REALITY AS AN INDIVIDUAL POINT OF VIEW

Introduction

Based on a science fiction stories and movies, I started with exploration of these questions: "Is the precisely constructed world, i.e. virtual reality, suitable for living? What are the key attributes of this constructed world that distinguishes it from the *real* world?" Nevertheless, approach to these questions led to more general problem of perception and interpretation, which required redefinition of reality concept. Questioning of this concept follows and is concluded by stating the possible role of fiction within this imaginary space.

True reality in contrast to the constructed one

The question of reality is a tricky one and I am not intending to make a perfectly comprehensive definition, particularly because it seems to be dependent on a specific point of view. I chose the science fiction view point – let's look at "Daddy's world" short story and "The Matrix" movie – both are good examples of literal approaches to the problem of multiple realities, but they are not the same. In fact, some of the key features are totally different as I'm intending to show.

In both stories is *true* reality defined by contrast to something that is *not* the *true* reality, but something constructed; something that is carrying the *untrue* reality inside. And the key point lie in observation the untrue reality from outside – from the reality that is more likely to be *true*, or basic if you want. The disadvantage of such a negative reality definition lies in the fact that it can be simply falsified anytime you get outside it to see it from more general level of reality – that you can never be sure (like in the movie "eXistenZ" from David Cronenberg).

In the text above I mentioned the phrase 'level of reality' which presupposes some structure – hierarchy – among different realities. The reality we are living in is a basic one, general, or *true*; reality that we cannot escape from. This basic reality may contain one or more virtual realities, usually inside the computers, that, as we say, possess a lower lever and also inside a virtual reality may be some reality of even lowest level – that is a reality of second level in comparison to the basic reality. And so on ad infinite (see the picture bellow).

But why am I talking about these levels? Answer is contained in SF stories that are dealing with reader's presumption that the plot is happening in the basic reality, while, in fact, it is not. The most exciting part is how characters in a story recognize the level of reality they live in. There are two possible ways: they may enter the reality from outside (like parents and sister in "Daddy's world") or find it out from inside (like Jamie) – with a help of some signs.

What are these signs? In general it could be events that are breaking the rules of the way the world is – something that doesn't fit to the picture of the world as it is presented and

experienced (freezing of environment in "Daddy's world"; dreams are inseparable part of reality in "The Matrix"). These observations are usually confirmed by some independent person (sister in "Daddy's world" and Morpheus in "The Matrix") – to ensure the puzzled character that his experiences aren't only parts of his personal fantasy or dream and thus can be eventually treated by a psychologist (you can see this approach in "Twelve monkeys" movie) – the aim is to distinguish between being something wrong with character or the world itself. This can be also the crucial point in a distinction between science fiction and psychological novel. Another point, a kind of confirmation, are the possible changes of reality that is known to be constructed – a thing that is impossible in the basic reality (people obey Jamie's instructions in "Daddy's world"; flying and higher speed in "The Matrix").

How to deal with a fact that you live in a constructed reality?

This is a question that emerges after discovering the odd nature of reality and also the focus of science fictions, dealing with this problem.

The first thing you think about is escape – the attempt to reach the *true* reality, with result highly dependent on the connection to that *true* reality. It matter whether you really are in the basic reality, like in "The Matrix", and your presence in a lower-level reality have a character of representation, or you simply cannot escape, because your existence is anchored to the lower-level reality – like in "Daddy's world" and "The tunnel under the world" – and thus you are pure simulacrum (according to the Baudrillard's distinction[1]), product of simulation. The fundamental difference of the two mentioned modes is that in "The Matrix" movie the whole world of Matrix is generated in order to hide the crucial reality, while in the rest of the stories is character simply a part of simulation and cannot live on its own.

As a result of this distinction, questioning the escape solution is on a place. In "The Matrix" escape seems to be appropriate reaction for reestablishing the living in truth, in accordance to the conscience and knowledge, it follows the logic of escaping from unjust captivity. We can also connect it to the concept of many dystopias (dealing with escape from bounding system)[2]. But does it tell us something about the constructed reality? Yes, it is telling us, that constructed reality may be a prison, built in a different way than we are used to, but its purpose is still obvious. Only thing that puzzles me a bit is the reason why would someone like to imprison others and let them forgot that they are prisoners? Maybe it has something to do with deformed idea of human rights[i] and maybe with totalitarian exercise of power[ii] or sophisticated business strategy[iii]. But what if someone would like to live in such an unreal place voluntarily? Wouldn't be that mere attempt for escaping the real world with its sometimes painful reality? But then, why do we have to care, if it wouldn't be someone we already know? Is it only a personal problem, or does it have a wider consequences in society?

