

After the bomb – a study into the mindset of the cold war era



After the chaos of the atomic bomb and the carnage of World War II, precedence was placed on government constructs to supply order to a tense climate, particularly in finding direction in a new ' East versus West' conflict. In John Le Carre's mid-twentieth century novel, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, the propagated glamorisation of the political-spy role acts as a foil to the bureaucratic, utilitarian characterisation of the Circus setting, wherein its façade projects an air of legitimacy to an ideologically confused populace. Thus political agency becomes an answer to the era's stasis, as dialogue illuminates Leamas' profession as an escape from the ennui and anxiety of a nuke-threatened existence. Similarly in Francis Coppola's 1970s film *Apocalypse Now*, paranoia in the threat of Communism and the Bamboo Curtain incites the American soldiers' sense of duty, as the military construct symbolically relies on violence to create a sense of power and security in an apathetic modern society. Contrastingly, whilst attempts to find purpose meet disillusioned success, the ephemeral questioning of America's Democracy, particularly in the hypocritical Vietnam crusade, dissuades the legitimacy of the central government's political direction and responsibility, as symbolised by Willard's loss of innocence and journey towards immorality. Samuel Becket's mid-Twentieth Century play *Waiting for Godot* supports this conception as well, as the titular religious question subverts the presence of salvation, from which the political paradigm loses sway in the face of spiritual and ideological emptiness. Thus, government polity cannot overturn a sense of powerlessness and anxiety in the post-bomb era.

As the nuclear-weapons race places universal desolation within threatening proximity, finding purpose and meaning is found in political agency. In Le

Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, federal propaganda plays into this social vulnerability, wherein the glamorisation of the political-spy role is explored through the archetypically masculine depiction of Leamas as both emotionally and physically resilient, as illustrated in "remorseless" and "hard". In an anxious climate still reeling from the morally questionable actions of WWII, a return to this traditional, conservative structure allows for the confronting truths of the modern era to be masked by "the same banality", from which a sense of stability and order returns. Thus, delusion presents itself as a basis for which order can be found. This is expressed through the characterisation of the Circus setting as a foil to the glamorised federal construct, wherein the bureaucratic, utilitarian and often dehumanising nature of the institution, particularly in the portrayal of Leamas as an "ends and means" in the court scene, contrasts to the public's sense of Western individualism as a moral basis. This represents the sense of loss experienced by the Cold-War populace, for which the repetition of "not knowing" underlines the social paradigms desperate search for legitimacy, order and meaning in an ideologically-confused setting, and its subsequent misplacement in the government polity. This is further expressed through dialogue, wherein Leamas' profession acts as an escape from the ennui of a nuclear-threatened society as, ironically, the position gives him a sense of purpose and power despite the threat's continued prevalence. This is illustrated in "...playing cowboys and Indians to brighten [his] rotten little life".

Paranoia creates the same effect in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, wherein the social paradigm's search for power in a vulnerable landscape incites

America's political involvement in Vietnam, specifically to curb the Bamboo Curtain and the threat of Communism in Asia. In order to supplant this ideological threat, the central government promotes the effort as an American responsibility; a military "mission". This is illustrated through the overt enthusiasm of the soldiers, as in the helicopter scene, the link to Norse mythology's death gods in the score's title, *Ride of the Valkyries*, implies their "god-like" responsibility, as in this brutality they assume power and superiority over fear; thus the "love... of napalm" and "victory", as inaction would mean the "nightmare" of "crawling, slithering, along the edge of a straight razor". Subsequently, as like in the characterisation of the Circus, dehumanisation in the political "termination" of opposition expresses a level of universal distrust and anxiety, in which paranoia allows for disassociation to thrive. Symbolically, this presents nihilism and apathy as a new vital piece of modern order, as despite the subsequent anti-war protest, it is soldier's like Kurtz who embrace the "horror" as a bi-product of existential crises within modern warfare; brutality is needed to find purpose within vulnerability. This is further embodied by his desolate characterisation, "just wanting to go out like a soldier, standing up", and "trying" to mean something in a disparate, Post-bomb world; thus promoting political agency as an escape from social anxiety.

