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Brainwashing: Technology and Oppression in Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s "Harrison Bergeron,"

"Welcome to the Monkey House," and "The Euphio Question,"

Introduction

Most dystopian novels, such as George Orwell's *1984*, deal with a society controlled and subordinated by a government. The government sets up a cultural system through which they can manipulate their people. This creates tension when a character discovers they can break free from this system. In Vonnegut's fiction, the system works the other way. Instead of a totalitarian regime which keeps society in check, it is society that keeps itself in check. While there are government officials and policemen who protect the integrity of the state, the oppression is largely inflicted by society on society. As Vonnegut's narrator in *Mother Night* states, we must be careful what we pretend to be, because we are what we pretend to be (vi). If we pretend to be happy in a society that promotes numbness over affection and feigned equality over true greatness, we will brainwash ourselves into believing we really are happy. Vonnegut's stories suggest that the numbness of his characters is created by the characters themselves, using technology, medicine, and distraction. This is where the brainwashing occurs. By brainwashing, I mean, using technology to alter a person's mental state. On the first page of "The Euphio Question," the narrator tells the readers, whom he presumes to be the Federal Communications Commission, that "Lew, Fred, and I found peace of mind by sitting in easy chairs and turning on

a gadget the size of a table-model television set” (189). The choice of “table-model television set” was not coincidental. This story draws a more powerful parallel between the society in Vonnegut’s fiction and mainstream American society. In “Harrison Bergeron,” Hazel suggests to her husband, George, that he take off his impediments for a moment, let himself rest, but George, so engrossed in his idea of equality will not take them off. He fears the government imposed penalty, but more than that, he fears returning to what he calls, “the dark ages” (9). He firmly believes that holding onto his fetters makes society better. But does it really? At both the beginning and the end of the story, the narrator tells the readers that Hazel and George have been crying. They think it because they have just seen something beautiful on the television, but they cannot remember. When their own son is shot on screen, Hazel cannot remember because of her below average intelligence, and George is forced to forget by the restraints he refuses to remove (14).

In “Welcome to the Monkey House,” humans are not contained by weights and earpieces, but by medication which, “made people numb from the waist down” (31). They are also encouraged to volunteer for “ethical” suicide. These two imperatives—contraception which does not impede reproduction, but instead takes away all pleasure of sex, and abundant suicide “parlors”—inflict a false morality on society. The narrator uses the word “morality” frequently, stating that the parlors and pills are a result of society finally understanding morality. Humans no longer derive pleasure for sex. The pills have lowered them to animals, using sex only for reproduction. This removes the connection humans feel for one another. They are replaced by machines in the workplace and no longer desire human company. They sit in their homes and

watch television, which, as the narrator says, “[encourages] him to vote intelligently or consume intelligently, or worship at the church of his choice, or to love his fellowmen, or obey the laws—or pay a call to the nearest Ethical Suicide Parlor and find how friendly and understanding a Hostess can be” (35). But the only one of those imperatives anyone really follows is the last one. Technology—again, a television—controls the society. In his critique of Vonnegut’s work, Robert Morace writes, “The prosperity that ‘used to be a synonym for Paradise’ (*Breakfast of Champions*) and that was dependent on the material and technological progress that was [General Electric’s] ‘most important business’ (GE’s advertising slogan) had (literally) delivered the goods but at the unsustainable cost of making people feel superfluous” (151). Though the people are now prosperous and moral, they are useless and unhappy. Which Vonnegut believes to be better, I will not yet comment on.

The Euphio is a machine that collects a radio wave from deep space and projects it, creating a feeling of complete contentedness. It is important, however, that the narrator calls it “synthetic peace of mind,” and, “like walking past a field of burning marijuana” (192). Neither of these descriptions are favorable. Both present connotations of outward stimulation. The Euphio machine makes people happy who are unable to be happy otherwise. But it is manufactured. It does not last, and when it is invoked, life comes to a grinding halt. The brainwashing agent in this story is a man-made device. The narrator of the story, one of the Euphio’s creators does not advocate its use. In fact, he says he is “heartsick” that word has gotten out about this machine. But why? It produces happiness. The narrator understands that

this brand of manufactured happiness is detrimental to the society. But his society wants it, and he, as a single citizen, is powerless to refuse them.

