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"I won't bite": Generative AI, Robotics, and the Ethics of Loss in *Black Mirror* 201 "Be Right Back"

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Since its premiere in 2011, *Black Mirror* has proven itself an important television series in its industrial impact and in its thematic ambitions: the show examines how we are to live with contemporary technology. One of its most celebrated episodes, "Be Right Back" (episode 201) considers how AI chatbots and robots can, and cannot, help people deal with personal tragedy. A key question for the show is how episodes like "Be Right Back" construct the ethical and moral dilemmas at the core of contemporary technologies. The essay examines how episodes invite viewers' interest and sympathy in familiar ways, namely, through focalization with key characters, but then rely on how viewer engagement with those characters can manipulate on-going moral and ethical dimensions. In this famous episode, those moral and ethical dimensions of character engagement are mapped onto the personal tragedy and the technological potential to ameliorate it for its main characters.

1. Introduction: A Mirror Held up to Our Age

Black Mirror is the phenomenally successful and groundbreaking anthology television series that has won multiple Emmys and BAFTAs, enjoyed broad audiences, and even changed television. Premiered in 2011, *Black Mirror* has proven a watershed in the television industry for at least two reasons. First, it addresses timely topics in an unusual anthology format that has been credited with reviving the anthology form itself. Referring to a changing cast of characters and contexts, the anthology approach can be contrasted with episodic or serial models, which have recurring characters episode to episode and season to season. The mutability of each episode's cast and milieu permits *Black Mirror* to adjust, fundamentally and effectively, to very different thematic topics. The show's unusual approach has drawn comparisons to one of the most celebrated television shows of all time, *The Twilight Zone*.[1] Second, *Black Mirror* helped galvanize a key moment in the rise of the global streaming services and their being taken as "serious" and "quality" television: Charlie Brooker first developed and produced *Mirror*'s seasons one and two for the UK's Channel 4, but then the show was bought (through outbidding Channel 4) by media giant Netflix: Netflix has now supported it through (as of writing) at least five additional seasons.[2] At the point in the early 2010s when it acquired *Black Mirror*, Netflix was still shipping DVDs and trying to establish its streaming service as something to be taken seriously. The content of the show shifted somewhat in this momentous sale and expansion, from more UK-based topics to globally oriented content to go along with its global distribution from the now undisputed streaming leader. By season six, the show had impressively managed to top, at times, the famous Netflix ratings chart.

    Black Mirror's impact and success, however, have been by no means only television-industrial: entire scholarly books have been dedicated to *Black Mirror*, including one suggesting that it is the television show most "connected to the fears and anxiety of the decade in which it was produced"—fear and anxieties that include the "shifting cultural and technological coordinates of the era."[3] As the show creator and runner Charlie Brooker has explained, the show's title refers to the ubiquity of screens in our lives now: "the black mirror of the title is the one you'll find on every wall, on every

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desk, in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a TV, a monitor, a smart-phone."[4] That general ubiquity of the eponymous black mirror parallels the show's thematic flexibility in its anthology approach: changing cast, characters, and milieus allow it to intervene in any number of debates about technology in our age. And, indeed, one of the many issues it has taken up seems particularly applicable in the early-mid-2020s, in terms of its invocation and initiation *avant la lettre*, of the large language models (LLMs) of the current wave, a downright explosion, of artificial intelligence. That episode, the first of the second season (201), is called "Be Right Back," and brings together the challenges of personal loss with the dubious contributions of this kind of AI. In this essay, I will consider how the show approaches the moral/ethical dilemmas it carefully constructs at the core of its anthology format.

2. The Technological Conceit of "Be Right Back": Chatbots, Robots, and Personal Loss

In *a*, perhaps *the*, key *early* scene of "Be Right Back" (201), Ash Starmer picks up an old, framed photograph of himself in the rambling rural house that he shares with his partner Martha. Ash's picking up this photo is immediately flagged as narratively con-sequential, because, until this point, he has hardly put his phone down (**Figures 1–2**). But now he puts down the phone to pick up a sepia-toned photograph: the film is sig-naling that this photograph, and what it allegorizes, will be important for the episode's plot throughout. At first, viewers might muse that this photograph could be of Ash's and Martha's child—perhaps a dead child, given the datedness of the image and the stillness of their house. But it turns out to be an earlier iteration of Ash himself, likely eight or nine years old at the time (**Figures 3–4**). He recounts that his mother kept this single photo of Ash, as her surviving son, after removing a whole series of other photos from the wall. First, she removed the pictures of her other son and then of her husband, because, as they died and were survived by her and Ash, she apparently thought it best for her and for Ash to pack the mementos away to the literal and metaphoric attic.

