
Is there any way out? *Black Mirror* as a critical dystopia of the society of the spectacle

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Abstract

One of the most appalling (and appealing) aspects of *Black Mirror* is the atmosphere of complete hopelessness in which the majority of episodes end. This essay, however, tries to prove that, at least in *Nosedive*, there is a way out. Using the concepts of (canonical) dystopia and critical dystopia, as understood by Rafaela Baccolini and Tom Moylan, along with Guy Debord’s idea of the society of the spectacle, I will provide a theoretical apparatus to support my analysis of the episode. After identifying the main aspects which cause and perpetuate the dystopic state on the episode, the paper will also explore their effects on people. Having this context in mind, the essay focuses on the importance of performances and social masks as one of the main results of a dystopia of the society of the spectacle. Then, it analyzes the role of different characters who somehow manage to escape the dystopic order and, simultaneously, reflects on the intriguing ending that only seems to reinforce the possibility to face *Nosedive* as a canonical dystopia. In conclusion, this essay argues that the non-obvious ways out of that dystopian state have actually a bigger impact on the audience.

Resumo

Um dos aspetos mais espantosos e atraentes de *Black Mirror* é a atmosfera de completa desesperança na qual a maioria dos episódios termina. No entanto, este ensaio busca provar que, ao menos em *Nosedive*, há uma saída. Usando os conceitos de distopia (canônica) e distopia crítica, definidos por Rafaela Baccolini e Tom Moylan, assim como a ideia de Guy Debord de sociedade do espetáculo, providenciarei um aparato teórico para embasar minha análise do episódio. Após identificar os principais

aspectos que causam e perpetuam o estado distópico em *Nosedive*, explorarei seus efeitos nos personagens. Tendo este contexto em mente, o ensaio foca na importância de performances e máscaras sociais como um dos principais resultados de uma distopia da sociedade do espetáculo. Depois, analiso o papel de diferentes personagens que de alguma forma conseguem escapar a ordem distópica e, simultaneamente, reflito sobre o final intrigante que só parece reforçar a possibilidade de encarar o episódio como uma distopia canônica. Concluindo, este ensaio argumenta que as formas não óbvias de escape da sociedade distópica apresentam, na verdade, um maior impacto na audiência.

1. Introduction

Black Mirror is undeniably one of the most acclaimed series by the critics in the present times. Even though each episode of the dystopian TV/Internet series, created in 2011 by Charlie Brooker, has its own plot and characters, there is a common element among all of them: technology and, more importantly, how it seems to dominate everyone's lives, stimulating alienating and problematic behaviors. The society of the spectacle is intrinsically linked to these elements, as both cause and effect of the alienation provoked by technologies, which is well portrayed in *Nosedive*, the episode I chose to analyze. Relating and reflecting upon these three aspects - the society of the spectacle, alienation and technologies -, this work intends to research whether *Nosedive* can be read also as a critical dystopia and the implications it might have on the audience. Since in *Black Mirror* the main characteristics of the dystopic state are the same that define the society of the spectacle, the present essay also aims to identify these aspects according to Guy Debord's book, *The society of the spectacle (La Société du Spectacle, Buchet/Chastel, 1967)*, relating and analyzing them to *Nosedive*.

When Debord wrote it, he was probably thinking about the cinema and the television, which, even though were extremely influent, were much less powerful than the internet and all the impact it had on the daily life. Nowadays, the spectacle is literally everywhere. Aware of this fact, the creator of the series, Charlie Brooker, said to *The Guardian*: "The 'black mirror' of the title is something you will find in every table, in the palm of every hand: the cold and shiny screen of a TV, a monitor or a smartphone" (Brooker). Each episode shows a different side of the new and "improved" (or worsened) society of the spectacle.

Even though Debord's book was written in 1967, there are many of its propositions that contribute for a better understanding of the present times. However, I deliberately chose to leave aside the political and economic aspects of Debord's text, since I believe that what relates most with this episode of *Black Mirror* is the impact of the society of the spectacle in social communication - according to him, the spectacle is "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (7), even because the spectacle would be "the opposite of dialogue" (11).

In *Nosedive*, the first episode of the third season, the main point of critique is precisely that: Lacie Pound lives in a society where in every interaction, real or virtual, people can use their cellphones to rate others from 1 to 5 stars. Although it might seem that there is nothing new to this idea, the difference between this society and ours is that people are rated not only by their posts on social media, but also by their actions. Those called "high fours", who are rated 4.5 or higher, are "influencers" and have many privileges and discounts in different areas, which is the reason why Lacie wants to become one - she wants to rent an expensive apartment, but she will only be able to pay it if she gets the discount. When Naomi, her school friend, invites Lacie to be her maid of honor, Lacie sees in that an opportunity to boost her rating: if she makes the perfect speech at the wedding, Naomi's husband's friends - all high fours - will be impressed and will rate her positively.

