



Conformity, Rebellion, and Confusion: Trends of the Western Literature and Films in the Cold War

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Abstract

The Cold War might well be one of the most complicated and intensive period in human's history. Although a new world war didn't break out, the tension between two world powers kept mounting perceptibly, bringing panic to everyone. As effective tools of political conflict, Western literary works and films at that time fully showed different thoughts and the ideological trends, which can be divided into three types. The first type is anti-communism propaganda and the praise of Western capitalist countries, represented by George Orwell. The second is the criticism of the Western world and even the whole civilization of human, of which the most creative element is black humor. The last type is the universal sense of loss and nothingness held by people in the Western world and their attempts to find a way out. By analyzing these trends and the outstanding works, we can probe into the world situation in the period of the cold war.

Keywords

The cold war, western, film, literature, ideological trend

1. Introduction

The Cold War was one of the most outstanding themes in the last century. Back then, a great number of things had undergone dramatic changes all over the world. The tension was between two great powers, one mainly being made up of the second world countries, led by the Soviet Union, and the other, consisting of most first world countries, led by the USA. Such tension brought the post-war world into yet another era of danger, terror, and uncertainty. "We demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!" (Douglas Adams, 1981). In that period, Western society was greatly influenced by the governments' anti-communism propaganda and the fear of another possible world war with nuclear bombs. With such emotions and ideology, lots of diverse and unique trends of thoughts emerged, and through literary works and films, we get to see the essence of them due to the fact that writers and directors were the pioneers of that time.

2. Ideological trends

From where I stand, the ideological trends can be divided into three types, and each of them was obviously reflected in some literature and film works. Next, I will elaborate on how these three were implied.

2.1 Praising capitalist countries

The first trend of thought was exactly the core idea of the Cold War in the Western world—anti-communism propaganda and the praise of Western capitalist countries. As the invisible war was gradually developed to a more intense extent, its cultural and spiritual areas gradually became the priority of the Western bloc. In that case, it put a

premium on literature in order to win over people of the Soviet Union and to keep Western society stable. On June 26, 1950, the United States, together with Britain, France, Germany, and other countries, established the “Congress of Cultural Freedom” in West Berlin, which was specialized in the cultural cold war activities against the Soviet Union and the Communist Party (Shi Penghai, 2015). A typical example is the writing of George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Though it’s not fair to say that this work is absolutely a tool of ideological confrontation, it is undeniable that it fits this trend of thoughts. The novel imagined a totalitarian country, Oceania, which is ruled by the only party of English Socialism. The whole country is under mass surveillance, and every individual has been brainwashed. Orwell modeled the authoritarian government in the novel after the Stalinist Russia, satirizing the Soviet Union’s government. And the main character was the typical Western tragic hero-like figure, who fought against the whole system to pursue freedom and love yet finally failed. By creating such a character, Orwell strongly criticized the Stalinist Russia. A similar theme went to another work of his, *Animal Farm* (1945). The two novels created by Orwell were favored by the Cold War decision-makers of the British and American governments, and were successively printed and distributed in a large number. Aside from novels, film became another important carrier of Western ideology, especially those spy films. The series of James Bond before 1991 was a typical example, in which the settings of the bad guy were often related to the soviet spies. These Russian spies, as an oppose to Bond, were all cold, rigid, bloodthirsty and even twisted in character. Bond’s humorous quality exists here not as a personality, but as an ideological expression that contrasts with the Soviet Union and satisfies the Western vision of a dualistic Cold War camp (Li Lingling, 2016).

Literary works appear in the form of books and words. The author’s understanding of the world in books can only rely on the guidance of words. The accuracy and intuitiveness of literary works vary from person to person. Just like the magic literature series “Harry Potter”, the description of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is very mysterious. The three tallest towers of Hogwarts—Astronomy Tower, Ravenclaw Tower, and Gryffindor Tower—with its unpredictable steps and the fact that everything is constantly on the move are explained not only in terms of appearance, but also in terms of the school system, such as the school song, emblem and motto, a brief history of the school, and campus culture. The creation of the school became one of the most important links in the Harry Potter worldview. However, the narrative structure of the film does not systematically introduce the magic school as described in the sequence of text. Instead, the film constantly supplements the description of the school in the book through the shooting shots required by the plots in the series of films, and watches every mysterious point of the school from the perspective of the characters in the film. Such detail control and narrative methods do not conflict with the mainstream plot, with logical and visual beauty.

Compared with literary works focusing on magic and adventure, other classical literary works may not have made so much foreshadowing and foreshadowing in narrative structure, nor created a new world at the level of macro narrative. How to show the characters’ personalities through lens language and narrative means has become a problem that the adapted films have to explore. Therefore, creating dramatic conflicts before and after the characters and the sense of contrast between the characters has become the usual technique in the narrative order. By creating contradictions, the audience can arouse their conjecture about the characters, and then reverse prove the conclusion in the subsequent narrative content, and finally give the audience a positive reply.

