

The Incapability of Time and History in Slaughterhouse-Five

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Abstract: *Slaughterhouse-Five* written by Kurt Vonnegut is a science fiction that depicts the depicts the main character Billy Pilgrim's time travelling after experiencing the bombing of Dresden. This paper interprets the relationship between Billy Pilgrim and Kilgore Trout based on Fredric Jameson's theory of mode of pastiche and nostalgia to analyse the incapability of time and history reflected from Billy Pilgrim. From the strategy of presenting this relationship, a wildly shared postmodern character can be suggested, which is the incapability of time and history in the contemporary society. Furthermore, this paper discusses Kurt Vonnegut's dilemmatic stance towards the postmodern symptom and the contemporary society by explaining the writers' condition in postmodern time. The paper aims to concretize the connection between *Slaughterhouse-Five* and the contemporary representation in general.

Keywords: Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Fredric Jameson, postmodern society, pastiche mode.

1. Introduction

First published in 1969, *Slaughterhouse-Five* immediately brought Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) great success and financial benefits along with its film made in 1972. By vividly portraying Billy Pilgrim and the bombing of Dresden, Vonnegut shows his strong motive for conveying the theme of anti-war. As a reflection of the form of representation in postmodern society, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society* written by Fredric Jameson displays some features of contemporary society, which may not turn out to be rather optimistic.

Researchers have explored and made comprehensive studies on *Slaughterhouse-Five*, mainly focusing on the atrocity and absurdity of war as well as the fatalism by analysing Billy Pilgrim's time-travelling experience. As a postmodern writer, Vonnegut was in great need of speaking. Considering the multiplex postmodern condition, we may infer that what he tried to convey was a more complicated suggestion based on the anti-war theme. There're several scholars who have questioned whether Billy Pilgrim was actually travelling in time or it was an illusion which is mostly agreed that it was caused by PTSD symptoms [1-3]. However, the connotation between the condition, the features of the postmodern society and Billy's illusion has rarely been discussed. This type of confusion is rapidly enhanced when Vonnegut depicts the relationship between Billy Pilgrim and another character, Kilgore Trout. The impact of Kilgore Trout on Billy's perception is quite similar to Jameson's claim about pastiche and nostalgia mode in contemporary society. It suggests that the growing trend of adding hints and indistinct imitations of older plots into the contemporary film implies an alarming possibility of society's incapability of dealing with time and history [4]. In this sense, this paper will draw on Jameson's claim as a base to identify the powerlessness in dealing with

time and history in contemporary society caused by the interweaving of various genres and Vonnegut's stance on this suggestion.

In order to explore the reflection of contemporary characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the essay includes two sections. The first section will discuss the pastiche and nostalgia mode in contemporary representation. This section will show the intervention of nostalgia in the present form of representation of art and discuss the relationship in pastiche. The second section will focus on the incapability of time and history in the novel. By describing their relationship, this section will present Kilgore Trout's impact on Billy Pilgrim and discuss Vonnegut's attitude to this postmodern condition.

2. The Mode of Pastiche and Nostalgia

Pastiche has become one of the central concerns of aesthetic representation in postmodern society. Jameson first considers pastiche as "the disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today." [4], which means, to a certain degree, he denies the possibility of creative originality and invention in the use of pastiche. Imagine a world with its new generation that keeps borrowing the efforts of the previous era and seldom makes a change. Then, it is just another society that lets its youngsters be soaked in past works while staying in a time which should have developed with improved knowledge and processing time to prevent people from being trapped by older habits. But a more worrying situation is a condition when people are staying in a mixture of past and present. In this way, they would lose the column of their culture and their origins in the reality would be nowhere to find. In this case, it is a shared characteristic that has attracted a certain extent of worry among the art production in postmodern society under the influence of the intervention of nostalgia in the present form of representation of art.

