

Fake Smile Cells: Repression and Silence in *Nosedive*

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Abstract:

Imagine a world where people rate one's social interactions online and offline. The ratings are not just another popularity contest but control one's socio-economic status. The pressure to conform and be likable would lead to self-repression, and a lot would remain unsaid in a world dependent on the currency of people's position in society. Though hierarchical discrimination has been a reality for humans for centuries, the narrative of *Nosedive* (an episode of the science fiction anthology *Black Mirror*) adds another system of hierarchy based on one's social ratings. The paper studies the act of silence and repression of emotions as an everyday phenomenon in the story. Further, the dystopian world of *Nosedive* is contrasted with our reality, and the nosediving effects of social comparison are also elaborated.

Keywords: repression, emotions, silence, social comparison

"Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth later in uglier ways." — **Sigmund Freud.**

Black Mirror is a British science-fiction TV series anthology that explores the impact of technology on humans. It has become a global phenomenon since its release, and its dystopian tone in each standalone episode warns about where we are heading as a civilization. Each series episode can be read through the Postmodern and Posthumanist lens as the writers depict our current obsessions and dependence on technology. *Nosedive* (episode 1 of season 3), written by Rashida Jones and Mike Schur, presents a world where an established social rating system forces people to put on a persona of niceness and repress all their negative emotions and behavior. Acting politely/respectfully, and positively is essential for maintaining social-socio-economic. The story follows Lacie Pound, a young woman whose world dictates being rated/judged by people on a minute-to-minute basis. Every interaction, whether online (through social media) or offline, is ranked on a 5-point star rating scale.

Everyone rates and is rated, and their rating affects their daily life. The ones with high scores enjoy a privileged social position and access to commodities and services (housing, cars, jobs, etc.), whereas those with low scores are treated as outcasts. The plot eerily marries our current obsession with our virtual self-image and the desire to be accepted and liked with existing structures of classism and materialism to create this grim reality where a simple score decides one's survival in the world.

Lacie, the protagonist of the story, is a 4.2 who wishes to improve her position in the world. The pressure of constantly comparing oneself and assuming the virtual images of people's lives to be their reality motivates Lacie to buy herself an apartment that is out of her budget. The house is symbolic of the idealistic lifestyle that she wishes to acquire. She is told to increase her rating to rent her expensive lifestyle apartment. Her meeting with a data analyst reveals that more 5-star ratings by "quality people" (the ones with high ratings themselves) can help her to reach a 4.5 rating in a short time ("Nosedive" 00:13:09). Soon, she finds an opportunity to achieve this when her school friend Naomi invites her as maid of honor for her wedding.

Stjepan Mestrovic defines a post-emotional society as one where emotions have been "transformed into a quasi-intellectual-phenomenon" and "insincere sincerity, synthetic candor, feigned frankness, and affected openness" are valued (Tüzün 150). *Nosedive* is a perfect example of a postemotional society, as everything seems to imitate authentic expression. Everyone pretends to be friendly and polite to the extent of toxicity. Openness is reserved only for people with good ratings. Lacie's world is post-emotional; therefore, emotions like frustration, anger, and disgust are hidden and often expressed through the passive-aggressive act of rating someone down. Lacie is rated down in the story when she misses her Uber ride for the airport and when she expresses her frustration at missing her flight. Everyday life actions elicit a specific response (emotion) from the audience through ratings. However, these responses are based on a transactional model where one rates favorably so that they also receive good ratings. People in Lacie's world are consumed by their persona, and hiding their "real" self has become a way of being in the world (Tüzün 161). Every character tries to conform to the system and be likable to people on their faces. This feigned sweetness often contrasts with their sharp facial expressions of disgust, annoyance, shame, irritation, etc. The real estate agent of Lacie and the airport assistance officer are good examples of this discrepancy between words and facial expressions.

"Between what is said and not meant, And what is meant and not said, Most love is lost." this quote by Kahil Gibran would gain an ironic position for the people in the story of *Nosedive*. In the post-emotional world of the episode, there is an unsaid understanding between everyone that they are using each other for a better rating.

