Media Mirr(err)ors: Hyper real and the Fragmentation of Self in Margaret Atwood's
Oryx and Crake

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Abstract:

In Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake, the main characters Jimmy and Crake entangle, entertain and explore themselves the evolving relationship between screens, surrealism, media and identity in virtual sphere. The novel portrays the current scenario of virtual dominance, survival and digital surveillance of individual privacy through the screen, making a drastic change in the techno advancement cultural world. Jimmy and Crake who are well secured from performing events and games in the computer addicted to several sites yet go through an inescapable moment and life situation while facing with psychological and mental ill health issues. Gradually, the fantasy overpowers the reality, and human progression and their emotions are challenged and replaced by virtual age of digital advancement. The virtual world places a strong impression on the real world favoring Crake who aspires to venture into producing and destroying anew. Therefore there is a surrealism and distortion in the form of virtual reality, creating an irreplaceable fragmented self and perils of identity crisis in the modern digi-culture which mirrors and errs through manipulated activities. The present study analyses the virtual real worldview and it's intersection of surrealism and VR, and how it becomes the monopoly of divide between the self and the device that are constantly in flux.

Keywords: Degital Sphere, Fragmentation, Hyperreal, Identity, Media Mirrors, Selfhood

Virtual Reality (VR) is the term used in the computer techno field which creates an imitation of the atmosphere in an extraordinary way with immersive experience. Virtual reality displays three types of simulation which are categorized in to non-immersive, semi-immersive, and fully-immersive simulations.

Virtual Reality is nothing but the Computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional image or environment that can be interacted with in a seemingly real or physical way by a person using special electronic equipment, such as a helmet with

a screen inside or gloves fitted with sensors. Virtual Reality aims at creating a friendly atmosphere, using technology and advancement in digitalized world, to interact with the human beings just as the natural world exposes the communication one to one or to the group through signs, pictures, writings and oral transmission of language. Virtual reality out smarts and replaces the traditional flat screen with the fake or replicated and immersive world.

According to Wikipedia, "Virtual reality (VR) is a simulated experience that can be similar to or completely different from the real world. Applications of virtual reality include entertainment (particularly video games), education (such as medical or military training) and business (such as virtual meetings). Other distinct types of VR-style technology include augmented reality and mixed reality, sometimes referred to as extended reality or XR."

According to Shneiderman, "analyses of VR user-interface issues may be too sober a process for those who are enjoying their silicon trips, but it may aid in choosing the appropriate applications and refining the technologies" (224). Virtual mode atmospheric experience certainly would cause the individual to fall prey to the side-effects pertaining to simulation and mental ill health. And this is well exposed by the manipulated activities performed by Jimmy and Crake in Margaret Atwood's Oryx and Crake.

Margaret Atwood was born on November 18, 1939, in Ottawa, Canada. She is a Canadian poet, novelist, literary critic, and essayist, widely regarded as one of the most significant contemporary writers. Atwood is known for her writings, keen social observations, and versatility across genres. Atwood has contributed and written eight picture books, two graphic novels, nine short fiction collections, eight novels, eight poetry volumes, eleven nonfiction works, and a number of small press editions of both poetry and fiction. Two Booker Prizes have been awarded to her: "The Blind Assassin" (2000) and "The Testaments" (2019). Her other notable accomplishments include the Guggenheim Fellowship (1981), the National Book Critics and PEN Centre USA Lifetime Achievement Awards, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Governor General's Award (1996, 1985), the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Princess of Asturias Awards (2008). Atwood has been captivated and steered ahead to voice out on environmental issues, genetic engineering, women's rights and their place in Western culture, and the effects of technology on people. Her work often explores themes of feminism, dystopia, environmentalism, and the complexities of human relationships.

The virtual world divides and keeps the individual aloof from the real world as it has been turned into a tool for deception and perception, creating a false desire and a way to control it. This indicates that people have entered a world where a strong link between humans and their technologies is essential.

