

A Basic Analysis of the Deconstruction of Space and the Metamorphosis of Character Ideology in Kafka's Novels

Fusun Zhang^{1, a}, Zhanjun Fan^{2, b*}

¹Department of Architecture, Nantong University, Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China

²Department of Architecture, Nantong University, Nantong, Jiangsu Province, China

^a 5564007@qq.com

^{b*} 24098340@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Austrian novelist Franz Kafka, as a representative writer of European novels in the twentieth century, has been titled by many critics as a nihilist, a realist writer, and the founder of the absurd for the absurd background often constructed in his works and his non-mainstream thoughts. The deconstruction of space in his novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, makes the story transcend the reality, under which the conventional concepts in the real world are subverted so that readers can understand the spiritual world of the characters more thoroughly. Therefore, the analysis of the deconstruction space in novels and its effects on the metamorphosis of character ideology will unveil to us the survival dilemma and ideological alienation of those modern people who are gradually marginalized. The way and meaning of life will then be understood, which will enlighten people on how to live in this absurd society.

Keywords: *Deconstruction of space; Ideology; Marginalization; Ego; Absurd*

1. INTRODUCTION

The characters in Kafka's works are often forced to compromise by the environment, which is undoubtedly the deformation of consciousness under the change of space. There are many studies on the relationship between environment and character consciousness in Kafka's novels, but few mention deconstruction space. Therefore, we study the deconstruction space constructed by Kafka and its influence on the characters' lives, in order to find out the principle behind the metamorphosis of characters' consciousness in absurd life and use it to alleviate the survival dilemma of modern people.

The analysis of the existence of individual ideology in space has always been one of the ultimate propositions that human beings strive to solve. Is human self-consciousness attached to the space in which it exists, or can it detach from the space to be an independent individual? Does the narrowing or widening of space only exert a polarizing effect on human ideology? In this regard, opinions vary within the art and cultural circle. Given that human ideology is an insubstantial concept, we, excluding the physical architectural space and

architecture-like space, finally focused on the immaterial space as the research object. Conceptually, immaterial space is basically divided into social space, sensory space, and imaginary space. While in a broader sense, the essence of space can never give us a concrete output at the visual level. It is also for this reason that the composition of space shares no concept in our ideology, leading to the cases that we fail to accurately observe the effect of space on ideology in reality. However, it can be seen from the treatment of time and space narrative structures as well as the arrangement of characters' situations in modern European novels that whenever characters sense the spatial changes, they tend to make a series of ideological feedbacks. At the beginning of the last century when space, social class, and self-consciousness dominated Western works, the narrative structures of traditional literature were also transformed under the impetus of European writers, which is the rejection from the early modernist literature to the realist space paradigm. Books like *Remembrance for Things Past* and *Ulysses* are known for the flow of consciousness that breaks the spatial framework, while *The Trial* and *The Castle* by Austrian novelist Franz Kafka both dissolve the protagonists' identities through the

deconstruction and subversion of the normal time and space, thus marginalizing and depriving the ideology. The narrative content of these two novels is basically composed of memories, imagination, and the inner thoughts of the characters. With secondary events of different periods interspersed within the main events, the time and space present to be fragmented, and the tortuous maze-like narrative feature of which, in turn, has added to the mysticism. Such a unique narrative feature makes him stand out among other peer writers. And the intention of Kafka's literature to deconstruct space has become more obvious - to create a closed, repressed, and absurd "Kafka-like situation", thereby naturally obtaining the ideological transformation of the characters in it. This kind of ideological metamorphosis caused by the deconstruction of space with people involved in the confusing predicament enlightened our new thinking. The deep despair suffered by the novel protagonists is a cryptic metonymy of the way how people of the early 20th century lived in the social space. Repressed space hinders spiritual ascension, ego erasure denies existence, and Kafka's characters will embrace nihilism in the post-era of disillusionment with personal heroism.

2. THE DECONSTRUCTION OF SPACE IN THE TRIAL AND THE CASTLE

Before analyzing the deconstruction of space-time in Kafka's novels, the basic structure of space-time should be first understood. Assuming that there are four poles before, two are for space and two for time, and the lines starting from them are intersectable. Regularly connected, the curves between these four points then form an invisible geometry, which is space-time. However, time-space, as a continuum, can be perceived by our consciousness. The perception of the space axis is reflected in the depth of silence, while the perception of the time axis is still present. Although the definitions of space-time vary in different fields, the interdependence of space-time, in a philosophical sense, refers to the expression of the evolutionary order of things. At the same time, it also defines the length of human life and the position of existence - people can freely choose where to live in one-way linear time, for which their existence can be truly experienced. However, the deconstruction of time-space in the two novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, subverts its original meaning. With the commonly recognized common sense, the so-called evolution of time-space, deprived by Kafka, characters have to experience conflict and struggle within the reconstructed absurd and irrational environment, resulting in ecological metamorphosis. It was once written by Kafka that "Literally, my fate is so simple that nothing but the description of the dreamlike inner lives matters, causing them to wither in a terrible way." The space created by Kafka was no longer whole, continuous, and boundless but visualized with space poles. While variable in the interior, its exterior boasts the property of constant

