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“YOU CAN’T OPT OUT”:  
THE INESCAPABILITY OF VIRTUALITY  
IN JOSHUA FERRIS’S *TO RISE AGAIN AT A DECENT HOUR*

**Abstract.** The paper looks at how Joshua Ferris’s *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* reflects the increasing importance of virtuality in shaping human identity. It argues that in the age of ubiquitous computing, facilitated by wearable technology, the virtual has become an intrinsic part of human phenotype. Consequently, the self can be construed as a construct relying both on the real and the virtual for creating identity, which is a dynamic entity undergoing unceasing modifications. Additionally, due to the transparency and omnipresence of wearable technology the process appears to be unconscious to an individual and, therefore, inevitable and irreversible.

**Key words:** virtuality; avatar; self; consciousness; technological unconscious; identity; ubiquitous computing; wearable technology; reality; presence.

In *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* Joshua Ferris, a contemporary American writer, depicts the life of Paul O’Rourke, a successful dentist who seems to enjoy urban lifestyle. At the same time the capable professional fails in his emotional life and he is a declared non-believer. His life seems comfortable but it is meaningless. One day Paul discovers that someone impersonates him online, which eventually leads to what can be called identity theft. At the same time the virtual alter ego makes Paul reflect on the meaning of his life in physical reality. With time, the protagonist, who used to shun the virtual reality, becomes immersed in it to an extent where he seems to assume his online impersonation as one of his own. The present study argues that the plot of the novel reflects that the virtual presence is no longer something optional, but rather an intrinsic attribute of the contemporary self, which dwells both in the real and in the virtual.

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In order to analyse the transition from reluctance to immersion into the virtual world it is essential first to discuss the concepts of reality and virtuality. Philip Brey distinguishes three kinds of reality, that is physical reality, social reality and institutional reality. As he observes:

Physical reality consists of entities and facts that are genuinely objective and that exist independently of our representations of them. Social reality consists of all those entities and facts that are not genuinely objective but are the outcome of a process of social interpretation or construction.... Physical reality and ordinary social reality can usually only be simulated in virtual environments, whereas institutional reality can in large part be ontologically reproduced in virtual environments. For example, rocks and trees (physical objects) and screwdrivers and chairs (ordinary social objects) can only be simulated in virtual reality. The reason is that their simulations are not capable of reproducing the actual physical capabilities of physical and ordinary social objects. On the other hand, money and private property (institutional objects) can literally exist in virtual reality. (46)

Construed in Brey's terms, identity falls into the category of institutional presence; hence it may not only be simulated but also it may exist in the virtual. In philosophical terms, virtuality is equalled with potentiality and in this respect it is by no means a new term. As Brian Massumi writes: "As a philosophical concept, the virtual has precisely to do with force. Derived from the Latin word for strength or potency, the base definition of the virtual in philosophy is 'potentiality'" (55). Michael R. Heim analyses the etymology of the virtual, which he dates back to 14<sup>th</sup> century French. He argues that

The strong but now less visibly intrinsic power fades in the fourteenth-century English term, which was borrowed from the French *virtuel*, by which "virtual" came to mean something implicit but not formally recognized, something that is indeed present but not openly admitted—something there "virtually" but not really or actually present. This weaker, nearly invisible virtuality would bloom a new semantic branch as the need for a computer-based aesthetics arose in the 1980s. Computers began to simulate digitized objects as recognizably vivid phenomena. (111)

Heim draws a semantic parallel between the fourteenth century French and the contemporary usage of the word. In a similar manner, André Nusselder compares Platonic thought to the philosophical foundation of the contemporary virtuality of the Internet. Nusselder writes that

Platonism considers the ideal world (a “virtual reality”) as the fundamentals of our everyday, shadowlike reality.... Nowadays we can again find this Platonic thinking in “idealistic” understandings of the Internet as the realm of “timeless data” where the cybercast can wander around as a free spirit detached from its physical condition. It would thus allow a person to be as she “really is” and not being evaluated by all sorts of physical characteristics (being female, colored, disabled). (75)

