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Exploring Kitsch: Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Parastoo Nasrollahzadeh
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Luca Pocci
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the concept of kitsch in two prominent novels of the twentieth century: Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Kundera in his novel offers a debate on kitsch, tracing it back to its original metaphysical meaning. In Vonnegut's novel, there is no direct discussion of kitsch. However, both the style of Vonnegut's novel and the world he depicts in and through the novel are imbued with kitsch and kitsch elements. The thesis offers a general overview of the concept of kitsch in the introductory chapter. The first chapter then aims to show how kitsch could be an attitude or behavior influencing the characters' lives. The second chapter, provides analysis on how kitsch contributes to the narrative fabric of Vonnegut's novel and to the fictional world of Billy Pilgrim. Both these novels can help us explore the multiple and complex expressions of kitsch, the threat it poses, and the necessity it imposes.

Keywords

Kitsch, Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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1. Introduction

1.1 An Overview of the Debate on Kitsch

Kitsch is one of the key terms in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Part six of the book “The Grand March,” in particular, offers a discussion of the idea of kitsch and the whole novel plays around it through the lives of the four main characters. According to Kundera, “the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 248). He goes on to explain:

Kitsch is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. (248)

Kundera mentions that the term was almost unknown in France even recently and it was known, in an “impoverished sense,” as “junk art (*art de pacotille*)” (*The Art of the Novel* 134). Kundera states that the word in French that “expresses the worst *aesthetic reprobation* the way the notion of kitsch expresses it” is *vulgaire, vulgarité* (*The Curtain* 52). The word vulgar comes from *vulgus*, meaning “people”: “‘vulgar’ is what pleases the people” (52). Kundera tells an anecdote related to the early years of his emigration to France where he was seen by others as “wrapped in an aura of respectable sadness” due to the country he came from and everything attached to it: “persecution, gulag, freedom, banishment from the native land, courage, resistance, totalitarianism, police terror”. He is sitting at a bar with a Parisian intellectual and in order to “banish the kitsch of those solemn specters,” he tells a story about how the police control in

Czechoslovakia had taught him and his fellow countrymen “the delectable art of hoax”. His way of amusing the man produces an opposite effect and the man solemnly replies that he doesn’t find the story funny. Kundera, then, concludes: “what held us apart was the clash of two aesthetic attitudes: the man allergic to kitsch collides with the man allergic to vulgarity” (54).

I believe this anecdote very properly expresses the difficulties of defining the concept of kitsch and assigning very clear-cut borders to it. Kitsch is a very nebulous concept. According to Theodor Adorno’s definition, “kitsch or sugary trash is the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart. Therefore, kitsch, purified beauty, becomes subject to an aesthetic taboo that in the name of beauty pronounces kitsch to be ugly” (71). Kundera found the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart vulgar and therefore an aesthetic taboo or kitsch; but for the man who was sitting with him vulgarity stands for the ugliness that distorts the ideal purified beauty of the image. Referring to the complexity of the concept of kitsch, Calinescu says:

We are dealing here indeed with one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics. Like art itself, of which it is both an imitation and a negation, kitsch cannot be defined from a single vantage point. And again like art—or for that matter anti-art—kitsch refuses to lend itself even to a negative definition, because it simply has no single compelling, distinct counterconcept. (232)

As Herman Broch warns, “rigid and neat definitions” of kitsch are not to be expected. According to Calinescu “[T]he word first came to use in the 1860s and 1870s in the jargon of painters and art dealers in Munich, and was employed to designate cheap artistic stuff” (234). Having diverse connotations, the etymology of the word kitsch is also ambiguous: some believe that “the German word derives from the English ‘sketch,’ mispronounced by artists in Munich and applied derogatorily to those cheap images brought as souvenirs by tourists” (234). Another

view sees kitsch as derived from the German word *verkitschen*, meaning “to make cheap” in the Mecklenburg dialect. The other hypothesis Ludwig Giesz mentions links the word to the German verb *kitschen*, which in the Southwestern part of Germany means “collecting rubbish from the street” and also “to make new furniture from old” (qtd. in Calinescu 234). Also, “to play with and smooth out the mud” is associated with the German verb *kitschen* (Mihăilescu 49). According to Calinescu, these definitions altogether contribute to the characteristics of kitsch: “first, there’s often something sketchy about kitsch. Second, in order to be affordable, kitsch must be relatively cheap. Last, aesthetically speaking, kitsch must be considered rubbish or junk” (235). *The Oxford English Dictionary* associates kitsch with poor taste due to “excessive garishness or sentimentality”. As it was mentioned, the term was translated into French as “art tape-à-l’œil” (garish art) or “art de pacotille” (junk or cheap art). However, such uses reduce “the semantic richness” and “complexity” inherent in the German word kitsch (Riout 538).

Kitsch is considered to be a product of modernity “technologically as well as aesthetically,” even though these two notions seem to be “mutually exclusive”: modernity suggests “antitraditional presentness, experiment, newness ... [and] commitment to change,” while kitsch suggests “repetition, banality, triteness” (Calinescu 226). But it is modernity’s emphasis on the present that evokes the instant beauty and the prompt pleasure of kitsch. The fleetingness of time, the transitoriness of things, the lack of stability and permanence, and consequently the unpredictability of the future and the contingency of history, associated with modernity call attention to the notion of time as something that paradoxically is both valued and valueless. Hence, the great paradox of kitsch, according to Calinescu: “kitsch is designed both to ‘save’ and ‘kill’ time. To save time, in the sense that its enjoyment is both effortless and instantaneous; to kill

time, in the sense that, like a drug, it frees man temporarily from his disturbed time consciousness, justifying ‘aesthetically,’ and making bearable an otherwise empty, meaningless present” (8-9).

In addition to being a result of aesthetic modernity, kitsch is the consequence of “the practical modernity of bourgeois civilization” (Calinescu 4). It is linked to the technological and economic development of the period and was brought into being by the industrial revolution (8).

A modern democracy, according to Alexis de Tocqueville, can lead to “a lowering of standards in both creation and consumption” (qtd. in Calinescu 226). The increase in the number of consumers demands rapid production; combined together these two factors are expected to generate a financial reward for the writers, or artists. As Mihăilescu suggests “Kitsch evolves from the culture of the Mass to mass culture” (60).

Hermann Broch considers kitsch as a “*specific* product of romanticism” (61). There is a nostalgic quality that is common to both kitsch and romanticism. Kitsch offers “an escape into the idyll of history where set conventions are still valid” (Broch 73), a time that looks more homogenous and continuous due to a “respect for tradition” (Calinescu 246). Looking back to an untouched past and glorifying it was the spirit of the age of Romanticism. The kitsch spirit, associated with romanticism, “wants to keep past values alive for ever, and sees the continuity of the course of history as a mirror of eternity” (Broch 72). But the fact that it is “falling out of context makes kitsch not fantastic as it apparently appears to be but absurd “(75).

A change in the aesthetic ideal, from transcendence to immanence, is also a product of romanticism. The absolute unattainable beauty, placed outside the system and thus keeping the system infinite and open, is replaced by a beauty found in the ordinary everyday things (Calinescu 239). Beauty becomes the sole immediate goal for any work of art and it equals truth. Broch

recognizes kitsch as “the element of evil in the value system of art,” because the kitsch system “requires its followers to ‘work beautifully’, while the art system issues the ethical order: ‘work well’ “(63).

Tomas Kulka analyzes the connection of kitsch’s emergence with modernity or romanticism as “two distinct lines of arguments” (13). The “sociohistorical or sociocultural aspects” of kitsch connect it to modernity and “the art-historical, stylistic, and aesthetic aspects” make kitsch a product of romanticism (14). Nevertheless, Kulka suggests that these two aspects support each other, especially as they both assign the same starting point to the appearance of kitsch, which is the second half of the nineteenth century (14).

In the introduction to *Kitsch and Art*, Tomas Kulka mentions different objections to the attempt at defining kitsch. Everyone knows what kitsch is; in his view, it is very obvious that kitsch is bad and has negative connotations. According to the subjective relativists, kitsch could be “in the eyes of the beholder” rather than possessing some formal features: whether something is identified as kitsch or not is a matter of taste and tastes are different and they depend on “sociological or anthropological context rather than [...] some ‘intrinsic’ structural properties” (1). These objections make the task of defining kitsch difficult. However, Kulka believes that the fact that the specific term, kitsch, exists negates these views (3). If kitsch is to be seen as exclusively dependent on sociohistorical contexts and therefore prone to change based on different historical or social periods, then the word “stereotype” or several similar words could be simply used in place of kitsch.

Kulka proposes the idea that “even if one is convinced that sociohistorical aspects are central to the study of kitsch, one cannot consider kitsch as a purely sociohistorical category” (6). He tries to take kitsch as an aesthetic category and to explain the aesthetically deficient aspect of

kitsch. Kitsch has been considered aesthetically bad or worthless; however, despite this aesthetic badness, kitsch appeals to the masses. And yet again, the appeal to the masses does not make kitsch any worthy (19). Why does kitsch appeal to the masses? Kitsch, or in particular a kitsch object, evokes “unreflective emotional responses” (26). Kulka points out that kitsch objects or themes are “highly charged with stock emotions” (28), that they are “instantly and effortlessly identifiable” (33) and do not “substantially enrich our associations” related to them (37). Therefore, our experience in encountering a kitsch object is not aesthetically enriching in a meaningful way. The points mentioned above jointly lead to the “essentially *parasitic* nature of kitsch” (41): “they suggest that kitsch does not create beauty of its own, that its appeal is not generated by the aesthetic merit of the work itself but by the emotional appeal of the depicted object” (42). According to Broch, what is important in both arts and science is “the creation of new expressions of reality”, not merely a search for “new areas of beauty” that would just create “sensations”. The reason for this is that “art is made up of intuitions about reality, and is superior to kitsch solely thanks to these intuitions. If this was not so one could certainly content oneself with previously discovered spheres of beauty, e.g. with Egyptian sculpture, which is without doubt unsurpassable” (61). In other words, the system of imitation that characterizes kitsch lacks the creativity, originality and imagination associated with the process of creation; it only appeals “to the sentiment” (Broch 75). The work of art can be copied but the method of creation cannot. Kitsch only reproduces the artistic effect.

Kulka also attributes to kitsch a “transparency” that results from a lack of “intensity”. Lack of intensity consists of “a special kind of redundancy” and this redundancy does not entail the possibility to omit specific features but the possibility to interchange them with “a wide range of alternatives.” In other words, kitsch refuses “to commit itself to the specific particularity of its

features” (114). Kitsch works are like “transparent symbols”. It is not the specific qualities of the symbols that matter, but, rather, “with kitsch the *what* overshadows the *how*” (114-15). This is in line with what Greenberg says: “if the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch . . . imitates its effect” (15) In his 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, Clement Greenberg contrasts kitsch with avant-garde as two prevailing concepts or cultural phenomena in the art world, both products of modernism, having emerged at the same time: “where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard” (9). Greenberg too introduces kitsch as a product of the industrial revolution that established “universal literacy” (9). Literacy, which prior to the industrial revolution was linked to “the formal culture,” evolved into a common and ordinary skill and, thus, from being exclusive to particular individuals or “refined tastes”, it became a “minor skill” (9-10):

The peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but they did not win the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city’s traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture whose background was the countryside, and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. (10)

Therefore, kitsch becomes the “simulacra of genuine culture” (10).

Greenberg defines kitsch in contrast with avant-garde as he believes that the precondition for the existence of kitsch is the availability of a “fully matured cultural tradition” that kitsch can take advantage of and borrow from. Kitsch takes from avant-garde devices, themes, tricks and

stratagems and “converts them into a system, and discards the rest” (10). It draws its life blood, as Greenberg puts it, from this “reservoir of accumulated experience” (10). In other words, “kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. . . . Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time” (10). Kitsch is accidental beauty while avant-garde is purposeful beauty. While in avant-garde art the actual medium or the form matters more than the subject, in kitsch art the priority given to an evident subject-matter leads to a neglect of the process of creation.

Kitsch is not bound to geographical, national or cultural borders but it has become a “universal culture, wiping out folk culture” (12). It can easily deceive and fool, sometimes even the avant-garde could fall into the trap of kitsch as kitsch is not always worthless, but it has sometimes created some “accidental and isolated” instances that are “authentic”, “of merit” and obviously profitable. Unless one has “true passion” for genuine culture, it is hard to resist the power of kitsch that surrounds, pushes and tempts one towards its fake beauty (11-12).

Greenberg attempts to explain the source of kitsch’s “virulence” and “irresistible attractiveness” (12). He mentions Dwight Macdonald’s claim that political regimes are to be blamed for the prevalence of kitsch as the official or dominant culture. Macdonald talks in particular about Soviet Russia and proposes that there the masses have been “conditioned” by the governments to admire social realism (12-13). Greenberg rejects this idea and comments that the appeal of kitsch to the masses, “neither in backward Russia nor in the advanced West,” is simply attributable to political and social conditioning. He believes that taste has varied over the ages, but “not beyond certain limits” and there has always been a “general agreement”, “a constant distinc-

tion made between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere.” This means that “[K]itsch, by virtue of a rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased this distinction in practice” (13). Therefore, the emergence of kitsch implies that there should be “no discontinuity between art and life” (14). The values of art should be grasped without “reflection” and the result should be an “unreflective enjoyment” (15).

In “The Structure of Bad Taste”, Umberto Eco offers a semiotic and stylistic analysis of kitsch; he attributes to kitsch characteristics such as “fungibility”, “redundancy”, “accumulation and repetition” and “a secondary imitation of the primary power of images” that lead to a kind of “artistic hoax” (182-3). He also relates kitsch to the mass culture that needs “immediate” and “ready-made” effects thereby placing it in “dialectic opposition to the ‘high culture’ proposed by the avant-garde” (185). Eco refers to a great extent to Dwight MacDonald’s definitions of Masscult and Midcult. While Masscult’s purpose is basically to please the crowd by any means such as “the production of effects without pretending to be art” (189), Midcult is “Masscult’s pretentious bastard” and has all the “essential qualities” of Masscult (189) but “with a cultural figleaf,” as Eco suggests by quoting Dwight Macdonald (190). Midcult becomes synonymous with kitsch: it borrows avant-garde’s features, after they are worn out, distorts them to make them understandable to the mass, with an emphasis on the effects and above all, it sells itself as high culture, and art (192). In other words, Midcult is based on falsehood. Both Midcult and Masscult then contribute to the concept of kitsch. For Eco, identifying kitsch or the structure of bad taste is more important than eliminating it. He believes that “a well-balanced cultural context does not require the eradication of this sort of message; it only needs to keep them under control, dose them, and see to it that they are not sold and consumed as art” (195). In his view

[T]he term Kitsch does not apply only to the kind of art that aims at producing an immediate effect; other forms of art, and other respectable activities, have a similar aim. Nor does it simply designate a formal imbalance, since that is a characteristic of most ugly works. Nor does it refer only to the kind of work that has borrowed stylemes which have previously appeared in a different context, since this can happen without lapsing into bad taste. Kitsch refers to the kind of work that tries to justify its provocative ends by assuming the garb of an aesthetic experience, by palming itself off as art. (203)

According to this description, kitsch could be differentiated from bad taste, as good or bad taste are “flimsy categories” (194). A critique of mass culture or midcult could slip into “snobbery” and “the difference between critical sensibility and snobbery is minimal” (194). Kitsch has usually been referred to with regard to the visual arts. Denys Riout quotes from Abraham A. Moles’

Le Kitsch:

It is not a semantically explicit denotative phenomenon, it is an intuitive and subtle connotative phenomenon; it is one of the types of relationships that human beings have with things, a way of being rather than an object, or even a style. Of course, we often talk of “kitsch style,” but as one of the objectifiable supports of the kitsch attitude, and we can see this style becoming more formalized into an artistic period. (539)

Herman Broch also suggests that kitsch is not only related to the arts but it is “a form of behaviour with regard to life” (49). Broch elaborates on this as follows:

In a broad sense art always reflects the image of contemporary man, and if kitsch represents falsehood (it is often so defined, and rightly so), this falsehood falls back on the person in need of it, on the person who uses this highly considerate mirror so as to be able to recognize himself in the counterfeit image it throws back of him and to confess his own

lies (with a delight which is to a certain extent sincere). This is the phenomenon with which we shall concern ourselves. (49)

Broch is referring to the existence of the kitschman and his need for kitsch. There is an interconnection between the two. Kundera, in his *Art of the Novel*, reasons along the lines of Broch: “there’s a kitsch attitude. Kitsch behavior. The kitsch person’s (*Kitschmensch*) need for kitsch; it is the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection” (134). The kitschman is “the prisoner of a purely conventional system of symbols” (63).

Poor taste, fake beauty, aesthetic lie, “false aesthetic consciousness” (Calinescu 241), vulgarity, status-seeking through appearance, “parody of catharsis” (Adorno 239), immediacy, quick instant pleasure, repetition through imitation, decoration, adornments, triteness, offering an escape from the banality of life, valueless art, lack of originality and creativity, and sentimentality are all features associated with kitsch. As Calinescu argues “kitsch is a world of aesthetic make-believe and self-deception” (262). It is “a response to the widespread modern sense of spiritual vacuum: it fills the empty time of leisure with ‘fun’ or ‘excitement’ and it ‘hallucinates’ [...] empty spaces with an infinitely variegated assortment of ‘beautiful’ appearances” (251-2). It offers answers to what is ungraspable. As Kundera’s narrator says in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*: “in the realm of totalitarian kitsch, all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions [. . .] A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it” (254), revealing the unintelligible truth underneath the intelligible lie.

