

Zuzanna Gawrońska

Landscapes of the Future : Space and (Post)Apocalypse in Philip K. Dick's novel "The Penultimate Truth"

Acta Humana nr 4, 49-57

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Mgr Zuzanna Gawrońska

UMCS Lublin

Landscapes of the Future: Space and (Post)Apocalypse in Philip K. Dick's novel *The Penultimate Truth*

Philip K. Dick's book *The Penultimate Truth* published in 1964¹, although indisputably valued among Dick readers, as it often happens with science-fiction texts, has received relatively little attention and has sporadically been the subject of exhaustive and sound analysis so far. Among those who contributed with a more extensive critical treatment of the underrated novel are Kim Stanley Robinson and his PhD thesis *The Novels of P.K. Dick*, Patricia S. Warrick *Mind in Motion: The Fiction of Philip K. Dick*, and Merritt Abrash with his 'Man Everywhere in Chains': *Dick, Rousseau and "The Penultimate Truth"*². Other authors usually dismiss it with just a few-word or line (most often unfavourable) commentary, or would not even have its name mentioned, like Fredrick Jameson who in his chapter on Dick's novels only implicitly included the book into the group of "the trash and the hack work"³.

The reason behind the book's lack of critical popularity may be what Abrash pronounces as "serious deficiencies" of *The Penultimate Truth*: "an excess of subplots, a confusing and unconvincing major character, and some convoluted and ultimately absurd time travel gimmickry"⁴. Undoubtedly the fact that Dick was concurrently working on another novel, i.e. *The Zap Gun*, could influence the quality of his writing and result in some weaknesses in the construction of the novel. However, what to one appears to be a drawback may on the other hand turn out to be an asset worthy of consideration and able to spur a critical impulse. "An excess"

¹ Some aspects of an earlier short story "The Defenders" published in 1953 were developed by Dick in this novel.

² In the collection *Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations*, ed. S.J. Umland, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut and London, 1995.

³ F. Jameson, *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, London and New York, 2005, p. 363.

⁴ M. Abrash, 'Man Everywhere in Chains': *Dick, Rousseau and "The Penultimate Truth"* [in:] *Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations*, ed. Samuel J. Umland, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut and London, 1995, p. 157.

could well be expressed as “richness” or “abundance”, “confusing and unconvincing” might be interpreted as “impenetrable and undeveloped⁵”, and “convoluted” is exactly the word one could apply with reference to the novel’s whole plot, taking into account its surprising turns of the action and its complication. For what draws attention on a closer reading and offers a rich material for analysis is precisely the construction of action as well as of space in *The Penultimate Truth*.

Generally speaking, the book has been labelled as depicting a post-apocalyptic dystopian vision of the world. But taking only a post-apocalyptic path of interpretation might be slightly misleading, if only for the fact that apocalypse is present throughout the novel on its various planes, and that for some of the characters it is not only a matter of the past, but the very present. Therefore, in view of what has been stated so far, the main scope of this article will be to undertake a preliminary study which would offer an interpretation focusing especially on two aspects: the complex organization of the dystopian space and its function(s) in the text as well as on the implementation of the motif of apocalypse in both the construction of the novel itself, especially its action, and the reading experience as well.

Before setting about to the analysis proper the last observation should be made with regard to the methodology employed in the article. The analysis of space will be conducted using James Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative⁶. Such choice of methodology may at first sight seem an uncommon or even illegitimate practice, since the theory has been created as a result of and for the analysis of character, not space. Yet, those familiar with Phelan’s theory might agree that in the course of reading his works one could arrive at a certain conclusion or to have a particular intuition, namely that it would be possible to expand Phelan’s rhetorical theory to other elements of the represented world and try to apply the categories proposed by the author also in the analysis of time and space. Hence, the following interpretation of the novel will also include, though as an experiment, an introductory

⁵ Reduction or “undevelopedness” present in character creation is considered a characteristic and in particular often a generic feature of SF characterization in comparison to realistic fiction.