To understand the pastiche in the representation and the nostalgia mode it leads is to understand the interweaving of the past and present and its effect on society. In order to show the pastiche in contemporary representation, Jameson uses two films, *StarWars* and *Body Heat* as examples to show an unconsciousness of diffusing past elements in contemporary representation in his essay. From these two films, we see two types of pastiche employment, the nostalgia mode and their relationship.

The first type of employment should be posited from the relationship between the successor and previous vectors of aesthetics. Jameson uses George Lucas's film *Star Wars* as an example. Though *StarWars* doesn't display the images of the past directly, according to Jameson, its strong eagerness of re-experiencing Buck Rogers's type of story in a way, proves that the film industry is keep employing the mode of traditional adventure story [4]. Jameson's claim here not only notes that pastiche does not have to be the reference of a concrete object, but also implies the imitation of the narrative thread, a rather abstract concept in narration.

The motive of imitation basically comes from the successors' admiration of the vector itself or the author of the vector, just as Zagzebski notes: "if I trust the emotion of admiration, I trust the way I see the object of my admiration. In that case I trust that she is admirable and worth imitating." [5] People may find emulating previous works' modes more efficient and attractive than coming up with their own creations. With this preference for easiness and convincing, they would be more likely to employ the mode from these works. But it is notable that this type of emulation may not be deliberate. When Zagzebski mentions her admiration for Sir Robert Scott's expedition to the South Pole, she acknowledged that though she isn't so passionate about adopting his spirit to herself, she did find an impulse of approaching and having that feature herself in the admiration. In this sense, one would unintentionally attempt to "emulate the admired person in the way in which she is admired." [6]

The other type is the allusive nostalgia diffusion in the contemporary representation. According to Jameson, the small Florida town in *Body Heat*, which is a film that takes its place in contemporary blurs the border of past and present and would, therefore, be categorized as a nostalgia work [4]. This

phenomenon is quite common in today's film industry. It is not a story mode, but a direct reference to the objects that existed in the past. As they are posited in a setting to which they don't belong, the representation becomes ambiguous. It seems that people began to perform an indefinable nostalgia in their work intentionally. The indefinable trait, however, as people produce and view these nostalgia works, makes it harder to be entirely understood. The diffusion of nostalgia cues also lets people deviate from their present representation. In a way, they're trying to attach to the past while being unable to step forwards in their own time because they have this admiration or love for the idol, which is the past. Speaking frankly, the reference to the past is "invading and colonizing" today's representation of art.

The emulation of previous works or creators and the diffusion of nostalgic cues lead to Jameson's realization of the essence of contemporary nostalgia. They both make it harder for people living in contemporary society to find their current form of representation, nor can they fully understand the representation in the past, tracing "the mental images on the confining walls." We even see points as Baudrillard's view arguing that the simulation (which is a concept that describes the imitation of symbolics that determines the cultural value) has begun to obliterate the reality. The simulacra, which originally make people fantasize, are replacing the reality and make it illegible. He applied Marshall McLuhan's "Implosion" to claim that the border between real and simulation has been imploded and people's previous experiences of reality have disappeared [7]. The overwhelming nostalgia and the unsureness of the present together, form society's incapability of time and history. Under this combination of time and uncertainties, people's identity in contemporary society hence becomes unsteady and unsure.

3. Incapability of Time and History in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

To identify this mode in the characters' relationship is to explore the motive of emulation of the character, the invasion of virtually nostalgic elements and the specific postmodern symptom we discovered in the preceding sector. This employment of mode of pastiche and nostalgia would serve as reference to study the cultural crisis suggested by Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and his posture.

3.1. Kilgore Trout and Billy Pilgrim

How does such a mode work on characters in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*? The trigger of this question is of course the moment when the readers realize their confusion whether Billy Pilgrim was really travelling back and forth in time or not? This type of confusion is rapidly enhanced when it comes to the scene in the New York bookshop, where Vonnegut reveals the content of some books written by the sci-fi author Kilgore Trout, where readers can find there's a high similarity to what Billy experienced. This provides the possibility that Billy Pilgrim was not travelling in time, but instead he was dwelling in an illusion inspired by Trout. When Billy had a flashback to his anniversary party, it is Trout who indicated that Billy had seen through a time window, which probably established the concept of time travelling in Billy's perception. The confusion about whether Billy Pilgrim was truly travelling in time or it was only his illusion after reading an excess number of science fiction hence aroused.

