# *THE DISCOURSE OF MADNESS VERSUS THE PARADOX OF ACCEPTANCE. A CASE STUDY IN NEGOTIATED REALITY*

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*Abstract: The movie "I Am a Cyborg, But That's Ok", directed by Park Chan-Wook, apparently revolves around a strange love-story between two patients in a mental institution, while subtextually displaying a complex net of inquiries into the nature of reality, the dynamics of psychiatric diseases and the role of society as formative environment. The cinematic discourse offers an insight into the seemingly chaotic chart of distorted meanings and inherently biased attitudes that ultimately shape the individual perspective.*

*Keywords: manufactured reality, treatment, attempted suicide, neurosis, manipulation.*

Often perceived as a romantic comedy, the movie "I Am A Cyborg, But That's Ok" is constructed upon a much deeper net of meanings than a mere love-story in the oppressive environment of a mental institution. First of all, it is an inquiry into the intricate definitions of normality, sanity and reality, and an equation containing complex factors, beginning with the perpetual human desire to find a coherent answer to the question "What is the purpose of existence?" to the need of wearing a social mask. The plot revolves around Young-Goon, a young woman who is convinced that she is a cyborg – throughout the movie, the viewer gets a glimpse at what might have caused her obsession, including her family's mental history and her own maddeningly repetitive life, but this is not what is important – the paramount importance lies in the potentiality of being cured, not in the disease itself.

The beginning of the movie consists of a scene whose meaning seems to be that of convincing the viewer that society has turned individuals into robots – along an endless assembly line, a voice commands the workers, and they all make the same moves, over and over again, in the exact same succession, until for one of the workers another voice takes over, ordering her to connect to a source of energy – cutting her own wrists, Young-Goon tries to recharge using electricity, and she is taken to a mental institution to be cured of her allegedly suicidal tendencies. Even if it clearly shows the reaction of the people around her – be it the apparently mindless co-workers or the hospital staff – the movie seems to be making a consistent effort of imagery to convince the viewer that she *really is* a cyborg (or, at least, that she is different). Basically, beyond the obsessive "straight line" asked by the voice from above giving directions to the workers, she becomes the individual with the most authentic human behaviour, since she stops acting like a robot. Young-Goon's mother keeps repeating "My daughter is a human being", while we see images proving that she is being deprived of the very right to act human, and forced to turn herself into a thoughtless machine, programmed to follow the indications of a voice whose source is never revealed.

The first scene inside the mental institution is confusing; Young-Goon in a wheelchair, pushed along a large hospital room by a kind-looking woman, who is explaining the particularities of the "cases" they meet – patients with various mental problems. Suddenly, though, the apparent comfort of the scene is dislocated by an intrusion from the real hospital stuff – the alleged nurse discussing the cases is actually a patient herself, and this unexpected



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identity shift is a preview of the series of distorted realities to be presented, through a complex combination of realism and expressionism, against the background of a shifting pattern of what Pudovkin would call relational editing[1]. Each character has his/ her own universe, populated by unique thoughts and threatened by individual obsessions.

Communication – in the universally accepted definition – seems to cease being an option for Young-Goon, who refuses to talk to people, choosing to focus her inherent communicational needs upon fluorescent lights. What she obsessively repeats when talking to lights or vending machines is actually a lamentation about human condition in general and the apparent gap of signification between her being and the universe around her: "I still don't know what my purpose is". From the perspective of purpose itself, she considers herself to be inferior to machines, since machines do possess some kind of meaning, some kind of purpose.

When she finally decides to break the self-imposed barrier of silence, after having met Il-Soon, she asks him to steal her sympathy (in a twisted collection of "laws" presented throughout the movie, having sympathy is the worst of the seven deadly sins[2]). Accordingly, the first thing she tells him is actually a self-contradicting statement: "I have this thing I want somebody to steal from me". The ambivalence between the concept of stealing and the wilful choice of giving something up suits Il-Soon perfectly, as he is known for his alleged ability – accepted as fact by the others, as if through a complex act of self-induced hypnosis - to steal the strangest things, from one's ability to play ping-pong to politeness and a day of the week (he is accused of stealing Thursday).

