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***Black Mirror's Nosedive* as a new Panopticon:
Interveillance and Digital Parrhesia in Alternative Realities**

François Allard-Huver & Julie Escurignan

Black Mirror is a British science fiction television series created by Charlie Brooker. Critically acclaimed, the series stirs much debate around its representation of dystopian futures of Western societies. Despite being all different, they share in common to be technological dystopias. Grim, pessimistic, and technologically-led, these representations confront the viewers with alternative societies deriving from the current use of new technologies. The lead characters of the show evolve in “always on” societies, where screens and devices have become vital elements of everyday life. As Greg Singh writes: “Throughout all of the stories, the characters are somehow beholden to a particular technology, or are otherwise trapped in a dysfunctional relationship with it.”¹ These dystopian futures, albeit dissimilar in one way or another to 21st-century Western societies, are nevertheless close enough to the world we live in (similar technological devices and similar attitudes toward them) for the audience to feel both connected to the story and compelled to think about its own use of technology in a reflexive perspective.

This chapter specifically focuses on *Nosedive*, the first episode of the show’s third season, written by Rashida Jones and Mike Schur and released worldwide in October 2016 on Netflix. The action follows Lacie Pound, a young woman living in a world where every interaction, whether online (posting pictures and status updates) or offline, is ranked by “online friends”. Everybody rates and is rated, each rating impacting people’s lives (their job,

¹ Greg Singh, “Recognition and the image of mastery as themes in *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011—present): an eco-Jungian approach to “always-on” culture,” *International Journal of Jungian Studies*, 6 (2014, 2): 121.

their housing, their friends). The society depicted in *Nosedive* calls upon our knowledge of technology and our consumer behavior of product, brand rating up to self-branding.

Through a semiotic analysis of the episode, this chapter explores the shift from a professional to a personal application of current marketing theories, and at showing how the society depicted in *Nosedive* works as the representation of a new panopticon, as crafted by Bentham² and reclaimed by Foucault³. In this panopticon, mobile devices and social media serve as “disciplinary” tools to normalize people’s behavior. Citizens experience a new relationship with the media and the ensuing social order, theorized by Jansson as “interveillance.”⁴ But this chapter takes a deeper look, beyond the concept of the panopticon. Indeed, *Nosedive* shows an era of *digital parrhesia*⁵, a model for truth-telling and its consequences in the digital public sphere⁶. *Nosedive* thus questions the balance between our right to anonymity, a growing need for more transparency and, paradoxically, one for more visibility. This need for visibility is at the core of the series and is reflected in its own title:

It might come as no surprise to know that the title of the series, *Black Mirror*, is a direct reference to the look of various screens that surround us: if you have ever looked into a monitor, or an iPad, or a smartphone when switched off, you won’t see nothing; tellingly, you see your reflection, darkened, untrue. Is this a black mirror reflecting what we are to become: switched “off” and self-obsessed; a constellation of fears, anxieties and desires; possessed by the urge to look and be looked at?⁷

In our modern society, if the walls of the panopticon have disappeared they have been replaced by communication devices playing the role of walls—as individuals seem to be imprisoned by their phone screen—and the role of guardians—as everyone monitors and judges everybody’s actions through social media.

² Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 4, 1843, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/1925>.

³ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

⁴ André Jansson, “Interveillance and identity: a quantitative study of privacy concerns related to new social media,” *Comunicazioni sociali*, 2, (2012): 274-287.

⁵ François Allard-Huver and Nick Gilewicz, “Digital Parrhesia as a Counterweight to Astroturfing.” in *Online Credibility and Digital Ethos: Evaluating Computer-Mediated Communication*, ed. Moe Folk and Shwan Apostel, (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2013): 215–227.

⁶ François Allard-Huver and Nick Gilewicz, “Digital Parrhesia 2.0: Moving beyond Deceptive Communications Strategies in the Digital World,” in *Handbook of Research on Digital Media and Creative Technologies*, ed. Drew Harrison, (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2015): 404–416.

⁷ Singh, “Recognition,” 122.