The scene foregrounds emotional responses to loss and its prosthetic salve, the photograph—photos do, and don't, help us, as humans with a certain emotional apparatus, cope with this kind of loss. But my phrase "thought it best" foregrounds, pithily, a central mechanism of *Black Mirror* in general: the show focuses not only on the behavior of characters in the face of personal challenges—as most fictional nar-ratives do—but also on a normative impulse therein to judge the best way to behave in challenging situations created by contemporary technology. Norms imply a subtending

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[4] Charlie Brooker, "The dark side of our gadget addiction," *The Guardian*, Dec. 1, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/dec/01/charlie-brooker-dark-side-gadget-addiction-black-mirror.
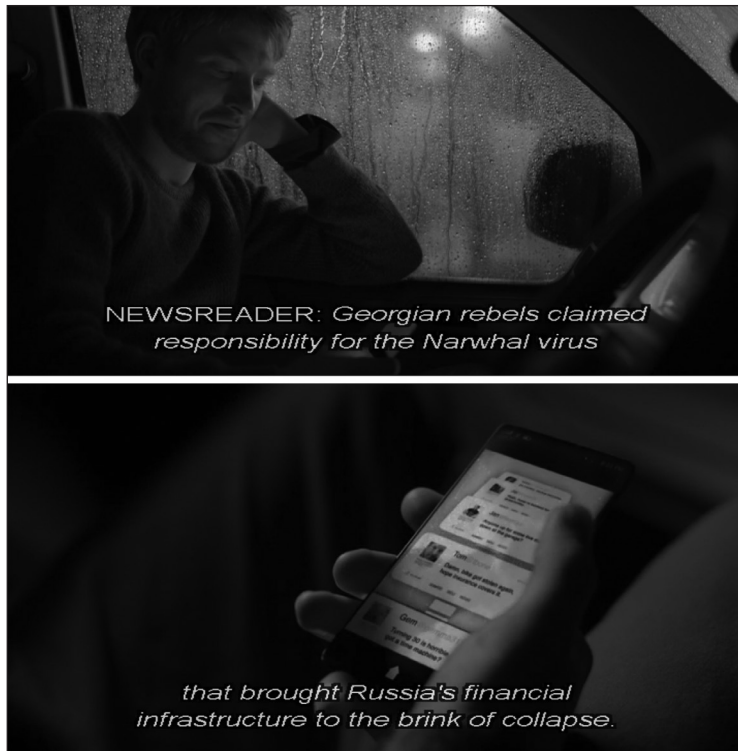
Figures 1–2: Ash's obsessive looking at phone in opening sequence.
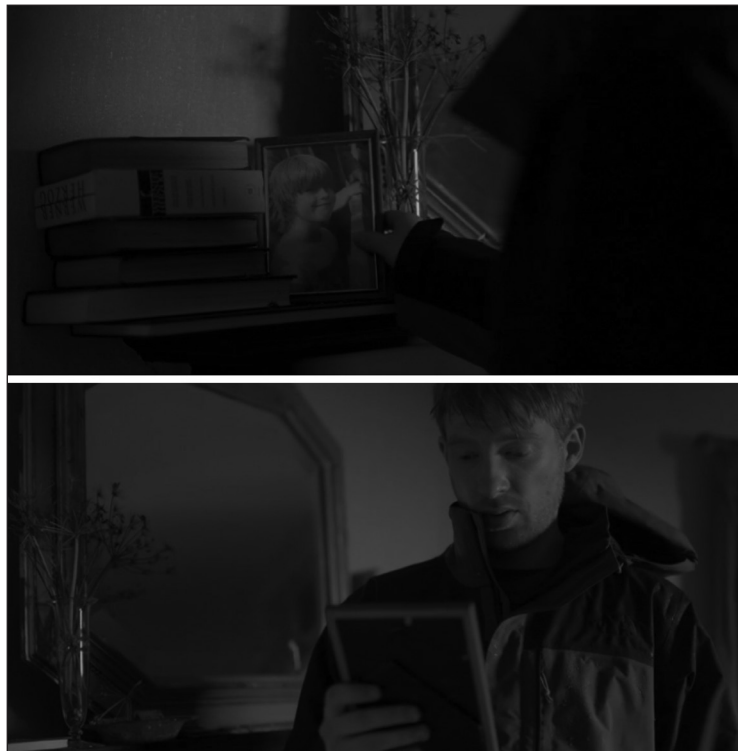

