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Distances: Human to Inhuman, Familiar to Unfamiliar. A Study of Vonnegut's War Short Stories

Abstract: This paper explores Kurt Vonnegut's short story collection *Armageddon in Retrospect* as a revealing volume in terms of how war and technology are addressed in Vonnegut's fiction. It argues that Vonnegut's late fiction revisits his earlier concerns from *Player Piano*, *The Sirens of Titan*, and *Galápagos* in order to expose the mechanisms of dehumanization at work in technological modernity. Through irony and moral inversion, *Armageddon in Retrospect* completes Vonnegut's alternative quest to understand technology not as an external force, but as an embodied extension of human violence and vulnerability. Considering the tension that comes with every extension and the story of how a young Hoosier relinquished his faith in technology, this paper attempts to put the pieces together and to reinforce the outpost of wonder, a state of being which Vonnegut never failed to praise, by asking the question: what (still) makes us human?
Keywords: War; Technology; Corporality; Corporeality; Embodiment.

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1. Introduction

In his later years, American writer Kurt Vonnegut Jr. often exchanged letters with various teachers and their students. In one of the more well-known letters he sent, Vonnegut apologizes for not being able to meet the children in person, as – alas! – to put it in his own words, "I now resemble nothing so much as an iguana"[1]. Though this letter was sent in 2006, one cannot escape the feeling that Vonnegut entered the literary stage as if he already was in his sunset years – at least, this is what he conveys in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-five*, the novel that secured his notoriety: "I have become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown"[2]. He was 46 when his famous war novel was published and 83 when the students at Xavier High School received his letter. A couple of decades and mysterious states of aggregation later, the "old fart" becomes an iguana amidst what must have sometimes felt like some never-ending sunset years.

Still, as even a first time Vonnegut reader could confirm, we are presented with

the work of a witty, dainty and upbeat writer who has oftentimes and in many ways stated that he prefers laughter to crying and that, to paraphrase one of the answers he gave when Robert Weide, the director of the 2021 documentary *Kurt Vonnegut: Unstuck in Time*, asked him about the war: the dogs chasing him down the street in his childhood left a deeper impression on his conscience than the trenches of World War II and the imprisonment in Dresden.

Without risking to spin cross-bred yarns in an analysis that does not discern between fiction and biography, we must not shy away from the fact that fighting in a war and surviving the devastating bombing of an entire city would leave one with an acute sense of finitude. As if life's most lurid experiences were already behind the young man in his twenties who returned to Indianapolis in 1945. Neither should be neglected the skepticism Vonnegut and many other veterans shared regarding the technological progress that put an end to the war and that was riding a high tide, making leaps and bounds in terms of domestic appliances, faster means of transportation, deadlier and more efficient bombs, all against the background of various global races, the arms' race and the race to the moon being the headliners of the postwar decades.

We must also consider that Vonnegut's writing career was jump-started by the window of opportunity provided by literary magazines and that he witnessed the shift from published short stories to television, which, for a while, left him struggling for a source of income. His time working at General Electric is also relevant, for the main novel that came from this experience – *Player Piano* (1952) – was placed by most critics in the category of science-fiction novels, despite the fact that Vonnegut was mostly describing what he saw at the General Electric plant. His rise to literary fame was accompanied by the blurred lines between science-fiction and technological progress, which in the first decade after World War II seemed to be especially tangled. It is this elusive relation to technology and scientific progress that this paper aims to fathom in a manner similar to the way one should write about war in Vonnegut's writings, namely with consideration to the fact that such themes ought not to overpower the essence of his novels and short stories which always favor the humanity within or behind vicious or superfluous chains of events.

Vonnegut shirks from demagogy, pedagogy and, in general, any sort of discourse that requires a sober and somber tone. Presenting an analysis of technology and scientific conduct in Vonnegut's writings should not chip away at the spirit of his work, superimposing a firm critical narrative on a text which flows and eludes. This is the reason why this paper focuses on the relation between human beings and technology as it is depicted in a volume which critics have not tackled in this sense, *Armageddon in Retrospect*. Published shortly after the author's death, this collection of short stories signals a symbolic return to two of the subjects that haunted Vonnegut's memory and experience as a human being throughout the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st: war and technology. In doing so, we will also make note of how the subject of technological progress was integrated by literary critics in their analysis of several well-known earlier novels, as their considerations will help

frame our own. These novels are *Player Piano* (1952), *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and *Galápagos* (1985). As expected, numerous articles and volumes have been written discussing these works and, while we cannot claim that our analysis can in any way rise to the complexity of these narratives, aptly looking at all the important themes they are constructed upon, we have selected them as elements of what we may call an unofficial trilogy of anthropocentric disintegration when it comes to Vonnegut's discourse on humanity and technology.

