

Social Transformation and Bodily Narratives: A Comparative Study of "In the Penal Colony" by Kafka and "1986" by Yu Hua

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Abstract: Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" and Yu Hua's "1986" share high degrees of similarity in themes and artistic characteristics. Therefore, a comparative study of these two works is conducted, utilizing methods such as thematic juxtaposition, cultural interpretation, and symbolic analysis, to delve deeply into how literary works portray special historical events and social changes during periods of social transformation. This study reveals the commonalities and differences, as well as the meanings and values of bodily narratives in different historical periods and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Kafka; Yu Hua; Period of Social Transformation; Bodily Narratives

1. Introduction

The body is a vessel for human existence and perception. "In a certain sense, literary writing is the writing of the writer's body in presence" [1]. Bodily narrative is not only a technique for character shaping and narrative progression but also becomes a subject and medium that can transcend history in writing.

During periods of social transformation, bodily narrative can be further divided into "in-text body" and "out-of-text body." In dealing with the same historical period, the "in-text body" consists of individuals who actively participated in history through personal experiences and are "experiencers" of the past, while the "out-of-text body" refers to "receivers" of the new history, passively shaped by external powers. Therefore, by analyzing the attitudes of the "receivers" towards the bodily narratives of the "experiencers," we can deeply reflect on the histories, cultures, and social relationships of different countries and nations. This paper selects Kafka's "In the

Penal Colony" and Yu Hua's "1986," two renowned works, to analyze the conflicts between historical "experiencers" and "receivers" during periods of social transformation. It elucidates the evolution of bodily narratives from the print era to the image era.

2. The Print Era: The Disappearance of Corporal Punishment as a Public Spectacle

In the print era, rulers utilized technology to strengthen social control, expanding the reach of power. "In the Penal Colony," set against the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, depicts a period of social transformation where human civilization faces crisis. The story revolves around a traveler visiting an island to witness the execution of a prisoner, carried out by a machine resembling a large printing press, with the prisoner's body akin to paper awaiting printing.

Foucault posits that "the body is the surface on which events are inscribed, the place of disassembly of the self, an apparatus forever in the process of disintegration" [2]. The execution machine, designed by the former Commandant, operates over 12 hours – the first six for "writing" with excruciating pain inflicted on the prisoner, and the last six for "recognition" of the inscribed text leading to death. The officer, treating the machine like a product manual, meticulously explains its composition, procedural characteristics, and execution details to the traveler, impassively observing his reactions.

The traveler, an objective and neutral "out-of-text body," draws the officer's attention, to some extent symbolizing the author's stance. After detaching from everyday life and arriving at the penal colony to observe the execution, the traveler maintains a certain distance from the ritual. However,

after hearing the officer's thorough explanation of the ritual's preparation and execution – from judgment, conviction, to the execution and sermon – the traveler gradually becomes involved, moving from maintaining objections to abandoning argument, ultimately making his visit part of the ritual's process. The novel's depiction of the execution machine's sacred ritual carries dual implications of religious and state alienation.

The execution ritual first alludes to the scene where God gives the laws to Moses: the officer represents Moses receiving the law, the phrase "Respect Your Superiors" inscribed on the prisoner's back echoes the Torah's repeated emphasis on "Fear God," and the judgment in the penal colony points to "the Last Judgment." After the interruption of the execution ritual, the officer hopes to cleanse sin and elevate the power of faith by executing himself as a scapegoat for others. Expertly operating the execution machine, the officer, calm and full of conviction, allows the iron spikes to pierce through his forehead.

Nietzsche believed that "the emphasis on the body heralds the coming of the Übermensch (Superman); only after the body unreservedly emerges, can the Superman arrive as scheduled" [3]. The officer in the novel is the "in-text body," a history shaped by faith and reason. His body, crushed into flesh and blood by the execution machine, metaphorically signifies that the nation, homeless and adrift, has broken free from the codes and controls history has imposed on the body, ending its guilty relationship with God, and choosing a new path amidst the intense turmoil of social transformation.