Naomi, while informing Lacie that she is not the Maid of Honour anymore as her rating has decreased to 2.6, tells her that when she invited Lacie to speak, she was a 4.2. The simulations predicted that a vintage bond of a low four speaking at her gathering would give Naomi a bounce of a minimum of .2 points. When Lacie retorts by asking if it was just about numbers for her, she hits back by dropping all pretenses "Oh, cut the shit! It was numbers for both of us. You wanted those primo votes, do not deny it. It is not like you could get them on your own. Let us not kid ourselves" ("Nosedive" 00:47:02). Many time people remain silent on witnessing the struggles of those with lower ratings. Lacie witnesses a colleague struggling to enter their office as he no longer has a suitable rating. Despite her wanting to help him, she chooses her self-preservation as helping the colleague means she invites the displeasure of others. The simple act of rating someone is just the sound of the smartphone pinging/beeping. The erasure of words from this action makes it impersonal and simplistic. While the rating says a lot without any verbal stimulus, it creates an almost robotic-like trance where everyone remains hooked to their screens, absorbing the lives of others through their pictures and captions.

Silence is a constant background in the episode as everyone constantly silences their authentic selves. The expressions are muted, the speech carefully crafted, and people look the other way when someone with a low rating asks for help. Moreover, there is collective silence about the rating system and the discrimination it leads to. The majority of the people are so comfortable with it that they choose to ignore the mental repercussions of this pervasive silence.

The constant social evaluation of one's overt behavior and exposure to idealized living standards leads the protagonist to repress her emotions. Repressing one's emotions is deliberate, and the silence. In contrast, others suffer because of the social rating system, which is out of convenience as she enjoys an excellent social ranking at the beginning of the story. Lacie's ambition of achieving a higher rating by attending Naomi's wedding as her maid of honor does not go according to plan. When Naomi drops her as the maid of honor, Lacie's mental state receives a final blow, and her behavior spirals out of hand. She gatecrashes Naomi's wedding with her clothes dripping in dirt and snatches the microphone to give a hysterical speech. In her speech, she finally expresses her feelings about how Naomi always looked down on her, tried to control her behavior, and even revealed that she slept with Lacie's boyfriend. Her breakdown, which was building up, erupts with far-reaching consequences. Repression in psychoanalytic theory is the exclusion of distressing thoughts, memories, and emotions from consciousness, which can lead to anxiety and neurotic symptoms (Repression | Definition & Facts | Britannica). Lacie ends up experiencing a nervous breakdown as her psyche can no longer repress her desire to

express her authentic self. Her consciousness struggles for control while giving the speech as she hopes to improve her rating, but simultaneously, she wishes to confront Naomi about betraying her. Her hysterical speech mixes her original speech and sentences, expressing her rage. She is arrested for causing a ruckus at the wedding.

The prison ironically becomes a place where she finally lets it all out. Even though she is caged in, it is in that cell where she gets an opportunity to express herself without fearing ratings. The prison cell beside her is occupied by a man perhaps free of the social rating world. They start listing the things they "do not like" about each other. The last dialogue of the story, "Fuck you!" is said in unison by these two characters ("Nosedive" 00:59:53 - 01:01:28). The freedom to utter obscenities and express her disliking is cathartic as finally, Lacie gets to speak things she would be punished for outside the prison cell. Hence, this prison cell is far more liberating than the world outside, where everyone is trapped inside their fake smile cells. The fake smile cells everyone has built-in *Nosedive* lead to a silent and repressed society that has tranquilized all their authentic impulses.

Nosedive also raises an important question about authentic self-expression and its importance for healthy mental well-being. The citizens of *Nosedive* are physically healthy and live in sanitized spaces, but their mental health suffers as they are pressured to be positive constantly. They are continuously hooked to their devices and virtual self-image; they look happy and satisfied, but what they feel is only explored through the point of view of a couple of characters in the episode and according to a recent study that analyzed the data of 10,560 Facebook users, individuals who are more authentic with their self-expression on the platform also reported greater life satisfaction (Bailey et al.). The study was only for one platform; the data from more social media platforms can help one imagine more clearly what a post-emotional society like *Nosedive* would look and feel like.