Figures 3–4: Ash's look at older photo, instead of phone.

moral-ethical force to the *Black Mirror* universe, particularly what moral-ethical norms should guide behavior as the contexts of that behavior are changed radically by technology. In fact, this is how *Black Mirror* regularly intensifies these questions of norms and technology—by offering contrasting perspectives on technology and then having its central characters make decisions about its use. With its deliberately provocative narrative design, *Black Mirror* has proven a key popular means of querying moral-ethical dilemmas created by our technologized age. This particularly celebrated episode of *Black Mirror* invites its viewers to consider: How should one react to this kind of loss? What feelings does one experience in the wake of it and what tech-aided actions, in turn, does one take in the wake of these feelings? The "best" action may well shift, as the episode queries, in our technologized age. Herein, I aim to investigate how *Black Mirror* constructs the moral-ethical dilemmas in ways that intersect with the so-called *ethical turn* in screen studies. *Black Mirror* highlights how audio-visual narrative forms engage some of the key moral-ethical questions of our time. In this particular episode, it does so in order to pose questions about how AI should or should not help humans in their lowest moments of searing personal loss.

"Be Right Back" traces a tragedy then compensated, somewhat creepily, by technology. Martha and Ash are a young couple who live in the large childhood house of Ash in the countryside, but one day, due to a work assignment for Martha, Ash goes alone to return a rental van. He never returns. Apparently, Ash died en route from an accident, with the episode subtly suggesting that his tendency to become distracted by, even lost in, his smartphone could be to blame, about which more below. Utterly shocked at the abruptness with which he is gone, Martha attends his funeral in a daze, but a friend tells her of a technology that allows one, more or less, to resurrect the dead by extrapolating from their social-media profiles and other digital traces. After some initial resistance, Martha gives and tries a chatbot, then a robot version of Ash—I'll call it Ash-Bot below—only to be disquieted by both the similarities and dissimilarities to her former loved one, who, after all, likely perished due to his propensity for technology and how all-consuming it can become.

In laying out different reactions to Martha's loss, the episode seems particularly prescient in foregrounding the importance of large-language models in AI and in the subsequent relevance of rhetorically sophisticated bots in general—in fact, this seems to me one of the episode's most important insights into our uncertain AI future (**Figures 5–6**). Artificial intelligence has been around, in one form or another, for decades, but obviously something changed in fall 2022 with the public release of generative AI systems based on large-language models that enable those systems to mimic humans' linguistic patterns and activities. My point herein is not to adjudicate the efficacy of these large-language systems, but rather to point out that something shifted

