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Metafictional Techniques and the Dismantling of the Fourth Wall in *Breakfast of Champions* by Kurt Vonnegut

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Abstract

Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* (1973) is one of the most creative, provocative, and philosophically disorienting uses of metafiction in twentieth-century American literature. The novel, which might be considered a fiftieth-birthday gift to himself, is a radical clearinghouse for Vonnegut's themes, characters and cultural frustrations, systematically dismantling the illusion of mimetic realism. This paper examines the use of the fictional world and the reality of the reader as a major ethical and epistemological ploy used by Vonnegut to rupture the narrative boundary. Vonnegut breaks the traditional novelistic contract in various ways, including his physical presence at the heart of his own novel, his use of crude visual images to slow the pace of the novel, his description of the semiotic collapse of the commercial language, and his overt discussion of the chemical determinism of his characters. The study contends that this structural upheaval goes beyond the aesthetic naivety of the general postmodernism; rather, it is a frantic moral search for human agency, authoritarian ideology and the commodification of life in late-capitalist America. Based on the theories of Patricia Waugh, Linda Hutcheon and Todd F. Davis, as well as cultural criticism of consumerism and semiotics, the paper examines how the creator-character relationship can be seen as a very close correlation of the relationship of the individual and the oppressive, mechanized systems of a highly programmed society. Overall, Vonnegut's choice to literally get out of the way and then to set his fictional alter-ego Kilgore Trout free is a very humanistic resignation. In a world of political and commercial programming, Vonnegut's way of breaking the illusion of the fictional worlds becomes his way of freeing his characters and his readers from the tyranny of absolute narrative and the system of sovereignty.

Keywords: Metafiction, humanism, determinism, postmodernism, semiotics, Kilgore Trout.

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Introduction:

The willing suspension of disbelief is too subtle to be expressed in the traditional novel; it's too complicated to be explained. The author has to be the hidden constructor, and the framework of his construction, the emotional, psychological and intellectual burden of the narrative, must be concealed so that the world of fiction to which he is giving birth is quite independent, organic and real. Kurt Vonnegut willfully and violently violates this fundamental agreement at every turn in *Breakfast of Champions* and does not bother to hint at the structure of a novel, but instead aggressively obliterates the boundary between fiction and reality. In the preface the author admits that all he is trying to do is "clear [his] head of all the junk in there" (Vonnegut 5), and thus sets up a narrative world that is self-aware and cannot be escaped, a space that is less about the novel itself than a highly mediated and artificial landscape into which the author unloads the anxieties of the mid-twentieth century. *Breakfast of Champions*, first released in 1973, shows the end of American postmodernism – a time in American culture defined by a strong mistrust of "big" narratives, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the growing sense of the homogenized propaganda of consumer capitalism. On the surface, the novel is about the inevitable and inevitable crash of two men in the culturally blanketed, fictionalized town of Midland City: Dwayne Hoover, a successful, well-respected Pontiac dealer spiraling out of control into a chemical schizophrenia, and Kilgore Trout, a broke and obscure science-fiction writer who has served as Vonnegut's tragicomic alter-ego for decades. But the real tension in the text is not between Hoover and Trout but between the characters and their all-powerful author. This paper examines Vonnegut's specific metafictional devices, whereby he methodically undermines his own narrative – both literally and physically, by hand-drawn illustrations, in his criticism of the commodification of language, and through the constant, clinical reminders that the characters are merely biological "meat machines. This study explores these techniques in great detail and reveals that Vonnegut's destabilization of the novel's boundaries is in fact a radical ethical critique aimed at alerting the reader to his or her own culture's indoctrination, and that in this way the novel's destruction becomes a form of emancipatory, deeply humanistic action.