⁶ In short, according to Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative stipulated in *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative*, characters can be considered as “multichromatic” in a sense that it is possible to distinguish in them three components: the mimetic, the synthetic and the thematic. The only indispensable component is the synthetic one, present in every literary creation of the character, the other two are potential; a character may possess all the three, however the synthetic element can be more or less foregrounded, whereas the mimetic and the thematic components may be more or less developed. The three components are constituted by dimensions (attributes) which in turn can convert into functions by the progression of the work (only in the case of the synthetic component dimensions are always functions). Progression is understood as movement, it is “concerned with how authors generate, sustain, develop, and resolve readers’ interests in narrative” (p. 17). Rhetorical transactions involve the author, the text and its elements and the authorial audience(s).

realization of this idea through an application of categories and notions of Phelan's rhetorical theory to the analysis of space.

To begin with this task it will be necessary to regard the category of space as a complex, "multichromatic" entity and to distinguish in it the three components: the mimetic, the synthetic and the thematic. The basic dimensions which constitute the mimetic component involve various aspects of space. It is the planet Earth as we know it, having the same geophysical properties and subject to the same laws of nature. The political division on two superpowers evokes the contemporaneous deadlock of the Cold War era, an indispensable element of the large-scale reality at the time when Dick was writing the novel. Also the well known names appear, defining space and conjuring up familiar images. However, the mimetic element is rather undeveloped as it frequently lacks even a slightly more detailed description, and is given only in the signal form of e. g. a well-known name. In this way, it becomes obvious that the author assumes the readers' expertise and invokes their knowledge or first-hand experience of what in the book forms the image of space. In *The Penultimate Truth* the mimetic component is presented against and often blended with the synthetic one. An exemplification of a closer localization would be New York, still bearing its original name – so the first mental categorisation would define it as "the same", though as soon as we learn that it is the city without the Times Square it becomes marked for "different". Since *The Penultimate Truth* is a work of speculative fiction, the synthetic dimensions have been maximally foregrounded: the city is no longer the same New York, and the face of the whole planet has undergone numerous and significant changes due to a particular "armageddon" – World War III.

Thus the synthetic component of space is shaped in the text by temporal and event framing of the apocalypse. At this point, it is important to note that apocalypse functions in the text in its two meanings, that is that of a "catastrophe" and "revelation". So first of all, let us focus on the aspect of catastrophe, with the view to its initiating circumstances and its aftermath. It can be gathered from the text that the pre-war globe was the world divided and represented by two scientifically and technologically advanced superpowers, which formed two ideologically hostile territories, Wes-Dem and Pac-Peop (short forms of the names standing for Western Democracies and Pacific Peoples Republic). After a few years of devastating warfare, and at the peak moment of the World War III, the fighting sides decided to use nuclear and biochemical weapons, which once conducted caused devastating radioactive contamination of the Earth's surface.

When the action of the novel actually starts the time is fifteen years past the nuclear armageddon. However, the war and its aftermath do not seem to have changed the officially recognized geo-political status quo and have affected people in the way one could predict, which definitely may arouse tensions in the reader

and redound to develop progression of the work. The result of the World War III is not the Earth united under one victorious power, but the world still horizontally divided in two, Wes-Dem and Pac-Peop (obvious synthetic attributes of space). Moreover, we learn that the division had also been made on the vertical plane, since the majority of the population both in Wes-Dem and Pac-Peop was made to hide underground in order to survive the atomic blast and its subsequent consequences. Fifteen years later, they are still kept in numerous bunker-colonies underground called “tanks”. The tanks contain complete living spaces, though relatively small, and factories with elaborate production lines. The activity of the “tankers” centres around production of specialized robots, which are meant to be used on the surface instead of people to fight under radioactive conditions. Each of the underground colony members is seen as performing a crucial role both in the society and in the process of production, so that the loss of any of them is not only a threat to the sustainability of the social life balance, but may also, as propaganda teaches them, have an impact on the process of production and, as a consequence, on their peoples’ winning or losing the war. One of the tankers in a colony performs the role of a supervisor and he is at the same time the only person contacting with his authorities on the surface. People receive information about the warfare and the situation above through transmitter devices, such as the radio and television, working only one way, that is only broadcasting. Thus, the tankers are convinced that the war and radioactive contamination of the Earth continue and that ascending to the surface would end in radiation sickness followed by inevitable death. For them, the apocalypse goes on.

