

**Coloniser, Colonised, and their Absence:
An Interpretation of Philip K. Dick's "Colony" on the Basis of
Homi Bhabha's Concept of Mimicry**

'Ultimately,
the empathic gift blurred the boundaries
between hunter and victim,
between the successful and the defeated.'

Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Ever since his death in 1982, science fiction author Philip K. Dick has been subject to various interpretations and reinterpretations, making him one of the most discussed authors of a genre used to be overlooked by literary criticism. Already in the 1970s, when Dick was still alive, essays started to appear on his writing, predominantly by Marxist authors. It was not until the mid-1990s, early 2000s that postcolonial theorists attempted to examine his works based on postcolonial ideas, like those of Homi Bhabha or Edward Said. From the fact that many science fiction works focus on space exploration and the colonisation of other planets, it was inevitable that sooner or later postcolonial theory will find its way to science fiction, and to Philip K. Dick, one way or another. With its emergence in the 1980s, postcolonialism could not have been the first theoretical movement to deal with Dick, even though most of his early works, which period arguably ends with the Hugo-awarded *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), are highly open to postcolonial interpretations. I am going to interpret one of these early works, the short story "Colony," written somewhere around 1952. I am going to base my interpretation on the idea of mimicry, introduced by Homi Bhabha, and I am going to show how it can find a completely new meaning in the writing of Philip K. Dick.

The context of the short story resembles that of many other space-faring stories the genre is commonly known for: a group of people travel to an uninhabited planet, which they name Planet Blue, and as far as they know, there is no lifeform on the planet whatsoever. However, it soon turns out that something does inhabit the planet: an unidentifiable, carnivorous lifeform that takes up the form of objects the colonisers use, be it a microscope, a

rug or a pair of gloves. When Major Lawrence Hall is attacked by his own microscope, or at least, *something* that looks like his microscope, he immediately rushes to the leader of the station, Commander Stella Morrison, who, of course, does not believe the story about the microscope of which two eyepieces ‘had twisted suddenly around his windpipe and were trying to strangle him’ (Dick 348). It is not until a red-and-white scatter rug attacks Captain Taylor that the station realises that there is danger indeed. They are too late, however, since Lieutenant Dodds has already died, due to being forced by a pair of gloves to shoot himself in the head. The crew is being decimated quickly, and the survivors eventually decide to call for help. When help arrives, they are to greet the rescue ship completely naked, in order not to take any of the lifeforms back to Earth with them. They enter the spaceship, in spite of the apparent danger, which is emphasized by ‘a peculiar tremor in the Commander’s voice’ (Dick 362). She feels that there is something wrong, but they enter anyway, only to walk into the belly of one of these lifeforms.

The story on its own is unlike the typical SF story one would expect: the enemy is not external but internal, where these carnivorous lifeforms take up the form of the colonists’ items through literal mimicry. According to Homi Bhabha, mimicry is the kind of resemblance between coloniser and colonised that invokes mockery in a way that the colonised takes the coloniser’s rules and customs as his or her own and uses them for his or her own benefits (Bhabha 86). According to Wisam Kh. Abdul Jabbar, it is not only mockery however, but also ‘a source of menace and violence that invokes resistance’ (Jabbar 5). In his interpretation, Bhabha’s concept of mimicry derives from the fact that someone, or in our case, something, that is being colonised has a natural resistance towards the colonisers that would eventually result in violence. As such, mimicry is a defensive mechanism used to adopt to the new circumstances the colonisers bring, forcing the natural inhabitants of the colony into the status of colonized. Not only is it a mechanism of adaptation though, but also a

weapon to kill and devour the colonisers. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the killing of colonisers per se is not inherently part of the idea of mimicry. It merely suggests that the colonised people, or beings in this case, mean a threat to the colonisers because they might one day rise up and send them away, liberating themselves in the process. This coincides with the definition in *Post-colonial Studies: the Key Concepts*, where mimicry is defined as an ‘inappropriateness,’ and where it is argued that

this ‘inappropriateness’ disturbs the normality of the dominant discourse itself.

The threat inherent in mimicry, then, comes not from an overt resistance but from the way in which it continually suggests an identity not quite like the colonizer (Ashcroft 126).

It is quintessential to note that the word ‘threat’ is used only to refer to the fact that mimicry is dangerous only because it jeopardizes the stability of the colony but not because of the danger of a revolution against the oppressors. Rebellion cannot be discussed then at this point, since mimicry in this sense is a way of living side by side with the colonisers, albeit reluctantly. Unsurprisingly, we cannot talk of a threat of violence that would involve the killing of colonisers either in Ashcroft or in Bhabha. What is discussed is but a repetition of what has already been said: that mimicry is a form of adaptation to the new circumstances via taking up the customs of the colonisers and attempting to live side by side, thus becoming ‘almost the same, but not quite’ (Bhabha 86). From this perspective, these lifeforms should adapt to colonisation via blending in and then live together with the humans. However, this happens only partially. Indeed, they do blend in via taking up the forms of physical objects, but no sooner does one of the colonisers touch any of these objects than they come to life and attempt to murder the person. Thus, mimicry is not only a tool to adapt anymore but also a weapon, a tool of violence, and a lethal one on top of that.

