In and Out of the Black Mirror; an Ideological Investigation into 'Nosedive'

Article · February 2020

1 author:

Ali Yazdizadeh
University of Tehran
3 PUBLICATIONS   **0** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

In and Out of the Black Mirror; an Ideological Investigation into 'Nosedive'

Abdolali Yazdizadeh
Univeristy of Tehran

With the advent of the 'golden age of TV series' and the entrance of acclaimed film directors such as David Lynch and Woody Allen into the TV series industry, the study of this medium has gained special interest among academic circles. Today, TV series such as Terminator: The Sara Conner Chronicles *(2008-2009) or* Westworld *(2016-present) are read as complex cultural texts reflective of deep-seated collective anxieties rather than mere escapist entertainment and their philosophical merits are the subject of academic papers. The present article also aims to read a popular TV series from a critical perspective and disclose its sub-textual cultural anxieties. The present study centres on 'Nosedive', the first episode of the third season of Charlie Brooker's much acclaimed* Black Mirror *(2011-present). By drawing on Baudrillard's postmodern theory and by reference to the cultural theory of Slavoj Žižek, I aim to expose the American character of the hyperreal condition displayed in this episode and disclose its sub-textual critique of the extremes of 'PC' culture.*

Black Mirror (2011-Present) is a British science fiction TV series masterminded by British humorist and author Charlie Brooker. It was launched and broadcast by Channel 4 until Netflix purchased the program in 2015 and produced an American spin-off. The majority of the episodes centre on the grim effects of the dominance of future technologies over human life and present warnings about a future that might be just around the corner. Consequently, the series is read as a depiction of the 'consequences of unchecked techno-capitalism' on the lives of individuals in 'a futuristic, dystopian projection' of the present.[1] Such a hermeneutic approach to *Black Mirror* is in conjunction with a well established theory on Science Fiction (SF) that posits the end product of all attempts to create alternative realities in this genre are defamiliarised visions 'of our own present.'[2] In the episode 'Nosedive', the validity of this theory is showcased as it delivers a sharp satire against the current obsession with social media in an alternative reality. However, tracing such distorted aspects of the present social reality is not the aim of this essay as they constitute the manifest content of the episode and do not demand much critical investigation. The present essay aims to delve into the latent content of the episode and unveil what components of the present socio-ideological reality remain concealed beneath its manifest allegorical surface. To this end, this essay is divided into two sections which will work from a close-reading of the episode's subversion of the order of 'hyperreality' to a critique of the extremities in Political Correctness (PC).

---

[1] B. Salem, 'Black Mirror: Technostruggles, Capitalism, and Media Culture in the United Kingdom' MA Thesis, University of Lancaster, 2015 , p. 7.

[2] F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, New York: Verso, 2005, p. 287.

The concept of hyperreality is indebted to the writings of the leading French Situationist thinker Guy Debord who famously described the historic postwar condition as a *society of spectacle.* Writing at the dawn of consumer capitalism and the rise of mass media, Debord posited that the 'the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world'[3] and the subject is reduced to the level of a mere 'Spectator'. This condition finds its most extreme case in what the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard described as 'hyperreality', the latest stage in the progression of the relationship between image and reality where it [image] evolves from 'masking the absence of reality, to having no relation to reality whatsoever.'[4] In this stage, images cut their umbilical cord to reality and in their self-referentiality (accruing meaning in relation to each other) become the sole signifiers of value and meaning. In their article 'Why Black Mirror Was Really Written by Jean Baudrillard' (2018) Jimenez-Morales and Lopera-Marmol read episodes of the anthology through the lens of Baudrillard's theoretical framework and apply his key terms and concepts to the show. Their discussion on 'Nosedive', though, fails to take note of its deep-seated Baudrillardian connotations. The episode is analysed as a satire against Western obsession with showing off 'a well put together image' and its pertinence to Baudrillard's ideas on exchange value are noted. They relate the general aura of the episode to a quote by Baudrillard: 'Americans may have no identity, but they do have wonderful teeth.'[5] The quote is taken from Baudrillard's *America* (1986) and refers to the dominance and importance of appearances in American culture. By drawing on Baudrillard's observations and by reference to the cultural theory of Slavoj Žižek I aim to expose the American character of the hyperreal condition displayed in 'Nosedive' and detail how the protagonist Lacie Pound's titular 'nosedive' enacts and carries the full weight of Baudrillard's conceptualisation of 'Evil.' Next I will tackle the question that whether the 'Evil' subversive force in 'Nosedive' challenges the hyperreal system, both within the context of the episode and that of the viewer, or is it contained and appropriated by the endless interplay of images that characterise hyperreality?

