

Question of Authenticity in the Multiverse of *The Man in The High Castle*

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Abstract

In his novel *The Man in the High Castle*, Philip K Dick provides us a glimpse into an alternate universe where the Nazi Germany and Japan have occupied the United States of America. Americans are the colonised and Japan and Nazis are the colonisers of 20th century. This paper seeks to analyse how Dick has problematised the question of authenticity throughout this novel by building and breaking various definitions of authenticity that exist in a world split between the Nazis on one hand and Japan on the other. Two cultures collide and superimpose their own definitions of authenticity through objects and ideas on the country they have colonised. As power relations are in a constant state of flux in these multiple universes within the larger framework of the novel, the definition of authenticity keeps changing throughout. Not only objects, but human beings and their authentic selves collide as the world around them is shifting. This paper will bring forth how these various interactions work and, at once build and collapse reality in Dick's world of science fiction.

Keywords: Authenticity; Multiverse; Science Fiction.

When we begin to talk about authenticity, where does that road lead us? Searching for authenticity can be a way for us to subvert realities, question the status quo, and offer us an entry into multiverses. Dick deals with authenticity from multiple perspectives by putting it to use in a number of situations. In *The Man in the High Castle*, colonialism and the question of authenticity are bound together. The novel presents to us a world that could have very much become our reality had Nazi Germany won the war. The Axis has won the World War II, Japan has occupied the West Coast of America and The Nazis have occupied the East Coast; the Rocky Mountains being a troubled buffer zone in between. A major part of the novel occurs in the city of San Francisco with Japanese colonisers coexist-

ing with colonized Americans. We witness the influence of Taoism in the Japanese occupied America and there is a visible difference between the Japanese as colonisers and the Nazi as colonisers. The Japanese are represented as focusing more on human behaviour according to the changing cycle of nature whereas the Nazi's are bent on monopolising the world in totality through their fixed ideologies. The cultural hybridity that this world represents manifests itself through the demand of American 'authentic' artefacts supplied by an American dealer to the Japanese elite. We witness how two primary concerns of Dick, "What constitutes the authentic human being" and "What is reality" (Dick, *How to Build* 260) are being addressed in the novel through artefacts and seemingly mundane objects.

In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Adorno makes a very strong statement about how, for the authentic to exist, there needs be the other, i.e. the inauthentic. For example, while classifying anything as authentic, say a concrete object such as food, one is paradoxically making it abstract as well concretely based on which one can categorise whether that food is authentic or fake. "Authenticity" of artefacts or objects at any given point of time is established by those in power. Their authority is imposed through definitions of what is real and what isn't. It is a process whereby "spurious realities" (Dick, *How To Build* 261) are created by people in positions of power. Any kind of fetishisation of what is authentic can make so called authentic cultures stagnant, trapping them in a time of long forgotten past and thereby side-lining their plurality of the present. But in Dick's world, opposing ideas on what constitutes the authentic can actually build opposing universes with realities capable of surviving on their own; realities which depict that the Japanese and the Americans have gained power at the same time. Interestingly, the hyperspaces are accessible through concrete objects like a piece of jewellery or a book. These objects are the results of the craftsmanship of artists of their individual standing and their art "unsmoothed by any passage over or across it" lends their creation a value of authenticity.

The work in question in this paper can be classified under the sub-genre of alternative history under science fiction. The world of science fiction is populated with alternate realities that have successfully provided us with worlds other than our own to think about and sometimes obsess over them. Science fiction is typically understood to be dealing with fiction filled with futuristic elements such as the space, time machines, sinkholes, automatons, aliens and other imagined mechanical and scientific possibilities. What is interesting here is the fact of how what science fiction writers have written in the past century has become a part of our reality in this

world. Playing with reality and questioning the status quo through presenting us with multiple scenarios makes us think “What if”?