in the public's perception (and use) of AI once it focused on linguistic training and gen-
erative imitation. In "Be Right Back," the basic model and then further refinement of
Ash-Bot is first and foremost based on language modeling and linguistic interaction
with humans: Ash-Bot's AI begins by absorbing the large archive from Ash's publicly
available social-media posts and then is refined by Martha's granting access to his
"private emails" to further train the Ash-Bot. Here, as with the large-language models,
the training materials for the AI are key and contentious. In her initial interaction with
this large-language-model Ash-Bot, Martha then adapts herself to Ash-Bot's AI such
that she experiences their messaging as one shared with Ash himself, similar to the bots
that I cited above. But that is not quite enough for her—when she messages him that,
above all, she would like to talk to him, she trains the AI further by playing it various
audio and video recordings, such that the literally post-human AI is soon mimicking
Ash's brogue-inflected speech and, eventually, his appearance. In effect, en route to
this embodied Ash-Bot, she is pitched an in-app purchase, a sentient-being upgrade
we can all expect from AI soon (**Figures 7–8**). In this way, the episode foregrounds a
recent development in our technologized world, that is, social media serving not only as
precise behavioral target for advertisers (their basic revenue model), but also as invalu-
able training material for a mimetic robot—a robot aiming not so much at autonomy,
but at a perfect, if creepy imitation of a being previously, recognizably human.
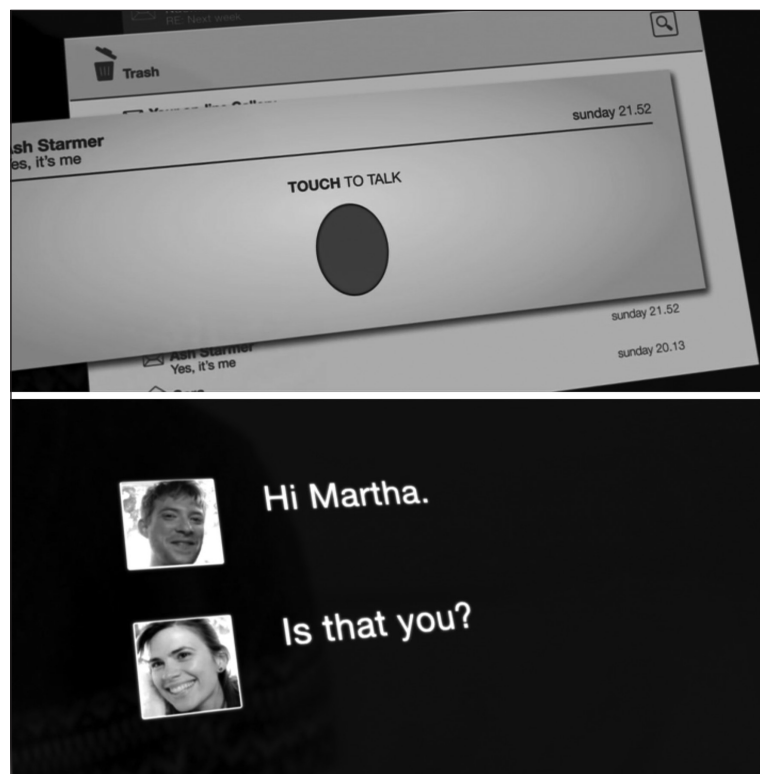
Figures 5–6: Linguistic mimicking of Ash.

Figures 7–8: Ash-Bot, and its AI, embodied.

3. Weighing Ethics: Alignment, Allegiance and Focalization in "Be Right Back"

In the scene with which I began, "Be Right Back" makes the loss of Ash's brother as a child into an allegory early in the episode's plot, not least to foreground what would be a justified and strategic response that is also ethically defensible. Ash hints that this photo of him that his mother kept contained a fake smile of his as he dealt with the death of his brother. Fakeness in dealing with personal loss will be a key theme of the show. But his mother's staging of this grief—by stashing away in storage photographs rather than working through them—is revealing in what I shall develop as the mechanisms of focalization of and moral allegiance to character. Ash's mother's reaction formation to their losses, and Ash's mocking of it, invites viewers to ethically judge her and his responses to these familial loses, which the episodes take as a point of departure: both the lose and reactions to it. Ash recounts the anecdote in part to judge her: he gently mocks his mother's reaction to the death of her son and then her husband—in fact, when his brother died, the remaining family went to a "safari park" that soon had monkeys all over their car but dead silence among the humans within. Ash's animalistic anecdote confirms the show's interest in the boundary between humanity and (other) wildlife, a motif of many of *Black Mirror*'s episodes.

How, more precisely, does the episode stage the ethics raised by the process of grieving in the age of generative AI? Partially by the allegorical mise-en-abyme anecdote with which I opened, and then by drawing viewers emotionally close to Martha's reaction to losing Ash. The recent ethical turn in media studies has highlighted how media can foreground ethical questions in their navigation of narrative and especially character. In their work on ethics in/of cinema, Murray Smith and Carl Plantinga detail how viewers' relationships to character are complex, transcending the conventional focus on pleasure, desire, and/or repression in psychoanalytic theory. They highlight how viewers can, on the one hand, achieve an alignment with a character, normally through narrative time spent on a character's narrative function and/or points-of-view, frequently termed the film's focalization. Focalization entails the deliberate deployment of a medium's technical apparatus—for film, especially the camera's and sound system's perspectives—to focus viewer attention on a character and/or a character's point of view. Funneling viewer attention through focalization fosters viewer alignment with a character and its narrativized experiences.