Meanwhile, on the ground, the ruling elites of Western and Eastern powers live in peace and relative comfort. It is such organization the spatial plane – as contrasted imagery (dimensions) – that constitutes the thematic component of the novel. Although all animals are dead and there’s no longer the old New York, people live and work in comfortable buildings equipped with automats and other technologically advanced devices. Interestingly, it seems that people do not inhabit the city, but its remaining premises are solely the offices owned by government institutions, the media and business thus. Therefore, even at this level space is again divided, it is organised according to an opposition: living space – private, the centre of personal power, and working space – official, the centre of executive power. Robots are no longer used as soldiers, but perform all kinds of jobs for their owners. In Wes-Dem people under the political ruler, Talbot Yancy (therefore called yance-men), form a hierarchical society, where status is measured by two categories: power – depending on the degree of executive power and the importance of the post acquired, and wealth, which reflects itself in the number of robot-slaves and the amount of land owned outside of the Wes-Dem cities. Radioactive contamination is eventually passing away and hence, there is much competition between

yancemen, who would willingly risk their health in order to take over a new piece of land, even not yet completely free from radiation, where they could build their luxurious villas. It is space marked for inequality. All yancemen are interested in maintaining the present state of affairs, therefore their main activities focus on organizing and sustaining the mystification by manipulation and fabrication of information (e.g. Yance Talbot's speeches), artefacts and even history (at some point in the novel they use a time machine in order to plant evidence of alien artifacts on land belonging to a housing developer, Louis Runcible, so that the hoax could be discovered and the land could be legitimately seized). Their work is dedicated to sustaining an illusion that both the war and radioactive contamination of the planet continue. In order to do this, a group of linguistically talented individuals within Yance-men elite prepare Talbot's speeches using a device called rhetorisor, a machine for converting linguistic units, even the most absurd or senseless ones, into eloquent propagandist speeches:

Coleen read the sentence aloud. "The well-informed dead rat romped under the tongue-tied pink log."

"Listen," he said grimly. "I want to see what this stupid assist that cost me fifteen thousand Wes-Dem dollars is going to do with that. I'm serious; I'm waiting." He jabbed the rerun tab of the machine.

The rhetorisor, in its cricket's voice, intoned: "We think of rats, of course, as our enemy. But consider their vast value to us in cancer research alone. The lowly rat has done yeoman's service for humanity..."⁷.

Furthermore, both spaces described above are presented to the reader from the perspective of two protagonists, representing the separate worlds. Nicholas St. James is the president in one of the tankers, while Joseph Adams belongs to a group of the Yancemen working for the Agency – Talbot Yancy's office in New York. The pattern of spatial organization becomes more complicated when the lead-mechanic in the tank falls ill and Nicholas is forced to leave the underground shelter in search for an artificial pancreas for transplantation. As he ascends to the ground, he finds himself on a barren, desert-like terrain (which he believes to be still radioactive) where he discovers groups of other underground refugees hiding in the nearby ruins. This situation discloses to the reader a third space on the vertical axis, an area which is an example of a physical *intermundium*, a transitory space between the two major spaces, which does not belong to any of them but also the one that does not offer any sense of security to the hiding people. The yancemen realm occasionally exerts its influence there sending the robots in search for the new refugees, who either do not survive confrontation with their weapons or are taken prisoners and put in one of the official refuge shelters (conapts), which in

⁷ P.K. Dick, *The Penultimate Truth*, Bluejay Books, New York 1984, p. 54.

reality performed a function of a jail for tankers. Yet, despite all hardships involved in living in the extreme conditions, the group dwells there and does not choose either to return underground nor to be forced to move to comfortable conapts. The explanation which one of the squatters gives is simple but existentially exhaustive:

“Then how come,” Blair said, “you’re squatting here in these ruins instead of lounging at a swimming pool in one of those conapt constellations?”.

