Postmodern Nihilism, Motion, and the Space of Postmodern Warfare

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have established a link between 'motion', 'nihilism', and the 'new machine', although nihilism is a typical psychological feature in postmodern texts and the alienation of the new machine is a factor that cannot be ignored. This essay analyses the nihilistic tendencies of the characters and their unconscious movements in the postmodern war space in Tim O'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* by applying the 'new machine' perspective proposed by Fredric Jameson in *The Cultural Turn*. With reference to Khatin-Zadeh Omid's understanding of movement and non-movement, Fredric Jameson's point remains valid within the macro-concept of movement, which includes the transient cessation of movement. This research will provide a new interpretation of the visualisation of nihilistic tendencies within characters in postmodern texts.

Keywords: *Nihilism, Motion, New machine, Postmodernism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Tim O 'Brien's "How to Tell a True War Story" and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* attempt to retell experiences from fragments' memories in a post-modernist warfare space. Significantly, when narrating experiences, the unconscious motion of characters generated by the new machine with nihilism appears in both texts. The existing study has proposed the nihilistic tendency of characters in the space of post-modernist warfare. However, few research the nihilistic tendencies of the characters from the perspective of the alienation of the new machine. It will provide a new perspective on the explanation of Fredric Jameson's point while exploring the impact of the new machine on the character.

There is a certain connection between motion, nihilism, and the new machine. Fredric Jameson affirmed the critical position of motion in revealing the character's inner nihilism. He admitted that motion was the only way for new machine to present nihilism, which established the connection between new machine and nihilism visualization. To explain this speculation, it is necessary to analyze the relevant texts of "How to Tell a True War Story" and *slaughterhouse-five* and focus on the characters' movement states and their psychological states. This essay will draw the points of Fredric Jameson to argue whether the unconsciousness of character's movement is the only way to express the sense of nihilism brought by the new machine alienation in the texts of the space of postmodern warfare. It will complement the understanding of character's nihilism in postmodern texts with the vision of new machine.

Based on the above statement, this paper will be divided into two parts. According to the text of "How to Tell a True War Story" and *slaughterhouse-five*, the first part will discuss the appearance of nihilism in the texts and its connection with the new machine. It also put forward the possibility of other text explanations that Jameson's viewpoint may deny. The second part will analyze the text of "How to Tell a True War Story" and *slaughterhouse-five* and explain how new machines rely on motion to reveal the character's inner nihilism.

2. NIHILISM IN "HOW TO TELL A TRUE WAR STORY" AND SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE

The inner nihilism of characters exists widely in the post-modern warfare space created by "How to Tell a True War Story" and *Slaughterhouse-five*. In *The Cultural Turn*, Fredric Jameson points out that what the new machine expresses through the motion state contains the mystery of high concentration.[1] When trying to explain this mystery, Tarlaci Sultan tried to compare physics with mysticism, and found irreconcilable contradictions between new physics and "old god," and

clearly demonstrated that "god" was not a theological concept,[2] and it is closer to inner needs.[3] This explanation also applies to abstract concepts (i.e., mystery) proposed by Fredric Jameson. The mystery in the space of postmodern war is more like the nihilism of the human heart.

2.1 Nihilism in Postmodern Texts

Such nihilism is manifested by the motion state brought by new machines. For example, in "How to Tell a True War Story," they walk Napalm up and down the Bridges. They bring in the Cobras and F-4S. They use Willie Peter and HE and incendiaries. It is all fire. They make those mountains bum. " [4] No one knows why they need to "walk napalm up and down the Bridges," which means they do not know the purpose of motion.The parameter of nihilism is the connection between the characters in the text and reality. According to Šerpytytė's concept, if there is a gap between a person and reality, then nihilistic tendencies are judged to exist [5]. It is consistent with the interpretation of nihilism adopted.

Pessimism about new technology makes the nihilism mentioned above all the more obvious. Just as Rosalind Williams once said that the "ruined world" made by ourselves, the same pessimism occurs in the two texts selected in this paper.[6] In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, when the narrator and two little girls cross the Delaware River, went to the NewYork World's fair, etc., Anna asks himself about the present "How wide it was, how deep it was, How much was mine to keep." [4] The Narrator has seen the virtual past and future in the new technology and is confused about the existing life state. It seems an irretrievable nostalgia for the distant.[7] It makes his inner nihilistic tendencies manifest, and it easily captures these nihilistic elements.

2.2 The Relationship of Nihilism and New Machine in Postmodern Text

There are some reasonable reasons for replacing optimism with pessimism about technology. That is, new technology has brought breakthroughs in geographical mobility.[8] The motion brought by new technology has structured the character's understanding of space, that is, distance on the map.[9] New technology (e.g., new machines) makes the constraint on time and space disappear in the old world and makes characters unable to quickly adapt to the integration of real space and virtual space.[10] For example, in "How to Tell a True War Story," When "Strange Gook Music" becomes silence again, "The Dark was coming on hard Now, And off to the West I could see the mountains rising in silhouette, all the mysteries, and unknowns. "[4] When the characters' perception of geography is blurred by the involvement of new technology, the mystery with

pessimism emerges in the text.