Lacie Pound's Nosedive: Reputation, Interveillance and Truth-telling

Nosedive follows the downfall of Lacie Pound, a young woman obsessed by her online ratings. Lacie lives in a society where people rate each other on a scale of one to five stars. With an average grade of 4.2, Lacie has access to a comfortable lifestyle and lives in a social bubble colored in pink pastel. However, the viewer soon discovers that, to keep living in these conditions, Lacie must spend a considerable time on the social media platform that rules over everyone's life, taking and liking pictures: indeed, one's average grade determines one's social position ("prime influencer" or not) and access to commodities (housing, cars, health, job). High reviews give access to everything and everyone, from discounts in housing to best jobs and top-notch health treatments. On the contrary, low grades restrict access: longer queues, economical offers at rental stores and no access to new medical treatments. For instance, Lacie can keep her job position as long as she stays above 2.5 or can access the last seats of an upcoming flight with a required 4.2.

Lacie's demise begins when she sets herself up to get an average grade of 4.5 in order to have access to the "Prime Influencers Program" of her dream apartment. In order to "boost" her grade she tries to benefit from the influence of a former friend Naomie, a 4.8, and manage to get invited to her wedding. Her refusal to hear out her brother's concerns about this project and the real nature of her former relationship with Naomie, who tormented her in high school, is the starting point of her grade drop and thus, of her social nosedive.

From that point, we only further discover how low grades worsen life conditions, both materially and socially. Despite trying everything she can to get to her friend Naomie's wedding, to which she is the maid of honor, her newly acquired low ratings prevent Lacie from getting a seat into a plane, accessing a reliable rental car, and even entering an upscale neighborhood. When Naomie discovers Lacie's grade fall, she forbids her to come to her wedding, as having someone with such bad ratings would negatively impact her own. The

audience then uncovers the social violence of this society, where “friendship” has often been replaced by an extreme form of professional networking and personal branding.

From Self-Branding...

In *Nosedive*, the marketing concept of personal branding goes hand in hand with Goffman’s self-presentation theory, in which he draws a parallel between theatre and social life⁸. In this model, one treats his or her behavior as an actor in a play where everyone plays several roles. The audience consists of all the people who observe the scene and react to it. There is just one step from there to building a personal brand using one’s theatrical persona on social media platforms.

This strategy of personal branding and the apparatus that surrounds it appears essential in a system of peer ratings. Peer rating as we see it in *Nosedive*, is the extension of business and service rating we know today. Rating has increasingly become part of our daily lives, as it allows the differentiation between companies proposing similar products or services. It has become common to search for reviews before making an online purchase or choosing a hotel. The act of giving ratings has become so widespread that companies such as TripAdvisor now enjoin their readers to become contributors in exchange for nothing but online badges. People rate to give their opinion and be part of the community. Lacie’s world is then no more than the mere development of this model.

Moreover, this new way to evaluate people and relationships introduces a dual process that is particular to social media.⁹ On the one hand, we observe a logic of calculated and interested social relationships, where we search for more friends and create an idealized self-image through personal branding. On the other hand, this logic of reputation and grading exacerbate social inequalities and creates a homogenous social space, visually and

⁸ Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (New York, NY: Random House, 1956).

⁹ Dominique Cardon, "Réseaux sociaux de l'Internet," *Communications*, 88, (2011): 141-148.

symbolically illustrated by different color universes throughout the show as we will later analyze. Thus, we not only create new means of connecting others but we also create new means of surveillance and new digitally rendered walls, a new *panopticon*.