In the works of Philip K Dick, the psychological underpinnings of the characters introduce us to the external world. The internal world of his characters reveals the details of the outer world. While his contemporaries rely on the elaborate description of the outer world in question, Dick chooses to reveal information regarding the setting of his world by using his characters as mouthpieces. Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Dick gave us a glimpse into what a hyperactive mind is capable of doing through his highly convoluted science fiction works. At the same time, we must not forget that Dick himself is looking at this alternate timeline through a coloniser’s gaze. But he is subverting the situation by presenting the colonisers, i.e. the Americans as the ones who are colonised in the alternate world. By shedding light on the “What If” situation, he is clearly shaking our apparently stable concept of reality. As Dick’s works are highly complicated and continuously break down the truths that they initially present and shatter realities continually, it can be claimed that “nothing is authentic” (Evans 367). As Dick focuses more on the internal voyage of his characters, authenticity becomes a medium through which they constantly rebel against those holding powerful positions. The relativity of reality means that it can be manipulated and at the same time, totalising notions of authentic realities must be questioned. Individuals need to find and define authenticities of their own. This is evidence of Gnosticism in Dick’s works. He focuses on how individuals navigate and gain spiritual knowledge of their own. He mistrusts any kind of pseudo-realities fed into our minds externally by those sitting in positions of power.

In *The Man In The High Castle*, the reality is destabilised as in Dick’s other works, but here he utilises the concept of authenticity to show how value shifts from one object to the other and how power relations are constantly built and collapsed. Not only artefacts, but language, social hierarchies, consumer products, aspects of causality and the individual humans are analysed from the point of view of authenticity. Dick reckons that the moral standing plays a crucial role in addressing the question of authenticity. The understanding of what is authentic is determined by the moral values of the society.

In any fictional world, the author is constantly constructing an ethnography of its own. All kinds of fictional worlds have to have a basic ethnographic structure, but not all succeed in doing it well. According to Reider, many of these works end up applying the “colonial gaze”, whether inten-

tionally or unintentionally. These fictional societies then are built upon the already established premises of where the power and knowledge would be distributed i.e. placing authority in the subject and depriving the object of authority. This power-play can be traced in Tolkien, Lovecraft and other authors. Dick is different because his gaze does not work on biases. Rather, he focuses on the process of the construction of ethnographies. He isn't laying out a simple compartmentalised society. He is constantly toying with the process of collection, distribution, classification and scrutinising the elements of culture. As Evans correctly postulates: "His postmodern ethnography examines the ways in which ethnography, and authenticity, are constructed" (368). Particularly, he focuses on the complicated interaction happening between individual artists in a conquered society, collectors who belong to the upper class society, and the brokers who are the mediators. These three categories are responsible for moulding the multiple authenticities that exist throughout the world of *The Man in The High Castle*.

East coast is ruled by the Japanese and most of the Japanese residents of California belong to the bureaucratic elite class. There is no sense of any active resistance from the Americans here. As is the case in most of the colonised places all over the world, the Americans both mimic and display passive antagonism towards the Japanese presence in a country which used to be entirely their own at one point. The Japanese followed a very methodical and disciplined approach towards life where seemingly trivial courtesies were points of getting offended if not followed properly (for example, bowing down in respect). Americans do not understand and visibly grapple with these subtleties. Cultural hybridity is portrayed through exchanges that happen between both these races. Americans, in the corporate space, tanned their skin and darkened their hair in a bid to assimilate themselves and gain acceptance from the Japanese. We also see that *I Ching*, the Book of Divinity is regularly consulted both by Americans and Japanese and there is a heavy reliance on the book as it constantly directs the causality and guides the inner musings of the characters. The Japanese people settled in America pick up elements from American culture like adopting American names (Paul and Betty Kasoura). There is a constant exchange of cultural characteristics and what is adopted depends upon what is authenticated.

According to Evans, there are multiple levels of authenticity juxtaposed against each other throughout the novel. The first kind of authenticity is based on the historicity of the objects. The past is attached to it, and the object's authenticity can only be verified by certain experts from that field.

A competitive market exists in San Francisco for “authentic Americana”. Customers were well-to-do Japanese businessmen and bureaucrats and the sellers were American dealers. All of these objects were from the pre-war era as, once colonized, America stopped having any cultural identity according to the Japanese. This particular authentication was facilitated by Japanese colonisers as to what would quantify as authentic American artefact. Once the process of hybridisation occurred, America ceases to exist as a separate identity. That is how ethnographies are rewritten by colonisers. And this new standard of ethnography is also followed by the Americans themselves as they are not aware of what existed before and hence end up mimicking what is projected by the Japanese.