1.2 Kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*

Milan Kundera, the Czech novelist, short-story writer, playwright, essayist, and poet, left Czechoslovakia for France in 1975 and in 1979 he was stripped of his citizenship by the Czech government. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was first published in 1984, in France, in an English and French translation. In 1985, the novel was published in the original Czech but it was banned in Czechoslovakia until 1989, until the collapse of the communist party in Czechoslovakia. Italo Calvino praises the book as an expression of the art of storytelling (55); however, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* could be considered a novel of ideas, due to the essayistic style in which it is written. Kundera inserts his authorial commentaries in the narrative and his reflections are sometimes so merged with those of the characters that it is hard to distinguish between the two. Also, Kundera mixes fictitious and biographical elements in his novel. Therefore, we are justified in identifying the narrator with Kundera himself. As the authorial voice tells us:

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own I ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author's confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become. (*The Unbearable Lightness* 221)

The authorial presence of Kundera is also evident in his commentary on the art of the novel and the process of writing. He draws attention to the creation of the characters and the fictionality of the created world they dwell in: "It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb;

they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying *Einmal ist keinmal*. Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach” (39).

The Unbearable Lightness of Being starts with Kundera’s narrator’s reflections on Nietzsche’s myth of the eternal return that suggests that “everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!” (3). Such a life implies an entrapment within the lived moments, whether excruciating or beautiful, for eternity. On the other hand, a life which only happens once and disappears never to return again is “dead in advance” and “whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing” (3), once it has come to an end. Believing in the idea of eternal return has some horrific consequences: “if every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make” (5). Nietzsche has appropriately called this myth the heaviest of burdens. Kundera’s narrator suggests that if eternal recurrence is a heavy burden, then our lives which are never to return “stand out against it in all their splendid lightness” (5). Parmenides, who considered lightness as positive and weight as negative, is also mentioned. However, this dilemma of lightness/weight is not that simply resolvable. The heaviest of burdens could crush us, but it is “simultaneously an image of life’s most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become” (5). It is “in the light of these reflections” that Tomas is seen, or is born into the world of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* “standing at the window of his flat and looking across the court-yard at the opposite walls, not knowing what to do” (6).

Kundera creates characters and has them live their lives in the light of his reflections on kitsch. In other words, it is through the lives of the four main characters in the novel - Tomas,

Tereza, Sabina and Franz - that Kundera's reflections begin to make their way through the readers' heads. Kundera writes: "what is unbearable in life is not being, but being one's self" (*Immortality* 288). He believes that the quest of his novels has been a quest of the self: "To apprehend the self in my novels is to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its *existential code*" (*The Art of the Novel* 29). The code of each character is made of certain key words. For Tomas, lightness, and weight; for Tereza, body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, and paradise; for Sabina and Franz (as we see in the chapter called "Words Misunderstood"), woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light, parades, beauty, country, cemetery, and strength. By focusing on these codes for each character, Kundera undertakes his interrogation of their individual worlds.

Set in Czechoslovakia around the time of the Russian invasion and the Prague spring period, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* focuses on the life of Tomas, a surgeon who, following a life of womanizing, has embraced lightness and is "an unencumbered man" (*The Terminal Paradox* 202) until he meets Tereza, a simple waitress from a rural town. Being torn between the weight of his (com)passion for Tereza and his own life, Tomas finally gives up on everything that was once of importance to him to follow Tereza to the countryside. Sabina, the painter mistress of Tomas, on the other hand is the epitome of lightness as she remains unattached to any constraint up until the end.

The original title for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was "The Planet of Inexperience" (*The Art of the Novel* 132). As mentioned in the novel "Any schoolboy can do experiments in the physics laboratory to test various scientific hypotheses. But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not" (*The Unbearable Lightness* 34). The existential code of the main character Tomas centers

around this issue: the lightness of living resulting from the irrevocability of things and the contingency of events.

Slaughterhouse-Five, the most prominent among Kurt Vonnegut's works, was written fifteen years before *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The two novels, which are the hallmarks in their authors' literary production, deal with a period of war and unrest that contributes to shape the existential dilemmas in the characters' lives. Both works put forward important questions in connection with a search for meaning vis-à-vis the contingency of time and history. While Kundera's text could be considered a meta-kitsch novel or an essayistic novel on kitsch, Vonnegut's novel is saturated with kitsch, even though the term kitsch is never mentioned directly. The concern with time plays an important and central role in each novel.

Both authors are present in their works; they both pose questions for which they don't provide answers. However, while Kundera's narrator in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* plays an important part in leading things forward by his direct commentaries, it is largely through the planet Tralfamadore and the Tralfamadorian philosophy that Vonnegut deals with the questions put forward in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In other words, these novels present very different fictional worlds: these fictional worlds are different in terms of style and genre, and in the way in which the characters' quandaries are approached and, consequently, in the overall impact they have on the reader. Taking into account Kundera's description that the whole novel is a long "meditative interrogation" or "interrogative meditation" (*The Art of the Novel* 31) one could argue that both *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* can be read as texts that share an important common denominator. They can be seen as texts that interrogate and meditate on the role that kitsch plays in mitigating the human feeling of entrapment in history and time.

Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death was published in 1969. In 1945, during the night of February 13, about 3000 tons of bombs were dropped upon the residential center of Dresden by British and American bombers and about 135000 civilians were exterminated and a city was annihilated "within the space of 14 hours and ten minutes" (Freese 209). *Slaughterhouse-Five* tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, a chaplain's assistant in World War Two, who survived this massacre as a prisoner of war inside a slaughterhouse in Dresden.

Kurt Vonnegut was born in 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana, to third-generation German-American parents. He dropped out of his chemistry major in 1943 and enlisted in the United States Army as a private in World War Two. He was sent to Europe and was captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. He was imprisoned along with other Americans in an underground slaughterhouse called *Schlachthof-fünf* in Dresden, where he survived the firebombing of the city in 1945. *Slaughterhouse-Five* was largely based on Vonnegut's World War Two experience. This "anti-war" novel, in addition to focusing on Billy Pilgrim, who goes through almost the same events Vonnegut has, introduces the extraterrestrial planet Tralfamadore and time traveling. It is important to mention that the book used to be banned by various schools and libraries, and that was due to the fact, which is mentioned in the novel, that the Dresden firebombing had remained almost a secret in American society: "I was supposedly writing a book about Dresden. It 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" (9-10). An associate professor at Missouri State University had said about *Slaughterhouse-Five*: "This is a book that contains so much profane language, it would make a sailor blush with shame, . . . The 'f word' is plastered on almost every other page. The content ranges from naked men and women in cages together so that others can watch them having sex to God telling

people that they better not mess with his loser, bum of a son, named Jesus Christ” (Morais). This comment brings to mind the concept of kitsch in connection with ‘shit’. In other words, “irreverent tone and purportedly obscene content” and language (Baldassarro), creating “false conceptions of American history and government” and teaching “principles contrary to Biblical morality and truth” (Alanna) were among the most important reasons *Slaughterhouse-Five* “began its history as one of America’s most loved, yet most banned books of the 20th century” (Baldassarro). It revealed the historical shit people would have preferred not to face.

In a somewhat similar manner to Kundera, Vonnegut’s presence in his novel is strong and noticeable. However, this presence is of a different kind. Whereas it is easier to take Kundera’s narrator as a ‘voice’ identifiable with the author, Vonnegut’s narrator is closer to being a character in the novel. The way Vonnegut mixes fictitious and biographical elements in his novel could best be noticed through the character of the narrator, who borrows a lot of actual facts from Kurt Vonnegut’s life and yet never mentions his name. Therefore, addressing him as the author-narrator would best reflect the context. Twice in the novel, the connection between the author and the narrator is directly pointed out. First, when Billy is taken prisoner by the Germans along with other Americans, the novel reads: “that was I. That was me. That was the author of this book” (120); the second time is when Billy and the other American POWs first arrive at Dresden: “that was I. that was me. the only other city I’d ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana” (141). Just like the author-narrator in his novel, Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis and he was at war and was taken prisoner by the Germans. The narrator also talks about his being a student in the Department of Anthropology in the University of Chicago, his service as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau, his working for General Electric in Schenectady, New York, his

teaching creative writing in the famous Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa and his being a writer at Cape cod. All these facts are true to Kurt Vonnegut's life. However, all the details that are mentioned in the first chapter about the process of writing this "lousy little book" (2) could be either factual or fictional. Not only does the author-narrator in the novel never mention his name, but he also informs the reader: "I've changed all the names" (1). This serves to discourage the reader from simply assuming that the narrator is Vonnegut himself, despite all their commonalities.

This author-narrator in the novel tells the story of Billy Pilgrim. Billy is held in Dresden as a prisoner of war by the Germans, survives the firebombing of Dresden, becomes an optometrist, marries a rich girl, survives a fatal airplane crash, comes unstuck in time, or rather travels in time to a planet called Tralfamadore where he learns the Tralfamadorians' philosophy of life. Not only does the narrator have a lot in common with Vonnegut, but Billy Pilgrim also shares a lot with both of them. Therefore, one must not only distinguish Vonnegut the author from the narrator, but also Vonnegut from Billy Pilgrim. In terms of syntax and sentence structure, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is written in a simple way that is Vonnegut's characteristic style. However, the interweaving of the author, the narrator and Billy Pilgrim, the irony and black humor and the going back and forth in time and in space make this novel a composite text and a challenging read.

It is important to note that, in reference to the time when *Slaughterhouse-Five* was written, Klinkowitz writes: "the personal extravagances and public idiocies of current life were eclipsing even satirists' abilities to make fun of the American scene—the scene was simply doing too good a job of it itself" (82). This statement brings to mind what Kundera writes in a letter

to Tomas Kulka: life is so saturated with kitsch that it has become “self-evident and thus invisible. . . . We are surrounded by kitsch. Kitsch is everywhere: television, newspaper, our private lives, politics. Even war is presented as kitsch.”¹ Seen from the perspective of Kundera’s statement, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a good example of a text that explores this phenomenon of kitsch saturation. There is no direct discussion of kitsch as in Kundera’s novel. However, both the style of Vonnegut’s novel and the world he depicts in and through the novel are imbued with kitsch and kitsch elements.

Vonnegut’s novel not only mixes different genres but also makes use of excerpts from various sources, and all these different ingredients are stirred into the recipe of the novel. This aspect could justify a definition of *Slaughterhouse-Five* as a pastiche. As Mambrol observes, “though pastiche commonly refers to the mixing of genres, the work may include elements like metafiction and temporal distortion” (Mambrol). The anti-war novel blends with science fiction, and autobiographical metafiction merges with a biographical account, combining history and fiction. Vonnegut has somehow reiterated, repeated, or accumulated many original sources to write a story he finds difficult to tell. As the narrative voice in *Slaughterhouse-Five* says: “there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” and instead of an “anti-war” novel one could write an “anti-glacier” one (3). Also, Vonnegut’s novel, as a metafictional text is composed based on the opposition between “the construction of a fictional illusion . . . and the laying bare of that illusion” (Waugh 6). Metafictional form can serve the purpose of suggesting that “reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures” (7). Consequently, “the ordered reality (the well-made plot, chronological sequence, . . . the rational connection between what characters ‘do’ and what they

¹ Kulka, Tomas. *Kitsch and Art*. University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, back cover.

‘are’, the causal connection between ‘surface’ details and the ‘deep’, ‘the scientific laws’ of existence” are rejected (7). This metafictional quality of *Slaughterhouse-Five* draws attention to how individuals construct their experience and sense of history in the real world.

Is it possible for “the present” to be only “present” and for you to be present only at the present moment? As Kundera says, “there would seem to be nothing more obvious, more tangible and palpable, than the present moment. And yet it eludes us completely. All the sadness of life lies in that fact” (*The Art of the Novel* 25). Each moment contains a little universe of sensations, thoughts, images, ideas, as well as the past and the future within it. The present moment seems to elude Billy completely as he, being “spastic in time,” is living all his experiences in time in one single moment. But is this a sad reality for Billy? Billy first comes unstuck in time during the war, in 1944, before he even mentions the Tralfamadorians, who kidnap him in 1967, by his own admission. While Tomas is “born” from the saying “*Einmal ist Keinmal*” and from Kundera’s reflections on the theme of eternal return, Billy is born from “looking back,” from Vonnegut’s reflections on how human it is to look back and to “be a pillar of salt”. If, for Tomas, everything is light because it happens only once, if a war between two African kingdoms lacks the horror it should have because it happened only once, for Billy each event is an experience to be repeated over and over again. This state of repetition makes his existence ‘heavy’ and also sets him apart from the majority of his fellow Americans who know nothing about the Dresden tragedy. Billy’s being trapped in the amber of the moment makes “*Einmal ist Keinmal*” sound like nothing but an illusion. In Vonnegut’s novel, the possibility to escape from the trap that the world has become is a hallucinatory world in which all time could be seen as the stretch of the Rocky Mountains. Billy’s escape from the clocks and the calendar that slay time by representing

it like dots rather than spaghetti lines becomes possible by his time travels. Any possible predictability of what he is going to face next is eliminated from his life, and he is constantly pushed from one stage in time to another without a sequential linearity. Billy's time travels embody Kundera's idea of the planet of inexperience. What is light in the world of Kundera, becomes heavy in Vonnegut's world. And yet, how does Billy embrace this heaviness? This will be discussed in the chapter on *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

In chapter two of this thesis which is focused on *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I will first explain how the concept of kitsch is explored in the novel, by analyzing the term's original metaphysical meaning, as Kundera puts it, in connection with shit. Then, by taking a closer look at Tomas and Tereza, Sabina and Franz with regards to their existential codes, I will discuss how they are or are not under the spell of kitsch. The last chapter in Kundera's novel, which is focused on the world of an animal (Tomas and Tereza's dog) and presents an idyllic picture of life is also analyzed in reference to how the meaning and the modes of manifestation of kitsch are therein represented. Chapter three of this thesis is focused on *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In this chapter, I will first focus on the stylistic features of the novel, including the autobiographical function and its narrative structure in general. By focusing on Tralfamadore as a planet where time and the thought of death can be overcome, the presence of kitsch and the author's and the characters' dealing with it are explained.

It is in light of the reflections presented above that these two novels, which belong to the canon of postmodernist fiction, are brought together in this thesis. Both novels draw attention to the process of writing; by way of the metafictional quality of the text in *Slaughterhouse-Five* and through the conspicuous presence of the author as a commentator and the essayistic tone of the narrative in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Each of the two novels plays with the notion of

time. While the very form of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is circular as it starts and ends with the same words, 'spoken' by a bird, in Kundera's novel, the contingency of time is counteracted in the last chapter by giving dog time center stage, and pointing up its circularity and repetitiousness.

Furthermore, both novels show interest in history as a product of ideological agendas. In Kundera's novel, the myth of the Grand March and Communism are discussed as attributes of political kitsch; in Vonnegut's novel, the main issue is the silence about the Dresden tragedy and the attempt to deny the burden of this historical event in American culture/society, a silence and a denial that the author-narrator opposes through his efforts to remember. Both novels, in this regard, are examples of how ideology manipulates history to the point of kitschifying the past and politics itself, which are both turned into self-serving, consolatory fictions. As Gillo Dorfles puts it, "perhaps politics is always kitsch. Which would prove that there can be no agreement between politics and art. But it might be better to say that 'bad politics' is kitsch, or at least dictatorships are" (113). The Grand March as the only path toward a liberated humanity and the silence about the Dresden destruction (a massacre that the winners see as a justified historical contingency) can be seen as examples of the kitsch nature of 'bad politics'. The fact that history is subject to ideological kitschification is evident in both novels even though each belongs to a different geopolitical area. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, ideological kitschification is expressed as an escape from history, and is represented through/by the character of Billy Pilgrim who cannot remember but can only relive the past. In Kundera, the sources of ideological kitschification are traced back to the Bible and to the necessity of affirming what the Czech author calls the absolute denial of shit.

In the final analysis, these two novels can be studied together as examples of a common concern with kitsch and the threat that it poses; the threat of falsifying history, namely any attempt at coming to terms with a historical atrocity which is not graspable, and that of denying the reality of “mankind’s fateful inexperience” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 223).

2. Kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

In his *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera refers to Hermann Broch's explanation of kitsch: "kitsch is something other than simply a work in poor taste. There is a kitsch attitude. Kitsch behaviour. The kitsch-person's (*kitschmensch*) need for kitsch: it is the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and to be moved to tears of gratification at one's own reflection" (134). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera offers a unique interpretation of the concept of kitsch. Through the characters and the dynamics of their interconnected relationships, he then proceeds to investigate how kitsch could be an attitude or behaviour influencing the characters' lives. This chapter first introduces the concept of kitsch as it is presented in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and then, by focusing on the main characters, Sabina, Tomas, Tereza and Franz, and finally the dog, Karenin, analyzes the existence of kitsch and a kitsch attitude in their lives.

2.1 The Concept of Kitsch in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Part six of the novel, "The Grand March" is almost an essay on kitsch. Kundera believes that the repeated use of the word kitsch that entered from German into all Western languages "has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning," that is "the absolute denial of shit in both the literal and figurative senses of the word" (248). In this novel Kundera brings into attention this metaphysical meaning of the concept of kitsch and to do so, he begins by drawing a parallel between kitsch and shit. The concept of 'shit' is traced in the Bible and in the first chapter of Genesis that stands "behind all the European faiths, religious and political" and then, kitsch as an aesthetic ideal and the notions of political and totalitarian kitsch are explained.

2.1.1 “A Death for Shit”

In the beginning of the chapter called “The Grand March,” Kundera reflects upon the death of Stalin’s son, Yakov, who “laid down his life for shit” (245) and through this example, Kundera sets off to delve into the concept of Kitsch. The death of Stalin’s son is the sole “meta-physical death” amid the idiocy of war, as opposed to the meaningless deaths of the Germans and Russians who died to expand or to defend their territory and power (245). Kundera suggests that “a death for shit is not a senseless death” (245). Yakov was the son of God, who underwent judgment for ‘shit’.² The proximity of the two very opposite poles, the sacred and the allegedly profane, the privilege and its rejection³, causes vertigo, making life lose its significant dimensions, making it unbearably light, leading Yakov toward death (244). Hence, the necessity of kitsch in life, as Kundera is going to elaborate. To empty one’s life from kitsch is to bring close all the opposite poles, with their resulting proximity becoming deadly vertiginous. Proximity *can* cause vertigo: “When the north pole comes so close as to touch the south pole, the earth disappears and man finds himself in a void that makes his head spin and beckons him to fall” (244).