As mentioned above, virtuality can be perceived as a potentially ideal reality, where self is not limited by physical, social or other random constraints. The self, in this view, can actively shape itself and its identity and present it to other selves in the virtual world. On the other hand this sense of control may be illusory. Nusselder points out that

Where this decline of symbolic authority is often celebrated as liberation, there is also a “darker” side to it. It also leads to an instable self that is an easy prey for manipulating techniques stimulating the pursuit of infinite possibilities, thus reducing the human subject to an object, deprived of freedom... (78)

The boundless realm of interactions and possibilities of virtuality seems to be a double-edged weapon, conjuring up the apparent freedom and control in shaping one’s identity and at the same time trapping the self in the volatile reality of endless and inescapable interactions.

In order to explore the self’s functioning in the virtual it is essential to discuss the concepts of avatar and presence. The etymology of the word *avatar* dates back to ancient times and was first used in the present day meaning by early computer game designers. As Heim explains:

These pioneers applied the ancient Sanskrit term “avatar”—the earthly incarnation of godly powers according to the mystical scriptures of the Hindu Upanishads—to the visual embodiments of users. The Hindu concept is the descent (ava = down) to earth of a deity, particularly Vishnu, in human, super-human, or animal form. Morngingstar and Farmer envisioned a similar descent of a human identity into a graphic representation in a virtual world. (119)

The self’s presence in virtual worlds is effected by means of the avatar. According to Bruce Damer and Randy Hinrichs, the avatar in the context of virtual worlds originally denoted “the visual representation of a user inhabiting a graphical virtual landscape” (20). However, the concept of avatar may actually go beyond the purely “visual representation”. James K. Scarborough and Jeremy N. Bailenson differentiate between spatial presence and

self-presence. They claim that “Spatial presence is the feeling of being there” (133). They elaborate on the concept by writing that “The idea of presence can be thought of as the experience of one’s physical environment; it refers not to one’s surroundings as they exist in the physical world, but to the perception of those surroundings as mediated by both automatic and controlled mental processes” (133). What follows is that presence is a sensory experience, employing all the senses at once or just some of them, e.g. vision. Self-presence, on the other hand, is the sense “that my avatar is me” (Scarborough and Bailenson 135). In other words, as Kwan Min Lee puts it, self-presence is “a psychological state in which virtual (para-authentic or artificial) self/selves are experienced as the actual self in either sensory or nonsensory ways” (27). What it means is that self-presence is the feeling that one’s avatar is not only a tool for communication but rather part or extension of the self in the virtual reality. As Damer and Hinrichs write:

The avatar is a key element of immersion and represents the individual as the interface appearing as a body in context, whether it is an exact replica or a metaphoric transformation of what the individual wants to project either consciously or subconsciously.... However the representation, an avatar can ably embody the user’s identity and be used to powerfully influence others. (18)

In view of the different kinds of reality presented above it can be argued that the self can exist in the virtual, embodied by its avatar, as it falls into the category of institutional reality.

Consequently, it can be argued that the self is not limited to the physical reality, but may also extend into the virtual. This process is hugely facilitated by means of ubiquitous computing. Made possible by wearable devices, ubiquitous computing represents what Andy Clark calls “transparent technology”. As he writes “A transparent technology is a technology that is so well fitted to, and integrated with, our own lives, biological capacities, and projects as to become (as Mark Weiser and Donald Norman have both stressed) almost invisible in use” (37–38). The extension of the self in the virtual is an example of what Nigel Thrift calls the technological unconscious. Thrift investigates how the technological unconscious works at the intersection of humans and their environment. Thrifts points out that “environments of which we are a part gradually come to be accepted as the only way to be because, each and every day, they show up more or less as expected” (175). He continues by claiming that the constituents of technological unconscious “do not belong to ‘us’ or to the environment. Rather, they

have been coevolved, and so refuse a neat distinction between organic and inorganic life or between person and environment” (176). He argues that the technological unconscious will increasingly work through information technology. As he writes