Robert Childan represents the category of American dealers thriving on the demand for American artefacts, living their life trying to please their colonisers. He owns a shop called “American Artistic Handicrafts” and he deals with “American traditional ethnic art objects” (Dick, High Castle 6) which included Civil War mementos and objects from pop culture from the pre-war era. His customer count relies upon how well he contextualises what he is trying to sell by recalling very accurately how those objects were put to use in the past (for example, American children playing with “Horrors of Wars” cards in 1940s). Although Childan is directly involved in taking forward the market of the “imposed ethnography”, he is still contributing to it by carving that ethnography. He moulds the narratives so that his clientele would be pleased by the aesthetic appeal of the object he is trying to sell. Here, the authentic value is determined on how well Childan can prove its’ ethnographic identity.

When Childan visits the Kasouras, he takes scrimshaw along with him as a gift that would complement their home’s sense of *wabi* (equilibrium and simplicity). He automatically assumed that authenticity of American objects was from the Anglo-American time period. But then Paul and Betty express their opinion that Folk jazz was the authentic form of American music. Childan was vehemently against the race of African Americans and his ideology aligned with that of the Nazis where their entire race had been wiped out by them. Also the fact that he has accepted what the Nazis thought about African Americans was a result of his passive resentment towards the hegemonic presence of Japan in his life. That perturbs Childan as he realises his helplessness as the colonised individual to be able to decide what classified as authentic. Amusingly, Dick has subverted the expectation of his readers by portraying the colonisers as the ones who are liberal, more accepting, and forgiving. The Americans aren’t always the sensible ones; the rigid dichotomy between the oppressors and

the oppressed has been overturned. Here we see that Paul and Betty are morally more informed than Childan whose mind is running in one direction only when it comes to establishing authenticity.

Another major incident that occurs in Childan's life is the revelation that all his Civil War Pistols werewell-made forgeries. The authenticity on which he ran his business comes crashing down on him in a single day. This line of investigation further reveals to him that the supplier, Wyndam-Matson Corporation is part of an entire ring that is involved in the mass-production of the fakes of authentic Colt .44 pistols. The founder of this corporation profits from the network of colonial authentication by debasing the established authentic product itself. Childan was not aware of the fakes because they were crafted in such a way that even experts might fail in verifying their authenticity. He comes to the realisation only when Frank Frink, a former employee of the corporation, under the disguise of a servant of a Japanese government official exposes the fake pistols. In actuality, Frank and his colleague needed to make space for themselves; a market for American jewellery of their own designs and hence needed to topple the current hegemonic idea of pre-war artefacts as authentic. And he successfully does so because later on, Childan begins selling their jewellery, branding it as contemporary American art.

We are witnessing another kind of authenticity here, different from the one which relies on historicity. This kind of authenticity relies on innovative craftsmanship which is capable of upturning the status quo. Ed McCarthy and Frank Frink quit their jobs at the Wyndam-Matson corporation and want to kick start a business of their own: handmade jewellery with original designs. Just the idea of producing something original is against the hegemonic idea of authenticity where only the pre-war mementos and objects were in demand and their mass reproductions also had a market space. By pitching in the idea of original contemporary designs, Frank and Ed were challenging colonial authority, the ruling aesthetics and creating a counter trend all at the same time. While the corporation was exploiting the established authenticated ideas by the colonised, Ed and Frank were overthrowing the system from within by rejecting it outrightly. They were engaged in the process of creating an authenticity that was postcolonial in nature.

Childan also plays along when he realises that his antiques were fake and his business under threat, he readily sells these designs by promoting them as the work of "American proud artists" (Dick, High Castle 183). The authenticity of these products is branded as unquestionable whereas the

market of Americana artefacts was questionable. Childan, racist in nature and a purist does not realise that the maker of this kind of jewellery was in fact a Jew in hiding, Frank Frink who has been branded as inauthentic by the Nazi ideology in the same veins as the African Americans.