2.1.2 Shit as A Theological Problem

The proximity of the son of God and shit is then connected with the story of creation, namely to the proximity of God’s perfect creation of humans in his image on the one hand and human defecation on the other. Another irreconcilable opposition. Through the narrator, Kundera talks about a childhood experience of seeing God illustrated as an old man standing on a cloud, in an Old Testament book retold for children (245). God personified as a man implies his eating

² As Kundera writes, during the Second World War, Stalin’s son, captured by the Germans, is put in a camp together with some British officers and they all share a latrine. After the British officers tell Yakov several times to clean his latrine smeared with shit, he takes offence and asks to have the camp commander as an arbiter. But “the arrogant German” refuses to talk about “shit”. Not being able to stand the humiliation, Stalin’s son runs into the electrified barbed-wire fence that surrounded the camp and dies (*The Unbearable Lightness* 243).

³ The privilege of being Stalin’s son, who was revered like God.

and having intestines; that is “sacrilegious” as Kundera writes: “I, a child, grasped the incompatibility of God and shit and thus came to question the basic thesis of Christian anthropology, namely, that man was created in God’s image. Either/or: either man was created in God’s image—and God has intestines!—or God lacks intestines and man is not like Him” (245). This is again, the proximity of two opposite poles, God and shit, that cannot be associated together and coexist. Thus, Kundera proposes the idea of how burdensome “shit” could be and makes God responsible for it: “Shit is a more onerous theological problem than is evil. Since God gave man freedom, we can, if need be, accept the idea that He is not responsible for man’s crimes. The responsibility for shit, however, rests entirely with Him, the Creator of man” (246).

After putting forward the incompatibility of God and shit or “the idea of a divine intestine” (245), Kundera draws attention to the idea of “sexual intercourse in Paradise” (246). He points out the different views of two theologians; Saint Jerome, who rejected the notion of Adam and Eve’s sexual intercourse in Paradise, and Johannes Scotus Erigena who considered sexual arousal to be based on will and wish, and not excitement. Thus, he concludes that what was found incompatible with Paradise is not sexual intercourse but excitement: “There was pleasure in Paradise, but no excitement” (246). It was after man was expelled from Paradise that he came to know excitement. Shit was not repellent in paradise. Upon his descent to earth, man was made to feel disgust and shame and thus covering that which is shameful was followed by excitement upon uncovering it. Kundera is in fact making a link between excitement and shit.

Erigena’s argument holds the key to a theological justification (in other words, a theodicy) of shit. As long as man was allowed to remain in Paradise, either (like Valentinus’ Jesus) he did not defecate at all, or (as would seem more likely) he did not look upon shit as something repellent. Not until after God expelled man from Paradise did He make him

feel disgust. Man began to hide what shamed him, and by the time he removed the veil, he was blinded by a great light. Thus, immediately after his introduction to disgust, he was introduced to excitement. Without shit (in both the literal and figurative senses of the word), there would be no sexual love as we know it, accompanied by pounding heart and blinded senses. (246-7)

2.1.3 Kitsch as “The Absolute Denial of Shit”

Kundera draws the conclusion that the first chapter of Genesis affirms “a categorical agreement with being” (248). By suggesting that the creation of the world and man is basically proper and perfect, Genesis puts forward an indubitable faith that eliminates any doubt in being or existence. Kundera asserts that the reason the word “shit” appeared as s--- in print has not been “a moral consideration’ as shit cannot be immoral, but ‘the objection to shit is a metaphysical one. The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation” (248). And as creation cannot be rendered unacceptable, “it follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch” (248). Therefore, Kundera defines kitsch as “the absolute denial of shit”. The denial of anything unpleasant in man’s existence, the elimination of conflicts and the harmonious union of men: “Kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence” (248). A world in which shit is denied is an attempt at recreating paradise. That is how Kundera draws attention to the original metaphysical meaning of the word kitsch.

There was no excitement in paradise because shit did not evoke disgust. Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit. Could that suggest that kitsch makes life boring? Idyll/paradise lacks the excitement that acknowledging shit brings about. In denying shit, kitsch substitutes excitement with

a kind of false exaltation. What Broch says about “a life inspired by kitsch” could be of relevance here:

the original convention which underlies it is exaltation, or rather hypocritical exaltation, since it tries to unite heaven and earth in an absolutely false relationship. Into what type of work of art, or rather artifice, does kitsch try to transform human life? The answer is simple: into a neurotic work of art, i.e. one which imposes a completely unreal convention on reality, thus imprisoning it in a false schema.” (63-4)

The hypocritical exaltation mentioned by Broch could parallel “the tears of gratification” Kundera mentions in *The Art of the Novel* (134).

2.1.4 Kitsch as an “Aesthetic Ideal”

The narrator tells us that “Sabina’s initial inner revolt against Communism was aesthetic rather than ethical in character” (248). It was not *the actual ugliness* of the Communist world that was repulsive to her but “the mask of beauty” the Communist world was trying to wear, or the “Communist kitsch,” the model of which was the May Day celebration (249). The May Day parade, with all its ceremonies, was not an “agreement” with Communism but with “being”; its motto was not “long live Communism!” but “Long live life!” Kundera comments that “this idiotic tautology” would attract everyone to the Communist parade even those who were indifferent to the communist theses (249). It’s not a political party Kundera, and Sabina as a character in the novel, are trying to question, but the aesthetic representation of an agreement with being, a being the agreement with which needs the mask of kitsch. An ideal is offered while the reality to which the ideal is opposed is something else. “In masquerading as art,” kitsch’s “fundamental mission,” is “the creation of a new myth that can mediate between the irrational chaos of reality and the

need for systematizing it. This mythological operation is indispensable for grounding the unifying value system so sorely needed in the present” (McBride 6). That is why Broch defines kitsch as “the element of evil in the value system of art” (63).

Outside her country, in America, Sabina experiences a different expression of kitsch. An American senator gives Sabina a ride in his big car with his four children “bouncing up and down in the back”. He stops the car in front of a stadium and the children jump out. The senator “gazing dreamily” at the “bouncing figures”, while “describing a circle with his arm, a circle that was meant to take in stadium, grass, and children” tells Sabina: “Now that’s what I call happiness” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 250). For her, the senator is similar to a Communist statesman on a reviewing stand in a Prague square who smiles at the “identically smiling citizens in the parade below” (250), feeling happiness and joy. Both the senator and the statesman have images in mind, images evoking feelings. As Kundera says: “When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme” (250). He goes on to say:

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love. Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. (251)

One is moved by the image of a collective tear shared by all. Kundera goes on to relate this feature of kitsch to the politicians, calling kitsch “the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements” (251). However, the dictatorial ruling of a single political power as opposed to various political tendencies in a society creates “totalitarian kitsch”. But totalitarian kitsch does not only refer to “political” parties; kitsch also exists where there is democracy. By totalitarian kitsch, Kundera means that “everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life” (252). Totalitarian kitsch is against individuality and any “deviation from the collective”; it is against any kind of “doubt” or any “irony” (252). Totalitarian kitsch forbids all questions and instead offers answers, because a question is “like a knife” that cuts through the aesthetic surface or the beautiful lie and reveals the truth lying beneath. In other words, totalitarian kitsch could mean that all kitsch is in fact totalitarian. Kitsch seeks to take control and to promote indubitable agreement. Kundera says: “[T]here are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international” (257). However, it is not different theories, or “rational attitudes” that make these systems different: “political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that *political kitsch*”; what matters is to be always on a “splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness”. The reflections on the notion of political kitsch are then explicated further: “The dictatorship of the proletariat or democracy? Rejection of the consumer society or demands for increased productivity? The guillotine or an end to the death penalty? It is all beside the point. What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March” (257). Gilles Fraser points out that the senator’s arm movement is representative of kitsch’s way to exclude” (131). With excluding, kitsch in fact includes everyone.

“What is so sinister about the American senator’s kitsch is that his own lens (‘describing a circle with his arm’) lays the foundation for this act of exclusion, and, at its most extreme, the logic of this exclusion leads to the ‘final solution’” (Fraser 131). Perhaps what is truly sinister is that kitsch’s authoritarian power does not follow any logic.

Kundera, in *The Art of the Novel*, refers to “the system of *symbolic thought*”, an irrational system that “underlies all behavior, individual and collective” (61). He explains that this irrational system, “the system of confusions” rules political life as well. Some political movements or some wars bear more importance than some others that are “*symbolically mute*” (63). For example, “the gulag will never supplant Nazism as a symbol of absolute evil in the European consciousness” or the war in Afghanistan will never gain the importance of the Vietnam war (63). The passions aroused by symbols correspond to sentiments. They are like metaphors that can be dangerous (*The Unbearable Lightness* 11). And this system of symbols in which “man is a child wandering lost” (*The Art of the Novel* 63) is not far from what a kitsch system of thought is based on.

2.2 Sabina and The Lightness of Being

The title phrase, “the unbearable lightness of being,” is mentioned three times in the novel and each time it is connected with Sabina (122). The first time it is brought up is when Kundera describes how we tend to use “metaphors of heaviness” in relation to difficult situations in our lives, calling them “burdens” we have to bear (121). About Sabina, however, he says, “her drama was a drama not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being” (122). This lightness in Sabina’s life is very much connected to the idea of betrayal. Betrayal is one of Sabina’s existential codes. Sabina is “unaware of the

goal that lay behind her longing to betray. The unbearable lightness of being—was that the goal?” (122); and here the title phrase is mentioned a second time.

The third reference to the title is when Sabina is living for a short time with the old couple in America and “a silly mawkish song about two shining windows and the happy family living behind them would occasionally make its way into the unbearable lightness of being” (256). Sabina has always denounced kitsch as her enemy but she too, as all the other characters, is under the influence of kitsch and has been carrying it with herself. Her kitsch attitude expresses itself in her image of home, “all peace, quiet, and harmony, and ruled by a loving mother and wise father” (255). However, she quickly becomes aware of this kitsch attitude and she knows that the beautiful images that come to her every now and then are nothing but illusions. As Kundera writes, when kitsch is recognized as kitsch it moves to the category of non-kitsch:

Sabina did not take her feeling seriously. She knew only too well that the song was a beautiful lie. As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness. For none among us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely. No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition. (256)

Sabina’s life is on the side of lightness and it will remain so, as that is how she wants her life to be. Sabina’s kitsch which derives from her image of home took shape in her after the death of her parents. This draws attention to the relation between kitsch and death and the fact that there is always fear of death behind kitsch (Horvat 171). Kitsch is there to offer an escape or consolation from death. The image of a peaceful home offers this temporary consolation.

As someone who has left her country, Sabina feels no attachment to her homeland; but as she comes from a country facing revolution, she evokes in Franz faith and admiration for life: “a

life of risk, daring, and the danger of death” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 103). This drama means nothing to Sabina. It does not remind her of her country, Thus the character of Sabina appears to be the closest one to Kundera himself as an exile trying to stay away from the kitsch feeling of a homeland under revolution. Instead, it is the word “cemetery” that has always evoked in Sabina nostalgic memories of her homeland (104) and this could be paralleled to her kitsch attitude, her image of a peaceful home. This is even more plausible if we consider that cemeteries in Bohemia are like gardens, covered in grass and flowers. Sabina is “unable to reconcile herself in death to what she had spent a lifetime renouncing” (Wawrzycka 278), that is her tendency to indulge in kitsch sentiments. At the same time, it is the fear of having no roots in the American land that comes to her mind. Sabina’s feelings of “rootlessness and alienation” (Wawrzycka 277) as an émigré is replaced by her fear of “shutting herself into a grave and sinking into American earth” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 273). She does not feel like an alien in America, but it is only “on the surface” that she doesn’t feel so; “Everything beneath the surface was alien to her. Down below, there was no grandpa or uncle” (273). Her decision to be cremated is to cut the ties to any land or the kitsch of home. But this decision and her dying on the side of lightness is not only the result of her kitsch image of home but also of her fear of rootlessness in “American” society. It is both kitsch and fear of kitsch that lead Sabina to compose a will requesting her body to be cremated and the ashes thrown to the winds (273). Sabina’s kitsch does not lead her to go back to her land but makes her want to vanish with the winds and that is what keeps her on the side of awareness.

For Franz “a cemetery was an ugly dump of stones and bones” (104). Franz’s feelings toward the cemetery is due to a disdain of death that prevents him from seeing peace reigning over a cemetery. A cemetery, at first glance is a site of death, that is the opposite of life. Sabina, how-

ever, knows that a cemetery is the only place where death has no business; “No matter how brutal life becomes, peace always reigns in the cemetery. Even in wartime, in Hitler’s time, in Stalin’s time, through all occupations” (104).

Sabina is a painter and for her “the problem with kitsch has nothing to do with taste, but rather to do with truth” (Fraser 125). It is “a beautifying gloss” (125) or “a folding screen” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 253) set up to curtain off truth, to deny shit, horror, ugliness, and death. Therefore, it makes sense that the narrator explains Sabina’s objection to kitsch as aesthetic rather than ethical. As Fraser observes, “in creating Sabina, Kundera clearly had Nietzsche in mind: Sabina is the free-spirited artist, the wanderer, and (because her criticisms are aesthetic rather than ethical) the one who operates ‘beyond good and evil’. Nevertheless, Kundera recognizes that Sabina’s use of ‘kitsch’ and her ‘aesthetic’ criticisms of totalitarianism(s) are themselves profoundly moral” (125). Going beyond good and evil is not a “wish to be moral monsters,” but Nietzsche and Sabina believe “morality to be insufficiently moral,” and consequently they seek “an order of moral seriousness that is ‘beyond’ the dictates of conventional morality. Both seek to articulate alternative configurations of virtue” (125). The morality in Sabina’s attitude is seen in her rejection of kitsch or in her awareness of it. It could be said that kitsch is “at the very root of Sabina’s betrayals” (Wawrzycka 275). Her betrayals began by betraying totalitarianism. Betrayal of her totalitarian father, “a small-town puritan,” who forbade her love and Picasso is followed by the betrayal of communism: “The first betrayal . . . calls forth a chain reaction of further betrayals” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 92). Kundera’s narrator explains, “what is betrayal? Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown” (91).

In a painting exhibition organized by a political organization in Germany, Sabina finds a biography of herself in a catalogue that describes her as “a saint or martyr”. The final sentence reads: “Her paintings are a struggle for happiness” (254). Sabina protests; when she went to America “she even managed to hide the fact that she was Czech. It was all merely a desperate attempt to escape the kitsch that people wanted to make of her life” (254). Her betrayal of her homeland is a way to stand against the pity that “reduces the ethos of . . . exile into the pathos of kitsch” (Wawrzycka 276). If kitsch is against individuality and prescribes a fixed set of values for the multitude, or one single transcendent truth for all, then Sabina’s betrayals could be her “flight from kitsch” (Wawrzycka 267). If the values she betrayed were not really her own values, Sabina’s betrayals could not be considered as immoral but could, instead, offer a different type of morality.

For Sabina, lightness and weight do not seem to be much of a dilemma as she stays on the side of lightness until the end. Sabina’s *Es muss sein* is her breaking into the unknown, her crossing borders, her flying away from kitsch. She does not need kitsch to add weight to the insignificance of life, nor does she use it to make the heaviness of living light or bearable. She has already come to terms with lightness. For her the bowler hat is an embodiment of the eternal return, a single tie replacing all the ties she betrayed:

The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina’s life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed. I might call it Heraclitus’ (You can’t step twice into the same river) riverbed: the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another semantic river: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo,

like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. (88)

2.3 Tomas, ‘Einmal ist Keinmal’ and ‘Es muss sein’

Sabina tells Tomas: “The reason I like you . . . is you’re the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster” (12). But is Tomas really, as Sabina says, the complete opposite of kitsch? And if so, why is he, in Sabina’s eyes, the complete opposite of kitsch?

Tomas is born of Kundera’s reflection on the myth of the eternal return; born of “*Einmal ist keinmal*”; of contemplation over the unrepeatability and irreversibility of things and events; of pondering upon the possibility of circumventing human time. That is Tomas’s existential code: living in a world with no eternal return. Eternal return, what Nietzsche calls “*das schwerste Gewicht*” or the heaviest of burdens (*The Unbearable Lightness* 5) and Kundera calls “a mad myth” (3). If the eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, living in a world without a return should be light; life should be like “a shadow without weight”. When everything happens once, the beauty or the horror of things mean nothing. Mistakes are overlooked because you can never know in advance how to act, or how to decide. Everything can be looked upon with an “aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine” (4). *Einmal ist Keinmal*.

Lightness has been considered as positive and weight as negative by Parmenides; for Beethoven, heaviness is apparently positive, as Kundera’s narrator says. Beethoven introduced the last movement of his last quartet with the phrase “*Der schwer gefasste Entschluss*” meaning “the difficult resolution” (32). Since the German word *schwer* means both difficult and heavy, Beethoven’s weighty resolution, or *Es Muss Sein* could be ‘the voice of fate’: “necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy

has value” (32). However, the essence of this “most ambiguous, most mysterious of all” oppositions is shaken by Kundera. That is done through the lives of the characters and mostly through the main character, Tomas, whose existential code words are lightness and weight (*Art of The Novel* 29).⁴

“Tomas was born of the saying ‘*Einmal ist Keinmal*’” (39). After meeting Tereza, “a miserable provincial waitress” (7) and pondering upon his strong feelings for her, Tomas is not even sure if it is “love or hysteria” (7). Being distressed and annoyed over his reflections, he considers his inability to decide as natural, because “we live everything as it comes” (8). “What can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself?” (8) Tomas thinks, and, he continues to ponder, “If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all” (8). According to Wirth, “the agitation of Tomas’s experience of human temporality endows him with a hatred of kitsch, of an immense suspicion and distaste for all of those who act as if they knew exactly what *should have been* in the human experience. They have acted not on behalf of today but on behalf of all eternity” (91). Tomas refuses to be on the side of kitsch, even though he knows that his excessive vacillation could in fact deprive “the most beautiful moments he had ever experienced [with Tereza] . . . of their meaning” (8).

