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Making Machines, Becoming Animals: The Mechanics of Psychic Numbing in Kurt Vonnegut's

Slaughterhouse-Five

In a 1973 interview with Robert Scholes, Kurt Vonnegut explained that his purpose as a novelist was to “poison ... minds with humanity.” This discordant sentiment captures the tension between bleak determinism and aspirational humanism that underlies Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Packaged with biting satire and black humor, Vonnegut's gritty, unromanticized depiction of violent and miserable humanity is always entertaining but never easy to swallow. Published in 1969 at the height of the Vietnam War, *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* is an antiwar novel following the life of World War II veteran and optometrist Billy Pilgrim who has become “unstuck in time,” spontaneously experiencing different moments in his life by no accord of his own (Vonnegut 29). During his travels he encounters aliens, known as Tralfamadorians, and assimilates their deterministic philosophy that suffering is inevitable and life meaningless. Vonnegut, himself a former prisoner of war who experienced the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, makes use of a variety of genre conventions, including autobiographical, historical, and science fiction, as he examines the immense psychological and social impact of war. Despite the vast body of scholarship on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the narrative's posthuman tendencies are often only explored tangentially.

Centering the novel's nonhuman elements reveals the mechanisms behind the sustained effectiveness of Vonnegut's unique brand of postmodern humanism. Even as the simultaneous animalization and mechanization of human subjects in *Slaughterhouse-Five* implicates American social and political power structures, the novel also demonstrates the way in which individuals can become complicit in exploitative, often brutal systems of dehumanization. Though written in direct response to World War II and within the context of the Vietnam War, the allegorical human zoo on the alien planet of Tralfamadore effectively captures and critiques the comforting determinism born of prolonged psychic numbing that many Americans continue to embrace in the modern era in response to shocking instances of violence and the unintelligible destruction of war. The metafictional, non-anthropocentric narrative resulting from these defamiliarizing features ultimately demands moral action that resists the dehumanizing force of psychic numbing despite the novel's ostensibly deterministic philosophy.

By reframing the enormous destruction of World War II in the context of the Cold War era, Vonnegut reveals how war, regardless of its supposed moral impetus, inevitably exploits and dehumanizes the young and powerless in society. Published at the height of the Vietnam War and the corresponding anti-war movement in America, *Slaughterhouse-Five* does not merely recount the psychological impacts of Vonnegut's own experience in World War II and the 1945 bombing of Dresden, Germany; it reevaluates the designations of World War II as the "good war" and the Vietnam War as the "tragic mistake." In his essay "For the Boys: Masculinity, Gray Comedy, and the Vietnam War in *Slaughterhouse-Five*," Peter Kunze, largely informed by Vonnegut's commentary in interviews contemporary to the novel's publication, interprets the novel as an explicit condemnation of an American culture that had willfully forgotten the lessons of World War II. Kunze claims that, during the Vietnam War, Vonnegut once again saw mere boys being

forced to enter the “duty dance with death” as he had been forced to do twenty-five years prior. He is thus determined to “demystify the false values and unfair pressures that compel them to service” by revealing the extent to which war is dehumanizing rather than masculinizing (Kunze 48). Vonnegut’s intention, as conceived by Kunze, is declared within the two-part title itself. Both World War II and the Vietnam War were “children’s crusades” in which young boys were sent to the battlefield as animals would be sent to a “slaughterhouse.”

As a non-linear, metafictional narrative, *Slaughterhouse-Five* critiques the American war mythos both directly and satirically to nuanced effect. Operating in the common postmodern mode of metafiction, Vonnegut “self-consciously alludes to the artificiality of [his] work” (“metafiction, n.”). This establishes a clear distinction between Vonnegut himself and Vonnegut as the novel’s narrator, as described by Alexandra Berlina in her essay “Religion and War Made Strange.” While the historical, or real, Vonnegut speaks directly to the reader from the first person perspective throughout the first chapter as he discusses the long, grueling process of writing his “book about Dresden,” there is the a definitive shift to a fictionalized account of anti-hero Billy Pilgrim (Vonnegut 4, 29). Vonnegut is then transformed into a character within this fictional world himself as the omniscient narrator of Billy’s life. Berlina argues that Vonnegut, in his role as a narrator, thus becomes a “fluid persona” that is cast as “rather Tralfamadorian” (28). Within the twofold argument established by the title that war is dehumanizing rather than masculinizing, Vonnegut first sets out to disprove the spectacle of war mythologized in film, art, and print for cultural consumption by “glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men” (Vonnegut 18). Recounting as his historical self how he came to call his Dresden book “The Children’s Crusade,” Vonnegut declares his commitment to an unglorified portrayal of war in which soldiers are not great men but “foolish virgins . . . right at the end of childhood” (18).

