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Gdy rozpadają się światy – przestrzeń dystopijna jako metafora starości

streszczenie

W rozwiniętych częściach świata starzenie się postrzegane jest obecnie jako zagrożenie nie tylko dla jednostki, ale także dla całych społeczeństw, i w związku z tym bywa metaforyzowane jako „nadciągająca katastrofa”. Ta metafora budzi obawy ze względu na możliwe destrukcyjne skutki zastosowania etyki kryzysu, czego efekt może stanowić zniesienie niektórych norm codziennego postępowania. W artykule analizuję korpus wybranych dystopii dla młodzieży w odniesieniu do metafory katastrofy jako wyrazu napięcia między młodością a starością obecnych w codziennych dyskursach. Wykorzystuję ramy teoretyczne krytycznej analizy dyskursu i humanistyki medycznej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem metafory poznawczej oraz intersekcji pomiędzy literaturą i medycyną. Kluczowe brane pod uwagę to kategorie to: pustynia, powódź, budynki, a także przyroda. Analiza ujawnia nasilanie się negatywnych stereotypów dotyczących starzenia się oraz promowanie ideologii związanych z kulturą młodzieżową i rozwojem biotechnologii.

słowa kluczowe

dystopia, starzenie się, katastrofa, metafora, przestrzeń

summary

Contemporarily, in developed parts of the world ageing is perceived as a threat not only to an individual's well-being, but also to the well-being of whole societies, and is metaphorized as “an impending disaster”. This metaphorization raises concerns as to the possible destructive effects it may have, considering the application of the

ethics of crisis, which results in lifting some of the rules of conduct that are normally followed. In the article I examine some of popular young adult dystopias with reference to the disaster metaphor, as expressive of the tensions between youth and old age present in everyday discourses. I use the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis and health humanities, with special attention to cognitive metaphor as well as literature and medicine intersections. The key categories considered are: desert, flood, buildings and nature. The analysis reveals the intensification of negative stereotypes concerning ageing, to the promotion of ideologies connected with youth culture and developing biotechnology.

keywords

dystopia, ageing, disaster, metaphor, space

biogram

[Anna Bugajska](#) – jej zainteresowania naukowe obejmują badania nad utopiami oraz zagadnienia związane z rozwojem biotechnologii. Autorka książki *Engineering Youth: The Evantropian Project in Young Adult Dystopias* (2019) oraz licznych artykułów i rozdziałów poświęconych literaturze młodzieżowej, posthumanizmowi oraz współczesnym problemom kulturowo-społecznym. Jej obecne badania dotyczą zależności pomiędzy fikcją a biopolityką w perspektywie społecznej i filozoficznej.



when worlds collapse

dystopian space as a metaphor of ageing

Old age is a disaster (suffering), a sudden misfortune
that strikes an undeserving victim¹

The disaster metaphor in relation to the ageing society has a long standing in the popular discourse, and is utilised by the media on an everyday basis. Even a cursory glance at the articles devoted to the elderly reveals hosts of stereotyped images, studied in depth by such authors as Virpi Ylänné, Andrew Blaikie, Scott Davidson, Bethany Spielman or Phil Mullan. Among these images, the most worrying are perhaps those presenting ageing as “an impending disaster”, “the rising tide”, “apocalypse” or “global warming”. It should be noted that this type of conceptual metaphor is usually applied to talk about the growing presence of older citizens in the labor

market, apparently being an economic burden for the younger generations, as well as for the health system in developed countries that ultimately have to address and manage the problems that old age brings with itself in this regard. These tensions coincide with the common taboo of death and suffering, as well as with the elimination of images of decadence and aging from public space, and, consequently, with the rhetoric of glorification of youth. Sometimes, the fear of aging leads even to the search for technological immortality: it is an attempt to institute a biopolitical utopia, focused, however, on the elimination of even the most ephemeral representations of death and corruption and not on the establishment of conditions that facilitate a happy and fulfilling life for everyone. Such biopolitics may therefore become “thanatopolitics”: thus, biopolitics becomes a kind of practical program, aimed at ensuring social “immunity” from ageing by eliminating those who threaten the survival of the youngest.

The abovementioned images, borrowing from the overwhelming fears of eco-catastrophe, utilize the basic homologising pattern which links humans with Nature, and they respond to the sustained popularity of dystopian visions of the world in the recent decades. As Spielman points out, the metaphors of enemy and disaster in relation to human beings may have dire consequences as they influence the measures applied by the authorities to deal with the groups branded with this stigma.

The problem of climate change has to be addressed immediately, but its most serious, life-threatening consequences may be avoided by learning about it and working with it. [...] “Disaster” and “enemy” metaphors, in addition to mapping force dynamics, also map an imperative: something should be done to defend society. Further, it should be done quickly. Finally, it should be done because someone’s – perhaps everyone’s – existence depends on it. [...] Further, because society’s existence is at stake, some actions that in other

circumstances would not be morally acceptable could be morally justified. In other words, by mapping a sense of crisis or an emergency these images imply that emergency policy and ethics apply².