Literature Review:

It is often said that *Breakfast of Champions* is an important transitional novel in Vonnegut's oeuvre, the point at which the novel-as-such is completely taken over by the authorial voice and the breaking down of the novel form. In his ground-breaking theoretical analysis, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh states that self-conscious fiction is literature that deliberately brings attention to itself in order to question the instability of the boundary between fiction and reality and to "remind the reader of the unreality of the 'reality' he or she is consuming" (Waugh 2). Vonnegut's text is a perfect example of this, making constant points to its own artificiality, and making

sure the reader does not mistake it for something that comes out of the hands of a weary and flawed human being. In addition, Linda Hutcheon points out in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that postmodern fiction must "work within the forms and linguistic structures it wishes to subvert" (Hutcheon 5). Vonnegut's novel about America, rampant consumerism, racism, and mental illness, is filled with interruptions of the flow of the narrative to remind the reader that it is made up. It is important, however, to remember that Vonnegut's is not the kind of postmodern metafiction that is common among the writers of his day, such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme, or Thomas Pynchon; it is a more personal and emotionally charged way of dealing with a subject that is often intellectualized and detached by his peers. Both Barth and Vonnegut employ metafiction, but while Barth's self-reflexivity frequently evokes the deprecation of language or the infinite regress of narration, Vonnegut's metafiction is decidedly moral and pointedly pedagogical. It is this important difference that Todd F. Davis discusses in *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade; Or, How a Postmodern Harlequin Preached a New Kind of Humanism,* and in which he claims that Vonnegut's application of postmodern deconstruction is not to indulge in trendy and academic nihilism, but to break up some very dangerous ideological structures such as nationalism, free market capitalism, and institutional racism, paving the way for simple, empathetic human interaction (Davis 45). If one reads this novel ethically, as Jerome Klinkowitz claims *Breakfast of Champions* is Kling's "writing himself out of his own universe," taking away all the novelistic apparatus to concentrate on the mechanics of perception and cultural programming (88), the author is denying himself the right to write the novel. The synthesis of all these viewpoints shows that Vonnegut smashes the fourth wall not just because he's tired of being smarmy or to show off his cleverness, but to prove that the human being, too, needs to break out of the ideological scripts imposed upon him/her by a consumerist, militaristic society – and that makes this a very 'humanist' metafiction.

Epistemology of the Felt-Tip Pen: Visual Disruptions and Semiotic Collapse

In *Breakfast of Champions*, one of the most immediate, polarizing, and conceptually daring metafictional techniques is Vonnegut's frequent–even over-frequent–use of visual fragmentation: the uninterrupted flow of prose is continuously punctuated by the author's own crude, felt-tip pen illustrations. He depicts everyday objects, animals, and cultural symbols, a hamburger, a pair of underpants, a flaming torch, the Holiday Inn sign, a cow, a handgun and an asterisk that he specifically identifies as an anus, in a simplistic style that seems more like a child's elementary school workbook than a serious piece of literature in contemporary America. This visual disruption plays an important epistemological role in that it makes the literary medium extremely opaque. In a conventional book, the text is supposed to be a window to another world that the reader is supposed to see through; typography is not a conscious element of the reading experience. Vonnegut violently interrupts a narrative of an imminent, violent, psychological

breakdown in order to draw a picture of a wide-open beaver or a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken, thereby creating an overt semiotic rupture that requires the reader to stop reading and start analyzing the physical material on the page. Metafictionally, Vonnegut plays a jaded, non-participating anthropologist recounting the strange behavior of Earthlings to an alien audience, divesting familiar objects of the cultural baggage often toxic with which they have been encumbered. He provides a drawing of an apple, as if an American had never encountered one, as an anti-literary strategy to defamiliarize the American experience. Through the use of very simple illustrations coupled with strictly literal definitions of terms like the reduction of the American flag to a USA, and the reduction of the hateful term "nigger" and the chemical formula for plastic to similarly deadpan, strictly literal definitions, Vonnegut exposes the tremendous absurdity of the arbitrary symbols that rule the behaviour of human beings and give them reason to be systematically violent. Moreover, Vonnegut gives commercial trademarks, such as the Holiday Inn logo or the KFC bucket, the same reverent treatment as religious icons and national flags, thereby leveling a scathing analysis of consumerism, suggesting that in late-capitalist America, corporate logos have taken the place of spiritual and civic symbols. These drawings do not allow the reader to be passively absorbed by their content, but always remind the reader of the author's hand that creates illusion; at the same time, they reveal the hollowness, flatness and colonization of the English language by constant commercial interests and advertising jargon.

