

The Re-occurrence and Reconstruction of History in Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*

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Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me*, published in 2019, depicts the parallel world of London in 1982, when artificial intelligence field was well beyond our current level of development. After Britain's defeat in the Falklands War, Tony Benn was elected Prime Minister. And Alan Turing, the father of artificial intelligence, did not commit suicide. The storyline is full of intertextual expressions, with the setting beyond the British Isles and the narrative structure abandoning the coherence in the traditional novel in favour of a fragmented feature that closely integrates the individual with the society and the history. The paper analyses McEwan's textual presentation of Britain's post-World War II history from three perspectives: textual truth, historical fiction, and historical reflection, in the context of the New Historicism, and explores how McEwan approaches the deconstruction of power discourses and ideologies. This paper aims to achieve reflection on the past, concern for the present and early warning for the future under textuality of histories and historicity of text.

Keywords: new historicism, *Machines Like Me*, textual truth, historical fiction

Introduction

The contemporary British author Ian McEwan is a prolific writer who has published 17 works so far, including two collections of short stories. His early works are mostly about sexual abuse, insanity, ethical taboos, and so forth, earning him the nickname "Ian Macabre". However, the main theme of his later works has changed. *The Child in Time* (1987) marks a turning point. It indicates that his writing style turns more to "serious topics" such as family life, ethics and morality, historical perception and conflicts of faith. As Ingersoll (2011) puts it, McEwan is a "novelist historian", not in the sense that he is a historical novelist, but in the sense that over the past few decades his writing style has gradually moved away from taboo sex and perverted violence to a particular moment in history and the history of that moment, which is a heartfelt, conscious and self-disciplined shift (p. 131).

Machines Like Me depicts a parallel world of London in 1982, which artificial intelligence research has already been well beyond our current level of development. In the novel, there are lots of historical events of modern England, and the storyline is full of intertextual descriptions. After Britain's defeat in Falkland Islands War, Tony Benn is elected Prime Minister. And Alan Turing, the "father of artificial intelligence", does not commit suicide. Meanwhile, 32-year-old Charlie begins two new relationships. The first is that he falls in love

with Miranda, his upstairs neighbor. The other is that he uses his inheritance to buy a new humanoid robot "Adam". "Adam" has a fake intelligence and appearance, which is able to complete the realistic and natural movements and expression changes. In the joint setting of Charlie and Miranda, "Adam" becomes a "living" Adam, as if it were their common child. The setting of the work breaks through the confines of the geographically Britain, and the narrative structure of the work presents fragmented features instead of the continuity of traditional novels.

The term "new historicism" was formally first introduced by Greenblatt in the 1980s. Since then, the new historicism has compatibly delved into both the relationships between history and literature, between individuals and literature on the premise of textuality. Louis Montrose, as one of the key representatives of the new historicism, provides the detailed explanation of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. According to Montrose (1996), the historicity of texts refers to "the historical specificity, the social and material embedding, of all modes of writing, including not only the texts that critics study but also in the texts that we study them" (p. 6). By the textuality of history, he suggests that "we can have no access to a full and authentic past" (Montrose, 1996, p. 6).

McEwan reconstructs the history of Britain after Thatcher came to power. At this time, Britain has not recovered from the trauma of World War II, rather the whole society is in a state of depression: riots in the streets, unemployment, inflation, racism, and so forth. New historicism holds that a text is a product of culture and history, and that the reading and interpretation of a text must be linked to factors related to the culture and history in which the text is produced. As Veenstra (1995) claimed, a sociohistorical context conditions its textual representations and likewise a text informs and sometimes even conditions the historical process (p. 180). In the text, McEwan illustrates the ideology and power discourse relationship implied behind the text through the fragmented description of the real history and the fictionalized history. Meanwhile he demonstrates his reflection on the history and his worries about the current world.

The Historical Truth Behind the Text

History, according to Foucault, is a discourse in the form of a linguistic statement. Foucault's "discourse" is social and historically specific, which does not arise in isolation from social facts. The various institutional contexts of society are closely linked to the practice of discourse production (Hu, 2012, p. 51). This is not to say that history is seen as a true description of past events, but as a "discourse" describing what happened in the past. As a discourse, all history is subjective and is written by people whose personal biases influence the interpretation of the past.