However, when she hears in the airport that her flight to the wedding's dinner rehearsal was cancelled, Lacie loses control and argues with an attendant. Since the airport has a "zero tolerance on profanity" policy, a security guard punishes Lacie removing one point of her rating and putting her on "double damage": every negative rating that she receives will be multiplied by two in the next 24 hours' period. She then decides to rent a car and drive for 9 hours to get to the wedding, and when her car runs out of electricity, Lacie gets a ride from Susan, an elder woman with a 1.4 rating. Susan exposes to Lacie the absurdity of that society, but Lacie is only convinced that there is something wrong when Naomi calls and asks her not to go anymore, claiming that she cannot have a "2.6" in her wedding.

Furious and desperate, Lacie goes on, still heading to the wedding. When she arrives there, dirty, hysteric and drunk, she still makes a speech, but not the one she had rehearsed to do; Lacie exposes to the guests how she feels about Naomi's apparent perfectness and, by doing so, she also highlights the fakeness of their relationship and her "friend's" futility. Finally, she is removed from the wedding by force and is arrested (it is not clear, though, if she is arrested for invading a private place or for possibly achieving a zero rate). The episode ends with Lacie and another

man in jail offending each other - since they have nothing left to lose, they do not need to pretend anything anymore: they can say whatever comes to their minds.

2. Dystopic society: causes and effects in *Nosedive*

It is necessary, first of all, to identify the several mechanisms that create and perpetuate that dystopic state in the episode. The most evident is technology, and even though it cannot be considered a “villain”, it acts as a catalyzer of negative actions and behaviors. In *Nosedive* it is directly connected to the spectacularization of daily life through social media, and it acts as an alienating mechanism. As Debord says, “the spectacle’s social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation” (16).

Another aspect that maintains the dystopic structure here is the socioeconomical hierarchization of society through the rating system. According to this hierarchy, the high fours deserve rights and privileges that are denied to those who are in a lower position in the rating pyramid - they are not allowed to go into some spaces and might have health treatments rejected if there is a person with a better rating waiting for the same medical care. In other words, “all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them” (11).

The political gap in this episode in particular also reinforces the decentralization of dystopia. Since no form of politics is shown, it reflects the fact that everyone creates that dystopia: it is not something imposed by a dictator, but perpetuated by all people. It is not, however, just “society’s fault”, generically speaking; it is each person’s fault as well (and here lies one of the many forms of criticism directed towards the spectator).

Technology seems to be intrinsically related to dystopias - critical or canonical - and it is usually connected to some mechanism that controls the masses. This domination, however, can be much more effective if people are unaware that they are being controlled. Even though social media can be used as a powerful source of decentralized information, it might be an alienating tool, reinforcing self-centered behaviors that might evolve into numbness, carelessness and isolation (noticing that they all affect not only the space of the body, but also of the mind). Since “separation is the alpha and omega of the spectacle” (13), the “lonely crowds” that Debord talks about are a predictable consequence of this system. According to him, “from the automobile to the television, all of the goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons to the constant reinforcing of the isolation conditions of the ‘lonely crowds’” (15). If the car and the TV were already considered isolating mechanisms,

the cellphones and computers enhance the feeling that we constantly live in “lonely crowds”: the scene in which the majority of the audience will instantly relate to *Nosedive* is probably the one when a group of people reunited check their phones instead of talking to each other.

Superficiality, as another effect of this society, is one of the biggest critiques in the episode: in every meeting, either in person or virtually, there is apparent perfection. There is a scene, for instance, in which Lacie buys a coffee and a cookie, immediately posting a picture of it on her social media. When she eats it, however, it tastes awful, which reinforces that, in this society, things are made only to be seen. Another evidence that superficiality is a major issue in the episode is that there is also a concern about fitting or not fitting into the beauty standards (Lacie is constantly exercising in the episode) and, in addition to that, their judgment of other people is based on really shallow interactions.