Chemical Determinism, Bad Fiction, and the Erasure of Human Agency

The philosophical dilemma that underlies this forceful structural disassemblage is Vonnegut's paralyzing unease over the possibility of free will, a point he continually emphasizes by calling his characters 'meat machines' and suggesting that they are operating without any alternative. He explains Dwayne Hoover's inevitable act of violence, not as a moral lapse, a psychological trauma, or a tragic character flaw, but, without ambiguity, as the direct and unavoidable result of his neurochemistry: "Dwayne's bad chemicals made him take a loaded 38 caliber revolver from under his pillow and stick it in his mouth" (Vonnegut 14). Vonnegut's prose is both extreme and chillingly clinical, a quality that is clearly appropriate to the characters' actions, which are driven by environment and biology, a narrative style that reflects the cultural reality of late-capitalist America dominated by a system of indoctrination tailored to individuals by advertising, political propaganda, and historical mythology. The inhabitants of Midland City—Francine Pefko, Dwayne's secretary; Harry LeSabre, Dwayne's sales manager; and so on—are essentially automata, repeating phrases from advertisements or spitting out classist, racist slogans they think are their own, caught in behavioral patterns that a society that treats them only as consumers has imposed upon them. This theme of determinism is intimately tied with the metafictional use of the fourth wall; the writer in a traditional novel is omniscient, taking absolute control over every thought, action and word of the characters, but by continually reminding himself

or herself of this (I made Dwayne do that! or I decided to have Francine say that!) Vonnegut literalizes the concept of determinism.

This philosophical crisis of agency explodes when Dwayne Hoover's chemically starved brain collides with Kilgore Trout's toxic fiction, a critique of the dangerous power of the narrative, within him. Meanwhile, Dwayne, on the verge of a complete schizophrenic break, seeks a means to explain his torment and the seeming emptiness of his life in Trout's low-priced science fiction book, *Now It Can Be Told*. The concept of solipsism is introduced as a central theme of Trout's novel: the reader is the only being in the universe that has a soul, the only one with free will, and everyone else is a robot, programmed to act as they do in order to make the reader react the way he was intended to react (Vonnegut 253). Where Trout sees this as a fun and harmless thought experiment, Dwayne Hoover sees this fiction as real and unequivocal truth, and armed with the conviction that nobody else has a soul, he goes on a bloody, violent rampage, severely beating his son, his lover, and several strangers, all at the Holiday Inn in Midland City. The violent scene is a potent reflection upon the moral responsibility of the author and a reminder that literature is not a harmless aesthetic exercise, but a very volatile programming language that can change the physical behavior of the "meat machines" that eat it. Vonnegut's overarching metafictional strategy is warranted by Trout's destruction; his continual and aggressive reminders to the reader that *Breakfast of Champions* is a fiction, designed to break the spell of the novel and not let anyone believe that it is a dangerous and actionable ideology.