Spielman does not go as far as to claim that the media discourse would covertly encourage inhuman treatment of the aged; nevertheless, she draws attention to the negative bias extending over an increasingly growing group of people.

It needs to be underlined that the metaphors listed exist within the context of the society as a whole, with a depersonalised, alienised threat of the ageing baby boomers hovering over the youthful 'us', and it definitely forms the basic dimension into which the dystopian discourse inscribes. However, the personal experience of individual ageing replays these metaphors at the micro level. This phenomenon falls into the field of interest of medical humanities, which delve into personal narratives. These disclose the existence of similar metaphors on an individual level. The accounts of illness, operating on the dichotomy of "chaos" vs. "mastery"/"harmony", can well be extended to the narratives about ageing³. The Polish psychologist Joanna Nawrocka, quoted in the epigraph, sources her evidence of the links between chaos, dissonance, and old age from folk beliefs⁴. The findings of critical discourse analysis and medical humanities allow to think about disaster narratives bidimensionally: as texts betraying social anxieties when it comes to the mainly economic domination of longlivers, and when it comes to individual, problematised relation with one's ageing body and mind in the era prioritizing youth and fitness.

The abundance of disaster and post-disaster fictions in the contemporary dystopian boom, co-existing with the language of crisis and threat concerning senescence, invites one to reflect deeper on the relation between the dystopian space as expressive of the tensions outlined above. Numerous studies have been performed as far as the connections between ageing and literature.

For a good review of the literature of the subject, it is worth turning to the chapter “Literary Portrayals of Ageing” by Diana Wallace, published by Cambridge University Press in *An Introduction to Gerontology*⁵. Some newer book publications, like Barbara Misztal’s *Later Life*⁶, are fundamentally sociological studies which, with the help of literary examples, intend to demonstrate that old age is a valuable period of life, and to trace the paths of psychological development and social engagement of the elderly. Skagen and Barry’s *Literature and Ageing*⁷ presents the same approach, not focused on the criticism of wrongs and on discrimination, but on the richness and variety of the human experience of temporality. “The difference that time makes” – to borrow the title of the introductory chapter – is investigated from the point of view of new perspectives, such as the Anthropocene studies. It is especially worth noting Sarah Falcus’s contribution “Age and Anachronism in Contemporary Dystopian Fiction”. She analyzes P.D. James’ *The Children of Men* (1992) and Yoko Tawada’s *The Last Children of Tokyo* (2014), asking the question about the possible rifts in generational continuity in societies faced with environmental disaster and resulting social disruptions.

Also within the scope of research into the children’s and young adult literature there is a strong trend to investigate interrelationships between various age groups. Especially notable are the publications of Vanessa Joosen⁸, and of Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak and Zoe Jaques⁹. The authors focus on intergenerational relationships and solidarity between different age groups, but also take note – especially in the case of Joosen – of ageist biases and attitudes with the view to expose them and target the deficiencies of biopolitical system that produces such kinds of attitudes. Taking into account the angle of this article, frequently referring to future and posthuman societies, it is worth noting the publications of Basu et al.¹⁰, Flanagan¹¹, Tarr and White¹², and Bugajska¹³. The authors investigate different aspects of the possible development of these societies, taking into account such factors as, for instance,

the radicalization of young people, climate change, technological progress, and the shifts and changes of identity under the contemporary social and existential pressures. While one could name many more authors working within this scope, these books give a fairly comprehensive overview of the dystopian boom that has swept over the young adult literature in the recent years.

The aforementioned analyses, it has to be underlined, frequently work from the perspective of the social studies, and do not foreground the linguistic dimension of the dystopian worlds. The tools provided by CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis), especially cognitive metaphor, can be fruitfully combined with the social contexts of literary dystopias, as I have tried to show in “Family, State, Fiction: ‘State is Family’ Metaphor in Juvenile Fiction”⁴⁴. As far as the presence of the elderly in the utopian/dystopian biopolitics imagined in the literature for young readers, I talk about it in “Senescence in Young Adult Dystopias”⁴⁵. Whereas this latter study stemmed from the perspectives of utopian studies, philosophy and sociology, here I investigate young adult dystopias (the total of 14 books), published in the period 2002–2016, with the tools provided by linguistics and applied ethics.