This is the advent of ‘ubiquitous,’ ‘pervasive,’ or ‘everywhere’ computing. It follows that ‘computing’ will become more and more context dependent. This means that devices will become both more location aware, knowing where they are in relation to users and other devices, and able to interact, dialogue, and adapt to users and other devices. In other words, computing understood as a network of devices will increasingly be able to be appropriate to the situation. (183)

David Beer builds upon the concept of the technological unconscious in the context of virtuality. He refers to Thrift, defining the technological unconscious as “the operation of powerful and unknowable information technologies that come to ‘produce’ everyday life” (988). For Beer, what engenders the powerful and unknowable information technologies is Web 2.0, the version of the internet which allows the users to both receive and create content. Beer writes about

...a vision of dynamic interfaces and virtual spaces of engagement where users are involved in acts of invention or *content creation* (both actively creating content and passively generating informational traces as they got about daily routines). The issue of content creation is clearly a crucial point as we consider the ongoing emergence and mainstreaming of user-generated online content in the form of rating and reviews, blogs, posts, tags, friending and so on—content creation in this sense is comparable with Bauman’s (2007) recent descriptions of what he terms a ‘confessional society.’ (992)

According to Steve Mann, the phenomenon presented by Beer will be accelerated by the wearable technology. Mann notes that

[o]ver an extended period of time, the wearable computer begins to function as a true extension of the mind and body, and no longer feels as if it is a separate entity. In fact, the user will adapt to the apparatus in the same way that we adapt to shoes and clothing to such a degree that being without them would make most of us feel extremely uncomfortable. (7)

All the aspects of virtuality mentioned above seem to be well portrayed in the plot of *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* by Joshua Ferris, especially in the proceedings of Paul O’Rourke, the protagonist. Paul is a successful pro-

fessional who owns a dental practice in downtown New York and still leads a defunct emotional and social life. His life seems meaningless to him. What is interesting, unlike many other contemporary city-dwelling individuals, he does not seek escape in the virtual world of the Internet. He shuns any online presence and even refuses to have a website for his dental practice. It appears that even though Paul's life seems empty to him, he seeks and misses authentic relationships in life and dislikes the artificiality of virtual relationships: "I remembered telling McGowan how I'd been flicking through all my contacts the night before when it occurred to me that many of them couldn't be considered real friends. I decided to delete a whole bunch, even if they were people I'd known forever" (Ferris 21–22). On another occasion, when responding to his assistant's suggestion to have a website for his dental practice set up, he says: "I was a dentist, not a website. I was a muddle, not a brand. I was a man, not a profile" (Ferris 32). At the same time he is not totally indifferent towards the Internet. Even though he refuses to be a participant of any virtual community such as social networking sites, he is still curious about what they have to offer to him. At one stage he reflects: "I kept a deliberately low profile online. No website, no Facebook page. But I'd Google myself, and what came up every time were the same three reviews: the one I wrote, the one I nagged Connie into writing, and the one Anonymous wrote" (Ferris 29). It seems that one thing that discourages Paul from virtual reality is its uncontrollability. This results in frustration, which becomes apparent when Paul reflects on the review published online by a dissatisfied patient. He says:

If somebody's doing a little research on the Internet for a new dentist, are they likely to choose the guy who might gouge them for lousy work while showering them with his cave dwellers? No. But there is no countering, no appeal, no entity to whom I can plead my case to have the post removed. So I'd Google myself every month or so, and when the review from Anonymous came up, as it did without fail every time, I'd curse out loud and feel the victim of an injustice, and Mrs. Convoy would say, "Stop Googling yourself." (Ferris 29–30)

However, it is not the unfounded online criticism which overturns Paul's life. Things start to change when Paul discovers that somebody starts impersonating him online. First somebody creates a website for his dental practice, then Facebook and Twitter pages appear in his name, which, obviously, comes as a surprise to him. When he is shown his alleged website, he is flabbergasted:

“Who did this?” I demanded.  
“Not me,” said Connie.  
“Not me,” said Betsy  
“Abby?” said Connie.  
Abby quickly shook her head.  
“Well somebody had to do it,” I said.  
They looked at me.  
“It certainly wasn’t me,” I said.  
“You must have,” said Mrs. Convoy. “Look, there we are.”  
We looked back at the screen. There we were. (Ferris 33–34)

At first the evident identity theft unnerves and infuriates Paul. He decides to take legal action, which turns out to be rather difficult as the legal system does not seem to be prepared for the challenges of the virtual era. When, rather naively, Paul asks a cyberlaw expert for help, suggesting notifying an appropriate legal body, she disillusiones him:

“What legal body,” she asked, “governmental agency, or law-enforcement bureau would you appeal to at the moment?”  
“The police?” I suggested. “The courts?”  
She laughed, I thought a little too heartily. “That’s good for out there,” she said. “But you’re in here[virtual] now.” (Ferris 130)

What is more, the online identity theft seems to undermine Paul’s weak personal identity, which he has had problems with in his real life, and which is reflected in his relationships with women and their families. He seems to lose his sense of self in relationships with women. For Paul a relationship appears to be a case of total, overpowering immersion in his partner’s self, to such an extent that his own identity becomes one with his partner’s. He notes at one point:

I was sad to lose Sam, whom I was all wrong for and who was all wrong for me, but I was pleased to know that after the cunt gripping eased, I returned to my former self: that there was, however nebulous and prone to disappear, a self to return to. (Ferris 56)

At the same time, Paul seems to look for a kind of communal identity in the relationships with his partners’ families. He reflects on one of his failed relationships:

I loved Sammy and wanted to marry her, but I also loved Mr. and Mrs. Santarocce and wanted to be adopted by them and live under the spell of their blessed

good fortune forever and ever. I would affirm God and convert to Catholicism and condemn abortion and drink martinis and glory the dollar and assist the poor and crawl upon the face of the earth with righteousness and do everything that made the Santacroses so self-evidently not the O'Rourkes. (Ferris 54)

On the whole, the plot of the novel suggests that the self is a rather volatile concept. As Paul says:

Connie returned my love as no one who had cunt gripped me ever had, and while it came with its own problems—namely, my suspicion that for the sake of love she was muting her true self as effectively as I was mine and that a day of reckoning awaited us—I was able to act more or less like a self-respecting adult aware of personal boundaries and in possession of his mind. (Ferris 65)

Paul's surrender to virtual reality seems gradual but inevitable. He reflects on how his disgust with the specific mode of communication in the Internet evolved from refusal to acceptance:

I swore never to use the emoticon ever...until one day, offhandedly and without much thought, I used my first :) and shortly thereafter, in spite of my initial resistance, :) became a regular staple of my daily correspondence with my colleagues, patients and strangers, and featured prominently in my postings in Red Sox chat rooms and on message boards. (Ferris 74)

Paul seems to eventually surrender to the online reality due to the availability of ubiquitous computing represented by the smartphone. He notes:

I tried my best to fend off the Internet's insidious seduction, until at last all I did—at chairside, on the F train, supine upon the slopes of Central Park—was gaze into my me-machine and lose myself to the Internet. (Ferris 74)

Paul's gradual immersion in virtuality is also noticeable in his conversation with Connie, his assistant and former girlfriend. Paul used to criticise her for her indulgence with her smartphone. Now that he himself has become strongly dependent on the smartphone and the new realms of knowledge and interactions it offers, Paul is in denial:

"I don't know that. I don't know how the Internet works."

"What do you mean you don't know how the Internet works? You're on your phone every five seconds."