2.2 Criticism of human civilization

The criticism of the Western world, as well as the whole civilization of human, also played an integral part in the literary field of that time. This is another trend in Western society -- the rebellion against the social control, often coexisting with aggressive ideological propaganda. A creative element that demands attention is black humor, which can also be called gallows humor. Kurt Vonnegut, a novelist from this school, stood out. His novels are famous for their absurd plots and bitter irony. In his *Cat’s Cradle* (1963), he criticized the instrumental rationality of the Western world by a story about how the nuclear bomb was invented. In another novel of his, *Jailbird* (1979), he criticized the capitalist society and the consumerism of the Western world. In *Slaughterhouse-five* (1969), Vonnegut discussed the absurdity and horror of modern war and exposed various atrocities of human self-destruction, using unique writing techniques so as to warn the American government, which hung on to the cold war, not to play the terrible role as a doomsday maker and a human destroyer (Li Yan, 2017). All of his works showed this sense of humor, along with desperation. It was mainly the Western world that Vonnegut satirized, the vanity, the greed, and their so-called reason. He once said about the modern war: The terrible consequence of the modern war is that ever since then people have lost faith in humanity. In the field of films there was also an outstanding director, Stanley

Kubrick. The most representative work of him under the theme of the Cold War might be *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). In this film a USA air force general believed his “natural fluid” was polluted because of the “communist conspiracy”. So he sent a team of bomber to conduct nuclear strike to the Soviet Union. And in the end the world was destroyed while the politicians were looking forward to a kind of one-man-with-ten-women life. The air force general’s self-convincing speech vividly showed the paranoia of the Western government and some Western people: I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion, and the international Communist conspiracy, to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluid (Peter Bryan George & Stanley Kubrick, 1964)! By showing the absurdity of the cause of nuclear war, Kubrick satirized the USA government, and expressed everyone’s concern of the tight tension that it could easily cause the nuclear war and total destruction.

2.3 Reflections on war and civilization

The third trend concerns something beyond the countries and nations without any ideological elements, but rather it showed the universal sense of loss and nothingness held by people in the Western world, the reflection of the war and civilization, and the attempts to find a way out. Due to the aftermath of the Second World War, people no longer believed that there exists the so-called different-from-animality humanity in human nature. Threatened by the tension brought by the Cold War, the governments’ surveillance, the prophecy of the Doomsday Clock, etc., the Western people got lost and tried to find a way out. One important writer is William Golding, whose masterpiece *Lord of the Flies* (1954) imagined a world after the nuclear war. A bunch of kids lost on an island where their natural darkness hidden beneath the civilized reason was thoroughly exposed due to lack of restriction. By making kids, who are normally considered to be cute or innocent, as protagonists, Golding expressed his idea that everyone has an evil side and uncontrollable desire of immorality in his heart in nature. In the epilogue of the novel, the writer demonstrated that it was the reflection on human nature that the war truly enlightened him with. Unlike Golding’s profound thoughts, another group of American writers went onto another path to pursue freedom and inner peace in the tremendous sense of nothingness and loss, which was named the Beat Generation. As a literal group, the Beat Generation not only wrote about their ideas but also carried out these ideas for real. The famous novel *On the Road* (1957), written by Jack Kerouac, described a story of a group of young people who tried to find out their own way of living and figure out the meaning of existence through traveling on the road. And actually, the main characters are the representatives of the writer himself and his friends in the Beat Generation. Another novel of his, *The Dharma Bums* (1958), described how the main character—also on behalf of the writer himself—learned things from the Chinese poet Hanshanzi and Japanese Buddhism. It also expressed the idea of nature-loving and freedom. There is a famous saying in this novel: *O ever youthful, O ever weeping* (KerouacJack, 1976) which expressed the love for the life itself. Another important figure of the Beat Generation was the poet Allen Ginsberg, whose most famous work is *Howl* (1950). In this long poem, the poet expressed the sense of loss, social misfit, and desperation for living in such a terrifying era. We can learn about this feeling clearly from the first line of the poem: *I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix* (Ginsberg Allen, 2007). To the litterateurs, it was a world of madness.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, the ideologies of conformity, rebellion, and confusion in the Cold War were demonstrated through some literature and film works. Though these three showed great diversity in thoughts, even with conflicts among themselves, they still share something in common. First, their tones were generally negative. After the Second World War, people were already exhausted, and they expected peaceful days while the Cold War came and brought people even more anxiety led by the near-at-hand apocalypse. Moreover, all three trends contained the element of the desire for spiritual salvation. It is easy to see that confrontation was the political theme in the cold war, so the ideology conforming to it predominated the literary field. However, the longing for peace and spiritual freedom is the nature of human beings, and wars can only bring with them the wasteland in spirit no matter what forms they are in. To some extent, rebellion and confusion were the descendants of people’s pursuit of them.

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