Though the grounds for performing such an analysis seem solid enough – dystopias being socially engaged writings in the first place and many of them dealing with bioethics and youth cult – medical humanities scholars make justified reservations as to the validity of the arbitrary application of their findings to any narratives. Zeilig provides an example of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which has been discussed from the perspective of the studies on ageing, as an invalid choice of text. According to her, there is no solid anchor anywhere in Wilde’s novel that would justify talking about it as a text about ageing⁴⁶. It is important to bring up this point here, as some of the texts of young adult dystopias which I am going to refer to in the further parts of this article do not take up the problem of ageing explicitly, do not foreground it or do not feature any significant old characters. It is due to the fact that the

presence of the elderly in contemporary young adult dystopias is rather limited, and when they appear, they are mostly cast in the roles of villains, representing either the obsolete values of the oppressive system or death itself. It is noticeable that the Wise Old Man pattern, pretty frequent in children's and young adult literature, does not enjoy the same privileged place in the juvenile dystopias of the last decade. The wiseman and adviser is usually an adult male character, representing the interests of the middlescent. Often enough the power is given into the hands of the teenage and the fit. The few texts that actually – like Malley's *Declaration* series (2007–2010) – confront the discomforts of ageing head-on, do not underscore the post-disaster dimension of the emplotment, which is pivotal for the metaphor I would like to look into.

Justification for the procedure is the integral link between the space and the body in the literary tradition, most recognizably present in le Roi Pechêur story of the Arthurian cycle. The quest of the knight beyond reproach is both to heal the king and to heal the land. The characters in dystopias, similarly, feature morally upright heroes, whose aim is to bring not only harmony, but also life to the culture of death the malfunctioning environments represent (*The Maze Runner*, *Unwind* Dystology, *More Than This*). Further, contemporarily the body is often described in terms of space (for example, as a building or a machine), and the awareness of links between healthy life environment and individual health is an indelible aspect of today's culture. The ageing process is often seen as a disease⁴⁷, and even goldenagenarians would experience pain in their joints⁴⁸. The aged, Nawrocka writes, "come from the world of chaos and disaster"⁴⁹; and since the contrast between the post-disaster landscape and the paradisal one is congenital to much of the young adult dystopias, it is legitimate to draw a connection between the ageing body and mind and the damaged environment. The Glade in *The Maze Runner* is a space for the young and healthy; similarly, the luxurious New Pretty Town in *Uglies* and the Gem Sectors in *Legend*, all of these being enclaves contrastive to

the dilapidated ruins and wild wastelands. The powerful existence of such metaphorization in the media and in folk beliefs only adds to the argument.

On the following pages I will be referring to some of the popular texts of juvenile fiction which in different ways present the life in a post-apocalyptic world. Out of these, only Nancy Farmer's *Matteo Alacrán* books²⁰ explicitly present the problem of ageing and strongly feature ecological themes. Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* series (2005–2007) is an ironic picture of the “survival of the prettiest”, who banish any signs of ageing or disability outside the borders of their consciousness, which is coupled with effective erasing the signs of the old times and the Oil Plague from the landscape available to the general population. By the same token, the knowledge about the sun flares in the *Maze Runner* cycle (2009–2012) is banned to the inhabitants of the Glade, until they break out from their artificial “paradise”. Patrick Ness's *More Than This* (2013) and Marie Lu's *Legend* trilogy (2011–2013) fuse the ideas of oldness, decay and death fully into the landscape, with only incidental occurrences of elderly characters; oldness being non-existent in the world of “humans” and reduced to the world of objects. The choice of such a varied selection of texts should provide a representative picture of the phenomenon in the juvenile dystopias of the recent years.

Bearing in mind the cultural and discursive context outlined above, some questions need to be considered while looking into the post-disaster space of the novels. As Spielman wrote, the metaphorization connected with climate change implies that the ageing of the society can be predicted and counteracted by proactive attitudes²¹. The more dangerous associations are those of natural phenomena that are not man-related, or those portraying the senescent as cannibals, zombies or terrorists²². It is necessary, then, to ask which option is prevalent in the discussed body of texts: the one of avoidable or non-avoidable disaster? Further, one should consider into which of the discourses outlined above fall the dystopian narratives: do they reflect the personal

experience of ageing, which can be related to the failing body on an individual scale, or do they mostly reflect the discourse of the media, describing the effects of the macro-scale social disaster? Obviously, those of the texts which feature the elderly characters and provide them with voice to speak for themselves would be more likely to portray the personal dimension of ageing.

Before answering these questions, though, in the following paragraphs I am going to investigate the construction of the post-disaster space more closely and present certain patterns that prevail in the popular imagination, which are not always consistent with the metaphorization present in the media. I am also going to look into the measures that dystopian societies applied to deal with the disaster and see how effective they were, as it will shed light on the possible ethical conundrums and test Spielman's hypothesis on the "emergency measures" as far as the incoming "grey hordes"²³.