Our expectation is that, put together and interwoven via recurring themes and reversed scenarios, these novels will serve as a practical frame for our analysis of the targeted short stories, finding a context for our considerations in the literature of the author himself. Thus, what we set to accomplish is to offer a measured reading of some of the texts included in *Armageddon in Retrospect*, as a way to shed new light on previously established interpretations of earlier novels. We also seek to better understand how the subject of technology is integrated in the writings of a *faux* science-fiction writer, declared humanist and iconic citizen of Indianapolis who, in what should have been his speech at Clowes Hall, Indianapolis, on the 27th of April 2007 (he died on the 11th) was still struggling to understand how one can separate life's bad news from the good news. Through humor, which, in his case, carries truth like a dagger, he provides us with his own answer to this dilemma:

> But seriously, my fellow Hoosiers, there's good news and bad news tonight. This is the best of times and the worst of times. So what else is new? The bad news is that the Martians have landed in Manhattan, and have checked in at the Waldorf-Astoria. The good news is that they only eat homeless people of all colors, and they pee gasoline[3].

2. Towards an Unofficial Trilogy of Anthropocentric Disintegration

As Stanley Schatt rightfully observes in his 1976 monography, *Player Piano*, the novel in which the tensions between humans and machinery take center stage, "was ignored by most literary critics because it was science-fiction; unfortunately for Vonnegut, many science-fiction critics dismissed it as good satire, but bad science-fiction"[4]. At the time, academics considered, as Vonnegut recalls on numerous occasions, that science-fiction literature was somehow less-than, a place in the literary field which housed modest talents and works that generally were not worthy of their attention. Paul Proteus, the hero of the novel, feels trapped in a world where machines hold the power and human life and resources are utterly disregarded. Of course, he had not always felt this way. For instance, at the beginning of the novel, he recalls one of the experiments he and some colleagues have conducted in their youth, when they were more excited about the prospect of automation. They had managed to register a worker's interaction with the machine he was assigned to operate and then to transfer this skill to a machine which would contain "the essence of Rudy [the worker] as far as the machine was concerned. The tape was the essence distilled from the small, polite man"[5].

But the relationship between humans and machines functions like a two-way

street, meaning that the characters lose their humanity just as machines gain it. This problematic corruption is initially signaled via the writer's choice of metaphors – for example, seen through Paul's eyes, his wife Anita is well aware of the "mechanics" of marriage and her warmth is merely a "counterfeit" - and culminates with tense dialogues and bursts of despair which bear witness to a humanity which, by that point, is already lost. Anita cries out to Paul: "All you need is something stainless steel, shaped like a woman, covered with sponge rubber, and heated to body temperature! I'm sick of being treated like a machine!"[6] When Paul finally denounces the myriads of ways through which technology has corrupted human life, he finds the words to describe the essence of this endangered humanity: "the main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings, not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems"[7]. We notice in this excerpt that Paul's vocabulary is still rather technical, but it is this precise apparent lack of expression and emotion that adds authenticity to the character's transformation and restores hope in a world in which, despite the poor linguistic expression, attempts to invest language with power can still be made.

The novel follows a variety of subplots, one of which is the visit of the Shah of Bratphur, a spiritual leader from the East. In the automated United States, the Shah is no more a stranger than the Tralfamadorians, the alien civilization which enables Billy Pilgrim to travel through time and space in *Slaughterhouse-five*. His language is poetic and his worries all the same – instead of being impressed by the complex and efficient machinery meant to ease domestic chores, the Shah asks why people insist on having things done at a rapid pace and when he finds out that the average American spends his spare time in front of the TV, he is, unsurprisingly, appalled. He refuses the offer presented to him by the officials to implement this system in his home country and sets the system controlling all the machinery for failure when he presents it with a riddle that the computer cannot solve.

After taking part in the revolution meant to destroy the machinery-oriented society, Paul Proteus experiences an epiphany as he witnesses the futility of the uprising: some revolutionaries are apprehended, whilst others are busy trying to fix an orange drink machine that they had destroyed amidst the mayhem of the revolution. What is implied here is that the efforts to fix the machine come not from a need that is linked to the utility of the device itself, but to what Paul had previously concluded to be the tell-tale sign of the American psyche: "the restless, erratic insight and imagination of a gadgeteer"[8]. As Schatt aptly observes, "Vonnegut suggests that the engineer's belief in technology and the revolutionaries' belief in mankind are both overly zealous"[9]. When it comes to the exchanges established between humans and machines, he notes that, undoubtedly, humans have lost their humanity but not before trying to capture it in the movements of the machines, which is why, "because of this touch of humanity, the machines are imperfect and mortal"[10].

Instead of exploring the interaction between biology and materiality as a straightforward and absolute conflict, Vonnegut pushes his narrative towards the limits of contemplation, in a space where

humanity, time and mortality are constantly negotiated. Where humans and machines meet, assimilation begins, and it does not take long until the once obvious differences between the two planes of existence start to fade. This scenario can arguably be more overwhelming and problematic than an imagined apocalypse, where violence and slaughter at the hands – claws? pinchers? – of machinery is the most dreaded possible outcome. What makes this scenario more devastating is that it ought not be imagined; it is already here. As Vonnegut himself explains in *Palm Sunday: An Autobiographical Collage*, the atomic bomb revealed the state of the sickness which by that time had plagued every soul of every highly industrialized nation. Such horror did this realization unleash, Vonnegut believes, that these souls could wish for nothing more but death. In the chapter "How I Lost My Innocence", based on an article he had written for a Swedish magazine, Vonnegut points out:

> It is quite awful, really, to realize that perhaps most of the people around me find lives in the service of machines so tedious and exasperating that they would not mind much, even if they have children, if life were turned off like a light switch at any time. How many of your readers will deny that the movie *Dr. Strangelove* was so popular because its ending was such a happy one?[11]

Going back to *Player Piano*, it is useful to note that, as an employee of General Electric, Vonnegut's job was to observe the work being done in the laboratories and write favorable stories for major magazines. As Klinkowitz points out in *Kurt Vonnegut's America*, while he was working for General Electric, the company's slogan was "At General Electric, progress is our most important product"[12]. It is not reasonable to believe that, while writing articles for General Electric at the end of the 1940s, Vonnegut had flashes of what would be the gleeful doom which ends Kubrick's 1969 movie. What is plausible, nonetheless, is that he must have experienced some sort of dissonance witnessing the automation of postwar American society, whilst still carrying the impression that war and the atomic bomb had left on his conscience.

This is not to say that Vonnegut preaches an actual return to a pristine state, utterly rejecting technology. In fact, as he states in his "autobiographical collage", enthusiasm for technological progress had accompanied him since an early age. Growing up in Indianapolis, part of his family owned a hardware store, the place where he became fascinated with the "cunning devices and compounds" which would welcome him in times of need throughout his life: "when I feel most lost in this world, I comfort myself by visiting a hardware store. I meditate there. I do not buy anything. A hammer is still my Jesus, and my Virgin Mary is still a cross-cut saw"[13]. Yet, considering how fast technology has evolved, visiting a hardware store can hardly pass as keeping up with the current state of technological progress; rather, it is an act akin to melancholy. It is this precise subjective distinction between various types of technology that accompanies another one of Vonnegut's opinions on science and its use of technology, namely the fact that, after the war, his innocence regarding science was still intact. It was the atomic bomb

which irreversibly shattered this state of being:

> How profound had my innocence been? Only six months before [the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki], as a captured American foot soldier, I had been in Dresden when it was burned to the ground by a purposely set firestorm. I was still innocent after that. Why? Because the technology which created that firestorm was so familiar to me. I understood it entirely, and so had no trouble imagining how the same amount of ingenuity and determination could benefit mankind once the war was over. I could even help. There was nothing in the bombs or the airplanes, after all, which could not, essentially, be bought at a small hardware store. […] But the bombing of Hiroshima compelled me to see that a trust in technology, like all other great religions of the world, had to do with the human soul[14].

And, as we have seen previously, to Vonnegut, the postwar human soul presents itself as profoundly diseased. What this extended citation enables us to conclude is that the writer's relation to technology is complex and that it treads a fine line between melancholy, horror, fascination, disdain and refusal – in effect, a web of threads to tread would be a more suitable image. But another aspect which arrests our attention is the familiarity that the nuclear bomb and post-Hiroshima technology lack.

When considering familiarity and materiality in relation to technology, several thinkers and works come to mind. The way Vonnegut establishes the relation between flesh and the "cunning devices and compounds" can be meaningfully framed by several of Don Ihde's considerations from *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context*. Unlike Vonnegut, Ihde clearly states his desire to break away from the limiting attitude towards technology, which places it under the strict confines of "good" and "bad". Instead, he proposes a change of lens: "There are no neutral technologies, or, positively put, all technologies are *non-neutral*. […] They are transformative in that they change the quality, field and possibility range of human experience"[15]. What this observation implies is that technologies ought to be understood in a phenomenological sense, which would favor the human-technology relation. Instead of perceiving technologies as mere objects, Ihde suggests that they should be considered as active parts in the human-technology relational pair.

Furthermore, when discussing how the human-technology relation is present in Heidegger's opinions on "good" and "bad" technologies, Ihde notices "a preference for what I call *embodiment relations*. Heidegger prefers, likes, those technologies which express straightforward bodily, perceptual relations with the environment"[16]. Such a preference for embodiment relations is, as Don Ihde states, "a nostalgic element in the romantic thesis"[17]. Naturally, our intention is not to compare Vonnegut's perception of technology to Heidegger's and, unlike the latter's, since we might be dealing with distinct natures of melancholy as in Vonnegut's case, meditating in a hardware store does not imply an *où sont les neiges d'antan* sort of question and neither does it evolve into an elaborate meditation

on how various types of technologies enrich or rob the Dasein of its essence.

Ihde invokes Heidegger to categorize human-technology relations; Vonnegut's perspective exemplifies similar dynamics but through narrative and autobiographical observation rather than ontological reflection. Vonnegut's is a straightforward observation on the courtesy – or lack thereof – that technology displays towards humans: are its constitutive elements known to humans? Has enough time passed in order for the substance of such technologies to be understood and assimilated by the human mind meditating in the hardware store? And most importantly, can the type of technology that made the atomic bomb possible truly be understood and would such an understanding bring about ease, not even to mention melancholy? Nevertheless, the term "embodiment relations" aptly captures Vonnegut's complex engagement with technology, both in his fiction and in his confessional writings. Given the scope of this analysis, it provides a plausible conceptual lens through which to frame his relationship with materiality and human experience.

Vonnegut's meditation in the hardware store also coincides with some of Gilbert Simondon's considerations from his 1958 volume, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. While it would be unwarranted to claim a direct influence of Simondon on Vonnegut, the temporal proximity between *Player Piano* (1952) and *On the Mode of Existence in Technical Objects* (1958) suggests a shared intellectual climate – a moment when both literature and philosophy were responding to similar anxieties surrounding automation and the place the human being might (still) hold within the technological sphere. States Simondon: "The most powerful cause of alienation in the world of today is based on a misunderstanding of the machine. The alienation in question is not caused by the machine but by a failure to come to an understanding of the nature and essence of the machine"[18] – and of the way it changes and conditions human behavior, might Paul Proteus add, whilst observing the revolutionaries' urge to fix the machine they had previously broken.

Simondon pushes his argument further, stating that behind the unbalanced culture lies its failure to fully recognize technical objects in a way similar to the one which integrates "things aesthetic", for instance. The implication here is that the machine is invested with a utilitarian function, but not with meaning. This, in turn, leads to investing the machine with a sacred status and this is where Vonnegut's meditations in the hardware store and the insights he provides into how he gave up his first religion, i.e., technology align once again with the French philosopher's line of thought:

> This, of course, gives rise to an intemperate technicism that is nothing other than idolatry of the machine and, through such idolatry, by way of identification, it leads to a technocratic yearning for unconditional power. The desire for power confirms the machine as a way to supremacy and makes it the modern philtre (love-potion)[19].

Thus, Simondon argues, one who wishes to dominate will create the android, investing it with its humanity and hiding his feelings of weakness and anxiety behind

his refined thinking, willing and feeling invention. Such an invention is nevertheless denied by the philosopher, who sees in the android a figment of imagination, no different than the characters in a painting. As Simondon emphasises, "no cultivated man would allow himself to speak of things or persons painted on a canvas as veritable realities with an interior life and a will, good or bad"[20]. Nevertheless, one such cultivated individual entertains the idea that machines could indeed possess such traits and an autonomous interior life. Needless to say, the current technological climate would possibly convince Simondon to fine-tune this precise statement. That being said, Vonnegut entertains the idea of a feeling, thinking and willing android via the character of Salo, the stranded robot from *Sirens of Titan* (1959).

As Thomas Marvis states in his *Kurt Vonnegut: A Critical Companion*, "*The Sirens of Titan*" picks up the theme of mechanization that was central to *Player Piano* and takes it to its logical conclusion"[21]. Vonnegut has an insightful way of using Salo, the android from Tralfamadore, as both a pretext for the narrative and as an allegory for humanity's most profound struggles. Naturally, the novel has numerous plot lines and a rich critical bibliography can accompany its analysis, but for the sake of this paper, let us focus on Salo and *his* – not "its" – built-in humanity. Salo's home planet, Tralfamadore, is inhabited exclusively by machines. Yet, like humans – and this is where Vonnegut's background in Anthropology comes forward – these machines have come up with a legend about their origins. The story goes that, in the beginning, Tralfamadore was inhabited by creatures that were not "efficient, predictable or durable"[22], i.e., human-like beings which created the machines in order to have them deal with the menial tasks of everyday life. However, gradually, humans started searching for higher purposes, which in turn left machines in charge of more aspects of life until, because humans "hated purposeless things above all else"[23] and nothing seemed to satisfy their desire for said purpose anymore, they began killing each other and, for their last act as inhabitans of Tralfamadore, "called on their machines to finish the job"[24].

It is because of this ancient connection between human-like creatures and the Tralfamadorian machines that all man-made edifices on Earth have been nothing but signs sent by the Tralfamadorians to guide Salo in his journey. In an ironic twist of the narrative, even the most meaningful plot serves as nothing more than a mission to deliver to the stranded Salo a piece of equipment he needed in order to repair his damaged ship. From the planet of Titan where he is forced to land, Salo has the opportunity to observe and learn human customs throughout the millennia. When he left his home planet, Tralfamadore, Salo was given a secret message to carry to the end of the Universe and was put under strict instructions not to read it until the message had been delivered. The revelation of said message comes at the end of the novel and it proves to be another one of Vonnegut's *faux* plots, toying with the reader's expectations whilst consequently touching on a deeper meaning: the message Salo is supposed to deliver is a dot on an aluminum square; in Tralfamadorian, the dot means "Greetings". This revelation proves that all of humanity's greatest achievements, thus manipulated

by the alien machines on Tralfamadore – the Great Wall of China, the Kremlin, Nero's golden house, Stonehenge, to name a few – have been nothing more than a coordinated mission to help an android deliver his planet's greetings to another culture located far away in the depths of the Universe. Can we argue that this makes humanity's greatest effort superfluous? An alternative reading of the passage (granted, an idealist one) would point out that, if all these struggles are indeed reframed by Salo's mission, at least they have been carried out in the name of connection, of seeking contact across time and space. Such a genuine and humane quest clearly sets the Tralfamadorians, and Salo in particular, above what we might expect from a machine, enhancing the humanity of the character.

This brings us to the fact that the hybrid nature of Salo, which is part machine, part human in function and affect, resonates strongly with contemporary theories of the posthuman. As Hayles argues in *How We Became Posthuman*, subjectivity is no longer confined to the boundaries of the biological body, but emerges from distributed interactions between human and technological systems. Salo exemplifies this "distributed cognition", functioning neither merely as a machine nor fully as a human, but as a hybrid locus of perception, decision, and emotion. Similarly, in a Haraway-inspired reading, Salo can be seen as a cyborg figure, eluding traditional distinctions between organism and machine, programmed function and human intention, and thereby problematizing classical notions of agency and identity. Through Salo, Vonnegut dramatizes a posthuman vision in which the boundaries of humanity are in constant negotiation, echoing some of the shared concerns of both postphenomenology and feminist technoscience.

In this sense, *Galápagos*, which numerous critics have viewed as Vonnegut's greatest achievement since *Slaughterhouse-five*, may be read as the culmination of Vonnegut's ongoing interrogation of technology's role in shaping and redefining what it means to be human in a deeply automated context. Just like in the case of *Player Piano* and *Sirens of Titan*, we do not aim to fully grasp the numerous and entangled plots of this novel, but to concisely place *Galápagos* as a continuation of Vonnegut's discourse on what it means to (still) be human against the highly technological background of the world. In summary, *Galápagos* confronts us with an apocalyptic scenario, in which wars and a deadly virus targeting human reproduction lead a small group of survivors to return to what one might call a more natural state, but which proves to be a parody of Darwinism. As for the bleak prognosis of apocalypse, Vonnegut once again exceeds and betrays our expectations, since through this scenario, his "intention was to contradict with its representation of the end the expectations of the contemporary reader imbued with Cold War fictions of disasters, dominated by the nuclear fears"[25].

In the novel, humanity's greatest fault are the big brains each of our skulls accommodate: "So I raise the question, although there is nobody around to answer it: Can it be doubted that three-kilogram brains were once nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race?"[26] The answer is swift and decisive: "There was no other source. This was a very innocent planet, except for those great big brains"[27]. We see here one of the

arguments Vonnegut will keep coming back to in his later writings, particularly in his last volume, *A Man without a Country*, a collection of literary and socio-political essays in which humanity's catastrophic effect on our planet is seen as the greatest tragedy never told. In a stark contrast to the natural world unfolding with opportunity for the few survivors, the big brains humanity once relied on have something of an internalized automation, not being able – or rather, not caring to – discern between good and evil. At this point, the hope that such corrupt machineries would choose to do good is a mere illusion: "And the famine was as purely a product of oversized brains as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony"[28].

Going back to the concept of embodiment relations, one must argue that *Galápagos* reverses the phenomenological direction Ihde describes. In *Postphenomenology*, Ihde views embodiment relations as technologies that extend and transform human perception in a way that makes the body and the technological artifact able to function as a single perceptual system. In Vonnegut's novel, however, this relational structure collapses: rather than perceiving the world through technological mediation, the few survivors of humanity must relearn to (re)inhabit their environment through bare, unenhanced bodies. In this respect, *Galápagos* may be read as a radical undoing of embodiment relations, more precisely as a regression from the technologically extended self back to a purely organic mode of being. Yet, paradoxically, this "return to nature" is not restorative but ironical, for it exposes how inseparable humanity had become from its tools and prostheses. The disembodiment from technology reveals, and not as much resolves, the ontological crisis Ihde associates with human-technology interrelations: what remains of the human when the technological extension is withdrawn?

Moreover, the brain itself is depicted as the source of all evil and suffering, a machine in an ontological sense, which is integrated in the structure of the human body as a parasitic piece of technology. Get rid of the brain, and a profound, good humanity awaits. We say "good" in the sense of desirable or, rather, preferable to the era of the big brains. In this sense, *Galápagos* presents a reversed scenario of the one from *Player Piano*. Yet once again, we are confronted with the complex task of recognizing humanity on the outskirts of Vonnegut's fictional experiment but, instead of having to salvage bits and pieces from the actual wreck yard left behind by the revolution against machines, we are asked to find such artifacts amidst the actual shipwreck of civilization. Do the survivors, with their shrunken brains and smooth bodies, adapted to swimming and hunting fish, hold more refined mirrors against our humanity than the android Salo or the devices which left the Shah so deeply troubled when he left the United States?

It goes without saying that there is no simple, singular answer to this question, since Vonnegut's discourse on what makes us human and what makes us machines raises such profound and complex questions and scenarios. Before we undertake the analysis of the short stories selected from *Armageddon in Retrospect*, we ought to include one of the answers Vonnegut offers to the question of what is human amidst any given scenario, be it an automated society, an alien plot or a surprising apocalypse. The answer comes from the last

novel we have considered so far, *Galápagos*: "And people still laugh about as much as they ever did, despite their shrunken brains. If a bunch of them are lying around on a beach, and one of them farts, everybody else laughs and laughs, just as people would have done a million years ago"[29].

3. The Armageddon Is Not Promised – It Has Already Taken Place

It is no surprise that humor is one of the resources Vonnegut turns back to when looking for proof of humanity in his novels. Laughter closely follows even the most despairing scenarios he imagines in his writing, and judging by his confessions and also by interviews and Weide's documentary, it seems that humor was also deeply and intimately intertwined with his life. The short stories that make up the posthumous *Armageddon in Retrospect* make no exception. Published in 2008, in the eve of the anniversary of one year since his passing, the book's full title is self-explanatory: *Armageddon in Retrospect. And Other New and Unpublished Writings on War and Peace*. Although the primary themes of the 12 previously unpublished short stories are war and the loss of humanity, technology also proves to be a focal point of interest, albeit in a highly stylized manner, compared to the previous works we have touched upon. We will refer to four such short stories, which have been selected on account on their subtle and metaphoric way of addressing technology and corporality. We will discuss these works in pairs of two, as we believe that the contrasts and similarities which such pairings reveal will support our main argument, which is that these texts constitute a discourse on corporality and corporeality which simultaneously continues and deepens Vonnegut's previous attitudes towards the subject of technology.

"Guns before Butter" and "Unicorn Trap" are centered around technology and a visceral hunger. The former frames this hunger via a group of American prisoners of war who spend their days cleaning up the debris left behind by the Allied forces bombing Dresden and sharing recipes, which they eagerly write down in their notebooks, accompanied with tips, tricks and drawings. The latter sets hunger against a medieval background, precisely in the home of a British family in 1067. The father is appointed tax collector by Robert the Horrible, a friend of William the Conqueror. The position thrust upon the father is synonymous with moral and social death in the English village. His wife, Ivy, watches with greed the retinue of nobles accompanying Robert the Horrible on a hunt, dreaming of how she could fashion a gown from the saddlecloth of the Norman leader's horse. Meanwhile, their son is preoccupied with building a trap for unicorns. No mythical creature ends up in the trap – but Robert the Horrible does mysteriously disappear, the same man who, one can argue, seen through Ivy's eyes, is somewhat of a hypnotic, enchanted unicorn himself. The suspense is short-lived, for Robert is the one who falls into the trap and, later on, is cut up by the father and son and the mother cooks his meat. In the background, the Norman nobles scour the forest in search of their missing lord.

Similarly, in "Guns before Breakfast", the American prisoners are mocked by their guard, Corporal Kleinhans, who is baffled by their favorite subject of conversation:

"'Food', he said softly. 'What good does it do to talk about it, to write about it? Talk about girls. Talk about music. Talk about liquor'. […] 'What kind of soldiers are these that spend all day exchanging recipes?'"[30]. Later, after being demoted to the rank of private, Kleinhans abandons his old prejudices and gives in to a vindictive hunger and the pleasures of an imaginary feast: "How about twelve pancakes with a slice of colonel between each one, and a big blob of hot fudge on top, eh?"[31]

Weapons, the symbol of Norman and Nazi domination, are thus countered by the visceral hunger of the conquered and the imprisoned. Whether we are confronted with a scene of gleeful cannibalism or a cathartic recipe, corporeality dissolves technology, annuls the superiority of weapons and redeems the injustices of captivity and conquest. It is a rather hopeful scenario, fictional as it might be, imagining the acidic gastric juices potent enough and the injustices committed by the conquerors corrosive enough to restore balance and give hope to the oppressed. Iby's fascination for the Norman uniforms and weaponry falls silent when confronted with hunger and with the need to hide any evidence that would lead her husband straight to the gallows. She imagines the horse-riding attire as fabric for a dress, a more natural use of such a fine material, which in turn responds to a more natural need, compared to the Normans' taste for pageantry and need to assert superiority on the battlefield and beyond, both in terms of armament and aesthetic choice.