For nearly a century, Britain has experienced great crises on the back of imperial recession. The Victorian period (1837-1901) was the most prosperous and powerful period in the history of the British Empire. And its social values were primarily "a mixture of Protestant Christian ethics, empirical philosophy, and social Darwinism." However, by the end of WWII, Britain underwent a series of changes. It can be said that in the 1960s and 1970s Britain was in a state of moral decline and decay. The fact is that Britain has declined from the "Empire on which the sun never sets" to the "Sick Man of Europe". With the Thatcher authority coming to power in the 1980s, the British economy achieved the "Thatcher miracle", and traditional morality and values were once valued and improved. However, Britain at the turn of the century had been seriously eroded by extreme

individualism, social injustice was widespread, and the poor, “excluded from national life”, was struggling to survive (Qu, 2008, pp. 13-14).

New Historicists focus on the “small events” in the “big history”. They draw attention to the “small histories” that are easily overlooked, and argue that the truth of history is not only expressed in the grand narratives (Zhu, 2006, p. 391). The main characters Charlie and Miranda want to form a family, but their domestic life is not going smoothly. First of all, Charlie has bought home a robot Adam who has sex with Miranda, resulting in an emotional crisis between them. Adam also tells Charlie that Miranda is not trustworthy, which also leads to a crisis of trust. After Charlie and Miranda’s adoption of Mark, Adam is jealous of Miranda’s close relationship with Mark. This sets the stage for Adam to later submit Miranda’s evidence of perjury in court to the police. By this time, Adam has already admitted that he has “affection” for Miranda. At the end of the novel, there is still no mention of Charlie and Miranda actually forming a family. Their domestic life is always up and down.

The chaotic state of Charlie and Miranda’s household is a microcosm of the society chaos in Britain after World War II. The post-World War II Britain has failed to seize the opportunity of the industrial revolution and has gone downhill. During Mrs. Thatcher’s term of office, the British economy once again has entered a phase of recession. On the issue of European integration, which is of global concern, Mrs. Thatcher stubbornly insists on her own position and disagreed greatly with other countries on issues such as unified defense and unified currency, making Britain exclusive in the European Community. At the same time, she orders the enactment of the “poll tax”, which has caused the people terribly dissatisfied. After the legislation of the Act, “there were riots with customary ritual destruction—smashed windows, shops and cars set on fire, barricades thrown up to block the fire engines” (McEwan, 2019, p. 205). “The tax financed local government and replaced the old system based on the rental value of a house” (p. 204). The policy is detrimental to the interests of many people. The combination of these factors has led directly to the downfall of Margaret Thatcher. After Tony Benn’s tenure, the situation in the UK does not get any better.

At this time, the British society is economically depressed and the unemployment rate is over eighteen percent. When Charlie speaks of Turing’s wealth, he says that “He was so far above wealth that he could afford to live in edgy Camden rather than Mayfair” (McEwan, 2019, pp. 171-172). Camden is an industrial and commercial city located in the Southwestern New Jersey while Mayfair is the top wealthy district of London. This slightly exaggerated comparison reflects the rise of the United States and the decline of Britain after WWII. Using the strategy of ideology, the post-WWII America, by confronting the Soviet, has taken firm control of small countries around the world that share a common ideology, and has stationed their troops in those countries. Besides, their armies have a strong nuclear deterrent so that they have achieved hegemony.

The Textual Fiction Behind History

Hayden White argues that we should acknowledge that every historical narrative is fictional because history is not only about the events, but also about the network of relationships embodied in those events. The net of relationships does not exist directly in the events, but in the mind of the historian reflecting on the events (Zhang, 1997, pp. 173-174). New historicism holds that all history is written subjectively, that the personal biases of compilers influence their interpretation of the past, and that history can therefore provide basic historical facts,

but not truth, reality (Wang, 2002, pp. 596-597). That is to say, history is not always real. New historicists believe that texts are products of culture and also form texts. In the novel, McEwan presents the reader with a new textual history by reconstructing British history. In the following, this paper discusses the reconstruction of the historical ending of the "Falkland War" and the assumption of that "Turing is still alive".

The author reconstructs the historical ending of the Falkland battle, in which Britain has suffered heavy casualties. However, despite this, the ambition to win is preserved. Margaret Thatcher not only gives everyone a sense of parliamentary and public permission to go to war, but also a gut feeling that the war is about the nation's honor (Aitken, 2006, p. 476). Mrs Thatcher, through the media, has spawned a national patriotism that conveys the ideology that war inevitably involves casualties, but that going to war is a heroic behavior. The words of ethical categories such as loyalty, duty, and discipline achieve a transformation toward a system of power that completes the socially distributive process of death. It is only a pity that soldiers who participate in war under such a national glory are naked lives. However, the brutality of war can dissipate all these honors. By rewriting war as an ironic form of history, McEwan conveys the incompetence of the British authorities and government, as well as a deconstruction of the discourse of power. At the same time, by blurring the boundary between history and reality in this way, McEwan accurately illustrates the spiritual panic and anxiety in post-World War II Europe.