In the second section I will work my way to a more concrete ideological plane where I endeavor to disclose the episode's sub-textual critique of the extremes of Political Correctness (PC). In spite of its expanding presence and influence, any attempt to map the ideological coordinates of PC drags one into a much contested territory as its different guises and wide-ranging zones of operation renders its conceptualisation problematic. Howard S. Schwartz, who has published three books on this topic, argues that the idea of *the pristine self*, a subject safeguarded against all emotional threats, is the foundation upon which the ideological edifice of PC is based and traces its impact in a wide range of phenomena from Halloween costumes to the anti-bullying movement.[6] On the other hand, Žižek focuses on how the cocooning of such a pristine subject in a PC-inspired 'Big Safe Space' impedes the possibility of a

---

[3] G. Debord,. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone, 1994, p. 26.

[4] K. Toffoletti, *Baudrillard Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts*. London: Tauris, 2011, p.17.

[5] M. Jimenez-Morales & M. Lopera-Marmol.'Why Black Mirror was Really Written by Jean Baudrillard' in A.M. Cirucci and B. Vacker (eds), *'Black Mirror' and Critical Media Theory*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018, p. 106.

[6] Howard S. Schwartz, *Political Correctness and the Destruction of Social Order: Chronicling the Rise of The Pristine Self*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 7-10.

true social transformation. However, Žižek ventures to take a step further and speculate about its origins and function. According to him, 'the need for PC rules arises when unwritten mores are no longer able to regulate effectively everyday interactions' and thus dogmatic rules replace customary politeness, 'blacks' become 'African-Americans', 'disabled' becomes 'physically challenged,' 'fat' becomes 'weight-challenged', etc….[7] The final outcome of this condition is a constant *intra/inter-surveillance* of lingual and social conduct according to PC set norms. It is precisely in terms of such self-censoring and surveillance that the ideological climate of 'Nosedive' and the ideological coordinates of the PC discursive regime meet.

Part I: A Fractured Mirror of Hyperreality

After its relocation to Netflix some concerns were raised that by being absorbed into the U.S. media system *Black Mirror* might become too 'Americanised'[8]. However, Brooker decided not to react against the American influence but rather to embrace it. The first episode of the American spin-off 'Nosedive' clearly manifests this influence: despite being shot in South Africa, its sunny-postcard setting is blatantly modeled on Californian suburbia. As Manel Jimenez-Morales and Martha Lopera-Marmol perceptively observe, 'Nosedive' displays what Baudrillard depicts in *America* (1986), 'a perfectly 1950s inspired pastel and kitsch, an aesthetically ideal society'.[9] In this seemingly Utopian world everything depends on a human-human rating app that is easily identifiable with Instagram, Facebook, or Uber. The ratings do not merely hold sign value but operate in buying plane tickets, car rentals, home purchases, and jobs.[10] In this fabricated world, the importance of public rating means that Lacie Pound could obtain a discount for a luxury house if she raised her rating to 4.5. Therefore, she gives high scores to service workers to receive high scores back and wears pastel colors, all to project a positive image that will maintain her pleasing status.

Such emphasis on appearances, in the words of one commentator, 'results in an incredibly superficial world where the only goal is to be as pleasant and nice as possible in order to get a 5-star rating after each encounter.'[11] Such an appearance-dominated pastel world is so devoid of original life substance that its creator Charlie Brooker locates it between two cinematic narratives of simulated substanceless reality. In an interview Brooker notes that 'Nosedive' is 'like a cross between *Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show*,' and describes it as 'a falsely bland world that they're putting together and projecting this optimism and friendliness'.[12] Brooker goes on to compare

---

[7] S. Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness*. London: Penguin, 2018, p. 194.

[8] M. Williams, 'The San Junipero obsessive's guide to the greatest Black Mirror episode yet', https://www.salon.com/2016/10/26/the-san-junipero-obsessives-guide-to-the-greatest-black-mirror-episode-yet/, [accessed April 10, 2018].

[9] M. Jimenez-Morales & M. Lopera-Marmol, p. 106.

[10] A. Cirucci, 'Digitally Natural Gender Norms in *Black Mirror*' in A.M. Cirucci and B. Vacker (ed.), *'Black Mirror' and Critical Media Theory*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018, p. 21.