It seems to me that I have raised more questions that I am able to answer and which are not focus of this article, so let's look the second case: Living in a simulation in a context of "Daddy's world".

It is also concerned with an escape from prison, but with different logic. There is no real chance of escape, due to the technical impossibility. Thus it is not a real prison, because the prison implies an outside world that you can eventually enter and where you are considered to be free. The status of prison is considered to be inherent in the constructed reality itself:

---

[i] in Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451"
[ii] in Orwell's "1984"
[iii] in Frederick Pohl's "Tunnel under the world"

> … "She doesn't want to be here no matter what I'm doing, no matter where I live. Because whatever this place looks like, it's a prison." Jamie looked at her sister. "I don't want my mom in a prison."
>
> Leaping flames glittered in Becca's eyes. "You can change the world you live in," she said. "That's more that I can do."
>
> But I can't," Jamie said. "I can change the way it *looks*, but I can't change anything *real*. I'm a program, and a program is an *artifact*. I'm piece of *engineering*. I'm a simulation, with simulated sensory organs that interact with simulated environments – I can only interact with *other artifacts*. *None* of it's real. I don't know what the real world looks or feels or tastes like, I only know what simulation tell me they're *supposed* to taste like. …"[3]

That's why the only way of escape is suicide. But once again: What is the suicide inside of the simulation? Is it simulated suicide? It depends how we treat the person inside the simulation, whether he is considered to be real or not. And we can go even one step further: Is the simulated reality real, in a same way the basic reality is real (at least for those inside)? I mean, whether there is some hierarchy of realities with levels and subordinance, as I mentioned before? I say yes to the first question, because if we can found there a real person, the reality must be considered equally real as a basic reality, with the same level of importance and the same guilty if we would destroy that reality and waste a life of human being. If there would be no person inside then it is only simulation – a thing that is eventually someone's property – but nothing more than artifact.

Focusing on reality

Now is coming the difficult question: What makes the person real? How we recognize a human being when we see one? Shall we use Stanley Fish's approach? He is dealing with interpretation in very wide sense and touches our problem too:

> "Insofar as the system (…) constrains us, it also fashions us, furnishing us with categories of understanding, with which we in turn fashion the entities to which we can then point. In short, to the list of made or constructed objects we must add ourselves, for we … are the products of social and cultural patterns of thought.
>
> To put the matter in this way is to see that the opposition between objectivity and subjectivity is a false one because neither exists in the pure form that would give the opposition its point."[4]

He cancels the subject-object distinction, which is viable for our sake because the definition of a human being cannot be made by a list of external descriptive features but should include the personal point of view too, I mean the self-awareness. Another important point is that recognition of such a human cannot be done outside the society, without the "publicly available system of intelligibility"[5] – that everyone's existence have a meaning constituted by a society; by the links, created through the contacts with other people; that everyone have some role in the context of humankind. Thus even the constructed entity may be called human as soon as it has contacts with some people and a kind of self-awareness. And once such an entity enters the human society, the human laws must be applied to its deeds (I don't think that human laws are able to judge the deeds of other entities) – that contains the care for well-being and punishment for ill-doing.

Now, we may return to the problem of reality. As I've used the connection between real person and reality for dealing with the problem of multiple realities, I think the same method can be used also for the definition what the reality is. *Reality is then everything the human beings are able to perceive and experience. It is environment – natural or constructed, and also the structures – systems of relations.* Concerning the physical research of substance, the relations seems to be the only thing that really exist :-) and we can also say that if there is anything that has no connection/relation to our reality (perceived by humans) it is considered not to be. If a tree in a forest fall and there is none to hear it and no chance to get a message that it has happened, it is no longer considered as an event.

