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A STUDY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS DIGITAL ARCHIVE AND SIMULACRUM IN
BLACK MIRROR'S NOSEDIVE

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Abstract

This paper studies Social Media through the lenses of Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995) and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981). Social Media functions both as an archive as well as a simulacrum since it stores information about a person and creates a simulated and recorded existence of that person on a digital platform. As a simulacrum, social media substitutes the real with signs of the real leading to a loss of distinction between reality and illusion. Netflix's popular dystopian sci-fi TV series *Blackmirror's "Nosedive"* episode studies social media as an online archive of hyperreal personal information and pictures. The nature of social media as a panoptical archiving medium forms a simulacrum that masks and perverts basic reality to an extent where reality is repressed and a 'precession of simulacra' occurs.

Keywords: Simulacra, archive, Black Mirror, Netflix, social media, social media studies, reality, virtual, hyperreal, Derrida, Baudrillard

In the age of smart technologies and internet communications, social media has taken over people's lives. The frenzy of uploading information in the form of texts, pictures, status updates and life events has led to the creation of an online archive accessible to anyone using social media platforms. New media technologies allow the creation of a reality that is away from the real. Virtual Reality (VR), Artificial Intelligence (AI) and smart gadgets are designed by feeding large amounts of information in coded formats into computers to simulate the real world. This simulation of the real holds power to replace reality and give rise to a simulacrum through grand representations of reality. New media has given way to the evolution of social media that is available to and changeable by everybody. Thus, social media creates both an archive as well as a simulacrum by storing quantified information about individuals in an intangible digital platform and by attempting to replace reality. The influence and dominance of social media archives on a person's life is the subject of *Black Mirror*'s *Nosedive*.

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Black Mirror is a British speculative fiction television series created by Charlie Brooker in 2011. It is much acclaimed for its dystopic view of how dysfunctional the world can get in future owing to the overuse of technology. The series spread over five seasons shows how technology dominates and alienates the people using it. *Nosedive,* the first episode of its third season, portrays its central character Lacie caught in the made-up world of social media who struggles to maintain the illusion of happiness and success. The social network shown here is a social audit system that allows people to rate each other. The ratings determine what friends someone can have, what jobs they can qualify for, what house they can buy and so on. This paper aims to study the social media used by Lacie and other characters in the episode as an intangible archive as well as a simulacrum using the concepts from Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995) and Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981). The purpose is to study social media as an online reservoir of pictures and information and how the nature of this medium forms a simulacrum to confound the perception of reality. People become the *archons* of their online profiles and contribute to the precession of simulacra.

Derrida's theory of Archivization in the digital world:

Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* states two requisites for creation and maintenance of an archive- *arkheion* and *archon.* In the traditional sense archives operate in a physical space called *arkheion* which is the site of preservation of information. It functions under the guidance and authority of *archons*- the guardians of the archives. The *archons* withhold the right of commencing, commanding and consigning information by choosing either to preserve or repress it. The process of archivization by the *archon* becomes an autocratic action since it happens under their jurisdiction, in the privacy of their residence. Derrida draws an analogy between archives and Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis by alluding to the process of archiving as being similar to the private process of memory making in an individual's mind. The supreme autocracy of *archons* over their archives changed with the coming of computers and the World Wide Web where websites became the site of preservation of information and new age *archons* opened their digital archives for public viewing.

The process of archiving is a process of "institutionalisation" (Derrida, 4) wherein commences the act of inscribing and the agency of authorizing. Presented as a lecture in the 1994, *Archive Fever* has Derrida deconstructing the archivization process and framing it as a political act when the world was on the verge of internet boom. He notes that, "There is no political power without the control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation." (4) This democratization of the archives has been achieved in the present times with the advent of new media technologies. With the coming of computers, archivization becomes a democratic process where anybody with access to computers also has access to archives on the digital platform. Derrida's primary focus with the archives lies in their *archeion* which he describes as "a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrate, the *archons,* those who commanded." (Derrida, 2) But this situation changes when nature of "*domiciliation*" of archives change with portable computers and mobile smartphones that makes the archive mobile and global. The *archeion* can now be carried anywhere their *archon* goes and is open to other archons for viewing and interpretation. The "place of election where law and singularity intersect in *privilege*" (Derrida,3) is now out in the open under the Foucauldian concept of panopticism where the archived information is for everyone to see. In social media, visibility of the topo-nomological aspect of the archive

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changes the way its contents are consigned. People (*archon)* then show what others would like to see and 'like' their content and this leads to repression of reality and formation of simulacra.

The world has come a long way from Freud's 'note' on the *Mystic writing pad* and Derrida's use of "little portable Macintosh" to present day smartphone technologies. As the structure of archive changes, the nature of the archivable content also changes. When Derrida says that "the technical structure of *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content" his postmodernist observation of the archive aligns with Marshall McLuhan's famous 'medium is the message' statement. McLuhan in his book *Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967) writes, "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication." (8) The 'nature' of media is the nature of the *arkheion* that influences the way their *archons* store and relay information. Same can be said for social media and its millennial users.

