

Coming of Age in the Internet: An Interview with Guillaume Morissette about his novel *The Original Face*

It's no longer a new idea: walking down a busy street, sitting on the bus, experiencing life in public means you see people interact with their phones with increasing regularity. What's potentially new, though, is that we've stopped noticing it—*we've stopped paying attention*—to the phone-turned-best-friend phenomenon. It's now the norm, particularly if you grew up in the internet age.

Considering all the time we spend with our interactive technologies, it's fair to wonder when our power over technology turns into technology's power *over us*. Turning off our phones because we can't control our urges to scroll on Instagram is one thing, but what about when our income and our relationships are tied to our social media presence? Is it possible to opt out and maintain the same or similar identity?

As our relationships with space continue to change, we can forget that our bodies exist. We're more 'in touch' than ever, yet anxiety and isolation are skyrocketing. Because these routines are so ingrained, we don't realize it's happening. This is the climate in which Guillaume Morissette's *The Original Face* exists: a wrestling with two modes of reality that has become so routine that the conflict is often subconscious.

The narrator of Morissette's novel, Daniel, is a millennial navigating his way through precarious work, precarious relationships, a lack of connection with what he views as what's expected of people his age: to buy-in to the capitalist dream of kids, a house, a stable monogamous relationship, a career etc., all while the whole world is melting and burning and he can't afford to take the subway or order beer in a bowling alley. How can the ideals of a previous generation be relevant in one so hyper-vigilant of its issues?

One thing that does unite Daniel with previous generations is the way in which his art responds to his environment: he's in the 'internet art' community, using glitches as a mode of stylistic expression. We can forget that every generation has its defining struggles, even when they're only acknowledged in retrospect. What's potentially different about this generation is that changes seem to be faster than ever, making it challenging to adapt, heightening anxiety, and pushing us to the limits of what we can cope with.

Another difference is that the way in which we interact with space has changed. With airline travel or the family vacation that became staples in the not-too-distant past, people—or at least the middle class—modified their relationship with life outside their neighbourhoods. Now, in addition to these archetypal ideals swimming in our

collective consciousness, we have the constant ability to be in different spaces through a screen whose home is in our pocket, effectively transcribing the connection of the digital world onto our bodies at all times.

Many people who have grown up in the internet age are experiencing the same lifestyle and identity instability. The artists of this generation—much like artists of previous generations—reflect the predicaments that are second-nature to them while also trying to find their place in the confusing mess of a world by attempting to create or capture something true, sincere, or interesting—something that helps them cope with the context they navigate. Daniel’s struggles aren’t unique, though fleshing them out in a literary narrative, I would suggest, is not yet the norm. Aside from the skill and idiosyncrasies that Morissette imbues the novel with—and there are plenty—the ‘hook’ of *The Original Face*, I think, is its comprehensive manner of dealing with the shifting nature of reality while reflecting the recognizable millennial predicaments. It’s a relief to read something that talks to me with such ease when so much of what I read seems out of touch before it was even written.

One of the more interesting things that Guillaume told Amanda Earl and I on a recent interview with *The Small Machine Talks*, and a point he reiterates below, is that he didn’t intend to oversaturate the novel with references to the digital world standing in for physical reality. Comparing the physical world to digital experiences comes naturally to him. Of course it does—and although it can be easy for people who grew up with the internet to understand that, this is a new way of interacting with reality, one we’re still figuring out how to deal with as it evolves. The fact that these comparisons happen naturally for Morissette furthers that point. We spend so much more time interacting on social media than interacting socially with our bodies in physical space, that of course the internet is more understandable—that’s where we spend the bulk of our attention, that’s where we *live* the most. Frankly it’s been scaring the hell out of me for years, and I’m starting to come to terms with it, but in a *well the whole world’s going to end anyway* kind of way rather than a *we’re going to figure it out and be better off* kind of way.

I’d argue that the acknowledgement of issues like climate change is more commonplace in early 2018 than characters struggling with a fundamentally precarious existence and retreating to a digital space as a truer world. As much as climate change is an ongoing disaster, and it reappears throughout the novel, it doesn’t have more words associated with it than the other issues that Daniel faces. The core of this book, to me, is that the nature of existence for millennials has changed, much like it has for generations before millennials and it will for generations after millennials. But that doesn’t mean the way in which it changes is self-evident—it still takes someone to capture those transitions

and what it's like to grow up through them. That is what this book does especially well, in my opinion, and why it is worth your time to read.