Nevertheless, government systems fail in securing a sense of power within futility. Despite a deluded placement of legitimacy within government agency, innate suspicion and distrust breaks the bond between the political body and the head, particularly as America's involvement in Vietnam contrasts to its basis in Democracy. In *Apocalypse Now*, this idea is

illuminated by Willard's metaphoric journey down the river, which parallels Leamas' road with the children in the car, and *Waiting for Godot's* road-side, the mission symbolises life and direction. In particular, it represents the direction of the political agency; a journey into immorality and disassociation. This becomes evident in the merging of Kurtz' and Willard's voice in the reading of the letters, as their retreat into the "jungle" becomes a strong motif for their shared sense of innocence lost; their immorality leaves them dehumanised and creatures of political apathy. This is further apparent in the characterisation of the soldiers as wilfully brutal and disassociated from their actions, as they symbolically become an embodiment of the political perspective. This is expressed in "...had a hill bombed, for 12 hours... victory". Thus a lack of constitute is signified, as the American political body's ignorance of its own moral basis of freedom of expression, specifically in order to combat its own personal war against Communism, implies hypocrisy. Hence, this illegitimacy incurs the social paradigms protest and disillusionment. This inner conflict inspires futility; so long as collective bodies differ in a lost setting, order and purpose inevitably fail and anxiety persists in confusion.

This theme is further expressed in Becket's *Waiting for Godot*, wherein political struggles are illuminated as inconsequential in the face of religious questioning. Its footing in Absurdism implies the era's lack of meaning, and subsequently its political vendettas as absurd, as in the wake of the atomic bomb and the "hope deferred", its actions are perceived as a response to the "something sick"; reactionary but lacking in meaning besides fear, likewise to America's Vietnam efforts. As anxiety breeds its likeness,

particularly in the motivations of the government polity, the process becomes a paradox. This is broached via the circular structure of the play, as the closing question, "well, shall we go?", equates to a lack of social mobility and static, from which ideological questioning cannot salvage them. This is further explored by the characterisation of Pozzo as a side act, as whilst the power relationship between the two parties, in parallel to the 'East versus West' ideological struggle, offers a distraction from their desperate "wait", their shared "loss of rights" implicates universal futility. Thus, anxiety stems from "nothingness" and the need to be the "thief... saved", particularly as the Cold War populace "compares (themselves to Christ)"; their misdeeds are misinterpreted as sacrifice, for otherwise they would have no purpose in a disparate climate. Hence, to exist in the Post-bomb era is to "waste and pine", as to accept a spiritual and ideological emptiness within the social consciousness is to fester in meaninglessness and cease to exist. Thus, whilst the government structure both succeeds and fails in feeding a sense of vitality to a vulnerable society through political agency, it is the deep-seated nature of the anxiety within the social consciousness that defeats the attempt.

While faith is often placed in government constructs to attain order and purpose within a lost environment, it is the wide-spread permeation of fear that cheapens the legitimacy of the agency. Whilst it succeeds in attributing purpose, both in the glamorisation of the spy-role in Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, and the sense of power inspired by duty in Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, it is delusion and social fear that founds it. Leamas symbolically escapes the ennui of vulnerability, as his profession allows a

disassociation from ever-present powerlessness. Similarly, it is the military constructs own basis in fear and paranoia that allows for a god-like responsibility. Thus any order or purpose attained in government agency is illegitimate, as the soldiers symbolically embody the brutality of the politics, and in Becket's *Waiting for Godot* the Absurdist nature of the play parallels the absurdist nature of the society, particularly as the religious question erodes any baseless meaning within the political struggle. Thus, it is the root of the social anxiety, the atomic bomb itself, that recreates its own futility in paradox, as the social paradigm continues to search for meaning and direction in a lost, conflicted setting.