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The Schizoids and Daydreamers in Cyberspace

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Abstract

This paper embarks on an interdisciplinary study of the novel *A Scanner Darkly* and cyberspace to explain the human tendency for the realm of dream and imagination. It draws upon Ernest Becker's death terror theory and discusses human's basic fear of death and his seeking and clinging to various means to overcome it. One of the human's mechanisms for self-defense to get over the reality of death is plunging into the realm of imagination and that of infinite fantasy; cyberspace is a systematic form of day dreaming and fantasy. The article shows how characters in the death-stricken world of *A Scanner Darkly* marred by the presence of computers, scramble suits and scanners manifest a strong tendency for the realm of fantasy and active daydreaming; in addition, it explains that this tendency exists to overcome their basic disguised anxiety, i.e. the fear of death. It draws an analogy between characters and Internet users' behavior in the novel and cyberspace; and discusses how infinite realms of daydreaming and fantasy evoked by virtual reality touch a latent tendency of schizoid characteristics in humans.

Keywords: *A Scanner Darkly*, Becker, Cyberspace, Death terror, Daydreaming, Infinitude, Schizoid characteristic.

“There is no point identifying the world. Things have to be grasped in their sleep, or in any other circumstance where they are absent from themselves.”

(Baudrillard, 2002, p. 6)

The contemporary world is the age of simulated realities extended to everyday life (Baudrillard, 1988). The online and offline worlds have merged and add to the slippery quality of reality. Hardly can one estimate their impact on a new generation of lifestyle and perception; one can only make concessions that the digital age is unpredictable and still unexplored.

Philip K Dick, the canonical writer of the digital age, is the creator of alternative forms of realities (Kucukalic, 2006, p.1). Dick's concerns in all his novels revolve around one issue, the question of reality; in his search for “alternative mental life”, he develops schizophrenic characters in his novels and “re-considers the labels and attitudes toward alternative perceptions of reality (Kucukalic, 2006, p.49).

In the novel *A Scanner Darkly*, he draws the reader's attention to the role of technology and its effects on the protagonist's mentality. He envisages a human being whose perception and sense of integrity are shattered by his digital sides, the multitude

of faces and of appearances. The altered mentality is the quality that all characters perceive. Characters suffer from anxiety, depression and hallucination; they often lose the sense of time and place, and in the search for improvement in their condition, they manifest active daydreaming. In fact, characters partly intentionally and partly unwittingly, leave the realm of reality and find some sort of abandon and release in the realm of dreams.

Ernest Becker believes that these behavioral tendencies are more or less universal human problems, and that they are part of a massive disguise of humans' fundamental fear and anxiety (Becker, 1973, p.8). He calls human beings animals with instincts and gods with power of perception and imagination. Sartre ascribes a "useless passion" to man since "he hopelessly always bungles up, so deluded about his true condition". He continues to say about man that "he wants to be a god with only the equipment of an animal and so he thrives on fantasies" (Becker, 1973, p.59).

Thus, humans with such power and the ability to predict the inevitable death have to find some way out, anxious about this imminent fate, suffering from the overhanging black cloud of death constantly. The realm of dreams is a way out of this reality. Daydreaming is a way out, and nowadays cyberspace has provided systematic grounds for daydreaming and fantasy in a world with the quality of infinitude, free of time, place, gender and aging, and all other offline world limitations, but infinite possibility is dangerous and opens a threshold to low or medium levels of schizoid characteristics.

This anxiety later in life finds manifold manifestations and is the cause of other psychological ills. Humans suppress this sense of insecurity and apparently get over it, otherwise they cannot keep on with normal life; however, the truth keeps lurking vividly behind the scenes. Man, meanwhile, unconsciously employs various means such as accumulating wealth, striving to stand out, seeking a wide net of protections and joining groups to think no more of this insecurity; the realm of dream and imagination is also one of these ways out, and perhaps a related one.

Bob Arctor, the protagonist, is a narcotic agent who has to put on the Scramble suit, an inventive piece of clothing which hides the wearer's appearance entirely, the color of his hair and eyes, and even his voice; he gets the code name Fred for his new appearance. Other police members also have to use this suit to hide their identity and protect themselves against drug dealers. But this digital suit, apart from other evils, inflicts serious damage to Bob Arctor's perception of reality and leads him to confuse reality with unreality.

