

The Poetics of Speculative Realism in Margaret Atwood's Select Works

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Abstract—Over the past two decades, Margaret Atwood has consistently defined her work as speculative fiction, pointing out the realistic foundation of her works, rather than imagining the future technology. Yet critics remain divided on how her works represent “reality” through imagination. Previous studies have primarily focused on speculative elements at the content and narrative levels, along with references to reality. This paper holds that her works are significantly different from the writing of traditional literature in terms of content and formal characteristics, especially in the cognitive and thinking levels such as speculative subjects, speculative narrative strategies and the use of cognitive modal words, but they are rooted in reality and reflect a speculative realism feature. The paper attempts to interpret Atwood's speculative novels—including *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Testaments*, and *Oryx and Crake*—from the perspective of speculative realism. It aims to reveal the reality from the cognitive perspective presented by the author and characters, and analyze the artistic charm of Atwood's speculative fiction.

Index Terms—Margaret Atwood, speculative realism, speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*

I. INTRODUCTION

Beginning with a *New Scientist* interview in 2008 and continuing through her essay collection *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination* in 2011, Margaret Atwood has consistently asserted that her work belongs to the genre of “speculative fiction” rather than “science fiction”, persistently urging readers to focus more on the “realism” inherent in speculative fiction. In her book *In Other Worlds*, Atwood emphasizes that her speculative fiction is rooted in present-day reality, projecting plausible logical extrapolations into the near future. However, critics remain divided on the specific dimensions where her speculative works demonstrate “realism”. Previous analyses primarily focus on the speculative elements within her content and narrative, as well as their references to reality. For instance, Bloom (2001) analyzes *The Handmaid's Tale*, using the depiction of Gilead society to confront contemporary social crises—such as religious extremism and gender oppression—compelling readers to confront the latent dangers within our own reality. At the formal level, the novel employs a framing device—pseudo-documentary techniques such as academic conference proceedings—to amplify its satirical intent, exposing contemporary social problems in the hope of catalyzing social and political change (p. 129). Winstead (2017) contends that Atwood employs speculative fiction to explore real-world political and economic issues, thereby expanding the boundaries of science fiction and emphasizing its realist qualities (pp. 228–246). Thieme (2023) analyzes speculative realism in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy and argues that “she narrates her ‘speculative’ material in a style that creates its own reality through its succinct use of minutely realized, darkly comic detail” (p. 128). In recent years, with the rise of cognitive literature research, the subject's cognition, sensory experience and the reader's perception mechanism in literature have become the focus of research. From the perspective of cognitive stylistics, Harrison (2024) analyzes how readers construct a rich conceptual model of their own reality and alternative reality when reading *Oryx and Crake* (p. 164). This paper holds that previous studies have overlooked Margaret Atwood's exploration of character and narrator cognition at the stylistic level. By applying Text World Theory, narratology, and cognitive stylistics, this article analyzes the distinctive features of how the author and her characters conceptualize and articulate “reality” on cognitive and intellectual levels. This form of speculative thinking bears a direct ideological relationship with reality, leading this study to term it “speculative realism”. This approach also offers a new theoretical pathway for reinterpreting Atwood's works, thereby facilitating an investigation into the poetics of her speculative fiction.

II. SPECULATIVE REALISM

Realism in literature has been perhaps the most discussed and controversial topic within Western literary criticism for over a century; it is not a singular, fixed literary paradigm, but is constantly reshaped and reconstructed by the evolution of social, philosophical, and artistic concepts. Therefore, a plethora of terms have been coined to categorize different forms of realism, such as traditional realism in Victorian England in the 19th century, critical realism and socialist realism in the literature of the former Soviet Union, psychological realism represented by James and Woolf in the first half of the 20th century, and variants of realism in the post-modern context, namely magic realism, meta-realism and new realism. Since the mid-19th century, “realism”, whether as a literary practice, a literary movement or a literary theory or a critical theory, has always been accompanied by controversy and doubt.

