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Sensational Implications: Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952)¹

I like Utopian talk, speculation about what our planet should be, anger about what our planet is.
(Kurt Vonnegut)

Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* falls within one of the longest and strongest suits in twentieth-century science fiction. "From H. G. Wells to Samuel Delany, science fiction is full of utopias, dystopias, ambiguous utopias, and 'heterotopias.'"² As Kermit Vanderbilt observes, "*Player Piano* is astonishing for the richness of utopian and dystopian matter in this first major outing of the writer who would soon own the best utopian imagination in American literature since World War Two."³

¹ An earlier version of this essay will appear in the 1999 Conference proceedings of the International Conference in the Fantastic in the Arts. All references to *Player Piano*. 1952. New York: Dell, 1980 will be given parenthetically in the text.

² Brian Attebery. "Fantasy as an Anti-Utopian Mode." *Reflections on the Fantastic*. Ed. Michael Collings. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 5. Krishan Kumar maintains that utopias are in decline in the twentieth century, but as Barbara Goodwin points out "he does this only by discounting a healthy number of recent science fiction and feminist utopias." ("The Perfect and the Perfected." Review of Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. Oxford: Blackwell, n. d., *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 July 1987: 786). Vonnegut's book is one of dozens within the science fiction and/or fantastic mode.

³ Kermit Vanderbilt. "Kurt Vonnegut's American Nightmares and Utopias." *The Utopian Vision: Seven Essays on the Quincentennial of Sir Thomas More*. San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1983, 137-173, pp. 139-140. Vanderbilt lists the typical elements of a utopian novel—all, of which, he claims, are present in *Player Piano*. "The new post-industrial civilization will be, customarily, a socialistic commonwealth of rational men and women, with wisely planned urban communities,

In *Player Piano*, the world, having passed through the First Revolution where machines took over man's manual labour, and the Second Revolution where machines took over all human routine work, is now about to undergo a Third Revolution where machines will do all the thinking. The huge computer, EPICAC XIV—the one the president of the United States with not the slightest trace of irony refers to as “the greatest individual in history” – sits in the Carlsbad Caverns in Colorado determining all of the country's needs from the number of refrigerators to be manufactured this month, to the kinds of books people should read, to the types of educational degrees universities may offer.⁴ Vonnegut used as his model for the all-wise, all-powerful machine the first digital computer, the “Electronic Numerical Integrator and Calculator” or ENIAC. Developed at the University of Pennsylvania's Moore School of Electrical Engineering from a proposal by John Presper Eckert and John W. Mauchly and weighing in at thirty tons with eighteen thousand vacuum tubes, the first public demonstration of ENIAC occurred on February 14, 1946. It was followed by a series of lectures at a conference in Philadelphia, summer of 1946, which led in turn to the widespread adoption of stored-program which eventuated in the modern electronic computer. Only a few short years later, Vonnegut extrapolates from these events to create EPICAC XIV. In *Player Piano* the United States has become a planned society run by corporations for profit.⁵ But this governing by computer results predictably in an increasingly sterile American society – a society with no real place or need for humans. As Norbert Wiener, who is often referred to as “the father of cybernetics,” caustically observed in his popular book, *Cybernetics: Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, “the average human being of mediocre attainments or less has nothing to sell that it is worth anyone's money to buy.”⁶

maximum individual freedom, socially oriented education, material abundance (with wise conservation of natural resources), non-alienating and non-competitive day labor and professional life, self-transcending leisure time for recreation and the arts, effortless virtue, dynamic social stability, permanent peace, and gratifying love” (p. 140).

⁴ The computer's name, EPICAC is awfully close to Ipecac, the children's medicine used to induce vomiting, as several commentators have noted.

⁵ Vonnegut's economics in *Player Piano* are intriguing. He postulates private socialism where the corporations, not needing to compete because of being monopolies, nevertheless are government regulated. Although there are no taxes on things, there is a heavy tax on machine labour.

⁶ Quoted in Hugh Kenner. *Dublin's Joyce*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1956, p. 163. Vonnegut was well aware of Wiener's work borrowing his first name for the “crass medical genius,” Dr. Norbert Frankenstein in his play *Fortitude* (Kurt Vonnegut. *Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloons*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1976, pp. 43–64) and quoting from his work both in interviews and in *Player*

In *Player Piano*, a discerning visitor from another culture, the Shah of Bratpuhr, the spiritual leader of six million people, correctly identifies all the citizens of this new ideal United States as "Takaru" or slaves.

The power and wealth of the United States, which grew through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in large measure thanks to an amazing outburst of creative technology and invention, remains almost synonymous with the machine. The machine may take the form of the car that provides the famous American mobility while contributing heavily to American personal isolation. Or it may take the form of the telegraph/telephone, or more recently, the "net" that tied the country together through instant communications. Or it may be the various electronic media machines (radio, movies, and television) that shifted the emphasis from news to instant event. Or it may be any of the vast array of techniques that transformed agriculture into agribusiness, the company into the multinational corporation, or the sleepy stock market into that behemoth of arbitrage, leveraged buy-out, and institutional investment of the new turn of the century.