Technology, whether familiar to the readers or of the science fiction variety, is prevalent in Vonnegut's work. In these three stories, he highlights three significant ideas, equality (in "Harrison Bergeron"), morality (in "Welcome to the Monkey House"), and happiness (in "The Euphio Question). These stories attempt to give clarity to society's definition of these ideas, but more than that, these stories attempt a condemnation of progress for progress's sake; they strive to show readers how the technology that we create in the belief that it will make us happier, is in fact, doing the opposite. It is brainwashing society into a unsustainable false equality, false morality, and false happiness.

The Importance of Vonnegut and Critical Essays

Vonnegut writes of himself, "I learned from the reviewers that I was a science-fiction writer. I didn't know that. I supposed that I was writing a novel about life" (1). As is evident from this statement, he never considered himself a science-fiction writer. His ubiquitous use of space ships, aliens, time travel and highly advanced human technology suggests otherwise. But his statement is true. He is not a science fiction writer. He is a writer who uses science fiction to show society how technology may be hindering us, rather than helping us. It is important to note that science fiction, in this paper, means the use of aliens and other futuristic elements, especially advance technology. Most of Vonnegut's critics strive either to prove or disprove his label as science fiction writer.

In his book *Sanity Plea: Schizophrenia in the Novels of Kurt Vonnegut*, Lawrence R.

Broer writes:

Do expressions of contempt for such inhuman or insane ideas make Vonnegut a pessimist, or rather the canary bird in the coal mine whose “bleak impoliteness,” John Irving says, provokes us to be more thoughtful, creative, and kind? Vonnegut sees the world...as increasingly unhappy, destructive, and ailing... (xiii)

Therein lies the importance of Vonnegut’s work. Amid the surrealism of his pretend worlds and religions and societies there is the truth of contemporary human culture. He shows humans as the unhappy creatures they are. Through his use of surrealism, Vonnegut can highlight human nature. He builds the necessary bridges for his readers to see the destructive parallels. Describing the Eupho as television sized is not a coincidental. It is perhaps one of the most important and telling lines in that story. The exaggeration of technology, to the point of science fiction shows the danger of the direction a society so focused on advancement will take.

Broer continues, of *Player Piano*, “...much of the success of Vonnegut’s first negative utopia comes from the pervasiveness with which the machine is shown to have infiltrated society and robbed people of the sense of usefulness, meaning, and dignity” (17). This chapter in Broer’s book, which is largely about mental illness in Vonnegut’s writing, examines the use of technology in *Player Piano*, a novel which acts as a sequel to many of Vonnegut’s short stories. This chapter focuses on isolation and how technology is used to isolate the characters from one another and from their ability to define themselves. He cites instances in the novel where, like in “Welcome to the Monkey House,” a mostly automated economy renders most of society without work, and therefore purposeless.

Science-fiction may make his novels unbelievable, but that is the entirely desired effect. As Peter Reed writes, "...the America described in [Vonnegut's books] resembles the one we live in, and we quickly realize that what Vonnegut wants to tell us about is not so much the future as the present" (24). In his book titled *Kurt Vonnegut*, he writes that Vonnegut wants to prove that even in a world where incredible things can happen—where aliens exist and a single piece of frozen water can destroy the world—the human element is powerless. Regardless of the setting, everything comes down to man's inability to control his destiny. It is not just that he cannot, it is that he will not. He cites examples from Vonnegut's more science driven novels, showing how individuals rely on technology to relieve them, and when it fails, are not able to cope with the world they are left with, though it might be easy to simply move on.

As Todd F. Davis, in his book *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, states, Vonnegut's appeal is in his subject matter. He presents his readers with difficult questions and wrestles with them "with grace and precision" (5). Vonnegut is an author that has a point to make about human life. It may be a grim point, but it is valid nonetheless. He uses science-fiction to weave his stories the same way an artist uses acrylics to paint a landscape. The paint is important, but it is not the object of the picture. Vonnegut's characters, setting and context are important, but they are merely vehicles for his message. His evidence stems from novels like *Slaughter-house Five*, where the story is thick with science fiction, but really about the main character's experiences at the bombing of Dresden during WWII and the effect of that on his life and the lives of those around him. Davis cites the more "normal" sections of the book to exemplify how even the involvement of aliens is meant to turn the focus back on human experience.

