NIV). Later in the Old Testament, public punishment is considered just. "The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you" (Deuteronomy 17:7, NIV). It is also important to distinguish in this case, however, between death and punishment, as we see that in the imagined future in *White Bear*, mere death is not enough, and not the aim, even if it is an ultimate consequence. The aim is retribution and we know this because they consider Skillane's accomplice to have evaded justice through death. Further, we see that part of the test for what is to be viewed as an acceptable punishment is whether a judge—the final word on the matter—decides it:

> "When people have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. If the guilty person deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make them lie down and have them flogged in his presence with the number of lashes the crime deserves, but the judge must not impose more than forty lashes. If the guilty party is flogged more than that, your fellow Israelite will be degraded in your eyes" (Deuteronomy 25:1-3, NIV).

Later in the New Testament, we see that God grants authority to the state with regards to punishment:

> "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that

[3] *White Bear* might also be considered from the perspective of eternal suffering, because Skillane is being punished in the same way day after day. However, the theme park's voyeuristic feel seems more in keeping with the notion of "eye for an eye" justice and public punishment when we consider the history of Christianity. We will, however, consider the question of eternal suffering later in the chapter on *Men Against Fire*.

> exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:1-4, NIV).

We also see in Job 34:26-27: "He punishes them for their wickedness where everyone can see them, because they turned from following Him and had no regard for any of his ways" (NIV). Thus, we can see that the concept of public punishment and torture is not only an ugly pock on the history of humanity, but something condoned throughout the Bible itself. Though there is a movement towards viewing punishment as a means of rehabilitation, that has not always been the case.

Given that the culture depicted in the episode has a criminal justice system which seeks retributive justice, has created technology that allows for the cyclical punishment Victoria suffers, and has the institutional authority to carry it out, a theme park of justice somehow seems like a logical conclusion. Though Jesus called for turning the other cheek and loving one's enemies, he also suggests that those who do evil will rise to be condemned by his father (Matthew 5:38-48; John 5:29, NIV). If humans have become god-like through the use of technology (as detailed in Part I of this thesis) the role of god-like judge might also be one of those new powers, gained through technology and desired just as much as eternal life or omniscience.

12.2.2 Stocks and pillories

Convicted of murder, Skillane lives the same day over and over again in an amusement park created to carry out justice, yet because she does not remember the event itself, or even who she is, there is no ability for penance, as was often the aim of punishment when using the stocks or pillories. As Skillane is put on display for the sake of derision, bound to a chair and paraded through the streets, it is hard not to compare the practice to pillories or other forms of public punishment common to New England colonial life (Earle, 1896). Alleyne (2018) also makes the comparison between Skillane's punishment and colonial manifestations of justice referencing Foucault's work on surrounding the history of punishment:

> "How might Victoria's forms of punishment, given Foucault's attentions to histories and genealogies, reflect the reemergence of colonial

> and imperial histories in our own contemporary real world? Indeed, Western history is replete with examples of spaces in which public stonings, lynchings, shame-killings, witch-burnings, dungeon torture, public floggings, and dismemberment were very much the norm" (Alleyne, 2018, The Scales of Justice, para. 3).

Alleyne (2018) goes on to write that "[t]hrough spectacle, the punished may be inadvertently be [sic] transformed into martyrs" (Alleyne, 2018, Internment and Lobotomy, para 5). Likewise, Petrovic (2019) also describes Victoria's public march, and compares it to Christ's walk to the cross:

> "Alert viewers may note that Tibbetts positions Victoria in the vehicle, strapped in though she is, so that the bulbs that shine on her body all further commemorate and make of her a public spectacle; she becomes an icon onto which the public casts their contempt. In this, Victoria's punishment is analogous to Gospel accounts of Jesus's walk to the cross (Mark 15.16-25) while the public mocks her. Yet no salvation or resurrection awaits Victoria; instead, seen religiously, she is always awaking in Gethsemane and always walking to Golgotha" (p. 77).

The spectacle of Skillane's punishment is certainly visible, though she is unlikely to become a martyr in the eyes of her contemporaries, even if viewers of the episode are sympathetic to her unjust torture. We see her booed and jeered at, told to "burn in hell", all while restrained to a wooden chair (Figure 12.1. The comparison between the means of social control used by the Christian church throughout much if its history and the social control played out within the episode are startlingly clear: the wicked should be punished, and the righteous should play a role in the process. Evil should be "purged" and let it be a warning to others. While discussing the idea of torture within the episode, Annabel Jones said, "The focus is very much on how we bring people to justice and what outrages we can do if we feel we're morally justified" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 87).

Speaking of God's judgment and the just punishment for the wicked on earth, David writes in Psalm 58: 10-11, "The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked. Then people will say, 'Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth'" (NIV). This concept of the righteous dipping their feet in the blood of the wicked seems particularly apt for the concept of public punishment in *White Bear*, where the mob revels in the drama of the punishment—for the theatrics just as much as the *justice* of it, as we saw was also the case in the discussion of colonial life above.

Figure 12.1: Restrained to wooden chair - *White Bear* (2013)

This idea of public penance is something that Brooker considered, albeit from a satirical angle, during his time as a columnist for *The Guardian*. In 2007 he wrote a piece called "Whippersnapper TV" where he details a sarcastic idea for a 24-hour TV channel which would depict young offenders carrying out ridiculous forms of public penance—the piece was included in his book *The Hell of it All* (2009).

> "As part of his punishment, Ryan has to hand over his mobile phone, so the police can search through his address book and text all his friends, telling them what time to tune in. Let's say it's 4pm. As the clock strikes four, Ryan's friends flop down on the sofa, switch on the box, and this is what they see. Ryan is wearing nothing but a pair of bikini bottoms. 'Hello,' he says, reading slowly from the autocue. 'My name's Ryan Daniels and I stole a trolley.' Then the Thomas the Tank Engine theme music starts playing and Ryan has to dance to it. When the tune comes to an end, it instantly skips back to the beginning and Ryan has to start again. This sequence is repeated until he bursts into tears" (p. 8-9).

Just one part of the extensive torture-fest that Brooker describes, we can see how his ideas about televised public penance and humiliation relate to details within *White Bear* (Figure 12.2). At the end of the column, Brooker writes: "Come the end of his punishment, Ryan will never offend again and probably

won't even go outside again. Problem solved. What's more, we've all been entertained. Everybody wins" (p. 9). This tongue-in-cheek description of televised public torture hints at Brooker's feelings on the absurdity of this kind of punishment, and his disgust and bafflement at our amusement with it. The spectacle, clearly, becomes a reflection on the viewers just as much as it does the offenders.

Figure 12.2: Public penance as spectacle - *White Bear* (2013)

However, in her article "The value of public penance in the age of clerical abuse, mass incarceration and #MeToo," Tushnet (2019) offers a more generous view of historical Christian public penance explaining it as a way of atoning for sin, especially when looking further back in history to medieval Europe.[4] Tushnet describes public penance in the Middle Ages as an act of collective atonement—something that brought the community together in the recognition of the universality of sin.

> "[P]ublic penance offered medieval Christians a language for repentance, humility and reconciliation that was in many ways richer than our own. [...] Penances were probably performed publicly when sins were notorious. (This is an oversimplification of a complicated debate about the boundary between secret and public penance, but for

[4]The article was published in *America magazine*, which according to their website "was founded by the Society of Jesus in 1909 as a Catholic weekly review of faith and culture" (America: The Jesuit Review).

> the most part, the penance was public if one's sins had been public.) The sins atoned for in this way could be anything from usury to homicide, from rioting to throwing counterfeit coins to the poor on your wedding day. [...] Although there was a real and painful separation between those performing public penance-whose rituals enabled them to be received back into the church and, for some, welcomed to the Eucharistic table on Holy Thursday—everyone did penance. Everyone fasted, everyone humbled themselves in ashes, and everyone confessed their sins. In the age of public penance, Ash Wednesday offered ritual acknowledgment that sin is universal. But it was also a recognition that certain acts have harmed the community in a public way."

As we can see, ideas and depictions of public punishment and penance as the pure spectacle have evolved from an approach to public penance as an experience of forgiveness and acknowledgement of the harm done to the community. In the past, following the penance, sinners were allowed back into the community, forgiven for their crimes. However, this form of genuine forgiveness following acts of public penance could not be more distant from what we see today, and what we see depicted in *White Bear*. We will look at Tushnet's (2019) article again in the context of contemporary culture, about which she herself was writing, later in the following subsection.

12.2.3 Christian influence on criminal justice

In *White Bear*, the idea of divine justice is played out within the law through the use of technology as a form of public punishment. When Skillane is driven back to the house where she will once again begin her punishment the following day, mobs of spectators yell at her, throw things at the clear trailer she is transported in, and the whole event is part of the experience of the theme park—all sensationally led by the theme park employees. We hear people shouting "Murderer!" and "Burn in hell!"—a further detail supporting the idea that Brooker is himself troubled by these specters of Christianity, particularly in relation to notions of justice.

This religious element within criminal justice is something we have seen throughout the history of Christianity, however. M. Jones and Johnstone write, "The roots of Western civilization reach deep into antiquity, as do the problems of crime and punishment. [...] The vast treasury of the Bible provides a rich heritage of history, theology and philosophy that has had a persistent impact upon modern society" (2015, p. 15). The long and intertwined relationship between religion and criminal justice has roots that span history dating back to biblical Israel and continuing through today.

> “Of course, there is a moral dimension to the definition of crime.... It [religious belief] has been, and in many societies continues to be, the major source of ethical and behavioral rules. Not surprisingly, when legislators or judges participate in the lawmaking process, they are strongly influenced by their religious beliefs. Every rule or criminal law thus has a moral dimension derived in large measure from cultural views concerning theology” (M. Jones and Johnstone, 2011, p. 9).

Therefore, it is no large leap to suggest that the creation of technology meant to punish those who have committed crimes might also reflect a religious element or mirror biblical punishment, as it does in *White Bear*. As detailed in the previous two subsections, Skillane’s public and perpetual torture mirrors Old Testament notions of “eye for an eye” justice as well as historical examples of public punishment and penance.

Writing in the wake of both the #MeToo movement and countless scandals of clerical abuse within the Catholic Church, Tushnet (2019) asks questions surrounding punishment and reintegration pertinent to the conversation. She emphasizes the harsh nature that our notions of public penance have taken on in the dawn of the internet, in contrast to examples of public penance throughout the medieval world (as detailed in the last subsection).

> “[R]ecent stories [...] suggest public penance is neverending for people who have been convicted of crimes today, no matter what they do. [...] Last summer a man named Geoffrey Corbis was found dead behind the wheel of his car, parked on a New York City street, a week after he killed himself there. I hesitate to speculate about the reasons for anyone’s suicide. But Corbis had changed his name after finding it impossible to get a job under his birth name, Geoffrey Weglarz. In 2013, Mr. Weglarz threw his sandwich at a pregnant McDonald’s drive-through worker and was arrested for disorderly conduct. The story ‘went viral,’ with his name attached, and Mr. Weglarz became an avatar of entitled rage. He never found a path back from disgrace. On learning Mr. Weglarz’s story, the writer Seth A. Mandel noted, ‘Everything is pointless if there’s no way back’” (Tushnet, 2019).

Contrasting modern day realities to medieval public penance, Tushnet suggests that today’s world leaves little room for restoration, a key part in the practice of public penance throughout the medieval world.

> “Even when people have paid harsh prices for misdeeds, we have little concern for the human need for restoration. Everyone who works

> in criminal justice reform, prison abolition or 're-entry' services can report that even a short prison sentence carries lifelong consequences" (2019).

Thus, we can see that instead of truly reflecting Christian notions of justice into the modern justice system, we are often left with only the most persecutory components of historical concepts, instead living in a reality where lifelong consequences haunt any offender. We will return to some of these ideas again in the next chapter when we look at ostracism in White Christmas.

12.3 Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a relationship between Old Testament notions of retributive justice and colonial examples of public punishment. Though, as we saw, public penance has, at some points in history, served a much more restorative role that current examples do. However, the relationship between punishment and spectacle likely functions more as a deterrent to onlookers instead of promoting rehabilitation and restorative justice. This is especially true in the world we see in *White Bear*. Taken to the extreme, all possibility of rehabilitation is taken away from Victoria as she is not able to process or even remember her crimes. Though the means of the looped theatrical torture is not actually available today, we saw through a modern day example of a minor crime "gone viral" (the story of Geoffrey Weglarz, who threw a sandwich at a pregnant McDonalds worker) that perpetual suffering happens regardless. Contrasted with medieval Christian practices, we are much less forgiving in today's society, leaving little room to rebuild a life in ruins.