The jewellery made by Frank carried abstract designs, an aspect not accepted by those in power. Recalling the conversation between Baynes, a double agent from Germany and Lotze, one can get two kinds of absolutely opposing beliefs. Whereas Baynes was all in support of cubism and abstractionists, Lotze spewed Nazi ideology in defence by saying that pictures should mean something rather than being vague and idealistic in nature. All the art that existed before the war was dismissed as being decadent. So Frank's creations were also helping the revival of a kind of pre-war modernism. As his work is based on life, its expression was a protest against the artefacts whose artists were not alive anymore.

When Childan tries selling this jewellery to his Japanese customers, they laugh at it. But then, due to his liberal and heterogeneous approach towards life and acceptance of Jazz as true American folk music, Paul Kasoura is later on gripped and enthralled by the pendant. He can identify a sense of *wu*, of wholeness and completeness that is almost holy. This quality is discoverable usually in "such trash as an old stick, or a rusty beer can by the side of the road." He doesn't classify it as art. Calling it art means setting up boundaries, encapsulating it under limitations because art is again bound to the concept of authenticity, which in turn is established by those in power. The pendant has its own idiosyncratic authenticity expressed by its transcendental nature. It gains its own identity in contrast to the historicity. The pendant is capable of pointing towards "an entire new world".

Two kinds of authenticity are juxtaposed here. One is a historically verifiable authenticity where the object belongs to a very particular position temporally and spatially. It is rare, not easily accessible; specificity is particular with very definitive characteristics (Colt .44, Mickey Mouse watch). This authenticity needs the stamp of an expert. The incident that exposes the problem of such authenticity is when Wyndam-Matson is asking his girlfriend to choose between two identical lighters and only one of them was carried by Roosevelt when he was killed. Naked eye is not capable of determining the fake from the real. There is a requirement of "A paper of authenticity. So it's all a fake, a mass delusion. This paper proves the worth, not the object itself" (Dick, High Castle 63-64). Cultural capital reinforces authority of people in power who determine the historicity of

objects and thereby assign authenticity and place a capital on the objects as well.

Another fault in these historically authentic products is laid bare when Tagomi uses an apparently hundred year old pistol, brought from Childan to shoot assassins sent by Nazis to kill Baynes. There is a strong possibility that the pistol was a fake and wouldn't have worked effectively had it actually been a hundred years old. But the fact that it was a fake did not affect the results which were very real. Authenticity lies "in the mind, not in the gun" (Matson, 64). Frank's pendant embodies the kind of authenticity which is manifested through skilful craftsmanship. The historicity is not under scrutiny; who has made it and what went into its making take centre stage here. The historical hierarchy is rejected here as Frank's pendant is made from junk. Frank has, without any doubt created space for post-colonial identity through his craftsmanship and paved the way for the existence of a new identity and culture, counter-hegemonic in character.

We also get to witness how authenticating any product can lead to its dilution almost immediately. When Kasoura talks about the pendant to his colleague, he is immediately offered to mass produce that pendant and mint money by claiming it to be good luck charm to poor people unaware of the exploitative nature of capitalism. Capitalism feeds on authenticity that is the danger posed by any object that gains recognition. Walter Benjamin has talked at length in his essay *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* on how authenticity is lost with mass reproductions. On one hand the seemingly unreachable object is now available and can be viewed by everyone, but is viewing the fake the same as the real? The essence is lost and people are happy with the mass delusions that are being fed to them. Childan, who is comfortable with selling fake antiques now suddenly becomes the preserver of authenticity in its true sense when he reacts against the idea of mass producing the pendant. He defends the local product for its value and doesn't want to commercialise it. Childan is protecting the pendant because of its *wu* and also has resentment towards their culture. He is representative of the two minds of the colonized people.