The research, as will be shown below, has disclosed features of the post-disaster landscape in the dystopias that may be related to the old age; however, they are not readily found in the language of the media, or else, they build upon it, digging deeper into the general metaphorization practices. Thus, in the cognitive category "climate change" fall the realizations of the consequences: "desert" ("global warming") and "flood" ("tsunami", "high tide", "incoming wave"), often in incremental relation to the disease pattern. The objectification of the body, common in biotechnological and posthumanist discourses, is seen in the metaphorization utilizing the images of buildings and machines. Finally, inscribing itself in the discussion of what is natural and unnatural, the images of plant and animal life, as well as generalised wilderness appear, as Nature encroaches upon the human-made identity holders. These images are often coupled with the representations of decay, decomposition, rotting and excrements.

climate change: desert, flood and the government

It is true that those juvenile dystopias that focus on the “new world orders” and the criticism of a chosen aspect of social life, like corporate mentality, militaristic regime, illegal immigration or surveillance, are usually plot-driven and, consequently, do not devote much space to the description of the environment, feeding the readers post-apocalyptic staples. In American context, the typical images tend to arise from the 09/11 and the Katrina Hurricane traumas. It implicitly links the ideas of age and oldness to concrete catastrophic events from the recent history, still reverberating in the collective memory with the emotions of fear and threat. The second type of images is grounded in the regions familiar to the authors, which happen to be the “blood meridian”: the South-Western part of the United States, associated with deserts, burning heat, extreme weather conditions, but also with hidden military bases, airplane graveyards, violence and the road to Californian Dream. The actual geographical spaces become fictionalised and even mythicised to express more universal anxieties.

The concrete disasters the authors construct in the memories of the survivor population are a mixture of the Gaia’s Vengeance trope, the technoscience and the human activity. Most of the time they cannot be linked to a single accident; rather, they arise from a chain of events which influenced the Earth’s harmony. They also usually coincide with government’s negligence or even ill will; however, the reason for the disaster is often mysterious and incomprehensible. Dashner writes:

The sun flares were completely unexpected and unpredictable, and by the time the scientists tried to warn anyone,

it was way too late. They wiped out half the planet, killed everything around the equatorial regions. Changed climates everywhere else. The survivors gathered, some governments combined. Wasn't too long before they discovered that a nasty virus had been unleashed from some disease-control place. Called it the Flare right from the beginning²⁴.

The above scenario is typical. Dashner, Ness and Lu refer to the climate change which results either in scorched stripes of land and debilitating heat or the rise of the sea level and massive flooding of certain parts of the world. Whereas the climate change metaphor in the media discourse stands for an avertible catastrophe, in juvenile dystopias it is much more of the uncalled-for punishment or doom, and is expressive of archetypal fears of death. Thence, Nawrocka's metaphor, which may be conceptualised as DISASTER IS AGEING, is here fully applicable. Burnt cities, desertified planes, and flooded areas surround the enclaves of life, youth, and beauty, reserved for the upper classes or some other privileged groups. The undamaged prison (Ness), police headquarters (Lu), medical facility or a convent (Farmer), dominating over the post-disaster landscape, position the ageing as an illness, a crime or a sin, and thus deserving of punishment.

This impression, stemming from spacial organization, is intensified by the images of physical and mental decay of people living in these areas. The most graphic illustration is given by Dashner: *The Scorch Trials* and *The Death Cure* offer vivid descriptions of the Flare sufferers (the Cranks) who fall victim to Alzheimer-like dementia, commonly associated with deep old age. In the end the Cranks engage in cannibalism, which positions the elderly as the "enemy" and "social contagion", preying on the young and healthy²⁵. Worth noting, on the way to the Crank city in *The Scorch Trials* the Gladers meet an old, dying man, which foreshadows their dramatic meeting with its infected inhabitants. As an encounter with an elderly person is considered a bad omen²⁶, such structuring of

the narrative turns it into a parable, wherein old age is equalled with metaphysical Evil. Similar undertones appear in other dystopias: El Patrón from the Matteo Alacrán books is called a vampire and his labourers “zombies”. The old in *Uglies* – ageing naturally, not goldenagenarian “crumbles” – are relegated to the wilderness, living in a savage reserve or in the Smoke community. Smoke in the novels is associated with pollution and contagion²⁷, further strengthening the link between the old, moral corruption, and the deadly plague.

It is necessary to point out that while the disasters are unavoidable and unpredictable, reflecting the Medean view of Nature, the plagues are mostly man-made. They are either biotechnologies that got out of hand or they are means of population control. After portraying the ageing process as something disgusting, scary and sinful, the authors point their fingers at the governments, responsible for releasing the deadly virus or refusing universal access to the “fountain of youth”. An explicit – although marginal in the whole cycle – statement is made by Westerfeld: his crumbles, who age well enough, in *Extras* sue the government for supposed withholding immortality technologies from the general population. This implies that humans are charged with full agency and responsibility for their lives, and if the escape from the land of death entails the fight against the “WICKED Creators” (*The Maze Runner*), it is a measure to be taken. Thus, the metaphorization plays into the transhumanist visions of immortality, and the youth cult, calling for democratization of anti-ageing technologies. The emergency measure here, as it appears, would not be totalitarian scaling down the population. Rather, the narrative slant is covertly advancing the case for institutionalised financial support for the development of biotechnologies.