In the opening, road-trip sequences of the episode, for instance, "Be Right Back" balances the focalization of Ash and Martha evenly, likely to highlight their closeness and (later literal) intimacy. Viewers see both externally focalizing shots of each character as well as brief internally focalizing (point-of-view) shots of each. As Peter Verstraten argues in his *Film Narratology*, the (film) camera can offer external focalizing shots that focus viewer attention on a particular character's experiences, but one significant subset of these focalizing shots are internal focalizing shots that project a character's point-of-view for spectators.[5] Despite being relatively balanced, the opening's internally focalized shots of Ash and Martha diverge subtly, in ways that then resonate throughout "Be Right Back": Ash's internal focalization frame his point-of-view shots on his phone screen, while Martha's frames Ash. Martha makes light of these differences by deriding his phone use, but then, shockingly, Ash the human dies early in the episode, likely due to this self-same phone. Once Ash-Bot appears, viewers are left overwhelmingly with Martha's external and internal focalization. For example, when Ash-Bot is being born in the bathtub or is banished to the garden for the night, the camera stays with Martha, leaving viewers entirely with her focalization despite her curiosity, anticipation, and fear of Ash-Bot as it is being delivered in an upstairs bathtub.

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[5] Peter Verstraten, *Film Narratology*, trans. Stefan Van der Lecq (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 40–41. Plantinga highlights, following Murray Smith, a parallel duality in engagement with character, which he terms a "bifurcation" between a "spatio-temporal attachment" and a "subjective access" to character. Carl Plantinga, *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 195.

This narratively driven alignment via focalization differs, and can narratively diverge, from one's moral and/or ethical allegiance with the character.[6] In most cases, such an allegiance is to the behavior, ethical or not, of a character, as morality more refers to behavior in relation to a larger moral system (e.g., Christian-oriented films like Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* or Scorsese's *Silence*, for instance). Usually, there is significant overlap between viewers' focalized alignment and their moral-ethical allegiance with a character—there may be moments when the viewer wonders about the ethics of what a main character does, but generally those ethics are part of a broader affinity with the protagonist fostered through focalization. There are also notable exceptions to such overlap that usefully underscore how alignment and allegiance can diverge and are therefore subtly different phenomena. As Plantinga points out, serial-killer films sometimes align viewers with the perspective of a perpetrator-protagonist, but then complicate any viewer allegiance with the killer. On the slightly brighter side, any number of Hitchcock films, along with many other films noirs, complicate allegiance with a character with whom viewers are otherwise aligned—for example, *Psycho*'s bifurcated protagonists, with both stealing Marion and stabbing Norman, both complicate any easy allegiance with their focalized actions.

In the beginning sequences of "Be Right Back," as noted above, focalization is largely balanced between Ash and Martha to underscore the intensity of their bond—but there is a slight favoring, in terms of editing, of Ash's internal (point-of-view) focalization as he looks at his phone. This obsession with his phone complicates viewer allegiance with him despite the camera's clear alignment with him via internal focalization: viewers see his point-of-view shot on his phone, but then also hear Martha's gentle mocking of his distraction by, and absorption in, the device. And, indeed, the last time viewers see him, as he pulls out rapidly in the rental van in which he dies, he is manipulating his phone while at the steering wheel. All these cases of a divergence of alignment and allegiance make clear that what was traditionally termed "identification" with a character turns out to be much more complex[7]: it might include a psychoanalytic pleasure/desire, but it also entails an on-going ethical/moral judgment by viewers of the actions of the character.

4. The Ethical Gray Zones of Human-Mimicking Contemporary Technology

Once one understands that split between narrative alignment (usually via focalization) and ethical allegiance to a character, the basic structure of the famous episode falls into place. A narrative's navigation of a moral-ethical allegiance with the char-

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[6] Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 142–227.