Tereza, to Tomas, was like “a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream” (10). Kundera’s narrator goes on to comment as follows:

He couldn’t very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river! If the Pharaoh’s daughter hadn’t snatched the basket carrying little Moses from the waves, there

⁴ Kundera in *The Art of the Novel* explains: “To apprehend the self in my novels means to grasp the essence of its existential problem. To grasp its *existential code*. As I was writing *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I realized that the code of this or that character is made up of certain key words. For Tereza: body, soul, vertigo, weakness, idyll, Paradise. For Tomas: lightness, weight. In the part called ‘Words Misunderstood,’ I examine the existential codes of Franz and Sabina by analyzing a number of words: woman, fidelity, betrayal, music, darkness, light, parades, beauty, country, cemetery, strength” (29-30).

would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we now know it! How many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child! If Polybus hadn't taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn't have written his most beautiful tragedy! Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love. (10-11)

Thus Tomas, who had celebrated his divorce realizing that "he was not born to live side by side with any woman and could be fully himself only as a bachelor" (10), who had his rules in order to ensure that "erotic friendship never grew into the aggression of love" (12) acts against his principles and lets Tereza into the privacy of his life.

For Kundera's narrator, Tomas's life revolves around one *Es muss sein* and that is not love but his profession: "He had come to medicine not by coincidence or calculation but by a deep inner desire" (193). To be a surgeon could mean "splitting open the surface of things and looking at what lies hidden inside" (196) which felt like "blasphemy" to Tomas, as it somehow meant interfering with God's plan (194). That was what attracted Tomas to this profession and this was not by chance but it was a necessity in his life. It was a necessity because it was deeply rooted in Tomas's desire to see what lies beneath. This is like Sabina's desire for betrayal, or a desire to step into the unknown. Sabina would also present this desire through the style of her paintings, where there was always something hidden beneath that could be grasped through a crack on the surface.

Tereza was "the reverse side of all his '*Es muss sein!*'" (219). Meeting Tereza was the result of "six improbable fortuities" (48). Tomas's inability to perceive human temporality makes him a follower of chance rather than necessity. Kundera's narrator seems to follow To-

mas's direction as this comment shows: "chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us" (48). Even though, at first glance, necessity seems to be on the side of heaviness and chance seems to be an expression of lightness, in Tomas's life fortuities magically add weight to the lightness of his life: "Necessity knows no magic formulae—they are all left to chance. If a love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it like birds to Francis of Assisi's shoulders" (49). Tomas welcomes the birds of fortuity on his shoulders and Tereza, the opposite of his *Es muss sein*, becomes the *Es muss sein* of his life.

Later on in his life, Tomas gives up his job. Giving up his *Es Muss Sein*, is something Kundera's narrator too ponders upon: "It is my feeling that Tomas had long been secretly irritated by the stern, aggressive, solemn *Es muss sein!* and that he harbored a deep desire to follow the spirit of Parmenides and make heavy go to light" (196). His two years after leaving the *Es Muss Sein* of his job and working as a window washer felt like a holiday and "the holiday from the operating table was also a holiday from Tereza" (226). But, later on, when Tereza asks him to leave for the countryside, Tomas begins to think that "his womanizing was also something of an '*Es muss Sein!*'—an imperative enslaving him" (234). He then longed for "a rest from all imperatives" (234). After all, "if he could take a rest (a permanent rest) from the hospital operating table, then why not from the world operating table, the one where his imaginary scalpel opened the strongbox women use to hide their illusory one-millionth part dissimilarity?" (234). He yearned for that "grand holiday" (198) represented by his freedom from the *Es Muss Sein* of his job to be replaced by a holiday free from both his '*Es muss seins*'.

As it was mentioned, for Parmenides, lightness is positive and heaviness negative while for Beethoven it is the reverse. Kundera's narrator explains that the story behind Beethoven's *Es*

Muss Sein composition is based on someone's debt toward the composer. Beethoven reminds the person of his debt, to which the person responds by asking, "Muss es sein?" Beethoven replies: "*Es muss sein*" and that "frivolous" joke turns into a serious voice of fate, a "metaphysical truth" (195). Lightness is made heavy, and as Kundera's narrator suggests it is not surprising to us as we have always associated heaviness with value. "The *Es muss sein!* of his profession had been like a vampire sucking his blood" (197). Tomas had left his family and son behind, trying to get out of "his weighty duty," but Kundera calls that a "social" *Es muss sein* while Tomas's profession was an "internal" one. Tomas's rushing into leaving medicine seems, therefore, "odd." So, Tomas's decision might conceal "something deeper that escaped his reasoning" (194). This deeper meaning might be "what remains of life when a person rejects what he previously considered his mission" (196).

In the chapter on kitsch, "The Grand March", it is mentioned that humanity was introduced to excitement after descending to earth and getting to know shit and disgust. And it was with excitement that sexual love began to exist along with "pounding heart[s] and blind senses" (247). Here, Tomas thinks that "if excitement is a mechanism our Creator uses for His own amusement, love is something that belongs to us alone and enables us to flee the Creator. Love is our freedom. Love lies beyond 'Es muss Sein!' even though it is still attached to the "clockwork of sex" (236). He believes that "attaching love to sex is one of the most bizarre ideas the Creator ever had" and that "saving love from the stupidity of sex" would be "the solution to all riddles, the key to all mysteries, a new utopia, a paradise" which would allow him to love Tereza "without being disturbed by the aggressive stupidity of sex" (236). This passage shows that Tomas would wish that the world was structured this way, that he could have his *Es Muss Sein* of womanizing and his freedom from it, love, together at the same time. He would have heaviness and

the possibility to flee from it at the same time. But the fact that this is not possible causes the exhaustion of choices in life. Tomas needs to go beyond his '*Es muss sein*' in order to have his freedom. But Tomas's two '*Es muss seins*' are different; one is on the side of heaviness and the other on the side of lightness, even though his being bound to an ideal lightness makes this ideal heavy like a burden to him. In *The Art of the Novel*, Kundera says something that seems to be relevant to Tomas's case: "The desire to reconcile erotic adventure and idyll is the very essence of hedonism—and the reason why it is impossible" (131).

Tomas once sees a woman in his dream and thinks she is "unlike any he had ever met" (238). She is the '*Es muss sein*' of his love (238). He remembers the famous myth from Plato's symposium that describes people as hermaphrodites that were split in two, and based on that "love is the longing for the half of ourselves we have lost" (239). Tomas's other part was the woman in his dream: "The trouble is, man does not find the other part of himself. Instead, he is sent a Tereza in a bulrush basket. But what happens if he nevertheless later meets the one who was meant for him, the other part of himself? Whom is he to prefer? The woman from the bulrush basket or the woman from Plato's myth?" (239).

He feels compassion for Tereza and "he knows that time and again he will abandon the house of his happiness, time and again abandon his paradise and the woman from his dream and betray the '*Es muss sein!*' of his love to go off with Tereza, the woman born of six laughable fortuities" (239). Even though Tereza is the reverse of all Tomas's '*Es muss seins*', she is the only thing he cares about. When he is undecided whether or not to sign the petition for political prisoners, the narrator comments that "she was the only thing he cared about. Why even think about whether to sign or not? There was only one criterion for all his decisions: he must do nothing that could harm her. Tomas could not save political prisoners, but he could make Tereza happy"

(219). Tereza gives weight to Tomas's life, when decisions are hard to make. In fact, Tereza had made the decision for him in the first place by entering his life. "In choosing to follow Tereza, though it means giving up, once again, his work as a surgeon, Tomas chooses heaviness over lightness" (284). In his view, "where Tereza is concerned, lightness is unbearable" (284-5). Tomas's womanizing is connected to his contemplation over and concern about eternal return: "Isn't making love merely an eternal repetition of the same?" (199) Tereza is his affirmation of human temporality. Another reason for Tomas's womanizing was his desire to discover the slight differences each woman would present; but "he had no desire to uncover anything in Tereza. She had come to him uncovered. He had made love to her before he could grab for the imaginary scalpel he used to open the prostrate body of the world. Before he could start wondering what she would be like when they made love, he loved her" (209).

In order to explain her unquenchable love for Tereza, Kundera's narrator refers to a special area in the brain "we might call *poetic memory*" which "records everything that charms or touches us, that makes our lives beautiful" (208). Referring to Tomas, the narrator says that Tereza had "occupied his poetic memory like a despot" (298). The narrator then reiterates something that he had affirmed earlier: "Love begins with a metaphor. Which is to say, love begins at the point when a woman enters her first word into our poetic memory" (209).

For someone like Tomas who can't make any decisions and is tortured by indecision, a chance happening could add meaning to life, it could free him of the hardship of decision making. But for a person like Tereza on the other hand, chance assumes a different meaning. Tereza mentions to Tomas that if she hadn't met him, she could easily have fallen in love with any one of an infinite number of men. Now what to do? *Es muss sein!* becomes '*Es konnte auch anders sein.*' (It could just as well be otherwise)" (35). Kundera's narrator comments on this as follows:

her words had left Tomas in a strange state of melancholy, and now he realized it was only a matter of chance that Tereza loved him and not his friend Z. Apart from her consummated love for Tomas, there were, in the realm of possibility, an infinite number of unconsummated loves for other men. We all reject out of hand the idea that the love of our life may be something light or weightless; we presume our love is what must be, that without it our life would no longer be the same; we feel that Beethoven himself, gloomy and awe-inspiring, is playing the *Es muss sein!* to our own great love. Tomas often thought of Tereza's remark about his friend Z. and came to the conclusion that the love story of his life exemplified not *Es muss sein!* (It must be so), but rather *Es konnte auch anders sein* (It could just as well be otherwise). (35)

For Tereza, chance has a different meaning because she does not see love as different from sex. On the one hand we have “an infinite number of unconsummated loves for other men” (35) for Tereza, on the other Tomas's desire for an “infinite number of women.” The contrast is between a desire for copulation versus a desire for “shared sleep” (15).

Before he meets Tereza, Tomas would try to save erotic friendships from “the aggression of love” (12), but after meeting Tereza, he wishes to save love from “the aggressive stupidity of sex” (237). The narrator supports Tomas's ideas by adding explanations to his beliefs and his acts; however, Tomas, who was a monster in the kingdom of kitsch, seems not to be able to live his own ideas fully.

2.4 Tereza and the Heaviness of Being

Tereza comes to Tomas with a heavy suitcase, uninvited (29). While Tomas has a life of erotic friendships representing lightness, his love and compassion for Tereza becomes heaviness. It is quite the reverse for Tereza: whereas she mentions she could have loved any other man had

she not met Tomas (meaning that her love for Tomas stands for lightness), she is deeply wounded by Tomas's sexual adventures, and this is a feeling that seems to express heaviness. Tereza in general stands on the side of heaviness and this is confirmed by Kundera's narrator who says: "she knew that she had become a burden to him: she took things too seriously, turning everything into a tragedy, and failed to grasp the lightness and amusing insignificance of physical love. How she wished she could learn lightness! She yearned for someone to help her out of her anachronistic shell" (143).

Her "anachronistic shell" is best observed in her view about the duality of body and soul. Tereza believes in the old-fashioned way of thinking body and soul as two separate, incompatible, and irreconcilable entities. That is why she was born "of the rumbling of a stomach" (39). The rumbling of her stomach happens the first time she goes to Tomas's flat. She feels love for Tomas, and love for her belongs to the purity of the soul not the cage of the body. But when her stomach starts to rumble, due to the fact that she has not eaten, the body asserts itself and the urgency of its basic needs. This is "a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience" (40). Body and soul are among Tereza's existential codes. This duality constitutes one of the reasons Tomas's philandering is so heavy for Tereza:

She had come to him to escape her mother's world, a world where all bodies were equal. She had come to him to make her body unique, irreplaceable. But he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of them: he kissed them all alike, stroked them alike, made no, absolutely no distinction between Tereza's body and the other bodies. He had sent her back into the world she tried to escape, sent her to march naked with the other naked women. (58)

Fear of being like everyone else, and of being deprived of singularity is also well represented in Tereza's dream. Tereza dreams of:

being marched around a swimming pool with a group of naked women and forced to sing cheerful songs with them while corpses floated just below the surface of the pool. Tereza could not address a single question, a single word, to any of the women; the only response she would have got was the next stanza of the current song. She could not even give any of them a secret wink; they would immediately have pointed her out to the man standing in the basket above the pool, and he would have shot her dead. (253)

Kundera's narrator's comment here is that "Tereza's dream reveals the true function of kitsch: kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death" (253).

In another dream, Tereza sees Tomas as a rabbit that she holds in her arms. She is so happy she cries out of joy; she carries the rabbit to a house where she used to live as a child, "the place where she wanted to be and would never forsake" (306). In the house she finds her great grandparents and she becomes happy to know that she is going to live with them.

She immediately found the room she had been given at the age of five, when her parents decided she deserved her own living space. It had a bed, a table, and a chair. The table had a lamp on it, a lamp that had never stopped burning in anticipation of her return, and on the lamp perched a butterfly with two large eyes painted on its widespread wings. Tereza knew she was at her goal. She lay down on the bed and pressed the rabbit to her face (306).

If Tereza's first dream reflects a fear of kitsch she cannot help but being at the service of, her second dream shows her kitsch attitude toward her childhood home. This dream also represents Tereza's hope for eternal return. Combined together, Tereza's dreams could be seen as ex-

amples of how a kitsch system works: “If dreams were not beautiful, they would quickly be forgotten. But Tereza kept coming back to her dreams, running through them in her mind, turning them into legends. Tomas lived under the hypnotic spell cast by the excruciating beauty of Tereza’s dreams” (59). It seems that Tereza’s dreams function as an aesthetic evil that has a paralyzing impact on both Tomas and Tereza.

Tereza stands midway on the road where kitsch reigns. Tereza “yearns for something higher” (44). As Kundera’s narrator explains “anyone whose goal is something higher must expect some day to suffer vertigo”. And what is vertigo? It is not fear of falling but “it is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves” (60). Being one of Tereza’s existential codes, vertigo demonstrates her oscillation between kitsch and non-kitsch. As Kundera’s narrator explains, vertigo happens when there are conflicts, contradiction, and lack of harmony. It is caused by the existence of opposites that cannot be reconciled. Tereza is overwhelmed, she feels heavy. Between two polar opposites that cannot be reconciled, one of them should go away and that is when kitsch comes into being. Kitsch becomes a tool for survival; it removes one of the poles; it eradicates the conflict by removing the ugly, the bitter, the indigestible, the harsher, the less beautiful, the less sentimental, the less acceptable, or the ‘shittier’. It removes it and replaces it with beauty. “The naked women marching around the swimming pool, the corpses in the hearse rejoicing that she, too, was dead— these were the down below she had feared and fled once before but which mysteriously beckoned her. These were her vertigo” (60). Tereza oscillates between falling and fear of falling. However, even though she aspires for something higher and transcendent and even though her feeling of shame deriving from the relationship with her mother makes her desire to

see a soul beyond her body, her personal idyll or “vision of Eden is the negative image of the denial of shit and sexuality” (Mai 111). Her paradise is “a paradise of the weak” (113).

2.5 Franz and The Grand March

Kundera’s narrator affirms that “Franz was obviously not a devotee of kitsch. The fantasy of the Grand March played more or less the same role in his life as the mawkish song about the two brightly lit windows in Sabina’s” (257). But it is only “more or less” that Franz’s image of the Grand March could be compared to Sabina’s image of home. Franz constantly lives with images and ideas. His love for Sabina is in fact a love for the *idea* of Sabina or the images Sabina evokes in him. It is the halo around this “painter-mistress” (83), an *émigré* coming from a revolutionary land of daring and danger that makes this love so “precious” (82) for Franz. He has an ideal in his mind that places Sabina in the position of a sort of Goddess or muse, giving a direction to Franz’s life. “For Franz, love was not an extension of public life but its antithesis. It meant a longing to put himself at the mercy of his partner” (83). Giving up one’s “weapons” like a “prisoner of war” and depriving oneself of any defense is the way to make love “the constant expectation of a blow” (83). Attributing such transcendence to this “unearthly love” (126), Franz has introduced a “zone of purity” into his relationship with Sabina that binds their love affair to “foreign cities” only in order to “save their love from banality” (83). He feels a kind of “guilt or defect” to have married his wife, and would rather sleep by himself, but “the marriage bed is still the symbol of the marriage bond, and symbols, as we know, are inviolable” (84).

Being a professor in Geneva, the idea of a life confined to university offices or libraries suffocated Tomas: He yearned to step out of his life the way one steps out of a house into the street. And so

as long as he lived in Paris, he took part in every possible demonstration. How nice it was to celebrate something, demand something, protest against something; to be out in the open, to be with others. The parades . . . fascinated him. He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history. Europe was the Grand March. The march from revolution to revolution, from struggle to struggle, ever onward. (99)

Even though Kundera's narrator comments that Franz is not a devotee of kitsch, this yearning allows us to see Franz as a kitschman.

Franz felt his book life to be unreal. He yearned for real life, for the touch of people walking side by side with him, for their shouts. It never occurred to him that what he considered unreal (the work he did in the solitude of the office or library) was in fact his real life, whereas the parades he imagined to be reality were nothing but theater, dance, carnival—in other words, a dream. (100)

Franz's longing for the unreal explains his relationship with Sabina, and the fact that when Sabina left, he was not really unhappy and even felt "happier with Sabina the invisible goddess" than the Sabina who had been in his life: "Sabina's physical presence was much less important" compared to "the golden" and "magic footprint" she had left on his life; one that could not be removed (120).