[11] A. Chitwood, '"Black Mirror" Season 3 Review: "San Junipero" and "Nosedive" Are a Sunny Start', https://collider.com/black-mirror-season-3-review-san-junipero-nosedive/, [accessed April 10, 2018].

[12] In his interview Brooker is a quite vague on the similarities that he perceives between these two episodes. My comparison is based on a reading between the lines of Brooker's comments. Ch. Brooker, '"Black Mirror: Showrunner explains season 3 endings."' Available from: Ew.com, [accessed May 11, 2018].

it with another episode from the series: 'We did a story in the second season, "Be Right Back", where Domhnall Gleeson comes back from the grave as a clone based on his social media profile. And in that story, he's bland.' Brooker's general view on social media is a bleak one, where 'you are rewarded for having a more extreme opinion. It's baked into the system, and that leads people to be more polarised.'[13] According to South Korean cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han, 'likeability' is a built-in feature of the social media system as there is no 'dislike' button on Facebook and we are only allowed to 'like' things.[14] It is precisely from this perspective that 'Be Right Back' and 'Nosedive' are comparable. The world of 'Nosedive' is an external materialisation of the pastel side of the social media where everybody labors to sustain a genial and amicable profile and Lacie appears as a living concretisation of a familiar type of social media profile: an all-loving, super-sweet figure. Thus, Lacie's fabricated persona and the simulated universe she inhabits are as much 'bland' as the clone based on Gleeson's social media profile. The difference is that while the cloned Gleeson is not able to transcend his programming and remains trapped within the coordinates of the diseased Gleeson's social media profile, Lacie eventually abandons her social media persona which leads to her final eponymous 'nosedive.'

Lacie's fiery yearning for higher rating sets her on a quest to impress the high rated guests of high school friend Naomi's glamorous wedding. However, many unfortunate accidents on her way to the wedding loosen her grip over her super-sweet persona and finally land her in jail where she is inmates with a man. They start to tease and insult each other gently and little by little they build up toward shouting vulgar obscenities at each other where all pretenses of pleasant mannerisms are forgotten:

> -I don't like your brassiere/ -I don't like your moustache/-I don't like your aura/ […] -What sort of cartoon character did your mum have to fuck to brew you up in the womb?/-At least I look like I was born, not shit out by some tormented cow creature in an underground lab/[…] -Fuck you next Wednesday/ -Fuck you for Christmas!/-Fuck you!/- Fuck you![15]

The sheer jouissance with which they verbally attack, abuse, and ridicule each other bears witness to the old Freudian formula 'the return of the repressed'. The characteristic libidinal discharge that accompanies the eruption of a repressed content (in this case aggressive instincts suppressed under a super-pleasant persona) reaches an orgasmic climax: the scene ends on a merging of Lacie and the other inmate hurling f**k-you's at one another at the top of their voices with their mouths wide open.

What is the significance of this scene? Upon what ideological foundation does it rest? In Peter Weir's 1998 drama *The Truman Show*, Jim Carrey plays the role of a

---

[13] S. Adams, 'Black Mirror's Stars and Writers on How They Made the Most Disturbing Season Yet', https://slate.com/culture/2016/10/the-stars-and-writers-of-black-mirror-on-the-disturbing-new-season.html, [accessed May, 10].

[14] Qtd. In N. Boeing, A. Lebert , 'Byung-Chul Han: "I'm Sorry, but Those are Facts"', https://skorpionuk.wordpress.com/2015/11/03/byung-chul-han-im-sorry-but-those-are-facts/, [accessed April 10 2018].

[15] C. Brooker et al. 'Nosedive', *Black Mirror*, Season 3, Episode 1, Netflix, 2017 [TV Program].

local clerk who gradually discovers his life is not real: he is the protagonist of a Reality TV show and his hometown is a huge studio set. According to Slavoj Žižek the movie is an example of 'the ultimate American paranoiac fantasy,' namely the fantasy of an 'individual living in a small idyllic Californian city, a consumerist paradise, who suddenly starts to suspect that the world he is living in is a fake, a spectacle staged to convince him that he is living in real world, while all the people around him are in fact actors and extras in a gigantic show.'[16] Žižek suggests that the underlying premise of *The Truman Show* and its counterparts (Phillip K. Dick's *Time Out of Joint* (1959) and *The Matrix* (1999)) is that 'the late-capitalist consumerist Californian paradise is, in its very hyperreality, in a way unreal, substanceless, deprived of material inertia.'[17]

