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A Buddhist Tourist in the Black Museum - Abstract

At first glance, “Black Museum” is a study in revenge. It is made more poignant as the very same technology that is used by Rolo Haynes is used against him. However, I’ll argue that a deeper look reveals the focus to be suffering more broadly construed. Since a central idea of Buddhism is that the human condition is suffering (*dukkha*), Buddhism offers an insightful way to understand the episode. I’ll use some key Buddhist ideas to uncover assumptions that might otherwise go unchallenged. For example, the experiences of Peter, Carrie, and Clayton presuppose a fundamental separation of mind and body.

Peter Dawson becomes attached to pain, Jack is attached to Carrie, Carrie is attached to Parker, and Nish is attached to her mother and to getting revenge for her father, Clayton. Although these attachments seem to differ from each other, I will show how they are all examples of the second noble truth that attachment leads to suffering. Peter’s addiction also challenges the assumption that pain and pleasure are opposed to each other.

The Buddhist idea of the impermanence of all things is demonstrated through, and also resisted in, Peter’s need for more and more pain experiences. It can also be seen in Jack’s attempt to keep Carrie as a central part of his life after her accident and Carrie’s distress at missing opportunities to witness milestones in Parker’s childhood. The tourists’ desire to perpetuate Clayton’s suffering via their souvenirs also conflicts with impermanence.

Applying the Buddhist principle of the interconnectedness of all things allows us to see the problems that arise for characters from a unique perspective and it helps to explain why Rolo’s proposed solutions fail. The transmitter and receiver allow Peter to connect more fully with his patients in some ways and yet disconnects him in others; he experiences their pain without their thoughts, emotions, and any physical effects. Likewise, Jack and Carrie are both more and less connected when she becomes Jack’s passenger. While Carrie has become a part of Jack, they are primarily limited to verbal communication. Jack and Carrie’s story also raises questions about the limits of privacy and autonomy in personal relationships.

Clayton and Rolo are connected to each other as victim and torturer, and then as host and passenger. They are also connected to their digital copies. Yet their digital copies are disconnected to almost everything aside from pain and suffering.

According to Buddhism, compassion should be our response to suffering. This contrasts with the notion that Nish is justified in exacting revenge upon Rolo and prompts questions about the compatibility of justice, karma, and compassion. While it might be thought that Rolo's punishment is due to his bad karma, Nish's direct involvement in his suffering will bring her bad karma. Thus, although "Black Museum" seems to end on a happy note, we should also wonder about Nish's and her mother's future suffering as host and passenger.