Other *Black Mirror* episodes that question concepts surrounding the role of public humiliation or judgment as social control might include *The National Anthem* (2011), *Shut Up and Dance* (2016), or even *Crocodile* (2017). However, *White Bear* is the most relevant for our discussion given the combination of retributive notions of justice, public punishment as spectacle, and its near mirroring of Christian punishment in early colonial America.

Chapter 13

OUTCAST AND CONDEMNED IN *WHITE CHRISTMAS* (2014)

— What does it mean, this register?
— It means you're blocked.
— By who?
— By everyone.

White Christmas[1] is the first of *Black Mirror*'s two portmanteaus, "several stories that spun off a central conceit" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 106).[2] The episode is made up of three stories within a larger narrative. Matt (Jon Hamm) and Joe (Rafe Spall) are sharing a Christmas meal together in the kitchen of the outpost where we are led to believe that the two have been working together for the last five years. They apparently have not spent much time together, and Matt suggests they get to know each other a bit better over a meal, to commiserate as to why they ended up there. The first story, an "icebreaker" as Matt calls it, shows Matt as a dating coach, in a situation that ends in tragedy. In *White Christmas*, the characters live in a world where everyone has Z-Eyes (a device that connects users with the internet directly through their field of vision). Matt used this technology to guide awkward dating hopefuls through small talk with women while he watches along, coaching their lines and offering advice. In this particular instance, things went wrong, and the woman his client, Harry, tries to pick up at a Christmas party kills him in a murder-suicide brought on by her delusions.

The second story, where Matt explains his actual job, shows him as a specialist who trains "cookies" to act as personal assistants. A cookie is a digital duplicate

[1]Episode directed by Carl Tibbets, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Channel 4 on December 16, 2014.

[2]The second portmanteau of the series being *Black Museum* (2017) which also explores a number of nested stories related to one another.

of a person; to make the copy a device is embedded just below the skin near the temple where it absorbs information and duplicates the consciousness of the individual. The technology in the episode is commercially used to essentially function like a perfect smart house/personal assistant. Your digital copy works making everything just the way you like it—and they would know how, they are a perfect copy of you. Matt's job is to convince or coerce these duplicates into playing the role they have been created for.

The third story, told by Joe, is of a failed relationship which ended in a digital block. The Z-Eyes that everyone in Matt and Joe's world uses have a function which allows users to block others with the push of a button. Once blocked, you appear to the blocker as a grey blur, and they appear the same to you; communication is impossible as sound is also blocked, coming out as muffled noise. Joe's ex-fiancée, Beth, who blocked him after he tried to convince her not to get an abortion, decided to keep the baby, but she also kept the block in place. After the child was born, the block extended to her as well, so Joe was never able to see his daughter. However, after Beth died in an accident, the block was lifted. Hoping to reunite with his daughter, Joe visits the girl and her grandfather at Christmas, bringing a small snow globe as a present. Once he sees the girl, however, he discovers that the child was not his, and that Beth had cheated on him with a mutual friend. Since she never told him the truth, he had always believed the child was his. In a fit of rage and anger, after being told to go away by Beth's father, Joe strikes him with the snow globe, killing him. After hiding for two days, Beth's daughter eventually went out for help, but got lost in a snowstorm and died of exposure to the cold.

We discover after Joe's story that Matt is actually assisting police in helping them to get a confession from Joe in return for avoiding a jail sentence for his part in the death of Harry, his dating coach client from the first story. Matt's specialty in cookie coercion makes him the perfect candidate to get an admission of guilt from Joe's cookie, created by police against his will. However, at the end of the episode, although police hold up their end of the deal—with no jail time—Matt gets registered as a sex offender, and with the Z-Eye technology this means that others only see him as an ominous red blob. He can no longer interact with anyone else, seeing others simply as "blocked" or greyed out blurs (Figure 13.1). Essentially, Matt is ostracized, marked in red as someone to stay away from, unable to communicate with the rest of society. The real Joe is awaiting trial in a jail cell, never having interacted with Matt at all, and the cookie version of Joe spends essentially eternity alone in the outpost—which has slowly turned into a replica of the scene of his crimes—the timescale on the cookie device having been sped up to 1000 years a minute by the police officers on the case.

Figure 13.1: Unable to communicate - *White Christmas* (2014)

13.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *White Christmas*

Popular opinions of *White Christmas* were resounding following its anticipated release, nearly two years after the second season aired on Channel 4. Writing for *The Guardian*, Wollaston (2014) praised the episode writing: "It's about slavery and morality and torture and separation and access to children as well as the technology, and what the technology does to us. It's about people, which is its real beauty. Along with all the razor-sharp wit, the nods and the winks, it manages to be a very human story." He opens his article writing about the blocking technology with an antidote about being blocked himself on Twitter. He explains the blocking technology aptly: "It's typical—and typically brilliant—*Black Mirror*. Brooker takes something that's already here, like blocking, and pushes it forward in time. Not too far though, more of a nudge than a shove, so that his dystopia isn't outrageous, it's plausible, and all the more terrifying for it" (2014).

Writing for *Den of Geek*, Louisa Mellor posited, "[i]f there's a lesson to *White Christmas*—a trio of *Black Mirror* stories about the consequences of loneliness and ostracisation—it would be to stop, think, and empathise. Even, or perhaps especially, with our public demons" (2014). She also comments on Brooker's history as a satirical writer saying "Years of dreaming up brilliantly obscene punishments for reality TV dunces and self-aggrandising celebrities in his Screen Burn TV column was solid preparation for Charlie Brooker to write *White Christmas*'

horrific final moments, which neatly pull taut a thread loosely woven throughout the episode."

While considering gender portrayal in *Black Mirror*, Cirucci (2018) looks at *White Christmas*, specifically focusing on the first cookie we see in the episode of a woman named Greta, and the domestic tasks she is forced to perform. Cirucci does not consider the other women of the episode, the partners of Matt and Joe, or even Jennifer (Natalia Tena), who killed Harry and herself—all of these characters might be more interesting characters to consider for their portrayals of stereotypical gender. Cookie Greta's torture and eventual acceptance of her role mirror in some ways the torture that Joe's cookie will later experience of essentially hell, albeit her experience is on a much shorter scale. Matt explains "See, the trick of it lay in breaking them without letting them snap completely, if you get me. Too much time in solitary and they'd just wig out. No use to anyone."

Writing about McLuhan's notion of reversal, Scolari (2018) focuses on the two technologies and their negative potentials within *White Christmas*. Specifically the Z-Eyes and their blocking function as well as the cookie. "[T]he episode shows the reversal potential of social media and artificial intelligence, in both cases limiting the freedom of users and transforming everyday life into a nightmare" (White Christmas, para. 1).

While discussing *Black Mirror* in the context of Baudrillard's theories, Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) write about *White Christmas* and our ability to become so enchanted by technology that we do not see its downsides until it is too late. In describing the punishments we see for the two main characters, they write:

> "Matt has been talking to Joe's cookie, helping the police get immunity from the charges for his involvement with Harry. The police torture Joe's cookie infinitely in the digital snow globe in which they had been all along, with *I Wish It Could Be Christmas Everyday* by Wizzard playing on a never-ending loop. Matt gets a free pass out of jail, but there is a final twist when he gets universally blocked" ("Hyperreality as the Spectator," para. 6).

Also writing about the universal block that Matt receives as punishment, Vacker and Espelie (2018) consider the scene to be the one moment throughout the series where cold media (which makes clear our insignificance in the context of the universe) is focused on, as opposed to hot media (through which humanity turns inward attempting to ignore our insignificance and distract through instant feedback loops).

> "In the conclusion to 'White Christmas,' Matt faces one of [the] most striking and profound fates in science fiction history, rivaling any-

> thing that's come from Hollywood. As penalty for Matt's social media voyeurism, the electronic 'Zed-Eyes' are activated to block anyone from seeing Matt or vice versa. With the electronic blockage, all Matt sees are outlines of others while others only see his outline—the equivalent of full absorption and utter disappearance. The electronic outlines are filled with pixelated white space spotted with dark specks, not unlike the static on television screens—the very static produced (in part) by the same background radiation confirming the expansion of the universe" ("Conclusion," para. 1).

This description of the scene, focusing on the absolute exclusion and disappearance of Matt, makes us aware of his complete ostracism from society. We will return to this point again in the analysis of this episode below.

Muller (2019) focuses on the treatment of the AI cookies throughout the episode, and the torture they endure of sped-up time as reflecting the torture of being blocked with the Z-Eye technology. She suggests, as many authors writing about *Black Mirror* have concluded, that the problem is not the technology itself but instead human cruelty which reflects our past just as much as *Black Mirror* suggests it will define our future. "There are high stakes in answering the question of exactly what distinguishes person from thing, since we traditionally view interactions between person and person or person and thing as warranting different kinds of ethical postures. And human history continues to unfold with tensions and conflicts revolving around the recognition (or not) of the personhood of others" (p. 96).

In their chapter, "*White Christmas* and Technological Restraining Orders: Are Digital Blocks Ethical?", Canca and Ihle (2020) consider the key issue in *White Christmas* to be the tension between the ethics of privacy and access to information in the episode. They look at both the cookie and the Z-Eye technologies and the issues they both bring to light in the way that they pit privacy and access to information against each other, a balance that is hard or impossible to find in the case of either technology. Later, they discuss the three ranges of blocking with the Z-Eye system we see throughout the episode: individual, individual and their offspring (with a court order), and society-wide. The consequences of each type of block brings about questions of proportionality of the punishment in relation to the crime. They also compare these practices to ones many see as acceptable today: "The digital blocks presented in *White Christmas* share similarities with our practices of ignoring, disengaging, issuing restraining orders, confining people to prison, and registering them in stigmatizing public registries" (p. 77). Later asking, "If we find ourselves intuitively concluding that digital blocks are wrong, we might want to think about why we find these other practices acceptable" (p. 78).

Gamez and Johnson (2020) write about *White Christmas* in their chapter considering cookies and consciousness transfer technology in *Black Mirror*. In their text, they take a deeper look at what it would really mean for code or something artificial to be considered conscious, whether it is possible, and what the ethical ramifications would be if it were. They conclude that artificial consciousness is unlikely given the current state of research, but they posit that if it were to ever become possible, it would likely follow the model that *Black Mirror* depicts, i.e. the duplication of a human brain as opposed to the creation of consciousness modeled on a brain. Likewise, they believe that the murky waters of questions regarding rights of duplicated consciousnesses would likely be a free for all, as depicted within the series:

> "If consciousness technology ever becomes mainstream, then all of the scenarios depicted in *Black Mirror* will likely come to pass. People will create copies of their consciousness and force them to manage their homes; they will create and torture copies of criminals' and colleagues' consciousnesses. Celebrities will sell toys containing copies of their consciousness; governments will interrogate consciousness copies in thousands of different ways until they finally break. There will be legislation. This legislation will be broken, by individuals and by governments" (p. 280).

Building on this conversation, Gardner and Sloane (2020) also comment on the cookie technology, asking if these doubles are really the original, and how this question could be approached from a number of theories on personality.

13.2 "You ever been blocked": a reading of *White Christmas*

While looking at *White Christmas*, this analysis will first consider the role of ostracism within the episode through the universal blocking we see at the end of the episode. The biblical conception of ostracism will then be considered in the context of modern day technological versions—both within the episode and in the world today. Following on from this discussion, the notions of free will and punishment will be discussed, particularly how a belief in free will makes punishing crime less anxiety-provoking, even though science is making clearer that we likely have much less free will than we would like to believe. For this reason, we will discuss Calvinistic viewpoints on free will and the criticisms of this viewpoint from a perspective of punishment.

13.2.1 Ostracism

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 5 we see Paul instruct the Church to cast out those who are amoral, writing: “Do not even eat with such people” and later, “God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked person from among you’” (1 Corinthians 5, NIV). This last expelling advice referring back to Deuteronomy, where the concept of purging the evil from the group is encouraged:

> “That prophet or dreamer must be put to death for inciting rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. That prophet or dreamer tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 13:5, NIV).

Elsewhere in Deuteronomy we see the same notion of purging, expelling, or casting out:

> “They shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death. You must purge the evil from among you. All Israel will hear of it and be afraid” (Deuteronomy 21:20-21, NIV).