Both Sabina and The Grand March give significance to Franz's life. The kitsch of the grand march and the kitsch of the image of an ideal love for Sabina each give weight to Franz's life. In the section called "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words," the narrator explains Franz's attitude about darkness and light (94). While Sabina distastes strong light and total darkness as they are both blinding, Franz is attracted to both. Darkness, for Franz, is "pure, perfect, thoughtless, visionless" (95). While for Sabina darkness is "the refusal to see", for Franz it

means “infinity,” making him feel infinite as well. Both the grand march and the image of a transcendent love bestow on his life a sense of infinity and eternity. His decision to go on a march to Cambodia is also the result of this attitude. He feels Sabina is calling him to go, as “he nourished the cult of Sabina more as religion than as love” (126).

While in Cambodia, seeing all the arguments and misunderstandings between the Americans and the Europeans, a photographer being blown-up and all the “comic” scenes that follow, Franz doubts the cause of this Grand March, even though he finds it hard to accept that “the glory” of the Grand March was equal to “the comic vanity of its marchers” (269), when there is “no longer any difference between sublime and squalid, angel and fly. God and shit.” Just like Stalin’s son, Franz “felt like placing his own life on the scales; . . . to prove that the Grand March weighed more than shit. But man can prove nothing of the sort. One pan of the scales held shit; on the other, Stalin’s son put his entire body. And the scales did not move” (269). Franz vacillates between awareness of a disillusion and falling back into a dream. There is a moment when the trip to Cambodia strikes him as “meaningless” and “laughable,” when he realizes the ineffectuality of his march and the futility of his image of an “unreal” love for Sabina. This forces him to see what his “real” life is (274), but right after, when he is assaulted by some men, the image of Sabina comes back to him, his real life vanishes and the dream comes back; the dream of being strong. Confronting these men gives him the “satisfaction” of being through with softness and sentimentality. But who could say for sure that Franz was really “through with being soft and sentimental” (274)? It is said that Franz is not a devotee of kitsch but he is inspired by a kind of “political romanticism” (Lindner) contributing to the “wickedness of an existence based on universal hypocrisy, astray in an immense tangle of sentiments and conventions” (Broch 65).

Franz romanticizes his love for Sabina even though there is a dictionary of misunderstood words between them.

2.6 Kundera's Idyll and The Dog History

Idyll is the name of the terrible, constant, and decomposed wind that blows through the pages of Milan Kundera's books. It is the first thing we must understand. Warm breath of nostalgia, stormy glare of hope: the frozen eye of two movements, one leading us to reconquer the harmonious past of the origin, the other promising the perfect beatitude of the future. They confuse themselves in one movement, one history. Only historical action would offer us, simultaneously, the nostalgia of what we were and the hope of what we shall be. The rub, Kundera tells us, is that between these two movements in the idyllic process of becoming one, history will not let us, simply, be ourselves in the present. The commerce of history consists in 'selling people a future in exchange for a past'". (Fuentes 15)

François Ricard believes that "it is possible to define the existential dynamics or 'law' of all Kunderian characters by the idyll each carries within, that is, by each ones' particular 'idyllic conscience'" (19). All the characters in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* long for possibilities to live in the trap the world has become. The traps of human time and history that make humans identify with their "historical appearance" (Wirth 99). Tomas's idyll centers around the idea of eternal return, and a world in which love could be separate from sex. Tereza's idyll centers around achieving something higher, which is rooted in her belief in the irreconcilability of body and soul. Franz's idyllic consciousness is expressed in his being part of the passionate collective acts that make all mankind unified for a grand cause: celebrations, parades, and marches.

Sabina's idyll could be an idyll of total freedom, an idyll without boundaries.

François Ricard expresses bewilderment over the fact that the concept of idyll is usually present in Kundera's work while the body of his work is generally "so alien to the spirit of the idyll." In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, this incongruity becomes even more evident when we notice that the idyllic chapter "Karenin's Smile" is followed by the chapter on Kitsch and shit (17-18). The theme of the idyll, as the other themes in Kundera, is also "ambiguous, polysemous, and cannot be reduced to anything stable and definitive" (18). Ricard categorizes Kundera's idyll into two types: the "idyll of innocence" and the "idyll of experience" (19-20). Two apparently different images are associated with the idyll of innocence. One is the revolutionary spirit evident in Communism's hope to achieve an idyllic state free of conflict and dissidence. The second image is related to any kind of collective event where everyone is united, such as a gathering of people in a nudist beach⁵. What makes these two different images related is "the abolition of the individual and the rejection of limits" (20). After taking her photographs of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia to a magazine's office where she is shown photographs of a nudist beach, and while the editor mentions that her photographs are completely different, Tereza comments "they're the same". Kundera's narrator says: "Neither the editor nor the photographer understood her, and even I find it difficult to explain what she had in mind when she compared a nude beach to the Russian invasion" (68). What these two worlds have in common is the paradise they each offer by "the dissolution of the individual in an assembled, collective universe" where solitude is impossible and where "all limits are transgressed" (Ricard 20-21). This is an idyll "located beyond all borders, be they those of individuality, of culture, of morality or even of existence. To contingency, to weakness, to doubt or to bitterness, it opposes plentitude: the plentitude of joy,

⁵ Reference to this can be found also in *The Book of laughter and Forgetting* where Jan and Edwige walk on a beach when the bathers are naked.

the plentitude of freedom, the plentitude of being” (21). In representing this kind of idyll, Kundera is in fact criticizing “the lie and the horror that are implicit in the idyll” (21). In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, this criticism is also seen in the discussion over shit, kitsch and the beauty that causes sentimental tears.

The second image of the idyll, the idyll of experience, or the “anti-idyllic idyll” (22) favors “solitude”; it is about “*private* idylls, born of *rupture*” and the solitude of this idyll does not only imply “distance” but “a radical desolidarization which puts an end to all communication and definitely disqualifies both the group and its longing for the idyll”. The hero of this kind of idyll is always a “deserter” (23). According to Ricard,

the condition of the idyll, here, is not transcendence but rather backing away; not the transgression of the forbidden, but that even more radical transgression: the transgression of transgression. Nor do Tomas and Tereza, in their village, live on “the other side” of the border—where life changes itself into destiny, where meaningfulness and plentitude prevail, where history is in motion. Their peace is a fleeting, a falling away from the border, into this world of “non-fate,” of non-plentitude, of repetition and of flawed meaning. (24)

Ricard calls this idyll negative while the other Idyll is positive (24) and a “non-idyll”; the negative idyll is “the world upon which descend, as the Idyll builds itself up, forgetting and devastation” (24). Kundera’s idyll in this chapter is mostly linked to a world of animal history and animal temporality. Karenin, Tomas and Tereza’s dog, becomes the main character in the last chapter, and turns into “the novel’s central metaphor” (Zoghby 281). All the animal imagery throughout the novel finally adds up in order to make Karenin a significant part of the story: picking Karenin from among the puppies his colleague did not want, Tomas was concerned that “the ones he rejected would have to die” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 24). All Tomas wanted to

do was to make Tereza happy and Tereza's happiness is linked to the dog. In his uncertainty to sign the petition, Tomas remembers Tereza holding a crow in her hands and thinks, "it is much more important to dig a half-buried crow out of the ground . . . than to send petitions to a president" (219). Tomas becomes a rabbit in one of Tereza's dreams, signifying the weakness Tereza wishfully attributes to him. Also, the extermination of dogs along with people by the Soviet regime is mentioned by Kundera's narrator; in this regard, Zoghby suggests "despite 'kitsch' as an effort to hide all excrement and all that is unacceptable. . . , in a sterile world life cannot continue" (282), because that sterility is a result of power. While Tereza is with Karenin, she "reflects that all human relationships, even her love for Tomas are affected by 'power play among individuals'" (Zoghby 282). Nature is not kitsch, but power is: "Tensions of political turmoil and repression" and "conflicts in the love relationships of the main characters" (283) are seen in parallel with the power man exerts upon animals and the animal world. These instances of animal imagery present in the novel culminate in a world in which Karenin becomes "the keeper of clock" (284) winding the clock of Tomas and Tereza's days so that the time in which they lived was "growing closer to the regularity of his time" (284).

The idyll, as a peaceful place, is usually an expression of the longing for kitsch and a "symptom of the human inability to confront the problem of time" (Wirth 93); living in the country, in nature, and close to animals, everything recurs naturally. Wirth places the problem of "human temporality" over the conflicts created by cities or human relations (93). The dog's sense of temporality in this last chapter sheds light on the complexity of human temporality. Also, the dog's temporality and the love between dog and man relate to the idyllic consciousness of Tomas, who is concerned with the idea of the eternal return and the complexity of love: "Karenin

knows nothing of the anguish of human time” (94). Later on in the novel the narrator reflects on Tereza’s relationship with Karenin as follows:

Nor had she ever asked herself the questions that plague human couples: Does he love me? Does he love anyone more than me? Does he love me more than I love him? Perhaps all the questions we ask of love, to measure, test, probe, and save it, have the additional effect of cutting it short. Perhaps the reason we are unable to love is that we yearn to be loved, that is, we demand something (love) from our partner instead of delivering ourselves up to him demand-free and asking for nothing but his company. (*The Unbearable Lightness* 297)

The dog also embodies Tereza’s idea of an idyll: “Karenin knew nothing about the duality of body and soul and had no concept of disgust” (297). Therefore, by creating an idyllic life in which Karenin and his temporality are at the center, both Tomas and Tereza’s idylls are realized: As Wirth explains, “despite their irreconcilable, polar opposite trajectories, Tomas and Tereza’s respective longings for freedom are symptoms of the biblical fall” (Wirth 93). They are symptoms set against the happiness of the infinite repetition of the same that characterizes the dog’s sense of temporality. Moreover, the idea that “no one can give anyone else the gift of the idyll; only an animal can do so, because only animals were not expelled from Paradise” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 298) could be read as an affirmation against all the grand marches that are there to gift humanity with happiness and peace. The dog is the expression of the eternal return and of inexperience (94) as his repetitive play every day “did not have to recognize the singularity of Karenin’s soul nor did it restlessly shift from game to game, as if *ein Spiel ist kein Spiel*” (Wirth 94).

The original title for *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was “The Planet of Inexperience” (*The Art of the Novel* 132). Kundera regards inexperience “as a quality of the human condition” as we were born only once, and going through life stages and making choices without knowing what to expect. We can never return to live life again with the experiences we gained. So the world is like a “planet of inexperience” and “the old are innocent children of their old age” (132). This is linked to the conflict of human temporality. The focus on the dog’s sense of temporality in the last chapter of Kundera’s novel, as Wirth says, does not suggest that we can pretend we are dogs, “copying their way of being as if it were our own” (95); Nor does it suggest that dog’s temporality is kitsch as it replaces linearity with an idyllic existence of repetitions. Rather, what this focus on the dog’s sense of temporality offers is “a small taste of the lost paradise of our animality” (Wirth 95): The more animal one is the less s/he will be tortured by time. Kundera “writes within the tradition of dog history, a cynical history, a history without a grand march or a great return” (84), and in so doing, he does not offer a return to kitsch but a distance from it.

Although Tomas and Tereza’s life together is not a happy life, in the last chapter they both experience a happiness resulting from a shared sadness. At first glance, choosing to go to the countryside and to live in solitude might look like a desire for kitsch, but on closer inspection it can be seen as a form of resistance against kitsch itself. As Wirth writes:

both Tomas and Tereza stood out against the wrath of the march of history. For Tomas, because the good as such is not present now, nothing in particular is the good for all time . . . Tereza also moves against the immense depersonalization of history, in which we are just numbers, just cogs in the movement of Spirit, in which our singularity is scarified in what Hegel once called the ‘slaughterhouse bench of history.’ (Wirth 92)

In the trap the world has become, and in the planet of inexperience, what does Kundera's novel offer? Through their individual existential codes, Kundera represents each of the characters as striving to deal with questions that produce an aporia or a terminal paradox: in living life, "we must employ ideas yet we are not properly equipped to do so" (Wirth 96). Karenin invites us "to have a better sense of humor about all of our ideas" because "contrary to Aristotle's elevation of humans over animals as the sole life forms having *logos*" (96) possessing an answer is not always the way to happiness.

3. “The World Is Cuckoo”: Sense Making in the Slaughterhouse of History

Herman Broch mentions “fear of death” as one of the reasons for the existence of a kitsch system of values; kitsch tries “to communicate to man the safety of his existence so as to save him from the threat of darkness.... As a Utopian form of diadactic [sic] art, kitsch foreshortens, for example, our glimpse of the future, and is content to falsify the finite reality of the world” (72). Kundera describes kitsch as “a folding screen set up to curtain off death” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 134). And to curtain off death, kitsch becomes “a systematic attempt to fly from daily reality: in *time* (to a personal past, as indicated by the kitsch cult of souvenir, to the idyll of history; to an adventurous future by means of the clichés of science fiction, etc.); and in *space* (to the most diverse imaginary and exotic lands)” (Calinescu 244). This creates a sense of “relaxation” (245). Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* seems to be about alleviating the pain of existence. Through the utopia of Tralfamadore, and through traveling in time and space, it seems that Billy Pilgrim can overcome both time and death. But how does kitsch contribute to the narrative fabric of Vonnegut’s novel and to the fictional world of Billy Pilgrim? In the search for meaning in life and in an attempt to make sense of the world, how do the author-narrator and Billy deal with kitsch? This chapter delves into the narrative structure of *Slaughterhouse-Five* and analyses Vonnegut’s strategy in narrating his war experience, while exploring if the pastiche-like quality of the novel yields to kitsch, or stays away from it. Also, by looking closely at Billy’s world and his fantasy of the planet Tralfamadore, this chapter tries to elucidate if an anti-war novel could resist kitsch or if kitschifying history is necessary in making the atrocity vivid. According to Calinescu, “if kitsch thrives on aesthetic infantilism, it is only fair to say that it also offers pedagogical pos-

sibilities, including the important realization that there is a difference between kitsch or pseudo-art and art” (258). Does Calinescu’s description of pedagogical kitsch apply to Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*?

3.1 From Kurt Vonnegut to the Author-Narrator to Billy Pilgrim

On the title page of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the readers of the book come across a commentary, right after the name of the author:

A fourth-generation German-American, now living in easy circumstances, on Cape Cod [and smoking too much], who, as an American infantry scout *hors de combat*, as a prisoner of war, witnessed the fire-bombing of Dresden, Germany, “The Florence of the Elbe,” a long time ago, and survived to tell the tale. This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore, where the flying saucers come from. Peace.

By way of this paratextual⁶ element, Vonnegut introduces himself as a survivor of the Dresden firebombing and the teller of the tale. He is a German-American, who was part of the American infantry scout and became a prisoner of war. He also introduces the book the reader has in hand as a novel that is written in the manner Tralfamadoreans write their novels. The book is dedicated to Mary O’Hare and Gerhard Müller. Chapter one starts as follows: “All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true . . . I have changed all the names. . . . I really did go back to Dresden I went back with an old war buddy, Bernard V.

⁶ Gerard Genette refers to productions like an author’s name, a title, a preface, or illustrations as paratexts. In his book, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, he says: “the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold* . . . It is an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text)”. According to Genette, paratexts are usually “authorial” and they are zones from which the author can “influence on the public” (1-2)

O'Hare, and we made friends with a cab driver, who took us to the slaughterhouse where we had been locked up at nights as prisoners of war. His name was Gerhard Müller" (1). By comparing this opening paragraph to the paratextual elements mentioned above, one could as well assume the narrator of the novel to be the real Kurt Vonnegut himself. There are also many other autobiographical facts in this chapter that make this point valid. The narrator talks about his being a student in the Department of Anthropology in the University of Chicago after the Second World War (7), and his service as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau (8). He has worked for General Electric in Schenectady, New York (10). He also talks about his teaching creative writing in the famous Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa for a couple of years (17). He was "a writer on Cape Cod" (4). He mentions Pall-Mall-branded cigarettes. All of these facts are true to the flesh and blood Vonnegut's life. However, even though the narrator in the first chapter (who would interfere directly a couple of times in the story) has a lot of similarities with Kurt Vonnegut, he never mentions his name in this chapter, identifying himself as Vonnegut; this narrator could be taken as a fictional "I" and it is as well plausible to call this narrator an "author-narrator".

The similarities and the connection between the real Vonnegut and the narrator then move to another level in the next chapter. In chapter two, Billy Pilgrim is introduced and he, too, shows similarities to the narrator and thus, to Vonnegut, the author. Above all, Billy has taken part in World War Two and has become a prisoner of war. He has joined the regiment during the Battle of the Bulge (30), the final German offensive of the war, and Vonnegut too has fought in this battle in 1944. Marriage with a pretty girl covered with baby fat, a fact that the author-narrator mentions in the first chapter, is an event in Billy Pilgrim's life too (7). Billy's time travels are also hinted at in the first chapter, making a link between him and the author-narrator; Beside the

reference to Céline and his fascination with time, the author-narrator also points out that his wife “always has to know the time and asks him what time it is and his reply is: “sometimes I don’t know, and I say, ‘Search *me*’” (7). Later on, he again refers to the irregularity he feels in the passage of time and says: “As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars” (19). Finally, Billy is born in 1922, just like Vonnegut, who was sent to Dresden as a prisoner of war and worked in a factory that made malt syrup for pregnant women. Billy also worked in a factory that produced malt syrup (152).

However, despite all the similarities that the author-narrator of chapter one shares with Billy Pilgrim, Billy has his own different life. Billy was born in Ilium, New York, and not in Indiana like Vonnegut; his father is a barber, and he goes to the Ilium School of Optometry. He was a chaplain’s assistant at war, usually “a figure of fun in the American Army” (29).