This confusion has already been discussed by researchers and Tony Tanner, a leading critic of American literature, has made a concise conclusion, addressing *Slaughterhouse-Five* as "a moving meditation on the relationship between history and dreaming cast in an appropriately factual/fiction mode" [8], in other words, what happened to Billy Pilgrim, was a disordered interweaving of different time periods, of fact and illusion. From this irregular onset of turning to his illusion, his vision and perception, as Vonnegut's fragmentary narrative presents, were scattered and uncontrollable. It is

exactly because of this uncertainty of the onset and the uncontrollability of the time he was “travelling” to, the atrocity of the bombing in Dresden, the kidnap of Tralfamadorian, they became perpetual and would keep happening infinitely. The type of dilemma shows opposition to linear time experience and therefore can be categorized as a symptom of the incapability of time and history. Billy Pilgrim then chose to adopt what he learned from Tralfamadorian’s philosophy, becoming less sensitive to death and time and falling into the web of fatalism and nihilism. His choice suggests a high possibility of the compromise of will after experiencing the incapability of time.

Since emulation is a stage in this postmodern symptom, Kilgore Trout can be viewed as a model to Billy Pilgrim.

Kilgore Trout became Billy’s favorite living author, and science fiction became the only sort of tales he could read. So they were trying to re-invent themselves and their universe. Science fiction was a big help. [9]

Apparently, Billy Pilgrim had great admiration for Kilgore Trout. It was just that he took a more extreme path – making Trout’s fiction his only read, enlarging the allusive cues into a totally reconstructed universe. Comparing to people’s process common admiration and emulation, the effect of Zagzebski’s theory on Billy Pilgrim is more obvious. Relating to Jameson’s theory, other than PTSD, the cause of Billy’s illusion can be his “repressed” eagerness of reexperiencing Trout’s story and hence repeating deliberate practice in his mind. At last, it turned out that Trout had become a pessimist of life himself. This pessimism acts as the reference to the Tralfamadorian’s philosophy of fatalism in Billy’s illusion. Here, because of the desire for emulation caused by the admiration to Kilgore Trout, Billy Pilgrim immersed himself in a setting built with a combination of Trout’s stories filled with time travel, aliens from hyperspace etc. Not only did he crave to go through these stories, he soon let the numbness and these fantasies fill himself entirely to gain a sense of escapism. It was written clearly that Billy was reconstructing his world and Trout’s fiction was a “big help”.

Kilgore Trout, as Rosewater commented, deserved his lack of critiques because his terrible writing couldn’t match his brilliant ideas. Let’s first put the attention on what Kilgore Trout wrote in his novels. Other than tremendous imagination, he showed his satire on war, religion and capitalism in his works. In *The Gutless Wonder*, he created a human-like robot that “dropped jellied gasoline on people” [9] and didn’t feel guilty because he had no moral value. It turns out to be more ironic when people couldn’t endure its halitosis and was then reaccepted it when the halitosis was cured. What Trout (Vonnegut) was trying to express was clearly people’s acceptance of a large scale of violence. Instead of accusing the robot of massacring, they chose to blame him for a lack of elegance. From this work, we see the shadow of the Dresden bombing. In his other works *Jesus and the Time Machine* and *The Gospel from Outer Space*, we can see how Trout set Jesus Christ as a common human. He then let God give him the divinity after being crossed. The empowerment was more like an act of sympathy, which shows common people’s strong demand for kindness. In the money tree story, Trout vividly portrayed how people did harm to each other for the money.