At an earlier point, Young-Goon's mother had stated "It's ok if you are a cyborg. It won't interfere with how you live. Just don't tell anybody", as if the problem were not the self-delusional behaviour itself, but the way the others perceive it, accepting it or condemning it. Il-Soon also readily accepts Young-Goon psychosis, also understanding the real reason behind her desire to have her sympathy stolen – she tells him it prevents her from killing the people she should kill – as being the remnant of a childhood trauma: seeing her grandmother being taken away by an ambulance, and perceiving the doctors and nurses dressed in white as attackers, consequently metabolizing this trauma mentally through an intense need for revenge. Revenge is already present in Young-Goon's mind, who fantasizes about opening fire in the hospital using guns sticking out of her robotic fingers[3].

Il-Soon has his own share of neurosis. Left by his mother when he was fifteen, he somehow managed to turn this trauma into a perpetual annoyance related to a frivolous fact: his mother took his electrical toothbrush. Driven by the persistence of his trauma, he turned it into an obsession about brushing his teeth. He is also terrified about vanishing into a dot ("I'm afraid I'll vanish. I'm anti-vanishing"). The metaphor of death present in the fear of "vanishing into a dot" strongly resembles the feelings of inadequacy and pointlessness experienced by Young-Goon, with the latter eventually refusing to eat – but, rather surprisingly, not as a means to put an end to her life; her refusal to eat stems from a deep

[1] Monaco, James. How to Read a Film. The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 323
[2] At number three, on the same list, there is "feeling guilty". At number four, "thankfulness".
[3] The imaginary enactment of her murderous fantasies is accompanied by cheerful music, with the association between the violence of the scene and the happy song producing a strange effect.



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belief that she really is a cy-borg (as opposed to a mere psy-cho, a word-play between the two characters). According to this belief, she needs to be charged instead of being fed[4].

At this point the viewer gets to witness a clash of realities. On the one hand, Young-Goon's psychotic conviction. On the other hand, the logical arguments provided by the doctors and nurses to put an end to her hunger-strike. One might think that the obvious choice should be based on reason, but then again, her supposedly good-willed "saviours" also use shock-therapy[5]. Against the background of this clash, Il-Soon chooses to completely embrace Young-Goon's apparent madness, and to act as if she really were a cyborg. If the serious discussions between Il-Soon and Young-Goon about stealing sympathy and talking fluorescent lights may appear as further damaging the sanity of both, we soon have the proof that, in this case, *not* questioning another person's reality, albeit made-up, is a much better alternative than forcibly convincing that person to adapt to another one, imposed by others. Throughout a significant scene, the two characters actually share one fantasy[6], as a metaphor for finding common ground instead of inquiring into the functionality of the other's reality. Having reached a level of understanding and empathy that enables him to connect to Young-Goon's reality, Il-Soon devises a strategy to save her; he convinces her that he has designed a "rice-convertor" ("rice-megatron") that can enable robots to turn normal food into energy, and he even mimics a surgical intervention, so that his patient trusts him completely. The device is constructed using the pendant he had got from his mother, and after the "successful surgery" he buries it – again, a gesture of symbolic value, and a metaphor for forgetting the past represented by his mother and his childhood trauma in favour of a future with Young-Goon.

The entire movie could be decrypted as a metaphor for the difference between treatment and actual help, where treatment stands for the method adopted by doctors and Young-Goon's fantasy world is considered a disease, and help represents the acceptance of this fantasy as functional reality, through empathy. It is in fact rather paradoxical: in an artificial environment (the mental institution), doctors try to cure the patients' perspective on a presumably objective reality. The one who succeeds in restoring Young-Goon's will to live is a mental patient, not a doctor – the dialectics of healing is more complex than detecting a disease and treating it. Throughout the entire movie, the disease itself is personified. The viewer does not see people with psychiatric diseases, but the human side of the disease.