closure. People inside the space can not only experience matter but also directly communicate with the space. In this way, the characters' prayers in the novels can always be echoed, which also clarifies the reason for the spiral movement of self-consciousness "from the inside out." Kafka specified the concept of "enclosure" in his novels as "Narcissism, self-reflected images, mirror-reflections, refractions of reality, retreat into holes and rooms—all of these suggest enclosure." In this eternal "enclosure", all real objects turn into unnecessary pendants, silent suffocation becomes the only and eternal object of perception, and the unit scale of time and space also changes with the metamorphosis of the protagonist's consciousness.^[1] "There is no having, only a being, a state of being which craves the last breath, craves suffocation." To enable readers to adapt to this change, the silent ambient narration is always interspersed into the stories. For example, at the beginning of *The Castle*, the protagonist K is placed on the wooden bridge to the village on a snowy night. "Shrouded in the mist and the night, the hill where the castle is located cannot be seen without the slightest light." In the following narration, K never explained where he came from or when he arrived in the village. We only know that he was invited as a land surveyor. It seems that K was thrown into this strange space absurdly and casually by an invisible hand. In the unknown moment when K faced strange assistants, indifferent villagers, and castle officials, his mission began. The castle, as a belief, then became K's life pursuit. More than had he tried to find the way from the village to the castle, but only failed inexplicably. One failure in the novel is described like this, "K has always expected that the road would lead him to the castle. It is only with this hope held that he keeps going on; his tiredness, apparently, causes him to hesitate. But he refuses to leave this road. And the village, with no end, also surprises him. There are always small houses, frozen glass windows, white snow, and nobody else." Obviously, the distance between the castle and the village is not too far, because whenever K stops to look at it, it always stands on that hillside. Although the straight line seems to be not too long, K fails to reach the end of the road. The road with this kind of superficial openness but alienation is exactly the labyrinth set up by Kafka, because he deconstructed the space between the village and the castle, irregularly dividing the whole and continuous original space into several small spaces.^[2] These small spaces have different volumes, exist on different levels, and are interspersed with "nothingness" (an unknown, empty, and confusing substance). In this way, the difference between K's sensory space and reality generates, giving K full hope while trapping him in the labyrinthine corridors. Even if K meets the so-called clue characters such as the messenger and the village chief, he can only wander around meaninglessly in the exhaustion of enthusiasm and energy, thus, K is trapped. Therefore, this novel witnesses K's fewer attempts to enter the castle but the more repeated mentality and dialogue. And the castle, as

the target, is forever suspended in a static narrative meaning, and the protagonist, in an intuitive sense, is always stuck in Bergson's extended time. Such a psychological stagnation is precisely due to the exclusion of individual ideology from external space.

Different from the way of perplexing the external space in *The Castle*, Kafka's deconstruction of space in *The Trial* is mainly reflected in the psychological level: the oppression of Joseph K's heart stands for ubiquitous court and unreasonable law enforcement officers, while the seemingly enthusiastic but indifferent social masses are constantly pulling and tearing his cognition of common sense. Likewise, Kafka, contrary to traditional writing techniques, does not confront the conflict between characters, but constantly imbues K with the thoughts that he is sinful by setting up the figurative incarnation of these laws. These thoughts confine K's soul like chains, and the trial of the law represents the enclosure of the protagonist. Joseph K's psychological activities in the face of different people are repeatedly described in this novel. He, revolting against justice, has been striving to prove his innocence through complaints, spurning the smoky court and absurd legal system, running around to declare his innocence in society, and thinking that he deserves a fair trial. It is believed by him that he could win the public's approval with his honest defense. However, K never thought that the reason for the final result was his disconnection of the psychological cognition from society. The moment when everyone thinks you are guilty, you can no longer escape the judgment of society. It is the estrangement between K and the real world that has led to such a tragedy: when both parties believe that the other party is absurd, naïve, and hopeless, society naturally chooses to stand against K.^[3]

3. THE "DASEIN" DISSOLVED IN IDENTITY DETERMINATION

"To be absorbed in thought; to meditate in silence; to ponder." "Identity" is a necessary way for human beings to find belonging and determine existence in life. The opening chapter of *The Trial* mentions that "a cage is looking for a bird", which means that the body is always on the journey to find the soul. Similarly, a space also necessitates ideology to complete itself. Just like Gaston Bachelard's philosophical thought of phenomenology, whether in *The Poetics of Space* or *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, the unity of object and poetry is emphasized. In other words, the daily phenomena are accompanied by the "processing" of their own ideology. Therefore, only after people calmly think and clarify their soul can the existence of ideology be essentially confirmed.

