Pavel Holubec
Sheila Ghose
Science fiction and technological revolution
2003, December 6th

SCIENCE FICTION AND REALITY CONSTRUCTION

Based on a science fiction story and movie, I would like to explore the following question: "*Is the precisely constructed world, i.e. virtual reality, suitable for living?*" As a good literal approaches to the problem of reality, I chose the short story "Daddy's world" by Walter Jon Williams and "The Matrix" movie. Both are dealing with the growing awareness of the main character about the nature of the reality they are living in – that their reality is constructed and that outside there is another reality that is more *real*. In "The Matrix" Neo finds out that the world he lived in was projected into his mind in order to hide the cruel truth – that his body was closed inside a box to produce energy for machines. Whereas in "Daddy's world" Jimmy is dead and a copy of his mind is living inside simulated environment, visited by the members of his family. But before tackling the initial question, I would like to delimitate the constructed reality in the terms of science fiction, that it to answer the question: "*What are the key attributes of the constructed world that distinguishes it from the real world?*"

In both stories *true* reality is 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 lies in observation of 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 a more general level of reality – that you can never be sure (like in the movie "eXistenZ"). But for the sake of story-telling, it is even better to have such a vague concept, because it provides enough space for further delimitation in the story-plot and for the use of reader's fantasy.

Some SF stories 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 the 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 something being wrong with the character or the world itself (usually SF is much more concerned with the whole world then with the characters that populate it). This can be also the crucial point in a distinction between science fiction and the 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 other special effects in "The Matrix"). A hint for readers in the text may be a particular simplification of the presented world for example a child-like environment in "Daddy's world", but even here you may interpret it as a child-like seeing of the surrounding world.

Now, after the specification of some distinguishing features between the *real* and constructed world, we may focus on the constructed one. Let's start with a sentence from "Daddy's 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." (53)

Jamie feels that his world is a prison without escape, having no real body, thus he doesn't want to put her mother into the computer after her death – he realizes a certain degree of morbidity in prolonging life after physical death. He sees a connection between the body and mind and if this connection is cut off, life ends. What remains is something unnatural – instead of walking skeletons there are digital zombies now. The only way of escaping this prison is a suicide (the same opinion can be found in Gibson's "Neuromancer", p. 106). Also in "The Matrix" it is stated that constructed reality (matrix) is a prison for the mind but the difference is that there exists a way of escape, which lies in the conscious choice (symbolized by taking a pill) and regaining the control over one's own body.

In all the mentioned cases, there is an initial dichotomy between body and mind, but as the story goes on, the connection between them becomes even more important. In "The Matrix" the body will die, if the mind dies in matrix, and vice versa. It seems that although the mind may travel in the digital (virtual) space without any barriers in a way that is body-independent, there is still some connection. The nature of this connection isn't explained at all, but there is some. Concerning its importance we should ask: Is Jamie still human being, having no human body?

In search for an answer, we'll use this piece of original William's text:

> "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 a 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. …" (53)

It shows that although he has no physical body, his mind is connected to something else – to the computer hardware. This is limiting him very heavily and we should also ask whether he has something that can be called mind? The passage tells us that probably not, because he is a program. But if the program is aware of himself, is it still program? This will, of course, depend on a way the program and the mind copy are made and the functioning of the human mind. The author has nothing to say about it, because science doesn't know it too. Everything is just a fiction. However, fiction may provide at least a glimpse of understanding, when there is such scientific uncertainty.

Here can be seen the limitation of SF stories – they cannot say much about the reality and current problems, if the whole discourse relies too much on what we don't know. But then, what the science fiction is able to say? Why are the SF authors introducing such non-real concepts?

Concerning science, SF may be useful in questioning it: using scientific methods it may point at their inaccuracy – that science cannot give answers to everything; that using the method of deduction may give some results, but it is useless, being founded on wrong

presuppositions. As Ursula Le Guin suggest in "The Left hand of darkness" (147): *What is the use of knowing the perfect answer to the wrong question?* Supposedly it should lead to the asking of better questions. Asking the useless questions is like proving the theories that are completely wrong – it is a way of exploring the areas of knowledge and reality, at random or systematically. The point is that you don't know what you'll find (if anything at all), independently of your expectations – you just have to walk in that darkness of ignorance with your eyes opened, not to miss something lying along the way and glittering.

Another point in fiction may lie in thinking up what does not exist, connecting it in an original way to the currently existing and description of these relations. It provides the vocabulary for grasping the current and likely-to-be tendencies. So, in its own way, science fiction is contributing to the construction of future world – by making it thinkable.

Answering the initial question, we don't know whether the virtual reality is suitable for living, because we don't know the character of such reality. Science fiction is only exploring the conditions in which it would not to be suitable to live (e.g. in dystopias). Nevertheless, this initiates the discussion on possible future development – creating awareness of what is not likely to be, which should lead to the construction of something more viable.

The obsession of SF with construction of reality may be due to the assumption that everything in human world is constructed, even the perception of other people (Fish 186-187) and destruction (creation of world without something). Science and fiction even more are thus helpful in making informed decisions of what we want to create. As was mentioned already in one old Greek play, I think by Euripides: the fate of people was given to their hands. And I would like to add that science and fiction are giving people the chance to drive it somehow in whatever direction they want. It is partly a matter of choice – which of the thousands pills are we going to take?

Works cited:

Fish, Stanley. "How To Recognize a Poem When You See One" (1979). *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers.* Bartholomae, David and Anthony Petrosky, 2nd ed. Boston: Bedford Books, 1990.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer.* 1984. With a new afterword by the author. New York: Ace, 1994.

Guin, Ursula K. Le. *The Left Hand of Darkness.* 1969. With a new afterword and appendixes by the author. USA: Walker Publishing Company, 1994.

eXistenZ. David Cronenberg. 1999.

Matrix, the. Andy & Larry Wachovski. 1999.

Twelve Monkeys. Terry Gilliam. 1995.

Williams, Walter Jon. "Daddy's world". *Nebula Awards Showcase 2002*. ed. Robinson Kim Stanley. New York: Roc, 2002.