As the author-narrator states, “there are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters” (156). Billy is also less a character than a plaything, either a plaything for the author-narrator or a plaything of the circumstances in his life and his hallucinations.

Billy’s life is surrounded by kitsch. His mother, “like so many Americans, . . . was trying to construct a life that made sense from things she found in gift shops” (37). The author-narrator, in fact, suggests that so many Americans lead a life which is defined by the act of collecting objects an average consumer will display in his house to create an atmosphere of “hominess” (Calinescu 249). Billy’s wife “associate[s] sex and glamor with war” (115). Here too, the author-narrator makes a comment that “it was a simple-minded thing for a female Earthling to do”

(115), namely to associate sex with war. In his discussion about ‘the kitschman’, Calinescu explains that a kitschman “tends to experience as kitsch even nonkitsch works or situations . . . [and] involuntarily makes a parody of aesthetic response” (259). He goes on to say that “in the tourist’s role, for instance, the kitschman will “kitschify” not only cultural monuments but also landscapes, and especially great sights, such as the Grand Canyon, which are advertised as wonders or freaks of nature” (259). It is interesting to point out to a section in *Slaughterhouse-Five* when Billy and his family visit the Grand Canyon when Billy was twelve years old (84-5). When the family is at the rim of the Grand Canyon, Billy’s father “manfully kicking a pebble into space, [says:] ‘there it *is*’” (85). They had come to this famous place by their automobile and had had seven blowouts on the way and still Billy’s mother says: “it was worth the trip” (85). But “Billy hated the canyon” (85) and, in the words of the author-narrator, “there were other tourists looking down into the canyon, too, and a ranger was there to answer questions. A Frenchman who had come all the way from France asked the ranger in broken English if many people committed suicide by jumping in” (85). According to Calinescu, “what characterizes the kitschman is his inadequately hedonistic idea of what is artistic or beautiful. . . . the kitschman wants to fill his spare time with maximum excitement . . . in exchange for minimum effort” (259) and the quoted part of *Slaughterhouse-Five* reflects Calinescu’s view regarding American culture.

During the war, Billy meets the eighteen-year-old Roland Weary, who tells him about his father’s collection of “guns and swords and torture instruments. Weary’s father was a plumber, but belonged to a club of people who collected things like that (33). Weary had the fantasy of a war story in which he and his other fellow soldiers were called The Three Musketeers, and would fight and kill everyone. This is made fun of during the novel when a woman writer in

chapter one and later on Billy's wife are eating a Three Musketeers Candy Bar. The British soldiers Billy meets during the war have no idea that the candles and soaps they are using are made from the fat of the Jews and gypsies and all the other enemies of the Nazi state. As an entertainment the musical version of Cinderella, "the most popular story ever told" (92), is being played.

When Billy and the other Americans are in Dresden two days before it is destroyed, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., an American who had become a Nazi comes to visit them:

Campbell was an ordinary looking man, but he was extravagantly costumed in a uniform of his own design. He wore a white ten-gallon hat and black cowboy boots decorated with swastikas and stars. He was sheathed in a blue body stocking which had yellow stripes running from his armpits to his ankles. His shoulder patch was a silhouette of Abraham Lincoln's profile on a field of pale green. He had a broad armband which was red, with a blue swastika in a circle of white. (154-5)

Campbell goes on to explain: "blue is for the American sky, . . . White is for the race that pioneered the continent, drained the swamps and cleared the forests and built the roads and bridges. Red is for the blood of American patriots which was shed so gladly in years gone by" (155). Campbell's extravagant costume is fabricated to create a particular effect and his attempt to explain all the signs and symbols serves to create an emotional appeal that turns out to be very redundant. He is there to ask the Americans to join the Free Corps to fight the Russians and communism along with the Nazis; he tells his compatriots that after the Russians are defeated they would be repatriated through Switzerland. Edgar Derby protests against Campbell's speech and speaks of the American form of government, "with freedom and justice and opportunities and fair play for all," adding that "there wasn't a man there who wouldn't gladly die for those ideals" and mentioning "the brotherhood between the American and the Russian people, and how those

two nations were going to crush the disease of Nazism, which wanted to infect the whole world” (157). It is at this point that “the air-raid sirens of Dresden howl “mournfully” and they take shelter in the slaughterhouse. The night after Dresden would be totally destroyed. The author-narrator calls Derby “a character” as he rises against Campbell, despite everyone’s being “a plaything of enormous forces” and despite war’s effect that discourages people to be characters. However, the irony is revealed when the American ‘freedom and justice and fair play’ ends up in firebombing and destroying a whole city. As Kundera writes in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, these systems, either what Campbell introduced or what Derby spoke of, could form “various kitsches”: “political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that political kitsch” (257).

Above all, Billy “didn’t really like life at all” (97) and was “unenthusiastic about living” (58). We will see later on how Billy deals with being so sick and unenthusiastic about life apart from sometimes weeping quietly “for no apparent reason” (78).

Kurt Vonnegut, the author, the fictional narrator who could be a counterpart for Vonnegut, and Billy Pilgrim, who could stand between a counterpart and a foil for the author-narrator, determine a three-layered narrative structure that causes the story to unfold without yielding to a mold. Vonnegut’s strategy in merging fact and fiction through these three layers of narration will be discussed further in this chapter.

3.2 Vonnegut’s Narrative Collage

“It is so short and jumbled and jangled . . . because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (24). This is how the author-narrator describes his Dresden book in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. He goes on to say: “Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never

say anything or want anything ever again. Everything is supposed to be very quiet after a massacre, and it always is, except for the birds. And what do the birds say? All there is to say about a massacre, things like ‘*Poo-tee-weet?*’” (24). The author-narrator thought it would be easy to write about Dresden; he just had to report whatever he had seen. But he finds the Dresden part of his memory quite useless when it comes to writing a book about it. No words came to his mind after he was back from war twenty-three years earlier, nor does he find words now that he has become “an old fart with his memories and his Pall Malls” (2). After all the death and destruction, what remains is silence; a silence so unbreakable that his attempts in trying to put it into words and his struggle to put the words on paper turns into a “jumbled and jangled” book about itself and about the process of writing it. As Giannone remarks, “The problem of living through the fire-bombing of Dresden is rivaled by the problem of writing about it” (83). Vonnegut’s book presents itself as a collage of different parts and pieces, a feature which is most evident in the first chapter.

In the first chapter, the author-narrator talks about how he sets off to say ‘everything’ about the Dresden massacre. He rambles on about all the different things that he goes through, in reality and in his head, during the process of writing this “tempting” story: “I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time” (2). He tries to remember what he saw in Dresden, but remembering such a tragic event, let alone writing a book about it, is no easy feat. He remembers a limerick that parallels his dysfunctional memory or his inability to write:

There was a young man from Stamboul,

Who soliloquized thus to his tool:

“You took all my wealth

And you ruined my health,

And now you won't *pee*, you old fool." (3)

He remembers a song about a man called Yon Yonson, from Wisconsin, that goes on through repetition "to infinity" (3) without any advancement. He says he had outlined the Dresden story many times, the best of which was what he did with his daughter's crayons on the back of a roll of wallpaper. During his reflections or his thinking out loud in this chapter, the author-narrator leaves no suspense in the book. He tells how the story begins and how it ends. In writing this book, he is going to look back and he wants "to say everything *all at once* because imposing conditions of time and space steal meaning from the event" (Klinkowitz 83). As Vonnegut breaks away with conventional storytelling, he also "intentionally deflates suspense" because "suspense is a function of a lack of knowledge at a single point in time and space" (Allen 7). Everything is anticipated even before it happens in the chronology of the unchronological events in the narrative. He even mentions what he thinks the climax of the story should be, the execution of Edgar Derby: "I think the climax of the book will be the execution of poor old Edgar Derby, . . . The irony is so great. A whole city gets burned down, and thousands and thousands of people are killed. And then this one American foot soldier is arrested in the ruins for taking a teapot. And he's given a regular trial, and then he's shot by a firing squad" (6). As a matter of fact, regarding climax, we might even suggest that the book doesn't have one. Considering that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" and there is only quiet hard to be shattered, climax, just like suspense, seems to be anything but a priority for the author-narrator.

He talks about his meeting with an old war buddy, Bernard O'hare, from whom he expects help in remembering, and with whom he goes back to Dresden. He goes to see Bernard O'Hare in 1964. Upon his visit, Mary O'Hare makes a comment that shows how all war/anti-war

novels make wars look glorious and those who fight in wars look like heroes: “you’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies” (14). Mary O’Hare believes wars are being encouraged by books and movies (14). The narrator, the fictional Vonnegut, promises her that his book would show that they were “foolish virgins in the war. Right at the end of childhood” (14). By calling the book “the children’s crusade,” he subverts the kitsch representation of war that media tend to produce.

Some passages from Charles Mackay’s *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* are mentioned as a source of information for children’s crusades.⁷ The author-narrator also cites from *Dresden, History, Stage and Gallery*, by Mary Endell, on the history of Dresden. He is reading the book when sleeping at O’Hare’s place. Two more books that he has with him to read on the plane are mentioned. One is *Words for the Wind*, by Theodore Roethke, from which he quotes part of a poem: “I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow/ I feel my fate in what I cannot fear/ I learn by going where I have to go” (19). The other book is Erika Ostrovsky’s *Céline and His Vision*, in which he reads about Céline saying, “no art is possible without a dance with death” (19). The author-narrator also remembers a scene in Céline’s *Death on the Installment Plan* and how time obsessed Céline (20). Incorporating excerpts from other books into the novel, which is not only limited to the first chapter, gives in part an essayistic quality to the novel itself. In chapter five of the book, there are even excerpts from Howard W. Campbell, Jr.’s

⁷ According to Charles Mackay’s book, as explained in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, The Children’s Crusade started in 1213 when two monks planned to raise armies of children in Germany and France, and sell them in North Africa as slaves. Thirty thousand children volunteered, thinking they were going to Palestine. Pope Innocent III thought they were going to Palestine, too, and admired them. However, most of these children were shipped out of Marseilles, and about half of them were drowned and the other half got to North Africa and were sold.

monograph that was a report “on the behavior in Germany of American enlisted men as prisoners of war” (122).

At some point on his way from O’Hare’s place, the author-narrator says: “we went to the New York World’s Fair, saw what the past had been like, according to the Ford Motor Car Company and Walt Disney, saw what the future would be like, according to General Motors” (17). This “incantatory repetition of *according to*” could be a “stylistic parody” of the gospels, though it is technology now which bears comparison with the gospels (Giannone 85). Reflecting on The World’s Fair, the author-narrator also says: “and I asked myself about the present: how wide it was, how deep it was, how much was mine to keep” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 17). Giannone comments: “*Slaughterhouse-Five*, like the Gospels, is an exploration of our moment in relation to death through the broken forms defining the dimensions of our presentness” (86). The chapter ends with reference to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in *Genesis*. What adds to the collage quality of the text, though, is that some of the characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, such as Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater, and Howard Campbell are taken from Vonnegut’s earlier novels. This collage of different fragments, repetitions and imitations, as mentioned before, is also seen in the other chapters through the end of the novel.

Vonnegut’s language is a very simple and colloquial one. Klinkowitz says: “Like his outer-space creatures who look like plain old plumbers’ helpers, Vonnegut’s innovative techniques are drawn from common enough sources so that the book he writes seems more a part of everyday life than a revolt against it” (94). However, “the composite origin” of this novel does not turn it into “an ideal food for a lazy audience” (Eco 182-3) as it is the case with works that can be labeled as kitsch. The “malicious collage” of kitsch aims at “producing a sentimental effect, or rather to offer it to the reader once it has already been exhausted” (Eco 182). But rather

than creating the effects of kitsch, this composite structure in *Slaughterhouse-Five* contributes to the themes the author is trying to depict in his account of Dresden. This collage of fragments and excerpts from original sources is not frameworked inside a conventional narrative structure. Vonnegut's style can be seen as an innovative strategy, a way of doing justice to a historical fact and its tragic legacy; the immensity of this event might have lost effect if narrated otherwise, in a more conventional manner.

Vonnegut calls *Slaughterhouse-Five* "a novel" but the first chapter starts with the words "All this happened, more or less" making the book look like a factual report, only to invite the reader to question the veracity of this report after, when the focus from "all this" changes to only the war parts: "The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (1). The author-narrator also confirms that Billy has come unstuck in time and that Billy's time-travels are true but at the same time, by using "he says" more than once (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 22), he makes the reader doubt the validity of what he, as the narrator of Billy's story, is saying. After all, it is Billy who says he has come unstuck in time. According to Giannone, "the opening words introduce an unstable verisimilitude where true and false, past and future, here and there, inner space and outer space are merged. This coalescing on many levels carries with it a repudiation of facts that makes our reading an ironic exercise. We learn to distrust history. Historical judgement is founded in causality, which this novel negates" (87), because Vonnegut intends to make it "a nonjudgmental expression of astonishment" at what he saw and did in Dresden (xii) as he says. Freese also points out that "any narrative reconstruction of a historical event cannot but proceed by selection and valuation and is thus by its very definition a sense-making endeavor" (217). This may be said to connect historical accounts to fabrication and also to rationalizing the irrational, which is

one of the many characteristics of a kitsch system. What Kundera says comes to mind here: “Before we’re forgotten we’ll be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 278). What remains of everyone or everything is what is narrated or depicted by those who do so; and “insofar as narratives can be completed and can present a unified plot, they ‘give reality the odor of the ideal’” (qtd. in Engler 27). Man tries to project “intelligible structures onto reality so that it can fulfill its desires by assuming meaning which reality itself denies him at every turn” (Engler 27). According to Broch, “a distinction must be made between overcoming death and escape from death, between illuminating the irrational and fleeing from the irrational. The technique of kitsch, which is based on imitation and uses set recipes, is rational even when the result seems to be extremely irrational, or even positively absurd” (73). But Vonnegut moves away from the conventions of historical novels and by finally saying that his book is “a failure” demonstrates how “a fictional context can relativize a factual statement” (Freese 217). He even goes as far as saying “people aren’t supposed to look back” (20). But he has to do it once to express his astonishment at what he did and saw in Dresden. And he looks back through Billy Pilgrim and through Billy’s created utopia where he can live comfortably. Vonnegut indeed creates a utopia that could function as an ideal system that gives order and structure to the turbid reality of history. However, it is Billy Pilgrim, insofar as he is the author’s plaything, who lives in the utopia of a pulp sci-fi world within Vonnegut’s anti-war novel. This is a way for Vonnegut to distance himself from Billy and, in particular, from any kind of intelligible message about the tragic legacy of historical traumas.

3.3 Tralfamadore: The Peaceful Utopia

The planet Tralfamadore and Tralfamadorian concepts of life, time and death play a central role in Billy Pilgrim’s life. On the title page of the book, Vonnegut introduces himself as a

survivor who is going to tell the tale of his survival, but not in the conventional manner of story-telling and not aiming to talk of the historical events and his war experience in a sequential or consequential way. He puts so much focus on the planet Tralfamadore and on Billy's time and space traveling that the firebombing of Dresden does not seem to be the main event of the book, not until the end.

Billy is kidnapped by Tralfamadorians in 1967 on the night of his daughter's wedding, as he first announces on a radio talk in New York in 1968. About a month later, Billy writes a letter to the *Ilium News Leader*, describing the creatures from Tralfamadore: "They were two feet high, and green, and shaped like plumber's friends. Their suction cups were on the ground, and their shafts, which were extremely flexible, usually pointed to the sky. At the top of each shaft was a little hand with a green eye in its palm" (25). These creatures kidnap Billy and take him to their planet which is very far, so it can't be detected from earth nor the earth could be detected from there (28). It is 446,120,000,000,000,000 miles away as Billy says (106). In Tralfamadore, Billy is placed in an artificial habitat, in a zoo, "a simulated Earthling habitat" (106). The first thing Tralfamadorians tell Billy to do on Tralfamadore is to take off his clothes (79). Billy was forty-four years old then, naked and "on display under a geodesic dome" and thousands of Tralfamadorians were outside trying to see him. They were "interested in his body—all of it" (106). They had "no way of knowing Billy's body and face were not beautiful. They supposed that he was a splendid specimen. This had a pleasant effect on Billy, who began to enjoy his body for the first time" (108). Where Billy was being displayed, there was no wall, nor place for Billy to hide. Everything, including "the mint green bathroom fixtures were right out in the open". When Billy goes to the bathroom "to take a leak" the whole crowd can see him (107). Even though the nakedness could link Billy's status to "Adam's shameless nakedness and proud majesty,"

(Mustazza 109) Billy's habitat is not a natural one but is a place with "ornamental conveniences" (Mustazza 108) and furnishings that are stolen from the Sears & Roebuck warehouse in Iowa City:

There was a color television set and a couch that could be converted into a bed. There were end tables with lamps and ashtrays on them by the couch. There was a home bar and two stools. There was a little pool table. There was wall-to-wall carpeting in federal gold, except in the kitchen and bathroom areas and over the iron manhole cover in the center of the floor. There were magazines arranged in a fan on the coffee table in front of the couch. There was a stereophonic phonograph. The phonograph worked. The television didn't. There was a picture of one cowboy pasted to the television tube. So it goes. (107)

There was also a picture painted on the door of the refrigerator. "It was a picture of a Gay Nineties couple on a bicycle built for two" (107). This could be "a perfect place for him as a middle-class, middle-minded, twentieth century earthling" (Mustazza 108).

The Tralfamadorians communicated telepathically (73). Their books were written in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars, that to Billy looked like telegrams. As one of them explains to Billy:

each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (84)

The description of Tralfamadorian books resembles their perception of life. There isn't any particular relationship between events, but seen all at once they create a beautiful, surprising and deep image of life.