The man grunted, gestured. “I just like to be free”⁸.

So consequently, this physical *intermundium*, although not totally beyond the scope of yancemen’s influence, is as close to be the symbolic representation of freedom as possible in the novel.

What is more, another *intermundium* can be identified in the novel if we take the tanker’s perspective into account. To their belief the tank is just a transitory space, a place in between the past and the future. It is their shelter (in its functioning resembling a womb) from the dangers of the radioactive disease and war, their vessel carrying them towards better times. However, although designed with this purpose, this space is only mentally generated by the anticipatory approach of its inhabitants because from the position of yancemen, this is a default place for tankers. In consequence, a space which should arise positive connotations, is turned into one displaying the function of a space of oppression, for in reality it resembles more a jail or a prison camp, forming an opposition with the other *intermundium*.

There is yet another apocalyptic element in the novel which serves the creation of tension and furthers progression of the work, namely the character called David Lantano. For the larger part of the novel, he can be regarded as a messianic figure, the merciful, the saviour. Not only does he rescue Nicholas who normally would have been killed on the spot by the robots right after his emergence on the ground surface, but he also takes him to his villa, feeds him, gives him clothes and offers a place to stay. However, there are two qualities that distinguish him from ordinary human beings which might suggest his supernatural provenience. First of all, what singles him out from other yancemen, apart from a reddish skin colour of a Cherokee Indian, are his outstanding rhetorical abilities. All the speeches he prepared would surpass those of his colleagues in terms of phrasing, argument and content. Secondly, there is this mysterious feature in him of appearing to be of a different age at different times. To Joseph he sometimes looks like a young boy, and not a long while later like an elderly wiseman in his seventies. Moreover, judging from his words and actions, Joseph Adams seems convinced that this would be the man that is going to lead the tankers and restore the right order of things (although Dick is not precise in the novel about what kind of order that might be).

⁸ Ibidem, p. 96.

Then finally in terms of the action the novel can be said to be constructed as a book of revelations. The number of turning points there is excessive, all the veils are pulled down as the action progresses and the reader participates in the unveiling concurrently with the protagonists. In the course of events it becomes clear that the two superpowers are no longer ideologically hostile, that Talbot Yancy is just a technologically sophisticated puppet attached to a desk in his presidential office, reciting his speeches synthesized by a rhetorizer while another machine is at the same time producing his simulacrum, the picture and sound then broadcast to the underground colonies. We learn that Nicholas will never get a pancreas for the colony mechanic, because all artificially produced organs intended for soldiers have been claimed by Brose, the actual aged Wes-Dem leader. Additionally, Joseph discovers that history has also been manipulated, that there exist two official versions of the events, A and B, one for Wes-Dem tankers and the other for Pac-Peops. And finally, that he himself is being manipulated by a bunch of power hungry and greedy individuals, and that the reality he thought he was shaping and creating is in fact a conspiracy designed by others. But the worse truth is revealed at the end, when all his hopes for Lantano's intervention shatter to pieces when he learns that Lantano has been actually following his own goals from the very beginning, using others as means, and has no intention of freeing the people living underground. This final disillusionment could be seen as playing with Christian tradition, when Jesus's decision to go to Jerusalem and offer his life for the mankind thwarts the dream of a Messiah that the contemporaneous Jews had, who would ensure regaining the kingdom on earth becoming a leader of a possible political revolt.

