

“You see me as I am?”

A sociological outlook on an episode of Black Mirror¹



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¹ A British science fiction anthology television series.

Image Credits: Netflix.

Men Against Fire

The fifth episode from the third series of Black Mirror

This episode portrays a certain dystopian society set in the future, with remarkable advancements in technology. However, this episode turns out to be more sociological than science fiction, showcasing societal influence and the social construction of reality in both a subtle, as well as an overt manner.

The episode begins with Stripe, a new soldier in the military, who's on his first mission to kill 'roaches'. All the other soldiers call him 'new', because that is presumably what they called someone who was new at the job. This is one of the very first subtle examples of **culture**, which when very simply put, is a way of life; the social ideas and behaviour of a society. We also hear Stripe tell them, "it's Stripe", which distinctly portrays his dislike for the term and his willingness to **deviate** from the social norm.

Stripe, along with his team, makes his way to the Danish village that has been raided by the roaches. Stripe meets a woman and her child who seem genuinely frightened. She asks Stripe to save them both from the roaches. The soldiers move on to Heidekker's place, which is supposedly where the roaches are hiding. The word around is that Heidekker is some religious freak, who lets roaches cross his land and leaves food out for them. Medina, the group leader, says that he is not a socialite and has interesting views on the roaches. Catching the word 'socialite', we see that Heidekker isn't much of a mingler because he probably doesn't share similar ideas with the people.

Medina very eloquently then explains about roaches; how their blood and DNA is different from other people and how it is essential to wipe them out to allow humankind carry on in the world. They find roaches hidden at his place and Stripe successfully kills two of them. Roaches are revealed to be human-like creatures, but with distorted, monstrous faces. Heidekker's action here is a very quintessential example of **deviance**, which refers to the violation of social norms and in some cases, laws. The general idea was that roaches were evil and

had to be destroyed. However, Heidekker thought differently, and did not want to kill these creatures. He, as it were, ‘deviated’ from the general social belief.

Rai wanted to kill Heidekker as well, because “roach lover counts as a kill too, right?”. However, Medina instructs her not to simply because he had committed no crime, as he was just a civilian and not a roach himself. But Rai’s remark shows that his willingness to deviate from the social norm marked him as a criminal in their eyes. Even though he hadn’t broken the law, he did not obey the social rules, which caused the feeling of repugnance amongst the soldiers.

Another sociological concept we notice here is **socialisation**, which takes place when members of a society start to conform to the norms and the values and start sharing similar ideas. It’s pretty evident that Heidekker doesn’t share similar beliefs with the other villagers and doesn’t loathe the roaches. He does NOT socialise within the society of the village.

Stripe starts noticing glitches in his mass system, and meets with Arquette. It is revealed that his real name is ‘Koinange’, probably hinting at the fact that the other soldiers didn’t want to call him that as the name did not belong to their culture and so, they gave him one that did. Stripe says he was relieved after killing the roaches and Arquette tells him that he should be proud of himself.

The team then invades a warehouse to kill the roaches. Stripe’s head starts aching again and his mass system stops working. Medina gets killed and the remaining ones go inside. Stripe encounters the roaches, however, they don’t seem to have that monstrous face anymore. On the contrary, they all look completely human to him! Rai starts killing everyone, but Stripe, thinking that they are all humans, intervenes and saves a woman and her child.

In a major twist, it is then revealed by the woman that it was the mass system that gave Stripe the sensation of the monstrous features on the people! They’re actually just humans, but are treated as ‘roaches’ because of their undesirable DNA and blood. They were considered ‘unfit’ for society. The villagers do not have mass in their heads; they cannot see any distorted appearance on the roaches, and yet see them as monsters, beautifully applying the idea that reality is socially constructed. They hate the roaches because “that’s what they’ve been

told!”. The media and television called them filthy creatures who have weaknesses in their blood. So everyone believed that, because these social forces influenced their thought and behaviour - an apt example of sociological imagination. The societies we grow up in influence the way we perceive others. It was the influence of the social **structure**, that shaped the behaviour of the people. A social structure, as it were, is a set of social systems and social forces that shape the thought and behaviour of people. Our thoughts and actions are often a consequence of large scale social forces.

This draws a very heavy parallelism to the Jews during the infamous Holocaust period during Nazi Germany. The Jews, much like the roaches, were heavily looked down upon because of their race and religion. They were considered sickly, narrow minded and socially unacceptable. This became the social reality at the time, and the social structure influenced everyone to think about the Jews in the same way. Similarly, the roaches were also treated as outcasts, simply because the social structure dictated so. This is a good example of **discourse**, which refers to all the social forces that shape the ideas and beliefs of people. Discourse generally emerges out of ‘power’ because it’s generally formed by the people in power - media, law etc. All institutions of power proclaimed the roaches to be unfit for society and ordered them to be killed by the military, which became the prevalent discourse in the society.

Moving on, Rai catches the roaches and kills them, and Stripe is imprisoned. Arquette explains to Stripe about the mass system and how it “controls your senses and helps you pull the trigger when you’re aiming at the boogeyman.” Soldiers may be a little reluctant to kill humans, but because they ‘look’ like monsters, it would be easier to pull the trigger. Hence, the soldier is under the influence and pressure of the mass system and society, causing him/her to feel no remorse while killing the roaches, who are considered diabolical, because that is how the social structure broadcasts it as.

Arquette tells Stripe, “the villagers and the other people won’t do it. Only you can do it, because Mass lets you do it. And that, my friend, is an honour.” Because killing roaches is considered honourable, because roaches are abhorrent creatures destroying the human race, because that is the social reality. However, Stripe replies back saying, “there is no honour here, it’s just killing”, clearly

deviating from the social belief that killing roaches is beneficial to society. Much like Heidekker, Stripe also deviates from the social consensus by not killing the roaches in the warehouse.

It would be cruel if we discussed about structure and not about **agency** as it is a very significant conceptual dichotomy in sociology. While social structures constrain and influence the actions of people, agency refers to the capacity of people to make their own choices and act independently. This concept is indisputably evident from the actions of Heidekker and later, Stripe himself. Heidekker does not carried away by the social forces of killing the roaches and rather, lets them into his house and offers them food. Stripe refuses to kill the roaches when he realises that he had been believing something that had been socially constructed. He decides to act independently, and hence, the social structure does NOT dictate his actions.

“The mass system, they put it in your head to help you fight. And when it works, you see us as something other.” This remark by the woman, who Stripe saves, elucidates it all in a nutshell. The mass system is analogous for the social pressure and forces, that Stripe was influenced by. Applying sociological imagination to this, Stripe was killing roaches, because of the social perception of the roaches.

“You see me as I am? You don’t see roach?”, asks the woman, utterly confounded.

The villagers saw her as roach.

The society saw her as roach.

The woman, who asked Stripe to save her and her child, saw her as roach.

Because we don’t always see things for themselves, as they really are.

We see them as *we* are.