[7] For the widely shared scholarly discontent with the notion of identification, see Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 194–95.

acter highlights how central moral or ethical judgments are to mainstream narratives—here, with *Black Mirror*, focused on the ethics around AI and AI-based bots. As Murray Smith and Plantinga outline, this engagement with character invariably entails a moral-ethical judgements about the character and their actions.[8] And these moral-ethical judgments can and often do trigger a parallel array of what scholars have termed "moral emotions,"[9] including anger, disgust, and indignation vis-à-vis characters. For example, although the scene with which I opened foregrounds loss, a critical judgement of Ash's mother's actions seems unduly harsh, even if it is narratively flagged as significant. Although viewers might disapprove of his mother's repressing of memories as a reaction to loss—such that our allegiance to her reaction to the loss is interrupted—we are likely to remain sympathetic to her dilemma. And, over the course of the episode, viewers are soon invited to give Martha herself this kind of leeway, in a kind of ethical openness about the duplication of people as AI-charged robots. For example, I think we could agree that copying a living human whom we love would be adjudged as ethically suspect. If you made a copy of your partner or close relative just for the purposes of their serving as a maid or butler, this would be, I think, morally and ethically suspect (see *Blade Runner* and its overtones of enslaved replicants). But, as with the scene above, people who have experienced searing personal loss are generally given greater ethical leeway in their reactions, which is exactly the gray zone which *Black Mirror*, in its ethical ambiguity, cultivates in "Be Right Back."

In sketching such an ethical gray zone, the episode conveys quickly that there might be something morally or ethically suspect in Martha's approach to her loss: such ethical doubts emerge as early as the funeral for Ash. As the camera finds Martha, she looks, understandably, emotionally crushed and psychologically absent, decidedly detached in her funeral black from the hushed tone of the mourners around her. An apparent friend, Sarah, who has also lost a loved one, observes to Martha that all this— the unexpected death, the mourners, having to abruptly move on—seem "not real," foregrounding the theme of fakeness that Ash raised early in his contrived mourning of his brother. Sarah suggests that she could "sign [you] up for something that helps, it helped me." Viewers would likely assume that this is some medication or drug, given that she says it suspiciously *sotto voce*, but she intimates that Martha's indulging her would be justified and satisfying, since Ash himself was a "heavy user" (suggesting more drug overtones with "user," of course).

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8 Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 204–6.

9 Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 39–40, which he bases on Jonathan Haidt's arguments concerning moral judgments as intuitions, see Plantinga, *Screen Stories*, 44–45.

Although, as it turns out, she means something technological, the drug subtext is no mistake. In fact, Charlie Brooker (the show's creator and co-writer of the episode) has associated the functional similarity between recreational drugs and contemporary technology as a founding theme of *Black Mirror* in general: "If technology is a drug—and it does feel like a drug—then what, precisely, are the side-effects? This area—between delight and discomfort—is where *Black Mirror*, my new drama series, is set."[10] The drug-like qualities of technology in our lives, Brooker is suggesting, locates technology between delight and discomfort, exactly the deliberately constructed ethical gray zone that I cited above. In this way, this scene—when Martha is at her most vulnerable—is one of the key ones for her reaction and our judgment of it. On the one hand, like Ash's mother's compensatory trip to the safari park to distract the family from its loss, the radical solution that Sarah is suggesting seems understandable, given the scale of the personal tragedy. On the other hand, the deliberate association with drugs, and Sarah's performance of its proffer, hints that there is also something morally or ethically suspect about it—a contradiction the show will leave deliberately open as an invitation for viewers to make their own judgements.

The episode is querying the morality and ethics of a technologized reaction to loss, an intensification of a moral-ethical dilemma we shall all face more and more. An initially negative ethical judgment on the loss-compensating technology is delivered by Martha herself. When she receives an email from the now deceased Ash, she realizes that Sarah has signed her up without her consent, and she angrily declares her friend's effort "obscene" and "it's sick, sick"—she suggests that it is a kind of tomb theft plundering the now dead Ash. Her first charge of obscenity highlights the crass violation of ethics that AI technologies can easily activate. It is far from clear whether Ash would have consented to this use of his profiles and posts. But a label of "obscene" recalls the seamy potential of social media on which the Ash-Bot AI is based. With this negative "moral emotion" of Martha's initial reaction, the episode cleverly cleaves viewers closer to her, in terms of allegiance, for being skeptical of the technology, including her declaring it unethical.

