

Technologies of Instant Amnesia: Teaching Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" to the Millennial Generation
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Abstract: Kurt Vonnegut is one of the most influential American writers from the latter half of the twentieth century. He is best known for his novels, but because the format of First-Year English and similar courses on composition requires the study of much shorter literary works, most students today only encounter Vonnegut through his one short story to attain a level of notoriety approaching that of his novels: "Harrison Bergeron." In this essay, Benjamin Reed resurrects, explicates, and expands upon a formerly marginal analysis of the story, one that both subsumes and deepens competing conventional interpretations, which historically have had the effect of limiting our understanding of both Vonnegut and "Harrison Bergeron." These unfortunate interpretations survive in part because they are frequently reiterated or rephrased by the same texts in which "Harrison Bergeron" is anthologized for the college classroom. The central argument offered here is that "Harrison Bergeron" is Vonnegut's hyperbolic diagnosis of a sharp decline in American intellectualism—our creativity, empathy, individualism, and basic cognition—during the era in which television replaced popular literature as our primary medium of diversion. For young, "tech-savvy" students, this reading is more relevant than ever, as the same "amnesiac" characteristics of American culture that Vonnegut inflates into absurd satire have only been enhanced and propagated by a proliferation of new technologies.

Key words: Technology, Television, Dystopia, Science Fiction, Dumbing-down.

Introduction

"Harrison Bergeron" is not simply Vonnegut's most taught short story, frequently it is his *only* short story still widely included in undergraduate curricula, over fifty years since its initial publication in 1961. Few Vonnegut scholars will challenge Donald Morse's statement that "Vonnegut's significance as a writer lies in his novels, not in his stories" (375), a form Vonnegut gradually retreated from and then abandoned in 1972, shortly after the immense critical, popular, and financial success of his sixth novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five* (372). Morse considers Vonnegut's short fiction "apprentice work" (375), yet the dystopian "Harrison Bergeron," stands as the exception, both for its obvious literary value, and its intertextual relationship to Vonnegut's novels. For students like mine, the story is likely the only exposure they will ever have to Vonnegut, as First-Year Composition courses typically cannot concern themselves with the deep and nuanced literary analysis of novels, but rather on episodic close readings of poems and short fiction, which are much more conducive to the incremental instruction of basic collegiate writing and research for non-English majors. However, "Harrison Bergeron" has much more to offer my students than its brevity. Despite its conventional critical interpretations, I have found that Vonnegut's best-known short story offers an urgent and frightening statement even more relevant to my students' generation than it was to the general, magazine-reading public a half century ago: in short, how consumerist media and the technology of mass communication have conspired to divest us of the higher functionality of our minds.

As a lecturer in the English department of a large public university, I teach "Harrison Bergeron" every semester, typically to students who don't share my background. Very few of them took AP English in high school, few of them read for pleasure, and fewer still want to become writers or scholars. My students generally prefer more competitive media—television and film, typically in the form of streaming video. Yet "Harrison Bergeron" always resonates. Even those who dislike it are moved to express why.

I. Handicapping Inequality

Here is a brief synopsis of "Harrison Bergeron": A married couple—George and Hazel Bergeron—sit in their living room, watching a live ballet program on their TV. This is in a hypothetical America set 120 years after the time Vonnegut was writing.

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General. (7)

Most people in this future America wear one or more "handicaps" designed to inhibit inherent abilities that might grant them unfair advantages in society. Because he is strong, George Bergeron wears a forty-seven pound bag of birdshot around his neck. Because he is smart, he wears "a little mental handicap radio in his ear," tuned to a government transmitter which, two or three times per minute, sends out sharp, jarring noises to interrupt and scatter his thoughts (9, 7). The ballerinas on the television program wear weights to hinder their grace and athleticism, but also hideous masks to hide their beauty. Once issued, handicaps must be worn constantly under threat of astounding penalty, as overseen by the office of the Handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers. But not everyone is affected directly. Hazel, George's wife, wears no handicaps.

Let us pause to consider Hazel. Because she has no handicaps, we already know a great deal about her: she is not strong, lovely, or intelligent. She's so average, even her name is the eye color between brown and blue. Her natural mental state is equivalent to George's handicapped mind: "Hazel had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts" (7). She is the

ideal citizen in Vonnegut's dumbed-down future America.

On TV, the ballet program is interrupted to announce that Harrison Bergeron, George and Hazel's teenage son, who had been arrested for plotting against the government, has escaped incarceration. A ballerina, compelled to take over reading a flash bulletin from a stuttering, incompetent announcer, reports that "Harrison Bergeron, age fourteen ... has just escaped from jail, where he was held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government. He is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and should be regarded as extremely dangerous" (10). A moment later, Harrison himself breaks down the door to the television studio and appears on camera.

Compared to the average person, Harrison possesses amazing strength, godlike beauty and stature, and (presumably) a piercing intelligence. He handily removes his ludicrously excessive handicaps. He tears "the straps of his handicap harness like wet tissue paper ... straps guaranteed to support five thousand pounds," and sheds his other handicaps, too, revealing the face of a man "that would have awed Thor, the god of thunder" (11, 12). He selects a dancer and strips her of her handicaps as well. He dispossesses the orchestra of theirs and instructs them to play. Harrison and the ballerina dance in graceful ecstasy until Diana Moon Glampers arrives and kills them both with blasts from a double-barreled shotgun. George and Hazel's TV burns out. Seconds later, both of them have forgotten that they just witnessed the violent death of their son—George because he's been distracted, presumably by a blast from his ear radio, and has gotten up to get a beer, and Hazel because she's as thick as two boards nailed together. The story ends a moment later with Hazel unwittingly playing the "straight man" in brief, double-act repartee:

[George] winced. There was the sound of a riveting gun in his head.

"Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee—" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy." (13)

What I love most about this story is how Vonnegut massages the escalation of detail into small spaces, like how the second time George winces at a blast from his ear radio, he describes the sound as "somebody hitting a milk bottle with a ball peen hammer" (8). I admire how deftly Vonnegut dovetails this realism into exaggeration. At first, the hyperbole is almost purely comical.

Harrison's appearance was Halloween and hardware ... Instead of a little ear radio for a mental handicap, he wore a tremendous pair of earphones, and spectacles with thick wavy lenses. The spectacles were intended to make him not only half blind, but to give him whanging headaches besides. (10)

A lifelong lover of slapstick comedy, Vonnegut can't help but escalate the absurdity. "Scrap metal was hung all over him. Ordinarily, there was a certain symmetry, a military neatness to the handicaps issued to strong people, but Harrison looked like a walking junkyard" (10-11). Vonnegut explains how the minions of the Handicapper General have forced Harrison to "wear at all times a red rubber ball for a nose, keep his eyebrows shaved off, and cover his even white teeth with black caps at snaggle-tooth random" (11).

Gradually, the hyperbole transitions into the romantically touching. "The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it. It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling. They kissed it" (12). Perhaps because I encountered this story so young, and because I later used it as a model for my own fiction, I've remained enamored by Vonnegut's small but adroit touches, not the story's subtext or its conventional interpretations.

Writing about the subjects of utopia and dystopia in American literature generally, and more specifically about Vonnegut's early science fiction novels (which were written in the same phase of Vonnegut's career as "Harrison Bergeron"), Robert Tally remarks, "Often utopia functions less as a means for imagining or organizing ideal social

formations, and more as an imaginary way of understanding ourselves and our place in the 'real' world" (*Kurt Vonnegut* 21). Elsewhere Tally explains, "Vonnegut's modernist techniques are ... used to represent the postmodern condition more realistically" (*Critical Insights* 7). There is little disagreement with the notion that "the 'serious' topic that the story declares itself to be concerned with is equality," while "[targeting] both social inequality and the consequences of trying to eliminate it" (Reed 81, 23), but from here critical analysis of Vonnegut's intended themes and primary subtextual meanings in "Harrison Bergeron" stratify into manifold interpretations. Perusing the "reflection questions" found in the many college texts in which this story is anthologized, or if one looks at the various reading guides published online, one is generally instructed to understand the significance of "Harrison Bergeron" along some variation of one or two basic readings. The first is that "Harrison Bergeron," like Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, "mocks Utopian dreams of a fully egalitarian society" while frightening us with "[t]he implications of the kinds of bureaucratic and coercive oversight" that such social systems would require (Reed 148, 82). The second conventional interpretation is that the story is a harsh critique of anti-communist paranoia during the 1950s, "[satirizing] America's Cold War misunderstanding of not just communism but also socialism" (Hattenhauer 387). In this view, Vonnegut's nightmarish system of American government in 2081 is a parody of what Americans feared might be wrought by losing military and ideological conflicts with Sino-Soviet socialists, a widespread fear that inflicted far more damage, for many Americans, than communism itself. While these two dominant readings seem mutually exclusive, in combination they can help elucidate what I find to be the actual target of Vonnegut's social criticism: television in particular, and more generally the consumerist imperatives of mass media that had become tantamount to censorship for average Americans, whom Vonnegut saw in 1961 as already succumbing to an existential threat to the vitality of our collective intelligence and creativity.

II. Conventional Interpretations

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That "Harrison Bergeron" is a thinly veiled attack on a Lowest Common Denominator leveling processes is the interpretation most consistently suggested by my young American students, for whom individuality is an inherently positive if not superlative virtue. They are not alone in reading the story as an allegory "warning against the erasure of individuality associated with communistic forms of government" (Farrell 183). In 1965 William F. Buckley reprinted "Harrison Bergeron" in his *National Review*, "assuming the author was an outspoken political conservative" (Klinkowitz 15). Buckley has not been the only influential figure to read the story as a "morality tale about the dangers of forsaking private enterprise" (Hattenhauer 389). "Harrison Bergeron" has been appropriated to excoriate the standardized testing mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Bracey; Fugate), cited in a brief challenging the constitutionality of diverting tax dollars from a wealthy Kansas school district (Rothschild), and even appears in the closing lines of Justice Antonin Scalia's dissent in *Martin v. PGA Tour, Inc.*, in which the Supreme Court supported the assertion by disabled golfer Casey Martin that the PGA could not lawfully deny him the option to ride in a golf cart during competition (*Martin* 698-705). (Prior to this decision, PGA-Tour golfers were required to walk between shots.) In fact, "Harrison Bergeron" is but one of a series of literary references made by Scalia at the end of his opinion. After describing the ruling as "Kafkaesque," he states,

[The majority's] *Alice in Wonderland* determination that there are such things as judicially determinable "essential" and "nonessential" rules of a made-up game; and its *Animal Farm* determination that fairness and the ADA mean that everyone gets to play by individualized rules which will assure that no one's lack of ability (or at least no one's lack of ability so pronounced that it amounts to a disability) will be a handicap. The year was 2001, and "everybody was finally equal." (705)

Lexi Stuckey's reading of the story (and, more so, of Vonnegut) overcorrects into

the opposite extreme, pegging him on the far Left. She contends Vonnegut actually *advocates* the fundamentals of the conformism portrayed in the story, and that the story lends itself to the reading that "it is acceptable to pursue egalitarianism by means of enforcing a lowest common denominator mentality" (Stuckey 85). Stuckey ends her analysis with a somewhat fallacious warning against misreading "Harrison Bergeron" as an anti-conformist story: "Kurt Vonnegut is deserving of his critical praise and fervently devoted fan base ... However, it is dangerous to become so enamored with the personal politics of an author that one perspective on his work is accepted with little question and becomes dogma" (89). Stuckey closes with a call to action: "As educators, let us not fall victim to this same fate ... Let us not become Diana Moon Glampers, Handicapper General, in our classrooms, shooting non-conformists out of the sky" (89). (Indeed, let us not.)

There is ample critical support for the notion that "Harrison Bergeron" is a sharp send-up of widespread anti-communist paranoia in early 1960s America, if not some specific American economic ideals themselves. The story was first published during the period in which the House Un-American Activities Committee was still operational, and just a few years after Senator Joseph McCarthy accused the ACLU of being a communist front. In "The Politics of Kurt Vonnegut's 'Harrison Bergeron,'" Hattenhauer quotes widely from Vonnegut's *oeuvre*, as well as from personal correspondence with the author, to attack the logic of the appropriation of "Harrison Bergeron" by conservatives such as Scalia and Buckley. Hattenhauer asserts that the story's lampooning of Lowest Common Denominator leveling was not Vonnegut's attack on a fatuous liberal zeal for egalitarianism, but rather that the story "satirizes the American definition of freedom as the greatest good to the smallest number" and "[the] American myth ... that only in a class society can everyone have an equal chance for achieving the greatest economic inequality" (391). For Hattenhauer, "Harrison Bergeron" is critical of communism and yet simultaneously, tacitly supportive of socialist ideologies by virtue of its implied criticism of capitalism. The story draws its absurdity from the capitalist notion that all citizens may fully enjoy the fruits of the free market despite the finitude of

capital and the fact that most of it lies in the hands of very few. Morse too has pointed out that the story's basic situation is a "*reductio ad absurdum* ... where everyone is indeed equal except for those in charge" (374). This is a significant point. Every time I teach "Harrison Bergeron," my students—often in chorus—want to know why Diana Moon Glampers, as the figurehead of enforced equality, wears no handicaps.

III. Toward a Vonnegutian Dialectic

The standard readings of "Harrison Bergeron" risk further bifurcation depending on how one paints Vonnegut's definitive political stripe. (Was he a closet conservative, or a liberal moderate?—etc.) Precisely because this approach raises the question of whether "Harrison Bergeron" is primarily a response to Cold War histrionics, it depends too heavily on adducing Vonnegut's personal beliefs to clarify his intentions. Stuckey's argument falls into a trap with statements like, "His personal politics are not consistent with a libertarian or conservative viewpoint. Therefore, the theme of egalitarianism is actually appropriate for Vonnegut to espouse" (85). The problem with this is that Vonnegut did and said things that supported views compatible with liberalism, yet also did and said things that contradict the assumption that he was, as Stuckey states, "a liberal thinker" (85). In his biography, *And So It Goes: Kurt Vonnegut, A Life*, Charles J. Shields writes, "Vonnegut was less a radical than a reactionary. He yearned for an old-fashioned America ... even for businesses like General Electric at its enlightened best. But only a close reading of his works reveal that" (248). In 1952 Vonnegut complained to editor Knox Burger that "Big business and big government ... were partners in foisting socialism on the country. How they sapped, in combination, Americans' *spirit of individuality with guarantees that adults would be inured from failure* was humiliating" [emphasis added] (Shields 126). Part of the conflict then, in previous attempts to adduce Vonnegut's intentions in "Harrison Bergeron," is the fact that Vonnegut's political morality not only seemed contradictory, but became increasingly difficult to place into a recognizable category as American political ideologies became more rigidly binary after the early 1970s. Shields argues that Vonnegut believed in free enterprise and the

capitalist system while simultaneously decrying its "tendency to blame the poor as a way of shifting responsibility away from the rich" (298). "What he objected to," Shields writes, wasn't capitalism itself, but "capitalist ideology, combined with Christian pieties, to justify the power of the rich over the poor" (298).

In *The Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut*, Peter Reed reminds us that

[i]n earlier stories—and subsequent fiction, too—Vonnegut has spoken out against striving for material acquisition, status, asserting superiority and other such aspects of competitiveness. On the other hand, the same stories show an admiration of those who strive, who take pride in something well done, or who are creative. (82)

Reed asserts that "Harrison Bergeron" "clearly satirizes an obsession with equalizing" (82), yet unlike Stuckey or Hattenhauer, Reed's analysis doesn't take a side in this apparent contradiction so much as absorb its core duality, explaining that the period in which Vonnegut wrote "Harrison Bergeron" was

the era of the cold war, where Sino-Soviet Communist (and, for that matter, European democratic socialist) claims of egalitarianism were ranged against Western ideals of capitalism and individualism. And on the other hand, it was the pre-dawn of the Age of Aquarius, an era in which competitiveness and superiority were scorned, and where incidents occurred such as forcing a former beauty queen to wear granny-glasses, shear off her hair, and dress shapelessly before she could be accepted into a commune. (81-82)

Vonnegut's apparent contradictions granted him immense facility at reconstructing the dualities of the era, which I believe is the underlying reason intelligent

readers can disagree so fundamentally on the primary subtextual theme of "Harrison Bergeron," especially in light of how it is fostered by the adroitness with which he lays out this dystopian vision's chief ironic motif: the mask is also the thing that reveals. When Vonnegut focuses on one ballerina, his narrator tells us "She must have been extraordinarily beautiful, because the mask she wore was hideous. And it was easy to see that she was the strongest and most graceful of all the dancers, for her handicap bags were as big as those worn by two-hundred pound men" (10). Those who are handicapped retain an inverse yet obvious reflection of their outlawed superiority. The attempt to achieve forced equality through social engineering—by delimiting positive qualities rather than ameliorating shortcomings—is futile, because individuality is inherent and only incompletely repressible.

Some instructors of First-Year English may find this detail of the story to be the sweetest fruit on the tree. In an era in which liberal arts have been systematically reduced from public secondary education, it is often left to us to provide a crash course in rhetoric, in which we must not only teach effective, persuasive composition but also furnish our students with the basic implements of a critical toolbox. The dancers' masks in "Harrison Bergeron" offer considerable potential in this regard, in that once explicated they unlock the story's greater system of meaning, making a number of essential concepts available in the form of object lessons, including irony, symbolism, metaphor, analogy, synecdoche, absurdity, satire, and social critique. This is the real value of "Harrison Bergeron": it acts as a type of conduit between the rhetorical and analytical skills we teach and the mental environment our students inhabit, as relating the subject and subtext of this story to "real world" issues is simple verging on automatic. I have found that my freshmen need little to no encouragement to offer their opinions on affirmative action, need-based disbursement of tax-generated financial aid, Title IX, trigger warnings, demographic-based college admission policies, and under-performing students who enjoy free-ride athletic scholarships. Today's undergraduates are also the first adults to enter the university when genetic engineering of human embryos is no longer hypothetical, reviving eugenics-era debates on the ethics of designing a more

perfect human population. These are the politics of our students' daily lives, and they elicit questions that are often more interesting and relevant than presidential debates, foreign wars, or the latest celebrity imbroglio.

In a future America where being average is the professed ideal—although Vonnegut comically demonstrates that the *de facto* standard of "average" in the story is actually far inferior to simple mediocrity—Harrison is superhuman. He is not just a revolutionary, but a Nietzschean *Übermensch*, cut from the same cloth as Ayn Rand's John Galt. After all, Harrison does not introduce himself as a messiah or philosopher, but as an autocrat. "'I am the Emperor!' cried Harrison. 'Do you hear? I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!' He stamped his foot and the studio shook ... 'I am a greater ruler than any man who ever lived! Now watch me become what I can become!'" (11). One can understand quite easily how William F. Buckley and Justice Antonin Scalia could have perceived Harrison's summary execution at the hands of Diana Moon Glampers—whose true purpose is to put a stop to "an imaginative world of possibilities" (Reed 81)—as a tragic allegory of a collectivist society's intolerance for gifted, individualist heroes. This is concordant with Stanley Schatt's contention that "In any leveling process, what really is lost, according to Vonnegut, is beauty, grace, and wisdom" (133).

"The mask is the thing that reveals," is, of course, another way of describing Vonnegut's sly, technical gifts for hiding meaning in plain sight. However morally unambiguous Harrison's climactic last moments may seem to those who sympathize with him as a tragic resistor of societally-enforced mediocrity, the action on the Bergerons' TV set is not the entire story. It is a story *within* a story. Reed writes, "Having the dramatic events be on television within a story puts 'reality' at two removes, giving emphasis to Vonnegut's technique," and "actually subverts its claims to realism by the sheer exaggeration of what it shows. Thus rather than pretending to show what is real it exposes its fictionality" (81). Yes, the interrupted television program at the visual center of "Harrison Bergeron" is a Randian allegory, but one that is instantly critiqued by the same *anti*-Randian morality tale in which it is embedded. The reader witnesses the

brutal felling of an iconoclastic *übermensch*, but she does so through the eyes of Harrison's intellectually castrated parents, whose "amnesia" allows only the most liminal of impressions.

Robert Uphaus states that Vonnegut's fiction frustrates the reader's pursuit of meaning and "defies problem solving" (165). Vonnegut's novels offer us the idea of absurdity or meaninglessness—whether it's the refrains "Poo-tee-weet" and "So it goes" in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the latter of which he uses to affiliate the moral contexts of all deaths, whether from old age or at the hands of horrific barbarity—even as they condition us to reject meaninglessness and relativism by their overriding preoccupation with compassion and human decency. Thus meaninglessness is actually meaning's stand-in, its cue. (Here again, the mask is the thing that reveals.) This is the nature of Vonnegut's delusory moral ambiguity, and how his stories *describe* and *approach* difficult ideas rather than attempt to answer their central questions. In the case of "Harrison Bergeron," what I think Vonnegut is actually getting at is the intellectual and cognitive damage wrought by television as its ascension matched the decline of magazine and book readership—which television itself caused. In 1961 America was a nation of a little over 183 million people, and nearly 180 million of them watched television on about 56 million sets (Minow 7). The FCC had already determined that most American children spent as much time watching television as they did in school (Minow 4). Vonnegut, ever concerned with weapons of mass destruction, had found one in nearly every living room in America.

IV. Amnesia

When I lead class discussions on this story, I ask my freshmen three questions. The first is, "Have you ever spent a mindless hour or two watching whatever happens to be on television, and, during a commercial break, someone walks into the room and asks you what you're watching and ... you can't remember?" All or nearly all of them nod because this is a common, decades-old experience. There is so much television available to us, presented in small parcels which are then subdivided by even smaller

narratives—commercials, all hyper-competitive with each other in a battle to grab our attention and to be memorable—such that all of it becomes so very trivial, and typically of low quality (on any number of bases), that it's completely possible to mentally dump any received meaning moments after the show cuts to commercial.

Second question: "What happens in this story?"

"Well, this giant fugitive teenager breaks into a TV studio—"

"Yes, but how does it happen *from the beginning*?"

"Oh. This couple—"

"George and Hazel."

"Right. George and Hazel are watching TV—"

And that's it. In one sense, that's the whole story. *Fade in*: George and Hazel watch television. *Blackout*. There is no change of physicality, no jumping forward or backward in time. The drama of Harrison and the ballerinas and the Handicapper General exists within the Bergerons' TV set, as a play within a play.

The third question: "Why doesn't Hazel need a mental handicap?"

"Because she's stupid?"

[*Laughter*]

"But that's circular. 'Hazel doesn't need a mental handicap because she doesn't need a mental handicap.'"

The answer is that Hazel doesn't need a device to arrest or interrupt her thoughts *because she already has one*: the TV set. It's the focal point of the story's physical environment, one we only "cut away from," as it were, to see the inside of a television studio. We never actually drop our focus from the TV until its tube burns out, and fully half the story is the action on screen. In fact, all but two of the harsh sounds Vonnegut describes crashing through George's mind are in sentences adjacent to lines about what's happening on television. "George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts ... George winced. So did two out of the eight ballerinas" (8). George's mental handicap is how Vonnegut cuts back and forth from the

drama on the TV to the drama in the Bergeron's living room, coupling the two technologies throughout the short duration of the story.

The primary subject of this story is technological, hidden right before our eyes. Television is what has been functioning, like a little radio transmitter in our ears, all along, immobilizing our potentially disruptive intellects by destroying the continuity of our thoughts. The equality of outcome satirized in "Harrison Bergeron" is darker and arguably more pernicious than socialism, or over-zealous egalitarianism, or even the free market. It's an "equality" achieved by the blandness of the American mind after long exposure to television.

A chapter in Vonnegut's retrospective of the 1980s, *Fates Worse Than Death*, concerning a "naive sermon" he gave in 1983 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York (139), demonstrates how his attitudes about television were, at some points, sympathetic to the central tenets of both Hattenhauer's reading of "Harrison Bergeron" as an anti-capitalist allegory, as well as the more conventional reading of the story as a response to anti-communist hysteria in the form of American attitudes and propaganda. I say "at some points" because Chapter XV of *Fates Worse Than Death*, from which the collection takes its title, both quotes the 1983 "sermon" and critiques it, revising one of its central theses: that television has had a pacifying effect on humanity through its exposure of the horror and stupidity of warfare. Contradicting his own words from 1983, Vonnegut writes,

American TV, operating in the Free Market of Ideas ... was holding audiences with simulations of one of the two things most human beings, and especially young ones, can't help watching when given the opportunity: murder. TV, and of course movies, too, were and still are making us as callous about killing and death as Hitler's propaganda made the German people during the frenzied prelude to the death camps and World War II ... What I should have said ... was that we weren't *going* to Hell. We were *in* Hell, thanks to technology which was telling us what to

do, instead of the other way around." (149-150)

Here Vonnegut unifies the ideas of modern slavery, nationalism, and the moral ramifications of wide-scale desensitization to violence through television. One cannot help but recall the ending of "Harrison Bergeron," when George and Hazel Bergeron do not remember the real killings they have just witnessed on television only a moment before, even though one of those murdered was their own son.

Joseph Alvarez, in "An Overview of 'Harrison Bergeron'," states that Vonnegut knew of FCC Chairman Newton Minow's famous 1961 speech describing television as a "vast wasteland," implying Minow's declarations about the state of television in America informed Vonnegut's short story, which first appeared in print five months later (Alvarez). Certainly, some of Vonnegut's 1983 remarks echo those made two decades earlier by Minow, a relatively young Kennedy appointee whose tenure at the FCC was brief; Minow also described the irony of television as a destructive technology that had escaped the control of its creators: "Broadcasting cannot continue to live by the numbers. Ratings ought to be the slave of the broadcaster, not his master" (5). In fact, the two men's attitudes sound reciprocal. Minow is very nearly describing a major theme of "Harrison Bergeron" when he states, "We need imagination in programming, not sterility; creativity, not imitation; experimentation, not conformity; excellence, not mediocrity. Television is filled with creative, imaginative people. You must strive to set them free" (10). Alvarez even refers to Diana Moon Glampers as "Big Sister," perhaps in reference to Whittaker Chambers's 1957 review of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, titled "Big Sister Is Watching You," in which he famously wrote, "From almost any page ... a voice can be heard, from painful necessity, commanding: 'To the gas chambers — go!'" (n. pag).

Alvarez states that it is "facile" to assume television alone is to blame for the hellish society in America in 2081, but Vonnegut is untroubled with world-building over the very brief duration of "Harrison Bergeron." Beyond noting "the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution" which enshrined the legality of the nightmarish

equality in 2081, and George's dismissal of Hazel's suggestion he illegally ameliorate his handicaps, citing the "dark ages" when "everybody [was] competing against everybody else" (9), "Harrison Bergeron" could be set in the present—in 1961, or indeed, in 2015. And it is patently reasonable, based on textual evidence, to understand television and its effects as both the instigation and focus of Vonnegut's hyperbolic satire.

Kathryn Hume writes that Vonnegut is a "novelist of ideas" whose "enterprise is to tackle problems—usually social problems, but sometimes artistic and personal" (n. pag.), and here we can see all three of these categories resting squarely in Vonnegut's crosshairs. In the 1950s, Vonnegut made an increasingly large portion of his income by placing stories in what he called "the slicks" (Klinkowitz 10)—weekly and monthly periodicals such as *Collier's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Argosy*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. He wrote at what is now known to be the end of that era, when the proliferation of television effectively killed the general interest magazine, forcing young writers to create "hack" work (Vonnegut, "The Art of Fiction"). Before the advent of television, families read stories like Vonnegut's aloud after dinner. These magazines were both entertainment and how people passed the time. Vonnegut had been making "a decent living" writing magazine pieces, which in part explains the relatively large gap between his first novel in 1952 and his second in 1959, by which time the magazine industry was rapidly shrinking (Tally, Interview). For those familiar with the current market for short literary fiction, the reaction might be to assume that while the business was better *then*, a writer would still have had to produce a great volume of work to support themselves. At least for Vonnegut, this was not precisely the case. In what ultimately became a sort of self-interview for *The Paris Review*, he detailed how the extinction of magazines affected him directly:

When I was working for General Electric, I wrote a story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," the first story I ever wrote. ... [*Collier's* fiction editor] Knox Burger ... bought the story for seven hundred and fifty dollars, six

Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice

Spring 2015 (8:1)

weeks' pay at G.E. I wrote another, and he paid me nine hundred and fifty dollars, and suggested that it was perhaps time for me to quit G.E. Which I did. I moved to Provincetown. Eventually, my price for a short story got up to twenty-nine hundred dollars a crack. Think of that. (Vonnegut, "The Art of Fiction")

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's online Consumer Price Index inflation calculator, \$2,900 in 1961 has the equivalent buying power of nearly \$23,000 in 2015; \$750 in 1961 buys nearly \$6,000 worth of goods today (USBLS).

The effective extinction of the freelance fiction writer was already an imminent reality by October 1961, when "Harrison Bergeron" was published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. A few years later, Vonnegut began to give up writing short stories specifically for magazines, and produced none at all after 1972 (Morse 372). *Slaughterhouse-Five* had secured his status as a great American novelist, rescuing him financially from his fruitful but doomed career writing for the vanishing slicks. But Vonnegut was aware of far more than just how this trend affected him personally.

Vonnegut, whose job at G.E. in the 1950s and 1960s was as a P.R. man (then a kind of hybrid between a copywriter and a corporate publicist), was nobody's fool when it came to the relationship of advertising and television. He understood that the real story on the small screen wasn't the madcap antics on *I Love Lucy* or the homespun morality of *The Andy Griffith Show*. The real story was chewing gum. Chevrolet. Lucky Strike cigarettes. The narratives of televised dramas are broken up into segments not to correspond with some classical notion of the three-act structure, but to create interruptions for commercials. As evinced by its own vapidness and interchangeability, typical television programming remains a "mask" that reveals, every six or seven minutes, its true justification. If network television shows were too good, or allowed to play uninterrupted, they might redirect our attention from the paid advertisements. "Short bursts" is the ideal structure for television, both for programs and commercials, and Hazel, who "[can't] think about anything except in short bursts," is the ideal

audience.

V. Delightful Technologies

While tech pundits have publicly wondered if new media is going to cripple television the way television extirpated magazine and book readership, television has actually spread and proliferated. If "television" is audio-visual content that comes with advertisements and product placement, then television has us surrounded. There are Internet channels such as YouTube and Vimeo, streaming services like Netflix, direct media purchasing from Amazon and iTunes—all of which are available on our computers, phones, tablets, and, now as ever, the home TV set. Competition between video game consoles is now centered on who will be the best holistic provider of home entertainment, as Sony and Microsoft fight tooth and nail for contracts with cable providers ("Game Consoles"). Everywhere there are screens—in our homes, at the gym, in waiting rooms, in jail, and mounted above hospital beds where people die and are born.

Perhaps an even better analogy to George Bergeron's ear radio has since arisen: the smartphone, whose buzzing and binging notifications are constantly dividing and sub-dividing our attention—as well as famously presenting challenges for the classroom instructor. Twitter is not unique among social media apps in how it forces users to truncate and serialize textual communication. Vine, a Twitter acquisition and video-sharing platform, lets users create and share micro-movies up to about six seconds long, which are then played on loops. Emoji and icons and abbreviations ("lol," "lmfao," etc.) must now be deployed as text, as formal language is no longer sufficient to rapidly convey meaning in the newer and ever smaller spaces.