Nevertheless, realism, as a mode of cognition or mental representation, has endured throughout history, despite the variation in its specific literary manifestations. Modern cognitive science has proved that “the neurobiological mechanisms interfacing us with the ‘real world’ largely overlap with those acting when we imagine fictional worlds both through images and words” (Pennisi & Falzone, 2020, p. 143). This mechanism is embodied simulation. The embodied cognition determines its inseparable characteristics from “reality”. Realism constitutes the foundational mode of artistic perception. Other aesthetic modes of cognition and representation either developed from or subverted realism, yet consistently exist in a state of interweaving with it—a dynamic that aligns with the principles of cognitive science. Wellek (1964) once stated that “realism appeals to a potent tradition in history” (p. 223). Judging from the development of cognitive science today, his statement still makes sense not only because Aristotle’s “imitation theory” laid a theoretical foundation for western realism, but also because the literature of all nationalities in the world is based on the same cognitive principle and follows the embodied simulation mechanism. Furthermore, considering the external world, writers cannot help but attend to the development of the real world—the very environment people are embedded in for survival. This attention provides the external impetus for their creative work. In different historical periods, writers face different situations. In today’s world, we are in the “Anthropocene” era together, and realism in line with the “Anthropocene” era came into being.

The Anthropocene is a new geological epoch proposed in 2000 by geochemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer, a term which designates an era in which human activities have come to dominate the evolution of the Earth system. The Anthropocene concept highlights that human beings have become a geological force. Specifically, human industrial production, energy consumption, and globalization processes have had an irreversible impact on the climate, ecology, and geological cycle. This concept not only reveals the far-reaching geological consequences of human actions but also fundamentally challenges the traditional “nature/culture” binary, transforming nature from a passive background into an active agent that co-exists and acts alongside human beings, as theorized by Latour. In response to the widespread environmental degradation of contemporary times, various forms of new realism have emerged in the fields of literature and art. As Lisa Ottum says, the Anthropocene functions simultaneously as a scientific designation and a narrative framework, effectively telling the story of humanity’s current position on Earth. Its reliance on plot and character elements is precisely what makes the Anthropocene a compelling subject for literary scholars (Reno, 2021, p. 17). Literary realism needs to adapt to this new environmental situation. What changes will happen to fiction? In *Anthropocene Realism Fiction in the Age of Climate Change*, John Thieme discusses 12 cases that employ realist fictional modes and analyzes how writers use their creative techniques to respond to the difficulties and challenges of world change. He asserts that climate fiction is more likely to generate an emotive impact because it frames complex environmental issues in a narrative form, contrasting with the relatively dispassionate approach of hard scientific data and statistics (Thieme, 2023, p. 1). Although the texts analyzed in this book are varied in form, they share the primary goal of detailing the consequences of human-caused climate change. Crucially, they achieve this purpose through diverse modes of realism that persistently examine the role of individuals within the social structure. Thieme’s (2023) core view lies in the power of various forms, which employ fiction to evoke readers’ emotional resonance, ultimately forging a social consensus on the reality of the climate crisis. Thieme attributed Atwood’s literary technique in the *MaddAddam* trilogy to “speculative realism”, that is, to make speculative imagination based on reality, and to create a narrative style that is both prophetic and realistic by combining speculative details with real-world problems. This style not only challenges the boundary between traditional science fiction and reality, but also prompts readers to reflect on humanity’s responsibilities and future within the Anthropocene. “Speculative realism” can be understood as a narrative strategy that combines speculative imagination with realistic details, such as the technology of bioengineering, pig organ transplantation, and disasters caused by climate change, embodied in the novel, which are not imaginary, but existing, developing, or theoretically possible in reality. From the linguistic point of view, Thieme also summed up Atwood’s extensive use of new words, such as “SoyOBoyburgers” and “Happiccuppuchino”, and combined the “fiction” in form with the “reality” in content, which is the embodiment of “speculative realism” in literary form.