Billy and many of his fellow soldiers, utterly devoid of masculinity, nobility, and the quintessential persevering human spirit, embody this childish naivete. However, as Billy travels back and forth in time, particularly between 1945 and 1968, the narrative begins to ironically contradict not only Vonnegut's proposed intention but Billy's own experience. He's told in 1968 that he ought to be proud of his son, a former delinquent whom the Vietnam War had "straightened out" and made "a leader of men" (77, 242). Thus, Billy's character, enabled by Vonnegut acting as the unconcerned narrator, demonstrates the generational perpetuation of war. Not only was Billy exploited by the American war machine himself, but he has now chosen to forget his own experience in favor of the more palatable cultural narrative that the war was doing boys a service by providing them the discipline and virtue required to become great men. "As people without power in time of war," soldiers must continually attempt "to prove to a wilfully deaf and blind enemy that [they are] interesting to hear and see" (247). This disappearance of soldiers as absent referents happens not only on the political level of the war machine and the cultural level of generational desensitization but also on the battlefield where personal violence is enabled and sanctioned.

Through the defamiliarizing techniques of animalization and mechanization, Vonnegut recovers these faceless victims of America's war machine without romanticizing their violence. By no virtue of his own, Billy becomes one of the few survivors of a 1944 German attack on his regiment. As he, two scouts, and the gleefully violent eighteen-year-old Roland Weary wander aimlessly behind enemy lines, Vonnegut alternately animalizes and mechanizes these human subjects: "crawling" through the forest, the soldiers are at once "big, unlucky mammals," and "woods creatures ... thinking brainlessly with their spinal cords" (49, 64). Billy himself is already "cold, hungry, embarrassed, incompetent," and, in short, everything the American soldier ought

not be when he further descends to the level of a mere mule for whom the cruelty of cursing, kicking, and slapping is not only justifiable but necessary. The two scouts having been killed, the tension of this alternate animalization and mechanization culminates as Weary's brutish animality converges with Billy's machine-like body. Billy laughs uncontrollably as the "barking" and "whimpering" Weary aims a kick at his spine, "the tube which had so many of Billy's important wires in it" (64). The reader, distanced from both Weary and Billy, is placed in the position of the onlooking German soldiers who watch the attempted murder with "bleary civilian curiosity" (65). From this perspective, the reader must contend with the uncomfortable association between herself and the German soldiers, either implicitly accepting or actively rejecting the notion that the scene playing out is acceptable. While Vonnegut-as-narrator "psychologically justify[es]", to use Berlina's expression, the notion that that this scene of Weary and Billy represents nothing more than a stupid animal attacking a mere machine, the novel is implicitly imploring the reader to reject this very assumption (Berlina 28). In another provocatively ambiguous scene, Vonnegut describes American prisoners of war being herded into a slaughterhouse in Dresden, Germany. The animals' deaths are portrayed with grotesque clarity, but the image is then jarringly transformed into a sanitized and domestic "home away from home" for the prisoners (194). The prisoners have thus become pigs to be thoughtlessly butchered. As Vonnegut unrelentingly reflects the animalizing and mechanizing effects of war, he forces the reader to assume the responsibility of insisting upon the soldiers' humanity.

Even as soldiers are preyed upon as animals and integrated into the war machine at the behest of the politically and socially powerful, desensitized individuals become complicit in their own exploitation and the broader perpetuation of war through their participation in dehumanization. Functioning as mere animals and machines, these young soldiers begin to

likewise see other individuals as machines that can be maltreated with no moral responsibility. This phenomenon is exemplified in the novel by the German guards, for whom a train car becomes “a single organism” while the human beings suffering and dying in atrocious conditions within are disappeared as absent referents (90). War forces individuals to struggle against not only the innate tendencies towards animality and the imposed role of machine; they must also struggle against the desire to alleviate their moral burden by dehumanizing the enemy.