Logic serves as the basis of action, while the absurd complements the logic. It is the absurd elements combined with unique logic that distinguish Kafka's novels. The point of view reverts to "The Castle", where the protagonist K only acquires an identity that gives

legitimacy to his actions. Therefore, he needs to enter the castle, let the authorities confirm his identity as a land surveyor, and endow his land-surveying work with life meaning. But what K doesn't realize is that he remains a stranger to the village, a stranger with no right to enter the castle. Consequently, there seems to be an invisible barrier between K and the social system of the village, and K is only a dispensable outsider in the eyes of others: "A stranger, a superfluous person, a person who gets in the way, a man who occupies the room of the maid, an over-confident who dares to ask someone like Cram to talk to him." Since K fails to enter the castle to be received by the officials, his identification road has been completely interrupted. After that, amid the villagers' repeated questioning of K's identity and K's self-paralysis, his existence in the world finally disappears. In the end, he does become a useless person to the village, a person without meaning, a walking dead. Throughout the narrative part of the whole novel, it can be noticed that K's life course from being marked as a stranger, unable to communicate with officials, unable to enter the castle, losing his identity to becoming an outsider, the reason for which traces back to K's identity as an outsider who is incompatible with the society described in the novel. From the reader's point of view, although the village's indifference and alienation towards anything outside are somewhat dehumanizing, such a situation is unavoidable because it is too saturated to satisfy the existence of those superfluous. That is to say, when every given position in this society is occupied, the superfluous people have to stray in the cracks, silently accepting the potential marginalization. Although "the subject is recognized in the mirror, and the existence of the mirror makes the subject more convinced of his existence.", K has no entity in front of this mirror, no matter how he swings his body, adjusts the light, or moves the mirror, it turns out to be in vain. Because it is never himself that decides whether K can manifest or not, but the mirror that is absurdly set in Kafka's novel. If the result of existentialism is to attain life results, then the perpetual predicament of the protagonist is the creator of nothingness. The unknown and nothingness become the greatest source of all fear and sorrow. Therefore, a trace of sadness belonging to outsiders can always be experienced in Kafka's works.^[4]

Kafka's literary spirit was once expounded by Wang Shudong in his *On the Significance of Kafka's Modernity* that "In this modern era where a single sacred truth has been disintegrated, Kafka neither followed Hegel and Marx who went to the rational history, nor did he engage in the absurd rationality with only rebellion like Camus and Sartre. He resolutely chose to pursue the divine transcendental position."^[5] It can be seen from Kafka's novels that his construction of the world is usually based on his intuition, and the shaping of the characters boasts imagination, which is a leap beyond the rules and authority, and also rejection and avoidance of society. "But for so long have I known myself only as a stranger,

a stranger in this century, a stranger in those who are still people.' Perhaps only Kafka could understand the bitterness of a stranger in the 20th century who couldn't fit into the world: when a fragile individual cannot integrate with the empty society, he can only withdraw his spirit from the real world for a long time and turn to the ideological world constructed by the individual. However, when the individual ideology cannot be accepted and recognized by the masses with too weak a body to resist, it will only be gradually dissipated in the torrent of the times, eventually losing itself.^[6]

4. THE ABSURD METAMORPHOSIS OF THE IDEOLOGY – SELF-ALIENATION

Ideology wanders around the problem, gets imprisoned in the problem, and deforms under the problem. Once it has gone through this process, the original self becomes a discontinuous self. It is monstrous and unwell.^[7] When space is squeezed out of nowhere, no way out is left for the individual. In Kafka's novels, strong spatial ideology constantly emerges ranging from castles, courts to underground caves. The existence of these spatial ideologies vividly depicts how private space is violently invaded and destroyed by public space, and how individual ideology surrenders to the collective. As shown in *The Wasteland*, as I once saw Sybill hanging in a cage in Komi City, when the children asked her, "Sybill, what do you want?" she replied, "I want to die." While Kafka's "A cage to find a bird" may have another explanation, that is a reflection of modern people being imprisoned and squeezed by social space. Just imagine that a person lives in an environment where his attributes contradict himself all day long, he will experience the double torment of mind and body. Then, if he wants to get rid of this suffering, he has only two options: one is to get out of this contradictory environment, which is death, the death of the body and the escape of the soul; while the other is to adapt to the environment, just like shellfish need to adjust the flesh to actively caters to its shell or the metamorphosis of insects. From the perspective of life and the world, the more people are immersed in it, the more inclined they are to choose the latter option. Therefore, this kind of alienation remains active and self-conscious at the spiritual level, which will not disappear with the change of external conditions, but closely connect itself with the will of the individual. And space only plays a catalytic role. But it is undeniable that people will always blame their changes on the uncomfortable environment, and think that they are bound to a given path all their lives. This is undoubtedly a pale and suffocating fate, and more an empty tragedy even under relentless efforts. This ending, of course, cannot be accepted. So, the metamorphosis of ideology arises, which may be manifested as a change in actual behavior or alienation in thinking. For example, the protagonist in *The Metamorphosis* becomes an inconspicuous bug, and Peter in *The Daydreamer* vents

