

Pavel Holubec  
Sheila Ghose  
Dec 11, 2003  
Science Fiction and the Technological Revolution

Q: “*Kilgore Trout’s unpopularity was deserved. His prose was frightful. Only his ideas were good.*” What’s *Kilgore Trout’s* role in *Slaughterhouse V*? Discuss the status of science fiction that the novel presents and apply this view to at least two other course texts. Keep in mind that tone is often as important in *Vonnegut’s* book as what is explicitly said.

## SCIENCE FICTION AS A GENRE, WHICH IS CHARACTERISED BY ASKING THE QUESTIONS AND SUBSEQUENTLY PERMANENTLY HIDING THIS ATTITUDE

Kilgore Trout is representative of low literary quality in SF. As I understand his character, science fiction is for him an escape from the everyday boring reality. The interesting point is that he is a writer and writing is the escape, whereas sci-fi is most commonly seen as an escape for readers. This point is supported in *Slaughterhouse V* in several dimensions: Kilgore Trout is depicted as a loafer delivering the mail all his life, but his stories contain interesting ideas despite their poor quality. These stories are seen as helpful for at least two persons that met themselves in crazyhouse. And finally, science fiction is an escape for main character during the terrible reality of war, does not matter whether his time and space travels are real or only his personal fantasy.

Science fiction is thus a medium for carrying the encouraging ideas to the readers, but these ideas are hidden inside the stories. Not everyone is able to dig them out. Some people understand SF only in a simplified way – as a pure entertainment, because they do not intend to search ‘behind the plot and amazing description of different reality’. This trend can be clearly seen in most of science fiction movies that are very much focused on special effects – like *Terminator*, *Alien* and *Matrix*. If the audience is not satisfied with special effects and they do not find an explicit way of new, interesting ideas presented and explained, they condemn the whole movie. But not only movies follow this trend of hiding ideas. For example in *Neuromancer* and *Unreconstructed M* there is a lot of description of the whole new reality and technology so it is hard to find any question in the text, although the questions are there – hidden behind the new reality that is presented as normal, everyday environment for story characters. It is hard to question something ‘obvious’, because it is not seen as a problem to solve. First, it needs to be identified as a problem and the way to do so is to mark a story as a science fiction story. Then most of the readers ask the questions, simply because of their attitude to science fiction as a genre that is usually focused on asking the questions (according to the Stanley Fish’s essay *How to recognize a poem when you see one*). This may be also important for many SF writers, because they don’t want to mark their books as ‘Mainstream’, because then the readers will expect more the literary quality – they will be focused more on the form and less on ideas that may be questioned.

Kurt Vonnegut is playing a kind of literary game with all these presuppositions concerning the genre. His book is not clearly marked as science fiction, but he uses the devices of SF genre (aliens, time travels) which may identify the book as sci-fi. But once you read the book as sci-fi, you are being persuaded that the sci-fi has no particular value, because of author’s attitude, expressed in the tone of the book, and mentioning only the worst aspects of SF (that identify it as low genre – e.g. *Tralfamadorians*). But even this attitude is much ambiguous: science fiction is a way of escaping reality, but he is doing it all the time. It is like

to point out that the tendency of escaping the reality is inherent in the very reality itself. Reality as an outside world is also seen as something that is just happening, something outside the mind. "So it goes." This sentence is ending almost each paragraph in Vonnegut's book. But once it is there all the time, isn't it like BIG question mark?

*Slaughterhouse V* is for me a book that wants to 'force' the readers to ask questions in many different ways: by mingling with the genre of Science Fiction, by puzzling structure of the text (time travels resulting in overall fragmentation of the text), by saying all the time "So it goes" and by the language itself. All this should force the reader to ask: "Why is the author doing all this stuff and do not write a simple, understandable book?"

Works mentioned:

Dick, Phillip K. *Unreconstructed M.*

Fish, Stanley. *How to Recognize a Poem When You See One.*

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer.*

Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse V.*