As Billy says, Tralfamadorians "had many wonderful things to teach Earthlings, especially about time" (25). According to them, there is no such thing as a linear time, like beads on a string:

All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever. (25)

In the Tralfamadorian conception, "the sting of time is removed, its ability to corrode is undermined, and the tragic view that the aging process makes for is eliminated" (Mustazza 113). In other words, the nonlinearity of time changes the view about death as being the end of everything. The reality of death is denied. Tralfamadorians, thus, believe 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. ... When a Tralfamadorian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in a bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments" (34). Having learned that from Tralfamadorians, Billy then says, "now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'so it goes'" (34).

Tralfamadorians also do not believe in the concept of “free will”. One of them tells Billy: “If I hadn’t spent so much time studying Earthlings, . . . I wouldn’t have any idea what was meant by ‘free will.’ I’ve visited thirty-one inhabited planets in the universe, and I have studied reports on one hundred more. Only on Earth is there any talk of free will” (82).

In addition to this, Billy learns from the people of Tralfamadore about the end of the universe. When Billy mentions the danger that the earth poses to the universe and all the violence, terror, war and slaughter the earthlings cause and the peace in Tralfamadore, they “close their little hands on their eyes” (111). This implies what they teach him later: “to concentrate on the happy moments of his life, and to ignore the unhappy ones—to stare only at pretty things as eternity failed to go by” (186). They show Billy that he should close his eyes to the unpleasant events. The gesture they make could also imply that Billy could not see beyond what he really sees; his assumption that the earthlings are “the terror of the universe” (110) is not really correct: Tralfamadorians assure Billy that the earth has nothing to do with how the universe ends and it is actually the Tralfamadorians who blow it up, experimenting with new fuels for their flying saucers: “A Tralfamadorian test pilot presses a starter button, and the whole Universe disappears” (111). In response to Billy’s asking them if they can prevent this from happening and keep the pilot from pressing the button as they already know in advance that it is going to happen, they again refer to their philosophy of time and free will: “He has *always* pressed it, and he always *will*. We *always* let him and we always *will* let him. The moment is *structured* that way” (111).

As time is nonlinear and the moments are eternal—eternally returning the way they are structured—and as there is no free will, the earthlings, if they tried hard, could learn to “ignore the awful times, and concentrate on the good ones” (112). That was the advice of Tralfamadorians. Giannone proposes that the habit of closing the eyes to unpleasant events “may liberate the

person from pain; but it may also isolate, because the disappearance of unwelcome sights sets the beholder apart from the universe that is banished” (89). But this distance from reality and being banished from a universe of pain is the mission of kitsch. This is how kitsch puts one into a soothing dream.

Billy first comes unstuck in time in 1944 while the Second World War is in progress, and when he is in the forest, about to lie down and die. He also starts talking about Tralfamadore after an airplane crash. He is the only survivor of an airplane crash in 1968. He is taken to a private hospital and a brain surgeon operates on him. It is after being released from the hospital that he goes to a radio program in New York and talks about both being unstuck in time and the planet Tralfamadore. It’s “not coincidental” that his space and time travel both start after his encounters with death (Merrill 68). Billy’s space and time travels are “modes of escape” (68). The sources of Billy’s Tralfamadorian fantasy, even though not directly mentioned, could be traced in the novel; when Billy was in the veterans’ hospital, he had read a Kilgore Trout science-fiction book. He sees the book about twenty years after the war in a bookstore in Times Square. “The name of the book was *The Big Board*. ... It was about an Earthling man and woman who were kidnapped by extra-terrestrials and were put on display in a zoo on a planet called Zircon-212” (192).

There is a connection between Billy’s time travels and his Tralfamadorian fantasy; although, according to him, each happens at a different time and are to be differentiated. Tralfamadorians use a metaphor to explain that the earthlings are trapped in the amber of the moment, deprived of free will and left without any explanations:

The guide invited the crowd to imagine that they were looking across a desert at a mountain range on a day that was twinkling bright and clear. They could look at a peak or a

bird or a cloud, at a stone right in front of them, or even down into a canyon behind them. But among them was this poor Earthling, and his head was encased in a steel sphere which he could never take off. There was only one eyehole through which he could look, and welded to that eyehole were six feet of pipe. ... He was also strapped to a steel lattice which was bolted to a flatcar on rails, and there was no way he could turn his head or touch the pipe. The far end of the pipe rested on a bi-pod which was also bolted to the flatcar. All Billy could see was the dot at the end of the pipe. He didn't know he was on a flatcar, didn't even know there was anything peculiar about his situation. The flatcar sometimes crept, sometimes went extremely fast, often stopped—went uphill, downhill, around curves, along straightaways. Whatever poor Billy saw through the pipe, he had no choice but to say to himself, "That's life." (147)

Contrary to how the earthlings see life, "the Universe does not look like a lot of bright little dots to the creatures from Tralfamadore. Tralfamadorians can see where each star has been and where it is going, so that the heavens are filled with rarefied, luminous spaghetti". They "don't see human beings as two-legged creatures, either. They see them as great millipedes—"with babies" legs at one end and old people's legs at the other" (110). Time being represented by spaghetti lines rather than dots, and human beings having more than two legs implies the continuity of time and the possibility of moving between temporal and spatial zones. One could see the influence of this philosophy on Billy's time-travels which, however, are said to be true by the author-narrator. It was mentioned earlier that it is Billy who says his time travels are true and even though the author-narrator mentions Billy's coming unstuck in time, he repeats "he says" many times, so he is only reporting what Billy says. However, this distinction between what Billy or the author-narrator believe is not always clear, as in this example: Billy was unconscious

in the hospital after the airplane crash for two days and “he dreamed millions of things, some of them true. The true things were time-travel” (149). Here, it seems that the author-narrator is confirming the time-travels or even if he is talking on behalf of Billy, the author-narrator’s words seem to eliminate or at least blur the distinction between Billy’s beliefs and his own. This contributes to the merging of fact and fiction that was mentioned earlier. There is no certainty about the veracity of time-travels.

Tralfamadore could be considered a utopia as it deals with paramount issues such as time, death, and free will and it resolves all the problems that exist around these notions. But could this utopia be as kitschy as the desire for an idyllic world is? Leonard Mustazza compares Billy’s utopia with Edenic features (109). Billy’s nakedness, as mentioned before, is compared to Adam’s shameless nakedness and Montana’s being sent to him by Tralfamadoreans evokes Eve’s appearance to Adam (111). Their love is heavenly. However, Billy’s artificial habitat is made from stolen ordinary items, and Montana is a motion picture star. Billy’s hallucinatory planet is different from a utopian heaven because everything about it is still as normal as on earth. What Billy does in this earth-like habitat is nothing extraordinary either; while doing everyday routines like showering, shaving, brushing his teeth, Billy answers to the Tralfamadoreans’ question if he is happy there, with “About as happy as I was on Earth,” and the author-narrator confirms by commenting “which was true” (145).

Billy watches a movie backward right before he goes to the yard to be kidnapped by the flying saucers. Watching the movie backward is a kind of wish fulfilment; Billy’s wish to have been able to change things. Wishes like that are in part fulfilled in Tralfamadore: “Billy Pilgrim’s madness is one with a method to it: his ‘trip’ to Tralfamadore and the ‘knowledge’ he brings back [are] reflecting his own desperate yearnings after peace, love, immutability, stability, and

an ordered existence” (Mustazza 103). With the “lack of faith in God” and “lack of confidence in humanity, the only paradise that Billy can hope to inhabit is a self-generated one” (114). A paradise that is fashioned like earth but without the limitations an earthly life brings. This planet, as Billy’s mental construct or his schizophrenic hallucination, “become[s] his reality, making him a permanent dreamer” (Mustazza 103). It provides answers to Billy’s existential questions and to his insoluble inquiries. Therefore, one could say that the utopia Billy creates in part resembles the world around him, replete with kitsch and all the kitsch aspects of American life, but, on the other hand, it is also an attempt to transcend the limits of human life, such as the trap of time and the inescapability of death. The Tralfamadorian philosophy falls out of earthly systems of representation; it puts time in a state of crisis, and it resists finitude. This fantastic utopia “separated from the actuality it transforms, . . . can be destructively overwhelming to the dreaming mind. . . . the self-blinding may create a swift regression to a death-like unconsciousness” (Giannone 89) or a sense of indifferent numbness. This self-blinding does not bear the fruit the self-blinding of kitsch bears. “Great psychic risk, then, accompanies the inner peace that Billy learns how to develop on Tralfamadore” (89).

According to Broch, kitsch rationalizes the irrational, by escaping from it (73). The fantasy of Tralfamadore is “a desperate attempt to rationalize chaos” (Merrill 69). The chaos of a human world represented at its worst in war. However, the chaos is not rationalized by false reasoning or false consciousness the way kitsch might do. Billy’s utopia introduces a new system that erases “the direct relationship between willed action and consequence” that was the case in the Edenic world of Adam and Eve; Billy creates a world in which “will and action are inconsequential . . . and where human destiny is in itself insignificant” (Mustazza 112). In other words, “Billy effectively ‘corrects’ the Edenic account so that human responsibility plays no role in the

present state of affairs and the inherent nature of things obviates any concern one might have for consequences” (112). This utopia evokes Edenic and idyllic features while, at the same time, distancing itself from them. As Giannone suggests, “fear disappears because fear is causality internalized, molded by an expectation of danger. Where effects do not connect with causes, ambition, anxiety, and danger cannot be felt. Without a measurement between effects there is no change. Finally, the mind masters death. The ultimate change. Billy is forever ready for a shot from a high-powered laser gun that kills him” (90-1). Tralfamadorian peace and “apocalyptic calm is born of total indifference. Since Tralfamadorians do not change, they have no ethical reference. The opposite of Lot’s wife, they know a great deal but care not at all” (92).

Despite the peace Billy associates with this planet, Tralfamadorians will tell him they are the ones that end the universe or that they simply close their eyes to the unpleasant parts of life. At some point in the book Tralfamadorians present a fatalism that brings to mind the futility of life on earth. When kidnapped by the Tralfamadorians, Billy asks his captors, “Why me?” The Tralfamadorians reply, “Why you? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*?” (97). In the same manner, when one of Billy’s fellow prisoners is beaten by a German guard, he asks the guard “Why me?” and the guard’s reply is “Vy you? Vy anybody?” (116). Merrill and Scholl believe that “this parallel exposes the inhumane consequences of adopting the Tralfamadorian point of view, for the denial of personal responsibility easily leads to the brutal excesses of the Nazis” (72). Tralfamadorians complain that “Earthlings are the great explainers” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 84) and they want to explain everything, and instead they tell that “every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine” (146). This avoidance of responsibility could somehow parallel kitsch’s lack of responsibility in artistic and moral terms. As Broch states, “kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art”; that element which leads to value working “beautifully” more

than the ethical working “well” (63). Tralfamadorians too, by negating the bad sides of life and closing their eyes to them teach living beautifully.

The deterministic aspect of the Tralfamadorian way of looking at life, their foreknowledge of the end of the universe and their saying that we are all bugs in amber, offers a sense of liberation that comes from not wanting any explanation. This far-off planet functions as Billy’s way to escape the pain of his existence and for this reason it should be categorized as a consolatory form of kitsch. However, this eccentric type of utopia is not an idyllic place one could resort to in an attempt to get away from the pain of being. It is formed by imitation, taking earth as a pattern. The lack of originality in the creation of Tralfamadore is compensated for by elements that could not be explained by earthlings and resist being framed. Tralfamadore could play the role of kitsch for Billy, and Tralfamadorians the role of kitschmen. However, the process of how kitsch is created is being shown, and observed; not exactly by Billy, but by the author-narrator and through a reader who can see the conscious attempt of representing a kitsch system of values. The Tralfamadorian concept of time might free time from what clocks say, but it makes temporality spatial, by comparing the flow of time to a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. It is a flow where one should not expect a flow: “All time is all time. It does not change. it does not lend itself to warnings and explanations. It simply *is*” (82). The people of Tralfamadore do not offer consolation by a return to a historical past where changes were not so rapid and unpredictable. Their system of kitsch is a compensatory system where they overcome time and the fear of death by already knowing the end.

3.4 From Retrospection to Observation: Vonnegut and Billy

What Billy has experienced in war and as a prisoner of war in Dresden has numbed his senses, about death—death in general, his wife’s death, or his own death. Billy survived the fire-bombing and war did not make him crippled, but it made him spastic in time. Raymond Olderman describes Billy’s life as a “spiritual suicide” (200). The world he is picturing is a world indifferent to man; in order to go on living man tries to make meaning out of this indifference. In such a world where values are exhausted, to go on living is possible through illusions. However, these illusions are not a way to escape or deny life, but to deal with it” (Olderman 190). To accept the illusions brings about some “personal emotional satisfaction [that] is the most abundant source of kitsch” (Broch 72-3). The illusion of the planet Tralfamadore and all the lessons its inhabitants teach is Billy’s way of dealing with life. “His personal myth carries out the same function that all myths do. It gives meaning to the apparently meaningless; it provides cause for hope. It provides relief from the otherwise horrible awareness of aging, death, decay, and meaningless sacrifice” (Mustazza 113).

Tralfamadorians teach about time, life and death. According to them, everything that is done had to be done, “everybody has to do exactly what he does” (254), and things happen exactly as they are supposed to happen. The Tralfamadorian’s philosophy of life is not to ask questions about the meaning of life or the purpose of god’s creation, because there is no meaning. To ask “why me?” is a very earthling question as Tralfamadorians say (97). However, to say that things happen as they are supposed to happen is just an illusion; and this illusion could be good as well as bad. It could be a good illusion because it “avoids self-annihilation in the name of purpose and meaning” (Olderman 194). The search for a particular “Meaning” could also cause the annihilation of others in the name of wanting to provide them with a theory of meaning that is

better than all others. That could in fact be the reason why men take part in “children’s crusades” or unreasonable wars (195). It could be a bad illusion because it might lead one toward the idea that everything is predetermined and therefore it reinforces the passivity and indifference, as is the case with Billy. Billy becomes, in part, a kitschman involved in “this game of illusions and spurious impressions” (Calinescu 259). “The temptation to believe the aesthetic lies of kitsch is a sign of either undeveloped or largely atrophied critical sense. Mental passivity and spiritual laziness characterize the amazingly undemanding lover of kitsch. Theologically, then, Richard Egener may be right when he identifies kitsch as the sin of ‘sloth’” (Calinescu 259).

There are several instances in the novel that show Billy’s awareness of kitsch. When he is in the mental ward in the veterans’ hospital in New York, he hears Rosewater say to a psychiatrist, “I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies, or people just aren’t going to want to go on living” (97). The author-narrator says that Billy and Rosewater are both dealing with the same crisis, which is finding life meaningless after having seen the war and “the greatest massacre in European history”. Both Billy and Rosewater are trying to reinvent “themselves and their universe” through the help of science fiction (96). In Billy’s case, this reinvention goes as far as creating the Tralfamadorian fiction and living life there where he wants to be lied to or close his eyes to all the ‘shit’ around him.

Billy Pilgrim is not really religious; he wasn’t a catholic but his mother who was an organist took him to different churches with her. She had a “terrific hankering for a crucifix” and the crucifix hanging on the wall of Billy’s room in Ilium was bought by her (36). Billy’s mother, like so many Americans, wanted to construct a life that made sense from all the little things she would buy from the gift shops (37). If his mother is totally unaware of the kitsch around her,

Billy is an indifferent consumer of kitsch, even though he seems to be aware of it at times. However, it should be noted that the author-narrator describes the Crucifix on Billy's wall as "extremely gruesome" (36). All the wounds are there. Billy's Christ is a pitiful bum who dies horribly (36); he is not the privileged son of God, but is adopted by God after being lynched for having no connections. This new Gospel, introducing a cruel version of Christianity, is written by Kilgore Trout, another science fiction helping Billy to reinvent his universe. By offering a different version of Christ's story, the author-narrator in fact cuts the thread to paradise and in so doing he not only does not deny shit, but rather admits its existence.

The only time Billy cries during the war is when he sees the condition of the horses that were carrying their wagon (188). Later on in life, he sometimes finds himself weeping "for no apparent reason" and it is "extremely quiet" and "not very moist" (59). Also he cries very little even though he sees things worth crying for (188). In dealing with this pain and with a life that has lost meaning for Billy, Tralfamadorians teach him a kind of blithe indifference that is reflected in the epigraph to the novel:

The cattle are lowing,
 the Baby awakes.
 But the little Lord Jesus
 No crying He makes.

The author-narrator interferes twice saying, "that was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (120, 141), which shows that he has been experiencing the same thing as Billy and he has even been with Billy during all that happened to him. Vonnegut writes the book and invites the reader, through the voice of the author-narrator, to listen while Billy gives in to the Tralfamadorian hallucination. Freese indicates a difference between "the actively protesting

Vonnegut and his fatalistic protagonist” (220). Billy could be a counterpart for the author-narrator showing his desire to fall into a realm of hedonism.

“Trying to write his novel the conventional way has brought the author nowhere, just as Billy’s attempts to bring the world into focus fail. To be successful each must find a different way of transcending the limits of conventional time and space in order to comprehend what these factors hide” (Klinkowitz 88). By narrating his story or “storifying the atrocity”⁸ he has witnessed through Billy Pilgrim’s life, and through a narrator who resembles him but is never named Vonnegut, Kurt Vonnegut creates a world that is not contained; a world that is expanding. Kitsch, just like modernity, is concerned with the problem of time, but this time, according to Calinescu, is not “the metaphysical or epistemological time of the philosophers, nor the scientific construct dealt by the physicists but the *human time* and sense of history as experienced and valued culturally” (9). Through the equivocality of Billy’s utopia and through his time travels, the author-narrator (and through him, Vonnegut) mobilizes a consolatory effect that allows him to look back and talk about his experience without his world being framed within the limitations and the relaxations of kitsch.