Based on Thieme’s (2023) research, this paper further discusses Atwood’s writing style: she is not only good at blending speculative imagination into reality-based narration, but also the speculative nature of her works is more deeply reflected in the cognitive thinking of the author and the characters on the reality, as well as the ideological and ethical orientation carried by this thinking form. To analyze this unique speculative poetics, this paper introduces text-worlds theory of cognitive poetics and combines the perspectives of narratology and cognitive stylistics to focus on the presentation of “philosophical speculation” in multiple text worlds, as well as the switching and collision between different worlds to convey deep themes and emotional impact. Text-worlds Theory is a cognitive-linguistic framework that explains how humans comprehend language by constructing mental representations, or “worlds”. It emphasizes the inseparability of text and context in a dynamic cognitive process. “World-switches” is a key concept in text-worlds theory, which refers to the temporal and spatial shift of our attention on the same ontological level when we are reading. It is not entering a completely different “possible world”, but adjusting the space or time coordinates within the parameter framework of the current “matrix text-world”(mostly in operation in a text). On the other hand, the modal world is a vertical move, entering a different ontological plane, such as a character’s desire, belief, dream, or hypothesis. Text-worlds Theory can assist, confirm, and even supplant the concept of “narrative levels” in explaining the internal structure of novels, thus providing a clearer framework for analyzing narratological topics such as narrator, narratee,

point of view, focalization, and diegetic and extradiegetic narration. While narrative levels remain a common topic in narratology, the presence of multiple world switches—including matrix, modal, and fleeting text-worlds—within the same narrative level allows for a more precise dissection of its internal structure.

This article will analyze Atwood's speculative novels through the lens of three key areas—speculative subjects, narrative strategies, and linguistic strategies—in order to discover the cognitive speculative discourse of the author and characters, and ultimately explore the poetics of speculative realism in Atwood's works.

III. SPECULATIVE SUBJECTS

Speculative fiction is essentially a testing ground for thoughts, relying on speculative imagination to break the limitations of human cognition. Throughout Atwood's speculative fiction over the past 30 years, almost all of them reflect realistic problems through fictional future society, and the background of such novels is usually set in a future totalitarian or dystopian society. Howells (2021), a famous scholar who studies Atwood, listed some core topics of Atwood's speculative fiction in *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, including "political, economic, social and environmental concerns" (p. 171). By employing Text-world Theory (Stockwell, 2020), we can see that in addition to the main topics expressed at the level of matrix text-world, Atwood also explores issues of freedom, power, control, and human nature in a realistic society, as manifested by the modal world-switches within the speculative discourse of her characters and narrators.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood makes up an extremely autocratic future country, the Republic of Gilead, and shows how religion can be used as a political tool to rationalize the oppression of women and the whole society. Her works not only warn the reality by setting the background in the near future, but also reflect on the propositions of freedom, gender, power, and system in the real world in the speculative discourse of characters and narrators. In the fifth chapter, the protagonist Offred compares her previous life with the present one through memories:

"Though I never ran at night; and in the daytime, only beside well-frequented roads." ... "Women were not protected then." ... "Don't stop on the road to help a motorist pretending to be in the trouble. Keep the locks on and keep going. If anyone whistles, don't turn to look. Don't go into a laundromat, by yourself, at night." ...

"Now we walk along the same street, in red pairs, and no man shouts obscenities at us, speaks to us, touches us. No one whistles."