Alan Turing is found guilty by the government of the time due to his sexual orientation, for which he died of poisoning at home in June 1954 after devouring apples containing cyanide. In the novel, McEwan allows Turing to live 30 more years. McEwan said bluntly in an interview that "I have reinvented the past. There's something completely arbitrary and contingent about where we are in the history of science. It could have been earlier, it could have been much later. And it could have been elsewhere, too. So let's push the science on, and let's have Turing not commit suicide" (Aron, 2019, p. 42). For Foucault, "sex" is a system of power/knowledge construction. There is a close relationship between power and sex. Because the mechanisms of power admonish the body, life, what reproduces life, what enhances the human species, to be mindful of its power, its control capacity or its availability, power talks incessantly about sex, and sex becomes the subject of political operations, economic interventions, moralizing or responsible ideology (Foucault, 1978, p. 147). I argue that McEwan, by assuming that Turing is still alive, is subverting the discourse of power in Britain at that time. As a person who contributed greatly to World War II and science and technology, Turing is sentenced to guilty by the society at that time because of his sexual orientation, which is a tremendous disrespect to his personality and history.

Reflections on History

Churchill once said that the longer you look at the past, the further you look at the future (Wu, 1999, p. 214). Unlike his previous novels about historical events in modern England, *Machines Like Me* runs through the theme of artificial intelligence. McEwan presents such a masterpiece in science fiction, which not only takes care of the social history of Britain after World War II, but also pays attention to the development of science and technology after the industrial revolution. After the outbreak of the "Falkland War", Argentina has used automatic recognition missiles equipped with the Turing algorithm system to bring artificial intelligence to the battlefield. The use of technology-mediated violence indicates that we are in fact entering an era of instrumentalized slaughter, leading to the creation of multiple and parallel death-worlds. McEwan rewrites the end of history,

using the British defeat to make people think about the connection between artificial intelligence and war. In addition, it reminds that in the post-human age, there is a possible risk of artificial intelligence exacerbating dehumanization and inhumanity.

Moreover, the author advances the first time when artificial intelligence defeats humans to the mid-1950s. "In the mid-fifties, a computer the size of this room beat an American and then a Russian grandmaster at chess" (McEwan, 2019, p. 176). It depicts the victory of IBM's supercomputer Deep Blue over the Russian chess grandmaster Garry Kasparov, which really happened in 1997 and has caused a worldwide influence at the time. Although it is not yet proved that AI could think like a human, it has been proved that AI is faster than humans in projection and information processing. The author's purpose of bringing forward this major landmark event in the history of human development to that time is to remind people to be alert to the development of science and technology. In the future, it can evolve so fast that we humans can hardly control it.

In the text, the advent of robots in London has threatened human existence. The introduction of service robots by the British government to fight back against a wave of strikes has led to a significant increase in human manual unemployment. In addition, Adam, the robot Charlie has bought home, appears to threaten humans twice. The first time is after he and Miranda have sex without Charlie's permission, and break Charlie's wrist when he comes to ask about it. Adam even warns Charlie not to touch his "kill switch" again, or he will simply remove Charlie's arm. The second time is when Adam has obtained evidence of Miranda's lies and turns it over to the court, leading to Miranda's arrest and imprisonment. In this sense, Adam has clearly violated Asimov's "Three Laws of Robotics" and posed a threat to human safety.

Conclusion

The novel presents us with McEwan's view of history and his ideology through a textual and historical narrative of the social conditions in Britain after World War II. By portraying the real history in the text, such as the British poll tax incident and the chaotic situation of British society after WWII, McEwan maps out the big history through the lives of small characters. Simultaneously, he intends to expose the decline of Britain after WWII and people's dissatisfaction with the government. In addition to the textual truth, the author also fictionalizes history in the textual narrative, such as the ending of the British defeat in the Falkland War and the fact that Turing is still alive. The fictional history reveals the author's deconstruction and subversion of the historical power discourse. The post-WWII Britain needs to reflect on its own reasons for going into decline. The history of the development of artificial intelligence also runs throughout the text. After the Industrial Revolution, science and technology developed rapidly, with the field of artificial intelligence bearing the brunt. And the robots portrayed in the novel have become a threat to humanity. McEwan has an attempt to tell us not to be a "Frankensteinian" through the event that robots can already violate the "Three Laws of Robotics". With the interaction of text and history, this novel gives reflections on the past, concerns for the present, and warning to the future.

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