The Author in the Cocktail Lounge and the Emancipation of the Character

The ultimate, jaw-droppingly meta moment of the novel occurs in the book's climax, when Vonnegut foregoes all deference to his novel's world and literally goes down there, settling in at the Holiday Inn in Midland City, where he watches his characters interact in the cocktail lounge while he sips on a drink and wears mirrored sunglasses. In doing so, the distinction between the real world and the text is completely blurred, and a strange and highly discomfiting degree of contact between creator and creation, in which Vonnegut documents the very presence of himself, and which is filled with immense power, profound guilt, and deep melancholy. He says, "I was on a par there in the dark in the cocktail lounge with the Creator of the Universe. I could shrink the universe down to a ball exactly one light-year across. I could expand it back up. I could shrink it down again. I had that kind of power" (Vonnegut 200). It is the statement of creative omnipotence, the forcing of the reader to acknowledge the terrifying dynamic of the creator/created as Vonnegut observes Dwayne Hoover spiral into violence, knowing himself to be the only one responsible, the designer of the "bad chemicals" and the one pulling the strings. Vonnegut's presence on the page breaks the momentum and escapist pleasure of the story, as the author himself becomes omnipotent, watching as Dwayne rages, in real time. This destruction is the moral underpinning of the novel; Vonnegut wants to reveal the hidden

tyranny of narrative domination: if the author is God, who makes his creations suffer for the sake of a diverting plot, then the author is a cruel and capricious tyrant a humanist cannot willfully emulate.

Refusing to play the tyrant, Vonnegut uses this metafictional climactic moment not to bask in his own glory, but to come to terms with his complicity in the pain of his creations and then, finally, to release his creation, Kilgore Trout. Vonnegut then speaks to his creation, telling him that he is the author and that he will no longer be able to manipulate the strings of the narrative: a clever device, as the mirrored sunglasses are able to reflect the reader's own gaze at the text in a surreal, heart-wrenching exchange. He frees Trout of the "lifetime obligation" of being a Kurt Vonnegut novel's tragicomic character, and as Vonnegut literally "drops out" of the novel, going back to his own "dimension" outside the book, at the end of the novel Trout cries out across the void, "Make me young, make me young, make me young!" (Vonnegut 295). The awesome interplay becomes an act of spiritual resignation and existential grief as Vonnegut does everything he can to defy the rules of fiction, rules that require the author to be a controlling god. Vonnegut gives up his characters and liberates them into the chaotic void, giving his own phantoms a theoretical freedom and breaking away from the narrative reality of the novel. The final cry from Trout is the last possible human question about the ravages of time, physical decay and death itself, a question that the author, who has knowingly given up his omnipotence, no longer has the means to answer, erasing the distinction between the artificial character and the very mortal human condition altogether.

Conclusion:

As with *Breakfast of Champions*, Kurt Vonnegut does not use metafiction simply to baffle the reader, to play empty linguistic games, or just to impress the reader with his own ingenuity; rather, he uses it to explain the frightening mechanisms of control, determinism, and programming that are essential to modern life. Vonnegut methodically undermines the traditional novel from the inside out by relentlessly exposing the narrative framework, using crude visual disruptions to defuse the language of its commercial power, reinforcing chemical and environmental determinism, and finally, stepping onto the physical pages of his own volume. He does this because the traditional novel, with its secret author, its tidy resolution, its sense of organic unity, is a comforting lie, unfit to prepare the reader for the late-capitalist America in which people are constantly programmed from without by marketing, by neurochemistry, by political rhetoric, by the very dangerous mythologies of an industrial society. A conventional novel that doesn't acknowledge such strings would be an ethical cop-out and the writer a co-conspirator in the systems of control he decries. Vonnegut is making the strings of his fictional puppet show visible in order to show the reader that they are indeed at work, and that he or she should seek to find them and resist being manipulated by them in his or her own life. At the cruel end of the novel, he lets Kilgore Trout go, metaphorically releasing the reader to as well; he surrenders his

own power, he asks his reader to see himself as he is programmed, to reject the falsehoods of the authoritarian narrator (politician, corporation, novelist), to try and do the extremely hard, important work of becoming their own. *Breakfast of Champions* is thus a humanist metafiction masterpiece that unmistakably demonstrates that one must be courageous enough to break the illusion of the book first, to find out the truth about human freedom.

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