"There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it". (Atwood, 2010, p. 34)

Scholars often analyze this passage as a prime example through the lenses of patriarchal oppression and ideological discourse analysis. Bouson (1993) argues that this passage brilliantly reveals how Gilead enacts oppression by redefining "freedom," and highlights the resultant contradictions and hypocrisy inherent in this ideology. In the name of providing "security" and "protection" (freedom from), the regime deprived women of their basic human rights and autonomy (freedom to), but in fact, it only replaced the previous with one systematic oppression, and put women, especially handmaids, in a situation of humiliation, isolation, and contempt (p. 140). Amin Malak believes that Atwood has constructed a bipolar opposition here, forcing readers to criticize: we should be alert to a society where "excessive choice" leads to moral disintegration. We should be more alert to a totalitarian society that deprives all people (including oppressors) of their free will and humanity in the name of "providing security" and turns life into a prison (Bloom, 2001, p. 7). Weiss (2009) believes that the most insidious operating mechanism of totalitarianism is revealed here, and the victims may actually become "collusion" of the oppression system, because they (at least subconsciously) accept the distorted "protection" provided by this system (pp. 120–141).

Analyzing this speculative discourse from the perspective of the text-world theory, the author constructs three text worlds: Text World 1: The past (the past America—the era of "freedom to") is a chaotic and dangerous place, and women need to keep a high degree of vigilance and implement a series of rules ("Don't ..." and "Don't ...") to seek safety. The "freedom" here is freedom to but the price is exposure to danger and harassment. Text World 2: "Now" (the Republic of Gilead—the era of "freedom from"). This world is constructed as a highly controlled, orderly, but oppressive place. Superficial security is achieved through extreme gender segregation, surveillance, and deprivation of personal freedom. Women's bodies are protected, but at the cost of their personality and autonomy. Text World 3: Aunt Lydia's world of consciousness, which is a modal world, constructed by Aunt Lydia's remarks, and represents the official ideology of the Gilead regime. The role of this world is to redefine the concepts in the first two text-worlds. It tries to compare the chaos of "Text World 1" with the control of "Text World 2" and demonstrate the superiority of the latter. This ideological filter forms a strong tension with the narrator's personal memory of "Text World 1" and his personal experience of "Text World 2", which constitutes the core conflict of the novel. The profound irony and critical effect are produced by the juxtaposition and contrast of multiple text-worlds, coupled with the intervention of Aunt Lydia, who attempts to reconcile these opposing ideological worlds. The author guides readers to reflect on what real freedom is. Any utopian promise that seeks to exchange "absolute security" for absolute control and the deprivation of individual rights will inevitably culminate in the darkest dystopia. By its nature, freedom has always been complex, risky, and demanding of defense; it cannot be reduced to a simple, either-or option.

IV. SPECULATIVE NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

In the narration of Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction, there are some speculative narrative features forming a profound philosophical reflection on reality, which can be primarily summarized into the following aspects. The first is the narrative perspective shift. When the author wants to "speculate" on a topic, the narrative perspective usually turns to the second person, which is divided into two situations: one is independent segmentation, forming the narrator's argument in most cases; the other situation is that there is no independent prominence in form, which usually belongs to the inner monologue of the character. This shift is not only a narrative skill, but also a skip to a discourse world constructed by the author, involving the classic roles of communication participants, such as speakers, writers, and their respective audiences (e.g., listeners or readers). The participants are traditionally engaged in a direct exchange, like a pair in a discussion or a writer and the recipient of their text (Stockwell, 2020, p. 160). Some textual information is shared and known by the communicators (the writer and reader), while other content is known only to the characters or agents within the story itself. The content of these hypothetical textual environments varies: some details are available to the people discussing the text (the writer/reader), but other details are exclusively known to the characters/performers inside the text (p. 166). In speculative discourse, the content is accessible to both reader and character/narrator participant, and the author clearly delineates the speculative sub-world from the matrix text-world in order to provoke readers' reflection and achieve common ground. The richness of the speculative sub-world is carried in the reader's existing memories, knowledge, and experience shape their understanding, incorporating both objective meanings and personal feelings. It draws upon the reader's whole background—knowledge, memories, and past experiences—to create meaning, which includes both factual interpretations and emotional responses (p. 162). When the narrative turns to the second person ("you"), the reader is directly drawn into the sub-world of the character or narrator. This narrative mode implies the universality of speculative activities: it is not only the personal thinking process in the text world, but also the thinking state that readers may experience. In this way, the writer promoted the individual consciousness activity to a universal philosophical thinking. For example, in Margaret Atwood's fiction *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia confessed in *The Ardua Hall Holograph*:

... How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman?