The results of the disasters are also reflective of the fear of individual and personal ageing: whereas desertification, burning and incineration may be associated with social exclusion and the ultimate annihilation of the body, the rising waters in Lu’s tril-

ogy – besides corresponding to the social menace of the “silver tsunami” – may find perhaps a closer match in the failing mental faculties. The connotations of water with dementia, madness and illness are integrated in the associative web with the underlying heritage of British pre-romantic dark lakes, adapted in the nineteenth century for the American Gothic (for instance, in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*). The suggestive picture of the flooded library portrays both the submerging of the personal consciousness in chaos, and the losses in the collective memory.

The rising eastern sun is now high enough to bathe the entire lake in a shade of murky gold, and I can see the tiny strip of land that separates the lake from the Pacific Ocean. I head all the way down to the floor of the building that sits right at the water’s surface. Every wall on this floor is collapsed, so I can walk straight out to the building’s edge and ease my legs into the water. When I look into the depths, I can see that this old library continues for many floors. Perhaps fifteen stories tall, judging from how the buildings on the shore sit and how the land slopes from the shoreline. Approximately six stories should be underwater²⁸.

The obliteration of memory, be it selective or total, is one of the prime features of dystopian makeup, provoking – like in the quotation above – romanticization of the past and/or behaviours oriented towards recall and restoration of its missing parts. Whereas the collective memory may be rebuilt or restructured to provide a solid framework of reference for the generations to come, individual age-induced amnesia is usually connected with irreversible identity impairment and resulting anguish.

In relation to the body culture studies the rising water may also play up the idea of excess, contributing to corporeal decline. As Lamb relates writing about the nineteenth-century hygiene movement,

the key to influencing longevity lay in controlling “excess”. Readers were told that poor heredity could be compounded by, and even good heredity could be sacrificed to, the dangers of excessive living, where “excess” implied everything from food, drink and sex to work and worry²⁹.

The ageing body gets out of control, out of bounds, becomes leaky, unclean³⁰, and finally, overwhelmed by the harmful influence of the environment, it has no power to resist. Bodily fluids, contained within, flow without unchecked, involuntarily transferring the private into the public space. Water, then, which usually symbolises life and new beginning, here would be homologised with the notions of death and decomposition, but also being stripped of privacy and exposed to public ridicule.

The unexpected crisis that falls on the societies and individuals provokes varying reactions. Some people want to kill themselves (*The Maze Runner*), some consciously seek social exclusion (*The Uglies*, *The House of the Scorpion*), and some try to pressure the authorities to take action (*Extras*). The governments formally stratify the society (*Legend*, *The Uglies*), distribute poison rather than cure (*Legend*), deny reality (*More Than This*) or sponsor unethical programmes (*The Maze Runner*, *The House of the Scorpion*) and apply radical measures (the original “kill order” of the Maze Runner series). Broadly, the above seem to confirm the shadowy implications of the disaster and enemy metaphors, forming “a very general framework which opens the possibility that violating certain prohibitions or refraining from carrying out certain ordinary obligations can be justified”³¹.

buildings: the body ruinous

How long does a house last? The answer obviously depends on how well you take care of it. If you do nothing, the roof

will spring a leak before long, water and the elements will invade, and eventually the house will disintegrate. But if you proactively take care of the structure, repair all damage, confront all dangers, and rebuild or renovate parts from time to time using new materials and technologies, the life of the house can essentially be extended without limit. The same holds true for our bodies and brains³².

In the above quote Ray Kurzweil, a well-known singularity proponent, refers to the comparison made by the biotechnologist Aubrey de Grey. It is only a single instance sampled from the prevailing linguistic framework in which the body is described in constructivist terms, with its organs perceived as parts of a building or a machine, thus shoving aside naturalness arguments and promoting the vision of infinite exchangeability of its separate elements. In dystopias the whole landscape may be read as the metaphorical extension of the body (in Dashner's novels, for example, the sky is "bruised" and "bleeding"), but the images of "zombie" machines and buildings are by far the most powerful. The constructions are "dead", possess "skeletons", are "infected", bear human names (Westerfeld), are riddled with "pockmarks" (Lu) or are "blind" (Ness); there is also an explicit link between the maze and human brain ("killzone", Dashner). Driverless cars are a frequent and powerful picture of shells without ghost. Personified death in *More Than This* is cruising around empty London streets as the only driver. Also people's bodies become objectified, which is mostly true for the books of Westerfeld and Farmer: they can be "ruined", "crumbly", "seamed", "repaired", "like wallpaper" or "a part of the chair".

