

ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

Emotional Exploitation in British Reality Television and Black Mirror

Research Question: How do the *Black Mirror* episodes *Fifteen Million Merits* and *White Bear* reflect the emotional exploitation embedded in British reality television culture from the 2000s to the present through the use of film techniques and central themes?

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Introduction

Reality television has been a prominent force in British popular culture since the early 2000s. Programs like *Big Brother*, *The X Factor*, and *Love Island* put normal people in emotionally intense circumstances and encourage their audiences to watch and judge them. The way reality TV shows presented themselves as depictions of real life enabled them to gain massive audience support and greatly benefited television producers. (Medhurst, 2024) Yet, as reality television continued to dominate the UK media environment, concerns arose about what goes on behind the scenes. The ethics of turning one's private life into entertainment, the manipulative use of editing techniques, and the pressure producers place on participants all became subjects of controversy. While this genre of programs appears to be light-hearted entertainment for most viewers, the reality is that they rely heavily upon the vulnerability and personal struggles of participants to generate conflict and drama. Thus, reality television exceeds being a part of the entertainment sector and serves as a reflection of how media advancements are distorting our society. A spectacle that Charlie Brooker explores in detail in the British anthology series *Black Mirror*.

The previously mentioned series has received recognition for its ability to reveal the unforeseen consequences of emerging technologies and how they can alter our society through dystopian narratives. Each episode of the series present a new setting and a different story centered around new technologies and their prospect of harming human values and behaviors. Most episodes are set in the United Kingdom, and hence, they reflect social issues essential to British society. Two episodes of *Black Mirror*, *White Bear* and *Fifteen Million Merits*, feature their ability to reflect how reality shows in

the UK convert shame and personal trauma into spectacle for mass audiences. This essay aims to analyze the two episodes of *Black Mirror* and their representations of the ethical troubles of British reality television culture. To achieve this, this investigation follows an interpretative approach, focusing on a breakdown analysis of themes and film techniques present in the episodes and relevant examples from real-life reality shows. Through these methods this essay aims to answer the question: “How do the *Black Mirror* episodes *Fifteen Million Merits* and *White Bear* reflect the emotional exploitation embedded in British reality television culture from the 2000s to the present through the use of film techniques and central themes?”

British Reality Television Culture

Prior to examining the dark sides of reality television, it is necessary to outline how it gained popularity in the UK and its cultural significance. Reality television in the UK originated from early documentary programs in the 1970s such as the BBC's *The Family* (1974), which produced an observational style of programming named "fly-on-the-wall". (Staff, 2017) The appeal towards reality shows increased around the turn of the millennium as competition increased among broadcasters and audience fragmentation created an opportunity for unscripted programming to flourish. By the late 1990s, the genre had evolved, with confessional talk shows and social experiment shows like *Big Brother* cementing reality television as a staple in British media culture. (BBC, 2020)

Due to the increasing success and commercial viability of the format, media focus shifted towards one trend, which is the strategic emphasis and exaggeration of emotional intensity. As stated by the Independent, British TV has gradually “switched up” exploitation for ratings to emphasize conflict and drama for the audience. (Lanigan, 2024) A number of different formats, including talk shows, talent shows, and dating series, share the same issue of being driven by participant vulnerability, which is the key element that draws the audience. This tendency is also discussed in the studies and policy discourses on the production of reality TV. Evidence submitted to the UK Parliament has confirmed that contestants are occasionally subjected to extreme pressure to create emotionally charged responses and surprising scenarios. (Johanssen, 2019) Culturally, this approach creates a media environment in which vulnerability is used as a viable commodity. In such an environment, contestants lose control over their own emotional boundaries and mental breakdowns appear to be a good reason for watching television. This cultural pattern forms the foundation that *Black Mirror* images in *Fifteen Million Merits* and *White Bear*, exposing the entertainment systems turn human feelings into spectacle.

Evidence that demonstrates the negligibility of contestant well-being is not new and continues to persist throughout decades, including examples of the behavior witnessed on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, where it was suggested that it exploited guests' real problems and caused mental harm. (Kleeman, 2021) Further evidence of the shift in viewer opinion towards greater awareness of the signs of isolation, bullying or emotional pressure of contestants is demonstrated by the reaction to *Love Island* and the amount of criticism it faced. In fact, concerns became so extreme that Ofcom

received more than 14,000 complaints about the 2025 series of *Love Island*. (Savage, 2025) Moreover, organizations that provide mental health services have also participated in considerations of the psychological impact of reality TV formats, particularly relating to body image and anxiety, which are two topics that are relevant to the representation of vulnerability on television. (Moreton, 2021)

Overall, emotional exploitation is not a rare occurrence, but rather a cultural norm in British reality television. This trend has resulted in a media landscape that the *Black Mirror* episodes, *Fifteen Million Merits* and *White Bear* project. In both episodes, the characters' emotions, breakdowns and susceptibility are watched and consumed by the audience, much like those who enter reality shows. The episodes illustrate how the portrayal of emotion is shaped and performed for the audience and not naturally experienced through camera angles, staging, and further film techniques. Ultimately, the *Black Mirror* episodes challenge the viewer to consider whether the emotions of reality TV contestants are authentic or manufactured. The cultural context of British reality television serves as the foundation for this analysis of how each episode employs themes and film techniques to portray emotional exploitation.