While computers and hard disks allow users or *archons* to spontaneously archive information and access it with ease and privacy, social media websites let their users publicly archive personal information and make it available for others to see. Social media has led to a heightened FOMO or the Fear of Missing Out in the millennials whose incessant urge to upload pictures, create content and influence to garner 'followers' can be likened to Freud's concept of death drive and conservation drive. The fear of death and destruction of memories leads to the conservation drive that gives rise to the archival desire or drive. This drive to leave behind impressions on an exterior substrate is what Derrida calls *le mal d' archive* or the archive fever. (Derrida, 12) In social media archival desire becomes associated with the feature of appreciation where viewers can 'like' or rate a person's archived items like pictures, videos or life events and choose to 'follow' them. The

present world and the possible near future world that *Black Mirror's Nosedive* portrays is concerned with inscribing an impression of reality and preserving it online for the world to see and rank them. The fear of being removed or forgotten from the society and missing out on opportunities are the driving forces behind the "fever" of uploading and recreating appealing doctored versions of themselves online.

Nosedive presents a dystopic future where archiving technologies have taken over the minds and bodies of people dictating their thoughts and actions. These archives are located on digital substrates that can be accessed through gadgets with screens. New media technologies have their users acting as the *archon* of their online profiles with the digital space as their *arkheion.* The digital democratization of the archive through social media contributes to the heightened urge to inscribe and publish (or post) contents for the outer world to see. This episode shows the future of social media technologies where the rating system divides the society into "primes" and non-primes like haves and have nots. The rating system of a seemingly democratic archive becomes an extension of the class system and denies people their democratic rights.

In this episode, Lacie Pound, a "4.2" young woman who lives with her brother Ryan is a trope for the *petite bourgeoise* who strives hard to make it in the world by getting ranked among the primes. Caught in the mad rush of gathering five-star ratings and climbing up the rating hierarchy, she wants to be able to afford a luxurious apartment in Pelican Cove, a gated "lifestyle community" reserved for "primes" which her below 4.5 rating does not allow. Ryan calls these apartments "fake smile jail cells" and is opposed to the idea of constant comparison and the pretentious happiness in social media. She lives a conflicted life in denial with her real self to such an extent that she cannot differentiate her individual self from her digital self.

Lacie's life is governed by the archive of social media that dictates her past, present and future. The episode opens with Lacie "working hard on her socials" by jogging and exercising as she takes snaps of herself and posts it online. She scrolls through her social media and swipes her thumb on her phone to rate people and their pictures. People are connected through social media where they post and archive moments of their lives for others to see. Lacie is both the participant and the result of a system where archives are private as well as public to an extent that they become one and the same. Lacie smiles up at random strangers and rates them all five stars in the expectation of being fully rated back. Rating people on their social media is shown to have replaced social niceties like greeting somebody and tipping waiters and cab drivers for their service. By quantifying people on digital platforms Lacie and her contemporaries contribute to classification of human lives. The café that Lacie visits every morning has customers who are all above four-point ratings. Social media reduces humans into bits of numbers on the phone screen and creates geographical archives of places where only a certain group of people can go to. Lacie could not book herself a flight ticket because her rating fell down to 4.1. Her colleague Chester was not allowed into the office building because his ratings decreased to 2.4 and Susan's husband was not allowed cancer treatment because he was 4.3. This public act of shunning people below 4.5 re-establishes the concept of politics of archives and autocracy of archons in an apparent democratic digitalization of archives.

Through social media, archives that preserve the societal laws and impose them are out in the open. They determine what coffee shop to visit, what dishes to cook, what friends to hang out with and so on. The faculty of panoptical archiving through social media puts all individuals under mass surveillance and leads to people feigning happiness to be ranked high for so long that the later replaces the former. This, thus, leads to the precession of simulacra.

Precession of Archived Simulacra:

Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981) examines the influence of symbols and signs in everyday life and states that reality has been replaced by hyperreality. Like the map from Borges' tale completely covers the Empire making it impossible to discern the map from the territory, social media in *Nosedive* has taken over Lacie's personal life making her social media profile and her individual-self indiscernible from each other. Her social media ratings become a replacement for her real self in a world that is a fusion of real and virtual. Traditional archives that manifest in the *arkheion* transform into technology aided archived simulacra that manifest through smartphones and visual augmentations that Lacie and other characters from *Black Mirror* have implanted in themselves.

Nosedive is a classic case of being confounded by the simulacra of social media whose point of reference is no longer in the real world yet has the world following its ever-changing diktats. It creates an inventory of experiences that an individual must participate in though there may not be any real reason behind it. Simulacra of the real world has preceded over the reality and it is all archived online. In Baudrillard's words, "It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. … it is no longer real at all. It is hyperreal: the product of irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere." (167) This "hyperspace" is created in the minds of individuals through smartphones. Just as people go Pokémon hunting in the smartphone game of Pokémon Go- a complete simulacra of geographical space where one catches non-existent objects by moving around in the real world, in the *Nosedive* universe people go around collecting ratings and being extra nice to

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everybody to be rated on an intangible medium that will determine their social acceptability.