But perhaps it is too late for that. You take the first step, and to save yourself from the consequences, you take the next one. In times like ours, there are only two directions: up or plummet. (Atwood, 2019, p. 32)

The passage opens with a first-person internal focalized narrative ("I") but promptly shifts to the second-person perspective ("you"). This shift in narrative perspective directly draws the reader into the character's sub-world. Through this technique, Atwood skillfully universalizes Aunt Lydia's personal dilemma—the step-by-step compromises made for self-preservation—transforming it from a specific character's soliloquy into a psychological process that any individual (i.e., the reader) facing moral quandaries might undergo. The matrix text-world represents the narrative reality of Gilead, while the phrase "you take the first step... you take the next one" constructs a speculative space. The content of this sub-world is accessible to both the reader and the character/narrator participant. Readers are invited into this morally ambiguous space, where they fill it with their own cognition and emotions. When Aunt Lydia describes that point of no return, each reader draws upon their own understanding and feelings about "choices made under duress", "the cost of moral descent", or "systemic complicity" to give it substance. The power of the concluding statement—"there are only two directions: up or plummet"—stems not only from the text itself but also from the readers' emotional resonance with such extreme predicaments. In high-pressure environments, morality and rationality gradually yield to the instinct for survival. Through Aunt Lydia's confession, Atwood not only critiques how totalitarianism corrodes humanity through incremental compromises and false binaries but also points toward a hopeful form of resistance: by using narrative art to awaken the speculative capacity within every "you", she enables readers to recognize the universality of these mechanisms. This awareness, in turn, empowers them to remain vigilant against—and resist—ideological appeals that demand the abandonment of humanity for the sake of "ascending" or claim there is "no alternative".

In order to distinguish Atwood's speculative realism style from traditional psychological realism writing techniques, it is necessary to clarify the concept of speculation. Speculation is a high-order cognitive activity, which refers to a psychological process that requires complex thinking processing, active participation and deep reflection. It usually goes beyond the basic information reception or simple memory and involves the reorganization of knowledge, abstract reasoning and meaning construction. As Hana points out, "speculative imagining should be differentiated from more free-flowing modes of imagining, such as daydreaming or mind-wandering, because it's usually structured by some goals or parameters—questions like "what if?", "what would happen if?", or "why would this happen?" (Varis et al., 2023, p. 106)... The method starts with existing foundations—familiar skills, experiences, materials, or data—and proceeds through an extremely uncertain exploration to produce a transformation: a new understanding, combination, or artifact (p. 107). People's speculative consciousness activities are not the psychological imitation in traditional narratology, but the modal world in the form of ontology. In this way, speculative consciousness activities are liberated from the traditional narrative framework and become an artistic tool to explore profound propositions. At the same time, this kind of conscious activity constitutes a parallel mapping with the real world, rather than a mirror image of the traditional representation.

For example, at the beginning of Chapter 23 in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist, Offred, lies alone, imagining that she can escape from the totalitarian countries in the future.

When I get out of here, if I'm ever able to set this down, in any form, even in the form of one voice to another, It's **impossible** to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colours, too many. **But if you happen to be a man, sometime in the future, and you've made it this far**, please remember: **you will** never be subjected to the temptation of feeling **you must** forgive, a man, as a woman. It's difficult to resist, believe me. But remember that forgiveness too is a power. **To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest.** (Atwood, 2010, p. 144)