From this vantage point, 'Nosedive' is a further allegory on the substancelessness and hyperreality of the American (*in its Californian version*) experience in the twenty-first century. As a concept, 'hyperreality' is bound to the name of Jean Baudrillard and his conceptualisation of simulation and simulacra. Baudrillard categorises the historical evolution of the relationship between reality and its representation (image) into four main phases: '[image] is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum.'[18] He broadly defines hyperreality, whose emergence coincides with the inauguration of the third order of simulacra and extends into the fourth one, as 'substituting the signs of the real for the real.'[19]

Social media stands as a conspicuous example of hyperreality where its users are ready to take absurd measures to signify that they embody certain desirable characteristics. Lacie's coffee drinking in an outdoor café is an exemplary case of this trend in the context of the episode. Looking at the people in the café through Lacie's eyes, which are equipped with smart lenses, the viewer realises that it is a high class place populated with citizens who are highly rated. Lacie's facial gestures make it clear that she neither enjoys her coffee nor her smiley-faced cookie but she snaps a photo of the half-bitten biscuit laying beside the coffee cup and posts it on social media, typing: 'It tastes like heaven'.[20] It is apparent that Lacie is trying to provide signs of belonging to the elite class on social media. These signs have no relation to the reality of Lacie's belonging and character whatsoever, therefore the image that she creates of herself on social media belongs to the fourth order of simulacra as it is 'its own pure simulacrum.' However, in the universe of 'Nosedive', the fourth order of simulacra is not limited to the virtual world. In an encroachment of the virtual upon the real, Lacie and most of the other characters appear as living extensions of their super-pleasant social media profiles in the real world.

In his travel memoir *America* (1986) Baudrillard describes U.S. as a 'giant hologram' and notes that 'the Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language

[16] S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 13.

[17] Ibid.

[18] J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 8.

[19] Baudrillard, p. 4.

[20] C. Brooker et al. 'Nosedive'.

in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model.'[21] Exaggerated as they might seem, especially provided that they were stated back in the 1980s before the rise of social media and VR, these assertions find a perfect echo in the universe of Charlie Brooker's 'Nosedive' where people appear as negative-free simulations of themselves. According to the Baudrillardian scholar Paul Hegarty,

> the world of simulation is entirely bound up with 'Good'—the real, the true, the safe, the hygienic, the politically correct, and the notion that we can all be part of a global community under the perceived Good of western liberal capitalism.[22]

Hegarty is taking on Baudrillard's 'discourse of the good' which the latter describes as 'performing cosmetic surgery on the negative'[23]. It is arguable that a certain satirical 'discourse of the good' regulates the behavior of the characters in this fictional context. It comes as little surprise that using the F-word costs Lacie dearly in the airport and the security and the passengers in the airport inflict a mass punitive rating loss on her. The fact that the enactment of Law—'we're zero tolerance on profanity'—is preceded and supported by the reaction of the public at the airport (giving Lacie low ratings and condemning looks) speaks of a public which is ideologically conditioned and homogenised by a reigning 'discourse of the good'. It is against the omnipresence of Good as such that the notion of 'Evil' finds new connotations. For Baudrillard, as Hegarty notes, 'Evil' is that which evades 'the system of simulation' and threatens to destabilise its sanitised reality: 'it is a structural critique of anything all-pervasive that emanates from simulation and a hygienised reality'.[24] This is precisely the function that Lacie performs in the episode: she destabilises the hygienised reality/hyperreality of her habitat by peeling off the simulacrum of a super-pleasant persona and subverting the reigning Good via unleashing long-repressed negative sentiments.[25] Through her journey, Lacie starts to lose grip on her social media based persona. At the end of the show, a filth-covered Lacie in torn clothes sharply contrasts with the fairytale wedding ceremony and its fairytale people. The figure of Lacie in ragged clothes staring at this glossy simulacrum of happiness from behind the bushes is the ultimate personification and foreshadowing of an 'Evil' about to strike. Her final act is delivered in the form of a hysterical 'realness' that wrecks Naomi's wedding and unravels the bitter facts of their contentious past friendship.

The present reading of 'Nosedive' and Lacie's rebel is in stark contrast with Erika M. Thomas and Romin Rajan's critique of the episode as an illusion of resistance against hyperreality that 'actually reproduces and perpetuates simulated reality' rather than illuminating the conditions of hyperreality. According to them,

---

[21] J. Baudrillard, *America*. London: Verso, 1989, p. 28.

[22] P. Hegarty, 'Evil', in *The Baudrillard Dictionary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, pp. 62-63.

[23] J. Baudrillard, *The Transparency Of Evil*, London: Verso, 2009, p. 81.