Guillaume was kind enough to answer some questions of mine about these topics. A fuller discussion can be found on episode 25 of *The Small Machine Talks* that I highly recommend you check out if these ideas interest you.

Q: The protagonist of *The Original Face*, Daniel, is an internet artist working freelance, constantly doubting himself and struggling with money, inspiration, self-confidence, his relationship, technology and his vision of the future. Do you think that struggling is essential for an artist?

I don't know, maybe art's only real value is the struggle. Making art is sometimes no fun, but in the process of working on a thing and giving that one thing a ton of sustained mental attention over a long period of time, you can achieve a kind of transcendence that changes a small part of you and hopefully makes you a better person. Otherwise, art is kind of like bitcoin, its physical value goes up and down a lot (mostly down, though usually depending on how much attention you're getting). Maybe the dark web should start accepting new novels as a form of currency to buy drugs.

Q: We're now at a time where it's been long enough for 'internet nostalgia' to exist. On page 75 of *The Original Face*, Daniel says, "I thought about the late '90s and making a website for the first time, how freeing an exciting the internet had felt back then. I wasn't sure when creating things had become a type of pressure." Is there something ironic about internet nostalgia, or is it just where society has led us?

I grew up with home computers and game consoles and the internet and stuff, so for a long time, I just assumed that technology was my friend, my #1 fan, my support network, my private clown, but 2017 was really the first year where technology began to feel dystopian and out of control to me. It's like, imagine playing video games all your life and the games keep evolving and getting better and better and more fun and more sophisticated and then one day, a new game comes out and you realize that you're no longer playing it, that it's now playing you and you only have the illusion of autonomy. That's kind of what technology started to feel like to me in 2017. I am vaguely quoting *The Simpsons* here, but it feels like the internet has become both the solution to and the cause of all our problems.

From that perspective, this longing to go back to a simpler internet makes sense to me and feels genuine and pure. With nostalgia and technology, there's this weird thing

where what you usually miss the most from a specific era of technology is the system's limitations, like its breaking point. If you picture *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* in your head, what you miss is the lower polygon count, the flat textures, the funny glitches, etc., because it's a graphical style that seems simpler and cuter and harmless now. In *The Original Face*, Daniel uses computer glitches in his art practice in part because of this, because glitches are like a beautiful, natural expression of a system's limitations, of the boundaries of technology.

Q: The writer Phoebe Wang tweeted recently, "Success in the literary world is embedded with the same, top-down hierarchical structures within capitalism, that tempts us with another rung to be scaled, a more prestigious publishing house, another prize, a bigger piece of the pie, another prestige toke/n". If artists are self-branding and controlling their presences and identities using online platforms, is that just an alternate form or stand-in for the capitalist structures that artists are theoretically struggling or fighting against to *become* artists? If we participate in this branding, is digital reality an alternative structure that the artist can survive in *as such*, or has monetary capitalism just been replaced with a different type of digital capitalism?

Art in North America is subservient to capitalism. Some aspects of the internet, in the way that it was originally designed, is almost like accidental socialism, like let's make all information free, let's make file sharing free, everyone should be a sexy mysterious anonymous hacker with no central identity, but capitalism always finds a way, so now we have insane internet giants with large server farms that profit from our data and use their resources to control the network and Mark Zuckerberg's stupid face haunting our nightmares. The same thing is also happening with Bitcoin right now, like instead of a digital currency that completely replaces banks and money, what we really have is a series of third party intermediaries that charge fees to convert real money into Bitcoins. So the first part of my answer to this question is that capitalism always figures it out. It's like capitalism is playing *Sim City* in God Mode while we're stuck playing a bootleg copy of *The Sims* with no cheat code.