As the heroine starts from hypothetical inference (if) and thinks about her record of this period of history after her escape, she uses two cognitive modal words (will, it is impossible ...) with positive shades in succession, which strongly expresses the narrator's attitude towards the grand proposition of history and truth. Any narrative is a kind of "reconstruction", which cannot completely restore the facts. Language itself has limitations, and it can't capture all the complexity of reality ("too many parts, sides, cross currents, nuances"). As Jacques Derrida said, the structure and symbol system of language itself will lead to the extension of meaning, so language cannot directly reflect reality, but will distort, omit, or even reshape reality. The author takes this opportunity to question the historical narrative, alert readers to everything she tells, and remind us that the novel itself is also a kind of "reconstruction", not a real "historical" writing. "But if you happen to be a man....." In this sentence, the author changes the narrative perspective and uses the second person to call you four times. At this point, the narrative shifts from the activity of the characters in the possible world to the modal world of the narrator. Atwood raises a critical feminist question: Why must forgiveness become a passive responsibility for women, while men are exempt from this moral dilemma? In the patriarchal society, women are expected to forgive, understand and bear the faults of men. But men rarely need to bear such "forgiveness pressure"; they can escape the guilt, while women are always asked to learn to let go. "To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest." This sentence expresses the author's speculation on morality and power. Forgiveness is not always a moral virtue, but also a part of power relations. The author uses the uncertain tone of the modal word "maybe" to remind female readers to reflect again: you have the right to choose not to forgive, which is a kind of power in itself. Like Sarah points out, "I want to advocate for the dialogical nature of speculation...speculation never emerges in isolation...we are always saturated by previous social interactions" (Varis et al., 2023, p. 112). The author utilizes the speculative modal world to highlight the asymmetry of gender power structure in contemporary society, thereby seeking to encourage readers' deeper thinking, dialogue, and emotional resonance.

At the level of narrative voice, unreliable narrators lead readers to recognize the narrative's inherent incompleteness, prompting them to question the authenticity of "reality". However, it is precisely this uncertainty and ambiguity that embodies a more philosophical "cognitive reality"—one less concerned with factual accuracy than with how individuals understand, experience, question, and construct reality. For instance, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred, as a first-person unreliable narrator, shifts between moments of clarity, vagueness, calm analysis, and indulgent fantasy. She often corrects herself, such as:

I made that up. It didn't happen that way. Here is what happened. (Atwood, 2010, p. 271)

...

This is the story, then.

...I went back to Nick...

...

I told you it was bad.

Here is how it goes. (p. 280)

This way of self-denial and backtracking makes her a typical unreliable narrator. However, this is not a technical narrative error, but rather an accurate reflection of the narrator's mental state: her perspective exposes the fragmentation of the subject's perception, unverifiable memory, and the uncertainty of truth within a totalitarian system.

In terms of narrative structure, Atwood's speculative fiction tends to feature open endings that move beyond the linear causality of the empirical world. Instead, they point toward a higher-order and more abstract cognitive reality, thereby reflecting the inherent uncertainty and incompleteness of the world itself. For example, at the end of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the hero "Snowman/Jimmy" found three surviving human beings approaching, hiding in the grass with weapons, facing three possible actions: coming forward to contact them and trying to establish new social ties; stay hidden, continue to live alone and maintain the status quo; attack them, eliminate potential threats, and play the role of the only survivor. The novel does not clearly explain the Snowman's final choice, instead concluding with the internal monologue, "What should he do?" This ending transcends the unfinished plot; it constitutes three philosophical inquiries concerning human morality, cognitive ability, and survival logic. This ambiguity embodies Atwood's core intellectual pursuit as a speculative novelist, prompting readers to reflect on the future coexistence of human and non-human species.