Z-Eyes in *White Christmas* let people see their virtual connections through their field of vision, but it also means that those who are deemed criminals can be blocked from sight and sound, through technological ostracism, to help others keep a distance. At the end of the episode, Matt is even singled out as someone not just blocked, but outcast—his blur appears red to everyone who sees him (Figure 13.2). Earlier, while talking to Joe’s cookie, Matt himself makes clear the need to be seen, understood, and listened to in various contexts while recounting the first two stories of the episode: “People want to be noticed. They don’t like to be shut out. It makes them feel invisible.” And later, “Silence can be oppressive. You think weird shit in a vacuum, huh?” However, the most telling explanation comes when Matt and Potter first discuss the blocking mechanism itself: “You ever been blocked? [...] It drives you crazy. [...] Once they hit that button, that’s it, you’re locked out. End of conversation. You can’t hear or speak to them. They can’t hear or speak to you. Every time you look at them, there’s just this... anonymous shape.” This foreshadowing of his final, complete block from everyone, shows a glimpse at how he will feel; if a block from a single person drives you crazy, what will a societal level block feel like?

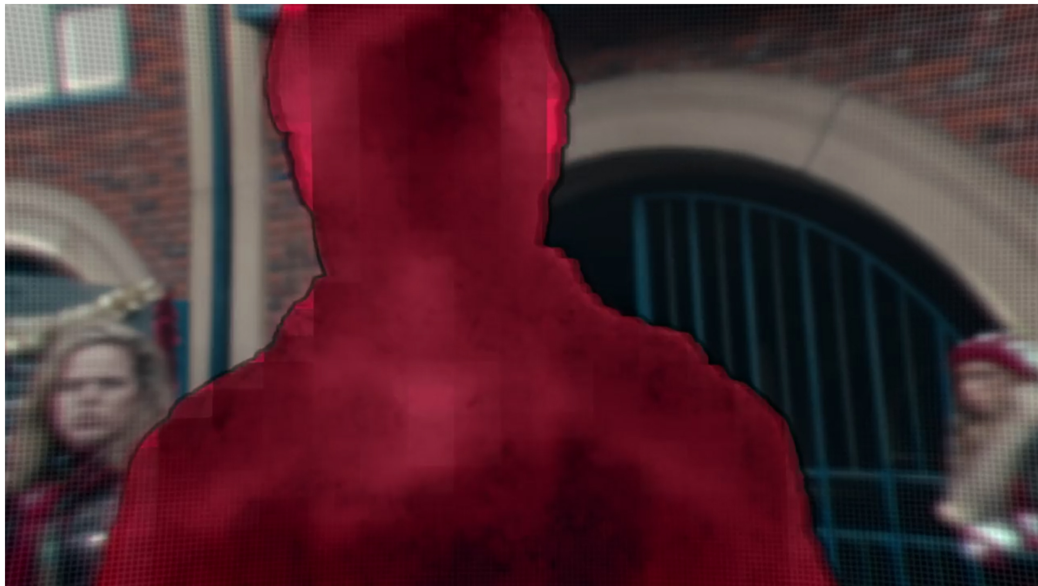

Figure 13.2: Blocked by everyone - *White Christmas* (2014)

This technology, while on the surface seems far-fetched, is reflected in contemporary culture and the criminal justice system today. In many places in the United States, sex offenders of all types are on public registries which often include their addresses. Likewise, they are prohibited from living in many places, particularly within certain distances of schools and playgrounds; this also includes sex offenders who committed crimes that had nothing to do with children (McCullagh, 2009).

More recently, some states within the United States have prohibited sex offenders from using social media as part of their parole conditions (McCullagh, 2009). Today, this is the equivalent of ostracism. No LinkedIn to look for jobs; not even any news websites because their comment features could be considered social media. More recently, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the complete prohibition of social media use is unconstitutional because it limits the freedom of speech of the individual. Similarly, the UK ruled such laws as an unreasonable intrusion on civil liberties (Liptak, 2017; Dalesio, 2017; Thomson, 2012). It is unclear the exact way the new US ruling will impact previous laws, but there is clearly public sentiment to push these individuals to the margins of society, one way or another.

Though writing about the episode *Shut Up and Dance* (2016), Joy (2019) writes about sex offenders and their treatment in a similar light:

> "Put simply, those stigmatised are seen to have less social value than others because of their perceived or imagined differences (Goffman,

> 1963). In society, being accused of a crime or being convicted of a criminal offence is one of the most stigmatising statuses that a person can possess (Westervelt & Cook, 2009). However, as Rose Ricciardelli and Dale Spencer (2018, p. 40) point out, beyond the label of 'prisoner' or 'exoffender', the 'most distressing stigma possible is that tied to the status of sex offender'. The ways in which these individuals experience both tangible and symbolic forms of stigma have been documented at length elsewhere (see Madden, 2008; Rickard, 2016), but to summarise, the most common collateral consequences reported by convicted sex offenders are housing restrictions and maintaining employment (Jennings, Zogba, & Tewksbury, 2012). Research has also shown that sex offenders are likely to experience symptoms of emotional distress such as depression and hopelessness (Levenson & Hern, 2007). In many cases, sex offender registration laws and other legislative acts have exacerbated the social and psychological problems encountered by convicts and, most importantly, have increased their likelihood of re-offending (Leon, 2011). However, such policies can be seen to reflect a more general perception that those who commit these types of crimes cannot be rehabilitated into society and deserve to suffer a punishment that is proportional to their actions (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). Stigma, then, appears to envelop any and all attempts at rehabilitation whether culturally (in terms of shared social values) or institutionally (in terms of the practices of those who administer criminal justice)" (p. 140).

Discussing the parallels between the isolation of the cookies in the episode to the power of the Z-Eye blocking technology, Muller (2019) explains:

> "When the cookie initially refuses to perform the functions for which she has been created— expressing personal preferences and enacting personal choices distinct from original programming, a hallmark of AGI[3]—Matt conditions her to conform by subjecting her to a simulation of accelerated weeks, then of months, of no input—effectively fostering the kind of blocking that he earlier had claimed would deeply trouble human beings, but with the added misery of having nothing to do to occupy the extended time. He tells Potter, 'Too much time in solitary and they'd just wig out,' demonstrating his awareness that the cookie will find this enforced seclusion and inaction similarly troubling" (p. 103).

[3] AGI here refers to artificial general intelligence. AGI is the hypothetical ability of machines to learn or understand in the same manner that humans do.

This subtle tie between the isolation often used to program the cookies, or as seen in the punishment of Joe's cookie just for the pleasure of it, with the psychological distress caused by the Z-Eye blocking is an interesting comparison. Thus, we see that both Potter's cookie and Matt receive essentially the same punishment, complete isolation and ostracism—though the ability to speed up time makes the cookie's punishment seemingly eternal while Matt's will just be a normal lifetime of punishment.[4] Muller (2019) again points to the connection of the two punishments and the vulnerability to exploitation that biological and cookie characters endure, with the law choosing to treat the cookie as conscious or not, to suit their desire—accepting the cookie's confession as testimony against the real Joe, but not accepting its personhood:

> "[T]he episode concludes with Matt blocked by everyone as legally instituted punishment for his crimes, and a Potter cookie lured into a confession that the original, organic Potter resists making. In 'White Christmas,' whether biology-based or code, whether readily understood as real or not, an entity's consciousness—the subjective experience of one's self—and the integrity of personhood—the agency to advance and protect one's own interests and well-being—prove vulnerable to disregard and exploitation by others" (p. 106).

Of the punishment for Matt in *White Christmas* Brooker said, "A bit like someone with a conviction on their record, which you'd see if you were Googling them to employ them. So it's a hellish representation of that going on in real time" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 121). We see, similarly to the chapter on White Bear, that both forms of punishment, public torture and ostracism, aided by new technology become within the grasp of humanity on a new level, on par with an all-powerful god.

13.2.2 Free will and neurons

In the debate on the concept of *free will*, Calvinists believe that for God to be all-knowing, he must know everything as it will happen, in a complete way. If this is the case, however, many argue that free will becomes an illusion at best, and that if all things are preordained, holding sinners accountable for their behavior is not in line with the notion of a loving God. How could he create a world where he has already decided what will happen, every action we will take, and yet still hold us responsible for those decisions and actions?

[4]This concept of eternal suffering will be considered in Chapter 15 through the discussion of *Men Against Fire* (2016) which considers the concept more concretely because of its use as a threat to social compliance.

> "We have now identified two versions of Calvinism that can be held with consistency if its defenders are clear on the following points. First, they must be explicit about which choices are determined. (Are all choices determined? Or is only the choice of salvation determined?) Second, they must acknowledge that if a choice is determined, it can be free only in the compatibilist sense: that is, the person who performed it could not do otherwise. One's freedom and responsibility for one's choice consists essentially in the fact that one willingly does what one has been determined to do. Third, they must recognize that the ultimate reason why anyone is finally damned is because of *God's sovereign choice not to save them* (emphasis added). God's sovereign prerogative, even in the case of beloved relatives and friends, may be to leave them in their sins to experience eternal misery. It's not for us to understand his sovereign will; we must only adore him" (Walls and Dongell, Molinist Calvinism, para. 5).

Proponents of Calvinism argue that God can be all-knowing in a definitive way, in which all things are preordained, while still not excluding the notion of free will. However, a perception of God as predetermining the damned and the elect does not seem to leave much real room for free will, not in any substantive way. Surprisingly, science is showing that free will might actually be an illusion after all.

> "The contemporary scientific image of human behavior is one of neurons firing, causing other neurons to fire, causing our thoughts and deeds, in an unbroken chain that stretches back to our birth and beyond. In principle, we are therefore completely predictable. If we could understand any individual's brain architecture and chemistry well enough, we could, in theory, predict that individual's response to any given stimulus with 100 percent accuracy" (Cave, 2016).

The question of free will seems to be an important one in *White Christmas*, especially with regards to the cookie technology, and the idea that given enough time, you can force the consciousness of someone to do anything—to become a slave to their original, or confess to a crime. Likewise, we see the use of the Z-Eyes, a technology linked to social media which, as we saw in chapter 7 when we considered the concept of surveillance capitalism, has the potential to change the way we behave and interact with the tangible world. Thus, the question of free will in such a world comes under scrutiny.

Numerous times throughout the episode, Matt and Joe acknowledge that the blocking technology enabled by the Z-Eyes can drive people crazy, and as we saw

in the subsection above, the coercion of cookies through isolation also has the potential to make them essentially useless, at least in the case of a home assistant. Thus, the collapsed sense of time enabled by the cookie technology does not really allow for free will in any real sense, because the cookie can be tortured into any behavior desired by the user.

13.2.3 Punishment and free will

Punishment is easier to justify when those doing the punishing believe that the offender had free will, and willingly chose to break the rules (Clark et al., 2017). In their article, "Making punishment palatable: Belief in free will alleviates punitive distress", Clark et al. found that both inside and outside of the lab setting, those doing the punishing found their task easier when they believed that the offender willingly chose their behavior, and they also felt less guilt afterwards. They determined "that free will beliefs help justify punitive impulses, thus alleviating the associated distress" (p. 194). We can see this concept playing out in the episode when the police decide to leave Joe's cookie on at 1000 years a minute overnight for Christmas, essentially leaving him in a purgatory for tens of thousands of years. Brooker described the choice as arbitrary, since the cookie device is abstract in the eyes of the police:

> "A lot of people ask why Potter deserves such torment. In a way, he did and he didn't. He's basically in hell—quite a lot of hell goes on in our stories—which is of his own accidental making. Part of the horror is that, to the police, this is a very abstract thing going on inside a device. For no real reason, the guy cranks it up to 1000 years a minute, just because why not?" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 121).

This description of Joe's punishment as hell is another small detail that lets us know Brooker is thinking about these connections between the use of technology within the justice system in *Black Mirror* alongside biblical notions of justice. Believing that Joe is responsible for his crimes, having made conscious decisions that led to the deaths of both Beth's father and daughter, the police believe his punishment is justified. He confessed to the crimes—at least his cookie did—and in addition, they do not necessarily believe the cookie to be a conscious being, just a duplicate. Thus, his torture is doubly justified; triply if you throw in the fact that it is Christmas.

— [police officer 1] Just changing the time settings. Cranked him up to 1000 years a minute. There's a proper sentence. Or do you want me to switch him off?
— [police officer 2] No. Leave him on for Christmas.

Somehow, this sense of divine justice is considered even more satisfying on Christmas, as we can see from the second officer's response. The Bible suggests not only that one is responsible for their wickedness, but that that wickedness will be charged against them: "The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them" (Ezekiel 18:20, NIV). When we see Joe's confession, he asks for forgiveness from God, but in the end his petition for absolution is ignored, and he is left alone to live in his guilt. After getting the confession needed for his own freedom, Matt dismisses Joe immediately in celebration of his victory over the cookie:

— [Joe] It was Christmas Eve, so she just, she just stayed hidden. She didn't move. Then on Boxing Day she realised that no one was going to help. Then she, um, gave her grandad a present that she'd made. And she went out to go and get help.
— [Matt] How far did she get?
— [Joe] May God forgive me. God forgive me.
— [Matt] So you confess? Joe? Just say it. Just let it out.
— [Joe] I confess. I confess. [whimpering]
— [Matt] Whoo! I knew I could do it. Boom! I told you I'd get it. All right, I'm coming out.

