

White Bear

White Bear (the second episode in Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* series, aired February 2013) asks important questions about justice and retribution.

Synopsis

Victoria awakes surrounded by spilled pills to discover that she does not know who she is or where she is or why she feels as she does. Her head hurts. Has she just tried to commit suicide? Televisions transmit a scary symbol. Her feelings of dislocation and disquiet gradually turn to panic and despair as she discovers that no one is willing to tell her what is going on or to help her; everyone she encounters merely films her silently on their mobile phones. Worse than this, people appear with shotguns and try to kill her; others in bizarre costumes try to cut or beat her. She meets a woman who appears to want to help her escape. Accepting a lift from another apparent helper, she is taken at gunpoint with a balaclava over her head to a wood where she is tied up and threatened with torture. Escaping, her female helper takes her to a facility to shut down the 'signal' that is making everyone behave like this. As Victoria experiences flashbacks involving a man, a van, and a little girl she thinks might be her daughter, she is not freed but captured and paraded tied to a chair before an appreciative audience, for whom she is the show.

At this point, it is revealed who she is: an accomplice to her fiancé who abducted, tortured and killed a little girl. He has died in custody. Victoria filmed the killing on her mobile phone. The audience screams 'murderer' at her. The little girl's white teddy bear has now become the emblem of a 'justice' programme in which Victoria must experience the same confusion, terror and fear of death her victim went through. After a public vilification and humiliation being paraded through the streets, Victoria is returned to her starting point. The props are re-set and her mind wiped. While this is happening, Victoria has to watch her own film of the child's death, while a new 'audience' arriving at the White Bear Justice Centre for the 'show' is briefed on what to do to take part in terrifying her. She will wake, be terrified and run for her life again and again and again, perhaps for ever.

In religious parlance, Victoria has been sent to hell for her crime. As in the medieval world view, hell is a place of pain and despair; the final few minutes of non-stop screaming provide the soundtrack to what such punishment sounds like. There is no hope for Victoria, nor any end to her torment. She begs for death, but no escape into death will be allowed. The 'devils' of this hell, are ordinary people equipped with technology, come to have 'fun' and achieve a sense of catharsis in frightening her, then shouting at and abusing her. The programme producers and actors are enjoying themselves, watching her suffer. They feel nothing but contempt for her.

At the heart of Brooker's dystopian nightmare is a dead child. She becomes a symbol of everything that should be protected and cared for. She is a little girl playing with toys, trusting adults. Her white teddy bear comes to stand for her 'innocence' and unspoiled world, ironically transmuted into 'justice'. 'White Bear' terrifies Victoria, although she doesn't know why.

The film suggests that a person who kills a child is beyond the pale. We are so outraged and furious that the killer is a monster to whom we may do as we wish. Victoria can have no humanity, or excuse. Her film wipes out all possibility of explanation. She makes no excuses and never expresses

regret, though there is a powerful irony in her inkling that the familiar face in the photograph might be her daughter.

Technology is a pivotal feature of this hell-world and concept of justice. The film of the child's death is evidence. The camera is an eye witness which accuses her over and over again. The 'audience' films her terror for its own enjoyment: number three on the list of rules is 'enjoy yourselves'. They take away mementos of the punishment inflicted on her. Their outrage is transmuted through consumption of media. Victoria is depersonalised, just as the child was depersonalised. She is now a commodity for other people's emotions and the dark heart in all of us that wants to hurt and punish others. She is Myra Hindley and Maxine Carr and Vanessa George.

But Victoria is also tied to objects which may symbolise the stake, the ducking stool, the electric chair, and subjected to 'ECT'. She is mad, bad or both. She is the weak female eaten up by sin, unable to resist evil. We can punish her for being female – the woman who is supposed to protect children not hurt them. She is Eve and the other women down the ages who have been seen as causative of dystopia and the removal of God's favour from the world which allows the devils to play. Contrasted with the 'strong' woman helper who has a plan and doesn't mind using a gun, Victoria is pathetic. She screams, cries and runs away. She is powerless and has no resources. But why should we care?

The film offers an interesting experience to the viewer. At the beginning, we do not know what Victoria has done, so perhaps we are concerned for her, feel anxiety and distress at her fear and suffering. We empathise with her feelings of injustice; we respond to her tears and her cries for help. But what about when we find out what White Bear means? Do we change our minds? Start to see her as a monster who has harmed a little child? Do we then transfer our feelings of bewilderment and sympathy to the child whose lost life demands justice?

Perhaps at this point we start to feel something is missing, something that will break the cycle. Perhaps what is needed is some way towards forgiveness, regret, restitution, remorse and repentance. Can there be justice without mercy? Victoria is bound up with and to her victim. What will give any of the participants closure? And how is judgement supposed to take place? In this form of eternal punishment, must something, or someone, break open the situation and change it, and set everyone free?

Other works with similar themes:

Iain M Banks: *Surface Detail*

Harlan Ellison: *I have no Mouth and I must Scream*

Some questions for Discussion

- What questions do you think the film asks about our society's notions of justice?
- At what point does the punishment fit the crime?
- Imagine you were one of the characters in the film. What do you think your feelings might be and how might they change as the 'show' progresses?

- What kind of 'black mirror' do you think is being held up to our own society?
- How might a Christian view of justice make a difference to this story?