After observing Trout’s works, we find Trout’s writings no novels of simplicity, but passing on his attitude towards various topics. He’s very similar to those Hollywood B-grade movies made with scripts of great potential but produced at a rather cheap price. We may hence address him as a B-grade author who combined several genres to a point where it is hard to define its essence [4]. His novels, therefore, provided a large space of understanding for Billy Pilgrim. However, it was either his terrible narrative, or more likely, it was Billy Pilgrim’s eagerness for escapism, that made Billy fail to understand what Trout was trying to convey. Because of the disappointment of his life in wartime, again matching with Zagzebski’s logic that people tend to imitate the way in which their models are admired, Billy selected to adopt only the escapism he sensed from Trout’s novels. Also, his choice of turning away from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* which vividly portrays human nature led to his ignorance of humanity. His sense of nostalgia was an accessory to his desire

for escapism, which made him too short-sighted to seek Trout's satire, nor did he understand his own present because of overreading science fiction.

Vonnegut's portrayal here makes Billy Pilgrim a very dilemmatic character. In one way he couldn't endure living in his own life. It is reasonable for him to search for a life elsewhere to obtain an alienation of his reality. On the other hand, he chose the bleakest part of Trout's novel to observe his life and became senseless to every trouble and death that he wished not to accept. Escapism is addictive because sooner or later one has to face the reality and when the moment comes, he has too much energy and willingness consumed in the fantasy so he tends to rely on that symbol which allows his well-being to maintain a perpetual present. What Billy gained from Trout - the pessimism, the science fiction story - had become an inseparable part of him and diffused into every moment of his life.

What Billy was trying to do was to set Trout's story as model for pastiche to find an escapism. Though as readers we cannot, and should not blame him for his preference of nihilism since we didn't experience such a trauma, we see the tendency of character's fatalism and escapism, that sense of nostalgia when he met Trout in the reality. Readers can also see paragraphs below that refer to longed peaceful nostalgia.

One thing Trout said that Rosewater liked very much was that there really were vampires and werewolves and goblins and angels and so on, but that they were in the fourth dimension. So was William Blake, Rosewater's favorite poet, according to Trout. So were heaven and hell. [9]

It's very subtle that Vonnegut placed some of the nostalgic elements like characters from faeries in the fourth dimension, which makes these elements forever out of reach for people living in the third dimension. This untouchability matches with Jameson's claim about nostalgia, that people never understand their past but still gain a sense of nostalgia from them. In this sense, it is likely that when we see the objects that we feel nostalgic about with our own eyes in the future, they would be very different from the image in our opinion.

3.2. Kurt Vonnegut's Stance Towards Contemporary Society in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Sharon Lynn Sieber, a Ph.D of Comparative Literature, describes Vonnegut as a writer who "would seem to command a territory that is somewhere in between magical realist and transreal." Before entering this point, we should first figure out the meaning of these two terms. According to Sieber, "Transreal" is the technique that makes the ordinary life fantastic. "Magical Realism" is the opposite, turning fantasy into common daily life [10]. This description perfectly indicates how Vonnegut presents the warp of fact and fantasy. With his use of fragmentary narrative, he puts the reader's feet in Billy's shoes to sense the incapability of time and history from a first-person view in order to present how pastiche and nostalgia greatly affected an individual. For Kurt Vonnegut, living in a postmodern time filled with an overload of information which is hard to identify the authenticity and interweaving of different genres would be hard for one to focus on a single representation. Living in this type of environment, people would feel themselves deviated from their specific period of time and then become numb and indifferent to reality as fact and illusion become indistinguishable, which is perfectly shown by the three words that keep appearing in the novel, "So it goes". The next generation will then inherit this way of thinking. They would have the stereotypes brought by their culture when viewing the past history as more muddled knowledge and media are sent to the people. What will not change is the phenomenon that people are unable to establish their cultural icon.