2.3 the Relationship of New Machine and Motion of Characters

The traditional concept of geography has been invalidated, and the characters in the text are confronted with the unknown and the blank. It also sets the stage for the character's next move, that is, motion without purpose. The reason for unknown and confused nihilism is the alienation of new technology.[11] Further, the character becomes numb to motion because of the cognitive change of geographical location brought by new machines, which can also be understood as the change of motion speed and mode.

This kind of breakthrough in the region makes characters fear that machines are not controlled by human beings and even the idea that machines control human beings. It makes character's sense of self shrink abruptly, negates human agency, and even leads to fatalism,[8] believing that everything in the world has lost its meaning and direction. In the text quoted previously, "Cobras and F-4S, they use Willie Peter and HE and incendiaries. It is all fire."[4] It can also be seen that due to the fear of the unknown, the narrator mentioned the new machine in a high density. Character do not have their thinking and judgment ability for the current postmodern war space but unconsciously use new machines to relieve their fear of the unknown.

2.4 the Relationship of Nihilism, New Machine and Character's Motion in Postmodern Texts

In this case, past life experiences and new technologies together create a space of conflict but full of reality in the warfare space. However, nihilism emerged and filled the space because of the irreconcilable contradiction between the new technology and the old experience. In the postmodern war space, nihilism is more pronounced through the character's numb and unconscious motion. For example, In "How to Tell a True War Story," it narrative that,"Right away, Lemon and Rat Kiley started goofing off. They did not understand about the spookiness. They did not know. A nature hike, they thought, not even A war." [4] The Characters fail to connect substantively with reality, thus showing their vague nihilistic tendency, which is made evident by the state of motion. They do not know what motion stands for, why it is motion, or even where to go. This behavior exposes their disconnect from reality and makes nihilism visibly visible.

The same conflict and nihilism appears in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. "Billy Survived, but he was a Dazed wanderer far behind the New German lines." [12] In addition to the time dimension not mainly discussed, Billy's motion also has apparent nihilism in geographical space. He felt uncontrollable and ignorant of the actual

changes in geography, although he survived and had motion.

It also confirms Jameson's explanation that motion played an essential role in making nihilism visualization more obvious and that the numbing motion was the result of new technology's geographical breakthroughs. It means that motion is an important way for new technology to manifest a character's inner nihilism in literary texts. It is challenging to capture traces of nihilism in text. The presentation of nihilism always seems to rely on the characters to express bewilderment or confusion about the mixture of reality and virtual in the dimension of time and space.[13] The spatial dimension will be mainly focused on, which is also necessary to focus on the impact of regional breakthroughs brought by new technology on the character's mind.

2.5 the Medium between Nihilism and New Machine in Postmodern Texts

In text, motion essential exists because it is difficult for new technology to have a direct connection with character's inner minds, and it needs a medium to communicate between the two. The connection is implicit. For example, when the text leaves the motion element, In "How to Tell a True War Story, " we see " pessimism about emerging technologies," And immediately following "All the things I did not understand."[4] There would be no thought process that provides the possibility of explanation. It will not be able to capture where nihilism "did not understand" came from and how it relates to new technology. The motion came along to fill the gap in this explanation. As the text shows, "Thinking about the coming day and how we would cross the river and march west into the mountains, All the ways I might die, all the things I did not understand. "[4]

However, there are some doubts that motion is the only medium for the new machine to show character's inner nihilism. Such statements may deny the possibility of other interpretations of the text. There is some evidence for this conjecture in the *Slaughterhouse-five*. For example, when Billy is threatened by a gun (a new machine), he showed a loss, and his thinking is out of touch with reality. However, he does not produce a substantial motion (such as avoidance) but appeared in a static state instantly. It attracts the attention and carries out textual analysis.

3. THE DEGREE NEW MACHINES RELY ON MOTION TO VISUALIZE NIHILISM

To explain nihilism's apparent visualization in postmodern war texts, there is a pattern established across the texts of "How to Tell a True War Story" and *Slaughterhouse-five* about the nihilism in postmodern warfare space. This pattern will mainly focus on the manifestation of character's inner nihilism when they are in the motion state in the spatial dimension and whether new technology shows character's inner nihilism through other ways or independently. Through the analysis of the pattern, the way of obvious visualization of nihilism will be captured intuitively. It will provide arguments for more textual explanations.

