

Proper Gander: Night Of The Living Tweet



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SOMETIMES, WHEN channel-hopping through the desert of reality TV and costume dramas, you can still find a rewarding oasis of originality. Charlie Brooker's sci-fi anthology series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4) has returned to challenge and unnerve the viewer. Although its stories are set in the future, *Black Mirror* itself also reflects the past. In the 60s and 70s, sombre one-off plays exploring the implications of science appeared on our screens as often as kipper ties did. Now, programme makers prefer to play safer than this kind of speculative drama. The future's not what it used to be.

We're introduced to Martha and Ash, a happy couple living in a few years' time. When Ash is killed in an accident, Martha is distraught. A friend suggests 'something that helps', and signs Martha up to an online service for the bereaved. Its software gathers up all Ash's facebook updates, tweets and website postings, and uses them to recreate a virtual version of his personality. 'The more it has, the more it's him'. Martha cautiously starts swapping online messages with the artificial Ash. By uploading his private messages and voicemails, she can even talk with the software as it mimics his speech. Then, 'Ash' suggests the next level, which 'might sound a bit creepy'. Martha's soon taking delivery of a mannequin, waiting to be brought to simulated life by data from Ash's appearance on any saved videos. And their relationship resumes, until she realises that 'he' can't take Ash's place.

Like Martha, the viewer is drawn in by what initially sounds like plausible technology. Surely, software which can analyse our online footprint and use it to mimic what we could say isn't too far off? We're already halfway there with facebook timelines and targeted online adverts which use our internet history to guess what we might want to buy. Lured in, the drama makes us accept this software as the thin end of an increasingly unsettling wedge. But despite our doubts, how many of us would be tempted to bring back something of a lost loved one?

Brooker's drama makes us think about how much we share our identities using technology. He doesn't dwell on the potential threats to our already-restricted liberties which come with our online presence. Instead, he makes us question how accurate are the personas we create through our tweets, texts and facebook updates. If anything, though, Ash's resurrected persona is more level-headed than how many of us portray ourselves online!

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