... to Self-Surveillance

This society focused on personal branding, appearance, “face”, and peer rating rises, amongst many, the question of the place of privacy, surveillance, transparency, and truth telling. Indeed, the first impression created by the show is that Lacie may leave in a modernized version of Bentham’s panopticon. The principle of the panopticon is one of a prison conceived so that every prisoner could be watched by a sole guardian without knowing if and when he is watched. Ultimately, Bentham envisions a system in which not only prisons but also schools and factories could be built this way and lays the foundation of a society where everyone watches everyone else that will ultimately be realized in modern western societies: “Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?”¹⁰ As Foucault theorized, we encounter here a modern form of the eye of power: “This reign of ‘opinion’, so often invoked at this time, represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective, and anonymous gaze.”¹¹ Michael Schur, who wrote *Nosedive*, qualified the society observed here: “I don’t think of it as the near future—I think of it as a parallel present.”¹² It thus derives from our uses of the Internet by creating a virtual “house of glass” and a real “electronic panopticon”¹³ where our lives are

¹⁰ Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, 264.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, « L’œil du pouvoir, » in *Dits et Ecrits, tome 2: 1976 – 1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 190-207.

¹² Eliana Dockterman, “Sci-fi evolves into disturbing reality in Black Mirror and Westworld,” *Time*, October 13, 2016, <http://time.com/4529439/sci-fi-evolves-into-disturbing-reality-in-black-mirror-and-westworld/>.

¹³ Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

constantly put under surveillance by the means of electronic devices, symbolized here by the fact that every character wears a digital contact lens connected to the phone's rating app.

Nevertheless, in *Nosedive*, the surveillance means and control apparatus differ from Bentham's panopticon as the show creates a narrative at the crossroad of new media criticism and dystopian culture. Indeed, the logic of *surveillance* is substituted by a *culture of interveillance*: "in which people enjoy following the activities of others as well as the automatized reflections of their own 'data doubles'."¹⁴ The world perspective has changed: a vertical control, from top to bottom, has been replaced by a horizontal form of control where every citizen is watching the other: "As mediated social interaction and the instantaneous circulation of images and opinions collapse into reined participatory techniques for consumer monitoring, the classical Big Brother model of top-down surveillance is intertwined with a number of other, increasingly interactive forms of mediated control, some of which are marked by a high degree of social complicity even pleasurable and/or empowering engagement."¹⁵

As we previously explained, personal branding strategies are at the center of the relations developed between protagonists in the show. They master digital tools and promote themselves through all available media. For Jansson, this could be the consequence of a more and more important focus on the mediatization of individuals started in our society: "interveillance means that social agents to a growing extent come to understand and define the relations between themselves and others via automatically generated recommendations of contacts and commodities (connectivity) and quantified simulations of social status (popularity). Interveillance practices are thus inseparable from societal surveillance processes, foremost algorithmically based commercial surveillance (datafication), but they are not

¹⁴ André Jansson, "Perceptions of surveillance: Reflexivity and trust in a mediatized world (the case of Sweden)," *European Journal of Communication*, 24 (2012, 4): 415.

¹⁵ André Jansson, "Interveillance and identity", 274.

systematic and hierarchical *per se*.”¹⁶ However, the difference we observe in *Nosedive*, which also generates a certain sense of discomfort when we watch the show, is that interveillance has become *systematic* and *hierarchical*: individuals only exist by their grades and their place in the world is entirely linked to this grade. Rating, qualifying social interactions *via* app and being rewarded with commodities are direct consequences of a society where actors are compliant with the surveillance culture which “can be seen as a playful aspect of personal relationships.”¹⁷ This apparent playfulness in downgrading others hides the fact that the nature of relationships at play here is not playful at all, but more likely a power play for social status.

Networked Society and Digital Parrhesia

The complexity of telling the truth is crucial when one tries to understand the true nature of a networked society. For the social psychologist Turkle, the “network” does not really pertain to information and communication technologies or devices but to social interactions and the significance we give to *mediated* communications practices over non-mediated ones.¹⁸ In the show, Lacie’s nosedive begins when she and her brother fight over Lacie’s perception of her relationship with Naomi as well as her increasing shallow behavior. Her brother tries to enter in a *parrhesiastic* relationship with her, that is to tell her the discourse of the truth, to be frank with her because he cares about her: “*parrhesia* consists in telling the truth without concealment, reserve, empty manner of speech, or rhetorical ornament which might encode or hide it. ‘Telling all’ is then: telling the truth without hiding any part of it, without hiding it behind anything.”¹⁹

¹⁶ André Jansson, “Interveillance: A New Culture of Recognition and Mediatization,” *Media and Communication*, 3 (2015, 3): 85.