More sources of images and videos on the internet, lead the individuals who have access, to education at the same time entertainment purpose in a virtual mode. Virtual entertainment, points to online live or pre-recorded show, that which pars with the offline show, just on-screen as an alternate event, by means of video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Teams and WebEx, including group activities like team building activities and interactive workshops. Entertainment brings about a greater transformation through concerts, music videos, magic shows, dance show, DJ sets and further. The virtual entertainment pools everybody together from different corners of the world under one platform making a remarkable and unique experience.

In Atwood's Oryx and Crake, while television represents an important instrument of modern technology, the more important electronic device is computer and internet. As Baudrillard believes, television is the central instrument in the world of technology that breaks down reality which in its more developed way happens in computer. He argues that in our postmodern life, television, films, media and internet destroy the reality, the whole idea of copying the true or false of something is broken down, all we have now are simulation of reality which isn't more or less the "real" thing but the reality which is simulated or changed into hyperreality. He says that in postmodern society, people experience something called "the death of the real" which means people live in a realm of hyperreality. In last capitalist society, the computer totally provides connection to all parts of the globe and modern society with providing many opportunities for capitalist marketing and advertisements and opportunities to associate the pleasure derived from this entertainment with the products themselves.

For instance in Oryx and Crake, when Jimmy and Crake search the websites dealing with executions, it is said that "these sites would have spot commercials, for things like car batteries and tranquilizers, and logos painted in bright yellow on the backgrounds walls" (94) which shows how advertisements are used in all opportunities for better selling products to the consumers.

In Oryx and Crake the cities are portrayed as high risking area where there are huge amenities for the people to have full access to them. And those people like Jimmy, who had never been to the city, had never seen them. He had seen only on televisions and therefore his experience is a virtual reality experience: "He had seen them only seen it on TV – endless billboards and neon signs and stretches of buildings, tall and short, some of them with clouds of smoke coming out the back; thousands of people, hurrying, cheering, rioting. There were other cities too, near and far; some had better neighbourhoods in them, said his father, almost like the Compounds, with high walls around the houses, but those didn't get on TV much." (31)

Later his virtual reality experience is substantiated with his emotional psyche where he is surrounded by vicarious experiences and activities of unreal life, that is being absent from real life experiences. Jimmy's mother who is a microbiologist, carries on her job by making study on the proteins of the bioforms which is unhealthy to pigeons and modify their receptors. She used to identify the microbes and viruses through the computer screens. Jimmy is introduced to computer screen in the beginning of novel by her mother Sharon. "On her computer screen she showed Jimmy pictures of the cells, pictures of the microbes, pictures of the microbes getting into the cells and infecting them and bursting them open, close-up pictures of the proteins, pictures of the drugs she had once tested:" (33) and Moreover Jimmy's mother expresses her true love to him by being together and playing computer games. "She let Jimmy play with the pictures on her computer, and once he learned how to run the program, he could play war games with them – cells versus microbes. She said it was all right if he lost stuff off the computer, because all that material was out of date anyway. Though on some days – days when she appeared brisk and purposeful, and aimed, and steady – she would want to fool around on the computer herself." (34)

So Jimmy repeatedly has a series of vicarious experiences, but rarely a real life experience. All these substitute experience have a negative impact on Jimmy's psyche. As Raymond Lavoie, Corey King and Danielle King observe in Virtual experience, real consequences: the potential negative emotional consequences of virtual reality gameplay, "the strength of the experienced negative emotion is positively correlated with negative rumination after the experience." (75).