We have worked out that the science fiction writer Kilgore Trout's influence on his reader is irreversible, but then we will make another astonishing observation that there's the shadow of Vonnegut on the character Kilgore Trout, since Vonnegut himself also presented a lot of his thoughts

in the form of science fiction. Now science fiction as a literary form with diversified elements is a perfectly appropriate vector to contain transreal and magical realism, to move within time periods freely. We've seen how science fiction satisfy Billy's wish for escapism. Obviously, Vonnegut knows this phenomenon well, especially when the trend of searching for escapism is going up. His wish of repressing the positivity of Kilgore Trout is shown by his self-mockery when depicting Kilgore Trout, letting him receive very little criticism and popularity. So why does he keep using this form of science fiction which is made up of a combination of different themes even though he understands the risk that it may cause? It is Yazdizadeh who uses Jameson's reference to T. S. Eliot to note that:

For Jameson, the representation of the reality of life under capitalism requires "elaborate strategies of indirection" that serve to disable "our own defense mechanisms against that reality" and render them laterally. [11]

He then defines the role of the Tralfamadorian as a "strategy of defamiliarization and indirection" that makes the ideological essence more palpable. From Yazdizadeh's indication, we actually find out that Vonnegut's own work was a combination of envisioning and pastiche, of course his motive isn't to emulate such type of mode and bring nostalgia but to present humans' limitations. It seems that we under-rate the difficulty of being writers nowadays. Harold Bloom, the American literary critic, makes such a conclusion in his book *How to Read and Why*: "Negativity cleanses, though at the high price of nihilism" [12]. The condition of postmodernism makes it more difficult for writers to pass on their thoughts and lessons, that it provides a dilemmatic point where they have to avoid speaking boldly to prevent their readers from being overbore and losing their directions while making sure the readers can accept their complicated euphemism.

4. Conclusions

As we have observed in the previous sections, Vonnegut was trying to pass on a widely shared postmodern condition instead of simply presenting the cruelty and pointlessness of war. The role of Kilgore Trout in the depiction of Billy Pilgrim coincidentally corresponds with the role of contemporary representation of art in the postmodern society. His novels happened to reinforce Billy's tendency for escapism and send him to the warp of time and history, causing his failure of dealing with time experience. In this case, we found out that from the relationship between Kilgore Trout and Billy Pilgrim we can sense a postmodern cultural crisis mentioned by Jameson, which is the inability of concentrating on the present and ultra-participation of past elements.

Jameson's mode of pastiche and nostalgia was firstly discussed. The significance of studying his theory is to identify the process and effect of interweaving of past and present in the contemporary society. We then figured out this process basically sprang out from the desire for emulation affected by the sense of admiration and argued that this postmodern symptom is likely to be irreversible because of one's preference using Zagzebski's theory. We then applied the result in sector 2 in the study of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and discovered that Billy Pilgrim set Kilgore Trout as his model to rebuild the universe. His timeline hence became disordered and the fantasy and reality could no longer be distinguished. Finally, we discussed Vonnegut's attitude towards this character. The postmodern condition makes it harder for writers and artists to represent their warning clearly and avoid presenting the combination of genres directly which would provide the possibility of incapability of time and history to the readers.

Vonnegut wished us to turn away from the multiplex representation with the combination of past and present, to prevent the society from going deeper into the incapability of time and history. Somehow, he himself found it very hard to tell his worrying boldly and directly, but to prose an intricate maze. The unspeakable suffering went on as he found himself living in a complicated era where writers and artists should be very careful with their responsibility. Nevertheless, he still hoped

that the readers would refrain from sinking into escapism and fatalism even though the impact of pop culture and pastiche cannot be dodged entirely. For modern people, ultra-nostalgia is nothing but another illusion that pushes them into the endless hole of escapism and fatalism. It is hard to reconstruct the true reality, but to maintain the identity and position steadily in the postmodern condition, one needs to learn to distinguish the border between fantasy and truth. We learn this when Vonnegut made his last call when Billy returned to his peaceful paradise, Tralfamadore, with the words on Montana's silver chain to emphasize his warning, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to tell the difference."

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