Thus, we see that Matt is also unwilling to acknowledge the potential personhood of Joe's cookie, and he clearly sees the potential punishment of the cookie as unsubstantial, as we saw from his discussion of torturing the cookies used as personal assistants. Ironically, as we saw at the start of this analysis his own punishment mirrors the isolation of the cookie's, and the police clearly also see Matt's punishment as justified. Thus, Matt, unwilling to recognize the lack of free will in others, is judged and punished by his own standards. The song, "I wish it could be Christmas every day" plays both at the beginning and end of the episode within the simulated world where Joe's cookie and Matt share their meal and their confessions. Presumably, aside from a sentence of 1000 years a minute, Joe's cookie will also be forced to listen to the song on repeat over a radio that cannot be broken and never stops. Stuck in a perpetual nightmare, Joe's duplicate is heard screaming as the episode finishes.

13.3 Conclusion

As outlined in the analysis above, the punishment of ostracism is central to the story of *White Christmas*, mirroring the biblical notion and contemporary pun-

ishments we see today for criminals and ex-convicts. However, the question of free will, as seen in the discussion of sped-up time forcing the compliance of cookies and scientific research surrounding free will, makes an argument against these types of ostracism. Finally, a belief in free will makes punishment easier to stomach, even if belief structures or science might indicate that free will is mostly illusory. Thus, the willful choice to believe in free will in order to justify punishment is clearly hypocritical, as seen in Matt's own behavior throughout the episode.

Other episodes that reflect this idea of being socially ostracized, at least from a certain vantage point, might include *Shut Up and Dance* (2016) or *Nosedive* (2016), though *White Christmas* has the most concrete use of the concept throughout the series. Likewise, its consideration of the role of belief in free will, and its demonstration of the lack of such free will, especially in the case of the cookie, gives it a compelling role in a discussion of the intersection of Christian concepts and technology within *Black Mirror*.

Chapter 14

THE EVIL AND THE GOOD IN *CROCODILE* (2017)

— You'll open up God knows what, you'll just rake it all up.
— I can't live with it, Mia.
— There's things they can do. 'Cause they can trace it back. They can trace it. They'll find the body, they'll find us.
— They won't find us.
— Yes, they will, then we're fucked.
— Look, when I quit alcohol, they told me to make amends with anyone I've ever hurt. Who have I hurt more than her?
— Also say you're not supposed to hurt anyone else. What about me?
— What about her?
— No, no, no.

Crocodile[1] (2017) tells the story of Mia (Andrea Riseborough) and her murderous spiral, each time killing to cover up the violence that came before it. The episode starts with Mia and her boyfriend at the time, Rob (Andrew Gower) at a rave or club, dancing and doing drugs. While they are driving home during the early morning hours after their night out, Rob is distracted while singing and accidentally hits a cyclist with his car. Deciding that he will be held liable, since he is certain he still has drugs in his system, Rob convinces Mia to help him dispose of the body. Years later, we see Mia as a successful architect, having put the past behind her. During a business trip, Rob meets up with Mia in her hotel room and tries to convince her that the two should write an anonymous letter to the authorities, so that the cyclist's wife will finally know what happened to her husband, who, according to a recent news clipping Rob has found, has never given up hope

[1] Episode directed by John Hillcoat, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on December 29, 2017.

on her husband coming home. Out of desperation to save the life she has built for herself, Mia kills Rob and disposes of his body.

Moments after the murder, Mia witnesses a road accident outside of her hotel window. The insurance investigator on the case Shazia (Kiran Sonia Sawar) tracks Mia down to get her witness statement. Unluckily for Shazia, Mia accidentally remembers Rob's murder and the initial hit and run during a session on the Recaller, a machine that can make memories into video and audio to be used in court in lieu of witness statements. Even though Shazia promises to delete the footage and never speak of what she saw, Mia is unwilling to take the chance, and instead kills Shazia after torturing her to find out who else might know that she was looking for Mia. Determined to take care of all loose ends, Mia goes to Shazia's house and kills her husband, since he knew she was going to get a statement from Mia. As she is about to leave the house, Shazia's baby cries out and presumably sees Mia's face. We next see Mia at her own son's school recital, intercut with police investigators at Shazia's house. We discover through their conversation that Mia decided to kill the baby as well, since presumably the Recaller machine can also be used on non-verbal infants. What Mia did not know is that that baby was blind, and would not have been able to generate images of her through the machine. Unfortunately for Mia, the child did have a pet hamster who witnessed everything that transpired, and can give testimony via the Recaller. The last scene shows Mia crying in the audience of her son's show while police enter in the back waiting to arrest her (Figure 14.1).

Figure 14.1: Closing scene - *Crocodile* (2017)

14.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Crocodile*

Since *Crocodile* is part of season four of *Black Mirror*, less has been written about it academically than some of the other episodes in this thesis. However, much has been said about it in popular sources, and the two academic texts on the episode will greatly inform the analysis in the next section, since both authors consider *Crocodile* from angles in line with this investigation. In an episode review for *The Atlantic*, Sims (2017) explained the Recaller this way:

> "In 'Crocodile,' the new tech is a sort of memory reader, a receiver that someone can pop onto your forehead to visualize what's going on in your noggin on a dinky little television. It isn't exact, and it involves triggering your recollections via specific sensations (like sounds or smells), but it's a way to reconstruct a crime scene by consulting the viewpoints of every possible witness" (2017).

However, Sims found the episode unfulfilling and instead viewed it as nihilistic and unnecessarily depressing. Likewise, he found the main character, Mia, to be a "rampaging monster" and implausible. Ultimately, though, Sims posits that the episode might have something to say about crime:

> "Perhaps Brooker is trying to suggest that intense surveillance creates crime as much as it stops it. That's an argument I'd be happy to hear more about, but it would need to be centered on a character whose pathology makes more sense than Mia's. The lead of 'Crocodile' is too nakedly evil, too lacking in redeeming features, to make that idea remotely compelling" (2017).

Larson (2019), as briefly discussed in Chapter 1, considers *Crocodile* for its portrayal not of technology usurping religion in its depiction of omniscience, but instead for their common themes of truth-seeking. She concludes that the quest for sovereign truth in the episode, and in the series as a whole, reflects the importance of such truth and depicts technology as simply another method of finding it. Though drawing on philosophical conceptions of truth instead of religious ones, Larson highlights Shazia as a character of faith in the series, and posits that her portrayal as such is not coincidental. Her role as a truth seeker via her job an insurance investigator is likened to "a conduit through which truth is revealed" (p. 227). Larson's text will be drawn upon again in the analysis section below.

In her chapter "*Crocodile* and the Ethics of Self Preservation: How Far is Too Far?" (2020), Doll considers Mia's actions throughout the episode and asks whether her self-preservation can be justified under any philosophical theory of moral behavior. It seems clear from the beginning that the behavior in the episode

is morally unjustifiable, but the discussion of the philosophical theories brings up some interesting points. However, Doll seems to simply conclude that Mia's story is a cautionary tale in moral behavior, while largely ignoring the science fiction elements of the story (specifically the technology that allows one's memories to be made visual for others to see). We will look at this technology in further detail and consider its crucial role in the narrative of *Crocodile* later in this chapter. It seems that Doll's discussion of whether self-preservation justifies Mia's acts fills in some gaps as to the shortcomings of the episode highlighted by Sims above, whose idea of surveillance culture as being the root of Mia's spiral will be considered in the analysis below.

14.2 "It's like confession, it's like Catholic confession": a reading of *Crocodile*

The story we see in *Crocodile* touches on a number of issues related to privacy, surveillance, self-incrimination, and the notion of public interest in regards to uses of emerging technology. These themes will be explored in the following subsections, first through the concept of an all-seeing God mirrored by the power given to governments and companies through the technology of the Recaller—a tool which can act as a witness to events long past. The following subsections will look at surveillance culture as it relates to the specifics of the episode, and debates around privacy vs. public interest especially in the context of horrific criminal acts.

14.2.1 God sees everything

The God of the Christian Bible is all-seeing and all-knowing. Everything done, even in the most private of settings is seen by him. "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Proverbs 15:3, NIV). Unlike the technology we saw in *The Entire History of You*—where users had the implanted Grain technology which recorded their experiences in an archival format—the technology we see in *Crocodile* is able to render memories tangible without any such implant. Likewise, the culture depicted is one where the law mandates cooperation. Thus, one can become a witness against oneself for acts committed long before the technology even existed. As Rob says to Mia while trying to convince her that they need to give the widow of the cyclist peace:

— [Mia] We said that we'd put it out of our minds. Weren't we just gonna try and keep it out?
— [Rob] I can't. I'm sorry.

— [Mia] It was a long time ago.
— [Rob] Well, in here, it's now.
— [Mia] Yeah, I know.

"In here, it's now." This idea means that with the technology of the episode, our own eyes, and the eyes of others, essentially become the all-seeing eyes of God in *Crocodile*. As was considered in Chapter 6, Blackwell's (2018) discussion of *The Entire History of You* sheds light on the notion of technology enacting an all-seeing God:

> "[T]he episode reflects a kind of surveillance that is less like Bentham's panoptic prison and more like the eyes of an omniscient and omnipresent God. Under such all-encompassing supervision, even the seemingly faithful follower, fully cognizant of God's attentive gaze, still sins. The Christian Bible itself acknowledges the inevitability of this fate, claiming 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God'" (Blackwell, 2018, The Role of Watched, para. 2).

This idea of the inevitability of sin, even in context of an all-seeing God, is an interesting one when we consider *Crocodile*. Especially since the "original sin" of the episode was the car accident where Mia herself was first a witness, and then an accomplice to the coverup—not an active participant in the death of the cyclist. Instead of confessing to her minor role in the accident, she is unable to put the comfortable life she has built for herself at risk, instead choosing to unravel further and further as she attempts to cover her tracks, losing any hope of returning to her normal life. This is reflected by the song the children sing at her son's school performance: "You could have been anything that you wanted to be. And it's not too late to change. [...] We could have been anything that we wanted to be. Yes, that decision was ours. It's been decided. [...] You know you're gonna be remembered for the things that you say and do" (Paul Williams, "You Give a Little Love"). This tension between the open possibility of who one could become is contrasted with the idea that our decisions determine that outcome. The question of whether it was too late to change in Mia's case seems unclear; at some point she could have changed her trajectory, but she clearly chose not to. Finally, this idea that you will be remembered for the things you say and do reflects the notion that our acts will be judged, if not by God then by those who remember us.

God sees all things, and thus comes to pass judgement on all sinful behavior. "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, NIV). This view of an all-seeing judge translates to

the world of technology in *Black Mirror* when we cannot run from the truth of the past. Thus, there is no hiding from God, much like there is no hiding from ourselves in *Crocodile*—our own memories come to act as a record against our evil deeds, "including every hidden thing."

Figure 14.2: Shazia as a seeker of truth - *Crocodile* (2017)

Larson's (2019) extensive analysis of Shazia's role in the episode as a seeker of truth also points to a depiction of the technology as an extension of religious notions of truth (Figure 14.2):

> "I have suggested that it is no accident that Shazia is a representation of her faith, and that her work with the Recaller is an extension of the faithful's search for truth and goodness. Not only does Shazia's dress and prayer recitation expose her commitment to her faith; she also exhibits a demeanor that would be expected from a pious devotee of her religion. [...] As Shazia peers into the Recaller, the camera looks up at her face, as if gazing up at a heavenly body. Shazia as the truth-seeker and pursuer of the 'good' is a testament to *Black Mirror*'s reverence for her faith. Murdoch (1971) explains that 'Religion normally emphasizes states of mind as well as actions, and regards states of mind as the genetic background of action: pureness of heart, meekness of spirit. Religion provides devices for the purification of states of mind.' Shazia's religion, therefore, is less prescriptive of the Muslim faith— there is no suggestion that the episode argues for the supremacy of one form of religious practice over another. Rather, the religious symbolism embedded in the character of Shazia points to an affirmation that those states of mind which religious practice

> promotes—purity and meekness—are essential to the pursuit of truth and the acquisition of the good. In the hands of Shazia, therefore, the Recaller's ability to eliminate ambiguity and to reveal an objective truth through exposing recorded memories is less a usurpation of divine omniscience, and more a testament to the sovereignty of truth. Shazia is the conduit through which truth is revealed, and her devotion to the 'good' is upheld as righteous when compared to Mia's attempts to conceal truth for self-preservation" (p. 227).