Martha's deliberately condemning judgment of the technology highlights how, even if we follow her focalization, there is another moral/ethical dimension to viewers' affinity with a character. But another, ethically complicating plot twist changes the context of these negative judgments: when Martha learns that she is pregnant, she becomes more willing to engage an AI solution to the absence of Ash, her erstwhile partner and now co-parent. With the Ash-Bot, she can imagine that she is sharing this

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[10] Brooker, "The dark side of our gadget addiction."

life-changing news with the father of the child to be. Soon, she has signed on for the embodied version of AI, boiled in a bathtub but looking exactly like Ash, albeit with much improved skin.

Martha's initial negative judgments of the technology, however, haunts her later choice and decisions. Her early declaration to Sarah that Ash-Bot is "obscene" later returns into some of the deepest doubts about Martha's moral-ethical choices vis-à-vis the technology. For most prominent example, it would seem obscene that Martha has sex with Ash-Bot—as viewers, we are watching a person who has experienced personal loss, and with whom we are narratively aligned, have sex with a robot shortly after first encountering it. Her surprise sexual encounter with the robot is set up earlier in the episode with an unsatisfying night with the real Ash shortly before he dies, during which he declares himself knackered/exhausted and rolls over to sleep. When Sarah, declaring the sex with Ash-Bot "real good," wonders where it has learned how to have sex, it reports matter-of-factly that it is a set routine "based on pornographic videos," just to underscore the underlying obscenity issues.

The themes of the shifting boundaries of obscenity and sexual disgust (as an important moral emotion) in our technologized age are, in fact, present in *Black Mirror* from its very first episode, "National Anthem." In this inaugural episode of the whole celebrated series, a kidnapper of an English princess demands, as ransom, that the UK prime minister have sex with a pig on national TV (also resonating with the human-animal theme cited above). After the queen makes clear that she expects the Prime Minister to "do what it takes" to save her granddaughter, the poor politician sees no choice but to accede to the disgusting demands of the kidnapper, who happens to be a Turner-Prize winning artist gone rogue. The intersection of the UK's top politician with bestiality seems to refer to the rumored, and later widely reported, violation of a pig's head by Prime Minster David Cameron when at Oxford (an unconfirmed controversy known as "pig gate"[11]). In any case, "National Anthem" flags the complex intersection of obscenity, disgust, and digital distribution as a theme for the show going forward. In these ways, *Black Mirror* is unabashed about the centrality of sex as part of what it means to be human, about disgust at certain technology-mediated sex acts, and about how those two can be, perhaps disturbingly, brought together more and more often by the digital age.

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[11] Suzanne Moore, "The David Cameron #piggate storm is a sideshow from the real issues. It's certainly effective," *The Guardian*, Sep. 21, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/21/david-cameron-piggate-sideshow-dead-pig.