In the final execution ritual, the impending obsolescence of the execution machine becomes a consensus, yet the officer remains indulged in past glories. Anchoring the officer's faith is the tombstone of the old Commandant, inscribed with the prophecy: "The old Commandant will rise again and lead his followers from this house to recapture this penal colony" [4]. This passage originates from Peter's encouragement to Christians in the New Testament.

On one hand, the officer firmly believes in

salvation from the Promised Land; on the other, his inheritance and mastery of the execution machine suggest that the effective element is the power possessed by the old Commandant rather than faith itself. The execution machine and its blueprints also embody the legal and technical systems of modern industrial civilization, hinting at the collective unconscious of modern people, where the state machinery, once alienated, becomes a tool of autocratic violence.

The body, as the initial perspective for perceiving the world, is utilized by rulers who employ technology for public control. The rake operating the execution machine inscribes words on the prisoner's body, utterly destroying human sensibility and instinct. Faced with technological domination, people lose the ability to negate and resist social injustice. In the story, the prisoner is sentenced to death by the machine solely based on a superior's testimony for disobedience. All power is vested in the machine.

For Foucault, the body is a site of despair, subject to various powers' manipulation and control, shaped and produced, altered and maneuvered. Facing power, the prisoner's body exhibits no fear or resistance. Under power's destruction and subjugation, it becomes a tool of production, incorporated into the history of production plans and objectives. Regarding the open trials that continue history in the penal colony, besides the traveler's visit, there is no longer an audience. In the era of the old Commandant, it was the center for disciplining the public, where cruel judgments made the spectators experience transient justice and the thrill of venting dark human nature. Authoritarian rule requires collective endorsement and recognition. From the past's crowded scenes to today's desolation, direct punishment of the body becomes increasingly concealed, "the body, no longer the object of punishment, disappears as a form of public spectacle" [5], and authoritarian rule in the modern era loses its public space of power.

3. The Image Era: Bodily Resistance as a Practice of Public Performance

"1986," written in 1987, is set against the backdrop of the end of the social movement,

a period when the truth about historical violence was concealed in a collective, selective forgetting, and the nation was transitioning from extraordinary to normal times. The novel depicts a once-conformist university history teacher who was persecuted and disappeared during the social movement for researching and documenting the history of punishment. When the history teacher suddenly reappears on the streets as if returning from the grave, he is deemed insane by the public. The teacher's madness is partly due to the Confucian tradition in China that emphasizes "the body's experience," stressing the need for personal experience and diligent practice. As a firsthand victim of the social movement, the teacher's "stimulation" into madness turns his body into a vessel for the memory of historical punishment and a personification of the social movement's history. On the other hand, his madness and loss of speech after becoming insane reflect the objectivity of history. Unlike other Scar Literature that describes historical events, "1986" does not judge history through a madman but realistically presents the social movement's dual destruction of the human spirit and body.

After going mad, the history teacher inflicts various punishments on himself, including "Mo (tattooing), Yi (nose slicing), Gong (castration), and Yue (foot amputation)," turning his self-mutilation into a brutal punishment performance. In China, meticulously maintaining the safety and integrity of one's body as part of ethics and morality is significant. In the era of imagery, the body transitions from the realm of natural ethics to the public domain of society, becoming symbolized, emblemized, and historicized, serving as a powerful rhetorical resource and narrative system in individual expression, and a medium for the production of resistant discourse.

Yu Hua's experience of growing up in a hospital made him particularly calm towards violence and death. For instance, in the description of Yi (nose slicing), "Yi! The steel saw begins to saw in, blood starts to seep out, and soon the saw is on the nasal bone, making a slight frictional sound" [6]. This description of the body is abnormal

and irrational, filled with pain and anxiety, resonating with the helpless and desperate emotional structure of the group of violence victims.