3.1 Nihilism Visualization by Motion in "How to Tell a True War story" and Slaughterhouse-five

It is very common and similar to express the inner nihilism of character by motion. Motion, with its strong nihilism, appears in both texts. Character are not clear about the purpose of their motion. As shown in the text of "How to Tell a True War Story","When a guy dies, like Lemon, you look away and then look back for a moment and then look away again. The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot." [4] Lemon and Rat are unaware that the war and the new machine threaten their Motion. They lose the perception of the external geographical space, which means they do not know what motion represents but blindly obey the current state. The disconnection of reality perception allows to capture their nihilism easily. In *slaughterhouse-five,* it has the similar situation,"Billy Survived, but he was a Dazed wanderer far behind the New German lines." [12] it is a straightforward narrative of "he was a dazed" when he survived a war and has motion to "the New German lines" the numbness of Billy through non-subjective position movements.

3.2 Nihilism Visualization by Other Medium in Slaughterhouse-five

However, the *Slaughterhouse-five* and "How to Tell a True War Story" text still have some subtle differences. The *Slaughterhouse-five* makes more attempts at narrative. The author thinks it is difficult to express this nihilism. Perhaps it would make the way nihilism visualization more diverse. "How to Tell a True War Story" seems to find a "True way" to show the character's inner nihilism by borrowing the *Slaughterhouse-five* expression. It seems to look for the most feasible and effective form of visualization, making more immature or inconspicuous nihilism visualization methods disappear from the text. It makes Jameson's general idea quite relevant in the context of "How to Tell a True War Story", but there is some argument in *Slaughterhouse-five.*

As analyzed above, the state of motion and the embodiment of nihilism maintain a close relationship in both texts. In "How to Tell a True War Story", motion seems to be the only way to establish an obvious connection between new technology and nihilism. At the end of this text, "It is about the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the Mountains and do things you are

afraid to do. "[4] It seems to indicate a new machine alienation as something people fear but have to accept, something that requires people to constantly cross rivers and into mountains. Motion is inevitable when New technology makes nihilism visible.

Of concern, however, is that we found a suspicious motion state in *Slaughterhouse-five*, "The third bullet was for The filthy Flamingo, who stopped dead center in The road when the lethal bee buzzed past his ear. Billy stood there politely, giving the marksman another chance. It was his addled understanding of the rules of warfare that the marksman should be Given a second chance. The next shot missed Billy's kneecaps by going end-on-end, From the Sound of it. "[12] The character's unconscious psychological activity is obvious expressed, yet he does not move geographically at all. When the bullets hit Billy, his reaction was insensitive and inconsistent with his usual reaction. He stopped dead center in the road without any motion. In this state, it can already capture Billy's disconnection with the reality of nihilism. It means that new technology visualizes nihilism without any geographical movement of the characters. It calls into question Jameson's claim that motion is the only medium to present nihilism for the perspective of new machine alienation

3.3 Macroscopic Concept of Motion

In this regard, some another possibility needs to be considered, that is, to make the motion referred to by Jameson macroscopic. Perhaps this paper can interpret the motion proposed by Fredric as continuous Motion in the narrow sense and a state of motion, that is, temporary stagnation in motion. Some studies in the field of abstract and concrete motion provide support. They believe that specific motion concepts should not be divided by dichotomy.[14] It means that perhaps it is more sense to regard as the state of motion from a macro perspective.

The evidence and text mentioned above may still be consistent with Fredric's view in a macro sense. However, this paper still offers more possibilities for interpretation of this view. The concept of motion states proposed by Khatin-Zadeh Omid seems to be consistent with the interpretation of literary texts. However, perhaps the macro and narrow distinction between motion concepts is not the only way to verify that all of exists ways of nihilism visualization. Therefore, the interpretation of motion state needs more in-depth discussion.

4. CONCLUSION

In How to Tell a True War Story and *Slaughterhouse-five*, Fredric Jameson's point about motion is the only way for new machine to visualize nihilism is still reasonable. To test Fredric Jameson's Points, this paper established a pattern across the texts of "How to Tell a True War Story" and *Slaughterhouse-five* about the texts

nihilism in Post-modern war space. This pattern focuses on the spatial dimension, and nihilism is produced when the degree of connection with reality is taken as the judgment parameter. However, when evaluating the inner nihilism of the characters, this essay considers how to make the inner nihilism manifest to the outside world. From the perspective of new technology, this paper finds that motion brought by new machines plays an essential role in making nihilism visible. Fredric Jameson highly affirmed the position of motion as the only way. In this paper, after analyzing the two texts , it finds that, from a macro point of view, motion is the only way for new machines to connect with nihilism. Therefore, the questioning of motion's unique status provides a new perspective for explaining Fredric Jameson's points, and also analyzes the way of the inner nihilism manifestation of characters from the perspective of new machine, providing suggestions for the research of postmodern style writing.

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