The transcendental quality of the pendant is put to application to prove the power of innovative authenticity when Tagomi travels to another universe (where the Allies have won the war) while holding some of Frank's handcrafted jewellery. By entering an alternate universe and experiencing that reality as concretely as the one he currently inhabited, his identity is now fractured. When he is back, he starts questioning the reality around

him. As Dick himself says, “as soon as you begin to ask what is real, you right away begin to talk nonsense” (Dick, *How To Build* 15). As in Dick’s world and in our own, we are aware of the existence of multiple narratives: what is normative and what is emergent, what is residual and what is dominant. But Dick constructs these alternative realities in physicality. Tagomi, the coloniser ends up in a world dominated by the colonised. Reversal of expectations is a tool to trigger the collapse of one’s identity and seemingly concrete realities as well. Dick shatters Tagomi’s groundedness in his own reality by transporting him to an alternate reality. It is important to become aware of the multiplicity of realities to evade hegemony, to question authenticity, to challenge stagnancy and it all begins at an individual level. Tagomi is now thrown into a world which is “both morally and ontologically ambiguous” (Evans 374).

The relationship between authenticity of artefacts and objects and the authenticity of human beings is also explored by Dick. Childan and his visit to the Kasouras’ reveal to us how he uses the concept of human authenticity in his mind. When he finds out that the couple is reading the novel, *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*, a banned book which talks about a world where the Allies have overthrown the Axis powers, Childan becomes dismissive about the Japanese as a race. He cannot think of a world where the Jews, Chinese, and Slavs would have survived. This thought ridicules him. He judges the Kasouras because they don’t have any authentic identity:

Witness them drinking from English bone Cina cups, eating with U.S. silver listening to Negro style of music. It’s all on the surface. [...] Think how it would have been had we won! [...] These people are *not exactly human*. They don’t dress but they’re like monkeys dolled up in the circus. They’re clever and they can learn, *but that is all*. (Dick, *High Castle*, 112,114)

This shows that even Childan is operating the way he is because of inherent hierarchies. He wants the Americans to have power so his promotion of contemporary American products as authentic.

His dismissal of an entire race as inauthentic echoes the rigid Nazi ideology. For Nazis, authenticity is a question of entire races. Their global agenda was to wipe out every other race but that of pure Aryans. Entirely prescriptive, dubious medical textbooks were devised to verify the bloodline. As Evans rightly puts it, “The concept of Nazi folkness goes beyond just defining authentic Germanness: it defines authentic humanness” (376). The capability of being authentic is characteristically determined

and Childan believes that the Japanese are an incapable race.

Nazi's ideology is fixed. For them, authenticity is a means of exercising total control. They "want to be the agents, not the victims, of history. [...] That is their basic madness". (Dick, *High Castle* 152) Dick is against totalising notions of reality and therefore bracketed definitions of authenticity where the process of invisibilisation is rampant. A singular kind of art form, race, ethnicity, religion is upheld as being superior to others. That leads us to an inconclusive statement as to whether anything can actually be called authentic? One can say that what Dick is maybe trying to reach at is a fluid definition of authenticity. For him, it lies in the transcendental attribute of very minute, seemingly trivial objects. He is speaking against abstraction and complete definitions. The origin of an object or a person takes a backseat and a fake Civil war pistol can also gain authenticity if it is useful in fighting off evil. A person is authentic depending on the moral high ground he or she is standing.

The final string in a search for reality and authenticity is displayed by Juliana Frink in her quest to find Abendsen, author of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. When she finally meets the author and asks if the events in the book are real, our notion of historicity is played with again when he says it was the *I Ching* that actually decided the narrative of the novel. The tangible novel in her hands now suddenly transcends the boundaries of authorship and narrative structure as *I Ching* is based on the philosophy of divinity and flow of energies in our lives. There is no inevitability in its predictions and each individual using it draws their own inferences from it. Through *I Ching*, Dick is challenging the idea of all kinds of master narrative.

Question of authenticity has been used as a tool of resistance by Dick: "The authentic human being is one of us who instinctively knows what he should not do." (Dick *How To Build* 278). Dick is breaking down the rigidity of categorisations and classifications. When his characters realise the existence of other realities, starkly different than their own, they don't disappear. We see them struggle and they undergo a transformation where constant breakdown of the imposed master narrative results in an acceptance of multiverses. He makes the readers think about the highly layered existence of authenticity and how power operates like a shadow behind it. After facing the breakdown of the singular nature of culture, we need to engage in forming our own definitions of authenticity which will challenge the status quo and keep the fluidity intact.

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