By representing humans in a model reminiscent of Rene Descartes’s animal-machines, Vonnegut demonstrates how the Western philosophical tradition undergirds the American war machine that enables mass violence and sanctions interpersonal violence. Articulated in the 17th century, Descartes developed the philosophical construct of the *bête machine*, French for animal-machine, which attempts to illustrate that a machine that functions and looks like an animal would be indistinguishable from the animal itself, as “neither ... could ever exercise rational thought” (Badmington 17). Thus, Descartes establishes the human as entirely distinct from and superior to the animal on the basis of his inimitable rationality. In his essay “Theorizing Posthumanism,” Neil Badmington demonstrates the way in which modern Western anthropocentrism, largely proceeding from Descartes’s conception of humanism, “already contains the conditions of its own transcendence” (19). This critical error of humanism is notably exploited by the *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s narrator. Returning once again to the image of the American soldiers as “woods creatures ... thinking brainlessly with their spinal cords,” Vonnegut-as-narrator challenges the notion of human exceptionalism on the basis of rationality (Vonnegut 64). The comparison does not only generally transform humans into animal-machines, but it additionally diminishes the primacy of human rationality by specifically mechanizing thought itself as a brainless process controlled not by some immaterial, spiritual human mind as

Descartes would posit but simply by the spinal cord. As *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s human subjects are made into animal-machines, Western humanism simply collapses, leaving an apocalyptic rather than transcendent posthumanism in its wake.

This feeble posthumanism that remains amid the ruins of modernism finds full articulation in the deterministic Tralfamadorian philosophy implicitly embraced and encouraged by the non-anthropocentric narrative that centers and equalizes ubiquitous human and nonhuman death. Tralfamadorians claim that “every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine,” and they are amused that “so many Earthlings are offended” by the suggestion (196). Within this context, humans are not transformed into animal-machines under the brutal conditions of war: they have always fundamentally existed as animal-machines, devoid of the rationality and free will that they imagine themselves to possess. While this flattening of not just the human-animal binary but the hierarchy of all living things does in fact combat dangerous tendencies towards human exceptionalism, it more problematically sanctions willful ignorance and immovable complacency. Before he has fully assimilated Tralfamadorian determinism, Billy tells the aliens of the appalling carnage and destruction that he witnessed during World War II, expecting due to his culturally inculcated anthropocentrism that they would “fear that the Earthling combination of ferocity and spectacular weaponry might eventually destroy ... the innocent Universe” (147). The Tralfamadorians are utterly uninterested in his accounts of war and violence, though. They already know how the Universe will end, and they have no interest in preventing either violence or destruction. All living beings are mere “bugs in amber:” each moment has a particular predetermined structure, so all that is left for anyone to do is “spend eternity looking at pleasant moments” (109, 150). Thus, the Tralfamadorians’ postmodern rejection of Western humanism is posed as inevitable and even tragic rather than triumphant.

In his role as narrator, Vonnegut embraces this complacent posthumanism. Not only was his use of animalization and mechanization instrumental in the transformation of humans into animal-machines, but his sustained non-anthropocentric focus continually minimizes the human experience. Vonnegut-as-narrator can therefore be understood as “rather Tralfamadorian” in accordance with Berlina’s description (Berlina 28). The narrator’s unconditional response to death is the deterministic mantra, “So it goes,” whether soldiers are killing one another on the battlefield or poison gas is killing “body lice and bacteria and fleas ... by the billions” (Vonnegut 107). This minimization of human suffering and death is frequently accompanied by defamiliarized violence. The narrator imagines artillery fire in battle as “incredible artificial weather that Earthlings sometimes create for other Earthlings.” With the repetition of the term “Earthlings,” humans become alien beings stripped of their personhood whose violence is trivial and even amusing. Rather than abandoning the description here, though, this defamiliarized image is ultimately made morbidly tangible as the narrator bluntly declares that “a lot of people were being wounded or killed” before callously dismissing these deaths with his typical, “So it goes” (135). Vonnegut’s deft metafictional narrative thus distances the reader only to suddenly place her shockingly and uncomfortably close to the painful reality of the gruesome spectacle. While operating on the surface as the deterministic narrator, Vonnegut simultaneously implores the reader to reject this easy dismissal of suffering and affirm the value of the lives lost to personal violence, mass destruction, and tragic accidents.

In this way, *Slaughterhouse-Five*’s metafictional, posthuman narrative reveals the cause and mechanics of psychic numbing not only in the context of war, but within American culture more broadly. According to Robert Lifton and Kai Erikson in the appendix to *Indefensible Weapons*, “Nuclear War’s Effect on the Mind,” psychic numbing, observed to occur in response