V. SPECULATIVE LANGUAGE STRATEGIES

Regarding language, the characteristics of speculative realism decouple the text's meaning from the narrative

framework of the textual world. Instead, meaning is constructed within a non-temporal, speculative discourse. In formal terms, this is achieved through the use of modality words, which express the predictive, hypothetical, and uncertain attitude of characters or narrators. These include modal auxiliaries (e.g., must, might, should, will, could), modal adverbs (e.g., possibly, maybe, perhaps), and verbs and adverbs expressing cognition and speculation (e.g., know, think, seem). Furthermore, the author frequently employs free direct quotation (without quotation marks) to directly express the views of the author, narrator, or character. This technique creates a “figure” effect for the entire quotation, which is highly significant in terms of both its placement and its content.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood fictionalizes an extremely autocratic future country, the Republic of Gilead, and shows how religion can be used as a political tool to rationalize the oppression of women and the whole society. In Chapter 14, the entire family is permitted to watch the TV news before the Ceremony—an action that underscores how, much like in many real-world nations, television news functions as a tool for government propaganda. After strict screening, it only shows the “victory” pictures recognized by the regime. Offred noticed the way the news was edited and the prisoners' expressions, and suspected that these pictures might be forged or carefully selected. At this time, it triggered her speculation:

...the news.

Such as it is: who knows if any of it is true? It could be old clips, it could be faked. (Atwood, 2010, p. 92)

They show us only victories, never defeats. Who wants bad news?

Possibly he's an actor. (p. 93)

Atwood exposes the manipulation of information and the resulting loss of truth under totalitarianism through these independent speculative discourses. The speculation of characters directly questioned the authenticity of news, suggesting that the countries in the world, like the totalitarian regimes in history (such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union), controlled people's cognition through forgery or selective reporting. The propaganda machines of other countries only show “victory”, cover up failures and create a false “invincible” image. This one-way narrative deprives people of their ability to judge reality and makes them blindly obey. The core ethical orientation of this speculative discourse is to expose how totalitarianism maintains power by manipulating information and depriving people of the right to know and judgment. In essence, the novel's questioning of “news” addresses a social problem deeply rooted in the real world, particularly the totalitarian political environment Atwood experienced during her 1984 visit to East Germany, an experience she also detailed in interviews. She stated that during the trip, she visited East Berlin, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, which gave her direct, personal insight into the nature of life under these supposedly utopian but ultimately totalitarian governments. She resumed writing the book upon her return to Toronto (Atwood, 2011). This firsthand encounter with states that controlled information and manipulated truth provided the crucial raw material for her depiction of Gilead's media ecology. Thus, her speculative fiction functions as a diagnostic tool, transforming the specific essence of life under mid-20th-century totalitarianism into a timeless critique of power's operation through information distortion. This critique resonates with unsettling relevance in our contemporary media landscape.

VI. CONCLUSION

Just as Atwood insists on the position of speculative fiction in her book *In Other Worlds*, it clearly shows her persistence in exploring the nature of reality. “What she defends as most crucial about speculative fiction is its closeness to ‘real’ speculation” (Winstead, 2017, p. 228). In other words, for Atwood, speculation is not to escape from reality, but to inquire and approach reality more intensely through hypothesis, deduction and imagination. The evolution of 21st-century realistic literature demonstrates that it has not succumbed to the challenges posed by modernism and postmodernism, but rather has been continuously revitalized through interdisciplinary dialogue spanning philosophy, cognitive science, and literature. As an extension of realism, speculative realism inherits the focus on social reality and the plight of human existence, yet breaks the traditional paradigm centered on reproducing reality. Instead, it turns to exploring reality's ontology and its multiple levels. The speculative themes, narrative strategies, and linguistic approaches summarized in Atwood's works are not merely derivations of human rational cognition, but also a refraction of social reality. Within the postmodern context, this form of speculation no longer seeks the ultimate answer. Instead, it deconstructs reality into a flowing network of meaning through uncertainty and the raising of questions. Future research can further explore the development of speculative realism in different cultural contexts, especially its application in non-Western literature. Furthermore, interdisciplinary perspectives, such as cognitive science and neuroscience, could be leveraged to analyze how the reality presented in speculation affects readers' cognitive models and perception of the world.

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