Also, Lot’s wife “endured a great deal but knew little, so the pillar of salt protects the novel from settling into the inaccuracies of rationality or conclusiveness” (Giannone 88). The author-narrator says the book is written by a pillar of salt, but the book is anyhow written. It is thanks to the world wherein Billy is immersed that the author-narrator is able to tell everything without really turning to a pillar of salt. In the end, the author-narrator, after all the descriptions given about Tralfamadore and all the peace suggested by them, shows his discontent with the Tralfamadorian philosophy: “If what Billy Pilgrim learned from the Tralfamadorians is true, that

⁸ Reference to the title of Peter Freese’s article, “Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*; or, How to Storify an Atrocity.”

we will all live forever, no matter how dead we may sometimes seem to be, I am not overjoyed” (201). In other words, he distances himself from Billy and his planet. Nevertheless, Tralfamadore not only resolves the difficulties of dealing with earthly matters but also the difficulties of writing.

Drawing on Lot’s wife’s story, the author-narrator says Lot’s wife’s looking back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was very human. However, he comments, “people aren’t supposed to look back. I’m certainly not going to do it anymore” (20). What Vonnegut does is telling his story through an author-narrator and then Billy Pilgrim, who is unstuck in time and therefore is not remembering the past but is “really” traveling through time and thus, re-experiencing the past again and again. By blurring the reality of Billy’s time-travels and the border between Billy’s remembering or re-experiencing things, like a manifestation of eternal return, the author-narrator is acknowledging everything that happened with all its bad and good sides. So the events are not drowned in an aura of nostalgia by happening once and then being remembered. But can the author-narrator do that without the consolatory effect of kitsch? No, Billy Pilgrim, as an average reader who reads Kilgore Trout’s science fiction novels as an escape from death, concurrently creating his own utopia in the form of planet Tralfamadore, is a kitschman who in turns becomes the kitschified version of the author-narrator and Vonnegut.

3.5 A Duty-Dance with Death

Death is a central theme in *Slaughterhouse-five*. It is a prevalent image all through the novel, noticed right in the beginning in the title of the story: *Slaughterhouse-Five, The Children’s Crusade, A Duty-Dance with Death*. The novel is written by “a pillar of salt” (21), a death emblem, and it ends with images of “corpse mines” and coffins (204-5). However, the counterpoint to all the dark images suggesting death is the philosophy of death of the Tralfamadoreans

who do not see any point in crying for a person's death as nobody really dies according to them. Billy himself survives many encounters with death, from being at war to surviving the bombardment and the destruction of a whole city in a slaughterhouse, to a plane crash in which everyone except him dies. And as he survives all these encounters with death, many people around him die. And "so it goes". Each time this phrase is used in the book, it is connected to death, whether it is a person's death, or a group of people's or an animal's, whether it is natural death, killing, massacre in war, or execution. The phrase keeps being repeated in the book until the number of these repetitions begins to "mount like a death toll" (MacFarlane 148). "So it goes" following any mention of death, expresses the uncertainty, lack of apprehension or, as MacFarlane puts it, a "supreme lack of coherence" regarding death or survival: it is "the when and why of our death that makes no sense in Vonnegut's cosmology" (148). The constant referral to the unpredictability and fortuitousness of death and the precariousness of life climaxes in Edgar Derby's senseless death.

Billy's utopia, even though it makes him forget death in a way, is telling him there's no need to look for big goals. That is why his utopia is the reverse of escaping from the dullness of quotidian life. But again, kitsch appears "as a pleasurable escape from the banality of both work and leisure" (Calinescu 248). His utopia in fact offers a twofold vision that could be reflected at its most and at its briefest in the bird singing "poo-tee-weet?" both in the beginning and the end of the novel. "There's nothing here of conventional fiction's attempt at a totalizing effect, a fraudulent impression that life is orderly and that unities of character and idea will, by virtue of systematic study, accrete themselves into some conclusive meaning" (Giannone 83). Even though kitsch is mobilized in this novel, not obviously 'declared' as in Kundera's novel, but 'deduced', the very form of *Slaughterhouse-Five* is in fact challenging kitsch. If the bird's song is

not to be understood by human intelligence and is not to be comprehended by human language, it could be seen as an unintelligible truth standing against kitsch as an intelligible lie. As Giannone says, “massacres defy explanations. Old forms are shattered. The world is cuckoo” (84).

If Billy’s time and space travels or his watching the movie backwards is “impractical for real life”, if Billy is at times peacefully indifferent, if the British POWs are “blithely unaware”, or if Vonnegut’s style of writing a war novel is not the easiest or the most straightforward (like the one Mary O’Hare suggested), it could be because Vonnegut “engages them as models to demonstrate their ineffectiveness” (Klinkowitz 97). Both through his style and through his protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, the author-narrator mobilizes kitsch, and that will prevent the narration of an atrocious war experience from the risk of being kitschified. *Slaughterhouse-Five* sets kitsch in motion only to end up in a novelty that defies the rationalization and the sentimentalization of kitsch.

4. Conclusion

In *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera mentions Broch, saying:

However heroically the modern novel may struggle against the tide of kitsch, it ends up being overwhelmed by it. The word “kitsch” describes the attitude of those who want to please the greatest number, at any cost. To please, one must confirm what everyone wants to hear, put oneself at the service of received ideas. Kitsch is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling. It moves us to tears of compassion for ourselves, for the banality of what we think and feel. (163)

And then he comments that:

Today, fifty years later, Broch’s remark is becoming truer still. Given the imperative necessity to please and thereby to gain the attention of the greatest number, the aesthetic of the mass media is inevitably that of kitsch; and as the mass media come to embrace and to infiltrate more and more of our life, kitsch becomes our everyday aesthetic and moral code. Up until recent times, modernism meant a nonconformist revolt against received ideas and kitsch. Today, modernity is fused with the enormous vitality of the mass media, and to be modern means a strenuous effort to be up-to-date, to conform, to conform even more thoroughly than the most conformist of all. Modernity has put on kitsch’s clothing” (163-4).

This is exactly in line with what Calinescu claims: modernity was characterized by “the myth of progress” that was predicated upon a “linear and irreversible” concept of time. Change was predictable and based on an orderly pattern. But soon this myth vanishes, rendering the future just as “unreal and empty as the past”, and this “widespread sense of instability and discontinuity makes instant enjoyment about the only ‘reasonable’ thing to strive for”. This leads to the

emergence of “the drive toward consumption” (246-7) and, consequently, to the rise of a kitsch system of values.

Kundera has talked about kitsch in his non-fictional and fictional works and in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he devotes an entire chapter to kitsch, claiming that its original metaphysical meaning lies in what he calls the absolute denial of shit. Kitsch excludes anything that is essentially unacceptable in human existence. Kitsch tries to overcome death and time and it offers fake beauty and a fake aesthetic consciousness. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* becomes an interrogative site for the exploration of kitsch and its omnipresence through the lives of the main characters. This thesis brings together Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* as two examples of a common concern with kitsch. It explores how in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the main focus is on kitsch as a discourse or mode of representation, while in *Slaughterhouse-Five* the focus is on the efficacy of kitsch, which is exemplified by Billy’s life and the planet Tralfamadore, and contrasted with the author-narrator’s commitment to ‘shit’ i.e. to recollect the past.

The characters in both novels have seen a period of war and uproar. Kundera’s novel is set in Czechoslovakia around the time of the Russian invasion; Vonnegut’s novel tells about the destruction of Dresden in 1945, near the end of World War II. Whereas Kundera’s novel is about historical time, Vonnegut’s novel offers a utopian escape from historical time through the planet Tralfamadore.

The first chapter of this thesis offers a general overview of the notion of kitsch. In the second chapter, the focus is on Kundera’s novel. Firstly, a description of the concept of kitsch based on how it is represented in the *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* is provided; then, the presence of a kitsch attitude and the centrality of kitsch in the main characters’ lives is analyzed

in order to find out whether or not these characters in their different settings could escape the tyranny of kitsch. The third chapter is about Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Considering that the use of utopia to overcome the anxiety associated with human finitude (i.e., with time and death) is characteristic of a kitsch system of values, the issue of interest here is how this use of utopia is incorporated within a text that rejects any kitschifying treatment of its subject-matter, i.e. the memory of a tragic historical event.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera depicts the complexities that are connected with the paradoxes of life and “the paradox he is most fond of is the essential identity of opposites. Opposites, that is, that could lead to the same consequences” (Doctorow). Sabina represents the lightness of being, living by betrayals, while Tereza is being crushed under the burden of commitment and the intense morality she adheres to. Tomas's philandering life looks light. Franz always follows a fixed set of criteria that makes him a committed person. However, one could not say for certain whether lightness is positive and heaviness negative and whose life is a happier and more fulfilled life. According to Doctorow, “the paradox of the essential identity of opposites describes an intractable world in which human beings are deprived of a proper context for their humanity” (Doctorow). Along with the complexities of paradoxes comes “the idea of the exhaustion of meaningful choice”: All of the characters “to one extent or another enact the paradox of choices that are not choices” (Doctorow). These characters are trapped in a linear historical time and everything associated with it, such as the political kitsch, affects their lives in such a way as to leave no escape from its influence. In such conditions, it is only awareness of kitsch and its presence that could move them to the context of non-kitsch. Tomas is called a monster in the kingdom of kitsch by Sabina who is the only character amongst the four representing this awareness, both through her life decisions and through her art (paintings). However,

falling into the trap of metaphors, Tomas dies on the side of heaviness. A life of terminal paradoxes, equipped with inexperience cannot be lived to the full, and the attempt to totally avoid kitsch is in part futile. Therefore, a desire for eternal return accompanies these characters, and most evidently Tomas who is born from the idea that 'Einmal ist Keinmal'. It is mentioned in the novel that "the history of the Czechs will not be repeated, nor will the history of Europe. The history of the Czechs and of Europe is a pair of sketches from the pen of mankind's fateful inexperience. History is as light as individual human life, unbearably light, light as a feather, as dust swirling into the air, as whatever will no longer exist tomorrow" (223). The contingency of history is reflected in the idyllic desire of all characters for a return to a world with set values. Tomas is obsessed with the idea of the eternal return, of a life that could be lived more than once, while Tereza's desire for a return to the comforts of the past is revealed through her dreams. Franz looks for a return to the ideals by always being part of The Grand March(es) of history. Sabina is aware of her desire to return to the roots, but her betrayals cut the link to any kind of return and it is only an object, the bowler hat that embodies an eternal return of difference for her. While both the title of the book, and the ending Kundera chooses for Tomas and Tereza could suggest that Kundera's narrator is on the side of weight, there is really no sign that can lead us to say that the lightness represented by Sabina is condemned. If the eternal return is the return of the same, then as Italo Calvino suggests, "a unique and unrepeatable life is precisely equal to a life infinitely repeated: every act is irrevocable, non-modifiable for eternity" (56). Both lightness and weight could become unbearable. Only a recurrence that allows for difference could make living bearably light. Kitsch can neither be categorized on the side of lightness nor heaviness. Kitsch can make the lightness of history heavy, but it can also cause the opposite effect, making historical heaviness light.

Each of the characters in Kundera's novel could be "the prisoner of a purely conventional system of symbols" (Broch 63). Sabina creates her own system of conventions and Tomas, by freeing himself from being a prisoner of his 'Es muss seins', cannot help but follow Tereza eventually, who becomes, in turn, Tomas's new 'Es muss sein'. Tomas's regret "when he contemplates the prospect of life without Tereza, addresses the loss of a magnitude of beauty rather than the waste of an opportunity for happiness" (Banerjee 201), and "the goddess of beauty . . . is the goddess of kitsch" (Broch 63).

Political kitsch and the fantasy of the Grand March associated with it are rooted in "the ideal of social perfection [that] is what inevitably causes the troubles of mankind" (Doctorow). In other words, "the desire for utopia is the basis of the world's ills" (Doctorow). And the inevitability of this political kitsch is strongly asserted in the novel:

Have I not said that what makes a leftist a leftist is the kitsch of the Grand March? The identity of kitsch comes not from a political strategy but from images, metaphors, and vocabulary. It is therefore possible to break the habit and march against the interests of a Communist country. What is impossible, however, is to substitute one word for others. It is possible to threaten the Vietnamese army with one's fist. It is impossible to shout Down with Communism! Down with Communism! is a slogan belonging to the enemies of the Grand March, and anyone worried about losing face must remain faithful to the purity of his own kitsch. (*The Unbearable Lightness* 261)

Kundera ends his novel with a chapter focusing on the point of view and sense of temporality of a dog. The death of Tomas and Tereza, however sad, is treated lightly, and in the last chapter the focus on the dog serves to introduce an important suggestion: "through the death of a

dog, and the obliteration of their own selves in a lost site in the country, there is almost an absorption into the cycle of nature, into an idea of the world that not only does not have man at its center, but that is absolutely not made for man” (Calvino 59).

Slaughterhouse-Five or The Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death is Vonnegut's attempt to tell the tale of the fire-bombing of Dresden which he witnessed and survived. The novel's essential concerns, which according to Peter Freese are “the fraudulent opposition between being and appearance, the ubiquity of human transitoriness and death and the crucial alternative between either capitulating before life's inherent meaninglessness or, if necessary, even to invent a meaning for it” (218), are also concerns found in Kundera's novel. The immensity of what happened in Dresden makes any attempt at storifying this historical atrocity without producing a kitschifying representation of the whole event and a kitsch anti-war novel a difficult enterprise. The difficulties of telling this tale are mentioned in the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. In order to talk about everything that happened, Vonnegut creates a narrator who cannot remember and even when he remembers he is turned into a pillar of salt and what he writes is a failure. The narrator in turn tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, who took part in the war as a chaplain's assistant and survived the firebombing in a slaughterhouse in Dresden. Billy's remembrance of the past is not in fact remembrance but re-experience. Billy's temporality takes the form of an eternal recurrence/return allowing him to relive the moments again and again. Reliving the past and the eternal recurrence make things “appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature” as Kundera says about the French revolution that happened once, for “This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict” (*The Unbearable Lightness* 4). Perhaps it is due to this mitigating circumstance deriving from the transitoriness of every event that a university professor tells Vonnegut's narrator about what Germans did to the Jews

when he hears that a novel about Dresden is being written, to which the author-narrator's response is "I know. I know. *I know*" (10).

In order to distance himself from what he witnessed, Vonnegut tells the Dresden story through an interconnection between himself, as the author, a narrator, and Billy pilgrim, all of whom share similarities with each other and yet are different. The narrator, who bears enough resemblance to Vonnegut to be designated as the author-narrator tells the story through Billy Pilgrim rather than himself. In so doing, he uses Billy as a plaything. Even though memory could be a form of self-preservation in a world where history is usually distorted by cultural forces, Vonnegut chooses to tell the tale of his survival not directly, on the basis of his own recollections, but indirectly, from the point of view of a plaything such as Billy Pilgrim. He blurs the border between remembering and re-experiencing by maintaining a distance in relation to the subject of his account. Also, by refusing any emotional identification with what he describes he avoids the pitfalls of kitsch. That does not prevent the author-narrator, however, from strongly confirming the devastating effects of war and the tragic absurdity of the firebombing of Dresden.

Through his time travels and his visits to the imaginary planet called Tralfamadore, Billy is constantly intent on kitschifying life, as his hedonism is motivated by the desire of escaping pain and achieving relaxation. For him, "kitsch appears as an easy way of 'killing time', as a pleasurable escape from the banality of both work and leisure" (Calinescu 248). Billy is a kitschman; In Billy's life kitsch is compensatory (an escape from the reality of war and daily life), combinatorial (a utopia assembled through elements taken from the reality of middle class American life), and consolatory (an antidote to death). In particular, the consolatory effect of kitsch in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is produced by a parallel world, planet Tralfamadore, where Billy Pilgrim can find peace. But is this utopia an idyllic place? It offers negligibility of death, and an idea of

immortality that could be idyllic, but not by way of harmony and rhythm and beauty. This utopia is not offering sweet serenity by canceling out shit: on the contrary, it offers the acceptance of shit, so that peace results from this acceptance. Nevertheless, Tralfamadore acts as a totalitarian kitsch fantasy, one that erases all kinds of questions and only offers answers. A question is like a knife that slices through the backdrop and reveals the truth that lies beneath, and kitsch as a system of beautiful lies cannot tolerate questions. However, Tralfamadore offers a kitsch fantasy along with an awareness of it. In this planet, one does not escape from death; the fantasy that this planet offers is that of forgetting death. One could say that it is the author-narrator who does not allow kitsch to really dominate and prevail in the story. The epitaph “everything was beautiful and nothing hurt” chosen for Billy is not the beautiful lie of kitsch but a bitter irony the author-narrator is consciously putting forward.

What is at stake in Vonnegut’s novel is the risk of kitschifying war as an experience and as an event to be retrospectively addressed in order to make sense of it. The author-narrator is committed to tell the story of a grave atrocity without falling into the trap of a kitsch(ifying) representation. He achieves this goal by attributing a double existence to Billy; one in the real world and one in the utopia of Tralfamadore. While this second existence offers Billy peace and serenity, it does not however possess the idyllic nature of a full-blown kitsch paradise.

Vonnegut, or to be more accurate, the author-narrator starts and ends his novel on a bird’s note. After telling Billy’s story, whose life is saturated with kitsch, the ‘poo tee weet’ of the bird is a final refusal to offer an intelligible message and to make sense of something senseless only for a consolatory, kitschifying purpose. Recall Kundera’s words: “Before we’re forgotten we’ll be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion.” For a concluding remark, we might build on Kundera’s words and change somewhat their meaning by suggesting

that novels such as *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* can play a precious function. Both these novels can help us explore the multiple and complex expressions of kitsch while also warning us that what we run the risk of forgetting, today, is that kitsch may not be something we are going to be turned into or a second nature. Perhaps kitsch is our nature.

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Curriculum Vitae

Name: Parastoo Nasrollahzadeh

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: Guilan University
Rasht, Guilan, Iran
2005-2009 B.A. English Language and Literature

Shahid Beheshti University
Tehran, Iran
2010-2013 M.A. English Literature

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2015-2017 M.A. Comparative Literature

Related Work Experience: Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2015-2018