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Forty-second Street in Vonnegut: Viewing *Slaughterhouse-Five*
and *Breakfast of Champions* in the Context of Exploitation Films

Early in the 1984 Paramount movie *Footloose*, a woman approaches the strict and conservative town's pastor: "Reverend, we have a problem. I heard that the English teacher over at the school is planning to teach that book, *Slaughterhouse-Five*! Isn't that an awful name?" While I guess it is possible to be shocked only by its title, this novel's content also has proved troubling for at least some readers. *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), Vonnegut's follow-up novel to *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), is perhaps even more shocking in some ways, especially when reading it several decades after its initial publication. Kaleigh Hughes, in her recent list "Every Kurt Vonnegut Novel Ranked in Order of Relevance" on the website Consequence of Sound, places *Breakfast* dead last at number fourteen, asserting that "Though *Breakfast of Champions* is one of Vonnegut's most beloved novels, . . . in it you can find the author indulging in dismissive sexism and blatant, flippant racism, which should not be overlooked." Indeed, though *Breakfast* has remained a favorite among Vonnegut readers, these distracting and disturbing elements have proved troublesome for many. Perhaps contextualizing both of these novels in a new way will open up possibilities for interpretation and/or account for the seemingly objectionable way Vonnegut handles controversial topics.

Both *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions* include scenes that take place on 42nd Street of New York City. In Chapter 9 of *Slaughterhouse-Five* Billy Pilgrim peruses the grotesque and bizarre items of an "adults only" bookstore in Times Square before heading to a radio station to participate in a literary discussion regarding the alleged death of the novel.

Likewise, Kilgore Trout “wandered out onto the sidewalk of Forty-second Street” in Chapter 8 of *Breakfast of Champions* and discovers not only an adult bookstore, but also even more outrageous sights than had Pilgrim. The Times Square area of the time period in which these novels were written was infamous for what are known today as exploitation films, movies that deliberately challenged the norms of filmmaking. They not only broke the rules of film aesthetics and sometimes were unapologetically inferior artistically (though a few of them do retain a unique charm today), but they also were uninhibited in their offensiveness. According to Anthony Bianco in his study *Ghosts of 42nd Street*, these theaters actually had a long history stretching back to the 1940s and 1950s of screening “many movies that no other theaters in the city would screen” (131). By the late 1960s and 1970s 42nd Street was inundated with exploitation movies. This paper will briefly examine Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, which were both written in the peak of 42nd Street’s debauchery, in the context of the 42nd Street “grindhouse” filmmaking—and will possibly even open up the possibility of viewing these two novels as exploitation works. Examining these novels in this way may provide potential explanation, though not necessarily justification, for Vonnegut’s addressing of sensitive topics.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE AS SEXPLOITATION

Slaughterhouse-Five has been viewed as a classic example of black humor; likewise, exploitation films compile outrageous, often uncomfortable details that often result in laughter on the part of the viewer. Such laughter is problematical, though, since the details may be not only shocking but also politically or morally objectionable. One of the types of exploitation films shown at the grindhouse cinemas dealt with war. These war exploitation films were often Italian

imports, with such titles as *Five for Hell* (1969), *The Inglorious Bastards* (1978), and *From Hell to Victory* (1979). These films would go a step further than the usual Hollywood depictions of war, ones that made “war . . . look just wonderful” as Mary O’Hare states it in Chapter 1 of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (354). The portrayal of lurid violence would in these movies reach the level of absurd. *Slaughterhouse-Five* likewise includes the sadistic evil of humanity that becomes more prominent in times of war. Especially to the reader familiar with the conventions of grindhouse cinema, *Slaughterhouse-Five* may seem in a sense like an Italian war exploitation film in style even though it is also an anti-war book. The absurdity of some descriptions do not make light of the actual horrors of war but rather highlight the absurdities of it.