"That's you! That's not me! That's you!" (Ferris 144)



Virtuality, access to which is facilitated by his smartphone, has become important part of Paul's identity, yet he does not want to or fails to acknowledge that during interactions with other people in the physical reality. In the quest to shape his stable self Paul seems to rely on communal identity, first in familial bonds with his partner's relatives and then in the virtual reality, in which one can create their alternative identities represented by avatars. However, Paul does not intently create his online identity. He unconsciously experiences a kind of identity shift, from the real to the virtual, even though, paradoxically, that was exactly something which he wanted to avoid, which is reflected in a conversation with his assistant:

"[...]I would never post dumb bullshit like this, and certainly never under my real name."

"Why never under your real name?"

"For the sake of privacy," I said.

"And so you post under this other name here, this YazFazOne?"

"Right, YazFanOne. That's me. This Dr. Paul C. O'Rourke, D.D.S., he's someone else. Except not, because that's also me. I'm Dr. Paul C. O'Rourke, D.D.S."

"So for the sake of your identity," she said, "you avoided using your real name, which effectively allowed someone else to use your real name and steal your identity." (Ferris 91)

In his urge to have an identity of his own Paul seems to accept his online identity, even though he has not created it, because it offers the realm of communal identity he has never experienced before. When talking about the content published in his name on the Internet at a certain point Paul starts using the pronoun 'my': "But if anything," I said, "if you read my tweets all at once, they're really more anti-Muslim. Or anti-Christian. Antireligion in general, if you read them all at once" (Ferris 273). Paul's online impersonator offers him a vision of him being a successor of an ancient people, with their tragic history and belief system. Tempted by the allure of the communal identity Paul starts to believe what he is being told. He undergoes transformation from a litigious victim of identity theft to an individual increasingly willing to accept his new online identity. This is demonstrated in a conversation with his assistant:

"Then what are you doing, getting wrapped in this thing?"

"What thing? It's not a thing. It has nothing to do with God. It's a tradition," I said. "It's a people. A genetically distinct people. And I'm not wrapped in it."

"Why is our website still alive? Why have you stopped pestering the internet

lawyer to do more? Why is it that every time I turn around, you're composing a new email? Whatever you're not wrapped up in, Paul, why does it seem to be so much more pressing than your patients?" (Ferris 208)

At this stage the interweaving of the real and the virtual and blurring the division between the two becomes even more conspicuous. This, in turn, may suggest that the division line between the real and the virtual, the physical individual and their avatar construed as an embodiment of the user's identity, is not clear-cut, which also casts new light on people's approach to spirituality and raises cosmological questions. Paul argues with his girlfriend, who, unlike Paul, is a devoted believer. Paul suggests that the information flow in the virtual world might be in fact a new form of prayer:

"That is the most blasphemous thing I have ever heard. A little technology could never take place of the Almighty, for heaven's sake. Mobile phones or no mobile phones, we still have the primal need to pray, do we not?" I'd tell her, she'd say, "Sending and receiving email and texts are not a new form of prayer. Do you not understand that that little machine, by taking your attention away from God and the world He created, is only increasing your despair?" I'd tell her and, she'd say, "I don't give a fig for the world it's created. It will never rival God's." (Ferris 104)

On another occasion, when Paul disconnects his office from the Internet, he suggests that the virtual world could be in fact a parallel universe, not created by God. What is more he suggests that it is an escapist reality, which seems to unnerve his assistant:

"...Did you see yourselves? You're addicted! Both of you! This is for your own good! Betsy, remember what you're always telling me about the world and its beauty? You're not looking at it anymore! The beauty, it's lost on you! I'm doing this for you." I said, "so that you don't forget God's world."  
"I beg your pardon," she said, "but I have not forgotten God's world."  
"I'm sorry, Betsy, but you have. I saw you. There was no getting out of God's world and into that other one, and it was driving you nuts."  
"That's a false distinction," she said. "Whether it's online or offline, it's God's world. He made everything there just as He made everything here." (Ferris 217)

The virtual reality, it seems, even though originated by humans, appears to have become an integral part of the universe in which the self dwells. It can be argued that the two realities are not totally independent as they seem to interweave and influence each other. As Heim writes:

Virtuality recedes as it becomes a ubiquitous subconscious component of everyday life, no longer a distant goal to be achieved somewhere special. A once stand-alone research vision gradually merges with everyday activities on computers. Such a blending process dissolves the specialized vocabulary that isolates and separates “virtual worlds,” “avatars,” and “telepresence”: these phenomena now scatter across many fields of routine activities. (112)

In this way the virtual imperceptibly becomes part of everyday life due to the technology of ubiquitous computing, which is becoming increasingly transparent. Consequently, this process is not what an individual can actively shape and control. It seems that the process is both inevitable and irreversible in terms of the self's integrity. Paul says to his assistant:

“I’ve lost control, Connie. I’m helpless. Look at this! They’ve hijacked my life!”  
“Just online,” she said.  
I thought about the difference between my life and my life online.  
“You can’t opt out,” I said.  
“Opt out?”  
“I tried to opt out, but you can’t opt out. Not anymore. I’m in it,” I said, looking down at my Facebook page. “And this is what I am.” (Ferris 125)

On one hand it can be argued that the self falls into the category of institutional reality, thus it may not only be simulated in the virtual but it seems that it can exist there independently in the form of a self-sustained avatar. On the other hand it looks as if the virtual reality provided an extension of the self, which dwells both in the physical and the virtual. Whatever the case, it can be concluded that the virtual is increasingly becoming an integral part of the human phenotype.

It can be contended that Joshua Ferris's *To Rise Again at a Decent Hour* well reflects the condition of the self in the era of ubiquitous computing when the near to constant accessibility of the virtual reality results in blurring the division between the real (physical) and the virtual. It can be argued that, as in Paul's case, the accessibility of the virtual results in the fact that the contemporary self dwells both in the real and the virtual and that the identity is a volatile entity which undergoes constant modifications and fine-tuning. This suggests an image of a self as a dynamic entity, characterised by its potentiality. As André Nusselder writes: Man is an “inter-esse,” a being-in-between here and there, now and later, body and mind, necessity and freedom: between the real and the virtual. Human reality is exactly the result of the interplay between those two dimensions” (82). In the era of ubiquitous

computing the self seems to increasingly rely on the virtual for creating identity. Additionally, due to the transparent nature of the wearable technology the process seems to be unconscious to the human agent and, consequently, seems inevitable and irreversible. What also transpires is the fact that identity strongly depends on the sense of community. Consequently, the ease of interaction between avatars in the virtual reality resulting in its communal character might also be a factor contributing to the increasing reliance of self on the virtual for creating identity, especially in the face of the decline of social bonds in the real.

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“NIE MOŻESZ SIĘ WYPISAĆ” —  
NIEUNIKNIONOŚĆ WIRTUALNOŚCI W POWIEŚCI JOSHUY FERRISA  
*WSTAĆ ZNOWU O LUDZKIEJ PORZE*

Streszczenie

W artykule poddano analizie sposób, w jaki powieść Joshuy Ferrisa *Wstać znowu o ludzkiej porze* odzwierciedla coraz większą rolę odgrywaną przez wirtualność w kształtowaniu ludzkiej świadomości. Artykuł podejmuje próbę dowiedzenia, że w dobie zjawiska przetwarzania rozpowszechnionego, możliwego dzięki technologii komputerów ubieranych, wirtualność staje się nieodłącznym elementem fenotypu człowieka. W efekcie *self* może być rozumiane jako twór polegający zarówno na rzeczywistości fizycznej, jak i wirtualnej w celu tworzenia świadomości, która jest tworem dynamicznym, podlegającym nieustannym modyfikacjom. Ponadto, wskutek transparentności oraz wszechobecności technologii komputerów ubieranych proces ten wydaje się być nieświadomym dla jednostki, a więc również nieuniknionym i nieodwracalnym.

*Streścił Piotr Czerwiński*

**Słowa kluczowe:** wirtualność; awatar; self; świadomość; technological unconscious; tożsamość; przetwarzanie rozpowszechnione; technologia ubierana; rzeczywistość; obecność.