During the course of the novel, Bob Arctor, the protagonist in the scramble suits or digital dresses, manifests a range of schizoid traits. Scramble suits which change the character's appearance altogether and give him a virtual identity unwittingly affect this mentality. Holo-scanners, computer-like high techs, affect the protagonist's mentality even further and change the atmosphere of the novel into more of a simulated reality.



Unfinished Dream

The novel *A Scanner Darkly* portrays characters' active daydreaming; they lose the sense of time and place in their fabricated reality. Characters plunge into symbolic realms of dreams, with one starting a dream and another one joining him halfway through. What is more astonishing is that in this act of dreaming, computers assist and add to the blurry line of dream and reality, as Fred/Bob is offered a filming of himself which does not match with a real happening, while he concludes that it is a "holo-scanners" act (Dick, 1991, p.114).

The modern world has offered endless possibilities for fantasy; cyberspace meets this need seamlessly and almost imperceptibly. One finds himself in other spaces in a literal blink of an eye and goes about interacting with other people as if in the real world; it is a world with open opportunities for endless dreaming and fantasy. In his book 'Subjectivity', Mansfield claims that in contemporary times, imagination and dreaming are the only parts of the human existence that remain, and we need to continue to feed and fuel it:

Perhaps, then, when we reach the end of the yellow brick of theory, what we discover is not the truth of ourselves, or even the genealogy of our non-selves but more, possibilities to feed the only organ worth having in the postmodern era: the imagination. In hyperactive fantasies – whether played out in front of the computer screen, in the office, or in traffic – desire and power become mere opportunities for improvisation. We seek not the truth of ourselves but an open-ended number of possible experiences, as we dream having it all... (Mansfield, 2000, p.172)

As Mansfield points out, humanity doesn't look for his truth but for other possibilities of his self and constantly strives for new experiences. And with the only perceivable faculty left to individuals being the power of imagination and dream, they feed it constantly with various means. Now computers and cyberspace are essential parts of human character. Cyberspace is the place in which the individual, free of time and place and other constraints of the flesh, enjoys his daydreaming and fantasy. Fantasy and daydreaming serve as journeys in the realm of infinitude; viewed in that light, they lie at the other end

from finitude and limitedness. They serve as steps in the direction of the realms of the symbolic, but, as Becker explains, too much dependency and trust on symbolic realms could be dangerous, and “the self cannot be contained by the body and the person is torn apart” (1997, p.89).

Characters in the novel are captured in an illusory sort of life intensified by their drug abuse. They are living in a world doomed to “infinite possibilities” (Becker 89). One starts dreaming and the other one joins him, and in no time at all, all this turns into a collective form of action. Fabin fantasizes and sees aphids everywhere and, in short, Charles Freck joins him in catching and killing them:

What the fuck are you doing there all day in the shower with the goddamn dog?” his buddy Charles Freck asked one time, coming in during this. Jerry said, “I got to get the aphids off him,” he brought Max, the dog, out of the shower and began drying him...I don’t see any aphids,” Charles said. “What’s an aphid?”... “How come I can’t see them?”

Charles Freck brought him an empty mayonnaise jar. Jerry went on searching, and at last came across an aphid leaping up at least four feet in air... Then he held it up triumphantly. “See?” he said. “Yeahhhhh.” Charles Freck said, his eyes wide as he scrutinized the contents of the jar. “what a big one! Wow!” (Dick, 1991, p.9)

The aphids are purely the figments of his imagination and have no real-world manifestations but when others also start seeing them, they are not just conjured by one imagination, but they turn into another form of reality; “The author reminds us... that reality is consensual in nature and that, with a few more participants like Charles, Fabin’s illusion becomes less unreal” (Kucukalic, 2006, p.156).

The same thing applies to the act of spreading certain news pieces on cyberspace and the internet, when one spreads bogus news of a terminally ill girl who needs the help of the community (Jordan, 2005), even if that girl has no existence beyond the computer shade and is only “a digital dream” in computer memory and the mere figment of someone’s imagination, a “fictional person” injected into Internet space, but community users believe her existence. They actively participate in her life story, to keep her alive, to save her from cancer. Hence the girl turns to an animated thing, they sympathies with her, help her and in short, she is everyone’s interest. Other users follow her life story and contribute to her existence. Although she is terminally ill and has a cancer, the news of her death is to the shock and sorrow of everyone. She dies not because someone informed Internet community users of it being a fake story, a fiction in computers memory, but users really ‘know’ her to have died of cancer. What counts is that users believed this fictive being, since they had believed her life and actively participated in constructing and forming her identity. As a result, one user’s fantasy turns to a collective form and after awhile, it is no longer fantasy or fiction but a reality.