One of Vonnegut’s points throughout *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that war can bring out the worst in people. That is certainly the case for the characters Roland Weary, who obsesses about various methods of torture and twisted sexual practices, and Paul Lazzaro, who later blames Billy for the death of Weary and promises to avenge his death. Revenge films were also prominent in 42nd Street grindhouses. Many of these had memorable titles such as *They Call Her One Eye/Thriller: A Cruel Picture* (1973) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and shocked audiences with sadistic, graphic methods of revenge. Vonnegut’s novel precedes the most classic examples of the grindhouse revenge genre mentioned already, *Slaughterhouse-Five*; however, revenge was a common motif of exploitation films stretching back to the early 1960s.

While *Slaughterhouse-Five* also includes problematical depictions of characters of color and even the disabled (“cripples” in chapter 3) (387)—yes, there was a type of exploitation film that depicted people with disabilities in far from appealing roles—by far the most prominent genre of grindhouse film with which to compare *Slaughterhouse-Five* is what is called

“sexploitation,” films that depict women in sometimes demeaning and/or socially defined roles. Many such films have “Girls” or their profession or activity in the title, such as *The Stewardesses* (1969), *The Cheerleaders* (1973), *Switchblade Sisters* (1975), *The Unholy Rollers* (roller blading film) (1977), and many others. The genre was already successful in the 42nd Street grindhouses by the time of the publication of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, and they are to be regarded as quite distinct from the adult “XXX” features that would later be common in Times Square. In many cases in the 1960s sexploitation films had no nudity at all and were scandalous and shocking more in their atrocious and problematical characterization and plot.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the character of Montana Wildhack is introduced simply as “a former Earthling movie star” (361), but before long we gather that she is in fact, to borrow the words of Marc Leeds, a “twenty-year-old porn queen” (Leeds 664). What she and Billy Pilgrim share does seem to be love, and it is importantly consensual; however, her presence in the novel may nevertheless be problematical, for some readers may view her as a mere escapist fantasy on the part of Billy, or perhaps even Vonnegut himself. Consider that both Vonnegut at the time of the writing of this novel and Billy at the time of his journeys to Tralfamadore are in their forties presumably. Is this a mere escapist fantasy to provide an outlet for a male of that age to escape with a voluptuous twenty-year-old? We must also keep in mind that the final drawing in the novel is of Montana’s breasts, between which hangs the locket with the serenity prayer engraving. Vonnegut’s biographer Charles J. Shields notes regarding the Montana-Billy relationship that “Not until *Slaughterhouse-Five* will a protagonist enjoy a sexual relationship with a woman that is mutually satisfying” (179). Montana Wildhack demonstrates what was sometimes common in sexploitation films: in seemingly demeaning roles female characters

nevertheless prove to be strong and central to the plot. Escapist fantasy or not, Billy's relationship with Montana is fulfilling for both characters. It is from Tralfamadore that Billy gains much wisdom to help him cope with the horrors of life on Earth, and central to that Tralfamadore experience is his sexual relationship with Montana.

In contrast to the positive role Montana Wildhack has in the life of Billy Pilgrim, most of the other female characters in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are exaggerated types that one would readily find in sexploitation films. Often when the narrator mentions Billy's wife, Valencia ("big as a house" 417), or his daughter ("Big Barbara" 434), he feels the obligation to remind us of their large size. Then of course there are other troubling details such as Roland Weary's bestiality picture; the objectification of Lily Rumfoord, a former go-go girl (a very common character type in sexploitation films, by the way); Maggie White, "a sensational invitation to make babies" (460); the German refugee girls in the shower; and even the death scene of the stereotypically irrational Valencia. These elements make *Slaughterhouse-Five* read like a sexploitation novel.

BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS AS BLAXPLOITATION

Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions* shares similar exploitation features of its predecessor. Whereas for many readers the charm of *Breakfast* might be in its breaking with traditional form, some of the characterization and details make reading this novel challenging decades after its publication. One way in which *Breakfast* automatically invites comparisons to film is through its use of drawings. *Slaughterhouse-Five* utilizes this visual element as well, but the use of pictures in *Breakfast* is more extensive, beginning with the novelist's sketch of his own rectum in the Preface, establishing that no topic will be off limits. Vonnegut's inclusion of drawings and the nature of several of the drawings bridge the gap between textual and pictorial

art. Furthermore, the pictorial nature of this novel easily coincides with seeing this novel in the context of exploitation filmmaking. In his Preface to *Breakfast*, Vonnegut asserts that “this book is a sidewalk strewn with junk, trash which I throw over my shoulders as I travel back in time” (504). Just as exploitation films of the late 1960s and early 1970s have continually both criticized and celebrated as “trash” movies, perhaps we can also view *Breakfast of Champions* in this context.

Breakfast continues the sexploitation elements from Vonnegut’s previous novel, especially regarding the various women that Dwayne Hoover, the car salesman, interacts with or attempts to seduce. Additionally, the novel also has a homosexual character, Bunny Hoover, the son of Dwayne Hoover, the car salesman. The extreme violence directed at Bunny from his father in Chapter 23 is a tough read, though this is the same type of scenario often depicted in exploitation movies of Times Square in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Bill Landis and Michelle Clifford note in their *Sleazoid Express: A Mind-Twisting Tour Through the Grindhouse Cinema of Times Square!* 42nd Street in the 1960s through the early 1990s was an active homosexual scene. There were underground films targeted for gay audiences, but there were just as many films by straight directors that allowed for on-screen harassment of gay characters. This is the type we see in *Breakfast*, though I certainly want to give Vonnegut the benefit of the doubt and allow for the possibility that he is frowning upon such abuse.

By far the most significant subject matter likely to provoke controversy, though, is the novel’s handling of race and racism. It is this aspect that can make the novel, despite its formalistic charm, a tough one to read. Landis and Clifford identify two exploitation subgenres dealing with race: “Blaxploitation” and “race-hate films,” both of which play off stereotypes.

Race-hate films such as *The Black Klansman* (1966) and *Mandingo* (1975) were definitely the more unpleasant of the two. In the words of Landis and Clifford, “The racial tensions that swept America throughout the 1960s and 1970s were refracted in race-hate exploitation movies, whose earmarks were explicit violence, brutal sex, and outpourings of forbidden vulgarisms,” whereas blaxploitation flicks such as *Foxy Brown* (1974) and *The Candy Tangerine Man* (1975) were marketed more for African-American audiences and were peopled by “pimps, players, and private eyes” (89). In *Breakfast* the ill treatment of Wayne Hoobler, “the black ex-convict” (604), obviously stands out as problematical, but this character at times seems like one straight out of an exploitation race film of perhaps either type previously mentioned. There is also the over-sexed Nigerian Cyprian Ukwende with his “bunch of women” (573) or even just the continual use of derogatory language that, though understandably making most readers uncomfortable today, nevertheless gives this novel a blaxploitation feel.

Regardless of some of the problematical scenarios and language regarding African Americans, it is still clear that Vonnegut is disturbed by the racism of much of white America. Perhaps in allowing some of the racist language and scenarios to appear in the novel, Vonnegut highlights not only the horrific nature of racism but also its absurdity.

In conclusion, Kurt Vonnegut’s two central novels, in addition to portraying key scenes in the Times Square area during the height of the grindhouse movie era, exemplify some of the characteristics of those exploitation films. I do not mean to indicate, however, that the author himself even viewed any of these films; that is one reason naming some that came after either of these novels is not illegitimate. We do know that Vonnegut had a low tolerance for on screen

violence. In 1983 he would walk out of the theater in a screening of the film *Scarface*, claiming “It’s too gory for me” (qtd. in Shields 359). Nevertheless, these two novels discussed here do demonstrate some characteristics of the genres of film that would dominate the Times Square cinemas of their time. Examining these novels in this light might allow us to begin to explain Vonnegut’s inclusion of certain kinds of disturbing content.

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