Similarly, Kleinhans is at first distraught by the soldiers' finding a certain voluptuousness in sharing recipes but later he caves in, associating revenge with his covert hunger, now freely displayed amongst the ruins of Dresden. The propaganda machine might be fine-tuned by elated speeches and bellicose rhetoric, but the human body and human imagination are better fueled by a vision of twelve pancakes, with or without the slice of colonel added to the recipe. Since he was demoted, Kleinhans relinquishes his gun and allows his imagination to roam alongside the prisoners'. In both scenarios, the technological and social superiority of the oppressors is thwarted by such humble devices as the trap for unicorns set by a young boy and a couple of notebooks filled with three American prisoners' visions of an imaginary feast. Akin to the scenario in *Galápagos*, when confronted with crumbling societies and failing technologies, humanity finds strongholds in the most curious of places. Similarly, Ivy's initial awe towards the Norman attire resembles the readiness with which society idolizes machinery in *Player Piano*.

Equally relevant is "The Commandant's Desk", where technology and biology intertwine in the figure of the protagonist, a Czech veteran who enthusiastically awaits the arrival of the American troops, the last and most desired of all the possible occupying forces his small town has known so far. The action is set in an uncertain future, in which Soviet Russia and the United States are at war – not a cold one – and the Czech Republic is one of the many countries that have passed under successive regimes.

The central figure of the story is an old man who had lost his leg in World War I and whose wooden prosthesis has become harmoniously integrated into all aspects of his life:

> Carved in the peg are the images of Georges Clemenceau, David Lloyd George, and Woodrow Wilson, who helped the Czech Republic rise from the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1919, when I was twenty-five. […] There are other faces that should be added, and now, now that peace is with us once again, perhaps I'll carve them. The only carving I've done on the peg in the last thirty years is crude and obscure, and maybe barbaric – three deep nicks near the iron tip, for the three German officers whose car I sent down a mountainside one night in 1943, during the Nazi occupation.[32]

Over the years, the veteran carpenter has been forced to build various pieces of furniture for the various rulers who took turns occupying the Czech town: a bed for the Nazi commander, a desk for the Russian one, which is especially intriguing since it was a desk equipped with a secret drawer containing the triggering mechanism of a bomb. But the American commander, awaited with such hope by the protagonist, turns out to be as cruel and detestable as his Soviet counterpart, refusing to acknowledge the Czech's suffering and sacrifices, and whom he treats as he would the rest of Europe: "If it were mine [Europe], I'd have the engineers bulldoze the whole lousy mess flat. Nothing in it but gutless wonders who'll follow any damn dictator that comes along"[33].

In "The Commandant's Desk", the mutilated body of the Czech carpenter becomes a space of historical, political, and affective memory. The prosthesis, a rudimentary technological object, is transformed into both an archive and an instrument of resistance. In a subtle way, Vonnegut reveals how biology and technology can coexist in a relationship of personal and historical interdependence. The act of carving, a manual task, becomes a counter-technology of the human, standing against the impersonal violence of the commandant's desk and the newly installed occupying powers. Going back to Don Ihde's considerations on embodiment, we can compare the carpenter's intimate knowledge of the material he is working with for his craft with the solution for the European "lousy mess" proposed by the American commander. A war veteran, caught up in numerous military conflicts and an inhabitant of a highly disputed territory, the Czech does not overtly reject all technology that goes beyond his craft, but he makes wood part of his flesh and, in turn and symbolically, hides the bomb within the "flesh" of the wood itself, inside his most precious work, the commandant's desk. This offers a meaningful tension between coporality, corporeality and technology, which blurs boundaries to such an extent that one cannot know for sure whether the wood and the bomb engulf the flesh or whether the flesh devours both materiality and technology, spreading its essence and lived history throughout the landscape which, in turn, becomes nothing more but a perpetual ruin, a wound that cannot be cauterized.

The dynamic between body, memory, and technology reaches its peak in "Great Day", where the android and artificial temporality acquire an ironic and unsettling dimension. The story is set in the year 2037. The protagonist, a sixteen-year-old soldier known only by his nickname, Great Day, enlists in the Army of the World.

Although his mother vehemently opposes his decision ("She thought the Army of the World was just for bums who couldn't find respectable work nowheres"[34]), the boy leaves Indiana and joins this absolute army, where he is assigned to the time-screen company. This military unit's mission is to simulate combat conditions. Since the army is global and all the nations are part of it, there are no enemies. Thus, military training is based on time travel: soldiers visit battlefields from the past, study troop movements, and rehearse tactics and strategies.

Two episodes stand out. First, the Russian company has a collection of nearly a hundred skulls "lined up on a shelf like honeydew melons"[35]. No one knows where these skulls came from, but the protagonist insists that somebody in charge should "get a whole slew of chaplains from every religion there is. They ought to give them poor skulls a decent funeral, and bury them somewhere where they won't ever be bothered again"[36]. Another soldier reminds him that these skulls do not count as people anymore, to which the protagonist replies "It ain't like they were never people"[37].