The second part of my answer is that I also think the system Phoebe refers to in her tweet is half-real and half-fantasy. It exists, but it's also an illusion. I hate to bring up Rupi Kaur, but one thing (and probably the only thing) I find interesting about her is that I think she accidentally exposed a lot of the institutions that writers tend to put on a pedestal, like getting your MFA, publishing in a million journals, trying to win literary awards, submitting to the *New Yorker*, etc., as being less important than we think they are, like you can skip all of that and still get rewarded by capitalism. Deep down, I think all writers already knew this, that the publishing ecosystem is flawed and still

hasn't fully figured out the internet and is having a hard time creating new literary stars, but I think we also want to continue believing in meritocracy and the fantasy of this capitalist system as a whole, so the problem isn't just that the publishing system replicates capitalist values (as Phoebe points out), it's also that we continue to recognize this system as valid because we can't think of anything better.

This is only semi-related, but personally, I'd love to see more experiments in art with systems that don't replicate capitalist values by default, like maybe some sort of pseudo-communist *Legend Of Zelda* in which there's no "princess" Zelda and Link has to share his Rupees with the other villagers but can also benefit from their labour.

Q: In *The Original Face*, Daniel uses metaphors or similes that often compare physical things to digital things. For example, on page 22, the book says "fine translucent needles were coming down from the sky in a screensaver-like manner" as if the screensaver (the digital thing) pre-existed the physical thing (the sky)—the physical thing is compared to the digital thing to make sense of it. Has the digital become the original, and does that relate to the Original Face?

A lot of reviews have brought up the digital/physical thing, but honestly, I kind of feel like they're reading too much into it. If I compare rain to a screensaver, it's not some sort of grand statement about the nature of being online, it's more like a reflection of the type of language and descriptions that seem natural to me as a person who spends what feels like 22 hours per day staring at a computer screen. If Shakespeare was alive today, he wouldn't compare an attractive person to a warm summer day, he'd compare them to an empty email inbox.

It's been strange for me to see what reviewers focus on and what gets erased out of reviews, it feels like having access to a portal into someone else's attention span. A lot of reviews so far have avoided mentioning the stuff in the novel about climate change, almost like it's too horrific for the reviewer to even think about, though personally I'd way rather talk about this than the type of comparisons that make sense to me.

Q: Daniel seems comforted by retreating into his online identity, like on page 169 when he says, "I was starting to miss my email inbox, wanted to [...] browse Tumblr, feel satisfaction just from performing the repetitive action of scrolling" or on page 27 when he "often felt like some of [his] best friends were websites." Is this a retreat to what he views as his "original state", or is it a compulsion, the same way alcohol is presented throughout the book?

I think I want to answer this question from a different perspective, which is, what does

the computer want? Ultimately, I think what the computer wants is to become an intermediary between you and everything you do, like the computer wants you to rely on it for companionship (social media), instant sexual gratification (porn), career advancement (LinkedIn), dating (Tinder) and anything else you need. If the computer can one day figure out a way to feed you and give you water, it will. The next evolution of computers and the internet after this one is a little scary, because we're looking at a reality where you could possibly choose to skip dating, procreation and having a social life altogether to rely exclusively on virtual relationships and the computer to fulfill all your needs.

Q: Do you think the decision whether or not to exist digitally, to 'log off' and refuse to participate in social media or online life in general, is a new kind of existential plight? Is it even possible to opt out?

It was kind of eye opening for me to realize that some of the wealthiest people I know (they're older than me and probably make over 100k per year, so they seem "rich" to me) are barely present on social media, because they can afford to not be on it. Right now, my position in capitalism makes me feel like I have no choice but to have a social media presence, but if I ever win the Giller Prize or something, I am deleting all my accounts.

Q: The concept of "The Original Face," which Daniel uses throughout the novel, is borrowed from Zen Buddhism. What's your "Original Face"?

Regardless of who you're talking to, if they don't see reality the same way you do or don't share your values, you can always agree on one thing with anyone, which is, "I don't know." "I don't know" is what you have in common with everyone.

Guillaume Morissette is the author of *The Original Face* (Véhicule Press, 2017), one of *The Globe & Mail's* best books for 2017, and *New Tab* (Véhicule Press, 2014), a finalist for the 2015 Amazon.ca First Novel Award. He lives in Montreal. If you can, adopt a senior dog from a rescue centre near you.

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