Mass media and publicity also contribute to maintain the dystopic state by creating unattainable utopias. Curiously, these people’s utopia is not only to be rich; it is to be approved by other people, even if it means to reject a “true” identity (which is another consequence of the impacts of alienation in the society of spectacle). Lacie fights to buy her own utopia, to buy a way of life apparently better than the one in which she is, but in fact, there isn’t much difference. Even if she is not aware of that in the beginning, she lives in a dystopic society, and her personal utopia is simply the highest point of dystopia: to achieve a 4.5 rating.

Lacie’s unbridled pursue of happiness is straightly connected to the next point: to reach utopias, a performance is necessary - and if existence is a performance, there must be a rehearsal: consequently, Lacie rehearses in front of the mirror laughs, gestures and her speech as a maid of honor. Her performance is the adoption of a social mask, and, by the end of the episode, she understands that to resist society is to drop the mask. Lacie only gives up on her performance when her friend says she cannot have a 2.6 in her wedding, what would mean not getting the necessary rating to buy the apartment; in other words, she would not be able to buy her personal utopia. In the wedding scene, the image of Lacie - muddy, drunk, with blurred makeup - opposes the performative perfection of the wedding. Her speech, rehearsed to be fake, but perfect, what people wanted to hear, becomes what tries to break the perfection of Naomi’s marriage and life. By dropping her mask, she shows the fakeness of everybody else’s social costume.

3. Critical or canonical dystopia: is there any way out?

To defend *Nosedive* as a critical dystopia, it is necessary first to identify the differences and similitudes between critical dystopias and canonical dystopias. According to Rafaela Baccolini and Tom Moylan, “[*Canonical*] dystopias maintain hope out of the story (...) for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future. Conversely, the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure” (7). In other words, the difference between a canonical dystopia and a critical dystopia is that in the first one there is not any hope nor any way out, while in the latter there is hope both inside the story and on the viewer. We can read this episode of *Black Mirror* as a complete dystopia if we consider only the story itself; but if we consider the viewers and the reaction that *Black Mirror* necessarily requires from the viewers, we might go further and analyze it as a critical dystopia as well.

In *Nosedive* there are four characters who somehow expose the flaws of the system: Ches, Lacie’s brother, Susan and, in the end, Lacie herself. Ches is one of Lacie’s work colleagues and, after he and his boyfriend break up, all of their friends decide to be on his boyfriend side. Even though Ches is gentle and even if he apparently had not done anything wrong, his ratings continue to go down until the moment he is not allowed to enter in the building where he works. Lacie sees it and it is clear that she does not agree with his expulsion, but, simultaneously, since she is quite numb to everything around her, she does not think much about it. Ches, then, is an unconscious representation of how the rating system is full of problems, since it is extremely subjective and susceptible to personal intrigues.

Lacie’s brother, on the other hand, is really conscious of the effects of that dystopian society in people in general and specially in his sister. He calls the apartment that Lacie want to rent “fake smile jail cells”, and in an acid talk with his sister he says: “I miss the normal you. Before this obsession we had conversations, remember? (...) Comparing yourself to people who only pretend to be happy” (Brooker). He does not choose to live outside the rating system, though: his way to get positive evaluations is through online games.

Susan, however, takes a step further. The woman that Lacie meets on her way to Naomi’s wedding has a 1.4 rating and lives, the best way she can, outside the rating system. She is sincere, she screams and she is not afraid of what people will think or talk about her - nor how they will rate her. Even if she looks, in the beginning, Lacie’s exact opposite, Susan is in fact some sort of Lacie’s double, because she sees her past self in Lacie and, at the same time, in the end Lacie somehow follows Susan’s path. Susan explains that she was a 4, but she decided to change after her husband’s death -

when he got sick, to be a 4 was not enough: “He was a 4.3. They gave his bed to a 4.4”. Susan then realizes the absurd of that society and willingly refuses to cope with the system.

These characters try, consciously in the case of Susan and Lacie’s brother and unconsciously in the case of Ches, to wake Lacie from her alienation state. Later on, after she realizes her own numbness and superficiality, she tries to wake up the viewer. After exposing her true self and the fakeness of their world in Naomi’s wedding, Lacie is arrested and she finally feels free to speak what she does not like in other people, which also happens with the man in the cell in front of her. According to Baccolini and Moylan, “by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical dystopia opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ex-centric subjects who (...) are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (7). Even though it might seem that *Nosedive* reinforces the “traditional subjugation of the individual at the end”, since Lacie ends up in jail, the prison could be seen, in fact, as a heterotopic place, because there is an escape of the regular order there - in prison, the rating system does not work and they have freedom of speech. It is ironic, though, the fact that they are only free in prison: their bodies are imprisoned, but their minds are free.