¹⁷ Miyase Christensen, “Cultures of Surveillance. Privacy and Compliant Exchange.” *Nordicom Review*, 37 (2016, special issue): 177.

¹⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011).

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II: 1983–1984 (Lectures at the College de France)*, (New York, NY: Picador, 2012): 9. Michel

But parrhesia and more precisely *digital parrhesia* does not simply mean telling the truth²⁰; it implies that the person who speaks the truth sincerely believes in it, honestly represents himself by doing so and takes a risk by telling the truth: “For there to be *parrhesia*, in speaking the truth one must open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person, of irritating him, of making him angry and provoking him to conduct which may even be extremely violent. So it is the truth subject to risk of violence.”²¹. For instance, in Ancient Greece, a messenger telling bad news to a tyrant could be executed: if someone wanted to tell the truth and felt risks for himself, he had to ask permission, he had to request *parrhesia*, and enter what was called the parrhesiastic game. If one is refused this permission, it can lead to social freefall.

Personal Branding as a New Physiological Need

The prominence of personal self-branding is clear in the society developed in *Nosedive*. People develop their image as brands do. They emphasize the features they want people to see while hiding the most trivial aspects of their lives. This is exactly what someone like Naomi, Lacie’s former friend, does as a “prime influencer”: she develops an image of herself showcasing her in the most beautiful settings, from paradise beaches to mansions. While aware of these strategies (she herself works hard on retouching her pictures to ensure maximal rating), Lacie cannot help trying to resemble Naomie. According to Lake: “personal branding used to include nothing more than a simple business card with your name on it, but with the development of social media and an increasingly individualized society, the brand you build around yourself is perhaps the single most important way to stand out in your spheres of influence.”²² If in our society, personal branding remains a “way to stand out”, in Lacie’s world, it has become a vital necessity, a physiological need similar to the ones

²⁰ Allard-Huver and Gilewicz, « Digital Parrhesia, 2.0 ».

²¹ Foucault, 11.

²² Laura Lake, “What is Personal Branding and What You Need to Know About It?,” *The balance*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-personal-branding-4056073>.

described by Maslow in his hierarchy of needs.²³ It is so important that people have councilors who help them manage their image, and their global rating. These councilors act as marketing strategists. In Lacie's case, her councilor advises her to get a boost from "quality people" (i.e. 4 points people or more) if she wants to achieve the grade of 4.5. This also directly recalls on the profound definition and uses of social network sites as they are not as much a tool to meet and connect as a tool that "enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" and thus to benefit from these *mise-en-scène*²⁴.

The *mise-en-scène* of everyday life presented in *Nosedive* is the clear illustration of Goffman's self-presentation theory.²⁵ Indeed, in Lacie's universe, everyone acts in a calculated and predictable manner motivated by the consciousness of being both observed and judged, as it also happens in Bentham's panopticon. This appears from the very beginning of the episode, in a scene where we discover Lacie practicing her smile in front of her bathroom's mirror again and again until it satisfies her. This aspect comes back again when Lacie rehearses her maid of honor's speech with her brother, highlighting the emotional memories she shares with the bride while a tear rolls down her cheek. At the end of it, she loses her moved face and asks her brother if the "tear was too much", to which he answers by calling her a "sociopath".

Nonetheless, this strategy of personal branding is necessary, as peer-rating is the foundation of *Nosedive*'s society. In this system, people rate each other on their looks, acts and behaviors. The peer-rating system is doubled by a self-moderating one. Lacie's world is based on the idea that the community moderates itself. In the show, we do not see anyone controlling the grades that are given. The only legal authority who appears in the episode (a security agent in the airport) actually uses rating to implement coercive measures upon Lacie

²³ Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, 50 (1943, 4): 370-96.

²⁴ dana boyd and Nicole Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (2007): 210-230.

²⁵ Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self*.

