

Be Right Back

The first episode in the second series of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror* examines questions of technology in the context of meaning and relationships.

Synopsis

Martha and Ash have just moved into his late mother's home. Ash, who is always on his phone using Facebook and Twitter, tells Martha that his mother put all the photos of his dead brother away in the attic as if she couldn't bear to be reminded of him.

On his way to return the van they hired for the move, Ash is killed. Martha is beside herself with grief, and feels the pain of loss and loneliness. At the wake, a friend says that there is a new technology which will help Martha through her pain and that she has signed her up to it. Martha says she doesn't want to know. Later she gets an email telling her she is signed up and then an email from 'Ash'. She quickly deletes it.

Martha's grief is redoubled when she discovers she is pregnant. First she phones her sister for help, but when her sister doesn't reply, she goes to the email trash and retrieves the email from 'Ash'. The idea is that someone's personality can be retrieved from everything they have ever said or done online through social media. Photos, videos, messages, blogs, all the constant stream of communication we post online can be used to recreate the dead. Martha begins by emailing and 'Ash' replies to her. She tells him she is pregnant and he responds enthusiastically. Then 'Ash' phones her. He sounds like the old Ash; he says similar things. She finds it enormously comforting. Soon, Martha is spending all her time talking to 'Ash', ignoring her sister. She records the sounds of their baby's heartbeat for him and takes him on walks with her so she can photograph her surroundings and talk to him about where 'they' are. 'Ash' responds in the way she wants and she feels less alone.

But then 'Ash' suggests that he can be more than a voice, he can be a person. Soon after, Martha takes delivery of a body which looks like Ash and, after various preparations, can walk, talk, pretend to eat and to sleep and can have sex with her. In fact the sex is more adventurous than before, being programmed from pornographic videos that Ash had watched. Martha is glad to have a physical 'Ash' with her, but from the first it is clear that 'Ash' is not the person she lost and can never be the person she loved. The simulacrum can only mimic Ash so far and it is not long before its lack of spontaneous emotion and intuitive knowledge, the history they shared and the things which were private between them and never put online, shows that he can never replace Ash. Martha becomes frustrated and angry with the replacement. The final straw is when she takes him to a cliff top and asks him to jump off and he meekly agrees that he will if she asks. The real Ash would have wanted to know why, would have fought back, shown fear or bewilderment or anger.

The final scenes of the episode show Martha with her daughter. It is the child's birthday and she asks if she can take a piece of birthday cake to Ash. He is now living in the attic and is visited only at weekends. He has joined the photos in the attic.

The episode makes a point about how much people today devote to sharing their lives online, but at the same time, asks whether this sharing amounts to anything meaningful. What makes a person a person? What makes a relationship a relationship? The answer, as far as Ash and Martha are concerned, is that although Ash spent forever on his phone, the 'reality' of his love and life with Martha was in the fabric of their time together. The depth and richness of relationship is built on more than a public persona and has to do with privacy, intimacy, sharing and closeness which is not offered to the outside world in a public form.

Another important point asks how far people might go to assuage their powerful feelings of love and loss when someone dies. The recognition that the surviving partner will never hear the loved one's voice again, or be able to touch them or share with them is tremendously painful. For Martha, this pain is compounded by finding out that she's pregnant. The episode suggests that a technology could be employed to 'help' assuage that grief, but while it helps the longing and loneliness, it does nothing to heal the wounds. Martha's sister, finding 'Ash's' clothes in the bathroom assumes Martha is healing her life by 'moving on', but in fact Martha is stuck, trying to resurrect a relationship which has died with Ash, but still haunted by his simulacrum whom she can't give up.

This episode raises questions which are pertinent to many issues in today's world about the uses to which technology can be put. Should people be allowed to replace the people and pets they grieve for, just because they can? What about cloning of pets, for example? Can the dead simply ever be replaced, or is there something so unique about a person and about relationships that they can never be recovered? What do these issues make us think about notions of death and resurrection and the religious idea that ultimate destiny leads to a completeness that is actually more than we are now, rather than being shadows of who we used to be? Martha believes for a while that she can be liberated from her grief and loneliness, but finds herself trapped and held back by the pretend 'Ash' that comes back to her.

Other film treatments of this kind of theme include:

The 6th Day (2000)

Truly, Madly, Deeply (1990)

Iain M Banks *Surface Detail* and the process of 'backing up' in all the Culture novels

Some questions for discussion:

How much of your life do you share online with others? Are there things that you would never share? What kind of 'you' would be resurrected from social media?

What does this episode tell us about the nature of grief? Do you sympathise with Martha's reactions throughout the episode?

What do you think this episode suggests about the death of human beings and what we leave behind? What is Ash's legacy?

Imagine you were Martha, how do you think you might react in her place?

What do Christian beliefs about death and resurrection offer to a grieving person? Can technology help or hinder in offering consolation?