In the same vein as previous critics, Josh Simpson's article, "This Promising Of Great Secrets," states that Vonnegut's major purpose in writing is to warn against the dangers of science fiction, or specifically, the pointless progression of technology in human society. While his article centers more around Vonnegut's satire, the introduction, again, as many critics have notes, touts Vonnegut as a prophet, a man warning against undue progress. He is not a purveyor of science fiction, he is a purveyor of truth. While most of the evidence Simpson presents has to do with whether or not Vonnegut's main characters are mad or are really seeing what they claim to have seen in the way of spaceships and alien planets, he does present evidence from Vonnegut's personal statements. Vonnegut protests his placement in the science fiction genre and Simpson defends these statements, citing human experiences as the more important in Vonnegut's writing than the alien experiences.

Thomas Hoffman, in his essay, "The Theme of Mechanization in Vonnegut's *Player Piano*," speaks, like Broer to the nature of Vonnegut's use of technology. He also writes of the reality in Vonnegut's pieces, relating instances of technology, even fictional technology to technology in the reader's lives. He argues that in Vonnegut, society has built for itself a buffer of technology, and that it has become more pleasurable to interact with the technological buffer than with other human beings.

These critics, and most of Vonnegut's critics discuss the prevalence of insanity in his works. That will not be discussed in this paper. Many of them (those quoted above) partially discuss the theme of science fiction and its relationship to Vonnegut's themes. These critics glance over the role of technology (science fiction) in his writing, and often neglect its significance. Vonnegut is not a science fiction author as far as a science fiction writer is someone

who writes exclusively about happenings far in our own future, or in the future of unknown, cosmically distant races. He is a science fiction writer is that he discusses the effects of technology on the society that creates it.

Thesis

In “Harrison Bergeron,” “Welcome to the Monkey House,” and “The Euphio Question,” society means to use technology as a great equalizer. Instead, technology provides an even more unfair and false world, suggesting that the constant technological evolution sought in our society may be hindering us as much as it progresses us.

Technology in “Harrison Bergeron”

Stanley Schatt, in his discussion of “Harrison Bergeron” writes, “in any leveling process, what is really lost, according to Vonnegut, is beauty, grace, and wisdom” (133). In his article, Schatt explicates the nature of “Harrison Bergeron,” stating that, as the previous quote as evidence, that the story means to show how attempts at equality hinder the progression of a society, rather than making it greater. In “Harrison Bergeron,” the entire story takes place either in front of or inside of a television set. George and Hazel Bergeron, parents of Harrison, are watching a troop of ballerinas. George thinks, “They weren’t really very good—no better than anybody else would have been, anyway” (8). As Schatt states, the beauty is lost as the ballerinas are weighed down and masked. George has a moment in which he begins to think things would be better if maybe the dancers were not handicapped, but it is quickly driven away by the “mental handicap radio in his ear” (7).

The narrator explains that these technological fetters are in place “...so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face would feel like something the cat drug in” (8).

This suggests a societal belief that in order for one person to be considered beautiful, someone else must be considered ugly. In “Harrison Bergeron,” society has solved this problem by handicapping everyone. In their article, “The Poverty of Equality,” Stephen Moore and Peter Ferrara write, “It is the opposite of justice and fairness to try to equalize outcomes based on...attributes [endowed by our Creator]” (28). This story is often used to highlight the injustice of trying to justify everyone. This is the purpose of Moore and Ferrara’s article, but they do hit on an interesting point in this line. The technology that the society uses to try to equalize their people is in fact more unjust than the equality.

In the case of Harrison, he is born with great intelligence, grace, and strength. Though he does not submit to his fetters, like most of society, he is given them, more than anyone. He has, “instead of a little radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides” (11). He is the epitome of man, and therefore, must be the recipient of the most injustice. That is not equality. It is not even a very good false equality. However the people en masse continue to submit to these different set of inequalities, in order to promote the façade of equality, an equality in which everyone is brought to the lowest level, and those who attempt to remove their earpieces or take off their weights are fined and jailed. The people choose to retain their fetters. When presented with the choice to remove his, George refuses, citing a desire not to return to the “dark ages” (9). George knows that if he takes out his ear radio, he will be able to think clear thoughts. He will follow through on his idea that

maybe the dancers should not be hindered and that his “abnormal” son be allowed to be abnormal.