Following in the footsteps of Lisa Rowe Fraustino's analysis of *The Giving Tree* and *The Rainbow Fish*, one could look at the buildings from the point of view of conceptual metaphor BUILDING IS A BODY. Then, the descriptions like the below one, taken from Ness, acquire an ominous dimension.

His old house. Unmistakeably, his old house. It looks weather-beaten and untended, the paint peeling away from the window frames, the walls stained from leaky gutters, just like every other house on this street. At some point, the chimney has partially collapsed onto the roof, a small rubble of bricks and dust scattered down the slope to the edge, as if no one ever noticed it falling³³.

When treated as a direct metaphor, the house would portray a decrepit person, abandoned and uncared for, with dirty skin, covered in excrements and urine, because of the inability to control the bodily functions. This motif of spoliation of the individual body is repeated by Ness on many levels, and will be referred to further on. In general, in the dystopian narratives we encounter recurrent images of paint peeling away, tattered wallpapers, omnipresent dust, crumbling walls and rusty rebar. Although unpleasant odour and trash are frequent, they do not always scare the characters away. Westerfeld's and Lu's heroes look at the ruins with a certain nostalgia and are drawn to them. As Bytheway writes: "images of older people fascinate the viewer. Whether it is a grandmother begging in a third world city or the self-portraits of Rembrandt, the viewer is drawn by the portrayal of old age, sometimes appalled"³⁴, as if the moribund bodies, represented by buildings and objects, contained a mysterious solution to the meaning of life. It may be, though, that the fascination with the ruins and romanticizing the dystopian space touch on another feature of the phenomenon of ageing. "Antique objects age 'gracefully'", stated Lowenthal "whilst human beings pass into a state of 'decline'"³⁵. This Western cultural predilection for valuing age in objects rather than in people is visible, for example, in Farmer's *Lord of Opium*, in El Patrón's private wing, filled with timeless works of art that survived his decaying body. Even his mattress was burned to remove the memory of the ugliness of decomposition, but his successor kept the antiques. In Dashner's

cycle ruins are inhabited by the Cranks and are shied away from by the healthy population. The deep old age, which is implied by the worryingly disintegrating constructions, is found scary and off-putting, sometimes as a result of direct neglect. Westerfeld uses the images of “crude, massive” “steel skeleton” to contrast enhanced, smart constructions of the Pretties, which silently brings in the aesthetic and pragmatic rationale for human enhancement, a major topic in his cycle. Thus, de Grey’s argument reverberates in the narrative: the ails of ageing can and should be avoided.

As could already be inferred from the example of the library, the building metaphor does not only relate to the body, but also portrays individual identity, which erodes together with the advancement of old age. “It may also be that older people, aware of bearing this stigma or what Goffman (1963) termed a ‘spoilt identity,’ withdraw from social relationships or interaction which they are perfectly capable of sustaining”³⁶. Given the direct link between the brain and the maze in Dashner’s cycle, one can interpret the constant combat against the reshuffling corridors and aggressive Griever, bringing painful memories of the disaster, as the battle for the restoration of one’s identity based on a youthful image of self. The realization of the horrible truth about the disaster makes the Gladers scream much like the demented El Viejo in Farmer’s novels, to the degree that the affected need to be separated from the rest of the group. The eventual crumbling of the Maze may be read twofold: either as the restoration of mental faculties and one’s desired, paradisaic identity, or the ultimate collapse of the psyche and individual death, ending in afterlife.

Finally, it needs to be noticed that by association with certain objects in the discussed narratives old age acquires deeper dimensions and is used as a device to portray the obsolescence of certain values. Rusty shopping carts (Ness) may symbolise the culture of consumerism and commerce. Charred cars (Ness, Westerfeld) – the culture of convenience and disregard for the environmental issues. Omnipresent pipes and factories – industrialization.

El Patrón's gloomy private wing and his ancient white house (Farmer) – the aristocratic Latino heritage in Mexico and the American imperialism. Ancient rifles (Dashner) – traditional warfare. Jameson's insightful analysis of longevity narratives provides points for further reflection:

what seems to be the deeper secondary line of reflection and allegorical intellection is the increasing institutionalization and collectivization of late modern or postmodern social life, as that seems primarily embodied in the vast transnational corporation, bigger than most governments, and virtually impossible to modify or control politically³⁷.

