

ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation, titled “Ideology and Resistance in the post-Cold War Novels of John le Carré,” is to explore the relationship of literature to society refracted through ideology and resistance, with specific reference to eleven of the twelve novels of John le Carré written after the Cold War, symbolized and objectified by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1980. For the purpose of this study they are clubbed together under the rubric “post-Cold War Novels,” though critical consensus on any such categorization is hard to come by. However, given that some of the characteristics identified in this body of work are more transparent and more relevant than what has gone before, such a grouping would appear to be in order. Second, looking at the ‘end’ of the ideological bipolarization of the world, offers the novelist a clearer vantage to target totalitarianism, elitism, nationalism, and scientism, to name the most visible objects of his critique.

What is more important than the choice of corpus or periodization is the thesis of resistance proposed in this work. It is suggested that le Carré resists the dominant ideology of Capitalism and its many byproducts by relentlessly exposing the hollowness of social economic claims made on behalf of modernity and its civilizational forbearer, Enlightenment. Instead of directly attacking his targets, le Carré adopts a unique method of resistance and subversion of oppressive structures of power and capital. He writes spy fiction, which on critical scrutiny, emerges as an Ideological State Apparatus of Capitalist modernity, and not just a popular genre catering to the masses. Having chosen his genre, however, le Carré works assiduously against generic conventions and formulaic features of spy fiction in order to the expose the complicity between the moral stance of spy fiction—circulated among others by successful Hollywood projects—and the capitalist-colonialist-racist-nationalist-sexist ideologies it promotes and protects. Le Carré’s spy fiction—and, by implication, le Carré himself—should be seen as a Trojan Horse figure in the world of consumer capitalism and popular culture, apparently compliant and complicit but in reality highly subversive.

It is suggested here that resistance has many shades, and there cannot possibly be a fixed order of resistance, given that the structures of oppression are too strong and too entrenched for direct confrontation. This thesis argues that there is a protean resistance mechanism at work in le Carré's fiction that consistently devises and revises its strategies of resistance, as evident in the frequent subversion not only the conventions of the formulaic spy novel, but also the horizon of expectations generated by his own writings of the Cold War period.

The thesis is informed by Marxist studies of ideology and resistance, primarily, addressed to the political content and materiality of literary-cultural texts. In specific cases, the study borrows from the work of Althusser, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Eagleton, and Jameson, to name the most easily recognizable thinkers. Two critical thinkers whose writings can be said to thread the work together are Edward Said and Raymond Williams, primarily because they offer two powerful tropes to make sense of culture and society. Williams, for instance, provides the telling expression "organic community" directing popular culture away from what is also called market civilization. Said, on the other hand, provides a convenient passage to the world of the postcolonial other, legitimized fictionally through myriad figurations of subalternity. Similarly, Adorno and Horkheimer provide a crucial counter-discourse to a specific type of modernity organized and orchestrated by consumer capitalism, and its symbolic territorial acronym, the West. For, Adorno insists on a certain regression in art and literature in view of what could be a persistence—whether explicit, latent, or residual—of structures of oppression in literary cultural texts and conventions. The literary artist is expected to throw up in despair, given the range and scale of oppression. In fact, literary complicity with structures of oppression, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, gets conveniently translated into a formal obsession, or a participatory celebration of the market's success. Insofar as detecting contradictions within literary-cultural institutions are concerned, Foucault's thesis on the Panopticon serves us well, especially when we look at welfare schemes as monstrous ISAs. This thesis does not, however, stop at this point, in the sense that discourse is seen as important, but not as infallible tool of oppression.

This is where the thesis brings in, both at the levels of history and praxis, le Carré and his special “brand” of spy fiction. The key lies in the will to power, but in an anti-Nietzschean sense, which, we may suggest, is a willingness to fight an enemy much more powerful than himself. While there is no doubt that the scales do not favour le Carré, he is not prepared to give up either the fight, or the object. Le Carré does not favour the idea of one last post, something that feeds most resistance literature and movements. He philosophically recognizes that the enemy, however powerful at a given moment, is only an agent of somebody or something. In a way, the resisting subject, at crucial moments in the battle against injustice, may enter a hall of mirrors, where one is likely to mistake the shadow for the object. If, for instance, his fight at a given point of time is directed at the so called “War on Terror,” it does not desist from looking at allied factors that create warriors who terrify. If the American soldier hero is shown to be a childish and immature gun handler, who has no right to shed the blood of unwitting civilians, the same soldier is portrayed as the product of the unequal distribution of wealth. In other words, le Carré sees evil in insurgency, which, then is attributed to colonialism, which, in turn, is attributed to human greed in specific contexts, and so on.

The point is that le Carré neither believes in, nor demonizes, one branded enemy of human kind. As the enemy is likely to adopt many selves and many shapes, so would resistance gain by being protean. On the surface, it may seem odd to say so, but le Carré’s fight against ideologies of oppression and exclusion has an uncanny resemblance to Gandhi’s war against the British empire. It is resolute, and yet, scattered. Perhaps, it gains its strength by being scattered. In the context of the post-Cold War spy novels, we can see le Carré’s multi-pronged attacks, not only on colonialism and crony capitalism—that are circulated by consumer driven and consumer oriented genres like the spy novel—but also the universalist rhetoric of democracy, and knowledge economies.

Le Carré repeatedly draws attention to the failure of some of the vital civilizational systems to protect the world’s interests: the university, for example. The complicity of educational institutions with tyranny is very much available in the resource driven,

and resource oriented research in which business conglomerates invest without any embarrassment. This, to le Carré, not only defeats the university, but also prevents it from engaging with truth in any real sense. As he sees it, universities no longer provide either the time or space for the fearless pursuit of truth, whether artistic, social, or scientific. He speaks of what he calls a Counter-University, which is neither impractical, nor impossible, in spite of the absurdity it conjures up, at first sight. Here, too, is a problem of assessment and understanding of the role that individuals and intellectuals play as part of institutions. Our universities have failed because they have ‘institutionalized’ knowledge, divorcing it from its most crucial axes: risk and responsibility. Our universities have compromised on knowledge by endlessly reducing or extending it to pliable systems. On the one hand, knowledge expands into abstractions, and no longer connects with the very people who invested in knowledge. On the other hand, it becomes a panoply of market goods that are useful, but no longer retain any human contact. Spy novels, in certain ways, undermine the role of social wisdom, to be sure, but fetishize utility to such an extent that it substitutes knowledge.

To this extent, it is necessary to recognize a recurring philosophical search for knowledge—almost bordering on the Faustian—in le Carré’s unique ‘anti-intellectual’ stance. One has to look at this issue with caution. The choice of the spy genre is, for le Carré, we suggest, at once a stance and an anti-stance. He practices a spy genre form that is, in effect, anti-spy genre. He proposes a utopian university that runs counter to the very philosophy of the modern university system. His call for democracy is so deep and disturbing that it is almost anti-democratic. This thesis negotiates with le Carré’s work in what can be seen as a Derridean negativistic mode of meditation, where what *is*, is at once *what is not*.