The importance of technology and brainwashing in “Harrison Bergeron” is that everyone continues on with their ear radios and weights, even though in the comfort of their own homes, if they removed them, no one would know. George chooses to keep his fetters on, even though Hazel says she wouldn’t mind, “if you’re not equal to me for a while” (9). He truly believes that any competition, even between he and his wife, would hinder society. His brain is so thoroughly washed, so thoroughly ruined by the constant squawking of his ear radio, that he cannot perceive the benefits of competition.

Technology in “Welcome to the Monkey House”

The technology in this piece is not only a television set, and an entirely automated economy, but also a new medication, required by society, which removes pleasure from sex. This attempts to inject morality into society. Because sex is no longer enjoyable, it is used only for procreation, and is therefore, supposedly, entirely moral. This use of medicine is a departure from the other two pieces, though in “The Euphio Question,” the effect of the Euphio is compared to the effects of drugs. This, however, is a literal drug, and one created specifically for the purpose in which it is now used.

Of the suicide parlor technicians, the women who perform the assisted suicides, the narrator states, “Practically everything was automated. Nancy and Mary...were lucky to have jobs. Most people didn’t. The average citizen moped around home and watched television, which was the Government” (34). Technology controls their lives. Because of the great

advancements in technology, presumably to make everyone's life better, every has to sit around their house all day, doing nothing. As the narrator states, Nancy and Marry are *lucky* to have jobs. The technology has created a situation in which society feels purposeless. This purposeless leads complete desolation, hence, the Suicide Parlors.

The narrator tells us that the television is “the Government” (34). The television controls the citizen like the a totalitarian government would. Instead of working, because of the automation, everyone just watches television all day, which instead of running programs, streams endless commercials. These commercials tell the watcher to vote, to follow his government, to love his fellow man, and to visit one of the conveniently located Ethical Suicide Parlors. This last commission, is the most important and the most easily followed. Without a purpose, there is no reason to continue living.

In the end, when the suicide parlor technician Nancy has thrown off the oppression of the genital-numbing drug, and present with normal birth control, she sees the possibilities of the new world. Though in the story, refusing to use the numbing medication is said to reduce the human race to animals, those who rebel find this to be a more natural and happy state. The pills made sexual desire something abhorrent, and without them, Nancy is able to realize the beauty of herself and her partner.

Technology in “The Euphio Question”

Morace writes, “...Vonnegut's work...weds fiction and social purpose” (152). In “The Euphio Question,” Vonnegut observes the effects of the growing technology scene and nihilism on religion and society. Joseph Ward writes, “...despite all of the great technological inventions

and scientific advancements over the course of human history, we still experience little more emotional maturity or happiness than we did in past centuries” (108). None of the scientific advancements have actually advanced society. And, Ward, argues, many have hindered it. He continues:

Vonnegut’s purpose is not simply to hurl criticisms about human thinking or throw stones at what we allow ourselves to believe. Rather, he seeks to fulfill his function as canary-in-a-coalmine, sounding an alarm intended to capture our attention so that we may take a timeout from the turmoil of our everyday lives to evaluate how we think, how we feel, how we act. (112)

His stories intend to warn us of the impending technological holocaust. In the example of “The Euphio Question,” if we continue to use the Euphio as a stand-in for the television, we can see that wipes out human interaction. And is this a bad thing? The narrator, in the second paragraph of “The Euphio Question,” (addressing the Federal Communications Commission), states, “...I might as well tell the story straight and pray to God that I can convince you that America doesn’t want what we discovered” (189). The narrator believes it a bad thing, a terrible thing.

When discussing with his partners how to profit off of this “happiness broadcast,” Lew, not the discoverer of the signal, but the push behind making it commercially available, says, “We make arrangements with the phone company to pipe signals from your antenna right into the homes of people with these sets... Instead of turning on the radio or television, everybody’s going to want to turn on the happiness” (196). Along with the reference in the beginning of the story to the Euphio’s television-like shape, there is a connection between the Euphio’s purpose and the purpose of a television. It is an amplified version of the television, a better version.