The second episode centers on Captain Poritsky, the clearest embodiment of Donna Haraway's remark that "modern war is a cyborg orgy"[38]. Restless, addicted to danger, Poritsky repeatedly expresses his contempt for the soldiers who have never seen a drop of blood or faced a real enemy. Here, Vonnegut's irony targets Poritsky, who apparently forgets there are no enemies left and it simultaneously targets the reader, who must wonder: is such an army even possible? What purpose would it serve once world peace has been acquired? And could such an army exist in 2037?

Poritsky, however, remains steadfast in his creed. To him, shells are music, and destiny holds no mystery: "I was born to fight! he hollered. I'm rusting inside!"[39] Thus, the company's newest mission delights him. The soldiers are to be teleported to observe a 1918 battlefield. Assisted by scientists (whom Poritsky despises), they operate within a perimeter demarcated by searchlights and smoke boundaries. Within this area, their ghostlike existence above the trenches of 1918 is devoid of danger. We are thus presented with the following double illusion: the soldiers of 1918 will believe that they see visions, while the soldiers of the Army of the World will believe this is only an exercise. Poritsky shatters this latter illusion. Driven by the sway of battle and his visions of victory, he steps outside the safe perimeter drawn by the scientists and crosses the boundary of light and smoke. Dragged along by his captain's frenzy, the protagonist recounts: "That crazy man dragged me right through that line of flares. I screamed and I cried and I bit him. But it was too late. There wasn't no flares no more. There wasn't nothing but nineteen-eighteen all around."[40] Let us recall the way Poritsky described himself: "I'm rusting inside". Yet his body, for all his martial conviction, proves to be not match for the bullets of 1918 and he dies instantly upon crossing the line of smoke. The protagonist survives, but loses his sight. The last image he perceives captures the symbolic reason why Poritsky's body, in danger of rusting, ultimately proved its fatal vulnerability: "And then another barrage hit. And it was steel and high-explosive, and I was flesh, and then was then, and steel and flesh was all balled up together."[41]

Blinded, the protagonist is introduced to Cassandra's plight. In the hospital, he

tells the soldiers of 1918 about the Army of the World, about the searchlights that made his journey through time and space possible, and about the world peace that will eventually reign on Earth, though not before more devastating wars:

> So I lay here, blind as a bat, and I tell 'em all the things I see so clear in my head – the Army of the World, everybody like brothers everywhere, peace everlasting, nobody hungry, nobody scared. That's how I got my nickname. […] Don't know who thought of it first, but everybody calls me Great Day[42].

Thus, in this volume, Vonnegut constructs a universe in which technology is neither utopia nor dystopia, but banal reality, sometimes ridiculous, sometimes lethal. His soldiers travel through time like ghosts, prisoners of war dream of recipes amid the ruins of Dresden, and a carpenter's prosthesis becomes a journal of memory and revenge. Wherever weapons speak, the body responds, with hunger, fatigue, pain, rebellion. In Vonnegut's world, flesh never lies, whether it is cannibalized with dark humor or torn apart by bullets. "And steel and flesh was all balled up together" – this might be one of the most powerful images of Vonnegut's war, which is centered around the tragic and absurd fusion between human and machine. At its center stands the body, witness, victim, devourer, and at times blind prophet, in a world where survival is seldom secured through strength and more often through frailty and fiction. As Katherine Hayles reminds us in *How We Became Posthuman*, the posthuman is not about transcending the body, but about a constant negotiation between materiality and technology, which Vonnegut seems to have understood when he crafted characters who drift between flesh, metal, and hallucination.

What Armageddon in Retrospect ultimately reveals is that Vonnegut's negotiation with technology and war does not culminate in a moral verdict, but in a profoundly humanistic ambiguity. In these late fictions, technology is no longer an agent of alienation or domination, as it becomes embodied, metabolized and even digested – literally – in grotesque feasts and emotions, such as anger, that threaten to devour not only a cruel Nazi colonel, but an entire war-torn city. In this sense, Vonnegut's irony completes the cycle initiated in *Player Piano* which begins with automation and ends with the organic resistance of the human body. His vision echoes Simondon's assertion that alienation arises from our failure to understand machines, and it anticipates Don Ihde's phenomenological insight that technologies are never neutral, becauce they transform the quality and range of human experience. Yet *Armageddon in Retrospect* seems to go even further. When the technological order collapses, the body itself reclaims the non-neutrality of matter, reasserting its agency through hunger, decay, and laughter.

The wooden leg that becomes a weapon against humanity's pesky inclination towards forgetting, the desk that has a bomb at its core, the recipies that turn starvation into communion, all these instances constitute a phenomenology of survival in which technology is not transcended, but reabsorbed into the human condition. Thus, *Armageddon in Retrospect* may be read as Vonnegut's reconciliation of war and technology. He exposes both

as mechanisms of dehumanization, but he does not stop there, for both war and technology end up being sites of re-embodiment and resistance. In the end, Vonnegut's retrospective on an Armageddon which no longer looms, but has already taken place, is not an apocalypse, but an anatomy of machines, myths and of the frail yet persistent human body that refuses to disappear inside them.

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