Larson discusses another moment of the episode, just before Mia murders Shazia. She writes in detail about the prayer that Shazia recites just before her death, noting that it is not the typical prayer said before death by those of the Muslim faith:

> "Whether morality is viewed as a developmental process, an evolutionary inheritance, or a social construct, moral psychologists tend to reject the idea that a sovereign 'good' exists beyond human mechanisms. Yet *Black Mirror*, and specifically the 'Crocodile' episode, seems to question this relativism by suggesting that there is something beyond human agency that governs the consequences of the characters' actions. And that something—which I am calling the 'good' or the 'truth'—is discovered as the plot unfolds. Shazia's prayer, 'We belong to God and to Him we shall return,' is particularly intriguing because it is not the prayer that is traditionally recited by a Muslim at the time of death. Whenever possible, a dying Muslim is expected to recite the declaration of faith and statement of faraj—two much longer prayers which reaffirm the individual's belief in God and the prophet Mohammed. Shazia's death scene is not rushed; Mia takes time to converse with Shazia, and she places a hand tenderly on Shazia's head (or, rather, upon her headscarf) as she waits for Shazia to close her eyes for the death blow. It seems that Shazia would have had ample time to pray the declaration of faith and statement of faraj, and Mia would have allowed her to do so. The prayer that Shazia utters, however, is traditionally prayed by survivors at the time of another's death. It is possible that Shazia felt rushed despite Mia's dawdling, and it is also possible that Shazia speaks this prayer for her husband, whom she understands will be the next to die. It is also likely, however, that this prayer is a warning for Mia; if 'we belong to God and to Him we shall return,' then Mia also is bound by a sovereign entity that will ultimately call her to account for her crimes" (p. 220-221).

As Larson's depiction of Shazia concludes, we see that her character is the opposite of Mia in many regards. Shazia seeks truth, and Mia seeks to cover up the truth. Shazia believes in consequences for our actions (we know this from her depiction as a person of faith), while Mia seeks to avoid facing consequences. Yet, we see that Shazia dies, and Mia lives. However, this victory over truth is short lived, since Mia will ultimately be held to account for all of her actions.

Finally, Shazia's blind infant represents a sort of innocence, much like Mia's own child and the song he sings at his performance. Shazia's son is unable to stand witness to good and evil in a literal sense in the episode, yet he is sacrificed along with the others in Mia's attempt at self-preservation. Throughout the New Testament, Christ gives the gift of sight to many people who were previously blind, and the concept of blindness is often used to as a metaphor for those who were spiritually lost (Luke 18:35; John 9:1-12; John 9:35-41; Revelation 3:17-20). We might see Mia's choice to kill the blind baby as a symbolic act of becoming blind herself—committing an act so heinous that she cannot go back. "We could have been anything that we wanted to be. Yes, that decision was ours. It's been decided" as her son sings to her while onstage just after she commits the final murders.

14.2.2 Surveillance culture

Once again, in *Crocodile*, we return to the notion of surveillance culture. As we saw in the other two sections, the range of impact that surveillance culture has within *Black Mirror* is significant. There are potentially positive ramifications in the form of surveillance capitalism's ability to help us determine what we really want, with companies today gathering so much information on us that they can build accurate predictive models of our behavior (as discussed in relation to *Hang the DJ*). Likewise, it can have unwanted effects on our behavior, pushing us to obsession (as seen in *Smithereens*), but *Crocodile* deals with just the situation that proponents of surveillance culture point to when discussing its necessity—the discovery of illegal behavior and the subsequent capture of individuals carrying out these acts. Interestingly, we see a shift in the episode from monitoring behavior while *on* technology to a new technology that can monitor experiences even when normal surveillance is rendered impossible. The eyes of the individual become the eyes of CCTV, or the all-seeing eye of God.

In a draft statement on encryption and security, the Council of the European Union urged tech companies to allow for back-door access to encrypted user data for the sake of public safety: "law enforcement is increasingly dependent on access to electronic evidence to fight effectively terrorism, organised crime, child sexual abuse, particularly its online aspects or any cyber-enabled crime and bring criminals to justice" (p. 3). They go on to argue that technology companies and

government agencies should work together, claiming that fundamental rights will be protected, but that technical solutions are necessary (i.e. a backdoor for government access):

> "Moving forward, the European Union strives to establish an active discussion with the technology industry to ensure the continued implementation and use of strong encryption technology. Law enforcement and judicial authorities must be able to access data in a lawful and targeted manner, in full respect of fundamental rights and data protection regime, while upholding cybersecurity. Technical solutions for gaining access to encrypted data must match the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality" (p. 4).

This push towards furthering the reach of government surveillance is often accompanied by arguments of bringing criminals to justice, actually just the sort of murderous behavior we see in *Crocodile*. However, we see all too often that criminal behavior is in the eye of the beholder and governments have tagged whistleblowers or cyber activists as criminals or government enemies, as seen in the cases of Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, and Reality Winner (Macaskill and Dance, 2013; Stack et al., 2019; Holpuch, 2018).

The question of privacy versus public interest is one that has plagued debates around technology in particular, especially since the dawn of the internet and governments' claims that online behavior should be monitored, but it is also a debate that surrounds journalists and the free press. In a column for *The Guardian* later published in *I Can Make You Hate* (2012), Brooker himself compared the press to an all-seeing God in a less than flattering comparison:

> "A few weeks ago, Murdoch, or rather the more savage tendencies of the press as a whole, represented God. Fear of God isn't always a bad thing in itself, if it keeps you on the straight and narrow—but politicians behaved like medieval villagers who didn't just believe in Him, but quaked at the mere suggestion of a glimmer of a whisper of His name. You must never anger God. God wields immense power. God can hear everything you say. You must worship God, and please Him, or He will destroy you. For God controls the sun, which may shine upon you, or singe you to a Kinnock. Soon he will control the entire sky. Furthermore, like all mere humans, you are weak. And God knows you have sinned. Chances are he even has long-lens photographs to prove it. But even as he chooses to smite you, God is merciful. You can do this the easy way or the hard way. Confess your sins in an exclusive double-page interview, or face the torments of hell. Have you seen what happens in hell? It isn't pretty" (p. 267).

This is a further indication that Brooker is thinking about these comparisons to religion, although in this context, not specifically in relation to technology. However, as we have seen in other chapters, his commentary, both about *Black Mirror* and not, holds clues to his opinions, and the specter that looms over the way he interprets culture.

14.2.3 Privacy and public interest

Crocodile takes the question of privacy and public interest one step further—do we have a right to privacy when it comes to our memories, our non-digital worlds? The world we see in *Crocodile* seems to say, "sure, but not really." The question of public interest and privacy is brought up within the episode itself when Mia is first being interviewed as a witness for the pizza delivery accident. Shazia, seeking witness statements as an insurance investor, tells Mia it is a legal requirement to give a statement if you have witnessed an accident:

— [Shazia] I don't wanna sound heavy but it's a legal requirement since last year.
— [Mia] It's a legal requirement?
— [Shazia] Well, if you've witnessed an incident, yes. I have to notify the police when people refuse, and when they get involved, it just drags everything out, so...
— [Mia clears throat] Come in.
— [Shazia sighs] Thank you.

This witness statement, however, must be done using the Recaller machine, to help with detail accuracy. Thinking that Mia is ashamed about the porn she had on in her hotel room the night of the accident, Shazia tries to reassure her that her privacy will be respected. The porn film was actually part of Mia's alibi to prove she stayed in her room all night, while she actually disposed of Rob's body at a nearby construction site, presumably of one of her architectural projects. Mia, worried she will recall the full events of the night of the accident is hesitant about using the Recaller machine:

— [Mia] Well, I can just tell you what happened. I can remember. The van hit the guy, and he fell over, and then people came to help.
— [Shazia] How fast was it going though, the delivery vehicle? See, I just need a sense of that. It's sometimes hard to articulate what your mind's eye's seen, but capturing your impression of what you saw is really useful.
— [Mia] OK, but I've got...
— [Shazia] And that's all I'm interested in. You can read the terms here if you like. All the legal stuff is in there. Look, I don't care what you might've been doing in the hotel room in your own time. I'm not gonna ask you anything about that. Won't go there.

— [Mia] OK.
— [Shazia] Private stuff is private stuff.

However, we actually know that Shazia is required by law to report any crime that she discovers during her use of the Recaller, as she explains to another reluctant witness, worried about an embarrassing memory: “Look, your memories will be sealed and private. Unless they indicate you’re harming yourself or another person.”

So, when Shazia later tells Mia, in a desperate attempt to save her life, that the Recaller session is “like confession, it’s like Catholic confession. It’ll be illegal for me to say anything. Totally illegal, even if I wanted to!” we know that she is lying, and Mia knows it too. As is common knowledge, the Catholic sacrament of confession is protected by the seal of the confession—a priest’s sworn duty to keep the information divulged in a session of confession secret. This notion of the seal of concession is something that was held up in many courts throughout the world up until very recently (Davey, 2017; Matranga, 2019; Wallace, 2019). Over the last few years there has been a push to treat the confession session as something similar to a therapy session, which is private except in the case of potential or previous harm directed at oneself or others.

Thus, we finally understand the desperation of Mia’s initial interaction with Rob. Even if he sent an anonymous letter, he would be tracked down, and if they found Rob, they would find Mia too. Thus, the knowledge that nothing is truly private actually pushes Mia to the depths of her murderous spiral. Unlike God’s all-seeing power, technology’s power in the episode has some small loopholes, and Mia’s desperate attempt to preserve the life she built for herself pushed her to murder in order to preserve her privacy—an inevitably futile goal, as we saw from the conclusion of the episode.

14.3 Conclusion

As we saw in *Crocodile*, Mia’s murder spiral exposes not only questions of whether surveillance can cause more crime—as suggested by Sims (2017)—but also whether the Recaller somehow enables government or companies using it to act as all-seeing gods, mirroring the the Christian God’s role of “keeping watch on the wicked and the good” (Proverbs 15:3, NIV). In many regards, Shazia and Mia are portrayed as opposites in regards to their relationship to truth—Shazia hoping to uncover it, and Mia hoping to obscure it. Mia’s murder of Shazia, however, does not signify the death of truth, however, it only demonstrates the futility in attempting to do so. Mia’s focus on self-preservation pushes her beyond the brink, to an unrecognizable version of herself.

The technology of the episode extends even further than the already wide range of ways that law enforcement is able to intrude into our privacy. As seen in the discussion in the second subsection, it is clear that governments are forever pushing the goal posts of where privacy begins, always arguing that crime prevention justifies dwindling privacy. Finally, the comparison within the episode between the session on the Recaller and the Catholic confession is more apt than it first appears. While Shazia uses it to her defense, Mia knows she is lying. Interestingly, Shazia was not lying at all, since the question of even the sacrament of Catholic confession has come under legal scrutiny as territory the government wants access to.

Clearly, the last two episodes of Part II of this thesis, *The Entire History of You* and *Hang the DJ* relate to this chapter's discussion of technology as all-seeing—though in the case of these two episodes the discussion was framed as one of *all-knowing* as opposed to the optical idea of all-seeing. Episodes that touch on the debate of privacy versus public interest include *Smithereens* (2017) where we see collaboration between government agencies and a private company in an attempt to solve crime. Likewise, the question of privacy versus safety is clearly a core theme in *Arkangel* (2017) where a mother installs something like the Grain technology in her daughter without her consent, and she continues to use it long after she has told her daughter she would cease doing so. As seen in the last chapter on *White Christmas*, the question of privacy in the face of law enforcement is clearly an issue in the interrogation of a digital duplicate which can act as a witness against the original. The final episode discussed in Part IV of this thesis, in the following chapter, also touches on privacy and government overreach though in the specific instance of a soldier and the alternation of what he sees and hears, a different type of intrusion.

Chapter 15

ETERNAL SUFFERING IN *MEN AGAINST FIRE* (2016)

— Is this what you want? On a loop? In a cell all alone?
— [whimpers]
— We can make that go away.