It's clear the trend is to find the smallest possible package people will still use to transmit communication, and the pinnacle of this trend may be Snapchat, an app that lets people send photos and brief videos that will dissolve—completely erasing themselves from the device of the recipient—after a few seconds. Founder Evan

Spiegel has explained that Snapchat "is intended to counteract the trend of users being compelled to manage an idealized online identity of themselves," such as what arguably occurs on Facebook, Instagram, Ello, and Pinterest ("Snapchat"). While Spiegel has somewhat successfully defied the maxim, "the internet is forever," he has done so by creating an app completely compatible with Hazel-esque, technology-induced amnesia. Although, it must be noted, Snapchat does not perform precisely as advertised; there are bugs and client programs that allow users to capture and store files sent to them (Hill).

Regardless, the vessels of language and experience are being shrunk and made more transient. Of course, one could say the same thing about postcards, telegrams, and haiku. But postcards are made special by being occasional prose, telegraphed messages were precious due to their novelty and expense. In haiku, compression is meant to yield meaning far greater than the sum of the parts. Snapchat, Twitter, Yik Yak, and Vine feature compression of another sense altogether: that which accommodates the maximum number of users by compelling them to consume the smallest acceptable parcels of memory and bandwidth.

All of these technologies are meant to entertain and delight. But we must remember that "delight," from the Old French *delitier*—"to entice away," "to charm"—can also mean *distract* ("Delight"). "Harrison Bergeron" portrays a general homogenization, marked by cognitive and intellectual decline, however those unwilling to get up from the couch in 1961 were in much less danger than we are now, as it is far more difficult to avoid or escape the computers on our desks and the phones in our pockets. (At least in 1961 there was such a thing as the signoff.) In a public radio segment investigating the arguably ironic finding that parents who work with computer technologies tend to set relatively strict limitations on "screen time" for their own children, Susan Linn, the founder of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, states that "No parents in history have ever had to cope with the unprecedented convergence of a ubiquitous, sophisticated, alluring, habit-forming screen technology, and unfettered, unregulated

advertisement. And *that* combination is really what the major problem is" (qtd. in "Even Techies").

Conclusion

I dramatically altered my approach the last time I taught "Harrison Bergeron" to my freshmen students. It remained the first reading of the semester, but this time I had the students write their interpretations and analyses before any lecture or class discussion on the material, to preclude biasing their personal reflections with an instructor-led analysis. For an in-class, open-book, short-essay response, they were given the following prompt: "Using 'Harrison Bergeron' as analogy and evidence, describe a situation or context in which an authority would be justified in lessening inherent inequalities between individuals." By far, the response that represented the largest plurality of theses, as well as the only answer I saw reoccur with appreciable frequency, was some iteration of, "An authority has the obligation to lessen inherent inequalities between individuals when such actions become necessary to help people feel equal." I confess that I was taken aback, and felt that I had just learned a great deal about my students, or that I had just realized I knew far less about them than I previously assumed. As a group, they were unconcerned with relatively objective measurements of fairness. I kept seeing the same verb, over and over again: *feel*. That their criterion for equality was personal and experiential struck me as both pragmatic and simultaneously, disquietingly perverse.

We have been encouraged to expect millennials to be entitled and narcissistic (Twenge)—although there are some, both within and outside of our national borders, who might claim these qualities are more centrally *American* than specifically generational—but it had never occurred to me how this alleged narcissism might inflect the alleged entitlement to which it is supposedly coupled. I believe my students are justified in expecting to partake in the American Dream, broadly defined as having a degree of social equality, freedom of expression, and economic opportunity. Yet I was unprepared to consider that in order for these ideals to be *real*, they must prove

themselves attainable within the framework of personal experience. That the intentionality of equality is predicated on its phenomenology strikes me as backward, yet this is entirely resonant of the sustained and disturbingly intimate bond between viewer and screen. Both relationships rely upon a dangerous assumption, one that is every First-Year English instructor's job to address, if not unravel: that the world is pretty much as it presents itself to me. This is the central menace of delightful distraction, distilled to its most carcinogenic particles, as sifted through an in-class essay: what appears on our screens may continue to portray the world in any way the programmers choose, so long as they do not displease the viewer.

Of course, I am not totally immune from the imperative of pleasing the audience, so I can't end my "Harrison Bergeron" lesson this way. I have to find something upbeat. So I tell my freshman that we *can* escape the clutches of delightful technology. Harrison Bergeron might be a terrorist in his world, but he is a hero in ours. He reveals the hero's essential quality: the power to resist. Authority is momentarily subverted. Harrison and the ballerina float, unfettered. They kiss the ceiling. They, like all of us, have an uncontainable *spirit* irreducibly tied to their individuality. Ultimately, Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" is a story that reaffirms our basic humanity. Hazel may forget what she just saw, but she is not altogether lost. She can still shed tears.

This the students understand. This they can appreciate. Now if they'd just stop texting during class.

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Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice

Spring 2015 (8:1)

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Spring 2015 (8:1)

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