It would be erroneous, however, to defend that *Nosedive* cannot be considered a critical dystopia claiming that there is not hope to live in that society outside the rating system. Those who would argue in favor of this would be considering only the fact that Lacie ends up in jail. As reported by Bacollini and Moylan, “although most dystopian texts offer a detailed and pessimistic presentation of the very worst of social alternatives, a few affiliate with a eutopian tendency as they maintain a horizon of hope (or at least invite readings that do)” (6). This “horizon of hope” within the story lies in characters as Susan and Lacie’s brother, who show that it is possible to be critic about the society, whether you choose to live within or without the rating system. In addition to that, even if the episode ends with Lacie in jail, she is likely to get out eventually; and the fact that the episode ends with Lacie and the other man offending each other shows that their mindset is probably changed: they have dropped their social masks at last.

When Lacie does her speech exposing the issues of her relationship with Naomi, it symbolizes not only the fakeness of the friendship but also reveals what impels people to go on posting on social networks. Those people there at the wedding do not seem to be affected by her speech, but those who are watching *Black Mirror* are. And as soon as the speech or the episode ends and the viewer “comes back” to his own

life, nothing changes. In this sense, *Black Mirror* can be a criticism to its own viewers, who might watch the show and do nothing about it.

4. Final considerations: the impact of a critical dystopia on the audience

The obvious interpretation to every *Black Mirror* episode (with the exception of *San Junipero*, the only one with some sort of clear happy ending) is to face it as a canonical dystopia: without any prospect of hope outside it. One of the biggest reasons for the success of the series is precisely the shocking effect each episode has on the viewers, and we must have in mind that the apparent lack of hope is actually a mechanism to cause a bigger impact on the audience.

According to Fernandes and Lima, Guy Debord does not consider the spectator as an “autonomous being, active and capable to react and to diverge” from what s/he receives from the cultural industry (12-3, my translation). To him, the attitude the society of the spectacle requires from the audience is “passive acceptance” (10), and that is precisely what *Black Mirror* intends to change. When *Nosedive* ends with Lacie in jail, the viewer is left unquiet and disturbed by it, while if there was an obvious happy ending, with everything solved, it would not require anything from the spectator. *Black Mirror*, however, requires action from the audience, even if it is indignation. The last scene here can be seen as a provocation to the viewer as well as an attempt to take the viewer out of his/her alienated and conformed state and do something to change the society in which they live.

The reasons why it is necessary to shock and mobilize the audience in order to arouse their consciousness is because it could become - and, in some aspects, it is already - our society in a few years. If we observe the excerpt below, we might have a better glimpse of this possible future.

In this world, anything from defaulting on a loan to criticising the ruling party, from running a red light to failing to care for your parents properly, could cause you to lose points. And in this world, your score becomes the ultimate truth of who you are - determining whether you can borrow money, get your children into the best schools or travel abroad; whether you get a room in a fancy hotel, a seat in a top restaurant - or even just get a date. (Denyer 2016)

Although the fragment above seems to be a synopsis of *Nosedive*, it could actually become China. According to the journalist Simon Denyer, the Chinese government has plans to establish a similar rating system by 2020. Of course there are more current “symptoms”, which can relate better to the Western civilization, and

Nosedive was one of the most acclaimed episodes of the entire series probably because it is extremely close to our society. According to Fernandes and Lima (1), *Black Mirror* “dialogues with a dystopian future that mingles with the present, which causes an estrangement in the audience due to its hyperbolic language - not because it seems absurd, but because it is presented as a possible chapter of reality.” The obsession with social media is a reflection of, among other aspects, our own obsession to live happy and perfect lives full time. The value each person has according to the success of their profiles - how many followers or “likes” someone has - is somehow a reality: the “digital influencer” is a new “profession”, which consists basically of people earning money, products or services and, in exchange, they give visibility in their social media to the same products and services, showing them to their thousands or even millions of followers.

The biggest hope in *Nosedive*, however, lies not within the story, but outside. When Lacie and the man in prison say “fuck you” at the very end of the episode, they are not saying it only to each other; they are also saying it straight to the camera, and, consequently, to the viewer. They are deliberately teasing the viewer and waiting for an action in return. Likewise, this episode of *Black Mirror* teases the audience through a non-obviously happy ending since it has a bigger impact and effect on the viewer, showing that the hope to change this possibly dystopic society in a near future lies not on a fictional series, but on the real people who are watching it.

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