At the beginning of the episode, one observes how carefully Lacie practices her giggles in front of the mirror. This simple act of honing one's smile to be accepted reveals how people in her world have mastered their fake smiles. Almost everyone is cooped up in this post-emotional world with smartphones, obsessing over their ratings. Only through two significant characters, one realizes the pathetic state of those obsessed with their ratings. Lacie's brother Ryan and Susan (the woman who offers her a lift to Naomi's wedding) are the ones who understand that the ratings can change someone drastically. Ryan is a 3.7 and gets favorable points from his gaming community online; he keeps on making fun of Lacie for wanting to improve her living standards by getting a better rating. He cares for Lacie and does not want her to attend Naomi's wedding as she is always mean to her. He believes that probably all high fours are "suicidal on the inside" as this obsession of comparing oneself with others

and pretending to be happy all the time can surely lead one to be depressed ("Nosedive" 00:24:08). Susan, on the other hand, is a friendly 1.4 who has given up on people-pleasing. As in the past, her high rating could not save the life of her husband, who had to let go of his medical trial position to a person with a better rating. So once she lost her husband, she gave up on the rating system and started speaking her mind, leading to her low scores. Ryan and Susan are examples of how one can survive in the cutthroat world of social rating while still expressing themselves. Ryan is still a part of the system. He dislikes the excessively feigned niceness and materialism, but Susan has decided not to play by the rules.

Lacie's conversation with Susan is pivotal as it voices why she continues to conform. She tells Susan that it is easy for her as she has lost everything she has, but Lacie, on the other hand, never has anything worth losing. She reveals that she is still fighting first to be content to "look around and think, well, I guess I am okay. To breathe out, not feeling - Like just And that is way off, like, way off. Moreover, until I get there, I have to play the numbers game. We all do, that is what we are in" ("Nosedive" 00:42:16 – 00:43:07). Lacie puts into words why everyone is running behind the numbers as they have not reached contentment yet. The kind of contentment Lacie is chasing comes with the cost of constantly repressing one's emotions and silencing one's authentic self.

The world presented in the episode seems farfetched, but our world already has a couple of systems in place, as shown in the episode. According to the website Datareportal, as of July 2023, 60.6% of all people use social media ("Digital"). The applications Facebook and Instagram, which are the source of inspiration for the online sharing portal in *Nosedive*, boast of being on the list of top five social media platforms that people use regularly as of July 2023 ("Global"). We already use an online rating system for rating services like delivery, customer support, and even places and organizations. While it is not as pervasive, it does influence our behavior. The social rating system in the story shares an ideological background with China's social credit system, which was announced in 2014. The social credit system is a regulatory framework intended to report on the 'trustworthiness' of individuals, corporations, and governmental entities across China. It is being posited as similar to having a credit score where good behavior is rewarded, and bad behavior is punished. The framework has yet to be rolled out entirely. However, the dire consequences of having a bad score could result in slower internet speed, removal of traveling rights either domestically or abroad, publicized as an evil citizen/organization, and being put on the blacklist by the government or other credit assessors (Ma).

Nosedive also does not seem like an exaggeration, as it takes up something as basic as a social comparison, vital for understanding and defining oneself. It turns

it into a giant that forces people to conform. Most dystopian narratives end with either the collapse of the dystopian world due to the actions of the protagonist or the protagonist ending up dead or imprisoned. Lacie's action of breaking her silence (even though it is a psychological breakdown) and expressing her authentic pent-up emotions is an act of defiance. Even though life will be difficult for her as she no longer enjoys the security of a high rating, she can at least exist without constantly repressing her emotions. She becomes the other in a society that values insincerity and feigned positivity. Her future appears to be bleak as the post-emotional society is comfortably ignorant of the ill effects of its social rating system.

While Lacie is successful in escaping her "matrix" of the social rating system, much like "Truman" escaping his reality of an artificial TV set, the question of whether we as humans will be able to escape or instead prevent our reality, which is increasingly becoming dependent on technology remains to be seen. As more and more people get addicted to their smartphones and virtual selves, the more the grim reality of constant comparison gets closer to turning into a nosedive. This social comparison could only result in disappointment, depression, and anxiety, as there will always be a section of people who will do better and who will have it all. Moreover, the pressure of only sharing what is good, positive, and happy with others also creates a constant need to feel and experience these positive events and emotions. The need for social acceptance and belongingness also included the need to be liked and accepted for one's virtual self—a self that lives in a space between reality and hyperreality, much like the one Lacie inhabits.

End Notes:

1. The word matrix is also used as a pun to refer to the 1999 science fiction movie *The Matrix*, in which humanity is unknowingly trapped inside a simulated reality, which intelligent machines have created to distract humans while using their bodies as an energy source.
2. *The Truman Show* is a 1998 American movie where an insurance salesman discovers his whole life has been a reality TV show.

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