Film techniques and central themes in Black Mirror

The British anthology series *Black Mirror* examines how modern technologies can create unintended consequences on our society. Although the general message and the major themes remain consistent throughout the show, each episode is unique in narrative and film techniques used. As the title, *Black Mirror*, suggests, the series reflects not only the potential future effects of new technologies but also the damaging

impacts on the current state of society. Two of the episodes, *White Bear* and *Fifteen Million Merits*, recollect the darker aspects of reality shows prevalent in the UK and demonstrate how an individual's personal exposure and weaknesses can be exploited for public entertainment. Although the storylines of the two episodes vary greatly, they share multiple common themes of the surveillance, the loss of individuality, and the commercialization of human vulnerability. These themes are explored through film techniques such as color palette, camera work and mise-en-scène, to emphasize the psychological tension experienced by the individuals behind the screens of reality TV.

Fifteen Million Merits

Fifteen Million Merits is the second episode of the first season of *Black Mirror*. The director of the episode, Euros Lyn's background in creating futuristic films is reflected in *Fifteen Million Merits*, which contains elements of science fiction to portray a dystopian setting with advanced technology and assertive media presence. For the writing of the episode, Charlie Brooker collaborated with his wife, Konnie Huq, who has been working as a presenter in British television shows for many years. (*Charlie Brooker Interview - Channel 4 - Info - Press*) Brooker's creative and innovative writing style was complemented by Huq's personal experience in the British media, which added authenticity to the talent show environment portrayed in the episode.

The episode is set in a highly restrictive and dehumanizing society in which inhabitants earn "merits" by pedaling stationary bicycles. It explores a dystopian world where the suppression of individual identity is replaced by constant media

exposure. The only opportunity for escape from this monotonous existence is to obtain fame through a talent show known as "Hot Shot", available only to those who can afford to purchase a ticket for fifteen million merits. According to Brooker, the inspiration for this system came directly from the appeal of fame promised by real-life talent shows: "There are a lot of people who do a job they hate for little reward, and one of the main means of salvation that's held up is to become an overnight star." (*Lambie & Lambie, 2023*). As this system unfolds, the episode follows two characters, Bing, a calm and reserved man who earns fifteen million merits upon the death of his brother, and Abi, a beautiful and kind girl for whom Bing uses his merits to enter her in "Hot Shot". Abi auditions for the show with hopes and ambitions however, her sentimental performance is converted into sexualized entertainment. Following that, Bing participates in the show, giving a defiant outburst that is similarly remade into "inspirational" content. Through the results of these two performances, the episode reveals how aspirations and emotions are absorbed into an entertainment machine built on audience attraction. The following discussion examines how this emotional exploitation occurs in British reality television using three major stances: the coercion of contestants into making decisions, the sexualization of the female body, and the intensity of emotional breakdowns.

Similar to the British talent shows, *Fifteen Million Merits* puts on a clear use of manipulation and coercion of participants to achieve commercial goals. This is first seen in Abi's audition, during which she is offered a drink labeled "cuppliance," which literally translates to "compliance in a cup", by the stage staff to chemically subdue her resistance to the jury's judgment. The cuppliance symbolizes psychological

control, loosening Abi's will-power and makes her emotional state congruent with what is being asked of her as a participant. This form of pre-performance interference is comparable to the tactics employed by real talent shows, where contestants have publicly criticized the production team for manipulating and pressuring them to act in ways that would yield more dramatic, entertaining performances. For instance, Zoe Alexander, a contestant on *The X Factor* in 2012, claimed that the production team misdirected her to choose a specific song for her to perform at the audition with the motive of humiliating her and producing a dramatic scene. (Dodgson, 2020) Her testimony strengthens how producers of reality shows actively control participants' behavior to maximize entertainment value. During Abi's audition, she sings a melancholic song her mother taught her, prompting the audience to cry. Yet, despite the flattering reception, the judges dismiss the possibility of her becoming a professional singer and instead advise her to join a pornography channel because she is more suited to it. Close-up shots of Abi during this part of the scene accentuate the difference between the innocence of her voice and the artificial mise-en-scène of the set. Additionally, the camera angle continuously switches between the judges and Abi, stressing the pressure that forms her decision-making. To convince her, one of the judges says, "It is either this or returning to the bike", illustrating the manipulative tactics used in British talent shows, where a contestant's consent is obtained through intimidation rather than their own free will.