The important question however is not whether mimicry is a weapon or not, but what it stands for, what it means. The question is who the actual coloniser is in this case, or whether we can talk of colonisation in the first place. It can be argued on the one hand that the humans are the colonisers of course, ‘ready to come in and cut down the trees, tear up the flowers, spit in the lakes, burn up the grass’ (Dick 348), thus becoming sole rulers of a newly established colony. In this respect, the carnivores are the natives who eventually revolt against the invaders in order to get their independence back, and through the process of decolonization, they gain total freedom eventually, as well as they appease their hunger in the process. However, on the other hand, it can also be argued that the arrival of the humans is not colonisation per se, since they are unaware of the presence of the carnivores, or any living being for that matter. Edward Said claims, if we want to simplify his theories to the bone, that colonisation requires two parties: the coloniser and the colonized. He argues that ‘to be one of the colonized is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times’ (Said 207). From this perspective, colonisers must not only come and take the land, but also be aware of the presence of the natives, i.e. the colonised, in order to become colonisers, plus they have to handle them as mere objects, otherwise they are mere tenants or settlers of an uninhabited place. As such, no colonisation occurs in the strict sense. It can of course be argued that this is an artistic representation of colonialist arrogance, in which case, the people from Earth come to the planet and take it as if nobody had lived there before, where the colonised beings are but mere objects, which is in no small part an argument that is highly emphasized by Said. However, the reason why this interpretation might be false is that the carnivores are not shown on any of the sensors the spacers use, nor can they be seen, they do not even have their own body as far as we know, hence they are not invaded.

At this point, the term of mimicry gains a new meaning once again, and something wholly different, but at the same time familiar, which is one of those binary oppositions postcolonialism is founded upon. We do not discuss coloniser people and colonized beings at this point anymore, hence the concept of ‘inappropriateness,’ which ‘disturbs the normality of the dominant discourse’ (Ashcroft 126), is highlighted, where normality is disturbed by the fact that the whole claiming of the land turns into a massacre. Strictly speaking, the dominant discourse in this case is based on the binary opposition of familiar/strange, in spite of the fact that ‘the complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other’ (Bhabha 86) is missing, in which case there is no Other present. That is, there is no coloniser, because there is no First (native) either, since nobody, or nothing, is being colonized in the strict sense, because the colonized subjects are not present, they merely lurk in the shadows, waiting to strike down on the defenceless humans. Jabbar argues that mimicry ‘becomes mockery when the colonizers’ deceptive and so-called noble mission to appropriate the colonized subjects exposes colonial pretensions’ (6). In his argument, colonial pretensions mean a desire to claim the uninhabited land, but his definition fails to emphasise the fact that Planet Blue is only seemingly uninhabited. We can safely argue that the short story points much further than this: when a carnivore at the end of the story mimics a spaceship and devours the settlers when they enter it, mimicry becomes much more than mockery. It is not only a tool to send the colonisers away, because if it were, then the carnivores would let them board the real spaceship and go home. In this scenario, mimicry has, in a way, a twisted meaning, because it not only serves the ‘inappropriateness’ of sending the colonisers home, but also revenge. This is the new meaning I have previously touched upon. That is to say, mimicry in this case stands for revenge, a tool to kill so to speak. We can speak of adaptation only to the point of being ‘almost the same, but not quite’ (Bhabha 86), in which case, the spaceship is ‘almost the same’ spaceship the rescue team sends, but ‘not quite.’ More

precisely, it is not the same at all in any way, since when the colonisers, who are not colonisers per se, walk up the ramp, they walk into the belly of the beast. And this phenomenon applies to any object that thins the numbers of the humans: Major Hall's microscope, Captain Taylor's red-and-white scatter rug, or Lieutenant Dodds's gloves. And naturally, the whole concept of mimicry is almost the same as Bhabha introduced it, but not quite, since Bhabha has not connected the concept of mimicry with the act of revenge.

In conclusion, it can safely be claimed that this analysis of the short story is abounding with binary oppositions. Firstly, there is of course evident opposition between the coloniser and the colonised, the humans and the carnivores respectively. Secondly, there is opposition between literal mimicry and the Bhabhaian concept of mimicry, where the former speaks of carnivores that take up the forms of objects, and the latter speaks of the 'metonymy of presence,' where the colonisers live together with the colonised beings, and where the latter eventually adopts to the former. But as we have seen, the presence of those colonised is something that cannot be called a presence, since they only show themselves when they come to feast upon the humans. Lastly, the greatest opposition derives from the fact that the title "Colony" is a misleading one, since we cannot talk of coloniser and colonised if we argue that in order to colonise a group of people, or creatures in this case, colonisers must be aware of the presence of them. From this perspective, no colony is being established, because there is no evidence of natural inhabitants, the 'colonisers' are unable to detect any lifeforms, hence they are not colonising but merely claiming the land for themselves. Finally, a binary opposition occurs between the original concept of Bhabha and the concept of revenge presented in the short story, in which it is clear that the whole idea itself is, to some extent, a misleading one if we try to find a deeper meaning to it through the concepts that has been identified in this paper. Overall, the title, the story, and the whole concept of colonisation is

misleading, but at the same time, intriguing from a postcolonial perspective, which is itself based on binary oppositions.

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