Moreover, the model of an apocalyptic text which can be traced in Dick's novel is to a large extent reminiscent of Karl Popper's philosophy of science. In his book he argues that the core of scientific inquiry is the truth, it can be measured as the function of explanatory power of false theories, and can be expressed as its approximation to the truth (Verisimilitude).⁹ Likewise, in the novel the ultimate aim of the protagonists' inquiry also turns out to be the truth. But the problem of verisimilitude becomes central to the thematic plane of the text also because it seems that the narrative itself follows this pattern of approximation to the truth by unmasking illusion after illusion (falsification of ideas), leaving the final idea (or ideal) of the truth beyond the characters' and the readers' reach. Thus, the book ends when the biggest lie of all is going to be exposed; however, the author leaves the reader in suspension and does not reveal its substance. As the title suggests, we only arrive at the penultimate truth. Moreover, it is the space of the book itself which is a place where the actual apocalypse occurs, where the process if not of

⁹ K.R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Basic Books, New York 1963.

arriving at the truth but its approximation proves to be equally important, as the only “true” option.

The analysis conducted so far allows to form a conclusion that Dick’s narrative as a realization of apocalyptic and dystopian model significantly determines spatial organization of the represented world: the space of the novel is a complex construct divided both horizontally and vertically, with additional transitory spaces, the *intermundia*. Organising space as divided, as a set of oppositions on horizontal and vertical axes, reveals that spatial plane in the novel is in fact – to use Lotman’s concepts – a complex semiosphere¹⁰. Thus, the function of the vertical organization of space and its opposition “above – under”, “superior – inferior” is to represent the thematic plane of the novel, social and political relations which serve to create a dystopian vision of the world. The division of space reflects the organization of social hierarchy, an unequally divided world of reversed values, where “up” instead of being the synonym of “good” means “wicked and corrupt”, and “down” translates as “good and pure”. Also the horizontal division into Wes-Dem and Pac-Peop proves to be a fake opposition, as in the course of his investigations Adams discovers for himself and discloses to the reader as well that nothing is real or true, that the only reality available is indeed a constructed one. What is more, it can be inferred from the previous remarks that the oppositions built upon both axes in fact are not simple juxtapositions, but rather they enter into and form dialectical dynamics of the work. Likewise, not only on the level of characterization but also on the spatial plane dimensions and attributes used in the novel seem to display a similar dialectical potential, since the same characteristics describe the dynamics of relations between the three components: the synthetic is understood in opposition to the mimetic one and they both “coalesce” into the thematic component. Thus the dystopian discourse of Identity and Difference proves to be encoded and functions not only on the thematic plane but also in the very structure of a literary work.

Summary

Landscapes of the Future: Space and (Post-)Apocalypse in Philip K. Dick’s Novel *The Penultimate Truth*

The article is a study of a dystopian vision of the world after the Third World War presented in Philip K. Dick’s novel *The Penultimate Truth*. The author of the article analyses the complex construction of space with special reference to its function and structure divided horizontally and vertically, along with physical and mental *intermundia*. Additionally the

¹⁰ As defined by J. Lotman in *Structure of the Artistic Text*, University of Michigan, 1977.

article discusses implementation of the motif of post-apocalypse on various planes of the novel, especially in the construction of the plot and character.

Additionally, the article is based on the assumption that the category of space can be studied with the use of methodology proposed by James Phelan, which so far has been used in the analysis of literary characters. Therefore, the leading methodology applied in the article is rhetorical theory of a narrative.

Streszczenie

Krajobrazy przyszłości – przestrzeń i (post)apokalipsa w powieści Philipa K. Dicka *Prawda półostateczna*

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi studium prezentowanej w powieści Philipa K. Dicka *Prawda półostateczna* wizji dystopijnego świata po trzeciej wojnie światowej. Autorka poddała analizie złożoną konstrukcję przestrzeni, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem jej funkcji oraz struktury podzielonej horyzontalnie i wertykalnie, wraz z dającymi się wyodrębnić fizycznymi i mentalnymi między-światami. Dodatkowo omówione zostało zastosowanie motywu postapokalipsy na różnych płaszczyznach powieści, m.in. w konstrukcji postaci i akcji.

Artykuł opiera się również na założeniu, że kategoria przestrzeni może być badana przy pomocy metodologii zaproponowanej przez Jamesa Phelana, stosowanej wcześniej w analizie postaci literackich. Dlatego wiodącym narzędziem metodologicznym stosowanym w artykule jest retoryczna teoria narracji.