[24] Hegarty, pp. 62-63.

[25] The complexity of the notion of Evil in Baudrillard's vocabulary renders it open to various interpretations, particularly provided that he returns to it and reworks it throughout his oeuvre. Hence, the present application of this term does not exhaust its critical potential.

'Nosedive''s complicity with and replication of hyperreality operates on two main levels:

> First, 'Nosedive' displaces the hyperreal onto the portrayed simulated dystopian future; Second, 'Nosedive' falsely presents instances of rejection and resistance of simulation through the juxtaposition of character foils and the representation of a cathartic finish.[26]

In the first case they argue that the episode 'produces a gap between now and the hyperreal expected to occur in future' which produces the illusion that 'if viewers reasonably internalise the messages of "Nosedive", they can mitigate this oncoming simulated reality.'[27] However, Fredric Jameson suggests that all attempts to create alternative realities in SF presuppose 'a process of distraction and displacement, repression and lateral perceptual renewal' whose end product is a defamiliarised vision 'of our own present'.[28] For Jameson, such an inevitable distortion of the *present* is due to our structural inability to imagine radically new alternative realities. The main function of SF, according to Jameson, is to produce a concrete rendition of life under late capitalism whose intensity evades an undistorted or a more direct form of rendition.[29]

This is precisely the case in 'Nosedive': there is no gap between a present reality and a future hyperreality: 'Nosedive' illuminates the existing condition of hyperreality via mechanisms of distortion so that the viewer can perceive it in its full intensity. To put it into Jameson's terms, its distortion and displacement of the existing hyperreal condition disables the viewers' 'defense mechanisms against that reality' so that it can 'enter the eye laterally, with its intensity undiminished'.[30] This function of SF has an emancipatory potential as it can awaken the viewer to the existing ideo-cultural realities and shock him out of the complacency caused by the inability to perceive them in their full intensity. In the case of 'Nosedive', the active viewer is awakened to the intense regulation of the private and public life under the hyperreal discursive regime.[31] This perspective contrasts with the more traditional forms of critical media theory that position the viewer as a passive consumer of mass media products, incapable of engaging with them on a deep level, and the mass media itself as a vehicle for the propagation and perpetuation of the dominant ideologies. This traditional stance is more or less echoed in the second part of Thomas and Rajan's criticism of 'Nosedive', particularly in their contention that character foils like Ryan (Lacie's

---

[26] E. M. Thomas & R. Rajan. 'Trapped in Dystopian Techno Realities (2108)' in A.M. Cirucci and B. Vacker (eds), *'Black Mirror' and Critical Media Theory*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018, pp. 223-224.

[27] Ibid, p. 227.

[28] F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, New York: Verso, 2005, p. 287.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] As William Pawlett notes 'for Baudrillard, each order of simulacra produces knowledge, ideas and perceptions that maintain and reproduce the power relations of that order.' W. Pawlett, *Jean Baudrillard: Against Banality*. London: Routledge, 2007, p. 73.

brother who is critical of her obsession with social media) and Susan (a truck driver in favor of 'realness' with a subpar score) relax the viewer into feeling

> self-assured that there are people who can resist the simulation. The simulation is not all encompassing, and […] if ever the viewer is confronted by simulation, the viewer has a mechanism by which to resist the hyperreal through the presentation of the character archetypes, Ryan and Susan.[32]

The viewer is thus positioned as a naïve and helpless receiver of an ideological message, incapable of resisting or challenging its mandates. However, we should not fall into the trap of dismissing the ubiquity of the hyperreal condition and portray escape from it as a matter of personal choice. Today we can find a declining number of individuals who do not wish to possess a smart phone or refuse to participate on social media. Their stance is one of keeping virtual reality at bay and leading an *authentic* life in which one is engaged with the real world and real people. Their logic parallels the logic of 'a man who lives in a large city and owns a Land-Rover' to signal that he leads a 'no-nonsense life'. As Žižek explains:

> a man who lives in a large city and owns a Land-Rover (for which he obviously has no use) doesn't simply lead a no-nonsense, down-to-earth life; rather, he owns such a car in order to signal that he leads his life under the sign of a no-nonsense, down-to-earth attitude.[33]

