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Course

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Accountability Versus Cancel Culture

Today's society holds accountability in high regards, often videotaping and releasing photographs to ensure that the guilty party is judged adequately by society. This use of technology goes along with the ways in which people are closely linked to their phones and the Internet. However, how far is too far? That is the question that the television series *Black Mirror* attempts to answer in each of its episodes—the storylines all warn viewers of the dangers of having too much technology. In its second episode of its second season, which premiered in 2013, called *White Bear*, the focus is more on the people involved though. It hones in on the voyeurs behind the screens, highlighting how people are obsessed with cancel culture. In an attempt to dissect cancel culture, Ligaya Mishan wrote an article for *The New York Times* as well, dissecting the long history that people have with public executions and punishments. In a way, the cell phones are a public platform, capturing every moment to introduce to a public jury, opening people up to shame and judgment. *White Bear* contemplates cancel culture in the form of mob mentality, asking the viewer how far is too far, how much is too much? Accountability is important to a society, holding people up to ethical standards that have been determined by the masses, but the use of technology has introduced a mob-like mentality, forever storing footage to be called upon continually, never giving those that have wronged a chance to correct themselves.

Public punishments were always a form of reckoning, an example for others to not act in the same way. Mishan states, "Guilt still derives from communally agreed-upon standards be

they manifest as religion, ideology, a legal code or just the rudimentary ethics without which no group can survive” (Mishan). While this form of law helps to deter other crimes, cancel culture is in itself a different animal. It might state it is the next form of public reckoning, but it is actually a mind trick to keep users all in the same place, doing the work of the platform and providing entertainment in and of itself, instead of the companies having to work harder for their money (Mishan). It is through this misconception of the public space that creates the bear that is cancel culture, instead creating a mob, much like what happens in *White Bear*.

The main character in *White Bear*, Victoria, wakes up with no memory of what happens to her, and she is left with the viewer to figure it out throughout the episode. The audience learns that she is being pursued, as one of the few that have not been brain washed by their cell phones. The people that want to hurt her are doing it solely for the observers. They do not engage with her, only following her with their cell phones as people with weapons attempt to hurt her. In the end, the audience, along with Victoria, finds out that Victoria is not the protagonist that everyone thinks she is—instead, she was a person that brutally tortured and murdered a little girl. It is apparent that she feels badly about this incident, crying and begging with those to help her and let her go (Tibbetts). In the end, though, her memory is wiped and she is introduced to a new day of this psychological torture, with people filming her pain the way she filmed the child’s. Even though Victoria is a different person without her memory, the people capturing the footage refuse to let her move on. They perpetually torture her, using their devices to eternally store the footage. They sign up to do this, almost gleefully. This highlights the ways in which society latches onto online bullying, cancelling anyone that does something they do not agree with, and holding it over their heads for years. Cancel culture is dangerous because it does not let anyone

move on. While Victoria's case is an extreme one, the episode reflects on the idea that the audience is simply watching, actively participating in her torture.

Black Mirror warns of the dangers of society, but this episode warns people of the dangers of how technology can invite them to take part of cancel culture, never allowing others to move on. People congregate online, becoming a mob that holds people accountable for the sins they think they have committed, becoming a jury of their peers. *White Bear*'s Victoria cries desperately, never being allowed to atone for her sins, while others continue to make a public spectacle out of her (Tibbetts). This happens over and over again, seemingly without end. The public sees this as fair, but it is torture in its own right. The people have overstepped the legal system that she was judged by, instead making the decision to cancel her and to bully her. Regardless what Victoria did was wrong or not, she had been given a sentence, even though it was ignored. This metaphor highlights how easy it is for those that participate in Internet cancel culture to pile onto others, using the anonymity of their screens to support their forms of entertainment and to get them out of the accountability that they crave for those that they have cancelled.

White Bear takes the metaphor to an extreme, but it shows a world in which the people manipulating the technology are the ones to blame. Society thinks they are introducing accountability and a public reckoning, but instead they are engaging in mob mentality, attacking those that they believe are wrong. They form their own opinions and judgments, creating a negative space for those that they disagree with. Cancel culture is not a public reckoning, but instead a form of entertainment for those that are not going through it. *Black Mirror*'s episode is eerie in the sense that the protagonist turns out to be someone different than the audience

thought, but she is never given a chance to atone for her sins and to move on from her bad decisions.

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