Seeing the world through the technological enhancements of their military implants, called MASS, the main characters in *Men Against Fire*[1] are a unit of American soldiers deployed overseas as part of a worldwide attempt to eradicate a new threat. "Roaches" (short for cockroaches), are terrifying screeching monsters with waxy skin and pointed teeth. The story follows a soldier named Koinange (Malachi Kirby), nicknamed Stripe—a new recruit on his first time out in the field hunting roaches. His unit finds that a group of roaches has recently passed through a small village and ravaged it for food. They appear to be hiding out in a nearby farmhouse, harbored by an old religious man, Parn Heidekker (Francis Magee) who sees all life as worth protecting. During the search of his house, we first see the monstrous roaches hiding in the attic, where Stripe kills two of them. While Koinage is upstairs killing the roaches, his squad leader Medina (Sarah Snook) lectures the man harboring the roaches, explaining that the problem is not one of empathy but of logistics: "The sickness they're carrying. That doesn't care about the sanctity of life or the pain about who else is going to suffer."

The military implants help the soldiers to have otherwise superhuman powers—they can see directly through drone cameras, they are able to see blueprints of buildings, and they see their mission details—all completely integrated into their field of vision. After the mission, Stripe starts having problems with his MASS, and he begins to realize that his enhancements are even more extensive than he

[1]Episode directed by Jakob Verbruggen, written by Charlie Brooker. First aired on Netflix on October 21, 2016.

realized. They inhibit his ability to smell, his ability to hear everyday details, and most importantly, they create the illusion of the monstrous roaches. The MASS implant blocks out the screams of terror and interchanges them for monstrous screeches, it eliminates the smell of blood and death and changing the faces of normal humans to something of nightmares—all to eradicate "bad blood."

The hunted roaches reverse engineered a way to hinder the MASS implant from working, and over the course of a few days Stripe's MASS no longer shows him roaches, but normal people. When his squad goes to investigate another site where roaches might be hiding, Stripe fights off another soldier, Hunter Raiman (Madeline Brewer) and saves two of the hunted "roaches," finally seeing him as the humans they really are. When the veil is lifted and Stripe realizes that the "roaches" are completely normal people, he is horrified. When Raiman catches up to Stripe and the roaches she kills them and incapacitates Stripe.

We next see Stripe in a white room, presumably a prison cell, where Arquette (Michael Kelly), the military psychologist, explains to him the truth of the roaches and the MASS technology. Because historically soldiers have been unwilling to kill the enemy, or if they did kill they were unable to accept their behavior psychologically (often suffering from post traumatic stress disorder or PTSD), the MASS technology was developed—enabling soldiers to avoid the issue of unwillingness to kill fellow humans. By transforming the "enemy" into monsters, the MASS technology likewise avoids the negative psychological issues of guilt after a soldier has killed, since they would never see the enemy as anything but monstrous. Stripe himself, upon signing up for military service, was informed of the way that the MASS technology would work and to what end; he was told his recollection of the conversation would be erased from his memory, and thus he would be able to carry out his duty with a clean conscience. He agreed the first time, and after the threat of endless torture using his worst memories against him (the killing of innocent people in the farm house, while they begged for their lives), Stripe agrees a second time to have his memory erased and remain a dutiful soldier.

15.1 Critical and popular perspectives on *Men Against Fire*

Men Against Fire received a positive reception from critics, with Gilbert writing, "'Men Against Fire' is one of the better episodes of the series, I think, because it actually featured a sharp twist with a message, and one that wasn't as obvious as the show's usual sermons (technology: bad, mob mentality: bad, brain implants: v. v. bad)" (2016b). Later she comments on the topics brought up in the episode

that relate to issues today as well as the notion of "inconceivable" endless torture, something that has been mentioned in other chapters of this thesis, and a theme throughout *Black Mirror* as a whole:

> "With this unexpected lurch toward the subject of eugenics, 'Man Against Fire' [sic] alludes to a wealth of different prejudices still rife among humankind, particularly institutionalized racism, tribalism, and fear of refugees (the villagers don't see the roaches as other, it's worth noting—they've simply been taught to see them that way). And it veers into darker territory still toward the end, when Stripe is adamant he doesn't want his mass reset, and the doctor informs him that if he refuses, he'll be forced to relive his murder of the two 'roaches' on a permanent loop via the implant while he sits in a jail cell. It's the kind of particularly inconceivable psychological torture *Black Mirror* likes to throw out once in a while, like being stuck in a log cabin alone listening to Christmas music for what feels like several million years" (2016).

In their analysis of *Men Against Fire*, Leon-Boys and Kristensen (2018) consider the episode using three theoretical perspectives: Foucault's discussion of Biopolitics, Haraway's hope for the cyborg as a transformational element in the breakdown of binary thinking, and Alexander G. Weheliye's discussion of Foucault's (and *Black Mirror*'s) lack of consideration of the role of culture in the production of racism. They seem to hold the episode to standards of theoretical ideas which the creators were probably not aiming for, though they do not disregard the interesting critique the episode does make. They suggest that *Men Against Fire* does not go far enough in its discussion of race and the social elements that go into such biopolitical outcomes in the real world.

In her text discussing gender roles within *Black Mirror*, Cirucci (2018) briefly discusses *Men Against Fire*. She focuses on Hunter, another soldier in Stripe's unit, as an example of how women throughout the series are used to exemplify the dangers of technology when taken too far. In its analysis of *Men Against Fire*, the text almost ignores Stripe completely, commenting that he is threatened simply with imprisonment. Also briefly considering *Men Against Fire*, Jiménez-Morales and Lopera-Mármol (2018) consider the distorted images brought on by the MASS technology as taking priority over the real, using concepts from Baudrillard to discuss these false images as hyperreal.

While writing about the oppressive use of the color white throughout *Black Mirror*, Vacker and Espelie (2018) write specifically about the scene in which Stripe is tortured:

> “Stripe meets a doctor whose offices include a white-cube-like room with a white futuristic Eames chair, white desks, white computers, white drapes, and rectangular white lights above. While in the white room, the doctor explains the illusion of the ‘MASS’ virtual reality program, which is used to inspire soldiers to kill without hesitation or remorse. Stripe’s memory is wiped, he’s discharged with full honors, and he is given (what his eyes see as) an immaculate house with a beautiful lover awaiting him there. Yet in reality, it’s a dilapidated white frame house adorned with graffiti. Like numerous other characters in *Black Mirror*, Stripe is trapped within an electrified world made possible by the cunning illusory uses of media technology” (Men Against Fire, para. 1).

This crucial scene demonstrates perfectly Vacker and Espelie’s point that “stepping into the light” is not always an experience of finding truth or clarity. As they demonstrate, white can also signify terror. However, their analysis has collapsed an earlier scene in Arquette’s office with a later scene between Stripe and Arquette in a different white room, which is presumably a prison cell. “Brooker and *Black Mirror* draw heavily from these visions of bright white spaces, realms symbolic of potential enlightenment yet also the locus of terrifying technological and human failure” (Vacker and Espelie, 2018, Terror in the Bright Lights, para. 2). Likewise, they discuss a play (*No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre) in which there are no doors for the characters to exit from, and they are trapped in a room with no way out. They write:

> “In the play, three characters share a mysterious hotel-like room in which they cannot shut their eyes or sleep and the lights cannot be turned off. There are no windows, no door handles, and no way out of the room. Trapped, the three characters must confront the lives they have lived and the destinies they have made, with no excuses and no escapes” (“No Exit,” para. 3).

There are clear parallels between this and Stripe’s experience of torture, although notably he is trapped alone in his own head reliving his worst experience. Visually, we see him surrounded by white walls unable to control what he sees, trapped with no escape, much like the characters in the play.

Došen (2019) explores *Men Against Fire* by comparing the technology of the episode with technologies currently under development by researchers as well as the US government. In particular, she mentions “new technological projection and manipulation of photo-realistic facial re-enactment,” US government testing of “chip implants affecting soldiers’ brains,” and finally Stanford’s “Face2Face

project dealing with real-time face capture and re-enactment of RGB videos" (p. 166). Likewise, she explores the ways that the "Othering" of the enemy has taken shape throughout the history of cinema, specifically looking at monsters and "the zombie as a menacing figure, both subhuman and superhuman" (p. 167). She explains that by making the Other into a monster within the episode, the justification for murder becomes simple. "Any possible questioning of the given task of killing the Others gets lost through the placement of the zombie illusion" (p. 168). Finally, she explores the question of empathy in normal soldiers' unwillingness to kill, as discussed by Arquette in the episode, and the idea of empathy as a foundational principle in a just and democratic society.

In her text on *Men Against Fire*, Manninen (2020) looks at dehumanization in the context of the episode and the role of language, both in real-world instances and in the episode itself. She explores the way that dehumanizing language makes it easier to see the other as non-human, thus making violence against them easier to justify. She explores episode's title writing:

> "The title of the episode comes from World War I veteran S.L.A. Marshall's book *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command*. Based on several interviews with World War II veterans, Marshall discovered that only one in four soldiers actually fired their weapons at their enemies during battle. Marshall proposed several ways to change military training to increase the number of kills—to make soldiers more efficiently deadly" (p. 118).

While briefly considering the threat made by the military psychologist to Koinage of constantly reliving his role in killing innocent people, Manninen simply says "If Stripe does not concede to the reset, he will live out his days in a cell, reliving his participation in the massacre on a nonstop loop. This option proves too much for Stripe to bear" (p. 125). She follows with the optimistic idea that Koinage has been discharged: "In the end, he arrives home, seemingly honorably discharged—but his eyes are still cloudy, implying that he conceded to having his implant reset" (p. 125).

While a number of authors have concluded that Stripe is discharged at the end of the episode, it is not necessarily clear that this is the case. It seems just as likely that he is simply back from a tour and will return to his life as a soldier. In theory, he does not does not remember anything about the incidents in the episode, thus it seems uncharacteristically sympathetic that a perfectly good soldier would be discharged under the logic of the episode. Stripe's choice, however, will play a crucial role in the following analysis of the episode.

15.2 "Make it stop! Please!": a reading of *Men Against Fire*

Described as his "war movie," *Men Against Fire* certainly shows us a side to war: the dehumanization of the enemy, the constant attempt to create soldiers who are not "weakened" by their humanity and empathy, and most importantly the absurdity as to where we draw lines between ourselves—how we justify our constant desire to eradicate the other. Brooker asks us to look within ourselves at the end of the episode when Stripe is offered the choice to suffer on a loop, reliving the murders he unknowingly committed, or to get it all erased and keep killing (Figure 15.1). Would we, if we found ourselves in the same situation, live in a constant loop, reliving the real footage of a series of heinous murders unknowingly carried out, or instead go back to seeing things simply as human versus monster? It seems like an impossible decision. However, in the end the ease with which we are likely to make this choice might be more horrific than the endless torture itself. Though the moral decision would be to stop the killing—to live with what we have done—it is rendered unimaginable by the constant replay made possible by the technology implanted into the soldier's eyes and sensory input. Thus, self-interest wins out, and the cycle continues. The following subsections will take into account three vantage points related to the episode. The first subsection will look at the idea of predestination as a preface for the second subsection looking at the notion of eternal suffering. Finally, the last subsection will consider how ideas like the elect and the damned came to play a role in Christian responses to the rise of Nazism in Germany, mirroring the way that civilians respond to the "roaches" throughout the episode.

15.2.1 The elect and the damned

In the discussion of God's divine foreknowledge, the Calvinist viewpoint (which has come up briefly in other chapters of this thesis), posits that not only does God know everything in a complete way, a preordained way, but that this means that God also knows in advance who will be saved and who will not.[2] Proponents of this perspective clarify that God's knowledge of the elect and the damned is accurate not because his foreknowledge allows him to see who will believe and who will not, but instead because he has *selected* them to be saved.

The group selected for salvation are often referred to as "the elect"—those who will join God in heaven; the others are "the damned"—those not chosen by

[2]Introducing Calvinism in their book *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (2013), Walls and Dongell make clear the lineage of Calvinist beliefs, as well as their respect for the academic rigor surrounding the theological viewpoint:

Figure 15.1: Suffering on a loop - *Men Against Fire* (2016)

God and will thus be damned to eternal suffering.[3] Since God knows everything, and all that will happen is preordained, many argue that the viewpoint lacks the possibility of *true* free will. Calvinists, however, argue that free will still exists within this theological perspective.

Opposing this idea of a preselected elect, critics of the viewpoint argue that the belief structure would signify God's *active* role in creating individuals who would choose not to accept him, due to the *way* he created them, and thus play an *active* role in their damnation. In other words, if we are preordained to choose God or

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"Before Calvin, however, the same basic views were defended by a number of important theologians, most notably Augustine (354-430), although Augustine was not as clear or consistent as Calvin on these matters. Another important figure in this connection is Martin Luther, Calvin's great contemporary in the Reformation, who also follows Augustine and was essentially in agreement with Calvin on the points we discuss in this book. And since Calvin, his system of theology has been further elaborated and refined by numerous theologians down to the present day. We do not by any means intend to reject everything associated with Calvinism and Reformed theology. We have enormous respect and appreciation for Calvin and the heritage he defined and engendered. Calvinism has for centuries represented a vital tradition of piety that is intellectually and morally serious. Calvinists have set a standard for scholarship and cultural engagement that evangelicals of other traditions can readily admire and emulate" (What is Calvinism?, para. 1-2).