to events of mass destruction and death such as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is “a kind of mental anesthetization that interferes with ... compassion for other people” (276). As Billy Pilgrim and his fellow prisoners of war emerge from the slaughterhouse that was serving as their shelter onto the leveled landscape, desolate like “the face of the moon,” following the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, they feel that everybody in the city ought to be dead: anybody who was alive “represented a flaw in the design” (Vonnegut 230). Rather than mourning the overwhelming number of deaths, though, Billy finds himself completely detached from the destruction that surrounds him. Before he has even met the Tralfamadorians and adopted their deterministic philosophy that dismisses suffering, Billy is filled with greater contentment while sleeping in the back of a wagon as it drove through the ruins of Dresden than at any other point in the novel: “he might have chosen as his happiest moment [that] sundrenched snooze” (248). At this culmination of Billy’s desensitization, Vonnegut suddenly reverses the role of the nonhuman element from that which projects apathy to that which recovers empathy. Billy, who had just been sitting happily in a city filled with corpses, is moved to tears for the first time throughout the entire war when he sees his horses’ broken hooves and bleeding mouths, as they had treated the animals as though they were “no more sensitive than a six-cylinder Chevrolet” (251). While the mechanization of humans is consistently condoned, the same easy dismissal of suffering is ironically rejected when finally applied to animals. Thus, even as the immediate imagery surrounding the novel’s nonhuman element illustrates a disappointingly complacent posthumanism, the metafictional narrative ultimately produced by the tension between the “real” Vonnegut and Vonnegut in the role of narrator proposes an aspirational posthumanism that extends increasing empathy and sensitivity towards all life. Optimism could not emerge from a novel so thoroughly dominated by satirized death and black humor without a heavy burden.

Slaughterhouse-Five consistently acknowledges war as a violent, perhaps inevitable cycle of exploitation and dehumanization enabled by the desensitization that pervades American culture. The only antidote to this desensitization is a lowering of emotional defenses despite the pain of reality.

Resisting this cycle of violence is not merely a matter of overcoming personal war trauma but reversing cultural trends towards increasingly isolated, consumerist lifestyles. While Billy's response to Dresden represented the culmination and solidification of his psychic numbing under conditions of mass destruction, he has been living in a deadened state for essentially his entire life, signaling underlying issues with the very cultural environment in which grew up. Thrown into a pool by his father so that he would learn how to swim as a little boy, Billy chooses to sink rather than swim, enjoying "beautiful music" as he loses consciousness and resenting the person who ultimately rescues him (55). In his essay "The Psychiatrists Were Right," Kevin Brown argues that Billy has not only been suffering from war trauma but anomic isolation, a phenomenon resulting from "a breakdown of mutual dependence" within a community (102). Brown points to Billy's deficient relationships with his parents, children, and wife as well as his lack of friends to prove that loneliness is central to Billy's psychological state. This loneliness is best understood when considered not only from the psychological but also the cultural perspective. Abdolali Yazdizadeh's essay "Tralfamadorian Utopia and the Logic of the Consumer Society" understands Billy's alienation from his surroundings and retreat into his Tralfamadorian fantasy as a symptom of a "late capitalist society" that produces "homogenization, passivity, and conformism on the part of its subjects" (110). Within the human zoo on Tralfamadore, Billy's animalization is fulfilled within the context of social alienation rather than the American war machine. Trying to focus only on the pleasant moments of life as

the Tralfamadorians do, Billy has succumbed to “enforced enjoyment,” identified by Yazdizadeh as a prominent topic within 1960s consumerist discourse (114). He chooses to live an apathetic, mildly enjoyable consumerist existence in which he is blind to any issues outside of his small domestic sphere. He chooses to live as a passive, homogenized animal because doing so shields him from the pain, suffering, and death that permeates existence. While Billy was initially exploited by powerful men who profit financially and politically from a brutal war machine, he is complicit in and finally responsible for his own dehumanization and psychic death.

Understood as a broad cultural phenomenon, psychic numbing extends beyond the battlefields of World War II and the fantastical human zoo on Tralfamadore as its pernicious effects have seeped through the past half-century since *Slaughterhouse-Five* was published into contemporary American culture. Inundated with news of violence and death both domestic and international, modern American desensitization persists most prominently in the apathetic consumption of commercialized suffering in popular media. In her 2016 *New York Times* article “What is a Constant Cycle of Violent News Doing to Us?”, Katie Rogers explores how the “constant stream of news on social media can be traumatic” and desensitizing. As different as the modern state of geopolitical affairs is from that of World War II and the Cold War, we are consuming more violence and death than ever as a society. With death tolls on our television screens tallying the lives lost to the coronavirus pandemic, shocking images of destruction from the Russian war in Ukraine on our phones, and news of mass shootings throughout the country appearing in our social media feeds several times a week, these constant cycles of violent news have only grown more intense since 2016 as the ubiquity of death in our culture begins to reflect the very pages of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Rather than persisting in complacent consumerism, we

must heed Vonnegut's call to resist the psychic numbing that erases the suffering of the dehumanized other in order to meet this moment without surrendering our humanity.

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