Similarly, Abi's treatment in *Hot Shot* directly mirrors how female participants in reality television shows are sexualized and insulted. Judge Hope gives praise to Abi's voice; however, he states that she will struggle being taken seriously as a singer due to

her physical beauty, claiming that a woman's femininity can take away from her abilities as an artist. Judge Wraith takes what Judge Hope stated regarding Abi's body further and offers her a place on his pornography channel. He promises "pleasure forever" and urges Abi to "forget about shame." By doing so, Judge Wraith reduces Abi to an object of pleasure as a viable career option. Similar instances of this type of behavior have occurred on *Britain's Got Talent*, where on several occasions, judge David Walliams was criticized for making sexually explicit comments toward female contestants while filming. (Glynn, 2022) These samples illustrate how women's bodies are subjected to comment and evaluation beyond their talents and how Abi's vulnerability and artistic skill are overshadowed through sexualization in *Fifteen Million Merits*.

The episode again brings attention to the focus placed on emotional collapse within reality shows. After Abi enters the pornography channel, Bing collapses in his small cell. He is constantly surrounded by screens and advertisements that he cannot escape. The use of low lighting and close camera angles effectively conveys him as confined and isolated. His speech when he appears on Hot Shot reveals all of his anger and pain, almost as if the show wants to allow audiences to view him break down further and the judges decide that his outburst would make good content. This situation parallels with British reality television, where producers have been reported to place participants under intense emotional pressure to provoke dramatic reactions for viewers. (Johanssen, 2019) Tears and outrage are deliberately cultivated to create captivating scenes, making breakdowns an expected part of the viewing experience.

Overall, *Fifteen Million Merits* shows how British reality television, especially talent shows, can use people's emotions, bodies, and choices for the sake of ratings. Contestants are pushed into decisions, judged on their appearance and encouraged to break down on camera, similarly to how early-2000s British reality television often turned vulnerability, conflict and desire into entertainment, especially through talent and competition formats. By the end of the episode, even Bing's anger and Abi's hope are turned into something to watch, suggesting that there is no limits of exploitation for content. In this way, the episode questions how much of reality television is truly genuine, and how much is shaped for viewers and ratings.

White Bear

Unlike *Fifteen Million Merits*, the second episode of *Black Mirror*'s second season, *White Bear*, presents a greatly differing story. The episode was directed by Carl Tibbetts, who has worked on many episodes of *Black Mirror*, and was written by Charlie Brooker, who is the creator of *Black Mirror*. The story focuses on Victoria, a woman who awakens with no memory and finds herself in a home that is in complete disorder. She searches for both answers and assistance while being recorded by a large number of people on their phones, who are not responding or helping her. Ultimately, it is revealed that all of what she experienced is part of an organized public entertainment display with the name of "White Bear Justice Park". This scheme is used to repeatedly punish a woman for a crime she once committed but has no memory of. Ultimately, White Bear Justice Park's motive for punishing the woman is no longer focused on justice, but rather on providing an exhibition of entertainment that will attract a large number of visitors. Thus, while *White Bear* does not depict an

exact reality television setting, as depicted in *Fifteen Million Merits*, it provides a powerful analogy through film techniques and shared themes of voyeurism, public humiliation, and the manipulation of the narrative.

Generally, the extent to which *White Bear* connects with the emotional exploitation in British reality television could be examined through a range of film techniques used in the episode. To begin with, the colors on the screen are dull and faded, mirroring the drab world in which the main character is. The camerawork is also prominent for giving the episode a reality-show feel, focused around the main character while remaining realistic and unstable. Furthermore, flashbacks are crucial in foreshadowing the reasons for which the main character is in this situation and for increasing dramatic tension. In the episode, time and again, we see the images of a young girl and a man, discovered in the pictures at the house where she wakes up, a glimpse of memory that continues to stay with her after she loses her memory. This progressive release of suspense corresponds to the reality TV practice of withholding important details until the right moment, keeping the audience engaged.