[3]Ideas of "the elect" and "the damned" are not exclusive to Calvinist thinking. However, the particular understanding of *how* these groups come to be, as articulated in the text, is unique to the viewpoint. The *selection* of the elect by God is what differentiates the Calvinist viewpoint from others.

not, and God is the one who preordained it, his selection of the elect automatically condemns the others to damnation; the question of why a loving God would do such a thing is an important one. Calvinists would claim that God does show his love and mercy—specifically by offering forgiveness to the elect.

Walls and Dongell describe the Calvinist doctrine's five points in their book *Why I Am Not a Calvinist* (2013) and consider the importance of the debate over salvation:

> "The issue of salvation is clearly at the heart of Christian theology; some of the most hotly contested disputes among believers arise over it. The distinctively Reformed account of salvation has been spelled out in five concise claims known for generations as the 'five points of Calvinism.' Indeed, these five points have been conveniently summarized in what is perhaps the most famous acronym in the history of theology, namely, the Calvinist 'tulip':
>
> Total depravity
> Unconditional election
> Limited atonement
> Irresistible grace
> Perseverance of the saints" (What is Calvinism, para 3-4).

As articulated above, in the traditional Calvinist doctrine, the concept of predestination is paired with the notion of the perseverance of the saints—the idea that once saved, it is impossible for the elect to fall away from God or to become a nonbeliever. Under this view, those who fall away from faith were considered to have never been *true* followers of Christ, or part of the elect, to begin with:

> "Since the non-elect have not been chosen for salvation, it is impossible for them to be saved. God hasn't bestowed on them the effectual grace that makes it possible for a fallen sinner to believe and to will and do good. So it would be more accurate to say of the non-elect that 'they cannot truly come to Christ, and therefore cannot be saved'" (Walls and Dongell, 2013, Does Divine Enablement Include Determinism?, para. 13).

Calvinist beliefs surrounding the elect and the damned, and the "us versus them" mentality it runs the risk of creating, relate to the two subsections below specifically the torture that Stripe will be threatened with, and the choice of many to go along with the eradication of others.

15.2.2 Eternal suffering here and now

In *Men Against Fire* we see the threat of never-ending, immersive punishment on a loop for a soldier who refuses compliance. Eternal suffering in the here and now is used as a deterrent; it works as a means of control. “He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, NIV). When Stripe’s MASS is corrupted and he learns the truth about the roaches, he defends them and is later incapacitated and brought back to the base. In a cell, Arquette, the base psychologist comes to him and explains what the MASS really does, and why it was created.

— [Arquette] Don’t feel bad about doing your job. The villagers won’t do it. The folks back home won’t do it. They don’t have MASS. MASS lets you do it. You. You’re protecting the bloodline. And that, my friend, is an honor.
— [Stripe] There’s no honor here. It’s just killing. Lying and killing.
— [Arquette] No one lied to you. You knew all of this. All along.

When Stripe is presented with evidence that he himself agreed to have his memory wiped, to make his killing more effective, we see that he rejects this view of himself. However, Arquette has another round of coercion ready. Since the MASS implant lets the government control what the soldiers see, hear, and smell, Arquette turns the technology against Stripe, showing him the killings he participated in without the MASS filter.

— [Stripe] What’s happening?
— [Arquette] We control what you see, Stripe.
— [Stripe] I can’t see nothing.
— [Arquette] Because we control it.
— [Stripe] Give me my fucking eyes back.
— [Arquette] Let me lay out your options.
— [Stripe] Give me my fucking eyes back, man!
— [Arquette] Let me lay out your options! Option one,you agree to have your MASS reset. All the recollections of the past few days, including this conversation, erased.
— [Stripe] No way.
— [Arquette] Option two’s incarceration. I’d advise you to consider.
— [Stripe] Fuck you!
— [Arquette] Mass is a friend. Without it, you will remember everything that you did.
— [Stripe] I ain’t having this Mass shit. No more. No way.

— [Arquette] Okay. Well, maybe you should see what life would be like without it.
— [Stripe] What's happening? Where am I?
— [Arquette] Heidekker's ranch. Three days ago. I have it all logged, Stripe. We can feed you everything that you did.

At this point, we see almost the exact same footage as the killing scene from the first part of the episode, only this time, there are no monstrous faces or shrieks, only scared people begging for their lives, and Stripe killing them without remorse. Once again we return to Arquette and Stripe in the white room (Figures 15.2 and 15.3):

Figure 15.2: MASS filter - *Men Against Fire* (2016)

— [Arquette] You'll see and smell and feel it all. Is this what you want? On a loop? In a cell all alone? We can make that go away. This conversation goes away too. All of it. But you gotta say the word. Just say the word, Stripe. And it all goes away. Just say the word.

Thus, we see the possibility of never-ending torture that uses someone's most horrific deeds against them, isolating them from the concept of good and from the concept of *themselves* as good. In the episode, the concept of eternal suffering is not inflicted with the same criteria as described in the Bible, but with the same goal—compliance.

Christian ideas of hell are varied, some proposing a literal reading of scripture: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral,

Figure 15.3: Without MASS filter - *Men Against Fire* (2016)

those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Revelation 21:8, NIV). However, others posit that instead of a literal burning lake, hell is actually best understood as separation from God. This idea could parallel the punishment threatened in the episode: Arquette suggests that Stripe might spend every second of the rest of his earthly existence in an endless loop devoid of everything good, devoid of any view of himself as good, as discussed above. This horror—both the absence of God in the biblical text, and the absence of good in the episode—is unimaginable. Stripe seemingly must comply, as Christians who believe in the threat of damnation must also comply with the code of living laid out within the Bible.

Considering the use of this kind of threat of torture as a means of compliance, the parallel to the use of ostracism as an assertion of group norms as considered in Chapter 13 becomes apparent. Likewise, we can see how it relates to the cyclical public punishment depicted in Chapter 12, although in Stripe's case, the punishment would be in isolation. Though the Church has played a role in social control throughout the history of Christianity, much like many other religions, suddenly we see a world where compliance can be sought for less than pure motives, as is the case in *Men Against Fire*. It is as if Brooker is asking us in each episode relating to punishment, "Does this person deserve to be punished in this way?" while making us less and less sure of our answers each time. As seen throughout this thesis, *Black Mirror* is actually peppered with many depictions of hell, something Brooker himself has mentioned, "quite a lot of hell goes on in our stories" (Brooker and Jones, 2018, p. 121). *Men Against Fire*, however, is arguably the

series' most violent episode, both in the technological torture as well as the human suffering enabled by the swift eradication of the undesirable "roach."

15.2.3 The great scandal

The doubling of the same footage with and without the filter of the MASS implant reinforces the demonization of the undesirable people; we see them first as they are imagined through the society in the episode, and then as they would appear to us. This demonization could be compared to any number of mass killings and genocides in which propaganda was meant to vilify the "undesirable" other. Došen (2019) posits that worse than the potential technology used against Stripe, is his decision to forget and continue killing—a decision made out of self-interest. She writes that the episode:

> "...portrays a rather nihilistic world in which the main character ultimately chooses not to fight against the establishment, but instead serves it by accepting to kill those who are considered to be less valuable. Stripe, who we learn volunteered for the service, does not even consider forcibly rebelling against the system, but struggles with the dilemma of whether to go to prison, tortured by the memories of killing innocent people, or to forget the past and continue to execute the orders of his superiors. The horror of this episode derives from *the plausibility of such a narrative in terms of an individual's decision-making process*, and not necessarily uncanny technology [emphasis added]" (p. 169).

Following this accretion, Došen (2019) explicitly compares the plot of *Men Against Fire* with historical cases of mass killings:

> "those who are regarded as subservient and regressive, and consequently, the nemesis of the progressive forces, are the humans who carry a higher risk of undesirable traits—of both biological (cancer, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, SLS) and psychological (substandard IQ, criminal tendencies, sexual deviance) pathologies. Here, the eugenic principles are reinstated as the crucial progressive nexus, but instead of implementing a policy of regulating sexual reproduction, radical annihilation occurs. Such practices were known from ancient Sparta and Rome (where physically weak and disabled children were sentenced to death by the law or the council of elders) to enforced euthanasia and mass murders in Nazi Germany. Unsurprisingly, Arquette endorses and promotes this strategy of obliteration.

> What may seem striking, though, is that the evident technological advancement that allows the control of soldiers' vision is not preceded nor followed by an ideological evolution. The concurrent scientific developments de facto provide a misleading confirmation of progress, appealing only to our fascination with what is possible to achieve by the instruments of technological innovation" (p. 170).

Thus, we see once again that *Black Mirror* probes our fears of technology, but more often than not only in the context of our already flawed humanity. The most horrific detail is not the technology's ability to inflict endless torture, but instead our inability as a species to escape the cyclical patterns of behavior we see throughout history—killing under the guise of progress. Technology in the episode only facilitates behavior that already exists below the surface. We have seen throughout history that even those with the best intentions can easily be led towards barbaric choices if the situation is framed as one of personal suffering or the unseen suffering of others (as we see is the choice put to Stripe at the end of the episode).

Writing about the often unexplored link between the Christian Church and Nazi Germany, Paul (2003) published an article for *Free Inquiry* stating that Nazism could not have succeeded without the aid of Christianity:

> "A growing body of scholarly research, some based on careful analysis of Nazi records, is clarifying this complex history. It reveals a convoluted pattern of religious and moral failure in which atheism and the nonreligious played little role, except as victims of the Nazis and their allies. In contrast, Christianity had the capacity to stop Nazism before it came to power, and to reduce or moderate its practices afterwards, but repeatedly failed to do so because the principal churches were complicit with—indeed, in the pay of—the Nazis. Most German Christians supported the Reich; many continued to do so in the face of mounting evidence that the dictatorship was depraved and murderously cruel. Elsewhere in Europe the story was often the same. Only with Christianity's forbearance and frequent cooperation could fascistic movements gain majority support in Christian nations. European fascism was the fruit of a Christian culture. Millions of Christians actively supported these notorious regimes. Thousands participated in their atrocities" (p. 20).

Paul (2003) traces a connection between Christian antisemitism and resentment among Christians who saw those of Jewish faith as unwilling to convert—we might understand that they saw them as part of the damned instead of the

elect.[4] “Anti-Semitism was also part of the mix; well into the twentieth century, mainstream Catholic publications set an intolerant tone that later Nazi propaganda would imitate. Anti-Semitism remained conspicuous in mainstream Catholic literature even after Pope Pius XI (reigned 1922-1939) officially condemned it” (2003, p. 20). However, in his second article on the topic, Paul acknowledges that in reality, it was more complex than just acceptance of Nazism or not as a blanket rule among Christians:

> “The relationship between Nazis and the churches was schizophrenic at best. Hitler dutifully paid the religious taxes he had instituted while he disparaged and schemed against the clergy those taxes supported. The party that once plucked crosses from schools it had encouraged to teach religion also held rallies in Christian venues blazoned with crosses. [...] Some religious schools and monasteries were harassed, even closed, and church property confiscated; others were protected by the regime” (Paul, 2004, p. 28).

There were certainly those who were in opposition to Nazi rule among those of Christian faith, and certainly those who were supportive of it or at a minimum willing to turn a blind eye. Thus, we see that even in the history of Christianity, where compassion, loving one’s neighbor, and empathy are taught as foundational, we can find examples of individuals acting out of self interest instead of choosing the more difficult yet morally righteous path. Likewise, there are numerous examples of Christians speaking out against the Reich, or those who hid Jewish people at great personal risk.

This muddy history is reflected somehow in *Men Against Fire*. We see many characters willing to go along with the soldiers, even though they do not see the roaches as monstrous themselves. The villagers who are unwilling to touch the food after the roaches have been in their food storage areas, for instance, do not have the MASS technology. Yet they are willing to go along with what the government tells them, because the choice is easier. We only see one character willing to risk his own safety for the roaches, the old man in the farmhouse, Parn Heidekker. We know he is a Christian because Medina, who got intel from the villagers, tells the group before the raid, “Okay, our friend here thinks the roaches went in the direction of Parn Heidekker’s place. Local oddball, seems to be some kind of religious freak.” On the way over in the truck Medina explains further details about Heidekker, and the group discusses the roach problem:

[4]The notion of the elect and the damned is not explicitly brought up in Paul’s articles, but it is unlikely that Christians in Nazi Germany believed in something like universal reconciliation (as discussed in Chapter 5) which is much less likely to sow the sort of hatred for the out-group that predestination might.