On a parallel line, a man who does not have a smart phone or social media account doesn't simply live an authentic life but he signals that he leads his life under the sign of an authentic living, or in other words he produces a declarative *image* of an authentic life which indicates his belonging to a certain attitude or rank of people. Regardless of whether or not such a declarative image has any connection to its bearer (i.e. if it is 'its own pure simulacrum' or not) it serves as a reminder of our earlier discussion on Lacie's communication of a certain signified via posting a declarative photo. Indeed, in this account, the ultimate image of the hyperreal condition is the bleak picture of a system that immediately appropriates all attempts to subvert it. Žižek describes this condition as the fundamental paradox of the 'passion for the Real': any attempt to peel off the semblances of reality and penetrate the Real thing 'culminates in its apparent opposite, in a theatrical spectacle—from the Stalinist show trials to spectacular terrorist acts.'[34] Indeed Lacie's 'Evil' strike both on the level form (Lacie occupying the centre of the stage and the wedding guests forming the audience) and the content (a hysterical crashing of a wedding by a traumatised woman) constitutes a literal 'theatrical spectacle' in its purest form. Therefore, to posit it as a 'theatrical spectacle' within the bigger universe of a fictional 'society of spectacle' (in a Platonic sense three steps removed from reality) would be a valid argument. However, for Baudrillard the

---

[32] E. M. Thomas & R. Rajan, p. 228.

[33] S. Žižek, *How to Read Lacan,* New York New York: W. W. Norton, 2006, p. 55.

[34] S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 13.

most substantial challenge to the 'spectacle' and 'the highest degree of spectacular' are extraordinarily united. Speaking apropos the terrorist symbolic challenge to the hyperreal system he asserts:

> It is at one and the same time the dazzling micro-model of a kernel of real violence with the maximum possible echo—hence the purest form of spectacle—and a sacrificial model mounting the purest symbolic form of defiance to the historical and political order.[35]

Lacie's act stands as a concrete example of this inherent duality that informs defiance to the hyperreal condition: synchronous with embodying 'the purest form of spectacle' it mounts a symbolic challenge against the hegemony of the spectacle. For Baudrillard a sacrificial model is the ultimate weapon against the culture of simulation and 'irreducible' symbolic acts 'such as acts of sacrificial violence may momentarily reverse the logics of the system, disrupting its precarious balance.'[36] Lacie performance (in the wedding) assumes the form of a sacrificial practice as it is the ultimate act of social suicide in the universe of 'Nosedive' and the traumatic manner in which it is committed carries the constitutive violence of an 'irreducible' act. Its irreducibility is the direct effect of its traumatic kernel (think of witnessing a brutal rape or torture), impeding its overall integration into our universe of meaning. The subsequent disorienting impact on the viewer is the constitutive substance of Nosedive's subversive force: it welcomes the viewer to the 'desert of the Real', i.e. the abyss left behind after the disappearance of the 'reality principle.' The cinematography, the make-up and the costuming of Bryce D. Howard and her effective role playing in the scene all contribute to the creation of a nightmarish creature who simultaneously embodies the ultimate excess of hyperreality and disrupts the multiple interplay of images that constitutes its Reality. At the end although this effect is transient and does not impede the continuity of hyperreality, either within the universe of 'Nosedive' or the viewers', its mark reorders the 'cognitive mapping' of an attentive viewer who is now more conscious of the interplay of images that constitutes his reality.

Part II: The Black Mirror of Political Correctness
Lacie's hysterical wedding crashing does not land her in a mental hospital; rather it leads to her incarceration. The sole inmate of this jail before the arrival of Lacie, an anonymous black man, shows a strong subversive potential akin to Lacie's which probably has caused his imprisonment in the first place. This leads to speculation that in the world of 'Nosedive' jail is only reserved for those who threaten to destabilise the hyperreal order of things. 'Nosedive''s excessively hygienic environment is thus protected against the subversion of those who might jeopardise the 'Good principle'.

---

[35] J. Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, London: Verso, 2002, p. 35.
[36] L. Wilcox. 'Baudrillard, September 11, and the Haunting Abyss of Reversal,' in *Postmodern Culture* 14.1 (2003) John Hopkins Press. Available from: http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.903/14.1wilcox.html [accessed April 14 2018].