His conclusions about the themes of history, family, storytelling and class struggle, inscribed into the narratives about ageing, are valid also for juvenile dystopias: on the basic interpretive level they reflect the need to supersede old, malfunctioning systems with novel, better ones. Oldness, then, becomes intermeshed with a host of negative social phenomena, and considering the popularity of juvenile dystopias, gives it overwhelmingly bad press, and positions the aged as implicit scapegoats, complicit in the crimes of the system, which call for punishment. Coupled with the aforementioned nostalgia for the glorious past, it creates a complex and inherently problematised picture.

(human) nature: where weeds promiscuous shoot

The above impression is reinforced, but also partially complicated by the elements of natural environment that appear in the narratives. Mostly, the authors use trees, flowers, weeds and animals to complete the image of decay with elements that make it less romanticised. In the narrative which expresses the vision of the body as an object, the unchecked proliferation of Nature, encroach-

ing on man-made civilization, can be justifiably seen to symbolise the progressive decomposition of the human body. Young heroes are surprised that “there is so much plant life in this place, all these weeds and ridiculous grasses, all growing completely out of control and unchecked”, that “there’s a fug of urine and musk, and the dust on the linoleum floor of the aisle is disturbed and streaked in any number of unpleasant ways”³⁸, and are terrified by trees: “gnarled”, “crippled” and “close to dying”³⁹. Not surprisingly, Westerfeld joins in the dialogue between human enhancers and alarmists – what is “natural” is oppressive, disgusting and threatening:

Talking to herself didn’t seem like such a bad idea there in the outer ruins, where the relics of the Rusties struggled against the grip of creeping plants. Anything was better than ghostly silence. She passed concrete plains, vast expanses cracked by thrusting grasses. The windows of fallen walls stared up at her, sprouting weeds as if the earth had grown eyes. She scanned the horizon, looking for clues. There was nothing long and flat that she could see. Peering down at the ground passing below, Tally could hardly make out anything in the weed-choked darkness⁴⁰.

Like a sentimental graveyard poet, the heroine visits the cemetery of the pre-plague civilization, but – contrarily to the “men of feeling” – she does not find consolation in soothing Nature. Whereas old buildings may sometimes emanate the aura of wisdom and solidity, and do not replicate the haunted house trope, the invading weeds, animised as “earth’s eyes”, fulfill the role of the vengeful ghost and become the scare factor. The haunted house trope is somewhat stronger in Ness and Dashner; however, even there it is wildlife that is positioned as real danger. Seth in *More Than This* is attacked by a boar and is frightened by a painting with a screaming horse, and Dashner explicitly equates the Cranks with animals, which induces in the recipient of the texts the fear of physicality, bodily

functions, and rampant appetites and desires, paving the way to individual and social “hell”.

Obviously, in the epoch of growing environmental awareness, the Nature as a monster theme coexists in the narratives with Nature-endorsing elements. By combining the troubling images with other, more positive ones, the authors stitch together the repulsive decay of humanity and the beauty of Nature. In *More Than This* the characters meet a charming doe with her young on the empty streets of London. In *Lord of Opium* Matt discovers that in the midst of the desert there is a biosphere, protecting the environmental heritage of the Earth. The Mushroom Master, an ancient scientist, uses the natural properties of the fungi to counteract man-made pollution. However, it only underscores that the processes of decay are acceptable in Nature, where the notion of the circle of life is fully applicable, but they are alien and scary in human beings. While the Earth may heal itself if left in peace, like in *The Death Cure*⁴¹ or in Ness’s book, the decrepit Cranks, El Patrón and Glass-Eye Dabengwa have to be killed.

The natural ageing processes are usually presented as destructive rather than creative, and are incremental to the overall picture of decay. Matt’s rotting orange (Farmer) and Seth’s mouldy rice and bulging cans (Ness) both fascinate and alarm the young characters. What is sought is clean, colourful, paradisaal space, admittedly, not always ensuring happiness. Simulated landscapes (Ness, Lu), pleasure gardens and “manicured” suburbia (Westerfeld) are artificial luxury spaces, combining the images of the primacy of youth culture⁴² with “the lands of old age”⁴³, but they are not the answer to the ecological disaster. Like in Westerfeld’s parable about the parasitical monoculture of white orchids⁴⁴, they may ultimately result in the rise of a dumbed-down, pleasure-driven society and loss of individuation. The ideal homeostasis of Farmer’s biosphere, expressing total control and opposition to chaos, disintegration and death, objectifies human beings and contains the seeds of unfulfillable utopianism.