Erving Goffman points out that performance as a grassroots resistance method is a symbolic practice at the deeper level of signification: individual expression already implies "the ability to make an impression," realized through symbolic marking activities, including "given expressions and expressions given off." The former emphasizes direct information attached to symbols, while the latter aims to reveal the action intentions behind the symbol representation, i.e., the representational intentions of the actor [7].

The madman's body becomes a publicly visible social symbol carrying specific meanings, piercing through the fragile social order, including health discourse and ethical norms, with its absurd self-harm performance and the terror of punishment in the "front stage." The meaning of bodily resistance is incorporated into the larger discursive structure, realizing the expansion of the body from biological to social, internal to external, animalistic to subjective, mobilizing the viewer to focus on the "backstage" societal contradictions and awakening the power hierarchy and the public's moral reflection on the imbalance of order.

When the ancient tortures that the madman once studied transform into horrific, bloody visual images, they fail to awaken emotional support in the social moral domain. Instead, the onlookers display indifference, merely observing dispassionately without contemplating the reasons for the madman's insanity or the truth behind his self-harm, allowing him to scream in pain.

As time progresses, people no longer fear this violence; rather, they persistently gather to watch as if it were "an interesting matter," discussing it enthusiastically – a situation that deeply saddens the former history teacher. "The collective memory of a nation or a society is often controlled by power. When the desire for people to forget the social movement slowly evolves into a series of rigid regulations, and even when the memory of that period can only manifest

certain positive aspects, the memory of the social movement gradually transforms from a national catastrophe into a history of only a few in power and the elite being persecuted" [8]. The wife, having survived, senses her husband's return but hides anxiously at home, rapidly aging due to her fear of light. The daughter, though not a witness to that historical period, is filled with strangeness and terror towards her biological father.

Hayden White's theory of "Metahistory" states: "The selection and interpretation of historical materials are creations by historians using language in different ideological contexts" [9]. Power attempts to erase this part of history, making it unperceivable to future generations. The real father dies in a miserable and lonely manner, while the false father appears beside the mother and daughter; the former represents the existence of objective history, the latter the deformation of collective memory. The novel's ending, with the family seemingly peaceful and harmonious, is not the true essence in the eyes of the madman.

During the period of social transformation, the long-standing social structure dissolves, and groups unable to adapt to the new social environment, losing their sense of identity and pride, experience a significant psychological gap, feeling intense resentment and deprivation. Such groups often resort to primitive, individualized bodily expressions to attract attention and spark public discourse. In "In the Penal Colony," the new Commandant is unwilling to support the officer's judicial procedures and harbors hostility towards the system.

Although the officer is steadfast in his beliefs and full of the will to survive, he ends in dejection due to the traveler's lack of support. In "1986," the madman's body becomes a grotesque spectacle, incompatible with civilized order and suffering great torment. The madman's self-harm eventually leads to the loss of his body, and while his body becomes numb, his mind gradually clarifies [10]; meanwhile, the mother and daughter symbolize the majority of people from that era, brushing past the historical violence metaphorically represented by the madman.

4. Conclusion

From the era of text to the era of imagery, human history resembles a history of corporal punishment, where bodily narrative in the public domain undergoes a striking transformation from being disciplined by power to performing for power. Inside the penal colony, the machine is destroyed by the new Commandant, and visible bodily violence ceases to exist. However, the soldiers and the prisoner, who could have escaped on a small boat, are deterred by the weight of the traveler's rope and do not dare to leave noisily.

The madman's bodily resistance against history in the novel, after paying a painful physical price, ends in tragedy as the onlooking crowd engages in casual forgetting and pathological joy. Thus, it is foreseeable that the disciplining of bodies by historical violence does not disappear with the cessation of cruel punishments. As the means of information dissemination advance, historical violence will penetrate deeper into our lives, affecting our bodies.

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