

The Waldo Moment

This final offering in the second series of Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*, looks at media, entertainment and political apathy. What will make us feel involved or get involved in how our society is run?

Synopsis

Jamie, a failed comedian, is the voice behind Waldo, a blue CGI cartoon bear. He is popular for his ability to cut through the verbal tricks of political spin, sending people up, refusing to be swayed by the vacuous offerings of politicians and others in authority who seek to manipulate people through the media. He is rude, foul-mouthed, but also cutting and edgy. He sends people up, exposing their pomposity and their cardboard personalities. People like to watch Waldo. They think he is funny and engaging. He gets their attention. Gwendolyn is career-driven Labour candidate in a by-election for a safe Tory seat. At her selection panel she is clear about why she wants to stand – to do something positive instead of moaning, but also to get on in her career. Asked if she has anything damaging in her background, she says with irony no, ...apart from a series of murders she committed in the past. She is selected. In due course she meets Jamie and they spend the night together. Their connection is real, meaningful, but out in the world, that counts for little. Gwendolyn is told to keep away from Jamie because he isn't good for her career and she complies; she doesn't call him.

Despite Jamie's protestations that he doesn't know anything about politics, he is driven into being a vicious political satirist through Waldo. His 'team' says he doesn't have to know anything about politics; they can get him all the basic info, statistics, anything he likes as long as he keeps sticking it to the candidates and becoming ever more popular. Eventually, the public only wants Waldo – he is a contender in the by-election. He might even win. Jamie gets angry and frustrated with himself, his team and the candidates and goes on a rant that is a massive hit with the public. Everyone loves Waldo who says what everyone thinks but never dares, or can be bothered, to say.

For Jamie this is all madness. He alone seems to be able to cling on to the knowledge that Waldo does not exist. He is a character, not a player. Waldo has no policies, no purpose, no meaningful background, but now Jamie is trapped. The public wants Waldo and he is Waldo. His team say that he is the biggest hit on Youtube. Jamie points out that the biggest hit on Youtube is a farting dog. What the public wants and enjoys is trivial and meaningless but still popular as long as it provides a moment's entertainment.

As the election approaches, Jamie tries to pull out, but the pressures are too great. Waldo has become a bigger creation than he is. Jamie tries to expose Waldo, to bring the edifice crashing down, but all that happens is that someone else takes over. The crowd turns on Jamie for trying to hurt Waldo and beats him up. From his hospital bed, Jamie watches the by-election result. Waldo comes second. The Conservative candidate for all his vacuity and woodenness still wins the safe Tory seat. Nothing has changed. But something has. Waldo has gone global. He is on the TV in many countries, his audience massively increased. He rules the screens. Perhaps he lost the by-election and came to rule the world. Jamie is now homeless and as he throws a bottle at the screen with Waldo's face on it, he is grabbed and assaulted by two police officers and left in the street.

The Waldo Moment asks questions about how and where we find meaning in a society like ours. It is a bleak picture, since nobody tells the truth or cares if anyone is telling the truth. Politicians are all about themselves, they repeat the spin that will keep them in their jobs or in power. In a democracy, elections ought to be able to expose such self-serving motives and allow ordinary people to choose someone to represent them who will have their interests at heart. But that takes a commitment from the public and the public also don't care. They are easily attracted or distracted by a comedy character. They delight in the send-up, the bad-mouthing, the ranting and mocking of an angry, disappointed, frustrated and sad individual who uses the mask of the character as both therapy and revenge. People are willing to vote for Waldo because they identify with him, he is more 'representative' than the politicians even though he has no policies and no political ability.

Perhaps the most telling moment in the episode is where Jamie and Gwendolyn spend the night together. Jamie whispers rather than shouts, weeps rather than mocks. There is tenderness and connection between strangers, between bodies. But the ways of the world prevent their relationship developing into anything else. Sex might be meaningful, but only if it has a context, and Jamie and Gwendolyn have no context; instead their night together fuels bitterness and damage.

Brooker's dystopian vision ends with a series of losses. Waldo loses. Gwendolyn loses. Nothing changes in terms of the political landscape. Jamie loses most of all, having lost the 'voice' of Waldo. He is nothing, unemployed, homeless, disregarded, and in the last seconds of the episode, those with the power take the opportunity to put the boot in. But Waldo the creation goes on and on, making money, achieving popularity, sucking in the public who will always consume entertainment and take it for reality.

Some questions for discussion

Who is your favourite cartoon character and why do you like the character?

Why do you suppose people like Waldo so much?

Why do you think Jamie is such a loser?

Why do you think Gwendolyn acts the way she does?

How do you think Christian values might transform the story? How could such a transformation happen and what do you think might be the result?