According to Hegarty such strict sanitisation precisely engenders its infectious obverse similar to 'the case of the overuse of antibiotics which allows the possibility of new bacterial evolution, or how excessively clean environments heighten vulnerability to infection.'[37] In present day U.S. and most of the Western world we find the ideological counterpart of such sanitisation in what is known as Political Correctness (PC). In practice PC is an extension of the 'discourse of the Good' with a strict adherence to whitewashing language and social conduct of offensive content and sentiments. According to Žižek, the advent of PC norms is in conjunction with the failure of our inherited unwritten mores of 'tact' and 'politeness' to regulate everyday interactions.[38] For Žižek, 'politeness' is located at the grey zone between the two extremes of 'inner morality' and 'external legality' as it transcends a mere obeying of 'external legality' and falls short of 'pure moral activity': 'it is the ambiguously imprecise domain of what one is not strictly obliged to do (if one doesn't do it, one doesn't break any laws), but what one is nonetheless expected to do.'[39] The PC norms and regulations precisely dislocate the coordinates of 'politeness' out of this grey zone to reshape it as an exclusive attribute of the legal domain so that 'instead of spontaneous customs followed in a non-reflexive way, we get explicit rules ('blacks' become 'African-Americans', 'fat' becomes 'weight-challenged', etc.).'[40]

The aforementioned airport scene from the episode showcases this shift from moral decency to legal necessity in terms of 'politeness': At the airport, Lacie realises that her flight is cancelled and she cannot buy a seat on another flight with her current rating. Her pleading 'Christ, I mean, surely *you can do something for me*' is immediately responded by 'I'm gonna have to ask you to moderate your language there' by the airport clerk and when she uses the F-word ('will you f**ing help me') there is a security alert for 'profanity and intimidation.' The security guard subtracts a full point from her rating for a period of 24 hours and places her on 'double damage' (the effect of subsequent negative ratings against her will be doubled).

In addition to concretising the re-coordination of 'politeness' into the legal domain and reframing it as a set of inviolable rules the scene also draws attention to other PC related issues. There is a widening of the definition of offensive language (a mere 'Christ…' invokes a warning for monitoring language) and 'intimidation' (not stepping outside the queue or perhaps raising one's voice) which satirically parallels the widening of the definition of verbal abuse, social misconduct, or harassment in the current PC climate. Indeed, if we go back to our initial assessment of the episode and read it as a material externalisation of social media, the airport scene stands as a subtle parody of our current tweet culture. Today, many users of social media adhere to a 'zero tolerance' policy which uncannily resembles 'Nosedive's' airport policies. The moment that any deviation from PC norms is perceived, a PC commonplace reply is automatically triggered. Their stance is one of ruthless imposing of the Good, 'denouncing every minimal deviation from the PC dogma as "transphobia" or

---

[37] Hegarty, p. 63.
[38] S. Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, p. 194.
[39] Ibid, p. 193.
[40] Ibid, p. 194.

"fascism" or…'.[41] In a similar fashion, Lacie's deviation from the Good dogma triggers an automatic low-rating of her by the people in the airport which precedes rate-loss punishment at the hands of authority. Indeed, in a radicalisation of our current *culture of surveillance*, authority is not the main guardian of the Good in this context but people themselves are the main punitive agency and punish anybody who deviates from their normativity.

This condition parallels our current ideological climate wherein 'the classical Big Brother model of top-down surveillance' has been replaced 'by a horizontal form of control where every citizen is watching the other.'[42] This shift in itself is the effect of a fundamental transformation in our 'society of spectacle'. Drawing on Best and Kellner's extension on Guy Debord's views, Giulia Bartolone argues that 'Nosedive' depicts 'a more advanced stage of the spectacle, […] *the interactive spectacle*', which involves 'an increased participation of the subject in the spectacle.' In contrast to Debord's spectacle, 'where the spectator was "passively consuming television or film images in the solitude of [his/her] own subjectivity," in the interactive spectacle the subjectivity has "imploded into an ever denser technological network," so that an individual's life is itself the spectacle.'[43]

The 5-star rating system in 'Nosedive' performs the precise function of making the individual's life itself the spectacle. Therefore, as the ratings are incredibly important to life in this fictional context—acting as deciding factors for home purchases, jobs, medical care…etc—everybody should practice strict self-surveillance since even failing to smile back whole-heartedly can lead to rating loss. The theme of surveillance and self-surveillance runs through many episodes of the series and has attracted much critical attention. It is often argued that *Black Mirror* offers a Panopticon-inspired view of life in the twenty-first century. Apropos of 'Nosedive' Angela M. Cirucci notes that:

> Clearly, the social rating system portrayed in 'Nosedive' is again inspired by the Panopticon. Because of the constant social and institutional gaze, users must surveil themselves, being sure to both post socially validated content to the platform as well as perform 'correctly' in the physical world.[44]

Such self-surveillance to post and perform 'correctly' mirrors the extremes of today's PC-liberal attitude in the virtual and physical world. As Nikki Johnson-Huston notes: 'They [liberals] can't even have a conversation with someone who sees the world differently without resorting to calling someone a racist, homophobic, misogynistic, bigot and trying to have them banned from campus, or ruin them and their reputation.'[45] Therefore, one should constantly self-police his language and

---

[41] Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, p. 195.