Along the plot development, it seems like the neurosis of normality poses a much greater danger to the individual than the deviation from the psychiatric norm, and the ending[7] places a significant question mark on the scientific effort to understand the disarticulated relationship between cause and effect in the case of mental patients, and supporting the idea of acceptance as treatment. If being different is no longer a problem, and the general meaninglessness of existence is included within the norm, than each individual's reality,

[4] Once more, her attempted suicide is given a new dimension – not an act of self-destruction, but an act of survival, based on the conviction she would need to connect to a power-source.
[5] Even though it is proven that I can cause amnesia and trauma, shock-therapy is being used for other patients as well, in spite of the complete lack of progress.
[6] Young-Goon and Il-Soon fly together, while yodeling – a talent stolen by the latter from another character – to a land where the former meets her deceased grandmother, being offered the chance to ask about the meaning of life.
[7] The two characters together, having overcome both her refusal to eat and his fear of shrinking into a dot, having discovered the true dimension of the connection between them.



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however strange, becomes operative and meaningful. From the medical point of view, the discourse of madness is treated through forcing the commonly acknowledged pattern of reality upon the patient. For the patient, it only means empowering a version of reality that he/she either does not comprehend, or finds hurtful. Doctors perceive Young-Goon as a case, a sum of symptoms, and an erroneously coded reality that needs fixing. Il-Soon sees her as a human being trying to cope with her reality on her own terms. Once he is able to adequately grasp her utopia-of-the-self, curing her stops being a matter of treating, and turns into a matter of curing. The treatment provided by the hospital is understood and felt by patients as psychological and physical torture, mind control and painful manipulation of individuality. Doctors are oblivious to Il-Soon's intentions, but his help is accurately apprehended by other patients[8], so shared madness looks better equipped for solving one's problems than an aggressively imposed normality. The social masks, once acknowledged as such, are no longer a hiding place, but a functional environment; as long as each individual can tap into another one's version of reality, communication can surpass any boundaries, and the healing process can begin. The entire textuality of disease is transformed, once the norm defining disease is so elastic as to encompass *all* versions of reality. Forced to choose between an exterior reality they cannot relate to and a wholesome unreality that they construct themselves, patients inevitably choose the latter, thus fuelling, once more, the conflict between doctors and patients – a seemingly paradoxical conflict, since it basically involves the people-who-cure and the people-to-be-cured. But if the treatment needs to be forcibly accepted, is that a treatment? This is one of the questions subtextually raised by the movie. If one individual, for whatever reason, creates his/her own reality, then questioning or even denying this reality can only bring about trauma, alienation and a further fragmentation of the connection between individual and environment.

Another question raised by the cinematic narration is related to the very definition of reality, and the answer suggested by the movie is perhaps more puzzling than the question itself. On the one hand, there seems to be a dual definition of reality which closely resembles the ones offered by Philip K. Dick: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away". On the other hand, though, all patients in the mental institution never stop believing – or, at least, they do not want to. But then again, in *VALIS*, Philip K. Dick states that "sometimes, the appropriate response to reality is to go insane", and this looks to be exactly the case. When faced with a reality that causes too much trauma – her grandmother being dragged away by doctors, in Young-Goon's teenage years, and Il-Soon being left by his mother – the individual has to resort to a safe haven; and if this haven does not exist, it has to be created. Moreover, they both perceive their slice of the real through carefully designed social masks, simulating perspectives in order to cope with it. This complex process of simulation echoes Baudrillard's theory on simulation[9], but here the different stages are not in any order anymore, but rather cyclical. Moreover, in the movie, simulation has no purpose, but represents a purpose in itself. Characters do not actually use it as a tool in perfecting their

[8] In the scene when Young-Goon is enjoying her first real meal after her refusal to eat, all the other patients are mimicking her gestures and seem really connected to Il-Soon's efforts; he is telling her what to do, step by step, as if she had long forgotten how to act like a human.
[9] While Baudrillard regards the process of simulation as being a set of distinctive stages, the movie views it as a repeating endlessly, fuelled by the developments in the interactions between characters.



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social masks, but as a certain level of functionality as far as their version of reality is concerned.

The movie could be interpreted as a strange love-story between a delusional guy who wears a rabbit-mask and a girl who thinks she is a cyborg, but also as a crash course in applied psychology or an introductory guide to acceptance. The complex interplay of realities and perspectives, of masks and selves, and of visions of normality and disarticulated norms, all against a background that seems to belong to a cyberpunk setting instead of a mental institution, ultimately deciphers the riddle of hope amidst what it seems to be a desert of meaninglessness.

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