Problems emerging from this definition are those concerned with personal events (dreams) and the fact that people are dying. Imagine an astronomer that discovered a new type of star by a means of his unique method and then died. If he didn't left any description of his invention that part of reality would be hidden – it would be considered that it doesn't exist at all. But if he would leave some hints of how to repeat his discovery and someone will find them, that part of reality will be there, at least as a blurred reality in someone's mind – with a chance for becoming less blurred after the reinvention of the dead astronomer's method. And the reality would become even less blurred after the visit of that star. What I want to say is that the reality as is perceived isn't stable, unchangeable and objectively existing (regarding Stanley Fish, we have cancelled the subject-object distinction and thus is better to say that 'reality simply exist', whatever it means). It is an indivisible part of the process of perception – it is there in one moment, but while you look elsewhere, the process of fading starts – the reality is only in your mind, until you'll reassure yourself once more. And what is in your mind depends only on what is perceived (philosophy of David Hume[6]) – what you have experienced, heard and been taught. Experience implies only you, while the rest is pointing at society. Reality as you 'see' it in mind is then *reconstructed* from different pieces: direct sensual experience (by eyes, ears, and touch), indirect experience (what you have heard, seen in TV or listened in radio) and memory. Brain is then gigantic device for assembling puzzle from these pieces of very different kind – it is making the picture of 'reality'. This activity includes verifying the relevance of pieces/data – if they contribute to the whole picture and are incorporable to the system (to the pieces or semipictures in memory) they are marked as real, otherwise they are marked as unreal, as dreams, as a misperception or mistake.

This is a personal/individual (I don't want to say subjective) approach to reality. Is any other, human independent, approach possible? Something that can be called a scientific approach?

Try to imagine a device/machine/robot with the same perceptive (have an input) and cognitive (able to reconstruct whole picture from pieces) function as people possess. If this 'device' would have an output to communicate the result of reconstruction, wouldn't it be a reality, seen human independently? Of course, there is problem of man-made device – whether it can be considered human independent – but try to omit this point while thinking about the answer.

Next stage is integration of differing personal realities (as points of view) into one. This process is inherent part of cognitive process of reconstruction from pieces and consequent creation of reality picture. It is being done unconsciously and individually, but I would like to focus on this process and show a possible way of integration of different points of view. That's why I have introduced the concept of 'blurred' reality – reality seen through the glasses of probability. The more people see some part of reality/world in the same way, the more 'sharp' (sure) the picture is. You can argue about the significance of particular opinions (that is different), but I can oppose saying that you never know all opinions due to the human limits. The reality perceived and thought is thus limited in the same way – somewhere in the middle(s) is the 'hard' reality shared by majority of society that is so close

to the certainty that the doubts are rare (but you cannot deny them), while on the periphery is the real blurred to mere possibility – very close to the dream.

And this is the place where the stories arise. You know that there should be something, because void is out of the reach of fantasy, and that's why people are fulfilling this area on the edge of reality (and time as well) by myths/fictions/predictions. And as you see, some of these 'dream images' becomes true. By the means of science fiction, but the other fictions and the science too, the dreams are brought into reality, sometimes very slowly, sometimes the thing they are trying to catch changes on a way because all these forces have to go step by step – bringing things into the system to be acceptable, in some way. And sometimes, they don't get beyond the blurred dream.

Concerning the creative moment in story-telling, I see certain reason in the statement that 'In the beginning, there was a word …'

Conclusion

I am ending in the way I've started. Reality is tricky concept, depending on point of view. The conclusions that I have reached are these:
1) reality is only one, but it's blurred by multiple points of view
2) stories, including science fiction, are widening the reality by bringing out the ideas that haven't been there before, that's why
3) reality is every time constructed – it is a puzzle picture, resulting from the process of reconstruction (abstraction) from pieces; these pieces are the products of perception
4) perception consists of three equal parts: direct sensual experience, indirect experience (mediated by any type of language) and memory.

---
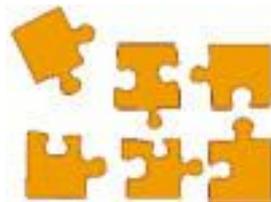
[1] Jean Baudrillard in his essay "Simulacra and Simulations" distinguishes several phases (or modes) of image:

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.

In the first case, the image is a good appearance: the representation is of the order of sacrament. In the second, it is an evil appearance: of the order of malefice. In the third, it plays at being an appearance: it is of the order of sorcery. In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of appearance at all, but of simulation.

Simulacrum is thus something that replaces reality with its representation:

*Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.... It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real. (*http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/postmodernism/terms/simulacrum.html*)*

[2] for example George Orwell's "1984", Jevgenij Zamjatin's "We", Aldous Huxley's "Brave new world" and Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451"

[3] Walter Jon Williams 2002, Daddy's World; in Robinson Kim Stanley ed. Nebula Awards Showcase 2002, New York: Roc 2002, p. 53

[4] Stanley Fish 1979, How To Recognize a Poem When You See One; in Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky, Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers 2nd ed., Boston: Bedford Books, 1990, p. 186-187

[5] Stanley Fish 1979, How To Recognize a Poem When You See One; in Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky, Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers 2nd ed., Boston: Bedford Books, 1990, p. 186

[6] David Hume 1748, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding