

## Retro, Nostalgia and Absurdity: The British Temperaments in Film 1917

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### ABSTRACT

The British film 1917 tells the story of two British corporals who crossed dangerous enemy territory to deliver vital information during World War I. The film is full of the retro and nostalgic temperament of British history. The main line of the film, the messenger mission and the battlefield ruins set off against the lonely soldiers, highlighting its absurd aesthetics. This article provides a detailed analysis of British temperaments conveyed in the film 1917 and it is found out the typical British temperaments of being retro, nostalgic and absurd are fully conveyed in this film. And with the understanding of these temperaments one can understand and appreciate the film in a better way.

### 1. Introduction

British films often present, inherit and develop their excellent traditional culture and humanistic spirit through the adaptation of classical literary works or historical retelling. The First World War was an unprecedented catastrophe in the history of mankind, and also an indelible piece of history of the British nation. The film 1917 continues the characteristics of British retro tradition, focusing on World War I and bringing back to the screen this heavy period of human history once again. This film tells the story of two British corporals, Blake and Scofield, who ventured across enemy territory to deliver vital information in order to save hundreds of thousands of lives during the First World War (Baidu Encyclopedia 2020). The film depicts in detail what the two soldiers encountered, saw and felt along the way. As the camera moves forward and the scene changes, 1917 unfolds the true picture of war through rotting corpses, wreckage ruins and wounded soldiers, with sincerity and perception, showing the audience the cruelty and absurdity of the First World War.

### 2. Elements of History, Retro and Nostalgia

The film 1917 is set in 1917, a year in which the war on the western front of Europe remained raging, while the pressure on the eastern front was lessening as the Russian Empire gradually disintegrated after the October Revolution. As a result, Kaiser Wilhelm II decided to evacuate troops from the French front to the stronger Hindenburg line built by the Germans themselves, to optimize resource allocation and troop preparation. During the withdrawal, the Germans destroyed all the weapons, cut down fruit trees, polluted wells, demolished villages, blocked roads, and blew up railway bridges. Abandoned trenches were heavily booby-trapped, and snipers and defensive units were planted on the retreat. The film is a masterful recreation of these war details and an exquisitely realistic portrayal of this period of history.

The setting and shaping of the messenger is also a reenactment restatement of history. During World War I, telephone line technology often failed due to artillery fire and deliberate enemy sabotage. Therefore, taking people as information carriers, messenger became the most important and dangerous occupation during the World War I. They are often required with strong physical and mental qualities, agility, capability to read maps, and a good sense of direction, which is also consistent with the qualities of the two characters in the film (Douban 2020). The story of delivering information may seem monotonously simple or even boring, but it is actually a more objective and realistic reflection of the truth of war.

The retro and nostalgic features in *1917* are not only reflected in the realistic restatement of history and the exquisite shaping of scenes and characters, but also rooted in the emotional connection and profound reflection of the British nation on the First World War conveyed by the film. The outbreak of World War I gave Britain the opportunity to reshape its domestic politics, and the national contradiction shifted from the pre-war internal nationalist conflicts to external rebellion against the militaristic acts of the German army. This patriotic fervor made the British people more United than before the war. Therefore, at the beginning of the war, the high national enthusiasm and patriotic spirit encouraged people from all walks of life to actively participate in the war, preached justice and civilization, and called the killing on the battlefield the “epic of heroism”. During this period, the strong patriotic enthusiasm was reflected in many literary works, accompanied by a return to traditional romanticism and pastoral aesthetics. In these works, there were comments that “war is for civilization”, advocating that sacrifice for the mother land was “pleasant and glorious” (Reynolds 2019). However, as the war progressed, heavy negative impacts were brought on the country. In the late 1920s, people entered a period of mature reflection on war, gradually seeing the destruction of individual humanity and national society, and realized the cruelty and evil of war, thus devoting more thoughts and work to recording and preserving the memories of a war generation. Many memoirs, novels and poems focusing on individual values, with strong humanitarian features, became important carriers of commemoration.

The First World War is one of the heaviest memories in British history and has left indelible scars across the nation. In Britain today, people’s emotional memory of World War I lies more in the long haze left by the trauma of the war and its sequelae on individuals and society. The images in people’s minds of World War I may be more of muddy trenches, gas-contaminated soil and rivers, and corpses rotting in the earth. The war was fought in harsh conditions, with craters, poison gas, artillery bombardment, rodent infestation, and rampant plague. Numerous soldiers died of diseases or suffered mental problems. In the film, the story of a soldier’s ear being bitten off by a rat was told as a pastime; a captain in the Devonshire Regiment shuddered and wept as the fighting began, showing symptoms of shell-shock. It is only when the humanity within is obliterated that a man can function as a soldier. After experiencing the horrors of war, soldiers became more sober and self-respecting from initial full-bloodedness and began to reflect on the meaning of war, resulting in war-weary and exhausted. The war left a serious aftermath on the whole British society. In addition to material losses, the mental trauma was often lifelong.

### 3. The Absurd Aesthetic Expression

The word “absurd” was originally derived from the Latin word “Surdus”, which was later extended to mean an inability to communicate with people or a fundamental disorder between people and the environment. Absurd literature is one of the most important genres of western postmodernist literature in the twentieth century. Absurdity elements appear frequently in British drama and film literature, and is one of the important and brilliant components of the whole British literature and even the world literature, which is represented by works such as British playwright Harold Pinter’s “The Room” “Birthday Party”, British films “Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels” “RocknRolla” and so on. These works pay attention to reality, focusing on life and the world in which people live, with serious and sober themes, whose concern and expression of human society is more universal, holistic, spiritual and forward-looking (Baidu Encyclopedia 2020).

In *1917*, elements of absurdity lurk in the tone of the entire film. First of all, the task of delivering information itself is absurd. As Colonel Mackenzie puts it, “That’s it for now, then the next week, Command will send a different message. Attack at dawn. There is only one way this war ends: last man standing.” This time the letter may have saved more than 1,600 soldiers’ lives, but hundreds of thousands more would die in the battles that followed, including possibly those who were saved today. The task of delivering the letter was given to only two soldiers, the grimness and cruelty of which made two soldiers almost doomed to die. The entire mission seemed to be a gamble of life. According to the interview, in the initial film, an orderly laid out a linen tablecloth for the officer after the two corporals left, so that he could enjoy afternoon tea. The scene was eventually cut out. “The officer’s disregard for the two soldiers was quite obvious.” (Shoard 2020) In the face of war and fate, life was just a number. Soldiers had no choice but to obey orders. The significance of sending the letter seemed to be saving lives, but it actually revealed more of the horror and powerlessness beneath the absurdity.

What is more absurd is this whole war when viewed in context. Unlike other nations, Britain did not fight directly for the motherland in World War I, neither to save herself from invasion nor to increase her territorial size, but “to fight generously for the freedom of other nations”. The British generally believed that “in essence, Britain’s involvement in the war was primarily based on morality rather than self-interested egoism: it was regarded as a war to defend the principles of freedom and civilization.”(Reynolds 2019) Even after the end of the First World War and well into World War II, the British government still commemorated fallen soldiers under the name of “dedication”, and memorial ceremonies were based on the celebration of victory and the glorification of soldiers. The suffering and sacrifice of soldiers was considered worthwhile. This was soon met with public rebellion and condemnation. During the war, for many who lived in Britain and fought on the front line, the “civilization” they fought for could ultimately be attributed to an extensive and hazy love of home, which was often

expressed in patriotic discourse (Reynolds 2019). In World War I, the British government vigorously promoted the concept of “national community”, advocating the justice of the “national war”. Through the war propaganda and medal awarding, many people unconsciously accepted the call of “national war”, resulting in a strong sense of national defense (Wei 2014). A large number of British people volunteered to fight, and the rear actively produced to support the needs of war. However, it was only when they actually went to the battlefield that they found it was full of blood, cruelty and terror. With the prolongation and cruel nature of war, the physical and psychological wear and tear, and the scarcity of war materials, people began to question the validity of “national war”, and developed strong feelings of war weariness. More than once in the film, soldiers question the reasons for the outbreak of war and the significance of their participation: “why did they start the war? Who are we sacrificing for?” They were not born militants, but went to the battlefield under the call of national interest and sense of responsibility. Slowly they came to realize that the profiteer of the war was not the so-called “national community”, but a few “opportunists”. Most people’s lives did not improve after the war, but further deteriorated. Sacrifices made by many families were not reciprocated (Wei 2014).

In addition, the narrative technique of the entire film is also absurd. *1917*, contrary to the traditional presentation and storyline of war movies, does not depict many grand warfare or military battleground, but focus on the small story of sending information, and portray the complex emotions of the individuals in order to express the large theme of war. At the same time, the film uses romanticism in many places, through the clever use of scenes, music and colors, to express the serious tragedy with symbols and metaphors.

Absurdity and romanticism are often opposed to each other, but they are subtly integrated in this film. When depicting the bloody and cruel theme of war, the director used poetic aesthetics to make *1917* look like a literary film in the guise of war. The aesthetics of despair and poetic fear on the battlefield are interwoven and fused, showing even more absurd features. No longer monotonous colors and endless bombardments, the film arranges slack scenes with the march of the protagonists, giving viewers a unique aesthetic experience. In the farm’s backyard, spring fields, broken-down cottages and cows in the distance form a pastoral scenery like an oil painting; on the fields, the petals of cherry trees flutter in the wind, peacefully and poetically like in a paradise; after nightfall, the German flash bombs and raging fires constitute a spectacle of light and shadow, just as hell on earth. The burning church behind the cross indicates the collapse of faith caused by the war and the struggle of human nature under this cruel fate (Li 2020). Changes of light and shadow give a layer of poetic colors to the whole ruins, making it so shocking and beautiful that it is somewhat unreal. Before dawn, Scofield runs out of the ruins and jumps into the river, and the color tone of the film changes from warm orange to cold deep blue; at dawn, cherry blossoms float on the water, echoing with the field part. The spectacle of light and shadow and the interweaving of water and fire are full of symbolic meanings. The film’s narrative there is no longer a function of “realism” and “reproduction” (Li 2020), but the regaining and inheritance of faith; In the early morning woods, soldiers sit around singing the old nursery rhyme *wayfaring stranger*. The cruelty of war is integrated into melodious tunes, and loneliness and despair reveal tenderness, courage and hope; In the frontline scene, Scofield runs in the rain of bullets, vertically through the smoke and charging crowds, brings the film to an emotional climax; the end of the film echoes the beginning, where Scofield sits on the grass and rests against the tree. Everything seems to be the same as the beginning, but everything is completely different again. In just one day, he has experienced another battle between life and death. No one knows how many more times he would go through before the war is over. In order to survive and return to his family at last, he has to fight to the end.

The Romantic expression is not a forgetting or avoidance of war. On the contrary, the aesthetic colors and the cold cruel battlefield form a contradictory collision. The spiritual shock and the interweaving of despair and hope, accompanied by strong symbolic metaphors, give viewers a kind of hope in despair. It depicts the cruelty of war more profoundly, prompting the viewer to deep reflection as well as highlighting the yearning and pursuit of peace.

“Understanding history is the only way to avoid future catastrophes.” With this film, the director wants to revise the discourse of war that has served chauvinism and isolationism in the past. “Sacrifice is obsolete.” (Shoard 2020) The film uses romanticism to “understates” the absurdity and cruelty behind war, while showing love and care, courage and faith in human nature. The emotions of individual soldiers interact with the thoughts and feelings of millions of viewers, evoking the fullest and deepest resonance in the bottom of their hearts.

#### 4. Humanistic sentiment

Compared to American films which are more entertaining, exciting and graphic, British films are often more concerned with reality, with an obvious humanistic and edifying characteristic (Chen 2007). In *1917*, one of the displays of humanistic feelings is the choice of narrative objects. Unlike previous war-themed films, *1917* does not portray many grand war scenes or record tense negotiations, but rather tells the story of two ordinary soldiers. By telling what they saw, heard, felt and thought along

the way, individual feelings were expressed, human values and human strength were transmitted, and the cruelty of war was interpreted from a new perspective. In the complex history of World War I, the barriers between people virtually weakened. At this point, the image of soldiers transcends nationality, and the two are the epitome of thousands of soldiers. Their experiences, feelings, thoughts and actions are the representatives of millions of people. As the story progresses, audiences and characters draw closer, and the capacity for empathy rises rapidly, inspiring the interaction of thoughts and emotional resonance among all humanity.

The film created two vivid and typical images of British soldiers. Blake is lively and outgoing, brave and optimistic, with a simple sense of humor. He gave up being a priest to fight as a soldier and complained about not being able to go home on Christmas Eve for turkey dinner. As far as he is concerned, the concept of war is vague, which is more like a job occupation, and he considered it an honor to be decorated with ribbons and medals in war. He is a good-natured man who took the initiative to rescue German pilots; he loves his family deeply, and set out to deliver the message when it's still daytime without thinking twice for the reason that his brother was in danger, with a sense of childlike and warm-blooded nature. Like millions of soldiers, deep down in his heart he was most concerned about his family. Blake's sacrifice was sudden, and it is also an honest and straightforward portrayal of war--there were not that many heartbreaking moments, and it's just a matter of seconds. Sometimes life and death only happen in an instant.

Scofield, on the other hand, is a middle-class man who is married and has his own family. Being introverted and strict, he fully demonstrates the subtlety and indifference in British national characteristics. Compared to Blake, Scofield has a clearer understanding of war. He took part in the Battle of the Somme, where he was awarded a ribbon. But he said he "doesn't remember much about it" and that the ribbon "is gone". He swapped the medal with a French officer for a bottle of wine. For him, it was just "a bit of bloody tin" that would not make any difference to anyone. The Battle of the Somme was one of the worst battles of the World War I and was called the "Somme Hell" because of its brutality. Scofield was one of the few who survived the "hell", and his "lack of memory" is more a form of reluctance to recollect and deliberate forgetting. For him, the ribbon he won in the war was not an honor, and he was even somewhat ashamed of it. He had already had some understanding and reflection on the cruelty and wrongness of war, and showed his disgust and aversion to it. He was kind-hearted enough to leave his food and milk with the French women and child he met in the basement. He also had a deep concern for his family, but "when he knew he couldn't stay, that he had to leave and they might never see him, he hated going home." At the end of the film, he took out pictures of his family, which made the audience understand his initial hesitation and scruples. It is precisely because of the realization of the cruelty of war that he is more precious and cautious about life. In the film, "The goal of the character is not to kill more people, but to go home." (Shoard, 2020)

As a war movie, the humanistic spirit in 1917 is also reflected in the universal spiritual emotions and values it pursues: the exposure, satire and reflection on the cruelty of war; the desire and yearning for peace; the awe of life; the respect for individual values; and the love, care, courage and faith of human nature. In the war, the loss of individual value is exposed; but at the same time, the glory and brilliance of humanity is released to the fullest extent. The nostalgia for hometown, the care and mutual assistance between friends, and even the kindness among strangers are all emotional pulses throughout the film, giving warmth and touch to the audience. For instance, family photos appeared many times in the film, which serves as a strong motivator to keep the soldiers fight to the end; Blake and Scofield helped each other along the way, and the phrase "age before beauty" reflects Scofield's responsibility and gentleness; in the basement, a French women raised a strange baby, while Scofield gave them all his food and milk. At this moment, humanistic sentiments were on extreme display. These emotions are simple yet profound, with universal humanitarian spirit, conforming to the current trend of the times, and can be understood and resonated with by people all over the world.

### **5. The History and Culture Behind British Temperament**

According to the British scholar Rez Cook, "cinema is the reproduction of class, society, race, region and identity". Film and television literature, as the carrier of national history and culture, embodies national identity and is a bridge for the outward export of national spirits. British cinema is the display of British national ideology. As a multi-ethnic country, Britain has gradually formed its unique social culture in the course of its long history. The cultural characteristics of Britain are connected with its geographical features and thousands of years of historical development. The incomplete bourgeois revolution under the feudal monarchy made the traditional feudal hierarchical society juxtaposed with the modern liberal democratic state system for a long time, and the former colonial suzerainty was often incompatible with the gradual decline of the "empire on which the sun never sets". The multiple factors of history and reality make the ideologies expressed in British films mostly focus on racial issues, self-identity and value orientation, cultural comparison and reflection, as well as cross-cultural, cross-national, cross-racial and even cross-social class themes (Chen 2007).

As a highly developed capitalist country, Britain is greatly influenced by the monarchy, and its values are relatively conservative. Its retro-traditional characteristics are rooted in national ideology, which is manifested in the retelling of historical events, the adaptation of classical literature and the film and art of traditional typical cultural symbols (Teng 2000). In addition, the British national character traits tend to be conservative and arrogant, subtly indifferent. As an “empire that once dominated the world”, Britain’s historical legacy of countless valuable products, from the majestic ancient buildings to the long-standing cultural heritage, all show the country’s adherence to the traditional retro style, often giving people a solemn and orderly atmosphere. Films and literary works created in this environment often reveal a heavy, solid, nostalgic and retro realism.

In the film *1917*, the color of absurdity is a unique display of British national cold humor. Britain’s cold humor has created a unique British national culture, the effect of which is applied to literature and film and television works, often shown in the use of irony, satire, absurdity, wit and elegance of language and expression, with a superlative attitude to self-deprecation (Zhao, 2013). British humor is not only a kind of emotional attitude and value proposition, but more importantly, it is loaded with “internalized national traits” and “cultural expression paradigms” (Fu & Fang 2016). Behind the absurdity, there is often profound wisdom, precipitate cultivation and an open-minded attitude towards life.

The history and culture of Britain is the core of British film ideology, and the perfect fusion of retro realism, absurd aesthetics and romanticism has created its unique style and temperament; at the same time, British film and literature also plays a role in feeding back the development of Britain. In today’s international arena, the two complement each other and prosper together.

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