[42] F.A Huver & J. Escurignan. 'Black Mirror's "Nosedive" as a New Panopticon' in A.M. Cirucci and B. Vacker (ed.), *'Black Mirror' and Critical Media Theory*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018, p. 47.

[43] G. Bartolone, 'The tension between Utopia and Dystopia under late capitalism: control, alienation and resistance in "Mr. Robot" and "Black Mirror"' MA Thesis, Leiden University, 2018, pp. 33-34.

[44] A. Cirucci, 'Digitally Natural Gender Norms in *Black Mirror'*, p. 22.

[45] N. Johnsonhuston, 'The Culture of the Smug.' Available from: huffingtonpost.com [accessed July 10].

conduct or make sure not to post anything which might be perceived remotely politically incorrect. The likes of Ryan and Susan who refuse to adhere to such moral stringency are not only banned from the social sphere but their reputation is also besmirched. This is well illustrated in the scene where Lacie's troubled look about Susan's subpar score leads Susan to assure her she doesn't bite. However, even intensive self-surveillance is not enough since 'under the PC discursive regime', as Žižek explains, 'it is not enough to follow external rules of politeness' as 'one is questioned endlessly about the sincerity of one's innermost convictions.' According to Žižek the immediate symptom of 'such operations is precisely the level of "sincere lies", of pretending.'[46]

The bland 'optimism and friendliness' that is projected in 'Nosedive' blatantly belongs to the domain of 'sincere lies.' It is best showcased and epitomised in the scene where Lacie is rehearsing her wedding speech in front of her brother Ryan: in her emotionally charged speech she attempts to paint an ideal image of devotion and intimacy that she and Naomi supposedly shared back in childhood; a simulacrum of an ideal friendship with Utopian proportions. Half-way through her speech rehearsal she sheds a heart-burning tear and after it is finished she asks Ryan if the tear was too much. Lacie's self-questioning of the level of sincerity in her pretention amounts to more than a mere avoidance of exaggeration as her friendship with Naomi is haunted by many disavowed traumas and repressed negative feelings. Ryan's immediate response to her acceptance of Naomi's invitation is one of total bewilderment as Naomi used to treat her cruelly and 'had f**ed Greg'—presumably Lacie's love interest back in school. This response is met by Lacie's complete denial of any negativity in their past including the Greg affair. This repressed content might very well be the main reason why Lacie constantly rehearses the speech during her turbulent trip to the wedding: this repetition is not merely for the sake of not forgetting the speech but to 'sincerely' believe the 'lies' which make its content. It is precisely the disavowed Real of this repressed content that resurfaces and disrupts Lacie's attempts to portray the loving picture she intended to put on display in the wedding. Her speech in the wedding is continuously disrupted by fragments of this Real that defy further repression.

Here the term Real carries the full weight of its Lacanian conceptualisation, i.e. traumatic content which resists integration within the Symbolic Order and threatens to destabilise it.[47] Indeed, in this case the Real of Lacan approximates Baudrillard's conceptualisation of 'Evil.' The Symbolic Order in 'Nosedive' is based upon and structured around 'sincere lies' and 'pretention' so that Lacie's hysteric sincerity emerges as the Real which disrupts and destabilises this Symbolic Order. Along these lines but on a different level we find the eruption of a different but related Real in the protest-vote that led to the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of United States. That is the Real of ethnic/sexual/racial antagonisms that was being suppressed under a censorious PC discursive regime. Following the election different surveys and statistics confirmed that frustration with PC stringency was a primary motive among

---

[46] S. Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, p. 194.
[47] S. Žižek, *How to Read Lacan*, p. 38.

Trump voters.[48] Trump's unashamed vulgarity and disregard for the PC rules of politeness apparently appealed to some sections of American population who found the imposition of PC normativity oppressive. In the end 'Nosedive' stands as a protest against the gullibility of imposing a negative-free normativity under the banner of a suffocating Good and warns against the aftermaths of such a naïve Utopian project.

---

[48] L.G. Conway, M.A. Repke and S.C. Houck, 'Donald Trump as a Cultural Revolt Against Perceived Communication Restriction: Priming Political Correctness Norms Causes More Trump Support', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, https://jspp.psychopen.eu/article/view/732.