

"WHAT IS AT STAKE IN A LITERATURE?" INVESTIGATION OF THE
POSTMODERN IN VONNEGUT'S "SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE" AND "CAT'S
CRADLE" FROM A LYOTARDIAN PERSPECTIVE



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BY

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I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtain and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore how Kurt Vonnegut's works fit into Lyotard's view of postmodern art and “what is at stake in a literature.” Departing from the similarities in their approach to issue of literary representation, two of Vonnegut's novels, *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle* are investigated from a Lyotardian perspective. Taken in the context of trauma literature, *Slaughterhouse-Five* focuses on the problem of representation on an individual level in terms of “the differend.” *Cat's Cradle* deconstructs the metanarratives of science and religion, and explores the possibility of presentation based on alternative, “petit récit” that do not conform to the established discourses. The theoretical framework of the dissertation is built on Lyotard's ideas about the postmodern and the postmodern aesthetics as the aesthetic of the sublime sentiment, as influenced by Kantian philosophy, Freudian meta-psychology and Wittgenstein's theory of 'language games'.

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Kurt Vonnegut eserlerinin Lyotard'ın postmodern sanat ve edebiyatın mevzubahsi anlayışında nasıl yer tuttuğunu araştırmayı hedefler. Vonnegut ve Lyotard'ın edebi temsile yaklaşımlarındaki benzerliklerden yola çıkarak, Vonnegut'un iki romanı *Mezbaha 5* ve *Kedi Beşiği* Lyotard'ın bakış açısına göre incelenmiştir. Travma edebiyatı bağlamında ele alınan “Mezbaha 5,” temsil sorununa “anlaşmazlık” kavramıyla bireysel seviyede odaklanır. *Kedi Beşiği* din ve bilim üst-anlatılarını yapı söküne uğratar ve yerleşmiş söylemlere uymayan alternatif “küçük hikayelere” dayalı temsil seçeneklerini araştırır. Lyotard'ın Kant felsefesi, Freud metapsikolojisi ve Wittgenstein “dil-oyunları” kavramlarına dayalı postmodern ve postmodern estetik anlayışı tezin teorik çerçevesini oluşturmaktadır.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PLAGIARISIM	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ÖZET	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	14
2.1. The Differend	16
2.2. Presence – The Phrase-Affect	26
2.3. The Kantian Theory of the Sublime	30
2.4. The Event	39
3. SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AND “THE DIFFEREND”	52
4. CAT’S CRADLE AND “INCREDULITY TOWARD METANARRATIVES”	87
5. CONCLUSION	114
REFERENCES.....	118

1. INTRODUCTION

In an age described as “the age of trauma” by numerous theorists, Kurt Vonnegut's novels appear as a testimony to the traumas of collective and individual afflictions. As has been remarked by Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo, “In different manners, the increasing interest in trauma was a response to concerns about memory, politics, representation and ethics that became prominent at the turn of the twentieth century, and which have mainly focused on the extreme forms of violence and victimisation that came to light after World War II.” (Nadal & Calvo, 2014, p. 1) Especially after the Second World War, a proliferation of trauma writing can be observed, spearheaded by Holocaust literature. Michael Rothberg draws attention to the “recent fascination with the Holocaust” in terms of “more general contemporary fascination with trauma, catastrophe, the fragility of memory, and the persistence of ethnic identity” (Rothberg, 1996, p. 3) *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a testimony to Vonnegut's own traumatic experiences in the war. For decades Vonnegut had tried to attest to the bombing of Dresden, but it was a painstakingly difficult process for him to be finally able to write about it. As clearly put by Vonnegut, “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 19) The novel is his way of working through his traumas, not to explain his experience but to finally pay attention to it and respond to it in such a way that it retains its singularity. Vonnegut tries to overcome the limitations on conventional representation with his innovative writing style, by employing alternative ways of expression, through a disrupted temporal plane and deferring the actual focus of the book. Instead of reporting the events as he had witnessed them, Vonnegut conveys his message through allusions, by showing the consequences of the war on its victims. His novel is one

of the best examples of postmodern works on how to deal with a subject that is out of the reach of human conception.

By turning it into a novel, Vonnegut approaches the bombing of Dresden without having a particular end in his mind other than engaging it in a critical way. To some extent it may look like a modernist project, and provokes questions such as, Is he trying to make sense of what had happened? Is he looking to put the events in a grand scheme of things? The way he handles the subject however reveals that it's actually about how unreasonable this state of affairs is. It all stems from the absurd turn of events that caused the death of millions of people, along with the destruction of Dresden. The war signals, then, that all-encompassing rationality had failed.

The use of highly sophisticated methods of destruction in the war made possible by technological advancements had drastic effects on Vonnegut. His disillusionment with the notion that science will save humanity was the result of countless atrocities committed by those in power wielding science as a weapon. The period after the war was shaped by a general feeling of distrust towards those systems that championed rationality, claimed absolute authority to explain the world and offer solutions for global improvement. *Cat's Cradle* is another metafictional novel by Vonnegut that questions the credibility of grand sense-making systems, in other words metanarratives, in this particular case religion and science. Vonnegut shows that even the most innocent or well-intentioned efforts to discover or impose meaning in the world are misguided, even dangerous. (Tally, 2011, p. 53) It is the story of the apocalypse caused by the same mode of thinking that gave the world nuclear bombs and other means of mass destruction. Vonnegut's critical approach to technological advancements, to totalizing ideas that are irrefutable such as nationalism or fundamentalist religious beliefs and his unconventional narrative

style make him the subject of this study.

Todd Davis argues that Vonnegut's writing is unfettered by modernist paradigms, it “[recognizes] the pluralist nature of reality and the postmodern deconstruction of metanarratives. The petite histoires Vonnegut offers are based on traditional humanist values but do not operate within a grand narrative or a totalizing schema as such narratives one did.” (Davis, 2006, p. 13)

Vonnegut's stance against metanarratives, and the primacy of “the petit histoires” deeply resonates with Lyotard's formulation of the postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” (Lyotard, 1984, xxiv) Similar to Vonnegut's disillusionment with the emancipating powers of scientific developments, Lyotard argues that the project of modernity and the grand narratives it is based upon have failed humanity on various occasions. For Vonnegut “such metanarratives have been used in the past to justify atrocities committed by Western culture,” (Davis, 2006, p. 13) therefore there appeared a moral imperative to listen to alternative voices that are marginalized and suppressed by dominant power structures.

The issue of testimony and representation of injustices, as suffered by Vonnegut himself in the Second World War, are focal points of Lyotard's philosophy. Kurt Vonnegut addresses these issues with his innovative writing style and unconventional narrative techniques, in accordance with Lyotard's expectations from the postmodern art.

Jean-François Lyotard was one of the most important post-structuralist French philosophers, whose works covered a wide variety of topics in philosophy, politics, aesthetic theory, and arts. He is most famous for his book *The Postmodern Condition*, written at the request of the Council of Universities of the Provincial Government

of Quebec to explore the condition of knowledge in the modern world, which is regarded as one of the founding texts of postmodern theory, and his formulation of postmodernism and the postmodern caught a lot of attention. Although postmodernism came to be negatively associated with loss or degeneration of values, relativism and the 'anything goes' approach and even nihilism by many, for Lyotard “the key task of a postmodern thinker is to confront both the apparent loss of values in 'anything goes' consumerism and the seemingly irresistible power of the market driven economies of the West that place profit before other values.” (Malpas, 2005a, p. 3) As Mélanie Walton explains, Lyotard's idea of postmodernism “is primarily methodological and purports an anti-historicism and active uncovering of bias... Its endeavor is to lay bare what otherwise remains un-presented or covered over.” (Walton, 2009, p. 12)

While Lyotard's earlier writings focus on phenomenology and libidinal philosophy along with the critique of structuralism, his later works such as *Just Gaming*, *The Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend* deal with postmodernism and justice in terms of “the differend.” However, Ashley Woodward identifies a consistent view in Lyotard's general philosophy that “reality consists of singular events which cannot be represented accurately by rational theory.” To go one step further, Lyotard problematizes the issue of representation based on dominant discourses and turns his attention to the stories of those marginalized or suppressed under the systems that claim authority over narratives. He believes these stories are always under threat of being silenced under the guise of consensus.

The issue of presentation comes to the forefront especially in *The Differend*. The impossible bind of a holocaust survivor as put forward by revisionist historian Robert Faurisson – if there were gas chambers there would not be any survivors

to testify for their existence and if there are survivors then there were not really any gas chambers – establishes the premise of his book. Faurisson's "rational" claims force the testimony of the survivor into silence which is impossible to overcome. Against the crippling silence imposed on the survivor, "Lyotard is seeking an idiom by which the silenced witness could give testimony to what the revisionist logic deemed impossible." (Walton, 2009, p. 10) The impossibility of expression, or presentation, carries with it infinite number of unrealized possibilities of linkages that could have been made to express the testimony. Departing from the paradigm of the Holocaust survivor, Lyotard recognizes the problem raised by the unrepresentable and its need for presentation. Basing his theory on a linguistic formula that considers the phrase as the basic unit of language, Lyotard explores the possibilities of linkage between phrases and the resulting injustices or "the differend" suffered by unrealized phrases.

Lyotard finds in the sublime sentiment features that correspond to the feeling aroused by the unrepresentable. As in the case of the sublime, which results from the struggle of the imagination to present a concept as conceived by the reason, "[t]he inexpressible upsets our perceptual and rational exercises and confounds our tongues. Its pure, immediate expression is impossible but our stammering and trembling before the abyss of meaning does give us a clue to its most productive expression." (Walton, 2009, p. 287) Lyotard's response to this situation is to listen to these clues in order to find a way to express the existence of the unrepresentable. Although he acknowledges the paradox underlying the effort to present something unrepresentable, the act of trying to come up with new ways of expression is what Lyotard advocates. This process is inherently characterized by innovation and experimentation. In order to find an expression for "the differend," we have to exceed the limits of conventional

methods of presentation since the unrepresentable, or the sublime, defy the limits of our ability of representation. This is not to be taken strictly in an aesthetic sense because Lyotard's vision is much broader as evident from his designation of the age to be postmodern. "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them." (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13)

Maria Beville's study *Gothic 'Un-representations' of Terror in Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five* approached *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a Gothic-postmodernist text "with the aim of analysing [the novel] as a work that explores the possibilities of presenting the unrepresentable." (Beville, 2007, p. 43) She set the premise of her essay with Lyotard's theories on the 'unrepresentable' based on the sublime experience formulated by Edmund Burke and Kant. Departing from the proposition that "the sublime condition is one that results in simultaneous feelings of exultation and terror," her work revolved around the central theme of 'terror' as the source of the unrepresentable, as well as a possible way of communicating that there is something unrepresentable. She suggested that "Vonnegut's Gothicism may be taken as a provocative attempt, in and through terror, to say the unsayable, to present the unrepresentable and to fathom the unfathomable." (Beville, 2007, p. 62) Her study followed how Vonnegut investigates the potential ways art can be useful in "alluding to the unrepresentable and proves that there are many creative ways of expressing or evoking that sublime concept which so evades our linguistic construction of self and reality." (Beville, 2007, p. 60)

Todd Davis in his essay *Apocalyptic Grumblings*, examined Vonnegut's works in terms of what Lyotard calls a "crisis of narratives" to "demonstrate that over the course of his career Vonnegut deconstructs and demystifies the 'grand narratives' of American culture while creating provisional narratives, *petite histoires*, that may

serve as tools for daily, localized living, a contingent morality that is never grounded in presence but, rather, works with an awareness of its own constructedness toward a symbolic vision of a better reality.” (Davis, 2001, p. 151) Davis provided a survey of Vonnegut's novels by looking into the ways he challenges the metanarratives of modernity, both in form and content. While *Cat's Cradle* experiments with the conventional chapter form, *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s “dramatically unconventional style represents Vonnegut's own painfully arduous labour to find a new paradigm for his experience in Dresden, a horrific moment in his youth that refused to be placed into a conventionally modernist paradigm.” (Davis, 2001, p. 157) More explicitly, Vonnegut's “refusal to use chronological time represents the dismissal of perhaps the most important totalizing myth in Western civilization. The idea behind chronological time as an organizing principle finds its impetus in our desire to show the orderly progression of 'history'.” (Davis, 2001, p. 158) Davis defined Vonnegut's general worldview as “postmodern-humanism” and designated him as “an ethical guide for the present generation.” In a later book, Davis developed even further this concept of “postmodern-humanism” of Kurt Vonnegut with a broader perspective of postmodernism in mind. Davis concluded that “Vonnegut shows great concern for those people who have been oppressed and degraded by the grand narratives of modernism in America. Yet for Vonnegut there is still hope. Because we may create our own narratives, the petites histoires of which Jean-François Lyotard speaks, the possibilities for personal as well as societal change are endless.” (Davis, p. 2006, 136)

In this context, my study aims to explore how Kurt Vonnegut's works fit into Lyotard's view of postmodern art and “what is at stake in a literature.” As evident from his writings including his rejected Master's thesis on anthropology, story-telling

as a way of making sense of the world was always centre of his attention. Thus, Vonnegut himself was a victim of the differend and his early writing career was shaped by his efforts to bear witness to it. By investigating *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the framework of trauma literature with a psychoanalytical approach, I intend to show Vonnegut's struggle with and eventual success at addressing the differend on an individual level. On the other hand, *Cat's Cradle* provides me with a broader perspective on metanarratives and their implications for humanity. I argue that Vonnegut deconstructs the metanarratives of modernity by exposing the logical conflicts at their core while promoting the importance of plurality of alternative stories that do not conform to the established values.

The first chapter of this study lays out the theoretical framework by focusing on the key concepts of Lyotard's literary criticism and his ideas on the postmodern such as the phrase as the basic unit of language, the differend, the sublime, presence or the phrase-affect, and the event. By tracing the relationship between Lyotard's linguistic theories, and their political implications, it is possible to arrive at his actual focus on the issue of justice. The problem of justice or injustice between phrases which he takes to be the foundational unit of language and the problem of how to link them, translate into bigger political and social issues in his body of work. Especially in *The Differend*, he fully develops his earlier theories on “language games” he talks about in *Just Gaming*, derived from Wittgenstein, into a well-organized theory of phrases.

The first part of the theory chapter introduces the concept of the differend as a dispute between phrases stemming from the lack of universal sets of rules that could authoritatively decide how to link them to create phrase regimens. The linkage of phrases is continuous, which means a phrase cannot not happen, it always takes

place. Regardless of what happens, there has to be a link between phrases, yet this linkage is contingent. This has broader implications on Lyotard's theories on the postmodern that is explored more in detail in chapter 3. Briefly, the phrase regimens that claim universal authority to organize phrases are called 'metanarrative'. For Lyotard, the postmodern era is defined by its "incredulity towards metanarratives" and he opposes the legitimacy of these metanarratives that are totalitarian and oppressive in favour of small narratives that respect the singularity of phrases, or as will be made clear later in the first chapter, of events.

In the case of the differend, there is something that demands to be phrased yet cannot be immediately, and therefore suffers the injustice of not being put into words, accompanied by silence. There is an incommensurability between phrase regimens which creates a crisis of representation that needs to be addressed here. Lyotard takes silence to be another phrase, signalling a discrepancy between parties that thwarts communication and at the same time reveals there is something that needs to be represented yet cannot be. He believes the only way to deal with this, to heed the call of the differend is to experiment, to find new idioms that could overcome the silence that accompanies the differend. He suggests that rather than applying pre-established rules to govern the linkage of phrases, new rules must be created a-new every time. He adapts the Kantian notion of reflective or indeterminate judgment in order to avoid totalizing narratives with their already set rules, in other words he demands each situation to be judged without criteria "case by case." In this way, every phrase-event will retain its singularity.

The differend makes itself known through a feeling, as a presence that there is something to be expressed. Lyotard benefits from Freudian concepts of metapsychology to explain this formless feeling in terms of twofold system

of repression, namely “primary repression” and “secondary repression”. Repression occurs in the unconscious as a result of an excessive disturbance that is too much to handle by the psychic apparatus. In primary repression which is the main concern of Lyotard's work, the effects of this “unconscious affect” remain hidden other than as a feeling that signals there is something, “the forgotten.” This something is without form therefore escapes conventional methods of presentation. This part of the chapter explores Lyotard's formulation of the presence as a Freudian “unconscious affect” as it is developed by Lyotard in *Heidegger and “the jews”*.

Lyotard positions primary repression against secondary repression in terms of the sublime and the beautiful in Kantian sense. To be able to connect these two theories together, Kant's study of aesthetic of the sublime in *Critique of the power of Judgment* is explained in detail. Lyotard finds in the aesthetic of the sublime the possibility of representing which is inherently undemonstrable yet demands to be represented. In this sense, the sublime sentiment corresponds to “the postmodern” in Lyotard's view that “puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself” without “the solace of good forms.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81)

The last part of the theory chapter develops the concept of “the event” as understood by Lyotard, in terms of “the unconscious affect” previously discussed. Lyotard conceives the event as something that ruptures the linear progression of time the moment it takes place. As suggested by Geoffrey Bennington, the recognition that the event is taking place is at the core of Lyotard's philosophy. (Bennington, 1988, p. 56) His priority is to acknowledge that the event 'happens' rather than 'what happens'. Lyotard's concern here is to bear witness to the event while preserving its singularity in the attempt of representation. There is always a risk of doing injustice to the event by testimony, by reducing it into an ordinary event through presentation. It is crucial

to break away from the narratives that provide pre-established rules of judgment lest the event loses its singularity or 'eventhood' under the totalitarian metanarratives. Against these dangers, Lyotard advocates for a postmodern aesthetics defined by experimentation and innovation inspired by the sublime sentiment.

The next chapter focuses on Kurt Vonnegut's most famous and critically acclaimed book *Slaughterhouse-Five* in the context of Lyotard's theories on presenting the unrepresentable. It is a semi-autobiographical novel that tells the story of Vonnegut's experience in the World War II, mainly the destruction of Dresden. Vonnegut survives the bombing of Dresden which he believes did absolutely nothing to help end the war which was virtually over at that point, as a prisoner of war in a meat locker. Although he would argue "[T]he importance of Dresden in [his] life has been considerably exaggerated," (Allen, 1988, p. 94) it clearly had a deep impact on his life and on his career as a writer. He admits it took him decades to be able to write about this event.

The chapter explores the concept of trauma and its representation via literature through Vonnegut's personal experience in writing *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Repression of traumatic experiences in the psyche is understood in terms of the differend. Trauma is described as an event that is injurious to the mind which avoids detection and therefore cannot be represented adequately. The failure of presentation immediately brings to mind a connection with the sublime sentiment. Frank Ankersmit explains that "trauma can be seen as the psychological counterpart of the sublime, and the sublime can be seen as the philosophical counterpart of trauma" (Ankersmit, 2005, p. 338) Departing from this definition, Lyotard's understanding of postmodern aesthetics of the sublime is explored as a way of possibly addressing the issue of representation in trauma literature.

Vonnegut's experiences in the war are told through the problematic hero of the book Billy Pilgrim, who is actually not an avatar of Vonnegut in the novel, contrary to the general belief. A spastic in time, Billy travels back and forth in time uncontrollably to relive his traumatic experiences in the war. The chapter assumes a psychoanalytical approach to Billy's traumas and the inevitable manifestation of his repressed memories/feelings by taking a close look at the novel.

At the end of the chapter, Vonnegut's disillusionment with technology as a mean of advancing humanity to a better future is tied with Lyotard's formulation of the postmodern as "incredulity toward metanarratives." Lyotard's belief that the narratives of emancipation had failed, which is to be the main theoretical framework of the third chapter is briefly introduced.

The third and final chapter examines *Cat's Cradle* in terms of Vonnegut's critique of what Lyotard calls 'metanarratives' of modernity. For Lyotard metanarratives or grand narratives constitute the main principle of the project of modernity. The function of these narratives is to provide an organized story for humanity that is progressing toward a single universal purpose. Lyotard claims certain events had led to the inevitable liquidation of this project and grand narratives of modernity are no longer valid in their claim to meaning and 'Truth'.

In *Cat's Cradle*, a freelance writer named 'Jonah' whose initial plan was to write about the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a result of sophisticated technological warfare, ends up writing about the destruction of the world, a disaster far worse than Hiroshima, by yet another scientific invention, a fictional substance called *ice-nine*. Although the theoretical invention of the substance was born out of benevolent intentions, its results were catastrophic.

Science without any concern for the moral implication of its products is horrendous for Vonnegut and morally wrong. The idea that science could find an answer to all of humanity's woes had lost its credibility in the eyes of Kurt Vonnegut after he witnessed countless atrocities made possible by the principles of the same scientific mode of thinking.

Against science that claims to have the solution for everything, Vonnegut pits a religion called 'Bokononism' that denounces any claim to truth and meaning. More of a post-modern artwork in its fluid structure than an organized religion, Bokononism brings a whole new perspective to the sense making systems that are based on absolute values, in this case metanarratives of science and religion. The value of an artwork in subverting the conventions of modern ideals is explicitly clear in *Cat's Cradle*. In this respect, the novel is not just a critique of modernity's narratives, it also explores the role of literature (or art in general) in post-industrial and postmodern age.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“The forgotten” is a key theme for Lyotard in his aesthetic literary criticism and he makes use of the postmodern sublime, which will be explained in more detail below, in order to understand how it comes into effect. In this context, he sets out to establish the difference between “a representational, reversible forgetting and a forgetting that thwarts all representation” by building his theories on “the Kantian text on aesthetics and the Freudian text on metapsychology”. The proposition he “dares” to make is:

“...that secondary repression is to primary repression as the beautiful is to the sublime – and this with respect to the matter or quality of what for Kant is the given, for Freud the notion of excitation, with respect to the capacity to synthesize in Kant and to associate in Freud, with respect to the spatiotemporal form in the former or to the formation unconscious-preconscious in the latter and, finally, with respect to the way in which neither the Kantian sublime nor the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* lets itself be inscribed in “memory,” even an unconscious one.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 5)

“The forgotten”, then, is profoundly persistent in making itself remembered as “the forgotten”. It incessantly comes back to haunt, and is not to be “remembered for what it has been and what it is, because it has not been anything and is nothing, but must be remembered as something that never ceases to be forgotten” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 3) says Lyotard and he identifies this something not as “a concept or a representation, but a “fact” a *Factum*: namely, that one is obligated before the Law, in debt.”

This obligation stems from a “presence” that is actually and most certainly not present because it has been forgotten. The “presence” is felt through the impossibility of representation which in turn forces itself to be represented and, “which precisely needs to be forgotten to be represented, although it must be represented.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 4)

On this basis, according to Lyotard, the real objective of literature has always been “to reveal, represent in words, what every representation misses, what is forgotten there: this “presence” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 5) which he believes lies at the core of representation. This notion derives from the culmination of his philosophical trajectory in what is generally considered to be Lyotard’s greatest work: *The Differend – Phrases in Dispute*, originally published in 1983. He lays the foundation for the theme of the forgotten through the silence that accompanies “the differend.”

“In the differend, something “asks” to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can presently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13)

2.1. The Differend

The Differend: Phrases in Dispute is arguably Lyotard's most noteworthy and important work in which he further develops his ideas on language and the postmodern and provides a comprehensive study of the concept of 'the differend'. This is his most philosophical and complex work according to Lyotard's own admission. Keith Crome refers to the French edition of *The Differend* in which Lyotard presents the book as "mon livre de philosophie", echoed by his second wife Dolorès Lyotard's foreword in Lyotard's posthumous collection *Misère de la philosophie*. More specifically, "*The Differend* presents a series of related positive philosophical theses concerning language (or the 'phrase'), argumentation and ethics." (Crome, 2004, p. 146)

The Differend investigates occurrences of injustice between two or more parties caused by the impossibility of an all-encompassing and regulating law in terms of language. For Lyotard, 'a phrase' is the basic element of language or communication that demands linkage to other phrases. Bill Readings identifies Lyotard's insistence on the "phrase as elementary particle" as a kind of "resistance to grand narratives or metalanguages" (Readings, 2006, p. 84) befitting Lyotard's theory on the postmodern. As explained by Stuart Sim, "Phrases operate according to the rules of their own particular regimen," therefore they "cannot be translated into another regimen." (Sim, 2011, p. 171) Phrase regimens regulate how phrases concatenate to one another. Lyotard lists a number of phrase regimens that arrange phrases according to their sets of rules such as "reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing, ordering, etc." (Lyotard, 1988, p. xii) Because these regimens are heterogeneous and incommensurable, phrases from different regimens are not translatable into one another but "they can be linked one onto the other

in accordance with an end fixed by a genre of discourse.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. xii)

Different phrase regimens, then, are brought together under a genre of discourse, which “supplies a set of possible phrases, each arising from some phrase regimen.”

(Lyotard, 1988, xii) Each genre of discourse regulates the linkage of possible phrases supplied by another genre of discourse that are heterogeneous to other sets of phrases.

The incommensurability of the sets brings about the problem of linkage, in other words there is a ‘differend’ between them.

Linkage is, for Lyotard, both necessary and contingent at the same time.

Linkage must continue although there is no ‘universal authority’ to guide how to link which means that concatenation cannot happen based on pre-existing criteria but has to be constructed anew every time depending on current conditions. That said, the phrase cannot not happen in the absence of another phrase that links up with it.

Lyotard explains:

“By *A phrase*, I understand the phrase which is the case. *der Fall*. The phrase *token*, the phrase event. A phrase-type is the referent of a phrase-event. For a phrase to survive the test of universal doubt stems neither from its being real nor from its being true (No. 101), but from its being merely what happens, *what is occurring*, *ce qui arrive*, *das Fallende*. You cannot doubt that something happens when you doubt: it happens that you doubt. If *It happens that you doubt* is a different phrase than *You doubt*, then another phrase is happening. And if it is found that it is not happening, but that it has happened, then it happens that this is found. It is always too late to doubt the 'what'. The question already has its answer: another question.” (Lyotard, 1988, pp. 66-7)

For Lyotard, the existence of a phrase, or better yet phrases, is presupposed. He employs a concept called “phrase universe” which consists of four different instances to designate how phrases carry meaning. Briefly explained, a phrase universe consists of

- The sense/meaning of the phrase
- The referent which the phrase refers to
- The addressor which the phrase originates from
- The addressee which the phrase is sent

“Each instance,” writes Simon Malpas, “is brought into relation by the phrase to form a particular universe’.” What is more, rather than preceding the phrase, these four instances come into play simultaneously as the phrase happens: “From this point of view, subjects, meanings and referents come into being as effects of the relation between phrases.” (Malpas, 2005a, p. 63)

Although it is presumed that there is always a phrase, that “does not mean that the phrase is real or meaningful, since reality and meaning are themselves effects of certain kinds of phrases or groupings of phrases”, says Bill Readings. (Readings, 2006, p. 85) Therefore, the signification is determined according to phrase regimens. From this point, Bill Readings comes to the conclusion that “A phrase, then, is simply the empty singularity of an event, the fact of an ‘it happens’.” (Readings, 2006, p. 85) He associates the basic element of communication –the phrase- with the fact that there is something happening that needs to be paid attention to. Furthermore, he believes the concept of ‘phrase’ is “Lyotard’s most fully developed account of the ‘event’ as pure happening.” (Readings, 2006, 85) Similarly, Ann Tomiche notes that Lyotard’s

phrase-event is a “pure occurrence, ‘before’ representation, signification and the subject.” (Tomiche, 2017, p. 32) Subjects (addressors and addressees) are situated in the universe which the phrase-event presents, and the meaning/signification is a product of the arrangement of phrases. Taking events simply as phrases, denies genres of discourses the possibility of attributing ‘meaning’ to events in order to represent them “by suppressing the singularity of the happening of each phrase.” (Readings, 2006, p. 85)

There is an agonistic relationship between genres of discourse which brings out certain sets of phrases. The actualisation of a phrase (or a set of phrases) necessarily prevents others from being realized and causes a differend to occur. In Rodolphe Gasché’s words, “not only does a responding phrase wrong the phrase onto which it links, it also wrongs all other phrases that could have arrived in its place.” (Gasché, 2000) He then goes on to make a distinction between the injustice caused by the wrong from an injustice in a moral sense because here, it is a sort of ‘objective’, “or, more precisely, ontological –wrong”, which is a necessary step to explain the nature of the differend in terms of phrase regimens which, in turn, will eventually lead to the injustice caused by the differend between two parties. Lyotard explores the injustice of the unactualized phrases that are ‘wronged’ by others as a result of the “absence of a phrase regimen or of a genre of discourse that enjoys a universal authority to decide” (Lyotard, 1988, p. xii) how to govern the linkages.

Such an authoritative phrase regimen or genre of discourse would be called a ‘metanarrative’; this, however, is impossible to attain and undesirable according to Lyotard, since he defines the “*postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, xxiv). He opposes the idea that there is a certain discourse grounded in truth which could organize and define the rules of linkage. “He rejects the idea

of a master-discourse (later called a metanarrative) that is thought to provide the basis for judgement in all situations” (Woodward) and advocates for the proliferation of idioms in an attempt to fight the injustice that would arise from a differend between disputing phrases. Simon Malpas explains that, “a metanarrative sets out the rules of narratives and language games. This means that the metanarrative organises language games and determines the success or failure of each statement or language ‘move’ that takes place in them.” (Malpas, 2005a, p. 24)

In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard develops the notion of language games adopted from Ludwig Wittgenstein, analogous to ‘little narratives’ as opposed to metanarratives. Lyotard, then, builds on Wittgenstein’s concept of language games that sees “language as the locus of events,” (Readings, 2006, p. 79) although in his later writings, instead of language games, which implies there are subjects situated outside language as players, Lyotard turns his focus toward and develops the notion of a ‘phrase’.

Lyotard also adopts Kant’s ideas on indeterminate or reflective judgment which can be summarised as judging without pre-existing concepts. Reflective judgment employs the imagination’s capacity of experimentation to find new ways to establish the nature of the object in question without having to depend on cognitive criteria. Language games and, later, phrase-events require indeterminate judgment lest the totalizing aspect of a metalanguage suppress their singularity.

According to Bill Readings, the key issue in *Just Gaming* that connects Kant to Wittgenstein is:

“...to insist that doing justice in a field of language games consists of resisting the pretensions of certain language games to provide the rules for other games, to become metalanguages. Thus, in each language game

we must try to judge without importing criteria from other games, such as that of theory (which claims to give criteria to all games). The language game, in Lyotard's reading, thus demands an indeterminate judgment, without criteria, on a case-by-case basis." (Readings, 2006, p. 80)

Readings also points out the fact that politics "is a matter of indeterminate judgment" for Lyotard in pursuit of a social justice that "must proceed without pre-existing criteria."

Lyotard provides the reader with a reading dossier as a preface to *The Differend* that ironically aims to nullify the need to read the book. In a world that is increasingly seeking to be efficient, in which "success comes from gaining time," Lyotard seems to expect there will be no more books because it takes too long to read and reflect upon them. Unlike determinate judgment, reflective judgment leaves aside pre-established concepts in order to understand the nature of an object and each time judges anew without criteria. Since an event for Lyotard is something that disrupts the referential frame, it requires experimenting to find new ways to understand it, in the absence of criteria to judge the event. As Bill Readings puts it, "Indeterminate judgment deals with the 'it is happening', not with the 'what is happening', with the event rather than with its constative content." (Readings, 2006, p. 79)

At this point, it perhaps appears that he believes reflection has begun to be seen as just a waste of time. On the other hand, reflection for Lyotard "requires that you watch out for occurrences, that you don't already know what's happening. It leaves open the question: *Is it happening?* [*Arrive-t-il?*] It tries to keep up with the now [*maintenir le maintenant*]." (Lyotard, 1988, p. xv) It is a crucial step toward

understanding the event in its singularity, by paying attention to the instant, the time the event *is*. This line of logic can be seen exemplified in Lyotard's estimation of Barrett Newman's works, which belong to the aesthetic of the sublime, or the aesthetic of the postmodern, epitomised by the avant-gardes according to Lyotard. "The postmodern," explains Ann Tomiche "is the name that Lyotard gives to art as event, art as 'gesture', that is art that testifies to the differend." (Tomiche, 2017, 40) What makes Barrett Newman's work stand out is "not the fact that it is obsessed with the question of time – an obsession shared by many painters – but the fact that it gives an unexpected answer to that question: its answer is that time is the picture itself." (Lyotard, 1991, p. 78).

Importantly, Lyotard's investigation of phrases in dispute further develops into a discussion on justice. Hatice Karaman identifies the subject matter of *The Differend* as "not only a philosophic-linguistic investigation regarding the phrase, but also an investigation on the possibility of justice." (Karaman, 2018, p. 77) In the same reading dossier, Lyotard provides a brief introduction to all the concepts that construct his idea of a differend, using the image of a courtroom to emphasise the idea of justice or injustice which arises out of dispute:

"As distinguished from a litigation, a differend [*différend*] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side

admits this rule). Damages result from an injury which is inflicted upon the rules of a genre of discourse, but which is reparable according to those rules. A *wrong* [my emphasis] results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse ... The title of this book suggests (through the generic value of the definite article) that a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genres is lacking in general.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. xi)

Hatice Karaman also recognizes the function of the differend as “a signifier for unveiling injustices in discourse” in Lyotard’s philosophy. (Karaman, 2018, p. 78) She quotes from *The Lyotard Dictionary*:

“The concept of the differend is based on a recognition of the deplorable ubiquity of injustice in human affairs, the repeated incidence of one discourse suppressing another, with those in control deploying it to render opposition all but invisible, thus entrenching themselves all the more firmly in power. The injustice in such cases lies in the stronger party preventing the weaker from even being able to complain of their oppressed state, with the former’s discourse offering no way for dissenting views to be framed.” (Sim, 2011, p. 116)

By nature, a victim of a wrong is rendered unable to testify. He or she is divested of the means to argue against the wrong they suffered. Then a wrong would be for Lyotard, “a damage accompanied by the loss of means to prove the damage.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 5) By comparison, a plaintiff can testify against the

damages done to him or her. “One becomes a victim if one loses these means.”

(Lyotard, 1988, p. 8) This happens when the victim is deprived of the means to make himself or herself heard, when there is no possibility for any kind of presentation of the wrong they have suffered. A victim is not in a position to present, let alone to recuperate damages. In addition to that, if the author and the judge of the damages turn out to be the same party, the plaintiff again loses the means to speak against the damages and becomes a victim.

By presentation, Lyotard understands that “merely something takes place. This something is a phrase, undoubtedly. Since a phrase presents a universe, for a phrase to take place is what I call presentation” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 75). Then the differend occurs when (at least) one of the parties is unable to communicate the wrong towards a tribunal which has the authority to judge and resolve the conflict, since there is no common measure or means of expression, and it “could neither be settled nor articulated.” (Crome, 2004, p. 7)

One of the crucial points to consider when dealing with a differend is to identify the reason behind the silence-phrase. Even if both instances result in silence, there is an important difference between not being able to speak and choosing not to speak. In the first case, silence may result from the victim’s loss of credible testimony e.g. when the victim is declared insane, when the victim is outside the discourse of the tribunal which has the authority to judge, or even loses their life, which in turn makes it impossible for them to prove that there is a wrong. There is a direct attempt at a cessation of linkages, or the privation of the next phrase-event that brings about the differend which is signalled by the inability to prove. The paradox Lyotard identifies here is that of the last phrase, “for a phrase to be the last one, another one is needed to declare it, and it is then not the last one” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 11).

Nonetheless, the paradox is capable of producing the fear of death, implied by the cessation of linkages, along with “the conviction that phrasing is endless” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 11).

In the second case, silence replaces the phrase with a negative one.

Considering that a phrase universe is composed of four instances as follows:

- The addressor
- The addressee
- The referent
- The sense

Silence negates (at least) one of the instances but “does not indicate which instance is denied, it signals the denial of one or more of the instances.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 14) The negative phrase that the silence implies is formulated by Lyotard as; the addressor is not competent to talk, the addressee is not competent to hear about the subject, there is nothing to talk about or it cannot be signified, it is inexpressible. Furthermore, the negative formulations which “deny the ability of the referent, the addressor, the addressee and the sense to be presented in the current idiom, do not point to the other idiom in which these instances could be presented.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 14) What it points to instead is the feeling that there is nonetheless something to be phrased. Moreover, something ‘asks’ to be put into phrases yet “suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away.” (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13) Lyotard believes the pain caused by the silent-phrase (and the pleasure of coming up with new idioms) is a call that urges human beings to find new idioms for what remains to be phrased and what needs to be heard.

Taking into account Lyotard's formulation of "the differend" as "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be," (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13) the unstable state Lyotard mentions coincides with the forgotten that thwarts all possibility of representation and is signalled by the feeling it leaves behind: "One cannot find the words." What is forgotten, or 'immemorial' cannot be recollected as a memory and is thus unrepresentable. Yet it still has 'presence' that calls for action and demands to be recognized. "It is condemned to be forgotten not in the way that an event that has occurred may not be remembered," says Lyotard, "but because there has not been a site or a time in which the event could have been inscribed." (Lyotard, 2004, p. 109) How this 'presence' operates will be discussed in detail below.

In order to answer the alarming call of this feeling, one must try to find new idioms, new ways of expression to represent the differend. "What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps", for Lyotard "is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them". (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13)

2.2. Presence – The Phrase-Affect

As has been touched upon above, presence is something which exceeds representation because it is not even present as an absence, as "blank space" or as *terra incognita* but it is still there. Lyotard manages to get around this contradictory implication with the use of the Freudian deep unconscious "where" he says, "there are no representations, not even disguised, indirect, reworked, reshaped ones like those with which secondary repression endows the forgotten past, the suffering, while the "psychic apparatus" is in a position to resist them, to adapt to them, and to accommodate them." (Lyotard, 1997, p. 11)

Freud explains the process of Repression in his essay from 1915 as the result of an instinctual impulse meeting with “resistances which seek to make it inoperative. Under certain conditions [...] the impulse then passes into the state of ‘repression’ [‘*Verdrängung*’]” (Freud, 1981, p. 146). The first stage of repression, which he calls *primary repression* (and which is Lyotard’s main focus as the cause of the unconscious affect) is the first phase of repression, “which consists in the psychical representative of the instinct being denied entrance into the conscious.” (Freud, 1981, p. 148) The second stage, which is called secondary repression or *repression proper* “affects mental derivatives of the repressed representative, or such trains of thought as, originating elsewhere, have come into associative connection with it.” (Freud, 1981, p. 148) He describes it as an “after-pressure” that comes into play after a *fixation* is established through *primary repression*. While *repression proper* tries to keep the repressed at bay by way of making it unconscious, *primary repression*’s function is to deal with that which has never been made conscious. Although it is denied entry, it generates a “presence” that does not leave behind a mark.

This is the result of a disturbance in the system of psychic apparatus that is too much for the system to handle. It goes unrecognized because the apparatus is not able to register what is happening. It is too much for the protective mechanism, so that it exceeds any kind of introduction into the system. “It is an excitation that is not “introduced”: it affects, but does not enter, it has not been *introduced* and remains un-presented.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 12) However, the system is still affected by the sheer force of this shock which has no entry or exit point. Lyotard imagines the effect of the shock to be “like a cloud of energy particles that are not subject to serial laws, that are not organized into sets that can be thought in terms of words or images.” (Lyotard, 1997, 15) As a result, the shocked psyche is unaware of the effects of the shock

because it is denied the possibility of presentation.

This is called “unconscious affect” in Freudian terms. Lyotard brings up Freud’s line of questioning here on the implications of such an affect that does not affect consciousness. Paraphrasing Freud, he poses these questions: “How can one say it affects? What is a feeling that is not felt *by anyone*? What is this ‘anyone’? How can I, [Freud] asks, even be led on the path of this insane hypothesis if there exists no witness? Is not the affected the only witness to the affect?” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 12) In this case there is not even the silence (a kind of silence which, for Lyotard is a negative phrase that links onto previous one in an inevitable line of phrases and which implies an impossibility of signification) that can make itself heard as silence. The absence of a witness eliminates any chance of initial response to the shock. It also puts the future testimony in jeopardy.

Something, that is some kind of feeling or “presence,” will come into effect later to make itself understood as an aftershock. It is a twofold process, so that the second shock will manifest itself in a completely different situation. Lyotard believes that “It will be represented as something that has never been presented ... This will be understood as feeling, fear, anxiety, feeling of a threatening excess whose motive is obviously not in the present context.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 13) And this suddenly emerging feeling is “as good as a testimony” for him. In this context, Claire Nouvet examines the affect in terms of the four instances of a “phrase universe” and she finds it lacks all four poles.

The unconscious affect, then, is inarticulate in nature and it negates any possibility of linguistic articulation by removing “the addressor” from the equation. Claire Nouvet prefers to call it “the infantile affect” and she says that “[a]ffectivity irrupts in the absence of an ego, “before” its emergence.” It happens in

a “pre-egoic” state that bypasses the subject as “I,” which is unable to experience the affect. According to her explanation, “[t]he affect that seizes and cripples the “grown up” sends this grown up back to this condition of infancy, of non-addressedness.

The adult in the grip of affect can no more address it than the child could. S/he reverts to the pre-egoic infant.” The experience of the affect happens without a conscious “I,” or a subject, which suggests “a kind of death of the 'mind' that claims to be the only subject of experience.” (Nouvet, 2003, pp. 233-4) In turn, the affect that lacks a subject or an ego is also deprived of an addressee.

Furthermore, “the infantile affect” has no referent or meaning. It is not grounded in any object; rather the object merely provides an “occasion” for the affect to come into place. Therefore, Claire Nouvet claims that referentiality is ignored by the affect. There is one more way the affect escapes the referentiality; for Nouvet ‘the referent’ is that “which is established as reality through discursive procedures” and is dependent on interlocution. Since she already disqualified the addressor and the addressee from the equation, the possibility of a referent is also removed. And finally, “the infantile affect” lacks meaning. She believes that it “does not communicate a signification about a referent.” Yet in Lyotardian sense, a “presence” is signalled by the affect. It makes itself felt by revealing that something is there but not what is there. Consequently, “the affect does not belong to the order of representation” says Claire Nouvet. As a result, the affect testifies to itself. It emerges as its own witness.

Lyotard finds in the sublime, as analysed by Kant in *Critique of the power of Judgment*, “some traits analogous to those of the unconscious affect and of deferred action in Freudian thought.” (Jews; p. 31) He designates it as an aesthetics of shock, “an anesthetics”, such as that introduced by the sublime. For Lyotard, who derives

the notion from Kant, the sentiment of the sublime is contradictory in that “it carries with it both pleasure and pain.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 77) The contradiction is a result of the conflict between the faculties of a subject, in the Kantian sense, namely “the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to “present” something.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 77) Lyotard explains that the sublime sentiment takes place “when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept.” (Lyotardm 1984, p. 78) Brian Willems describes this process briefly:

“You are expectant, you have a concept in your imagination, but your experience exceeds that concept and you are left shivering out in the cold. This revaluation of the concept is the pain out of which pleasure is derived. The pleasure is the pleasure of being open to something new, something outside of the concept held in the imagination.” (Willems, 2010, p. 41)

Although we may have the Idea of certain concepts, then, such as infinitely great or infinitely powerful, we lack the means to adequately present, “make visible,” those Ideas. Those are the ideas of which “no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience)” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 78).

2.3. The Kantian Theory of the Sublime

The significance of Kant's theory of the sublime lies in the fact that Kant attributes the sublime experience to the activity of the mind, unlike the earlier ideas which places the sublimity in the object of nature. “Whereas most theorists, whether

German or British,” points out Paul Guyer, “characterized the experience of the sublime as our emotional response to the magnitude and power of nature and to exemplary cases of human morality, Kant explained the complex feeling of this experience as a response to the limits of our own imagination, and the power of our own theoretical and practical reason.” (Guyer, 2012, p. 102) As a result, the natural objects which had been taken as the source of sublimity became “mere triggers” according to Kant's views, now that we ourselves had become “the proper object of the experience.”

Kant's ideas on the beautiful and the sublime can be traced back to his earlier works, although he presents a fully developed version in his 3rd critique. In these works, similarly to the 3rd critique, Kant distinguishes the characteristics of the beautiful and the sublime from one another. While the beautiful is associated with an agreeable sentiment that is “joyful and smiling,” the sublime arouses “satisfaction, but with dread.” Thus, Kant notes that both feelings are “agreeable,” yet he recognizes the difference between them in terms of their effects. (Kant, 2011, p. 14) To give a few examples from his *Observations*, Milton’s description of the kingdom of hell in *Paradise Lost* inspires “satisfaction, but with dread” whereas the description of natural landscapes such as flowery meadows, “of valleys with winding brooks, covered with grazing herds, the description of Elysium, or Homer’s depiction of the girdle of Venus¹” generates “an agreeable sentiment, but one that is joyful and smiling.” (Kant, 2011, 16) The feeling of the sublime can be produced by something terrifying, violent, majestic, lofty, something simple yet not easy to take in. As a contrast, the beautiful is associated with things that are calm, quiet, cheerful and peaceful. Kant also compares them in terms of size and duration. What is great and big in size that hints

¹ From *The Illiad*

at infinity evokes sublimity.

Emily Brady says “The sublime is associated with great height” in Kant's earlier works, and she draws attention to the concept of the mathematical sublime in a passage from his *Observations* that explains, “The mathematical representation of the immeasurable magnitude of the universe, metaphysical consideration of eternity, of providence, of the immortality of our soul contain a certain sublimity and dignity.” (Kant, 2011, p. 25)

She also points out some differences between Kant's earlier approach and his 3rd critique, mainly the more empirical nature of the *Observations* compared to “an emphasis on the metaphysical ideas of freedom and reason” that concerns “Kant's Critical period.” (Brady, 2013, p. 52) Robert Doran also supports this idea in his survey of the sublime, saying that “Kant's *Observations*, like Burke's *Enquiry* before it, represents an empirical investigation of aesthetics considered as feeling.” (Doran, 2015, 204) Furthermore, the *Observations* has a broader scope of sublime subject matter that is closer to the earlier studies of British theorists. (Brady, 2013, p. 53) Kant also established that the sublime is, unlike the beautiful, “not an object for taste, but rather an object for the feeling of emotion.” (Kant, 2006, p. 141) Nonetheless, “the presentation of the sublime” for Kant “can and should be beautiful, since otherwise it is wild, coarse, and repulsive, and, consequently, contrary to taste.”

In his 3rd critique, Kant starts his analysis of the sublime by comparing and contrasting it with the beautiful. They share some similar traits as well as differences. They are both aesthetic judgments that are based on “feeling, and in particular on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure;”² they are both reflective judgments that depend neither on sensations nor on determinate concepts; (Kant, 2002, p. 128) based on

²<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-aesthetics/#2>

a given “intuition,” both judgments are singular. On the other hand, they assert universal validity and both judgments are related to “the feeling of pleasure and not to any cognition of the object.” (Kant, 2002, p. 128) Neither of them offers any kind of “conceptual understanding of the object as a ground, motivation, or end,” (Brady, 2013, 56) rather, both judgments operate impartially and without interest. The beautiful and the sublime “please for themselves,” (Kant, 2002, p. 128) solely based on aesthetic concerns.

Then, Kant proceeds with the differences between the beautiful and the sublime. Mainly; “the beautiful in nature,” for Kant, “concerns the form of the object, which consist in limitation.” On the other hand, “the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality.” (Kant, 2002, p. 128) Emily Brady positions Moses Mendelssohn as influential on Kant's theory of aesthetics. In Mendelssohn's account, similarly to Kant's, “what is genuinely beautiful has definite boundaries which it may not overstep. If the full dimensions of the sublime cannot be taken in by the senses all at once, then it ceases to be sensuously *beautiful* and becomes *gigantic* or *enormous in extension*.” (Mendelssohn, 1997, 192-3) Kant follows up on this idea of enormity and attributes to what is sublime, an absolute greatness. (Kant, 2002, p. 131)

For Mendelssohn, the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime lies in the immensity of the object. As opposed to the 'order and symmetry' the beautiful object possesses, the sublime defies comprehension and therefore cannot be perceived in its totality due to its enormity.

While Kant explains the satisfaction that arises from the instance of the beautiful as being connected with the “representation of quality,” in the case of the sublime he connects it with that of “quantity.” The imagination (the faculty of presentation) is in “free play” with the understanding (the faculty of concepts) in which no faculty can dominate the other; they harmoniously come together and the unity of the faculties are made possible in the case of the beautiful. Doran points out “the pleasure in the judgment of the beautiful comes not from the sensation” but from the said harmony. (Doran, 2015, p. 208) In contrast to the beautiful, Kant observes in the sublime “not play but something serious in the activity of the imagination.” (Kant, 2002, p. 129) The imagination pairs up with the reason – which is the highest faculty of human mind that is related to supersensible “Ideas” – and the two faculties are in conflict with each other. The imagination struggles to present as a whole which is enormous and disrupts any sense of boundaries. Because the imagination is rendered inadequate for the task of presentation, it “awakens the feeling of a supersensible faculty in us.” (Kant, 2002, p. 134)

He also distinguishes between the kind of pleasure derived from both the sublime and the beautiful. Kant associates “a feeling of the promotion of life” with the beautiful, while the sublime causes a different outcome. The pleasure derived from the sublime can be indirect, generated by “the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them.” (Kant, 2002, p. 128-9) The sublime causes a momentary shock to the apparatus that threatens its continuity, leaving it face to face with a state of privation (the annihilation of the self); the end of which results in relief, followed by an augmented sense of self-preservation. In such a condition, the mind “is not attracted by the object but is also always reciprocally repelled by it.”

(Kant, 2002, p. 129) Kant designates this kind of pleasure as “negative pleasure” since “the satisfaction in the sublime does not so much contain positive pleasure.”

(Kant, 2002, p. 129) It is, then, a complex mixture of pleasure and displeasure as opposed to the simple pleasure derived from the beautiful.

Different from that of the beautiful, which “presupposes and preserves the mind in calm contemplation,” Kant finds in the feeling of the sublime “as its characteristic mark a movement of the mind” (Kant, 2002, p. 131) when judging the object. He relates the said movement “through imagination either to the faculty of cognition or to the faculty of desire.” (Kant, 2002, p. 131) He examines these relations under two broad categories; the mathematical and the dynamical. Briefly summarized, the former is related to the magnitude of the object and the latter is related to power. However, Lyotard is quick to point out that these two terms “do not signify that there are two kinds of sublime, one mathematical and the other dynamical,” but rather “indicate that the sublime (of nature) is on the one hand considered 'mathematically' and on the other 'dynamically'.” (Lyotard, 1994, p. 90)

In the case of the mathematically sublime, facing an overwhelmingly large object that possibly suggests the idea of infinity, the imagination strives yet inevitably fails to estimate the magnitude of the object in its totality and as a result, is not able to provide an adequate representation. As mentioned earlier, the imagination's failure awakens the reason which is capable of thinking of the infinite as a whole. For Kant, the reason's ability “indicates a faculty of the mind which surpasses every standard of sense” (Kant, 2002, p. 138) and he sees the surpassing of the senses “as an enlargement of the mind which feels itself empowered to overstep the limits of sensibility from another (practical) point of view.” (Kant, 2002, p. 138) Thus, he finds “in our own mind a superiority over nature itself even in its immeasurability.” (Kant,

2002, 145) Kant believes that reason cannot achieve this without the failure of the imagination's effort. This said, the efforts of the imagination to push itself beyond its limits and its subsequent failure brings out a feeling of pain or displeasure, and is immediately followed by the reason's triumph that generates a feeling of pleasure derived from the "enlargement of the mind".

The dynamically sublime is "nature considered in aesthetic judgment as power that has no dominion over us." (Kant, 2002, p. 143) It is felt when the subject is facing, from a position of safety, a terrible, fearful object of nature such as "threatening cliffs" or a thunder storm or "volcanoes with their all-destroying violence" which in comparison, dwarfs the capacity of the subject to resist such an enormous power.

As is the case with the mathematically sublime, the irresistible power of the dynamically sublime "certainly makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical powerlessness, but at the same time it reveals a capacity for judging ourselves as independent of it and a superiority over nature on which is grounded a self-preservation of quite another kind than that which can be threatened and endangered by nature outside us, whereby the humanity in our person remains demeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion." (Kant, 2002, p. 145)

Robert Doran sees in this division two underlying transcendental ideas in Kant's Critical philosophy: "The Mathematically Sublime relates to theoretical reason's demand for *totality*; the Dynamically Sublime to practical reason's demand for *autonomy*." (Doran, 2015, p. 221) Both categories serve to reaffirm Kant's moral philosophy which is "the idea that man can transcend the limitations placed on him by his sensuous nature and natural causality, thereby realizing the essential freedom

on which rational moral consciousness is grounded.” (Doran, 2015, p. 221) In a very similar vein, Emily Brady suggests that “these two forms of the sublime are not narrowly circumscribed experiences. Rather, each in its own way puts us in touch with our moral capacities, and reveals to us, through sensible experience, our capacity for freedom.” (Brady, 2013, p. 59)

Considering the limitations imposed on the faculties in presenting an object by the sublime feeling, the problem of linkage that arises out of the incommensurability of different phrase regimens takes on a new meaning. On the one hand the differend poses a threat to the continuation of phrases, on the other, it demands that the linkage go on, hence creating a crisis of representation. By challenging the ability of the Imagination to present an object to its limits, the differend between disputing phrases resembles the sublime experience articulated by Kant. Lyotard recognizes the potential in the aesthetic of the sublime to properly address this crisis.

The aesthetics of the sublime thus works toward uncovering the sublime feeling by way of putting the unrepresentable in the presentation itself. Lyotard describes the sublime as having “no consideration for form” or something as an “unform.” That is because the sublime feeling happens as a result of an excessive force touching the mind without entering it. Quite similar to the way he explains *primary repression*, which results from the impossibility of binding the experience within the mind as a fixed entity that can be represented in an intelligible way, in the sublime feeling, “the imagination is also completely unable to collect the absolute (in largeness, in intensity) in order to represent it.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 32) Stemming from a Kantian analysis of the sublime that renders the imagination incapable of creating forms to present the absolute, Lyotard marks “the end of art, not as art but as

beautiful form.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 44) Similar to this notion is the “after-Auschwitz” aesthetics of Adorno. The aesthetics of the sublime cannot be grounded on sensible forms. It is a product of a feeling that cannot be presented in conventional forms which strives towards possessing a consensus of sense based on “the solace of good forms.” To make beautiful art today for Lyotard means to make kitsch. On the other hand art cannot be sublime. Art can only “make” sublime. Taking it one step further, it is possible to say art can only make the sublime “happen.” Lyotard clearly states that no one can be a “witness and truthful reporter” of the sublime affection, or its equal. Therefore, art cannot bear witness to the sublime, “but to this aporia of art and to its pain.” Namely, that there is something it cannot communicate, rather than saying the unsayable.

Lyotard is advocating for an aesthetics of the sublime which allows the unrepresentable to be put forward in presentation itself rather than trying to represent it. Representation functions as *repression proper* in a way that will allow what is remembered as “the forgotten” to be forgotten instead of something ‘immemorial’. “Whenever one represents,” says Lyotard, “one inscribes in memory.” Although it seems like a good idea against forgetting, it results in the opposite because, “only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten, because it can be effaced.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 26) On the other hand, what is not inscribed cannot be effaced because it lacks materiality. It cannot be forgotten, but rather remains as an affection that cannot even be qualified, as is the case with *primary repression*. Representation will result in the drowning of “the feeling” through *repression proper* by giving it a form that can be made absent instead of bearing witness to its presence. As has been noted earlier, the ‘immemorial’ is an event which has not been inscribed in memory, that defies conventional cognitive

faculties. It demands recognition solely for the fact that *there is* a ‘presence’, not concerned with forms that indicate the contents of *what is there*. Therefore, Lyotard prefers to side with the aesthetics of the sublime that defies representation, as opposed to the beautiful which relies on the assumed consensus of good forms. In this context, the section below explores the concept of the ‘event’ in terms of Lyotard’s approach to the subject.

2.4. The Event

Geoffrey Bennington describes the fundamental drive in all of Lyotard’s work undoubtedly to be, as put by Lyotard in *Discourse, figure*, which was translated by Bennington, to ‘rendre compte... du fait qu’il y a de l’évènement’, to account for the fact that there are events, or, more literally, that there is (some) event. (Bennington, 1988, 56) Bill Readings briefly sums up ‘the event’ as “the occurrence after which nothing will ever be the same again.” (Readings, 2006, p. 43) Lyotard describes the occurrence as “the instant which ‘happens’, which ‘comes’ unexpectedly but which, once it is there, takes its place in the network of what has happened. Any instant can be the beginning, provided that it is grasped in terms of its *quod* rather than its *quid*. Without this flash, there would be nothing, or there would be chaos. The flash (like the instant) is always there, and never there.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 82)

An event, for Lyotard, is “Not a thing, but at least a caesura in space-time.” (QP; 11)³ An event can change the fabric of time and space, yet the change is not easy to grasp in terms of tangible manifestation. It operates subtly on the one hand,

³Que Peindre – Lyotard Translated by Bill readings in *Introducing Lyotard*

happens all too fast to leave a trace and yet it is recognized after the fact that it has already happened.

Lyotard's refusal to position the postmodern as periodically following the modern reflects an idea that challenges the modernist conception of historical time. "The time of inscription comes both *after history* and *before* it, since History is in a sense constituted by the possibility of being re-transcribed." (Readings, 2006, p. 44) Every act of inscription of history, of an 'event', is possibly an 'event' in itself. It precedes History by re-writing it, which can constitute a break from established historical norms.

Bill Readings points out that the anachronistic temporality of history is understood by Lyotard in Freud's terms as "*Nachträglichkeit*, or deferred action, in which the event occurs both too soon and too late, It occurs too soon to be understood, and is understood too late to be recovered." (Readings, 2006, p. 44) It is the nature of the 'affect' which Lyotard explores in detail in *Heidegger and the jews*. The first shock of the event that comes and goes without a trace will be presented as a feeling that 'it happens' only later, although 'what happens' cannot be figured. Bill Readings sees "the aesthetic and critical experimentation of the postmodern artist and writer" for Lyotard as characterized by this displaced temporality. (Readings, 2006, 43) Thus, Lyotard's ideas revolve around the question of how to present something that escapes signification, something that is dislodged in time:

"The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event*; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or what amounts to the same thing, their being put

into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always begin too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*).” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81)

The affect cannot be registered as it is, rather, it can only be understood by the momentary signal that it is taking place. This is an important aspect of Lyotard’s approach to the event. Lyotard distinguishes between ‘it happens’ (the *quid*) and ‘what happens’ (the *quod*). His concern is not what happens, the signification but “is it happening” (the *it* indicating an empty place to be occupied by a referent). (Lyotard, 1988 79) Bill Readings identifies a focal point in Lyotard’s later work concerning the distinction of the eventhood of the event (the ‘it happens’, the *quid*) from its meaning or content (‘what happens’, the *quod*). (Readings, 2006, p. xiv)

Lyotard draws from Barnett Newman’s works the time of the event –which is always now- that is “a stranger to consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 90) Lyotard’s comments on Newman lead Graham Jones to conclude that Lyotard does not completely agree with Kant, who believes the sublime experience, “after some initial pain, ultimately affirms the subject’s sense of his or herself at a higher level.” (Jones, 2014, p. 113) Rather he believes “the value of the sublime experience for Lyotard would seem to reside in its very capacity to defer, even prevent, such a possibility.”

As has been noted, Lyotard prioritizes the fact that something occurs over the significance of the occurrence. It is not a matter of “*what* happens or *what* this might mean.” The *quid* necessarily comes before the *quod* in order for us to speak of what happens. He explains:

“That it happens ‘precedes’, so to speak, the question pertaining to what happens. Or rather, the question precedes itself, because ‘that it happens’ is the question relevant as event, and it ‘then’ pertains to the event that has just happened. The event happens as a question mark ‘before’ happening as a question. *It happens* is rather ‘in the first place’ *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?* Only ‘then’ is any mark determined by the questioning: is this or that happening, is it this or something else, is it possible that this or that?” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 90)

Moreover, “For Lyotard, it is not simply the case that there are events that deconstruct the rule of meaning; one has to judge how to judge them, one must do something with events, speak after them by linking phrases to them, despite the fact that events offer no fixed criteria as to what we might do or how we might do it” (Readings, 2006, p. xv). Then the question becomes how to deal with an event without doing damage to its eventhood. Judging the event under certain genres that claim to have superiority over others is to deny the event its singularity. When subsumed into a system, the event is stripped of its powers to affect any substantial change. In order to prevent the event from dissolving into just another instance, the event’s singularity, its *difference* must be preserved. Responding to an event is to respect its singularity. The event demands to be recognized, without signification, as a presence. To bear witness to an event is to find/search for new ways of linking. Through representation, by already established and recognized forms of presentation, the event loses its singularity, thus becomes any other ordinary event, eventually it is wronged.

The importance of finding new linkages stems from the break with pre-ordained rules and metanarratives that prescribe a certain way to judge events. The result is the inevitable totalitarianism of a certain genre of discourse. The event must be judged without criteria, without prejudice. The heterogeneity of the event is what makes it an event. The event demands justice for its heterogeneity. Judging the event with pre-established criteria means the loss of its meaning as a singular event and it eventually results in reducing it to a common event with no *difference* from others.

Lyotard sees modernist historical practices of representation as unjust toward the singularity of the event. Totalizing the narrative under certain significations causes the event to lose its eventhood. Any claims to representation of the event will subsume it among many others, thus resulting in doing wrong by neutralizing its singularity. Bill Readings explains that “Lyotard’s account of postmodernity is the evocation of the figural as displacing historical representation, the demand that the writing of History become responsible to the singularity of the event.” (Readings, 2006, p. 46)

The state of historical writing after the Holocaust provides the basis for Lyotard’s arguments on how to approach the issue of the representation of events. He advocates against conventional methods of representation of such unimaginable horror and destruction since an adequate presentation is impossible. The wrong done to the victims of the Holocaust demands to be testified as it is –the unrepresentable horror that can only be signalled by the feeling it imparts- it demands the call of the differend to be heard. Representation will only result in doing injustice to the singularity of the event by transforming it into just another atrocity in the history of mankind. The artist, the philosopher, the politician must bear witness to the silent cry of the victims instead of trying to be their voice. Once again, what is at stake here

is not 'what happens' but 'it happens'. What is at stake here is to find a way to testify to the 'immemorial' that forces itself to be remembered as 'the forgotten'.

Barnett Newman's approach to the sublime in his paintings coincides with Lyotard's ideas on representation. He takes Newman's works as an example of his conception of the time of an event presented through art. "What distinguishes the work of Newman from the corpus of the 'avant-gardes', and especially from that of American 'abstract expressionism' is not the fact that it is obsessed with the question of time – an obsession shared by many painters – but the fact that it gives an unexpected answer to that question: its answer is that time is the picture itself." (Instant; 78) Newman seeks sublimity in the "here-and-now;" he also accepts the task of art to bear witness to the inexpressible. "The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another word, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens." (Lyotard, 1991, p. 93) This can be seen in the notion of "The time the painting *is*." Newman's paintings reveal the time as themselves in themselves. The work of art embodies the experience of time in its material entity.

On this basis, Lyotard contrasts Newman's work to two important works by Duchamp, both of which refer to events; *The Large Glass* to the 'stripping bare' of the Bride and *Etant donnés* to the 'discovery of the obscene body'. The former event has yet to happen and the latter one has already happened. Newman's work, on the other hand, shows that the occurrence, the moment, has arrived. In this context, Lyotard identifies two differences between Newman and Duchamp that are poetic and thematic. For Lyotard a painting by Newman is "an angel. It announces nothing; it is in itself the annunciation." (Lyotard, 1991, p. 79) While Duchamp attempts to "give an analogical representation of how time outwits consciousness," Newman does not represent "a non-representable annunciation; he allows it to present itself."

(Lyotard, 1991, p. 79) The figure of an angel carries within it all the implications of holiness. It does not need anything else to represent itself.

Nothing is given in Newman's paintings other than 'dimensions, colours, and lines'. Everything is there on the canvas but there are no allusions of any kind to any referents. Lyotard identifies in a Newman painting the contrast between "stories and its plastic nudity." The feeling that is conveyed by the painting is the feeling of 'there', the feeling expressed by the sublime. Lyotard says that "there is nothing to 'consume'" in Newman's painting because "one cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous." (Lyotard, 1991, p. 80)

Newman's painting defies the phrase universe formulated by Lyotard in that it has no addressor, addressee, not even a referent. Lyotard explains that the message 'speaks' of nothing; it emanates from no one. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 81) The painting is the message and the messenger in this instant. The message is put forward in a presentation that presents nothing. It simply *is*. It brings forth a feeling that says something is there, a *presence*. A presence that demands to be heard, obliges the audience to lend an ear to its force. For Lyotard obligation is a "modality of time rather than of space and its organ is the ear rather than the eye." (Lyotard, 1991, p. 81) It is clear from this view to see Lyotard's concern with the sublime affect which makes itself known in an instant as a formless force rather than spatial organization that works through representation.

The subject matter of Newman's painting, then, is 'artistic creation' itself. "It is immediacy. It happens here and now." In this context, Lyotard categorizes the work of Newman in the aesthetics of the sublime. He briefly introduces the sublime through Burke's ideas on the subject (whom Newman read and found 'a bit surrealist'). Kant's work on the sublime also carries some similarities as well as differences with Burke's

Enquiry, although Robert Doran points out that there is some controversy regarding whether or not Kant was directly influenced by Burke. (Doran, 2015, p. 178) He cites a few sources that provide conflicting accounts on the topic such as Paul Crowther⁴ who suggests “that the piecemeal affinities between Kant and Burke's texts are probably due to common source material” or John Boulton⁵ who claims that “certain isolated observations and phrases point unmistakably to Burke’s influence.”

For Burke, what characterizes the sublime is the feeling of *delight*, or “the negative pleasure ... which arises from the removal of the threat of pain.” (Lyotard, 1991, 84) Burke says there is nothing like fear that “robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning.” (Burke, 1998, p. 53) Fear, which is “an apprehension of pain or death” is similar to the actual sensation of pain. (Burke, 1998, p. 53) Burke explains that any threat to a person’s self-preservation, anything that can result in privation (mainly the privation of life) is the cause of *terror*: “*Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence*” (Burke, 1998, 65) and “the approach of death may be ‘terrible’ in that they announce that the gaze, the other, language or life will soon be extinguished;” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 84) the terrible idea that nothing will happen again. What removes this threat of privation is the sublime feeling that “something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take ‘place’ and will announce that everything is not over.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 84) Similarly, what Lyotard finds in the sublime feeling is the necessity of the *quid* (it happens) which follows the moment of *terror* when facing possible annihilation. “An event, an occurrence – what Martin Heidegger called *ein Ereignis* – is infinitely simple, but this simplicity can only be approached through a state of privation.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 90)

⁴Paul Crowther – The Kantian Sublime page 12

⁵John Boulton – Introduction to Burke’s *Enquiry* (Routledge) page cxxvi

As has been noted, “The sense of beauty is for Kant” says Lyotard, “kindled by a free harmony between the function of images and the function of concepts occasioned by an object of art or nature.” On the other hand, the aesthetics of the sublime is characterized by “a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 98) For an Idea of reason exceeds the faculty of presentation, the imagination is not able to provide adequate presentation of the Idea. “This failure of expression” causes pain resulting from “a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 98) The pain turns into pleasure through the imagination’s efforts to “harmonize its object with that of reason” and the signalling of “the immense power or ideas.” This kind of disruption of the faculties brings out “extreme tension” as described by Lyotard –or what Kant calls agitation- which “characterizes the pathos of the sublime, as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 98)

Lyotard explains that the sublime feeling in Burke’s inquiry is triggered by “the threat of nothing further happening.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 99) This is the major aspect of Burke’s analysis of the sublime which Kant’s analysis does not consider. Although beauty inspires pleasure, another kind of pleasure is derived from a stronger source than that of satisfaction, namely pain and impending death. While the soul is affected by bodily pain, “the soul can also affect the body as though it were experiencing some externally induced pain, by the sole means of representations that are unconsciously associated with painful situations.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 99) This is what Burke calls *terror* and it is connected to the threat of privation. Privations such as that of light which causes terror of darkness or of language that causes terror of silence, to give a few examples from Lyotard’s article. “What is terrifying” Lyotard sums up, “is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening”

(Lyotard, 1991, p. 99).

In accordance with this view of the source of the sublime, Lyotard provides an account of the sublime feeling:

“a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any ‘it happens’, strikes it with ‘astonishment’ (at lower intensities the soul is seized with admiration, veneration, respect). The soul is thus dumb, immobilized, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life. For Burke, the sublime was no longer a matter of elevation, but a matter of intensification.” (Lyotard, 1991, pp. 99-100)

One important aspect of Burke’s analysis is that the sublime feeling requires a suspension of the cause of terror. Otherwise *terror* will not subdue and the kind of pleasure that is aroused by its relief will never occur. This is explained by Lyotard as the privation of threat of privation, and Burke calls the resulting pleasure *delight*.

Therefore, if the aim of art is to inspire intense feelings in the addressee, then it is no longer achieved by the mere imitation which is associated with the beautiful. Lyotard sees in Burke’s observations “the possibility of emancipating work of art from the classical rule of imitation.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 100)

Following his description of the sublime sentiment, Lyotard identifies modern aesthetics as “an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one” which, “continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81) As such, modern aesthetics is not compatible with sublime sentiment which is a

product of the combination of both pleasure and pain. Whereas the postmodern, situated in the modern as a part of it according to Lyotard, “denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable” and therefore is able to put forward “the unrepresentable in presentation itself.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81) The postmodern looks to find new ways of presentation “not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81) The postmodern artist works without the guidance of pre-established rules and “cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81) In this respect, as has been noted before, the postmodern work have “the characters of an *event*.”

Further developing the idea of the postmodern as an event, Bill Readings explains:

“For Lyotard, the postmodern marks a temporal aporia – a gap in the thinking of time which is constitutive of the modernist concept of time as succession or progress. This temporal aporia is characterized by Lyotard as the time of the ‘event’ which functions figurally for the modernist discourses of epistemology, historiography, politics and art” (Readings, 2006, p. 40).

Lyotard deals with the consequences and the implications of such disruption in the temporal domain. The ‘aporia’ needs to be identified in way that recognizes its ‘eventhood’ without being subsumed by any totalizing idea. Its presentation as a

disruption that escapes formal configuration creates a problem of representation.

Lyotard addresses this situation by embracing the problem as such, something that is unrepresentable.

Bill Readings suggests that for Lyotard, “The understanding of postmodernity in terms of the *event* ... is radically different from the conception of the postmodern as the contemporary historical *moment*” which means “the possibility of thinking history as a succession of moments” is denied by the figural force of the events. As a result, the *moment* cannot be put in the scheme of the grand narrative of emancipation. As noted by Lyotard, “Postmodern is not to be taken in a periodizing sense.” (Lyotard, 1999, p. 16)

Bill Readings puts Lyotard on the opposing side “to the majority of writers on the postmodern for whom postmodernity appears as the contemporary critique of modernism; postmodernity as the negative moment of modernist self-consciousness.” (Readings, 2006, p. 41) Lyotard himself refrains from such attempts to determine the nature of the postmodern lest it tie “postmodernism to the adoption of an attitude by a subject.” (Readings, 2006, p. 42)

“For Lyotard, postmodernism is an event, not a moment in the consciousness of things for the artist, for the people, for the spirit of an age. To understand the event as if it were a state of the soul or spirit is to ignore the eventhood of the event in the interest of taking account of its meaning, to reduce figure to discourse. Second, the identification of postmodernity by means of formal properties will tend to reduce the temporal aporia which the postmodern opens in representation to the status of a problem within representation. To put it another way, once

the postmodern is formally recognizable, it is no longer opening up a hole in representation; rather than testifying to the unrepresentable, it will have presented it.” (Readings, 2006, p. 42)

Therefore, the event “happens in excess of the referential frame within which it might be understood, disrupting or displacing that frame” (Readings, 2006, p. 43). As a result, the event cannot be understood according to the set of rules governing that frame in the spatial and temporal domain, other than being reduced to a moment through representation. Bill Readings goes on to say that “the time of the event is postmodern in that the event cannot be understood *at the time*, as it happens, because its singularity is alien to the language or structure of understanding to which it occurs” (Readings, 2006, p. 43). Very much like the sublime affect, the event does not signify any meaning, that is, ‘what happens’ or the *quod* cannot be identified as such. The event can only testify to the ‘it happens’ or the *quid*, “which cannot be reduced to a representation” (Readings, 2006, p. 43).

3. SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AND “THE DIFFEREND”

Kurt Vonnegut Jr was one of the survivors of the bombing of Dresden; at the time he was in a meat locker of an underground slaughterhouse where captured American soldiers were kept. The bombing had lasted from February 13 to February 15, engulfing the city in a fire-storm and when it was all over, Dresden was in ruins⁶. It was “like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighbourhood was dead.”(Vonnegut, 1991, p. 178)

The scale of the destruction is made even more striking by the comparisons throughout the novel with the atomic bomb that hit Hiroshima. Kurt Vonnegut says the bombing of Dresden “wasn’t a famous air raid back then in America. Not many Americans knew how much worse it had been than Hiroshima, for instance. I didn’t know that, either. There hadn’t been much publicity.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 10) Later on in the novel, portions of the forewords by Ira C. Eaker, Lieutenant General, and British Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby from David Irving’s book *The Destruction of Dresden* are quoted extensively and juxtaposed together with “a copy of President Harry S Truman’s announcement to the world that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 185)

“Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British “Grand Slam,” which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history

⁶<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/world/europe/dresden-germany-anniversary.html>

of warfare”

Reportedly “135,000 people died as the result of an air attack with conventional weapons” in Dresden and “the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71,370 people” says Air Marshal Saundy in Irving's book. (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 188) This is a deliberate effort on Vonnegut's part to make visible the dire consequences of this relatively unknown military operation.

On the other hand, these figures have remained heavily disputed throughout the years. The estimated death toll varied unconvincingly between 25,000 and a shocking half a million (according to the German Government of the time) casualties. Kurt Vonnegut's (and Irving's) figure and the comparisons with Hiroshima bombing had seen some criticism from historians such as Tami Davis Biddle for being inaccurate and, according to Ann Rigney, for generating false historical awareness. More recently, The Dresden Historians' Commission published its official report after five years of research and concluded that up to 25,000 people died in the Allied bombing of Dresden – drastically fewer than previously estimated or unofficially claimed.⁷ Yet the figure of 135,000 remains widely referenced thanks to the popularity of Kurt Vonnegut's novel.

How important is –in a case such as the bombing of Dresden- the historical accuracy of the number of casualties? Should we consider Vonnegut's novel as a historiographical representation and expect from it historical facts with spot on accuracy? It is true that the novel is a semi-autobiographical work that reflects Vonnegut's experience in the war through its (anti)hero Billy Pilgrim's (mis)adventures. Billy is captured by the Germans as Kurt Vonnegut had been and he survived the bombing in a meat locker underground like Vonnegut. We get a glimpse

⁷<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8574157.stm>

of the ruinous state in which the city had been left after the bombing through Billy's eyes. "All this happened, more or less" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 1) says Vonnegut right at the beginning of the novel. He lets us know that the parts about the war are pretty much accurate, that his writing reflects his own personal experience. One guy he knew "really *was* shot in Dresden for taking a teapot that wasn't his" and another guy he knew "really *did* threaten to have his personal enemies killed by hired gunmen after the war." (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 1) The novel also depicts, however, the (science)fictional planet of Tralfamadore, yet another place Billy had been taken as a captive; together with his travelling in time this doesn't fit the conventional progression of history.

Ann Rigney prefers to "take the broader framework offered by the concept of "cultural remembrance" when comparing the approach provided by works of historiography and the products of fictional writing. She uses the term "cultural remembrance" in her essay "to designate the complex set of mnemonic practices through which collective views of the past are continuously being shaped, circulated, reproduced, and (un)critically transformed with the help of media." (Rigney; p. 6) She prefers the term to highlight "the constructive and performative aspects of social memory production and to suggest the need for examining it in terms of an ongoing cultural *process*, involving a whole range of mnemonic practices." (Rigney, 2009, 6) Vonnegut's fictional world lays the foundation for exploring the traumatic effects of the war on Billy Pilgrim, who becomes "unstuck in time" in Tralfamadorian fashion, thus defying the linear progression of time. Rigney explains the Tralfamadorian fantasy "as a way into imagining Billy Pilgrim's post-traumatic stress and desire for calm." (Rigney, 2009 15) The novel can be said to be one of the early examples of

what is called “historiographical metafiction,”⁸ a genre that self-consciously deals with the question of how historical representation should be undertaken while itself operating on a fictional dimension. Linda Hutcheon uses the term to target “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages,” (Hutcheon, 1987) in this case the traumatic effects of World War II and the bombing of Dresden, as experienced by Kurt Vonnegut and carried on, without being able to be resolved yet put on forward by the novel itself.

Ann Rigney points out that “whereas earlier writers of historical fiction used their focus on individual experiences as a platform for giving extensive details relating to the embodied experience of the past, Vonnegut's fictional world is surprisingly bare.” (Rigney, 2009, p. 18) She sees Vonnegut's as a different approach that does not focus so much on the minute details of the events. On the contrary, it is the “scarcity of detail that counts. Indicative of this is the fact that, although the novel is known as a book about the bombing of Dresden, we are actually given no account whatsoever of the actual bombing raids, only of their aftermath as experienced by Billy Pilgrim when he emerges from the shelter of the slaughterhouse where he had been held prisoner.” (Rigney, 2009, p. 18) I believe this is the one crucial aspect of the novel. The question Kurt Vonnegut has to wrestle with here is: How do you present something that is virtually unrepresentable such as the horrors of a massacre or the horrors of war in general? During the course of the World War II, for instance, countless atrocities had been committed which left terrible scars on many generations to come.

⁸Term coined by Linda Hutcheon

Ann Rigney sees a certain powerlessness in the notion of “presenting the unrepresentable.” She argues that Vonnegut’s “minimalism” actively “withholds information and withholds judgment in order to engage his readers in a reflection on the trivial and the serious, on knowledge and wisdom, on agency and passivity, and on the horrors of war.” (Rigney, 2009, p. 21) In this sense, rather than acknowledging the novel as a representation, she sees it as a “performance directed towards readers.” She differentiates the performative aspect of the novel achieved by “understatements” from “presenting the unrepresentable.” Rigney sees an inherent “powerlessness” in the expression and finds it not entirely adequate in this case. Instead of focusing on the issues of (un)presentation, she proposes to “shift the emphasis away from the matter of representation and (un)representability (how a text refers), to the matter of performativity (what a text does in the here and now).” (Rigney, 2009, p. 20)

Although I agree with Rigney regarding the performative function of the novel, I also want to argue that Kurt Vonnegut does manage to present the unrepresentable in itself in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, or at least bears witness to it “by finding new idioms,” to quote Lyotard. Vonnegut's experiment with form, or rather formlessness of narration, discontinuity of time and space, signals the postmodern aspect advocated by Lyotard, that is, the aesthetic of the sublime:

“Kant himself shows the way when he names “formlessness, the absence of form,” as a possible index to the unrepresentable. He also says of the empty “abstraction” which the imagination experiences when in search for a presentation of the infinite (another unrepresentable): this abstraction itself is like a presentation of the infinite, its “negative presentation.” He

cites the commandment, “Thou Shalt not make graven images” (*Exodus*), as the most sublime passage in the Bible in that it forbids all presentation of the Absolute.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 78)

The same principles at work in avant-garde painting can be observed in other forms of art, like literature. According to Lyotard, through negative presentation, “figuration or representation” will be avoided. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 78)

On his way back to Dresden with a Guggenheim Fellowship to do research for his novel, Vonnegut's flight to Frankfurt from Boston was cancelled due to fog and he had to spend the night at a hotel in Boston. Somehow it seemed to him the time would not pass, as if “somebody was playing with the clocks ... The second hand on [his] watch would twitch once, and a year would pass, and then it would twitch again.” (Vonnegut, 1991, 20) So he turned to the books he brought with him that he meant to read on the plane. One of them was a book on Louis-Ferdinand Céline by Erika Ostrovsky, called *Céline and His Vision*.

Kurt Vonnegut encountered the work of Céline in his forties. Céline was a physician, a writer, and a fierce anti-semitic who collaborated with the Nazis. In *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut explains that Céline's book *Journey to the End of the Night* “penetrated [his] bones” while he was working on *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He came to realise that he adopted what screams out of everything Céline had written: “Death and suffering can't matter nearly as much as I think they do. Since they are so common, my taking them so seriously must mean that I am insane. I must try to be saner.” (Vonnegut, 2006) and channelled it into one of the most famous phrases in literature: “So it goes.” Vonnegut says he “felt the need to say this every time a character died”

in the novel. It stands out as an attempt to undermine the terrible burden that strains the mind over countless deaths. Throughout the novel, Vonnegut introduces myriads of deaths to the reader, with his classic response “So it goes.” His book about Dresden proves how commonplace death is, especially after witnessing a whole city being devoured by flames along with 135.000 casualties. As made clear by Céline's approach to it, it is quite easy to be driven mad in the face of “plain old death”. Now imagine witnessing a massacre that left hundreds of thousands of dead bodies behind. Vonnegut had to find a way to cope with it even after so many years, which he attempted to do by writing about it.

Vonnegut brings up the fact that “Céline claimed from time to time to have been trepanned in the First World War, as the result of a head wound.” (Vonnegut, 2006) Coincidentally, Céline comes up in the introduction part of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He mentions that Céline cracked his skull in the war and “[a]fter that he couldn't sleep, and there were noises in his head. He became a doctor, and he treated poor people in the daytime, and he wrote grotesque novels all night. No art is possible without a dance with death, he wrote.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 21) Philip Watts argues in his critical essay on Céline and Vonnegut that the tone of Vonnegut's novel is signalled by a short passage he quotes by Céline that he comes across in Ostrovsky's book:

“The truth is death... I've fought nicely against it as long as I could ... danced with it, festooned it, waltzed it around ... decorated it with streamers, titilated it ...

⁹(Vonnegut, 1991, p. 21) Watts draws parallels between Vonnegut and Céline “as a writer who directly confronted death” and “is thus inscribed at the beginning of Vonnegut's novel.” (Watts, 2002, p. 37) He suggests Céline is the inspiration behind

⁹Philipp Watts explains that Ostrovsky quotes from *Le Pont de Londres* by Céline and from his correspondence. (43)

one of the novel's alternative titles: *A Duty-Dance With Death*, and further claims “[w]hat Vonnegut inherits from Céline is ... a terminology of spectacle with which to represent and ultimately to condemn the horrors of war, as well as a protagonist who remains uncomprehending when faced with this destruction.” (Watts, 2002, p. 37) He even takes it further by stating that the events recounted in *Slaughterhouse-Five* “[are] to a great extent a rewriting of the war sequences in Céline's 1932 *Voyage au bout de la nuit*.” (Watts, 2002, p. 33) It may also be possible to see a connection between Céline's head trauma and the plane crash in which Billy cracked his skull open. Quite interestingly, it was only after the accident that Billy started talking about his adventures with alien abductors in the planet Tralfamadore and their philosophy.

The novel is overshadowed by the inevitable destruction of the whole universe. Tralfamadorian technology will eventually blow up everything and the universe will cease to exist. From the Tralfamadorian point of view, the biggest cataclysm there can possibly be is taken so lightly that it ends up infinitely diminishing the weight of a massacre of 135.000 people and the destruction of a whole city. The phrase 'So it goes' takes on a new meaning under these circumstances. All of the deaths witnessed in the story are untimely precursors of total annihilation.

In the introductory first chapter of the novel, Vonnegut explains that “over the years” whenever he was asked what he was working on, he would usually reply “the main thing was a book about Dresden.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 3) He thought that since the subject was so big “it would be a masterpiece or at least make [him] a lot of money.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 2) After all, he had witnessed one of the greatest massacres and destruction in European history first-hand. He would simply write about his experience in the war and it would do the trick. There is no question that the novel made him a lot of money and made his reputation as a great writer. “The

Dresden atrocity, tremendously expensive and meticulously planned, was so meaningless, finally that only one person on the entire planet got any benefit from it,” that person being Kurt Vonnegut himself. (Vonnegut, 2006, p. 295) However, for Vonnegut it was not simply an easy task of writing his memoirs. In fact, it took him many years to finally finish his novel about Dresden. He admits this “lousy little book cost [him] in money and anxiety and time.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 2) Too few words about the event came to his mind to write a book. “And not many words come now, either” he says, even after his novel was published, when he has “become an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls, with his sons full grown.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 2) In an interview with Robert Musil in 1980, Vonnegut explains the difficulty of working up to a book like *Slaughterhouse-Five*:

“... I had to say something about it. And it took me a long time and it was painful. The most difficult thing about it was that I had forgotten about it. And I learned about catastrophes from that, and talking to other people who had been involved in avalanches and floods and great fires, that there is some device in our brain which switches off and prevents our remembering catastrophes above a certain scale. I don’t know whether it is just a limitation of our nervous system, or whether it’s actually a gadget which protects us in some way. But I, in fact, remembered nothing about the bombing of Dresden although I had been there...” (Allen, 1998, p. 230)

He had been present. As a writer, he felt an obligation to represent the horrors he had witnessed. “It seemed a categorical imperative that I write about Dresden” he says; yet he cannot remember. Kurt Vonnegut strikes a psychoanalytic note when he mentions “a gadget which protects us in some way.” In one of his lectures, Sigmund Freud talks about a process he calls 'repression' in which he came to realize the forgotten memories of the patients were not actually lost, that they were still accessible:

“but there was some force that prevented them from becoming conscious and compelled them to remain unconscious [...] the force which was maintaining the pathological condition became apparent in the form of resistance on the part of the patient [...] The same forces which, in the form of resistance, were now offering opposition to the forgotten material's being made conscious, must formerly have brought about the forgetting and must have pushed the pathogenic experiences in question out of consciousness.” (Freud, 1990)

As has been explained before, repression occurs as a result of resistance to an instinctual impulse in order to prevent it from entering into the conscious realm. Freud wrote that “*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.*” (Freud, 1981, p. 147) Furthermore, Freud proposes a two-fold structure of repression which consists of primary repression and secondary repression or repression proper.

Lyotard adopts the Freudian concept of repression into Kant's theory on aesthetics. He associates primary repression with the aesthetic of the sublime and secondary repression with the aesthetic of the beautiful. As has been touched upon, Lyotard favours the aesthetic of the sublime over the beautiful. The sublime aesthetic, for Lyotard, is the aesthetic of postmodernism and it is based on presenting what is un-presentable. Unlike the beautiful, the sublime aesthetic is not concerned with the form of its subject matter, rather it deals with what is formless. The connection between the sublime and primary repression stems from the impossibility of representation.

In primary repression, the unconscious affect comes and goes undetected. It does not leave any trace of entry behind and is kept away as if it never happened. Almost. It is stored away as if it is completely forgotten, but it nonetheless emerges from the pits of the unconscious to make itself felt. Consciousness is overshadowed by the presence of something immaterial that cannot be adequately described. To use Kantian terms, the faculty of imagination is incapable of presenting the idea of the repressed, therefore it remains unrealized by the faculty of reason. However, the forgotten succeeds in persistently making itself remembered as the forgotten. It makes itself felt as a presence that craves attention. It makes itself heard as an obligation, as a debt to be paid. Even though it never managed to become tangible, it is not possible to escape from its screeching call.

In Vonnegut's case, his forgotten memories from the war and from the bombing of Dresden signal the effects of traumatic events he had not been able to address properly in a way that could allow him to work through them. His novel about Dresden was his way to finally pay attention to the call of the differend. Veas-Gulani explains the function of the novel with reference to Billy Pilgrim, its fictional hero:

“Vonnegut tries not to face his suppressed memories directly but to get to the core by slowly uncovering layer after layer. The novel reflects this process of narrowing in on himself through the two trauma stories. Billy’s story allows an indirect and detached exploration of the effects of the Dresden bombing because the character is mostly fictional. The narrator’s story parallels Vonnegut’s on one level, but on another level, it is an integral part of a work of fiction. Removing himself from the factual to the fictional plane by creating the narrator allows Vonnegut a degree of distance from himself and his experiences.” (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 182)

Dylan Sawyer traces the origins of the word 'trauma' to the Greek word for 'wound', “indicating a serious injury not only to the body but also the psyche” and notes the elusive nature of the trauma identified “from its very inception... [which] has been considered a damage able to cloak its presence under the severity of its own assault.” (Sawyer, 2014 159) Sawyer quotes an observation from Professor of English Cathy Caruth and from American historian Dominick LaCapra that “the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (Caruth, 1995, 4) which results in “a dissociation of affects and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel.” (LaCapra, 2001, 42) The danger identified by Dylan Sawyer is the inevitable silence of the victims caused by the loss of ability to express themselves due to the injuries suffered

by the faculties of recognition and representation. (Sawyer, 2014, p. 159)

Various accounts given by trauma theorists led Sawyer to believe that “a crisis of representation can be addressed by literary studies.” The idea that literature and psychoanalysis coincide in this regard stems “from their understanding of the traumatic as an occurrence that troubles the very principles of narrative itself; namely, the disruption of its linear chronology and formal structure in an effort to present what is unrepresentable.” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 166) Hence, Sawyer finds a common point between the *differend* and trauma which is “anti narrative” in its affect because of the challenge it issues “to the capacities of narrative knowledge.” (Luckhurst, 2008, 79) He believes that “the two are inextricably linked to one another through their relationship with Silence, being both the impact and the *affect* of cataclysmic injury, present in the very absences they intuit (the wounds from which they speak) and ultimately incommensurable with articulation.” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 161)

Dylan Sawyer argues that a traumatic event is different from an event in its inability “to provide the 'safe distance' necessary to evoke a sense of the 'traditional' sublime, overwhelming the perspective of its victim to ensure that while he or she cannot escape trauma's shadow, neither are they able to sharpen it into any clear definition.” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 171) According to this view, Billy Pilgrim's numerous traumatic experiences (mostly) do not qualify for the sublime notion which brings pleasure out of pain, but it is rather what Sawyer calls a “*traumatic sublime*, a sensation constituted more by the *despair* felt at the mind's failure to appropriate the event's full magnitude combined with an acknowledgement of its unceasing attempt to recreate and represent the traumatic event's occurrence.” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 172) Nonetheless, the function of literature appears here, as advocated by Lyotard, not to relate the trauma itself but to transform the traumatic events in their unrepresentable

nature, both for the victim and the writer (in this case inseparable), through (unconventional) methods of narrative/presentation, into a testimony of the unrepresentable. Therefore, as mentioned earlier, in Lyotard's view, art cannot *be* sublime, yet it can only *make* sublime.

Although Sawyer says he disagrees with Lyotard in that “the philosopher nevertheless fails to fully take into account the trauma suffered as a result of the event, particularly the fact that it may paralyse rather than promote the ability of faculties to instigate new presentations,” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 173) later on he concedes that “the traumatic sublime may promote a certain feeling of hope, for in arousing such a sensation the resulting testimony – even in its failings (and indeed, because of its failing) – can still be shown to attest to the *affect* of the traumatic event and by extension also its presence,” ultimately resulting in the “*differend*’s demand that genres of discourse adapt so that its voice may be heard, even if that voice might be more powerful (and 'authentic') when silenced.” (Sawyer, 2014, pp. 174-5)

Considering both stances here, the *traumatic sublime* formulated by Dylan Sawyer does not really differ from the postmodern sublime as a concept. Rather, it recognizes the traumatic as a specific form of *event*, which admittedly never appeared in Lyotard's oeuvre as a fully developed concept but was left rather ambiguous.

The traumatic events in Billy Pilgrim's life can be traced way back to his infancy, like the time he was thrown into the deep end of a pool at Ilium Y.M.C.A by his father, in order to teach Billy how to swim, when he was a little boy. “It was like an execution,” describes Vonnegut. Another example is when Billy and his family were standing at the rim of the Grand Canyon. “Billy hated the canyon. He was sure that he was going to fall in. His mother touched him, and he wet his pants.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 89) These childhood traumas add a new dimension to the way

Billy Pilgrim is perceived, offering an alternative explanation based on a continuum of a series of problematic events in Billy's life, instead of one big moment – the bombing of Dresden – that caused all the problems. Rather than designating a singular cause as the root of all evil, Vonnegut weaves an intricate web of events scattered throughout Billy's life, both prior to and after the war period.

As van der Kolk and van der Hart¹⁰ note, “Severe or prolonged stress can suppress hippocampal functioning, creating context-free associations, which are hard to locate in space and time... When people are exposed to trauma, that is, a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience 'speechless terror.' The experience cannot be organised at a linguistic level, and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organised at a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioural re-enactments, nightmares and flashbacks.”¹¹

The argument that Billy Pilgrim's journeys in time are actually flashbacks of his experiences in the war are not uncommon. As Susanne Veas-Gulani explains in her paper, where she assumes a psychiatric approach to the novel:

“Being 'spastic in time' is a metaphor for Billy's repeatedly re-experiencing the traumatic events he went through in the war, particularly as a POW during the Dresden bombings. Psychologically, Billy has never fully left World War II; instead, in Jerome Klinkowitz's words, he lives in a 'continual present.’” (Veas-Gulani,

¹⁰*Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma – Bessel A. van der Kolk, Onno van der Hart, p172

¹¹Brett, E. A., and R. Ostroff. 1985. “Imagery and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview.” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142:417-24 // van der Kolk, Bessel A. 1987. *Psychological Trauma*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press.

2003)

As a result of his trauma, the distinction between the past and the present disappeared for Billy Pilgrim. “Indeed,” says Dominick LaCapra, “in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities. (LaCapra, 1999, p. 699)

Vees-Gulani likens Billy's situation to Judith Herman's description of former prisoners of war suffering from PTSD:

“The rupture in continuity between present and past frequently persists even after the prisoner is released. The prisoner may give the appearance of returning to ordinary time, while psychologically remaining bound in the timelessness of the prison... Studies of prisoners of war, for example, report with astonishment that the men never discussed their experiences with anyone. Often those who married after liberation never told even their wives or children that they had been prisoners... Thus, even years after liberation, the former prisoner continues to practice doublethink and to exist simultaneously in two realities, two points in time. The experience of the present is often hazy and dulled, while the intrusive memories of the past are intense and clear.”¹² (Vees-Gulani, 2003, pp. 89-90)

¹²Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic, 1997

A short interaction between Billy Pilgrim and his new bride, Valencia, exemplifies this notion of evasion quite well. Billy deflects a series of questions from Valencia about the war with short, often single word answers in a short scene when they were on their honeymoon, which ends with him travelling back to 1944 to the prison hospital he was in.

Billy's attitude toward Valencia creates a stark contrast with his relationship with Montana Wildhack, “a former Earthling movie star” who was kidnapped by Tralfamadorians, like Billy himself, and put in the zoo so that they could exhibit a model human life for visitors. Planet Tralfamadore and its inhabitants were eerily similar to the products of a science fiction writer Kilgore Trout whose work Billy became acquainted with while he was in a mental hospital ward where he checked himself in after he returned from the war and “suffered a mild nervous collapse.” Billy was sharing a room with a war veteran named Elliot Rosewater (who is a recurring character in Vonnegut's novels). Incidentally, Elliot Rosewater, like Billy Pilgrim, was unable to cope with his traumas and the aftershocks of war. Both Billy and Elliot Rosewater “were dealing with similar crises in similar ways. They had both found life meaningless, partly because of what they had seen in war.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 101)

As a genre, science fiction is sort of looked down upon as second rate literature among critics. Kurt Vonnegut never really embraced the label, on the contrary, he fought off the title of a science-fiction writer for commercial reasons. In an interview with Joe David Bellamy and John Casey, Vonnegut explains:

“If you allow yourself to be called a science-fiction writer, people will think of you as some lower type, someone out of the “mainstream.” ...they are thought to be inferior writers, and generally are, I think – at least the ones who go to conventions... I was classified as a science-fiction writer because I'd included machinery, and all I'd done was to write about Schenectady in 1948! ...but I would run into people who would downgrade me. I ran into Jason Epstein, a terribly powerful cultural commissar, at a cocktail party, When we were introduced, he thought a minute, then said, “Science fiction,” turned, and walked off. He just had to place me, that's all.” (Allen, 1988, p. 157)

Nevertheless, Kurt Vonnegut does not deny that his works contain aspects of science-fiction. On the contrary, it has an important function in his writing. For example, he views the science-fictional elements in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a tool for creating comic-relief “just like the clowns in Shakespeare,” to lighten up the mood of the novel that deals with quite a heavy subject. He goes on to say in an interview with David Standish he gave for *Playboy Magazine*:

“When Shakespeare figured the audience had had enough of the heavy stuff, he'd let up a little, bring on a clown or a foolish innkeeper or something like that, before he'd become serious again. And trips to other planets, science fiction of an obviously kidding sort, is equivalent to bringing on the clowns every so often to lighten things up.” (Allen, 1988, p. 94)

Vonnegut's approach here resonates with Umberto Eco's view that "comedy is the quintessential human reaction to the fear of death." (Zanganch, 2008) Therefore Billy's inter-planetary travels take on a deeper new meaning, considering the effects of trauma and the function of science-fiction in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It is not only comic-relief for the audience, but possibly a source of relief for Billy Pilgrim as well. It is not within the scope of this research to determine whether the sci-fi elements should be taken as (fictional) reality or just symptoms of mental distress; nevertheless, it is safe to say Billy Pilgrim found a mock haven in planet Tralfamadore, not only in his human habitat simulation dome which he shared with young movie star Montana Wildhack, but also (more importantly) in the Tralfamadorians' fatalistic philosophy in the face of complete annihilation. The same way Céline's writing helped Vonnegut to come to a realization that "[d]eath and suffering can't matter nearly as much as [he thinks] they do," (Vonnegut, 2006, p. 289) Tralfamadorian philosophy changed Billy's perception of death by changing his perception of time. In a letter he was working on to send to "the Illium *News Leader*" about the planet Tralfamadore, Billy explains that the Tralfamadorians' ability to see beyond the conventional understanding of time allows them to "look at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance" and make it possible to "see how permanent all the moments are" so that "they can look at any moment that interests them" because "[a]ll moments, past, present, and future, always have existed, always will exist." (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 27) In accordance with this view, "The most important thing [Billy] learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral." (Vonnegut,

1991, pp. 26-7) This way of looking at things prompted Billy to adopt the Tralfamadorian phrase “So it goes,” which they say about people who died, while facing death himself. Such an attitude must surely help the Tralfamadorians to cope with the threat of impending doom, which is the destruction of the whole universe. When put in perspective, the destruction of a whole city, let alone random individual casualties, loses signification in the grand scheme of things.

James Berger argues that “The apocalyptic event ... generates new meanings and new historical narratives, as it obliterates old ones. Thus ... the apocalypse is a revelation, an unveiling.” (Berger, 1999, p. 188) Etymologically, the word 'apocalypse' derives from the Greek verb *apokaluptein* which means *to uncover* or *to reveal*. And it came like a revelation for Billy after witnessing unmeasurable devastation and horror, that there is an alternative way of accommodating Death and he took it upon himself to convey this message from a higher realm to the people of earth. “He was doing nothing less now, he thought, than prescribing corrective lenses for Earthling souls [who] were lost and wretched... because they could not see as well as his little green friends on Tralfamadore.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 29)

The strings of event, or rather short scenes -as per the novel's structure- that follow one another in chapter three of *Slaughterhouse-Five* reveal a good deal of examples of Billy's responses to trauma or post-traumatic stress. The chapter opens with Billy Pilgrim and Roland Weary being captured by the Germans behind enemy lines and taken to a stone cottage that was a collecting point for prisoners. Billy fell asleep and travelled forward in time from the cottage to his optometry office where he recently developed a habit of falling asleep during examinations. Sleep disorders such as failure to fall or stay asleep after a traumatic experience or a tendency to fall asleep

often when facing stressful situations, are common¹³. “He had fallen asleep at work before. It had been funny at first. Now Billy was starting to get worried about it, about his mind in general. He tried to remember how old he was, couldn't. He tried to remember what year it was. He couldn't remember that, either.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 56) At an early stage of the novel, Billy Pilgrim is presented as a person with a distorted perspective of time, who is struggling to keep up with the linear-structure of time, often getting lost due to his travels. While Billy was looking out the windows of his office, it was revealed that the date was “1967, which would make Billy Pilgrim forty-four years old. He asked himself this: 'Where have all the years gone?'" (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 57)

A siren going off - which was actually announcing high noon - was enough to scare Billy out of his wits and swing him back into the war through time travel. He was expecting World War Three to start any time; unable to overcome the war's effects on himself, anything that reminded him of the war could easily trigger another trip in time back into it.

Another example of the failure to grasp traumatic memories that re-surfaces as somatic sensations is Billy Pilgrim's new 'habit' of crying. The introduction of this habit of Billy's is accompanied by several identifications and associations in the third chapter of the novel. Following his capture by the German forces and the incident at his office, Billy Pilgrim found himself driving to a “Lions Club luncheon meeting.”(Vonnegut, 1991, p. 58) On his way to the club, Billy first passed through Illium's black ghetto which reminded him of “some of the towns he had seen in the war.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 59) A few moments later, he drove through the

¹³ Barbara A. Caldwell & Nancy Redeker (2005) SLEEP AND TRAUMA: AN OVERVIEW, *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 26:7, 721-738, DOI: [10.1080/01612840591008294](https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840591008294)

neighbourhood he grew up in which turned into “a scene of even greater desolation” due to urban renewal. “It looked like Dresden after it was fire-bombed – like the surface of the moon.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 59) Vonnegut's choice of words here implicates the violence against memory, such as the destruction of Dresden, a cultural landmark that was wiped away from the surface of the earth, or Billy's psyche that was destroyed by the magnitude of the destruction which left a seemingly blank slate behind. Incidentally, the subject of conversation at the Lions Club was the Vietnam War. The speaker at the club who was a major in the Marines was talking about how necessary it was to fight the communists, advocating “bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 60) After the luncheon meeting Billy Pilgrim headed home to take a nap under doctor's orders to “relieve a complaint” he had.

“Every so often, for no apparent reason, Billy Pilgrim would find himself weeping. Nobody had ever caught Billy doing it. Only the doctor knew. It was an extremely quiet thing Billy did, and not very moist.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 61) Although it was said the reason for Billy's condition was unknown, shortly after it was mentioned, Vonnegut takes us through Billy's time travel back to the war, in Luxembourg where “he was marching with a lot of other prisoners.” Only this time “it was a winter wind that was bringing tears to his eyes.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 63) Billy was spastic in time which meant that he had no control over his time travelling, yet it does not mean that his travels are arbitrary. Time travel functions as a medium that justifies the challenges to a conventional narrative form, in turn suggesting a rupture in the linear time frame. The juxtaposition of these events blurs the lines separating the past from the present, and from the future as well.

Vees-Gulani makes an interesting point about how the psychiatric

establishment failed to help Billy Pilgrim. When Billy checked himself in a mental hospital, the doctors agreed that “He *was* going crazy” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 100) yet they could “neither [provide] an accurate diagnosis nor [offer] any coping mechanism.” (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 179) The doctors overlooked, or disregarded the (highly) possible impact of the war on Billy and looked for the cause elsewhere, in Billy's childhood.

“They didn't think it had anything to do with the war. They were sure Billy was going to pieces because his father had thrown him into the deep end of the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool when he was a little boy, and had then taken him to the rim of the Grand Canyon.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 100)

As has been touched upon earlier, Billy's childhood 'traumas' complicate the situation. According to Vees-Gulani, the doctors jump to this conclusion by excluding the war from their diagnosis, thus failing to identify the real source of Billy's mental problems. In *Beyond Trauma* it is formulated that “The origin of the individual's problems is found in an external factor, something outside the person.” According to this formulation, “The scientific study of trauma uncovers the effects of atrocities, war, and losses on individuals and explains how and why their adjustment may be disturbed.” (Kleber & Figley & Gersons, 1995, p. 11) Vees-Gulani argues that psychiatry failed to consider the external effects listed above and fell into the “tendency to underestimate the role of trauma and to use individual vulnerability as the reason for people's suffering.” (Kleber & Figley & Gersons, 1995, p. 13) I would agree with her point about the war, but she seems to fail to consider Billy's childhood

traumas as external effects that could also impact Billy's mental health. Veas-Gulani uses the definitions in *Beyond Trauma* to support her claim, yet apparently she does not consider the incidents at the Y.M.C.A. swimming pool and the Grand Canyon as “serious life conditions that confront an individual with powerlessness, disruption, and death,” (Kleber & Figley & Gersons, 1995, p. 11), notions which are also characteristic of the sublime emotion. Billy Pilgrim's life is marked by the sublime from early on, and it is not an easy task to designate the origins of his traumas.

Perhaps the most striking manifestation of the resurfacing of trauma as a 'second shock' Billy Pilgrim undergoes happens at Billy and Valencia's eighteenth wedding anniversary party. As has been explained before, the enormous force of the traumatic 'event' prevents the articulation of the 'affect' through negation of testimony by the psychic apparatus. The possible linkages are ruptured before they could be realized in the process of *primary repression*. Nevertheless, the unconscious affect makes itself felt through an unidentifiable 'presence' that signals there is “something that has never been presented” to quote Lyotard again, and it will eventually make itself known as an aftershock in the form of a “feeling, fear, anxiety, feeling of a threatening excess whose motive is obviously not in the present context.” (Lyotard, 1997, p. 13)

In this case, what triggered a response from Billy was a barbershop quartet of optometrists called “The Febs,” singing “That Old Gang of Mine.” For no apparent reason, “Billy Pilgrim found himself upset by the song and the occasion... Billy had powerful psychosomatic responses to the changing chords. His mouth filled with the taste of lemonade, and his face became grotesque, as though he really were being stretched on the torture engine called the *rack*.” (Vonnegut, 1991, pp. 172-3) The scene had quite an impact on Billy, who had no idea what was actually going on. “He

had supposed for years that he had no secrets from himself. Here was proof that he had a great big secret somewhere inside, and he could not imagine what it was.”

(Vonnegut, 1991, p. 173) The initial shock that did not leave any trace behind was emerging as a result of a later association in Billy's mind as an aftershock, following the two-fold process formulated by Freud, adopted by Lyotard. Valencia's reaction to Billy here is quite revealing in terms of how Vonnegut treats the subject of trauma. She observed “You looked as though you'd seen a *ghost*,” to which Billy simply answered “no.” It could be argued that in fact, Billy did come face to face with a ghost, not in the conventional sense but a ghost of a memory that up until that point remained hidden.

Dylan Sawyer defines the *differend* as “a ghost that *haunts*, capable – like the apparition of Hamlet's father – of instigating action within houses of power that once sought to inflict (ultimate) exile.” (Sawyer, 2014, p. 39) Later he explains “to be haunted is to be reminded of something at the edge of memory, of something perhaps not otherwise permitted by reason or recollection” to reveal itself within consciousness. (Sawyer, 2014, p. 182) Billy's ghost, or his *differend* finally reveals itself to Billy in the form of an emotional breakdown.

When the barbershop quartet sang again a few moments later, “Billy was emotionally racked again.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 175) There was no question as to the source of his condition. “The experience was *definitely* associated with those four men and not what they sang.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 176) What follows is a detailed description of the bombing of Dresden through the memories of Billy Pilgrim for the first time in the novel. Interestingly, this time Billy did not travel back in time, instead he remembered the events that caused the association “shimmeringly.” I agree with Veas-Gulani's take that “[t]he Dresden bombings and their effect are too painful to

relive and at first even too frightening to remember. Thus the strong physical and psychological reaction to the barbershop quartet, which even disturbs Billy's usually normal outward appearance, shows how deeply Billy has buried his Dresden memories." (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 178) He remembered the explosions booming above destroying the city while the prisoners were safe in the meat locker along with their four German guards. He remembered at first "Dresden was one big flame" and then "[it] was like the moon" after the bombing had ceased, killing everybody else in the neighbourhood. "So it goes."

When it was finally safe to leave their shelter, the American prisoners and their four German guards came out of the slaughterhouse only to face the complete destruction of Dresden. Vonnegut's description of the German guards' reaction to what they had just seen immediately brings to mind the 'speechless terror' that has been mentioned earlier, as a response to traumatic events:

"The guards drew together instinctively, rolled their eyes. They experimented with one expression and then another, said nothing, though their mouths were often open. They looked like a silent film of a barbershop quartet." (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 178)

The sight of the catastrophe crippled their linguistic abilities, rendering them completely unable to first process and then to articulate the event in its totality. Trauma studies coincide with the theory of the sublime in this particular aspect. The event defies the faculty of presentation's abilities to represent, only to present the event through allusions signalling an existing 'presence', in this case psychosomatic reactions. Through these reactions the origins of trauma can be identified. The

differend in this case is constituted by the inability to represent the traumatic event. What the aesthetic of the sublime offers is alleviation of pain by looking for an alternative way to present the traumatic experiences, in turn dealing with the differend by finding new idioms to represent it.

Lyotard argues that the role of literature is to pay attention to the screeching call mentioned earlier and pay its dues. He acknowledges the impossibility of such a task, yet he adamantly puts it as the role of literature and philosophy to try find a way to address it. At first to recognize the impossible and, then, to try to find a way to deal with it. For Lyotard achieving this is not the main goal; the main goal, instead, is in the effort on the path leading to it. The phrase presenting the un-presentable already poses questions about the futility of the task in hand. This does not necessarily have to discourage us from trying anyway.

The therapeutic effects of finishing his book about Dresden can be observed in the way Vonnegut viewed the change in his approach to writing:

“I felt after I finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* that I didn't have to write at all anymore if I didn't want to. It was the end of some sort of career. I don't know why, exactly. I suppose that flowers, when they're through blooming, have some sort of awareness of some purpose having been served. Flowers didn't ask to be flowers and I didn't ask to be me. At the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, I had the feeling that I had produced this blossom. So I had a shutting-off feeling ... that I had done what I was supposed to do and everything was OK. And that was the end of it. I could figure out my missions for myself after that.” (Allen, 1988, p. 107)

Vees-Gulani comments on Vonnegut's take by pointing out that “telling the story does not mean that the trauma can then be forgotten ... the Dresden experience does not lose its important position in Vonnegut's life after he completes the novel; but it can now be adequately integrated into the author's past.” (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 182) She also recognizes the possibility of “further creative exploration” in the public dimension created by Kurt Vonnegut's testimony, which will “draw attention to something that we often prefer to suppress and deny although it is important to remember, namely, the crippling nature of war and the terrible toll that modern warfare extracts from those forced to live through it.” (Vees-Gulani, 2003, p. 183)

Keeping this in mind, Vonnegut's novel is not just about an atrocity or about how to present the topic, but one of the main themes of the novel is the question of representation itself. Not only do we come to realize Vonnegut's struggle with the impossible task at hand of presenting something virtually un-presentable; the issue of literary representation is also dealt with in the general framework of Vonnegut's work. This theme of representation pops-up throughout the novel at various points.

Having studied Kurt Vonnegut “the public figure”, “the literary figure” and “the literary art” of Vonnegut covering the period between 1949 and 1969, Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer developed a thesis stating that “*Slaughterhouse-Five* constituted a resolution of sorts to themes and techniques developing throughout his previous work.” (Klinkowitz & Somer, 1973, p. 14) As revealed by Vonnegut himself in the opening chapter of the novel, he had always been working on his “book on Dresden” all those years. He was struggling to unearth the forgotten part of his memory with the help of his artistic vision.

Klinkowitz suggests based on John Somer's conclusion that “the novels from 1952 to 1969 are not only of interest in their own right, but also dramatize the growth

of Vonnegut's powerful and tormented imagination, his maturing grasp of the Dresden experience, and his technical innovations necessary for its artistic manifestation.”

(Klinkowitz & Somer, 1973, 25) They believe the matter of Dresden was always present in his early novels and had been a drastic influence on “the world picture for *Player Piano*, the psychological barrier for *The Sirens of Titan*, the backdrop for *Mother Night*, the informing principle for *Cat's Cradle*, the climax for *God Bless You*, *Mr Rosewater*, and finally the essence for *Slaughterhouse-Five*.” (Klinkowitz & Somer, 1973, p. 25)

Since his return from the war, writing about the bombing of Dresden was on Vonnegut's mind. He thought it would be relatively easy just to report what he had seen. And he also thought the subject was big enough to draw the public's attention. What he had not realized at the time was that the subject was too big for him to just write about it. However, the process of writing his book on Dresden turned out to be painstakingly slow. It took him many years to finally be able to finish, and yet it still seemed to him as something “jumbled and jangled.”

The main reason for that was his memories about Dresden failed him greatly. As noted above, the event seemed to have disappeared from his mind. Not being able to remember, Vonnegut sought help from his war buddy O'Hare in order to jolt his memory. “Listen-” he said, “I'm writing this book about Dresden. I'd like some help remembering stuff. I wonder if I could come down and see you, and we could drink and talk and remember.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 4) As it turned out, O'Hare was in quite a similar situation to Vonnegut's. Although O'Hare reluctantly accepted to meet with Vonnegut, part of his memories about the war were as useless as Vonnegut's. The two old war buddies spent the night circling around the subject without coming up with anything tangible. As a result, Vonnegut had to employ an alternative approach to the

subject, which denied him the possibility of a realistic representation of it. He could not “deal with the subject on a purely realistic level” because:

“...the book was largely a found object. It was what was in my head, and I was able to get it out, but one of the characteristics about this object was that there was a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place, because I don't remember. And I looked up several of my war buddies and they didn't remember, either. They didn't want to talk about it. There was a complete forgetting of what it was like. There were all kinds of information surrounding the event, but as far as my memory bank was concerned, the center had been pulled right out of the story. There was nothing up there to be recovered – or in the heads of my friends either.” (Allen, 1988, p. 94)

As has been mentioned before, there is a contradiction between the need to testify and the impossibility of testimony, manifesting itself in the work of an artist. In Lyotardian perspective, the difficulty Vonnegut faced while trying to write about what is 'forgotten' appears to be how to preserve the singularity of the event while heeding the call of the *differend*, without doing injustice to the event and its victims. In his study on Holocaust writing, Edward James Young observes the same kind of obstacles in the way of representation:

“It is almost as if violent events – perceived as aberrations or ruptures in the cultural continuum – demand their retelling, their narration, back into traditions and structures they would otherwise defy. For upon

entering narrative, violent events necessarily reenter the continuum, are totalized by it, and thus seem to lose their “violent” quality.

Inasmuch as violence is “resolved” in narrative, the violent event seems also to lose its particularity – its facthood – once it is written. In an ironic way, the violent event can exist as such (and thus as an inspiration to factual narrative, it seems) only as long as it appears to stand outside of the continuum, where it remains apparently unmediated, unframed, and unassimilated. For once written, events assume the mantle of coherence that narrative necessarily imposes on them, and the trauma of their unassimilability is relieved.” (Young, 1988, pp. 15-6)

Lyotard himself acknowledges the problems posed by testimony. “Attested,” he says, “suffering and the untameable are as if already destroyed. I mean that in witnessing, one also exterminates. The witness is a traitor.” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 204) Therefore, he proposes that the artist takes it upon himself to find alternative ways of presentation, through experimentation to avoid the risk of transforming the event, in this case the bombing of Dresden into a mere representation of just another atrocity in the history of mankind. Vonnegut's position here is highly precarious since he was not only trying to produce a historiographic piece of literature, but he was actually a witness to the massacre. With a simple phrase he acknowledged the fact that “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre.” Even the most arduous attempt is bound to fail (to some point) to adequately represent the atrocity. The aesthetic of the beautiful betrays the 'immemorial' by undermining the unrepresentable nature of what is 'forgotten'.

Let's take for example, the issue with the new project of building a Holocaust memorial in the UK. In an interview with The Guardian, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, a 95 year-old survivor and a cello player who “only [survived] because a cello player was needed for the women's orchestra, a group that had to play marches for the camp's enslaved labourers and concerts for the SS,”¹⁴ strongly objects to the project on various different grounds, and does not really believe a memorial could do justice to the memory and the legacy of the victims. “Nothing can really come anywhere near what actually happened, you know.”

Vonnegut's intention to write a different kind of war novel is established early in the book. His visit apparently infuriated his war buddy O'Hare's wife, Mary, who believed Vonnegut would write a book which would glorify and glamorize the war, with parts to be played by “Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men.” As a result, “war will look just wonderful, so we'll have a lot more of them.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 14) Upon discovering Mary's frustrations, Vonnegut reassured her the novel would be nothing of the sort. On the contrary, Vonnegut showed that the war was actually fought mostly by 'babies', helpless little adolescents. Billy Pilgrim with his ridiculous features and outfits becomes an extreme parody of typical war heroes. Over time, Billy accumulated different pieces of clothing in lieu of a uniform which he lacked terribly that would transform him into a 'clown'. “He had silver boots now, and a muff, and a piece of azure curtain which he wore like a toga.” (Vonnegut, 1991, p. 147) Billy's look inspired indignation even in German people. So much so that one civilian confronted Billy on his appearance: “Did you expect us to *laugh*? ... You thought we would

¹⁴<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/dec/27/holocaust-survivor-anita-lasker-wallfisch-uk-holocaust-memorial-learning-centre>

enjoy being *mocked*? ... And do you feel *proud* to represent America as you do?"

(Vonnegut, 1991, pp. 151-2)

Thus, as has been discussed earlier, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the result of Vonnegut's struggling for many years to write about his own experience during World War II. He admits this book cost him a lot of time, money and anxiety for years. His war memories, although absent from his mind, kept gnawing at him to come out. He felt obliged to write about the "greatest massacre in European history" not only for the sake of making lots of money and earning fame, but also for the simple fact that almost nobody in the United States had even heard about the bombing back then.

It appears Vonnegut felt obligated toward humanity as well. The act of writing becomes a revolutionary attempt at creating awareness of the brutal destruction of humanity all over the globe. An impersonal tone rings throughout the whole novel in order to reinforce a general stance against war altogether. Although Vonnegut always believed he fought for a just cause in a just war, he later announced himself to be a pacifist on various occasions. He wrote that he had wanted to "record somewhere, for a long time, something easily forgotten: my generation was raised to be pacifistic, but it fought well in a war it felt just." ¹⁵

He was disillusioned especially with his own government and the ideals they were ostensibly fighting for after he witnessed the total annihilation of Dresden, along with the hopes of technology to help the human race advance. On many occasions he brings up what his war buddy O'Hare answered him after he asked what he had learned from World War II. His answer was "I'll never believe in my government again." And his scepticism and frustration toward technology permeates his oeuvre.

¹⁵Esquire - Times Change, Kurt Vonnegut p60

The bombing of Dresden was a moment of rupture in Vonnegut's life. It transformed him by destroying the fabric of reality he was familiar with so far. He was brought up with the ideals of a family line of “free thinkers” that championed rationality over religious belief and superstition. His brother was a successful scientist, his father a frustrated architect who lost his business during the Great Depression. They decided that he would pursue a scientific career like his brother.

As has been noted, however, after the war, he lost faith in scientific advancement. The seemingly inevitable result of such advances was a more efficient and thorough destruction of humanity. He underwent a Lyotardian break with the narrative of the emancipation of humanity through scientific advancements and technology:

“Scientific truth was going to make us *so* happy and comfortable. What actually happened when I was twenty-one was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima. We killed everybody there. And I had just come home from being a prisoner of war in Dresden, which I'd seen burned to the ground. And the world was just then learning how ghastly the German extermination camps had been. So I had a heart-to-heart talk with myself. “Hey, Corporal Vonnegut,' I said to myself, 'maybe you were wrong to be an optimist, Maybe pessimism is the thing;' I have been a consistent pessimist ever since, with a few exceptions.”¹⁶

¹⁶Kurt Vonnegut Jr, 'Up Is Better than Down.' *Vogue*, August 1, 1970, p. 144.

Lyotard says the “thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are ruled by the Idea of emancipation of humanity” which aims for the liberation of humanity as a whole through “the progress of the sciences, technologies, the arts, and political freedoms ,... from ignorance, poverty, backwardness, despotism.” It was believed that emancipation would cause the masses to reach a higher state of happiness and freedom through education and take control of their own lives in a decided manner. Its vision encompassed all continents and promised ideals that were seemingly “moving toward a humanity transparent to itself, toward a world citizenry.” (Lyotard, 1992, p. 81)

Yet the belief in emancipation through enlightenment declined as these ideals had failed to live up to such great expectations according to Lyotard. Although the political class kept up the appearance of commitment to these ideals in their discourse and programme, “it does not seem able to heal the wounds inflicted on the 'modern' ideal over some two centuries of history.” (Lyotard, 1992, p. 82) The failure he believes was not the result of “a lack of progress”. For Lyotard the emerging “possibility of total war, totalitarianisms, the growing gap between the wealth of the North and the impoverished South, unemployment and the 'new poor', general deculturation and the crisis in education (in the transmission of knowledge), and the isolation of the artistic avant-gardes” arose from “technoscientific, artistic, economic, political” development. (Lyotard, 1992, p. 82) Instead of delivering the promises made to improve the well-being of citizens of the world, “technoscientific development has become a means of deepening the malaise rather than allaying it.” (Lyotard, 1992, p. 78)

4. CAT'S CRADLE AND "INCREDULITY TOWARD METANARRATIVES"

Published in 1963, Kurt Vonnegut's fourth novel *Cat's Cradle* could be seen as a turning point in his writing career. The novel launched him on his way into superstardom especially on university campuses where he became one of the favourite writers of the youth of the time. Written during the height of the Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis, the novel explores "the dangers of irresponsible scientific advancement undertaken without adequate concern for the human costs that technological progress may wreak." (Farrell, 2008, p. 81) Vonnegut himself had witnessed first-hand the use of technologically sophisticated methods of destruction in World War 2 in the Allies' bombing of Dresden. More significantly, the use of the atomic bomb and the consequent threat of nuclear apocalypse inspired many of his novels, including *Cat's Cradle*. To oppose the scientific mode of thought that believes to have all the answers to humanity's woes, Vonnegut invents a religion called Bokkonism in the novel that subverts the meaning of truth by completely rejecting any claim to it. Science and religion provide different perspectives that constitute what Lyotard calls 'metanarratives', systems that offer an understanding of the world according to their own sets of rules. Lyotard believes metanarratives lost their credibility in an age he calls 'postmodern' through various rupture points in history and can no longer lay claim to valid solutions to the human condition. Lyotard proposes a new mode of expression based on dissensus, characterised by innovation and experimentation in favour of small narratives that face the threat of being silenced by the hegemony of mainstream metanarratives. Following Lyotard's ideas on the postmodern aesthetics of the sublime from the preceding chapter, this chapter will introduce his concept of metanarratives, and then explore the ways Kurt Vonnegut handles the religious and scientific metanarratives in *Cat's Cradle*.

The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge is regarded as one of the seminal texts on postmodernity and postmodern studies. The object of Lyotard's study "is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies." (Lyotard, 1984, xxiii) For Lyotard, "the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age." (Lyotard, 1984, p. 3) Departing from the idea that "scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse," (Lyotard, 1984, p. 3) he analyses the status of knowledge that has been turned into a commodity "in a knowledge-driven economy in which technological innovation and the ability to access and manipulate ideas rapidly is a key means of surviving." (Malpas, 2005b, p. 36)

Lyotard's analysis is based on the idea that knowledge constitutes different narratives that help make sense of the world, on any level, through stories that strive to bring together a meaningful composition. Narratives can appear in very different forms and genres such as historical, scientific, literary, political, psychological or even casually personal ways. All narratives operate according to their own distinct sets of rules that are not translatable to other genres. As briefly mentioned earlier in the first chapter, "Lyotard calls the sets of rules that determine the legitimacy of particular forms of narrative 'metanarratives', and argues that these metanarratives provide criteria that allow one to judge which ideas and statements are legitimate, true and ethical for each different form of narrative." (Malpas, 2005b, p. 37)

Lyotard characterizes what he calls the *postmodern* era as incredulity toward metanarratives. (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv) What Lyotard means by this, Simon Malpas explains, is that "the criteria that organise knowledge, sort the legitimate from the illegitimate in each discipline and guide the development of thought are no longer as persuasive as they were when they formed a part of a modern grand narrative."

(Malpas, 2005b, p. 38) With the absence of pre-established criteria to determine the legitimacy of any given narrative, the postmodern era brings with it a “crisis of narratives.” This crisis brings with it a crisis of representation. It is no longer possible to attribute to any kind of totalizing discourse the qualities to provide a complete and accurate view of the world, be it scientific, economic or religious. (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiii) For Bill Readings:

“That crisis means that we can no longer tell a new story (begin another modernity); it means that our understanding of the place of narrative is itself in crisis because we no longer believe in metanarratives. Meta- or grand narratives provide accounts of how the field of narratives might be organized and returned to a centre, origin, or meaning, Grand narratives organize and legitimate the narratives of culture by positing an origin (God) or a telos (universal emancipation) that gives the rule to narratives whilst itself escaping the condition of narration.” (Readings, 2006, p. 48)

Lyotard sees grand narratives as the governing idea behind modernity, which is “not an era in thought, but rather a mode of thought, of utterances, of sensibility.” (Lyotard, 1998, p. 314) Lyotard claims “[t]he thought and action of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are governed by an Idea [in its Kantian sense] ... the idea of emancipation.” (Lyotard, 1998, p. 315) A grand narrative, Bill Readings briefly explains, “claims to be the story that can reveal the meaning of all stories, be it the weakness or the progress of mankind. Its metanarrative status comes from the fact that it talks about the many narratives of culture so as to reveal the singular truth inherent

in them.” (Readings, 2006, p. 47) These narratives aim to organize moments in history towards a higher purpose, working to reveal the meaning constituted by the progress of history. In general terms, “Modernity's metanarrative is that of a project which works through a rupture with the past that will perform the emancipation of a universal subject of history.” (Readings, 2006, p. 48) Modernity is simply defined by the reliance on grand narratives that “construct accounts of human society and progress,” by offering systematic explanations about the way the world works and how human beings are positioned within the grand scheme of historical progress. (Malpas, 2005b, p. 37) These grand narratives are built upon products of the enlightenment such as the universalist values of emancipation and progress. While defining the concept of enlightenment with its ambitious aims of liberation for all humanity through rational thought, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize the breakdown of this program: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 1)

Thus, according to Robert T. Tally Jr. “...these Frankfurt School critics famously turn conventional wisdom on its head, suggesting that the very forces of humanistic progress led to the atrocities lately observed. That is, they reasoned, it wasn't that barbarism had briefly triumphed over civilization, but that civilization itself contained such elements of barbarism.” (Tally Jr, 2011, p. 54)

It is also worthwhile tracing the development of Horkheimer's approach to science from his earlier writings. Paul Connerton notes that he had believed “the humane function of science depended on its humane application. The scientific mode of thought and its products are neither humane nor inhumane.” (Connerton, 1980, p.

62) His measure for the outcome of such technologies had depended on their practical uses. The emergence of fascism which was seen as “a violent episode in the transition to corporate capitalism,” the atrocities of the concentration camps and the destruction waged by the World War 2, transformed his earlier position which can be explained as “revulsion against capitalist oppression and against the denial of that oppression by the prevailing ideology,” into “a traumatic experience,” says Paul Connerton:

“as if mankind as a whole, with the aid of its gigantic technological apparatus, were inexorably heading towards an inferno – a sado-masochistic vision of history which was in itself no novelty, but re-echoed the fascination exerted by the nihilistic potential of technology evident among a number of thinkers in the German language-area during the first quarter of [20th] century.” (Connerton, 1980, p. 61)

Therefore Horkheimer's belief in the emancipatory powers of science and technology crumbles into disillusionment by recognising “[t]he fact that rational control over nature which has grown with the European philosophical and technological achievement has produced such anti-human results [is not] the consequence of historically contingent factors, but as necessarily resulting from that achievement itself.” (Connerton, 1980, p. 62)

Considering the problems of the enlightenment, Tally draws attention to the similarities between the ideas of the Frankfurt School and some of the subject matter Vonnegut engaged in his novels throughout his career. He claims that “Vonnegut spent much of his time meditating on the dialectic of enlightenment, and Vonnegut’s conclusions are usually directly in line with Adorno’s: regardless of intent, the

mastery of the world—in terms of knowledge or power, which after Francis Bacon's New Organon we recognize as the same thing—inevitably destroys the world.” (Tally Jr, 2011, pp. 54-5)

Coming back to the grand narratives as the driving force behind the project of modernity, Lyotard's analysis enables him to define the 'postmodern condition' in terms of the emergence of little narratives (*petits récits*) against grand narratives which, as has been suggested, are going through a crisis of legitimation. His critique of the postmodern stems from the failure of the project of modernity, in other words, the failure of grand narratives. He says “We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives – we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse,” and formulates that “the little narrative [*petit récit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 60) Succinctly explained by Bill Readings:

“Each little narrative does not aim to tell *the* story, to put an end to narrative; rather a little narrative evokes new stories by the manner in which in its turn it has displaced preceding narratives in telling *a* story. Thus, Lyotard's claim is not so much that 'everything is narrative' as that a story is not *the* story, that there can be no narrative to put an end to narratives.” (Readings, 2006, p. 51)

For Lyotard the main characteristic of the postmodern is the proliferation and opposition of little narratives to grand narratives or metanarratives. Therefore the postmodern appears “as a loss of faith in progress and a splintering of the universal

projects of speculation and emancipation into a vast field of competing projects and narratives.” (Malpas, 2005b, p. 43) In his critique, Lyotard focuses on two aspects of modernity.

Firstly he focuses on the 'Speculative Grand Narrative' that finds its roots in the German philosophical tradition of the early 19th century, most importantly Hegel's 'speculative dialectic', which “charts progress through the development of knowledge as individual ideas and discoveries build towards a systematic whole that reveals the truth of human existence under the auspices of a particular metanarrative ... a grand unified theory in which our place in the universe will be understood.” (Malpas, 2005b, p. 37-8) There is nothing outside of the grand narrative of speculation, each narrative is subsumed under a totalizing system and “the truth or falsity of any statement or language game is determined by its relation to the whole of knowledge.” (Malpas, 2005a 26)

And second, the 'Grand Narrative of Emancipation', in which human freedom is the focal point. It aims to liberate humanity through knowledge and development from oppression, poverty, savagery and suffering. Unlike the 'Speculative Grand Narrative', “knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 36) As explained by Simon Malpas, the grand narrative of emancipation “sees the development of knowledge as driving human freedom as it emancipates humanity from mysticism and dogma through education... the development of knowledge is seen as a tool to improve the human condition, help people to understand their place in the world and emancipate them from prejudice, oppression and ignorance.” (Malpas, 2005b, p. 38)

Although there are fundamental differences between them, in both grand narratives discussed above, “all the different areas of knowledge are brought together to achieve a goal that is projected forward into the future as being the answer to the problems facing society. Under a grand narrative, all the social institutions such as law, education and technology combine to strive for a common goal for all humanity: absolute knowledge or universal emancipation,” Simon Malpas explains. (Malpas, 2005a, p. 27)

There can be different grand narratives with their own different ways of approaching the idea of emancipation. Lyotard provides some examples such as:

“[A] Christian narrative of emancipation in which Adam's sin is redeemed through love; *Aufklärer* (enlightenment) narrative of emancipation from ignorance and servitude thanks to knowledge and egalitarianism; the speculative narrative of the realization of the universal idea through the dialectic of the concrete; the Marxist narrative of emancipation from exploitation and alienation through the socialization of labour; the capitalist narrative of emancipation from poverty through technical and industrial development.” (Lyotard, 1998, p. 315)

These grand narratives can coexist or even conflict with one another; nevertheless their ultimate goal is the same: to design and offer a system promising liberty.

Lyotard provides a series of events that took place in the 20th century which eventually led to disillusionment with the grand narratives of emancipation. The

atrocities of Auschwitz refute the speculative doctrine that “All that is real is rational... At least that crime, which was real, was not rational.” The events of 'Berlin 1953, Budapest 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980' refute the doctrine of historical materialism that “all that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian... the workers rise up against the Party.” 'May 1968' refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism that “all that is democratic exists through and for the people, and vice versa.” 'The crises of 1911 and 1929' refute the doctrine of economic liberalism that claims “if left to themselves, the laws of supply and demand will result in universal prosperity, and vice versa. And 'the 1974-9 crisis' refutes the post-Keynesian adjustments that have been made to that doctrine.” (Lyotard, 1998, p. 318)

Lyotard traces the loss of credibility of grand narratives through these events, “regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 37). He jokingly admits to the temptation of “[lending] credence to the great narrative of the decline of great narratives”, which he argues was already there “in the very beginnings of Western thought” dating back to Hesiod and Plato. (Lyotard, 1998, p. 318) He argues that “the project of modernity (the realization of universality) has not been forsaken or forgotten but destroyed, 'liquidated'” and he regards 'Auschwitz' to be the ultimate symbol “for the tragic 'incompletion' of modernity.” (Lyotard, 1992, p. 18) As for contemporary postindustrial society and postmodern culture, universal goals for humanity were set aside for 'efficiency' and 'profitability'. In this context, Simon Malpas explains that “the aim of research and development is to make production and consumption cheaper and quicker so as to maximise the potential for profit” under capitalist system. (Malpas, 2005a, p. 28)

In a postmodern age where conventional forms of narratives are no longer credible, Lyotard advocates against totalizing metanarratives that aim to supply

reality, in favour of celebrating differences and inventing allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81) As has been discussed in an earlier chapter, Lyotard associates postmodern art with the aesthetic of the sublime which is characterised by experimentation and innovation in its effort to find a way to present the unrepresentable. For Lyotard recognizes the disruptive potential of art; the cultural change he envisions is possible through these features of the postmodern. As explained by Simon Malpas:

“Lyotard adopts the idea of the sublime to describe the way in which art or literature can disrupt established language games and ways of representing the world. Modern art, he argues, has the capacity to present the fact that the unrepresentable exists: that there are things that are impossible to present in available language games, voices that are silenced in culture, ideas that cannot be formulated in rational communication.” (Malpas, 2005a, p. 47)

Similarly to Malpas' views, Bill Readings argues that “The aesthetic of the sublime and of the experimental that Lyotard sketches in *The Postmodern Condition* and attendant articles is precisely an attempt to situate art as the field of a resistance to metalanguages.” (Readings, 2006, p. 54) This cultural change does not aim to bring about new truths, or in other terms institute new metalanguages. On the contrary, its goal is to “*displace the rule of truth*” by championing dissensus through (often) competing ideas (Readings, 2006, p. 54) and “to testify to an event to which no truth can be assigned, that cannot be made the object of a conceptual representation.” (Readings, 2006, p. 55)

Kurt Vonnegut's body of work can be taken as an example of the experimentation and innovation advocated by Lyotard. "Especially since *Cat's Cradle*," says John Tomedi, "it has been clear that Vonnegut will embrace experimental forms of storytelling to make his point" and he suggests "[t]he convoluted chronology of *Slaughterhouse-Five*" for example, "is symptomatic of Vonnegut's view that old plots [such as the Judeo-Christian Bible's story of fall and redemption] have failed humanity." (Tomedi, 2004, pp. 64-5) *Cat's Cradle* on the other hand deals directly with the issue of how certain narratives of emancipation lead to cataclysmic results. Since it has become impossible to assume a grand scheme of things that can explain the world with the breakdown of metanarratives, Vonnegut strives to depict the ways in which some of these narratives had failed by drawing comparisons with religious and scientific entities through the use of new modes of expressions.

Vonnegut's anthropological studies at Cornell had a big influence on his worldview regarding different cultures and belief systems. "We weren't allowed to find one culture superior to any other," (Allen, 1988, p. 181) he says in an interview, which led to "a sense of cultural relativism, accepting all cultures and their belief system as equally valid." (Tomedi, 2004, p. 39) In addition to that, "It confirmed [his] atheism" by showing and studying religions as "the Rube Goldberg inventions [he]'d always thought they were," (Allen, 1988, p. 181) referring to a famous cartoonist whose works depicted very complicated machines doing very simple tasks. These, in turn, appeared in Vonnegut's work as different invented religious systems such as 'The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent' in *The Sirens of the Titan*, 'The Church of Jesus Christ the Kidnapped' in *Slapstick* and 'Bokononism' in *Cat's Cradle*.

Tomedi refers to James Whitlark's ideas¹⁷ on the anthropological aspects of Vonnegut's work which enable the juxtaposition of patterns from different cultures against an alternative society with a science fictional background. By doing so, Vonnegut can make use of old stories to make "new statements on society."

In *Palm Sunday*, Vonnegut sketches out some graphs he prepared for his Masters dissertation at the University of Chicago. "The fundamental idea," Vonnegut explains "is that stories have shapes which can be drawn on graph paper, and that the shape of a given society's stories is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads." (Vonnegut, 2006, p. 285) Vonnegut tries to capture in those graphs basic representation of various popular stories, creation myths and so on. In one of the graphs, Vonnegut plots the most famous story of Western civilization, "Cinderella," in which the fortunes of a young girl who was in a wretched place in life increase greatly step by step, fall down again, only to be redeemed at the end. The University of course rejected Vonnegut's proposition because "it was so simple and looked like too much fun." (Vonnegut, 2006, p. 285) Nevertheless, at some point Vonnegut came to a realization that "those steps at the beginning look like the creation myth of virtually every society on earth. And then I saw that the stroke of midnight looked exactly like the unique creation myth in the Old Testament. And then I saw that the rise to bliss at the end was identical with the expectation of redemption as expressed in primitive Christianity." (Vonnegut, 2006, p. 288)

Tomedi compares the structure of *Cat's Cradle* to the plot of the Cinderella story, without the redemption that comes at the end. In this form, *Cat's Cradle* actually resembles the creation myth in the Old Testament with the 'Biblical fall'. For

¹⁷ Whitlark, J. Vonnegut's Anthropology Thesis. Literature and Anthropology. P. Dennis and W. Aycock. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1989

Tomedi, the “new statement” Vonnegut makes “is that belief systems of any kind are contrivances, and that nothing is capable of bringing about salvation.” Therefore, the novel “denies the possibility of any redemption, Christian, Bokononist, or otherwise.” (Tomedi, 2004, p. 40)

Cat's Cradle opens with the narrator saying “Call me Jonah,” mimicking the famous opening lines of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and also carries with it strong religious connotations. “Like *Moby Dick*”, says Robert Tally, “*Cat's Cradle* explores the apocalyptic ends to which science, madness, and even hearty fellow-feeling can lead.” (Tally Jr, 2011, p. 55) The novel is also similar in structure to Melville's, composed of numerous little chapters, although not even close to it in bulk. The name Jonah brings to mind the Prophet Jonah, who is the central figure of the Book of Jonah, deployed by God to journey to the city of Nineveh and deliver to its people the message of impending divine retribution upon them. Instead of following God's orders, Jonah tries to sail away but ends up being swallowed by a giant fish as punishment. He is only freed after he decides to go to Nineveh and follow through God's command, and the fish vomits him out, upon which he prophesies the overthrow of the city in 40 days. The whole city repents, which leads God to spare it from his wrath.

Jonah, the narrator of the novel, a freelance writer who sets out to write a “factual” book called *The Day the World Ended*, about the day the atomic bomb was dropped and “what important Americans had done on [that] day,” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 1) ends up writing about a disaster far worse than Hiroshima. He becomes a pseudo-prophet of a mock religion, Bokononism, telling (or writing) the tale of the great destruction of the entire world by a substance called *ice-nine* and “a history of human stupidity.” He reveals that he intended his book to be “a Christian book” since he was

a Christian when he first started out, but he admits “[He is] a Bokononist now” which suggests his book is a part of the Bokononist faith, and further implies it is another part of *The Books of Bokonon*.

Jonah's motives for writing appear later in the novel when he explains that he records these events following Bokonon's advice to “write it all down,” for Bokonon asks: “Without accurate records of the past, how can men and women be expected to avoid making serious mistakes in the future?” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 170). This, then, imparts a great sense of irony and futility, considering the history of mankind.

Bokononism is the religion of the inhabitants of a fictional island called San Lorenzo, invented by and named after Lionel Boyd Johnson and Johnson, pronounced in the extraordinary dialect of English as 'Bokonon'.. After being shipwrecked together with a marine deserter called Earl McCabe on the poverty-stricken island of San Lorenzo, the two men decided to take control and build a utopian country, without facing any opposition. McCabe took on the role of regulating laws and the economy while Johnson invented a new religion. In order to make it more appealing to the masses, they decided to outlaw Bokononism. Eventually, McCabe became the island's new governor, and Johnson, or Bokonon, became the outlawed and elusive figure of reverence. The utopian state they envisioned together based on the ideals of progress and development had failed to provide any sort of improvement to the wretched conditions of life, only the island's religion stood as the last bastion of hope with its ever growing scripture, keeping the people of San Lorenzo busy from their miserable lives. In the words of Julian Castle, an American sugar millionaire who founded the only hospital on San Lorenzo at the age of 40 after years of decadent and wasteful living:

“McCabe and Bokonon did not succeed in raising what is generally thought of as the standard of living ... The truth was that life was as short and brutish and mean as ever.’

‘But people didn’t have to pay as much attention to the awful truth. As the living legend of the cruel tyrant in the city and the gentle holy man in the jungle grew, so, too, did the happiness of the people grow. They were all employed full time as actors in a play they understood, that any human being anywhere could understand and applaud.’”

(Vonnegut, 2011, p. 124)

The faith of Bokononism is based on the essential proposition that is contained in the first sentence of *The Books of Bokonon*: “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies,” which is mirrored by the preface of *Cat's Cradle* which goes: “Nothing in this book is true,” and further reinforced by a quotation from *The Books of Bokonon*: “Live by the *foma* that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.” (1 : 5) ‘Foma’ meaning ‘harmless untruths’, Bokononism strikes the eye as a system that is entirely built upon lies, paradoxically recognising “the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it.”

(Vonnegut, 2011, p. 203)

Linda Hutcheon defends parodic postmodern representation against “[t]he prevailing interpretation that postmodernism offers a value-free, decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms” and argues that “postmodernist parody is a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations.” (Hutcheon, 2001, p. 94)

Bokononism with its features and its function appears as a parody of a

conventional idea of religion. It is an eclectic mixture of calypso style psalms, subverted versions of the Biblical stories and a combination of various religious practices and, of course, the not-so-optimistic vision of its inventor, Bokonon. Its scripture is fluid and freely subjected to change, its theory 'Dynamic Tension' is based on the ideas of a bodybuilder on how to build muscles.

“It was the belief of Charles Atlas that muscles could be built without bar bells or spring exercises, could be built by simply pitting one set of muscles against another.

It was the belief of Bokonon that good societies could be built only by pitting good against evil, and by keeping the tension between the two high at all times.” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 73)

As such Bokononism can be viewed as more of a postmodern artwork than a religion, which makes Bokonon the artist, and under its practice life itself becomes a work of art.

Unlike other religious belief systems, Bokononism subverts the claim to 'Truth' and self-reflexively denies itself the status of a 'metanarrative'. In this respect, Vonnegut's invented religion can be viewed as a critique of sense-making systems of the world that Lyotard designates as 'metanarratives'. Bokononism does not offer any solutions, does not pretend to improve the human condition. Vonnegut offers an alternative perspective through a religion that promotes constant self-questioning rather than demanding fanatical devotion. (Although that does not stop the people of San Lorenzo from being very firm believers in Bokononism. In fact it could be argued that it strengthens their faith even more) Especially when considered alongside the

critique of the technological ideology and its consequences that permeates the novel, the main theme of Vonnegut's work reveals itself to be a study on the systems that promise the emancipation of humanity. While technological advances bring about the ultimate end of the world, Bokomonism traces the human condition in such a world dominated by science through the lenses of a failing religion. For Robert Tally, "Vonnegut takes aim at those grand sense-making systems, particularly science and religion, and shows that even the most innocent or well-intentioned efforts to discover or impose meaning in the world are misguided, even dangerous." (Tally Jr, 2011, p. 53)

Todd Davis investigates the grand narratives of emancipation in *Cat's Cradle* through the perspective of American culture. First of all, Vonnegut "dismantles [the] grand narratives of modernism based on the idea of essence" and "by continuing to struggle against the narrative framework of American culture, establishes an ethical code that insists that because the only way we may know our world is through language, the narratives we choose to tell have no essential truth." (Davis, 2006, p. 58) Nonetheless Vonnegut recognizes the importance of narratives even without an essential truth, "because they either contribute to our well-being or to our destruction whether they are true or not." (Davis, 2006, p. 58) Therefore, Vonnegut's efforts can be taken as a warning not to succumb to "absolutism, but instead [to] see the light of relativity... Vonnegut demystifies and decenters the grand narratives of America while beginning to offer inevitably provisional answers, the only kind there are to the questions of a postmodern condition." (Davis, 2006, pp. 58-9)

Todd Davis sees religion, "more specifically Christianity, [arguably] to be the single most significant narrative that undergirds the structure of American culture; it poses as the center for truth, for referentiality, in both overt and covert ways." (Davis,

2006, p. 61) Although religion's influence has somewhat diminished over the years among intellectuals, Davis believes it still to be “the foundation for the premodern and modern conception of language and essence.” (Davis, 2006, p. 61). *Cat's Cradle*, with Bokononism at its crux, challenges the most fundamental aspect of Christianity by subverting the importance of the 'word' by designating words from the start as “foma,” as harmless untruths. In the New Testament, the Gospel of John starts by proclaiming, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1)¹⁸ By destroying the essential truth in language, Vonnegut leaves it open to question the authority stemming from narrative solely because it is *the* narrative. For Klinkowitz, Bokononism “offers a system that allows the truth to exist, yet in a way that people are not forced to pay attention to it.” (Klinkowitz, 2010, p. 47) Zoltán Abádi-Nagy shares a similar view that “Bokonon's ironic religion glosses the truth rather than reveals it, but the emphasis on the necessity of untruths to gloss over truths implies a highly revealing irony burlesquing the function that traditional religions performed in human history when state and religion became entwined.” (Abádi-Nagy, 2002, p. 77) But their takes on whether Bokononism functions as an escape mechanism (like an opiate) for the people of San Lorenzo to prevent them from seeing reality differ. While Zoltán Abádi-Nagy believes formal persecution of Bokononism by the state “is a secret arrangement between its inventor and the dictator of the island to divert San Lorenzans' attention from a sordid reality,” (Abádi-Nagy, 2002, p. 77) Klinkowitz rejects the commonplace idea that Bokononism is an opiate. On the contrary, “It turns away from nothing and in fact accepts unpleasant facts of reality for what they are, as a part of the whole truth – but never as Truth itself.” (Klinkowitz, 2010, p. 47)

¹⁸

The Holy Bible – King James' Version

Todd Davis argues that Vonnegut demonstrates his “disdain for static definitive meaning; for Vonnegut... there can never be singular truth, only the shifting, changing, and developing truths we discover in searching the self.” (Davis, 2006, p. 62)

Adopting very much a Lyotardian attitude, Vonnegut embraces the primacy of “little narratives” over grand narratives of any kind which are the products of consensus claiming to offer Truth once and for all. Vonnegut recognizes the elusive nature of meaning making in an inherently purposeless universe which constitutes his main theme (Harris, 1990, p. 131), while at the same time he “wishes to create and promote an ethic that ennobles humanity.” (Davis, 2006, p. 10) As opposed to Harris, for Davis, this ethical position in the face of an absurd existence is what constitutes Vonnegut's main theme. Klinkowitz's ideas also seem to back up Harris' point on the matter. “If life seems without purpose, perhaps it is because we have tried (and failed) to impose a purpose inappropriately. The quest for meaning can be self-defeating, especially when pursued with the rigidities of convention that in truth no longer apply. The radicalness of the author's own proposition seems so only because of the persistence of those conventions he so successfully interrogates” (Klinkowitz, 2002, p. 16). Klinkowitz acknowledges that Vonnegut is criticized for being a nihilist by some, yet he believes Vonnegut's message to be a hopeful one.

Todd Davis identifies the novel's main action to be Jonah's discovery of Bokononism, “a religion that paradoxically offers a narrative for living without establishing a metanarrative,” which he takes to be “the first formal example of *petite histoire* in Vonnegut's fiction.” (Davis, 2006, p. 63) A comparison between Christianity and Bokononism reveals the latter as a postmodern religion. “The grand narrative of Christianity is found in the Bible, complete with a beginning and an end, an essential and totalizing truth; the *petite histoire* of Bokononism is found in its own

books, incomplete, fragmented, without a clear beginning or end.” (Davis, 2006, p. 63)

According to Richard Giannone, when we look beneath the surface event of *Cat's Cradle*, “we can read the history of modern science and religion shifting from their original purpose – to provide knowledge and faith – to their harmful effects of destruction and deception.” Being much more than just an allegorical work, however, the novel “provides an account of Jonah's personal encounter with the false claims of science and religion.” (Giannone, 1977, p. 62)

Peter Freese sketches out a comparison between these two sense-making systems in *Cat's Cradle*, namely science and religion, by pitting them against each other in terms of their merits and the consequences that come about as a result of their applications. His investigation clearly favours religion, in this case Bokononism over natural sciences. “Although Bokononism is a self-avowed system of helpful lies,” he says, “it proves much more beneficial than its opponent in the novel, namely, natural science. It is this allegedly enlightened science, as practised by amoral and inhumane experimenters smirking at such superstitions as “God” or “sin,” that brings about the end of the world by freezing the earth into a ball of solid ice.” (Freese, 2002, p. 100)

“Papa” Monzano's approach, the dictator of the island of San Lorenzo, for whom science is “magic that *works*”, proves to Freese that “belief in technological progress is just another, and terribly dangerous, religion.” (Freese, 2002, p. 100) What “Papa” cares for, of course, is not the scientific vision that aims to benefit humanity, but the technological advances in warfare that could assist him in maintaining political power.

Freese takes the children's game which gave the novel its title as a symbol of meaning making in an arbitrary and absurd universe which is forever in motion consisting of meaningless strings, “which man, through an act of his creative

imagination, has to define as meaningful.” (Freese, 2002, p. 100). He argues that in order to avoid succumbing to the hopelessness of nihilism, man has to invent meaning that he can discover, and “if he bases his imaginative creation of meaning on the helpful lies of religion, he will be much better off than if he grounds his understanding of self and world in the inhumane truths of science.” According to Freese, this is the message of the book that made it into “a cult book of the youthful counterculture of the sixties with its revolt against technocratic rationality” (Freese, 2002, p. 100)

Freese concludes that even though Vonnegut accepts that religions “are manmade myths or lies, they provide the sense-making structures necessary for man's survival,” and prove to be essential against “unbridled technological progress with its alleged objectivity, which is nothing but amorality, and its built-in tendency toward ultimate self-destruction.” (Freese, 2002, p. 101) Freese himself seems to be strongly condemning the aspect of technology handled in the novel. Nevertheless the notion that Vonnegut champions religion over science seems untenable. He rather advocates for an alternative way of interacting with and understanding the modern world supplemented by religious values he believes to be useful, if not essential. He is not a believer to begin with, yet he believes religions have a lot to offer in terms of fairness, compassion, mercy and so on, in a world now dominated by amoral, apolitical science that is completely divorced from humanity under the pretence of “pure research.”

Dr Felix Hoenikker, the main subject of Jonah's book about the metaphorical end of the world, appears as a caricature of a scientist, a parody of a certain scientific mindset that champions knowledge for knowledge's sake, without morals, supposedly divorced from humanity in its implications and consequences. Vonnegut bases Felix Hoenikker, one of the so-called “fathers” of the atomic bomb on Irving Langmuir, a stereotypically absent-minded scientist, a Nobel Prize winner who “was childlike in

social relationships and claimed that he was simply unearthing the truth, that the truth could never hurt human beings and that he wasn't interested in the applications of whatever he turned up." (Allen, 1988, p. 97) As Jonah continued to find out more about Hoenikker and his family, more details emerged about Hoenikker's detachment from the world. Hoenikker's youngest son Newt relates to Jonah a story in his letter, about the day they tested a bomb: "After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, "Science has now known sin," to which he replied, "What is sin?" (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 13) Considering all the qualities Hoenikker displays, Todd Davis explains that "Hoenikker represents Vonnegut's greatest fears: a man who has a mind so brilliant that he can find the means to destroy the world, but who has no conception of right or wrong, of moral value." (Davis, 2006, p. 64) Richard Giannone compares "Dr Hoenikker's deviation from responsibility in his scientific research" to the deviation from the original aim of Jonah's book, "a deviation which brought about the Hiroshima disaster in the first place and then yielded *ice-nine*, which finally destroys the entire world." (Giannone, 1977, p. 53)

In his interview with *Playboy*, Kurt Vonnegut raises his concerns about the role of scientific advancements when talking about the scientists of General Electric where he worked as a PR man for the research laboratory. It was a group of people "all simply dealing with truth and not worried about what might be done with their discoveries," (Allen, 1988, p. 97), much like the view Horkheimer had on the scientific mode of thought in his earlier career. The use of the atomic bomb was a wake-up call for them and Vonnegut believes "they've learned that anything they turn up will be applied if it can be. It's a law of life that if you turn up something that *can* be used violently, it *will* be used violently." (Allen, 1988, p. 97) That was the case

with the discovery made by his brother Bernard Vonnegut, an atmospheric scientist, that silver iodide could be used in cloud seeding in order to make it rain or snow under the right conditions. Kurt Vonnegut relates his brother's shock "when it came out that [the US] had been seeding the hell out of Indochina for years" in warfare. (Allen, 1988, p. 97)

Vonnegut here is simply reiterating the concerns he already raised in *Cat's Cradle*. Dr Asa Breed, the head of the laboratory Felix Hoenikker works in, is the embodiment of the belief that science and technology are the only answers to humanity's problems. His commencement speech to Ilium High School sums up his philosophy: "The trouble with the world was, that people were still superstitious instead of scientific... if everybody would study science more, there wouldn't be all the trouble there was." (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 18) He strongly believed that "science was going to discover the basic secret of life some day." Paradoxically, the very thing that would eventually destroy life on earth is a product of science. Vonnegut creates a contrast between the catastrophe caused by the use of technology, and the manner in which scientists carry out and view their works. It is quite revealing how Asa Breed cannot wrap his head around the fact that a man was hanged back in 1782 for murdering twenty six people, but is unbothered by the countless casualties of the atomic bomb: "Somebody ought to do a book about him sometime... Think of it. Twenty-six people he had on his conscience!" (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 21) As a dark contrast, Jonah was working on a book about the day thousands of people were killed.

When Jonah met with Dr Asa Breed for an interview to learn more about Dr Hoenikker, his work in the laboratory and the day of the atomic bomb, although he did not have hostile intentions, "Every question [he] asked implied that the creators of the atomic bomb had been criminal accessories to murder most foul." (Vonnegut,

2011, p. 28) This of course causes great indignation in Dr Asa Breed who thought “All [Jonah's] questions seem aimed at getting [him] to admit that scientists are heartless, conscienceless, narrow boobies, indifferent to the fate of the rest of the human race, or maybe not really members of the human race at all.” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 28) For him scientists are widely misunderstood in what they are and what they do. “Here [at the laboratory], and shockingly few other places in this country, men are paid to increase knowledge, to work towards no end but that.” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 29) He designates the work of science and scientists to be “pure research”, though it would be a great mistake to assume a great vision of emancipation fuelling the ideals of research. “New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth,” says Dr Asa Breed. “The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.” (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 29)

Lyotard rightly identifies “knowledge in the form of an informational commodity” to be “a major – perhaps *the major* – stake in the worldwide competition for power.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 5) The aim of research is no longer to achieve scientific consensus but to increase efficiency, or 'performativity'. For Lyotard, the idealist and humanist narratives must be left behind “in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46)

Richard Giannone associates the technocratic order with the monster that swallows Jonah in the biblical sense. He says “Jonah sinks into the world of materialistic absolutism where pure research is a cover for profiteering and militarism and where no one questions what is going on.” (Giannone, 1977, p. 56) It could be argued that Jonah the narrator's Bokononist transformation was his way out of the

belly of the monster. The mock religion of Bokononism provides the necessary perspective to achieve critical distance from the systems that supposedly offer the answer for everything.

Vonnegut strongly opposes the idea that science can exist independently of any morals. Every research subject, every invention potentially has tremendous implications for human life. Felix Hoenikker's research, behind the facade of pure intellectual interest, is used to increase military power for world domination. The pure research argument is invalid in these circumstances since the consequences of research on the world are never impartial. The weaponization of technology is inevitable, as is evident from countless incidents throughout history, in fact it quite clearly seems to be the main goal of research in general. Science without consideration of moral and political implications cannot exist. Scientists cannot hide behind an apolitical shield of pure research. The prospect of nuclear holocaust during the cold war era after the atomic bombing only confirmed Vonnegut's views. As great as “research unfettered by commercial concerns” sounds, “Vonnegut feared at the time and would demonstrate in his first novel [*Player Piano*, as well as in *Cat's Cradle*] scientific research unfettered by moral concerns – by a simple interest in how its results would be used, to be even simpler – could be a great evil; and the fact that the means for atomic warfare may have been born this way is all the more troubling.” (Klinkowitz, 2010, p. 46)

As Giannone suggests, for Vonnegut science is “the intellectual abuse of our age which has gone beyond endangering the abstract ideal of truth to threaten everyday survival.” (Giannone, 1977, p. 60) In *Cat's Cradle*, the invention of *ice-nine* is the result of playful theorizing, inspired by how cannonballs are stacked on top of each other in an unusual way. This led Felix Hoenikker to figure out an alternative

way to crystallize or freeze water, which presents different physical properties than regular ice. Although Felix Hoenikker was only interested in abstract research and was not after world domination, or political power himself, his invention, falling into wrong hands because of his inability to foresee strongly possible consequences or his complete disregard of them, ends up destroying the world.

According to Davis, the desirable alternative to a model of scientists represented by Hoenikker, appears in Dr. von Koenigswald, who works at the only hospital on the island, the 'House of Hope and Mercy', founded by an American citizen, Julian Castle the philanthropist. As a man of science, Koenigswald was ready to perform the last rites of the Bokononist faith for Papa Monzano, the president of the island, who was on his deathbed. His readiness to undertake 'unscientific' measures in order "to make a human being feel better" is proof enough for Davis that he "is the man of science who Vonnegut embraces, a figure not unlike Vonnegut's brother, Bernard, or even Vonnegut himself." (Davis, 2006, p. 64) What Davis fails to take into consideration, however, is the fact that Koenigswald was part of the S.S. for fourteen years, and a camp physician at Auschwitz for six years. It is known that German doctors took part in conducting various medical experiments on camp prisoners such as mass sterilization, drug testing and so on, to go along with extermination¹⁹. Apparently Koenigswald was "doing penance" for all the horrible things he had taken part in, by saving lives on the island. "If he keeps going at his present rate, working night and day, the number of people he's saved will equal the number of people he let die – in the year of 3010," (Vonnegut, 2011, p. 133) says Julian Castle. It is beyond doubt, then, that Koenigswald is 'not' part of the scientific

¹⁹ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-medical-experiments> ,
<http://auschwitz.org/en/history/medical-experiments/>

tradition Vonnegut is believed to advocate for and certainly not a good alternative to Dr Hoenikker. On the contrary, he is even more culpable with his crimes against humanity than Dr Hoenikker, who was only interested in abstract ideals of research.



5. CONCLUSION

Literature has always been crucial for unearthing what was once perceived to be inaccessible, irrational, or even undesirable. The issue of representation and the entailing concern for justice is at the core of Lyotard's literary criticism and his expectations from literature. In this context, Kurt Vonnegut's works manage to touch on these issues of representation and justice brilliantly. As was shown in this study, Vonnegut's novels are about giving voice to the silent and the unheard as a way of "[bearing] witness to differends by finding idioms for them." (Lyotard, 1988, p. 13)

I chose not to proceed chronologically with the novels in order to deal with 'the crisis of representation' on an individual level at first by focusing on *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Vonnegut's efforts to address his traumatic wartime experiences that he had struggled to express for decades. Although this was not his first novel that deals with the subject of World War II – the first one being *Mother Night*- it was the book in which he finally tried to attest to the event that had escaped presentation for such a long time. For Lyotard, "The spirit of the times is surely not that of the merely pleasant: its mission remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to the nondemonstrable." (Lyotard, 1982) The aesthetic of the sublime and its relation to 'primary repression' from a Lyotardian perspective, provided the basis of my perspective regarding Vonnegut's attempt at bearing witness to his differend, in writing about Dresden. The traumatic event Vonnegut experienced is understood in terms of the sublime sentiment that exceeded the limits of adequate presentation, yet as something that demands presentation, nonetheless. Instead of reporting what he had seen realistically, Vonnegut alludes to the event by showing its effects on Billy Pilgrim, the fictional hero of the novel; in other words, he focuses on the presence that signals there is something that cannot be put into words. Vonnegut's

alternative approach to the event, his innovative writing style fits the formula proposed by Lyotard in finding a way to present the unrepresentable through experimentation. This study shows that Vonnegut's novel can be an example of what Lyotard expects from a work of art, as stated before, to find idioms to bear witness to differends. As is the case with the sublime sentiment, the painful attempt at presenting something inherently unrepresentable proved to be therapeutic for Vonnegut.

The novel also reveals 'the crisis of representation' in a broader context. It is an attempt to challenge the established metanarratives by “petit histoires” of the marginal, contrary to the official history, to reveal the extent of the relatively unknown bombing and its devastating results to the public. Under the strict authority of the dominant discourses of the age, any story falling out of the limits of what is conventional can easily be silenced and suppressed. In a time like this, postmodernism in art began to rise as a challenge to the rule of centralized meaning and rationality, against the systems that claimed to have the Truth under their keeping. Thus, ‘the crisis of representation’ appeared in accordance with postmodernism, in keeping with the constant readjustment of reality “which the drive toward knowledge, technology, and wealth will continually destroy in order to replace it with a version considered more viable—and which itself will eventually be replaced.” (Lyotard, 1982)

Similarly to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Cat's Cradle* appears as an alternative way of representing historical events. Jonah the freelance writer attempts to write a book about the day the atomic bomb was dropped by piecing together stories from Felix Hoenikker's close circle. As the novel progresses alongside Jonah's story, his book is transformed into a “history of human stupidity.”

Lyotard's formulation of the postmodern as “incredulity toward metanarratives” finds a strong expression in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*. Lyotard

problematizes the subject of representation based on dominant discourses and turns his attention to the stories of those marginalized or suppressed under the systems that claim authority over narratives. As has been shown in this study, *Cat's Cradle* poses a challenge to the dominant metanarratives of the time by exposing them for what they really are. The ironic end of the novel, a catastrophe caused by the very scientific discoveries that were supposed to save the world, reveals Vonnegut's point of view on the matter. The metanarrative of science, which became a religion in itself, appears, despite its promises of a utopian future without any woes for humanity, to be nothing more than a weapon in the hands of power-crazy political establishments. Considering the novel was published during the height of the Cold War, the depiction of the end of the world as a result of a ridiculous accident further emphasizes the precariousness of human life under the ever-present threat of a nuclear holocaust. It is an important distinction that Vonnegut's criticism is aimed not at science itself, but its function in the post-industrial and the postmodern age, toward more knowledge, more efficiency and more authority. As long as unchecked technological advances, without any moral concern for their possible outcomes keep being made, the end of the world might be a single freak-accident away.

Vonnegut's critique of the metanarratives of his culture is reinforced by his handling of the issue of religion in *Cat's Cradle*. The prominence of Boknonism in the novel, as a man-made religion that denounces any claim to truth and meaning, undermines religious authority as a metanarrative. In a world inherently devoid of any immanent meaning, "any invented sense-making system is continuously disproved by man's immediate experience of the world, and the arbitrariness of events perpetually defeats any system of alleged causalities." (Freese, 2002, p. 99) Contrary to the conventional idea of a religion, Boknonism denies the existence of a meaningful

progress toward a certain aim.

Unlike a metanarrative that imposes the rules of linkage of phrases yet speaking from a position of one, Bokononism allows a plurality of voices and alternative stories to come together, as opposed to the unified voice of a conventional religion, or the single-minded rationality of science. In this context, it might seem like Vonnegut is favoring religion over science, but I believe the function of Bokononism is only to provide an alternative perspective that respects the fragmentation of ideas by allowing a multiplicity of voices to be heard or come together in a system that respects their individuality. According to this view, Bokononism is not the solution, but an inevitable response to the oppression of marginal voices by metanarratives.

From a broader perspective, by investigating two of Kurt Vonnegut's novels via Lyotard's ideas on aesthetic representation based on the sublime sentiment, my dissertation revolved around the issue of “what is at stake in literature.” I came to realize the real concern of Vonnegut is not what to represent but rather how to represent. This question constantly appears in his work as he keeps experimenting with new methods of narration, looking for new rules of presentation, while pushing or even transcending the boundaries of time and space in his storytelling, as if to repeatedly pose the question “What is literature?” Thus, Vonnegut fits Lyotard's view of the postmodern artist or writer as a philosopher: “the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an *event*.” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81)

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