(removing one point from her grade for 24 hours). In Goffman's theory, this leads her to lose her face in public.²⁶ This self-moderating society leads to drifts: some people, such as Lacie's coworker, become scapegoats for the rest of the group, which allows itself to judge his personal life (he has broken up with his partner) and punish him by giving him bad grades. Similarly, low rating leads to even lower rating: grading acts as a "customer review" about a person. If someone is badly rated, people become suspicious and rate the person low as well. This is what happens to Lacie when she hitchhikes with a grade of 2.8: despite her neat appearance, drivers do not stop and rate her low for the sake of doing so, leading her to an even deeper downfall. In *Nosedive*'s universe, judgement over a person has shifted from one's external appearance to one's social media grade.

Interveillance in a Digital Dystopic Society

The problematic power plays in the discourse are at the center of the show's questions. On the one hand, Lacie and the other characters are seeking "authentic gestures" or "meaningful encounters" when meeting others through their digitally enhanced social lives. On the other hand, they seem to be unfit to accept going beyond the surface of these "meaningful encounters" specifically when someone tries to tell the truth and play the parrhesiastic game. In *Nosedive* we have a perfect illustration of this game played by several characters and the consequences it has on them in this digitally mediatized society. Lacie's brother is the first character who risks telling the truth: he fights with his sister who refuses to hear it and will thus be "punished" by her as she sends him a bad grade. Entering the parrhesiastic game has a cost and implies consequences for both the person telling the truth and the person receiving it. In this mediatized and shallow society, using digital parrhesia without permission consequently led to lose "stars" and to lose the social status associated with them.

²⁶ Goffman, *The presentation of self*.

The truck driver encountered by Lacie explains her that she once put a lot of efforts in having stars, she “used to live for it”, but once she decided to tell everybody what she really thought, she lost her social status. The protagonists’ mediatized self is not a digital double, a pseudonym, or an avatar, but a digitally created *ethos* with all the implication of an ethos. Therefore, using digital parrhesia can then lead to the same consequence as real parrhesia for the subject. When Lacie tells Naomi, without permission or invitation to do so, the truthful nature of her “friendship”—that Naomi used Lacie to cast a favorable light on her—she enters the parrhesiastic game. This unwanted truth led all wedding guests to give Lacie bad grades. Consequently, she loses all her stars and is arrested. This arrest symbolizes death, a social and digital death materialized by the forced withdrawal of her contact lens. However, this death opens a door for different relationships, less shallow, more open, cruder too and ultimately truer. Paradoxically, it is only when Lacie reaches a “real” prison, with glass windows reminding the panopticon logic, that she is able to free herself and to practice parrhesia in its most basic form: tell everything, swear, laugh.

Conclusion

Through a semiotic analysis of the episode, this chapter illuminated the shift from the current, professional use of marketing theories such as self-branding and peer-rating to the fictional and personal application of them in *Nosedive*’s universe. The society depicted in the series moved from self-branding to self-surveillance and shows how easily the boundaries between the private sphere and the public one can be crossed. In addition, Lacie Pound’s world, as created by Charlie Brooker, is the representation of a new panopticon²⁷ in which the “disciplinary” tools normalizing people’s behavior are social media and mobile devices. More than a society of surveillance, the one displayed in this episode of *Black Mirror* is one of

²⁷ Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*.

interveillance²⁸ where people watch, rate, and judge each other continuously. However, beyond the *mise-en-scene* of everyday life lies the question of parrhesia²⁹, or in this case, digital parrhesia³⁰ and its consequences: for the characters; whether it is online or offline, parrhesia comes with relief and a (re-) connection to “real” life but also with a risk of downfall within society.

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²⁸ Jansson, “Interveillance”.

²⁹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*.

³⁰ Allard-Huver and Gilewicz, “Digital Parrhesia 2.0”.

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¹ An influencer is a person who can have an impact on trends, purchase decisions or behavior due to his/her status in the community. Influencers, thanks to their real or perceived knowledge and relationships, have authority in the community in determining trends. In *Nosedive's* society, 'prime influencers' are high-grade citizens who benefit from advantages because they are considered influential enough for companies who want them on their side.

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