One of the major effects of the Euphio is a disdain for work and responsibilities. As the group is testing the machine, first a milkman stops by. Before the gadget has a chance to take its full effect, he mentions that he has left his milk van parked dangerously on the corner, and that he has to leave. Lew turns the Euphio up and the milkman says, “Good day to be indoors,” and is not able to leave. Next, a state trooper arrives, angry and determined to get the milkman to move his vehicle. Instead, he turns to the narrator’s son and hands him his gun, saying, “Hey, kid—like guns? ...just like Hoppy’s.” The child then proceeds to shoot holes in the windows and walls, and the only comment anyone makes is, “He’ll make a cop yet” (199). The last visitors are a group of Boy Scouts, collecting old newspapers for a fundraiser. When they hear the Euphio’s otherworldly hiss, the leader says, “...forget it...we’d just have to carry ‘em somewhere” (198). This is the Euphio’s true purpose. It does not produce happiness, it undercuts a person’s desire to work, to fulfill his responsibilities, and to adhere to societal conventions.

The test only ends when a storm begins and knocks out the street’s power. The group has been standing at the window, cheering on the destruction, and suddenly, they realize they are cold, wounded, and starving. A Western Union telegram boy, who was the most recent addition to their party, says that they have been there at least forty-eight hours. With this realization, everyone but Lew is afraid of what they have discovered. Happiness of that “purity” and quantity is dangerous. The Euphio, and its ability to distil cosmic signals into “happiness” is dangerous (201).

Lew, ever enthusiastic, says, “For the price of a fifth of whiskey, [everyone] can buy sixty hours of Euphio!” Fred, who discovered the effect of the cosmic hiss and built the Euphio,

responds, “Or a big family bottle of potassium cyanide” He continues, “Look...this little monster could kill civilization in less time than it took to burn down Rome” (203).

The narrator, in his closing comments to the FCC states, “The question is not whether Euphio works. It does. The question is, rather, whether or not America is to enter a new and distressing phase of history where men no longer pursue happiness but buy it” (205). The narrator and Fred have destroyed the original machine, but Lew has built his own and, with a few modifications, is prepared to begin streaming happiness to every home in America. But the narrator’s comment at the end is the one readers must latch on to. Happiness is not happiness when it has not been pursued. When it is simply presented, or purchased, there is no satisfaction in that. It is a false, unsustainable happiness, that effectively, as shown by the results of the test, can wreak havoc on the country. In his parting statements, the narrator suggests using it as a weapon. And that is false happiness’s best use: numbing minds, rendering them otherwise useless.

Conclusion

These three stories and Vonnegut’s critics show how Vonnegut’s use of technology is rhetorical. It is not science fiction for the sake of science fiction. Technology is used to deliberately numb the minds of the masses. It is used in “Harrison Bergeron” to impede the progress of those who could be great. In “Welcome to the Monkey House,” it builds a buffer in between people, making it hard for them to connect, and robbing them of their purpose to live. “The Euphio Question,” magnifies the dulling effect of too much television and not enough interaction, as well as the price of manufactured rather than earned happiness. The technology is

not just there. It is actively oppressing and hindering the minds that could stop it. Why doesn't George Bergeron remove his ear piece, especially in his own home? Is it because laws are in place to punish him for doing so? Partly, but more because he has been poisoned by degrees to believe that it is better for everyone to be the same and dull, rather than have some fantastic people and many substandard people. When given the chance to take off some of his weights, he prefers to keep them on. He believes in the concept of equalization implicitly. Why do Fred and the narrator, at the end of "The Euphio Question" take fire pokers and smash the machine to bits? They realize what George Bergeron cannot (because of sirens going off in his head). They realize that happiness does not come from dullness. It cannot be manufactured, and it cannot be commercialized. In "Welcome to the Monkey House," Nancy is kidnapped and taken underground until the numbing medication wears off. When she has sex for the first time, she does not yet realize it, but she is liberated from her oppression. She is set free by the very act condemned as immoral. She understands, more fully than George Bergeron can, and than Fred and the narrator do, that action is what leads to happiness, not passivity.

It is not difficult to see that Vonnegut means to warn society against its reckless use of technology. Most of his writing was before the time of the internet and cellphones, but in the television and telephone, he saw the possibility of disconnectedness. He saw the technology that was often meant to bring us closer as a society, driving a wedge between individuals, or else, creating a situation in which no one was an individual. It is not necessarily the technology that is bad, but the way it is used, the way society allows it to be used, that creates the dullness and the oppression. Using Broer's metaphor, Vonnegut is the canary in the coal mine of technology.

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