his dissatisfaction by constantly exchanging souls with things. The reason for this kind of alienation is the protagonists' subconscious escapism from reality. This is a self-protection mechanism, under which some unnecessary troubles are avoided through materializing the self to appear consistent with the material world. However, such camouflage disconnects the subject's ideology from the ego at the same time, making the subject an unconscious "monster".^[8]

Weisstein once said that Kafka's works are full of endless corridors, locked doors, and labyrinthine passages, where contact with others is sought and forbidden at every narrative level. Land surveyor K has turned to many locals for help in his pursuit of the distant castle, but their responses have been mostly indifferent, even questioning the authenticity of K's identity. Even with the "enthusiastic help" of assistants, village chiefs, and messengers, K fails to get any substantive feedback but received more resistance. Like a child who was locked up for overplaying, K's mental state gradually changed from the initial confidence and enthusiasm to the final exhaustion and numbness. When reading, an inexplicable sense of fate will overwhelm the reader. K is undoubtedly a dedicated person. In the face of all kinds of obstacles, he still has not forgotten what he should do as a land surveyor. But after experiencing everything, the "land surveyor" that he pursues has changed from a job to an inescapable life condition. As mentioned in the second part of this paper, K, as a human being, must not lose this state, otherwise, his existence will lose its meaning. But Kafka deliberately set the ending that K cannot get what he wants and lingers, so K can only struggle between the state of things and people, unable to detach. The outcome of K remains unknown, but what is certain is K's original ideology, and to be a dedicated land surveyor has absurdly become the pursuit of fame. "Monster" and "metamorphosis", these two words are not just the common intention symbols in Kafka's novels, but more his abstract generalization of the absurd state of existence of ordinary people in Europe in the 20th century in a rigid society. Against such an indifferent background, people who cannot seek the meaning of life will inevitably stand on the opposite side, become indifferent in behavior, and pursue only material interests.^[9] "Once a person cannot bring benefits to others, or even cannot support himself, he is like a beetle rejected by others." Perhaps this is the sadness of modern people in Kafka's eyes.

5. CONCLUSION

The poet Wystan Hugh Auden once commented that "Kafka's dilemma reflects the dilemma of modern people." Kafka's novels are like a mirror. Through the refraction of light, it projects real objects into a new plane with a new image formed, which endows readers with a familiar and unfamiliar feeling. I would say that the deconstructed

space tends to confuse people but bring them closer to the nature of the phenomenon at the same time. On one hand, for the physical space in his novels, Kafka did not give any structural framework, in other words, the world he created was absurd and chaotic, such as the unknown distance between the two clear landmarks of the village and the castle; but on the other hand, the social space in the novel is orderly. Whether it is the strict legal system in *The Trial* or the strict hierarchy in *The Castle*, it shows that the society operates under a fixed formula in Kafka's novels. Kafka's works are renowned for absurdity, but his writing features are far more than that. By deconstructing the space and constructing compression across social classes, he completely separates the protagonist from the social environment at the cognitive level. Through the arguments in the preceding text, we know that when a person's cognition is disconnected from society, his consciousness will become gradually marginalised and will eventually gradually deform and dissimilate. Thus, the fictional story reflects the absurd reality through Kafka's mirror. As for what he thought that people and animals are absurd, the world is made up of absurdity, and this method of abandoning the surface to the essence allows readers to more intuitively experience the suffering and torment of the characters and to think about the reasons behind this phenomenon. From the study of the Kafkaesque space and self-consciousness, it can be found that alienation between individuals is normalcy. So, Kafka's works give modern people such a survival guide, to recognize the rationality of the absurd, find our own identity position, and seek the value of existence in this position. Since the absurd is unavoidable, it is better to add the reality within one's ability and equip oneself with meaning. After all, in the contemporary society, the Kafkaesque characters are destined to sink into the world with confusion and inanity.^[10]

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