This story evokes thousands of other familiar ones with regard to the internet that we don’t cease to come upon every day. Few Internet users doubt the truth of these wandering identities. Their trust in these ghostly beings reflects the human tendency to create and believe other possibilities; man seeks other possibilities to feed her/ his need for fantasy, to believe that there could be existence out of this body and the limited offline world.

Infinite reality is shaded by the computer and it is a naïve question to ask how much of virtual reality is real, but the real question to be asked is: how much of virtual reality is not real? Does one who interacts with these ghostly beings in virtual reality manifest a sort of low to medium-level schizoid tendency? Becker believes that indulging in “...too much possibility is an attempt to overvalue the power of the symbolic self...” (p.76). There, the line between real and unreal is blurred and the experiences are so real that cyberspace users could easily embody a schizoid characteristic. This is the point that Dick had realized; unreal is real, and at the same rate of possible realms, the real could be unreal. Fictional identities, daydreaming and fantasies are the beings that precede the reality and survive it. Becker argues that “in this sense, what we call schizophrenia is an attempt by symbolic self to deny the limitation of finite body”; users in cyberspace pose and “exaggerate one half of the human dualism at the expense of the other”. Thus, the real name, appearance and perception could be nothing but the shadow of the other. A schizoid is one who attempts to transcend his/her situation and corporal constraints. In fact, it is a secret scheme and a silent revolt to fight back this “impossible creature”, the mortal being with Godlike imagination, However, “in doing so the entire person is pulled off balance and destroyed” (Becker,1997, p.76). Perception is the main target, it could be affected and altered by the “simulated reality” (Baudrillard, 1988).

In the crowd scene, where Bob gives a speech about the harms of drugs, through the mask of Fred, the “scramble suit”, he poses a new appearance, name and selfhood; in fact, Fred is his “symbolic self”(Becker,1997, p.76). He tells the audience that he has two daughters, but the point is that two daughters are part of this new identity; they exist only at the level of his imagination. Later we see that Bob/Fred obviously manifests some schizophrenic characteristics. Psychologists inform him that his brain is split and act separately. The same scenario goes for the other characters. As the name of the novel suggests, seeing darkly reflects the mind and perception of characters; “they fail to distinguish the real from the unreal”, and their minds are the projection of other perceptions: “The group is on the perceptual ‘outside’ too: Fabin, Freck, and Arctor’s time and space perceptions are distorted; they often get lost and ‘run fantasy numbers’ – active daydream – as they move about the daily reality of southern California” (Kucukalic, 155).

One may reason that addiction is the cause of characters moving to the other level of consciousness, somewhere in other levels of perception. But as Kucukalic suggests, this sense of futility and confusion is dominant in the lives of both drug users and non-users (2006, p.160) and addiction only augments this quality, but it is in general principle that it is out there by default. Dick uses drugs as a strong and tangible proof to show the vulnerability of reality, that human’s mind can picture and perceive other layers of existence, since it is vulnerable and prone to other possibilities. This tendency stems from our need to transcend our fate to lull ourselves into soothing illusions of our fabricated world in which we are apt to be lost. The fact justifies Dick’s belief that our alter ego has a schizophrenic characteristic, dormant in all of us.

A touching scene regarding the merged line of reality and dream is when Bob/Fred is watching the recorded tape of holo-scanners and sees Bob’s sleeping beside Connie. Through the act of holo-scanner and computers, Connie’s face merges with Donna’s face, and presents a scene as if Bob is sleeping with Donna Hawthorn. While, in reality, he was with Connie and he fancied Donna, and Donna always rejected him. Bob

speculates that it can be the act of holo-scanners, “a digital dream” (Jordan). This scene shows computers and technology contributing to human imagination and fantasy. Yet Fred/Bob cannot digest the fact; with wild guesses he concludes it is the act of holo-scanners, a sort of malfunction:

Halfway between, he decided. Still half Connie; already half Donna. I better run this over to the lab he thought; it’s been tampered with by an expert. I’ve been fed fake tape... Or maybe it’s a visual interruption or breakdown electronically, he pondered. What they call *printing*. Holo-printing: from one section of the tape storage to another... Crosstalk, he decided. Like that: accidental. Like ghost on a TV screen. Functional, a malfunction. (Dick, 1991, p.113)

Through this scene, one can derive Dick’s theory and prediction that dream, imagination, deception, and fantasy, once considered human characteristics, are the territory of computers now: they fantasize instead of and on behalf of humans, and do it impeccably. Humanity has shared his imagination with computers. Human beings, with the help of machines, computers, and networks, fulfill their need for fantasy and other possibilities; they are able to transcend human limitations in no time. Computers fabricate images and feed their mentality.

But it does not end here. In another level, power and cyber-culture take advantage of this new quality and contribute to this sort of daydreaming and picturing the world. Communities on the Internet will turn to be “the focus of regulation, cruelly tricked by powerful cultural investments and the institutions”, for with this method, they would be more controllable and easily influenced. “Here, identity is neither liberating nor expensive nor expressive of our selfhood, as much as a trap, something to be frustrated and deconstructed if we still believe in any possibility of freedom” (Mansfield, 200, p.172). It offers an understanding of contemporary world as Mansfield points out: “in fact, this dream has shifted in consuming/service-driven economies from being a slightly guilty private secret to being an economically responsible duty” (Mansfield, 2000, p.173).

Webs, chat rooms, *the Facebook*, and other social communities on the Internet are places to fantasize about what one wishes, a tour in various levels of imagination. There one can pose a new profile, reverse gender, face, job and age. It is not important who really is behind that profile, a “human” or a “thing” (Dick, 1991, p.185). It is welcomed for it feeds man’s need for improvisation; the need to interact while escaping reality. Cyber communities are places for public daydreaming, a collective one.

There are other means of fantasy for cyberspace users, such as various digital games. The significance of such sources of cyber fantasy is that computers dream something up and humans enter it, as holo-scanners fantasize and produce a fictive scene of Bob/Fred. It was not Bob Arctor who dreamed it up, it was computers who fantasized and he entered their dream; it was the act of three dimensional holo-scanners as he speculates: “If this was a click-on, click-off, interval scan, he thought, we’d have a sequence showing Arctor in bed with a girl who probably never did get into bed and never will, but there it is on the tape”(Dick, 1991, p.113). Holo-scanners come to fantasize instead of Bob/Fred. It is applicable to digital games too. In fact, the image does not enter the subject’s mind, but it is the subject which intrudes into that image; computers are active and humans are the passive consumers. Users are fond of these creatures for they fulfill their need for immortality. Digital beings are immortalized creatures, living forever;

cyberspace users indulge in impersonating and taking their role and, thus, they experience undying moments.

All the same, one should concede that this new system of dreaming is done mechanically, even in the absence of that big creative human soul. Human, the sacred creature of old, once gave his place to animals as Darwin reduced him to animal descendants, and now to a machine. This is another fall since the original fall, the third fall, to an even less sacred being; animals have the chance to enter heaven, since they are able to die, and their soul may transcend the ephemeral, but being the machine inheritor invariably wipes out all hope, it send the soul out, and puts in place the mechanical one.

Conclusion

This part explained the act of computers and virtual reality in contributing to and creating for cyberspace users an abstract ethereal and unreal space which at times leads them to a schizophrenic state. Therefore, in the contemporary world, the lines demarcating the realm of the real are blurred more than ever. The proclivity for daydreaming stems from human's basic anxieties. Man suffers from two basic fears, the fear of death and the fear of life. He/she trembles at the thought of living and standing alone in the world and, thus, he represses the feeling and goes about developing some self defense mechanisms, finding solace in fantasy and daydreaming to transcend his situation, as the new generation has found it in computers and Internet space. Cyberspace is a place for infinite possibility and if users are "not bound enough to everyday things", this tendency goes to extremes and could tear apart the user's lives and beings, steering them towards split selves, as illustrated in the case of Bob Arctor, the novel's protagonist, who, while plunging into infinitude, was torn apart and turned into a split self (Becker,1997, p.76).

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