In his famous *Essay on Man* (1734) Alexander Pope wrote about human nature as of “a mighty maze! but not without a plan; / A wild, where weeds and flow’rs promiscuous shoot”. The same sentiments which in the eighteenth century were applied to the moral dimension of human life now are transplanted to the realm of body. The answer to the crisis that strikes the Earth, the “rising tide” or “time bomb”, is technicised or simulated life. The abandonment of the failing body and its physical and mental malfunctions is extended to the metaphorical embracing of the ideologies propagating cyborgization and mind upload.

conclusions

The performed study of the dystopian landscape in relation to the powerful metaphorical link between ageing and disaster, present in everyday discourse and permeating imaginations, has demonstrated that in juvenile literature the dichotomy between the young and the old becomes a convenient scaffolding to build upon the layers of added value. Where in Lowry’s exemplary *The Giver* (1993) the oldness was associated with positive qualities, currently it acquires powerfully negative connotations, and the ideologies driving the market for biotechnological advancement seem to be the answer for the looming crisis.

The disaster that strike the dystopian societies in the studied examples is usually unpredictable and impossible to avoid. More often than not it has to do with violent climate change, thus providing a textual anchor connecting it with the experience of individual and social ageing. Especially the fear of the deep old age: failing body and mind, dementia, and the loss of the status of a human being (deterioration of the Cranks) is clearly visible, supported by the descriptions of crumbling buildings and aggressive weeds. At the same time, it is suggested that we can counteract or deny the processes of natural decay, for instance, by uploading into the virtual reality (Ness). On the social level, frequently

the disaster is so overwhelming and the damage so irreparable that it results in the abandonment of the old world.

There are, of course, slight differences in emphasis between individual authors. Whereas Lu seems to promote the idea of the ultimate victory of biotechnology, Dashner is more pessimistic: only the escape from the crumbling land of the dead into the miraculous, paradisaal space, can safeguard the survival of the human race. The motif of flight from the damaged, potentially threatening environment is also present in *More Than This* and *The Lord of Opium*. It is worth mentioning that the latter seems to be more traditional in the portrayal of the problem of senescence: the Mushroom Master, a senile, infantile old man, provides the cure for the man-made pollution, though this positive image is powerfully contrasted by those El Patrón, El Viejo and Glass-Eye Dabengwa. The effect of employing such imagery plays into the overall idea that decomposition and rebirth are proper in nature and not in human beings. The Mushroom Master, being a fairy-tale-like character, removes the visions of Fourth Age into the idealised realm of the fantastic.

Importantly, the dystopian variation on the media discourse, wherein the old are homologised with disaster, brings further associations with guilt and the resulting punishment. Old age is implicitly positioned as a crime or sin, resulting in ghettoisation of everything associated with the "catastrophe", and in demonisation of the senescent (supported with the metaphors from "enemy" group: "vampire", "zombie", "cannibal", "predator"). Tentative suggestions of Spielman as far as the implication of the disaster and enemy metaphors for the government policy acquire here even more ominous dimension. Dehumanization of the old provides moral grounds for inhuman treatment, and the crime-sin relation presents the actions taken not only as justified, but also as well-earned by the target group. The scope of possible social reactions, present in speculative fiction, ranges from ostracism to murder.

The culpable, though, are not only people who should display proactive attitude and prevent the feebleness and decline in pro-

ductivity with the help of available technologies. The governments are also to blame for their lack of either investment in technological advancement or democratization of the findings. Westerfeld, Dashner and Lu in fact present the authorities as having a vested interest in the presence of the common ugly, decrepit, monstrous enemy, and effectively creating one. The heroic function falls into the hands of the young and fit, thus strengthening the cultural predilection for glorifying youth.

As can be seen, the landscapes of the dystopian fiction for young adults are rich in imagery which can be successfully interpreted in relation to the metaphorical framework of politics, economy, biotechnology and medicine. The theme of senescence, despite often seeming 'invisible,' removed from the narratives, can nevertheless be traced with careful reading. The analysis of the disaster metaphor in particular reveals further dimensions of the contemporary concept of ageing: as something deserving punishment, therefore, not really random and not completely unpredictable. This should be seen as exacerbation of the conceptions described by authors such as Spielman or Ylänne, although they are contemporary with the discussed novels. In the history of young adult literature as such we can also observe shifts in the representations of the old people, as described in the aforementioned literature of the subject, but also worth further study to the inclusion of newer publications and to the acknowledgement of generic variety within this specific type of literature. Since the literature for young adults has a powerful attitude-forming effect⁴⁵, the overtones of homologising the dystopian space with old age should not be dismissed as a literary device, but looked into more closely.

endnotes

1. J. Nawrocka, *Spoleczne doświadczenie starości: stereotypy, postawy, wybory*, Kraków 2013, s. 42: "starość jest losową katastrofą (cierpieniem), nagle spadającą na jednostkę, która na nieszczęście starości nie zasługuje" (translation by the author – A.B.).

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19. J. Nawrocka, *Spoleczne doświadczenie starości...*, *op.cit.*, p. 37.
20. N. Farmer, *The House of the Scorpion*, New York 2002; eadem, *The Lord of Opium*, New York 2013.
21. See R. Kurzweil, *Singularity Is Near*, London 2006, p. 187.
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