How Post-modernist Authors Destabilise Linear Narrative by Utilising Metafictional Techniques

By Tahlia Kertesz for CMN260: Novel Ideas

Post-modernist texts John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* scrutinise the relationship between metafiction and narrative structure. However, the manner in which these authors apply their techniques could not be more different. Barth's metafictional techniques render the significance of the text as merely self-reflexive, and exposes the limitations of narrative fiction by critiquing linear plot. Whereas, Vonnegut experiments with Historiographic Metafiction and self-reflexivity to enhance the significance of the text as an 'anti-war' novel, while disregarding traditional linearity. In my own creative piece, 'The Red Violin', I experiment with a secondary metafictional text to immerse the reader into the detective genre and therefore create an innovative narrative.

Waugh (2003) defines metafiction as fictional writing that self-consciously 'draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (Waugh 2003: 2-5). Waugh suggests that authors apply metafictional techniques to their work to not only explore the structures of narrative fiction, but also to explore the construction of 'reality' itself (Waugh 2003: 2-5).

Linguist L. Hjelmslev (1961) coined the term 'meta-language' - a language which takes another language as its 'object' (cited in Waugh 2003: 2-5). These two languages can be broken down into the *signifier*, the 'sound image' of the text on the page, and the *signified*, the 'concept evoked' by the text (Saussure cited in Waugh 2003: 2-5). John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* embodies these languages to display the process of a novel's construction and the limitations of originality in literature. John Barth's 1967 essay, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', claims that conventional motifs and themes of literary representation have been 'used up' to the point that originality all but ceases to exist (Barth 1984: 62-76). Saussure asserts that one can '…explore the *theory* of fiction through the practice of *writing* fiction'. Barth achieves this in *Lost in the Funhouse* by exposing the skeletal workings of a narrative by playing with the two 'meta' languages of the *signifier* and the *signified* by placing them alongside one another within the text (cited in Waugh 2003: 2-5). For example, the plot is the *signifier* of events occurring, and the *signified* is the concept of narrative structure, explicitly shown in Barth's inserted diagram, 'figure 1', which extenuates the exhausted pattern most fictional narratives adhere to: exposition, conflict, complication, climax and resolution (Saussure cited in Waugh 2003: 2-5; Matos 2013). He says:

> The *beginning* should recount the events between Ambrose's first sight of the funhouse early in the afternoon and his entering it with Magda and Peter in the evening. The *middle* would narrate all relevant events from the time he loses his way; middles have the double and contradictory function of delaying the climax while at the same time preparing the reader for it (Barth cited in Matos 2013).

Matos observes that although the narrator claims this is how *Funhouse* should be structured, Barth disregards linear plot 'by delivering a narrative with a prolonged exposition' and rearranging details of the plot's 'climax' throughout the text (Matos 2013) Furthermore, the dominant symbol in the text, the funhouse itself, not only serves as a multifunctional symbol representing the non-linear, labyrinth-like structure of the narrative, but also as a metaphoric representation of the adolescent rite of passage (Erten 2012: 153). Barth begins the narrative with a question 'For whom is the funhouse fun?', and answers, 'Perhaps for lovers.' He then adds, 'For Ambrose it is a place of fear and confusion' (Bath 2014), identifying the narrative as a 'coming of age' story for the protagonist, which Barth uses to expose the heavily overused nature of the theme (Erten 2012: 153). He contends:

> One reason for not writing a lost-in-the-funhouse story is that either everybody's felt what Ambrose feels, in which case it goes without saying, or else no normal person feels such things, in which case Ambrose is a freak. 'Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?' (Barth 2014).

Barth reflects the fear that all authors feel: that there is nothing new to say about a motif that has been stretched and played with many times before. The author may be dead, as Roland Barthes says in his controversial essay 'The Death of Author': 'To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text' and on what can be achieved within a narrative, [however] 'by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and the world as text)' can free it from overuse (Roland Barthe cited in Burke 1998: 24). Barth's construction of *Lost in the Funhouse* refuses to hide anything. Evidently, by constantly demonstrating what techniques and conventions all authors abide by and apply, Barth critiques linear narrative structure, re- arranging it, and comments on the exhaustion of motifs within literature, thus rendering the plot of *Funhouse* as merely a self-reflexive tool depicting how writers assemble narrative.