The most striking part of this episode and the *Black Mirror* universe is the faculty of sight that enforces the social media archive and its simulacra. People's lives become an extension of the colour scheme and neat pattern of their smart devices. The pastel colour palette that dictates the entire society is an evidence of precession of social media simulacra. It feeds the illusion or rather the delusion that everything is happy and peaceful in a world where acts of violence occur when anybody can be down rated by random strangers and eliminated from the society. The faculty of sight is pertinent when the augmentations work in sync with smart devices and access the online profiles of people which shows the physiological implementation of simulacra. In a scene in the episode, when Lacie and Bethany Jones, a 4.6, get into the elevator they barely look at each other but are blatantly going through each other's online profiles because the nature of this media allows them to do so. They speak with fake enthusiastic and exclamatory voices because the illusion of happiness must never slip. Lacie's Reputelligent reputation counsellor advices her to show "authentic gestures" to score high on rankings in a situation where the lines between authentic and artificial blur. Lacie aims for "an artificial resurrection in a system of signs" (Baudrillard, 167) and partakes in the culture of simulation for so long that she joins the uninterrupted circuit of simulacra.

In the grand scheme of things, Lacie is a replaceable part in the giant machinery of social media. She represses the real and preserves the hyperreal in her social media archive because the medium of archivization demands so. In order to not be rated out of the society she has to follow the pattern which results in her institutionalisation to such a social system. The social media that she and her peers use is a simulacrum through and through. According to Baudrillard, there are four phases of formation of image. They are, "1. It is the reflection of a basic reality. 2. It masks and perverts a basic reality. 3. It masks the *absence* of a basic reality. 4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum." (170) The images in social media go through the process of perversion that removes them out of the realm of reality given the insane number of filters and beautification they go through before being posted online. This act of repression and destruction of reality places the images in the archived simulacrum. Social media is not a simulation because simulation "threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary"". (Baudrillard, 168) When Lacie tries making tapenade it is real but it is inspired from her childhood best friend Naomi's feed. Her friend is a 4.8 and when she posts pictures of herself eating tapenade made by her fiancé it feeds into the reality that tapenade is what everybody must have. Thus, Lacie, a 4.2, feels that she must also jump on the bandwagon and not be left out. When her brother questions her choice of dish she says, "It is just something I wanna eat, Ryan.". Thus, social media feeds become a sort of Disneyland where people seem to do what makes them happy and escape monotony but they are shedding the original version of reality and stepping into hyperreality. They are constantly feeding new signs into the simulacra which displaces reality even more**.**

In the made-up world of social media, when Lacie posts the picture of Mr. Rags- a ragdoll she and Naomi made in summer camp, she is manipulating with the symbols of her non-existent relationship with her ex-best friend for ratings. Baudrillard says, "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning." (171) This proves to be the case where Lacie and Naomi are no longer friends or in real touch Mr. Rags becomes a symbol of nostalgia. This gets Lacie invited to Naomi's wedding as her maid of honour. She prepares an emotional speech which she is assured would get her full five-star ratings from the prime guests. Her brother calls out on her "sociopath"

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behaviour and warns that people like Naomi must be suicidal off the screen. Following a spat with him, Lacie's nosedive begins. She gets "dinged" down by several people which knocks her social ranking to 4.1. From then begin a series of unfortunate events that lead to her losing her ratings and being shunned from the grand wedding that she had her hopes pinned on to be able to get a discount in Pelican Cove as part of "Prime Influencers Programme". Despite being forbidden from the wedding, Lacie manages to sneak into the wedding looking dishevelled and out of place after hours of hitch hiking. She gives her speech that was supposed to raise her rankings yet it pushes into prison. Her appearance and rebellion threaten to break apart the spectacle of simulacra and hence she had to be removed. Lacie is put in prison where her visual augmentation is removed and she is forced into a glass cell without her phone. In captivity and without the rating device, she finds her voice and spirit. She engages in a spirited exchange of profanities with her prison neighbour unafraid of losing her ratings. Here the archive and simulacra break apart removing all of the society imposed repression and frees Lacie.

Conclusion:

Black Mirror's Nosedive depicts a rupture of social media archive and simulacra in the absence of the *archeion.* The archive would dissolve if the *archeion* dissolves. Similarly, simulacra shatters without the substrate that mediates its illusion. Derrida's concern regarding the archive was with the physical manifestation of its *archeion.* The digital structure of *archeion* of social media archives: the smartphone determines its varied content and global accessibility. Though such an archive appears democratic, there exists a hierarchy among *archons.* Social media archives have admins who can remove or block users and in Lacie's case punish them. Archives are created by *archons* by preserving or repressing information. In *Nosedive,* the users of social media seem to have all authority over personal

accounts and the freedom of rating. Yet in such public photographic archiving of people's daily lives, repression of certain thoughts and actions take place which if expressed would disturb the simulacra of social media. Lacie's failed attempt to climb the social rating hierarchy and her ultimate liberation in a prison cell marks the return of her repressed self. Without the substrate to hold the archive and feed the simulacra, experiences are archived without archive. *Nosedive* presents the dissolution of archive through the dissolution of *archeion* and the removal of the *archon* from her position of privilege in a scenario where her archive was one of the many that formed the simulacra.

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