A central theme within *White Bear* is voyeurism and the desensitization of turning emotional pain into entertainment. The episode uses the camera to place the viewer directly into Victoria's headspace. The fluidity of the camera movement creates a sense of instability as it moves rapidly and focuses in and out of frame. At the same time, wider shots reveal "onlookers" filming her with their phone cameras and smiling. These viewers treat her fear as a spectacle to be observed, especially when the walls open and they are shown cheering under bright lighting as if appreciating a grand finale. In this case the "onlookers" symbolize the audience's complicity in this

cycle of emotional exploitation. Similar cases have been present in British reality television, as audience engagement was the key reason for continuing the emotional exposure and humiliation of participants. Researchers describe this form of content as “humiliatainment,” where the humiliation of individuals is used as entertainment for others. (Jogdand, 2023) A prime example of this is *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, which allowed participants to be publicly humiliated in front of a live studio audience, as well as millions of home viewers and was cancelled after a contestant committed suicide right after the episode. (BBC News, 2019) Although the show marketed itself as a moral intervention or a means of seeking the truth about participants' actions, its true draw was the audience's reactions to insults, animosity, and humiliation of entrants. As a result, the voyeuristic theme in *White Bear* is a reflection of the role that audiences play in perpetuating the humiliation of participants in British Reality TV. These arrangements rely on viewers who find satisfaction in viewing others get offended. Thus, the episode supports the notion that exploitation continues to exist because people continue to watch.

Another critical theme in *White Bear* is public shaming, as punishment is administered through collective hatred rather than through justice. Through White Bear Justice Park, Victoria is singled out and perceived as an adversary, as well as encouraged to be judged and emotionally isolated from society. As a result of her amnesia and lack of personal identity, Victoria is viewed by park visitors as simply a bad person who committed a crime rather than as a person with dignity and worth. Interestingly, she is not introduced by her name until the last moments of the episode, which appears to be a reminder that the whole concept of public shaming is based on the ability to

overlook personality to create emotional rationales. This plot reproduces a common trend in the British media, as individuals are depicted as villains and are held to joint hate. During the first UK series of *Big Brother*, a housemate known as Nasty Nick was soon identified as the antagonist after his fellow housemates discovered that he was orchestrating nominations, and the entire country responded with extreme criticism and media coverage that made his presence an object of ridicule and scorn. (Lawson, 2000) By transforming individual emotions into a platform for condemnation, the episode exposes the power of crowd shaming as a method of emotional exploitation.

A final theme explored in *White Bear* is narrative manipulation, in which participant behaviour is controlled to fit a predetermined storyline. Throughout the episode, Victoria constantly faces new challenges and mentally coercive elements, which she reacts with fear. Her strain and confusion make the audience empathize with her and make the episode more compelling. The final twist reveals that the entire sequence of events were calculated and established to elicit emotional reactions out of the character. This is indicative of what happens in reality shows where editing and sequencing are used to create how emotions are portrayed and interpreted. The actions and reactions of contestants are heavily edited in most reality TV programmes to create clear storylines of conflict and drama, irrespective of the broader context. In both scenarios, the manipulation of emotions is made by controlling the narratives where the feelings are structured, further enhanced and recur to keep the audience interested instead of providing a pure view of reality.

In general, the mechanism of emotional exploitation is explored in the episode *White Bear* through the public punishment scheme constructed for a villified criminal. The episode demonstrates how British reality shows exploit participants with the means of public shaming, participation of the audience and exploiting the storyline. Instead of justice or understanding, the episode and the theme park format depend on emotional exposure for attraction. By such, *White Bear* exposes the potential to make the consumption of other people's feelings a banality of the entertainment culture, which directly corresponds to the emotional exploitation of the British reality TV.

Conclusion

This essay has explored how *Black Mirror* portrays the emotional exploitation embedded in the UK's reality TV since the early 2000s through the episodes *Fifteen Million Merits* and *White Bear*. By looking at ways in which manipulation, humiliation and audience engagement shape the narratives of these two episodes, along with film techniques used such as camera work, lighting and mise-en-scène, it has shown how both episodes reflect current British television culture. The "talent" show format of *Fifteen Million Merits* reveals how ambition and hopes can be exploited for profit, and *White Bear's* public punishment scheme reflects a culture where humiliating people as entertainment is acceptable. In both instances, emotional misery is created and presented to fulfill the audience's expectations, highlighting how exploitation became normalised as a part of popular television formats.

Furthermore, *Black Mirror* offers a broader critical view of the British media culture and the way it relates to technology, surveillance and mass consumption of television

programming. It does so by referencing and reflecting back to familiar programs that emphasize how television audiences have become accustomed to enjoying others' downfalls. In addition, these episodes suggest that emotional exploitation is not exclusive to reality show producers, but rather stems from the societal values that support confrontations and the downfall of individuals. Ultimately, *Black Mirror* encourages its audience to reflect on their role in perpetuating this social phenomenon and whether or not entertainment based on another's suffering can exist side-by-side with both empathy and an ethical understanding.

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