Vonnegut's style of metafiction within *Slaughterhouse Five* offers another way to enhance narrative meaning through breaking linearity, in this case, to comment on history and representation. Freese infers that Vonnegut 'uses the science-fiction motif of time-travel to break up not only the subjective experience, but also the objective measurement of time, and thereby to spatialize [sic] his tale' (Peter Freese cited in Bloom: 2009: 23). The spatial form of the novel is highly fragmented and events occur in non-chronological order, which marks it as an innovative novel. Vonnegut even apologises in the author's preface, saying the novel is 'so short and jumbled and jangled' because 'there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre' (Vonnegut 2000: 16). By introducing the Tralfamadorian fourth-dimensional view of time as a single image where the past, present and future all occur simultaneously, Vonnegut also presents a pessimistic, resigned outlook on death, as a human can be dead in one moment and alive in all other moments of time (Vonnegut 2000: 22). The repetition of the phrase 'so it goes' cannot be mere coincidence, as it appears within every time zone that the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, visits on his 'unstuck' journey through his own timeline. Farrell suggests that the recurring refrain serves as a punctuation point for each death, forcing the reader to notice death rather than 'evening them out' and thinking of it as inconsequential as the Tralfamadorians believe (Farrell 2008: 361). Therefore, it can be inferred that Vonnegut did have something

'intelligent to say about a massacre' (Vonnegut 2000: 16). By constructing a disorienting non-linear narrative, Vonnegut makes the readers more aware of any repeated phrases such as 'so it goes', and encourages them to notice each account of death within the text. In doing this, Vonnegut ensures that those who died in the Dresden firebombing are not forgotten from history, as we remember them through fiction. Furthermore, as an 'anti-war' novel on the Dresden firebombing, *Slaughterhouse* corresponds with Hutcheon's definition of Historiographic Metafiction as writing that combines self-aware fictional elements with historic events (Linda Hutcheon cited in Schneider 2008: 2). Heisenberg (1972: 126) asserts that it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer, whom is describing it, always changes what is observed in some way (cited in Waugh 2003: 2-5). The metafictionist is conscious of this dilemma as they take reality and remould it to suit narrative conventions. In the case of war-history, the application of Vonnegut's metafictional techniques comment on the notion that 'there is no history, except as it is composed' (James Baldwin & E.L Doctorow cited in Bloom 2009). We see evidence of this as Vonnegut continuously breaks the narrative frame and intrudes upon the story to say 'I was there' (Vonnegut 2000: 67) and 'That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book' (Vonnegut 2000: 125). By translating his experiences of the Dresden firebombing into a work of Historiographic Metafiction, Vonnegut undoubtedly suggests that history, much like fiction, is subjective to human construct, and as such we are unable to present an objective account of history without intruding our thoughts upon it in some way (Heisenberg 1972 cited in Waugh 2003: 126). Therefore, not only can *Slaughterhouse* be considered a novel that disrupts linear narrative structure; it is also a self-aware novel that breaks narrative frames in order to explore the dilemma of subjectivity and representation within history and fiction.

In my creative piece, 'The Red Violin', I experiment with actively engaging the reader by layering narrative with a secondary metafictional text. My creative praxis exists in two different times: story time experienced by the characters and discourse time experienced by the readers. Narrative theorist, Genette, categorises the manipulation of these two times as either analepsis (flashback) or prolepsis (flash-forward) (Genette cited in Bae & Young 2008: 156). The metafictional red text within 'The Red Violin' exhibits elements of prolepsis as it can read prior to the detective narrative as a foreshadowing device simultaneously with the detective narrative or after as a reflective device. In doing this, 'The Red Violin' breaks conventional narrative structures as it offers alternative systems of consumption. The red text seemingly randomly tossed among the narrative encourages the reader to piece it together. Once the red text is placed in conjunction with one another it creates an authoritative guide:

> Are you paying attention? Good. Sitting comfortably. Excellent. Now let's
> begin. You have two jobs to do. Find out who he is and why he kidnapped
> her. Just go with it. Be a detective.

This guide, written in second person, engages the reader whom would otherwise complacently consume the narrative. Evidently, this reimagined application of metafiction

within the detective genre is highly experimental and is subject to complications, especially involving the unstable cohesion of third-person-limited narration alongside second person metafictional commentary. In the future I will endeavour to re-work any irregularities of voice and polish my creative praxis so that it might more effectively engage readers.

Undoubtedly post-modern authors can evoke diverse meaning in their texts by destabilising traditional narrative linearity through various metafictional techniques. Barth's techniques intrude upon his narrative to critique linear structure while commenting on the exhaustion of overused literary motifs, thus reducing the plot of *Lost in the Funhouse* to a pretense in which he exposes a novel's typically linear construction. Whereas, Vonnegut purposefully constructs *Slaughterhouse Five* in non-chronological order to engage the reader and explore the dilemma of subjectivity and representation within a Historgraphic Metafictional work. In my own creative piece, 'The Red Violin', I attempted to experiment with a secondary metafictional red text interwoven within detective narrative in order to challenge the reader's idea of how a narrative can be constructed much like Barth and Vonnegut have.

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