Jimmy begins his friendship with Crake playing computer games, especially chess with him. "He used to play chess with Crake but they'd played by computer, not with actual chessmen. […] He lets himself drift back to those after-school times with Crake. "Jimmy used to play chess with Crake but they'd played by computer, not with actual chessman." (44) Crake wins and he was good at chess game all the times. It was harmless enough at first. They might play Extinctathon, or one of the others. three-dimensional Waco, Barabarian Stomp, kwiktime Osama. They all used strategies you had to see where you were headed before you got there, but also where the other guy was headed. Crake was good at those games because he was a master of the sideways leap. Jimmy and Crake employing themselves on different computer chess games leads to the manipulation of life, because it goes against the real and natural way of playing usually adopted by real humans. Here what Jimmy and Crake engage in is not real, but a manipulation of machine programmes. In regular activities of schooling, Jimmy used to frequent school cafeteria with balanced meals and other optional meals. "If there was any lunchtime left over and nothing else going on, he could go to the library and watch old instructional CD-ROMs." (61) Though Jimmy is quite curious to know things from

old instructional CO-ROMs, passion for the computer games fashioned his curiosity and he joined hands with Crake while doing their homework.

Jimmy was always impulsive and led by his emotions in his life; he was often unrefined and uncouth, riding rough with people; he often sought relief in these virtual games with Crake: "Jimmy was impetuous and lacked finesse, so that wasn't too productive and they dropped it. Or, under pretence of doing their homework, which sometimes they really would do, they would shut themselves up in Crake's room, where they would play computer chess" (88)

Although Jimmy and Crake are well secured from performing events and games in the computer yet go through an inescapable moment and life situation while facing with psychological and mental ill health issues. The virtual world places a strong impression on the real world favoring Crake who aspires to venture into producing and destroying anew. As an adolescent young boys both Jimmy and Crake eventually end up in engaging their whole life by way of real-life game play.

Apart from the games, the two had other options also. Regularly, when they were not playing these virtual games, they were engaged in watching other virtual stuff in the internet. Most of what they watched was also equally pernicious and harmful. They watched online live beheadings, killing, torture, open-heart surgery, autopsies, executions, harassments and teasings, forced suicides, and also heavy hard core porn. Sometimes they watched violence and porn together or switched from one to another. Gradually they were not able to distinguish between virtual porn and virtual violence.

The virtual reality is now a substitute for reality and when the reality returns, the human psyche takes it as a fantasy. This appeal of the warped violence to the human psyche is done through violent virtual content and games. This explains why the troubled Crake and Jimmy waste most of their adolescence locking themselves inside a room and surfing the internet for violent material such as violent video games and perverted adult sites. Jimmy and Crake are soon rendered incapable of dealing well with their feelings of frustration, anger, loss, betrayal, sexual fantasies that is caused by various adolescent crises such as school issues, sexuality, fragmented families, uncertainity and anxiety, feelings of isolation from family and peer. Their strange friendship is bound by the internet material they take in and the video games they play, mainly Blood and Roses, Barbarian Stomp and Extinctathon. The virtual play of the two becomes a way for the gamification of their physical identity, ultimately turns out to become an epic final game where humanity becomes the object at stake.

Virtual act and computer activities dissociate and distance the individuals more and more by not unifying them into one. The common element of effective participation and inter relation among the human is put off in the western culture. Therefore the individuals live a secluded life even in the existence of a real society.

According to Foucault in his Discipline and Punish, "The crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by collection of separated individualities" (203).

According to Baudrillard, we exist in a hyperreal world, where "things are being replayed ad infinitum." By calling our surroundings the "ecstasy of communication," he implies that it has become a hyperreal "simulation" of reality. He argues that, although there is an increasing amount of information, its meaning is continuously diminishing (79).

The study concludes that the Media which has been designed as a virtual technoculture in a modern world puts our world, particularly our culture, at great risk of losing its authenticity and true nature, either directly or indirectly. Propaganda, television, the internet, and other technological tools all function as a surveillance system to manipulate and mould the public's thoughts and desires, and they are utterly captivated with the magical power of the newest technology. The presentation of cataclysmic possibility is under our way, foreboding the threat that awaits the young minds that are addicted to virtual worlds. The present study is a red alert to all those who may consciously or inadvertently drift into virtual world or unwanted sites for they would soon be unable to distinguish between authentic and false experiences. Though there are numerous dystopian writings that predict gloominess and doom for the human race, Atwood's genius and brilliance has made Oryx and Crake a classic in this category. It is a work that one may ignore only if they have no thought for the future.

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