— [Medina] So Mr. Heidekker is not exactly what you call a socialite or a mingler. Seems like mental health issues. He's got some interesting views on roaches, by all accounts. I'm putting his info in your MASS system now. Been complaints lodged against him going months back. Locals claim that he let roaches cross his land, left food out for them. Could be just shit talk from the local villagers though so...
— [Soldier] Yo, how many roaches we got left out here? A couple of thousand? A couple of hundred, if that? I mean, back home we had millions, man. It only took two years to get shit back on track. Out here you got rustic fucks throwing them scraps. No wonder it's taken so long to mop shit up.
— [Stripe] But how can anyone be dumb enough to help a fucking roach?
— [Hunter] Hell, yeah.

Later in his house, we are given visual confirmation of Heidekker faith with a series of long shots of his face with the cross on the wall behind him. Medina gives him a long lecture on why belief that life is sacred is conducive to her own perspective, that the roaches should be exterminated:

> "Cross on the wall there. You got principles. Think all life is sacred. And I get it. I agree. All life is sacred so you even got to protect the roaches. Right? It's not their fault they're like that. They didn't ask for this. I get it. We get it. There's shit in their blood that made them that way. The sickness they're carrying. That doesn't care about the sanctity of life or the pain, about who else is gonna suffer. We don't stop the roaches,in five, ten, 20 years from now, you're still gonna get kids born that way, and then they're gonna breed. And so it goes on. That cycle of pain. That sickness, and it could have been avoided."

She continues, after we see that Stripe and Hunter have found the roaches hiding in the attic. The words act as a voiceover narrating the killings themselves:

> "Every roach you save today, you condemn God knows how many people to despair and misery tomorrow. You can't still see them as human. Understandable sentiment, granted, but it's misguided. We gotta take them out if human kind is gonna carry on in this world. That's just the hard truth. Gotta make sacrifices."

After they kill the roaches and restrain Heidekker, Hunter suggests they should just kill him too:

— [Hunter] We gotta listen to Mr. Sunday School all the way back to base?
— [Medina] You can cover your ears.

— [Hunter] Yeah, or, uh....I'll just hit permanent mute.
— [Medina] Lower your weapon.
— [Hunter] Roach lover counts as a kill too, right?
— [Stripe] He's a civ, right? You shoot a civ, that's gonna stay with you the rest of your life.

Much like Shazia, in Chapter 14 we see another depiction of a person of faith in Heidekker, the only one willing to harbor the "roaches"—likely at great personal risk, even the threat of death, as detailed above. Although we know that Heidekker will not be killed, he has clearly been arrested and will be punished for his role in protecting the roaches, and in distracting the soldiers while a few escape. Interrogated or tortured, we know that Heidekker gives up information because later Medina tells the group: "It seems Heidekker didn't stay silent too long once we got to work on him."

Although Došen (2019) compares the "roaches" in the episode to zombies, or monsters in a general sense, their depiction as beast-like is not far the notion of the enemy as beast in biblical texts surrounding eternal suffering either:

> "A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: 'If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark on their forehead or on their hand, they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name'" (Revelation 14:9-11, NIV).

This question of "worshipping the beast" might be compared to those who "protect the beasts" in *Men Against Fire*, specifically Heidekker, who hides roaches. Thus, it becomes clear why portraying the enemy as a beast might be beneficial. The less the enemy is human, the easier they become to kill, but also the easier they are to hate. The only other civilians we see in the episode are the villagers who told the soldiers about Heidekker—the people who had their food stolen. They do not see the roaches in the same way as the soldiers do, yet they treat them with the same disgust, unwilling to eat the food that has been touched by the roaches, "They've been in the food. We'll have to destroy everything they left. No one will eat it." This contrast shows how easily most people are able to shift their behavior towards others if it is more beneficial for them, if *they* will avoid suffering. It is a hard choice to make in the face of society-wide acceptance to resist. The villagers do not, Stripe is not able to, and even Heidekker eventually gives into interrogation or torture.

15.3 Conclusion

As articulated above, beliefs surrounding the elect and the damned are beneficial to an understanding of eternal suffering as well as how easily an in-group vs. out-group can shift towards viewing the other as no longer human. Stripe sees a glimpse at eternal suffering and what it would be like to exist outside of the structure in place; there is no resistance, only suffering or acceptance of the belief structure. Similar to the way that Calvinists see God, there is not really a choice to accept, instead the structure (God) selects you, your acceptance of the structure (God) is unconditional. Once you are in the in-group, you are not able to reject it.

Likewise, we can see how this idea of the preservation of the saints might easily slip into a disgust or dislike for those who are non-believers, especially those of other faiths, unlikely to be converted, and thus, unlikely to be of the elect. By seeing the other as part of the damned, it becomes easier to see them as expendable. We saw parallels to this mentality between both Nazi Germany and the society depicted in *Men Against Fire*. The depiction of one person aiming to resist, Parn Heidekker, as a person of faith shows for a second time in the series a person of faith eventually defeated or killed (the second being Shazia in the last chapter). This portrayal of the eventual impotence of believers might be seen as yet another example of technology replacing the traditional roles of religion.

Other episodes that touch on this concept of eternal suffering include, as mentioned above, *White Bear* (2013) and *White Christmas* (2014), but other episodes like *USS Callister* (2017) and *Black Museum* (2017) also bring up the idea in regards to future uses of technology related to suffering. As seen in Chapter 11, *USS Callister* portrays an all-powerful god-like ruler of a virtual game with digital duplicates who are tortured into compliance. Black Museum shows a digital duplicate tortured for public amusement, reenacting his execution by electric chair over and over at the behest of museum visitors. Brooker also suggested that *Playtest*'s Cooper might end up in a simulated hell of sorts, as mentioned in Chapter 10. However, the combination of the use of eternal suffering in the here and now as a means attaining compliance seems unique in *Men Against Fire*, where we see eternal suffering threatened as punishment for those unwilling to carry out the new world order, with a widespread shift in beliefs about who deserves to live and who does not.

Part V

Conclusion

Conclusion

Taken together, the 12 episodes of *Black Mirror* considered in this thesis build an interesting argument towards the consideration of the relationship between technology and Christianity. The television series as a whole explores our obsession with, and trust in, technology. It also looks at how that trust can easily break down into a future where technology is no longer a liberating tool, but a mechanism of control. While it occasionally considers the more positive possibilities of technology, more often than not, it looks at the darker side of our technological futures, all the while drawing upon specters of Christianity's past.

The first group of chapters considered the promises that technology within *Black Mirror* holds in common with Christianity (Part II). In this part of the thesis, four aspects of technology in the series, and the optimistic promises that they bring with them, were compared to Christian concepts: two in relation to death, the first in dealing with the death of a loved one (as viewed in *Be Right Back*), and the second in everlasting life after death (as seen in *San Junipero*). The following two touched on aspects of omniscience, the first being individual omniscience outside of time (as we considered in *The Entire History of You*), and the second, omniscience through algorithmic predictions (in *Hang the DJ*). These chapters considered the promises that technology holds, as well as the ways that it might improve our lives. Not by coincidence, this group of episodes contains some of the more optimistic or heartfelt moments of the show.

It might be argued that the similarities between technological imaginings of god-like powers and depictions of these powers in human imaginings of deities throughout history come from a common root desire. Harari (2016) discusses these similarities when considering our technological desires, however within the world of *Black Mirror*, the similarities run too deep to be brushed off in this way. While it might be true that these common desires play some role in the similarities between our aims for technology and the ways that religions came to depict gods (who fulfill our deepest desires for ourselves in notions of everlasting life, omniscience, omnipotence, etc.), this view cannot explain the depth of commonalities we saw played out within the episodes of Part II.

Next, in Part III, behaviors that both technology and Christianity ask for in return for the fulfillment of the promises from Part II were explored. This part of the thesis considered four characteristics, or virtues, that the technology in *Black Mirror* asks for which also reflect Christian concepts: devotion or attention (as seen in *Smithereens*), piety and socially agreeable behavior (in *Nosedive*), sacrifice and complete trust (considered while analyzing *Playtest*), and finally obedience to power (in *USS Callister*).

While it is clear that religion and technology have overlapping roles within society, along with government, laws, and morals, their relationship in *Black Mir-*

ror goes beyond this lineage-based explanation which we might understand from a text like Ellwood's article, "Religion and Social Control" (1918). The particularities of these demands from Christianity and the technology of *Black Mirror* demonstrate that Christian ideals and virtues still haunt our understandings of what it means to be a dutiful or upstanding member of society—especially in the context of technology's assertion of what a true tech believer/user/consumer should look like.

Finally, we looked at what some of the consequences of transgression might be and how the punishments within *Black Mirror* often mirror some of the major concepts we see within the Bible (Part IV). Part IV of the thesis looked at four responses to transgression in *Black Mirror* which reflect Christian concepts. They included public punishment (in *White Bear*), ostracism (as explored in *White Christmas*), surveillance and judgement over our actions (in *Crocodile*), and eternal suffering (which was explored in the context of *Men Against Fire*). The four chapters in Part IV make clear that the commonalities we see between Christianity and the technology of *Black Mirror* cannot be explained as coincidence.

The persecutory role of technology in the series goes far beyond the influence that we already see of Christian ideas of justice in our legal systems today. This amplification lays bare the commonalities, and their cause—the specter of Christian ideas within society, ideas that go so deep that we hardly see them until magnified to their extreme in this way. After analyzing these episodes, it becomes clear that a simple link between religion and notions of criminal justice, social control, and punishment only accounts for some of the similarities we saw between biblical concepts and the technology of *Black Mirror*, especially in their most persecutory outcomes. Christian concepts of punishment, in their most explicit forms, take shape within the worlds we see in *Black Mirror*. The idea of technology making tangible various imagined hells is something that we saw Brooker himself articulate.

We have seen that beyond the 12 episodes discussed in this thesis, there are others that could be examined for their relationships to the Christian concepts highlighted from alternative angles, or for specific details present in the episodes. Likewise, each episode considered in this thesis could be further analyzed through this general framework while comparing concepts to other religions, an exercise that I will leave to someone more familiar with those faiths. It is important to emphasize one final time that this thesis was by no means attempting to exhaustively analyze all possible interpretations of *Black Mirror* in regards to the question of the specter of religion; instead, the aim has been to map an argument as to why the show might be contemplated using this model, as a general framework of consideration. Furthermore, as we have seen through the literature review presented in each chapter, others have taken different approaches to the systematic reading of *Black Mirror* as a whole or through the analysis of individual episodes. These

readings of the series are no less valid, simply different interpretations focused on different themes within a uniquely layered and complex series.

Importantly, the framework of reading popular culture through the lens of Christian ideas is not a new one (as articulated in Section 2.2). However, this research has aimed to take a different angle from the traditional way this type of interpretation has been done, instead bringing it together with the comparison of technology and Christianity (as explained in Section 2.1). Their combination then results in the possibility of looking at the framework of Christianity—and its particular teachings and traditions—as a model which is carried out by the technology within *Black Mirror*. This approach could theoretically be applied to other examples of popular culture, though those examples would need to have similarly compelling cases of the mirroring we have seen between concepts throughout this thesis. Thus, the framework used in this text is by no means meant to be all-encompassing, instead it was borne out of the peculiarities of the particular combination of elements seen within *Black Mirror* itself.

It seems clear that when viewed together, this grouping of episodes asks questions about the relationship between seemingly abandoned Christian concepts, and our potential uses of technology. Together, they build a convincing argument that Brooker and Jones might have themselves considered these questions about the specter of religion. However, it is important to let the episodes speak for themselves, and as Brooker wrote in the foreword of *Inside Black Mirror*, and as quoted at the start of this thesis:

> "Never trust anyone who mentions auteur theory or discusses a film or TV show as though it's the work of one individual. Each *Black Mirror* film (and we insist on pretentiously considering them 'films') is the product of months of heavy lifting by literally hundreds of people" (2018, p. 7).

So, what is to prevent us from following the same path as the societies in some of the *Black Mirror* episodes considered here? *Black Mirror* seems to be telling us that not much stands in our way, technologically or culturally. Everlasting life, predicting the future—those things could be great, but on the other hand, public punishment, ostracism, and eternal suffering do not hold the same lure. Technology, as we have seen throughout these episodes of *Black Mirror*, holds great potential, but, haunted by Christianity's past, it also holds dangerous possibilities for dark futures.

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