5. Conclusion: Into the Attic of Memory and Morality

In the episode's climactic scene, Brooker cleverly revisits an earlier set-up near some cliffs that hosted, allegedly a lovers' leaps into the abyss. To Martha's claim of a tradition of shared suicide, Ash-Bot's instantaneous research shows that it was only people jumping alone who had died there, an ambiguity inviting a late-episode clarification. Feeling more and more dissonance at its uncanniness and, presumably, her own attraction to it, Martha leads clueless Ash-Bot to the cliff and abruptly orders it to jump off (**Figures 9–10**). This signals a remarkable genre reversal from much of the episode, that focuses on Martha as the victim of traditional melodrama—here, suddenly, Ash-Bot's potential as a melodramatic victim comes into focus. The order to Ash-Bot to jump off the cliff is disquieting, because of Ash-Bot's puppy-like loyalty and conformity to her wishes—he has assumed, despite being artificial, a certain innocence undeserving of this fate. Here, too, the moral-ethical fairness of a character's trajectory would seem to be at stake—melodrama, for instance, is premised on the underserved suffering of the secretly virtuous. The suffering in melodrama seems all the greater because of the secret virtues of the sufferer.
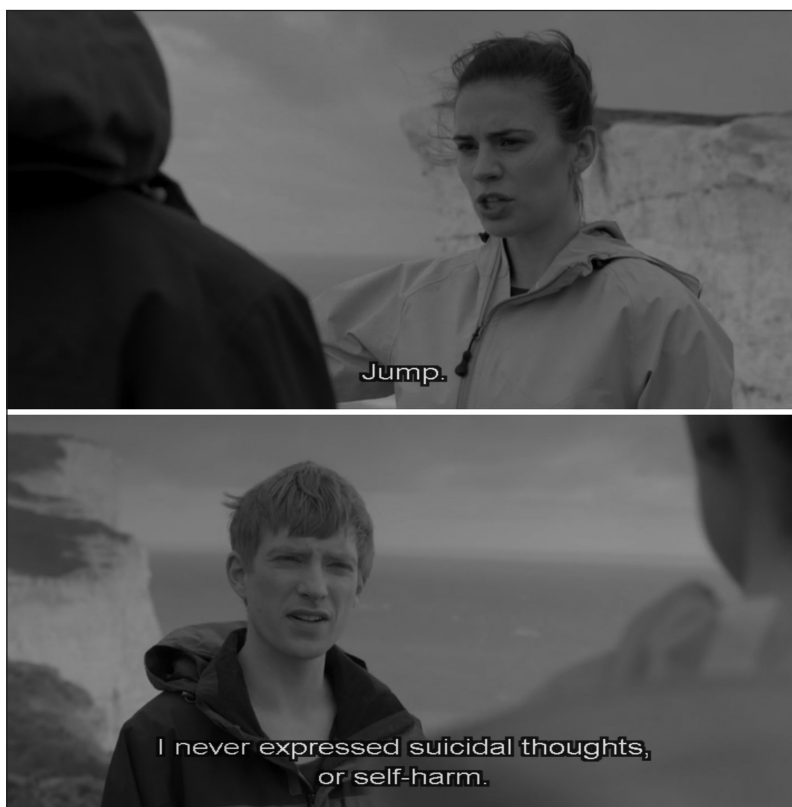
Figures 9–10: Martha's dubious moral test at the lovers' leap cliff.

While a moral reasoning that Ash-Bot is merely a robot might cause us to conclude that a machine that does not "deserve" one fate over another, our moral intuition is that it does not deserve this destructive fate. In fact, this gap between moral-ethical intuition and reasoning is one with which *Black Mirror*, well aware of the mechanisms of narrative, often plays. Narratives, like life, unfold in a flowing manner generally not fostering considered reflection of moral-ethical reasoning. Viewers hear Martha's qualms about using technology this way after the funeral—a deliberately slowed down and lugubrious narrative event—but her decisions to feed the AI more of Ash's media posts and then video, as well as her decision to purchase the physical robot, are taken quickly. Such snap judgements are based more on moral emotions than moral or ethical reasoning. Also like life, narratives produce the snap judgments of moral emotions via intuition: viewers often sense, by way of these intuitions, whether a character is to be adjudged good or not in its actions, with judgements being delivered constantly, in the on-going flow of narrative.

Perhaps because of this dissonance between intuition and reasoning in viewers, the episode saves and even perhaps redeems Ash-Bot: although it initially leaves open if Martha, indeed, ordered him off the cliff and into the abyss of self- (or mechanical?) destruction, viewers watch an epilogue in which they see Martha years later, with her daughter having arrived at ten or eleven years old, while Ash-Bot now resides in the attic. It inhabits that part of the house—notably away from Martha's bedroom—to which Ash's mother once banished photographs of her dead son and husband. In this way, Ash-Bot continues to serve as a memento, but remains more like a photograph than a person with whom one could talk, narrate experiences to, have sex with. Martha has carefully recategorized and conceptually reframed—also for us, the viewers—Ash-Bot as an object and not as a potential person. The apparently happy, or at least compromise, ending seems to be that Martha has ontologically relegated the robot—to which she once she declared her love. She has now relegated him to the status of an inanimate, albeit still compensatory object like a picture from long ago. Neutralized from drawing too close to humanity, Ash-Bot generously leaves an extra piece of cake for Martha's, and perhaps its, daughter. The daughter had brought Ash-Bot a piece of cake, likely out of the knowledge that the robot does not have to eat and would leave the tasty morsel to her. It is no wonder the girl will grow up with an affinity for Ash-Bot—but hers is an intuitive affinity for Ash-Bot that Martha, knowing its suspect and even obscene origins, likely lacks. And the daughter's use of technology for self-serving purposes reminds viewers how humans tend to exploit whatever is around them, ethically or not.

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