Instead of building temples, we build laboratories;
 Instead of offering sacrifices, we perform experiments;
 Instead of reciting prayers, we note pointer-readings;
 Our lives are no longer erratic but efficient.⁷

Lewis Mumford as early as 1934 stated in his prescient study, *Technics and Civilization*:

Mechanization and regimentation are not new phenomena in history: what is new is the fact that these functions have been projected and embodied in organized forms which dominate every aspect of our existence. Other civilizations reached a high degree of technical proficiency without apparently, being profoundly influenced by methods and aims of technics.⁸

Piano (13). Hughes believes that "Vonnegut appears indebted not to Wiener's 1948 monograph *Cybernetics, or the Control and Communications in the Animal and the Machine*. 1948. New York: MIT Press and Wiley, 1961, but to its popularization, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (Cambridge, Mass: Riverside Press, 1950). The latter was revised and toned down in the second edition (1954) after *Player Piano* was published. No mere catalog of borrowings can reveal Vonnegut's assimilation of the 1950 edition..." (David Y. Hughes. "The Ghost in the Machine: the Theme of *Player Piano*." *America as Utopia*. Ed. Kenneth M. Roemer. New York: Burt Franklin, 1981, p. 113, n. 4).

⁷ W. H. Auden. "For the Time Being." *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Random House, 1976, p. 287.

⁸ Lewis Mumford. *Technics and Civilization*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934, p. 4.

In the United States of *Player Piano* and especially in Vonnegut's *Ilium*, where Paul Proteus tries but does not really succeed in becoming his own person, a "free man" remains squarely within and controlled by a society dominated by such technics. The novel thus satirises both the over-dependence on technology and the over-reliance on the expertise of technocrats.

Sheppard contends that "because technology is inextricable from twentieth-century man's life and has profoundly changed him, Vonnegut cannot reflect upon contemporary man's metaphysical anguish without also commenting upon his technology."⁹ But the reverse may be even truer in that Vonnegut cannot reflect upon the role of technology in the twentieth century without also reflecting on human metaphysical anguish, especially as exemplified in Paul Proteus.

Proteus's flailing about, trying to be at home in Homestead, buying a farm that he cannot run, and attempting to be the Messiah of the saboteurs all reflect his blind desire to become a conscious being, to become fully human. The corporation, on the other hand, wants him to be its ideal manager – bright, but completely within the corporate mould. His wife, in her turn, wants him to be her ideal husband – loving but totally dedicated to succeeding in the corporation. The revolutionary Ghost Shirts want him to be their ideal leader – famous, but selflessly dedicated to their cause. None of these – the corporation, his wife, the Ghost Shirts – wants him simply to be or to be for himself alone. Needless to say, no one ever asks what he wants. The wonder is that he does not become like his fellow workers: alcoholics, dropouts, or flunkies – the hollow shells of wasted men, "Leaning together / Headpiece filled with straw."¹⁰ When the corporation or his wife is not using Paul, then the revolutionaries are. The latter write letters in his name, issue manifestos he does not know if he agrees or disagrees with, and act generally as if he were their Messiah – a role he definitely does not wish to play. If he does not really know what he wants to be or become, Paul at least knows that he does not want to be a lone human manager overseeing machines.

Vonnegut's book is a plea for human beings to be what they are able to be best: human – which is, frail and strong, thick-headed and intelligent, cruel and kind, failing and succeeding, hating and loving. This belief in the humanness of human beings will become a constant in all of Vonnegut's later novels and stories.

⁹ Sallye J. Sheppard. "Kurt Vonnegut and the Myth of Scientific Progress." *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* 16 (1985) 14–19, p. 15.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot. "The Hollow Men." *The Collected Poetry of T. S. Eliot*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952, pp. 56–59, ll. 3–4.

It is also his warning against that ancient human desire for perfection, especially perfection in society which all too often, as in this novel, leads simply to sterility. Aldous Huxley, similarly worried, chose for the epigraph to *Brave New World* a telling quotation from Nicolas Berdiaeff's *Slavery and Freedom*: "Les utopies apparaissent comme bien plus réalisables qu'on ne le croyait autrefois. Et nous nous trouvons actuellement devant une question bien autrement agissante: Comment éviter leur réalisation définitive?"¹¹

In *Player Piano*, the corporation, working to establish its notion of utopia here on earth actively opposes any belief in the importance of variety in humans and their experience. All in the name of making everything as easy as possible for everyone and granting everyone a far greater degree of certainty than is usually possible in a non-planned, unregulated, free society. The good life in *Player Piano* will be achieved thanks to the corporation responsible for running everything in Ilium, which, in return, demands complete loyalty and service. Such loyalty and service are, however, not just expected, they are required. Vonnegut satirises the kind of husband-wife working relationships that may and often do result from such expectations in the meaningless conversations which take place daily between Paul and Anita. Proteus proves the upwardly mobile, aspiring young husband, while his wife, Anita - "Ilium's Lady of the Manor" (12) - dutifully spends all her time and energy plotting ways to boost him up the corporate ladder. Vonnegut's sharp satiric eye neatly skewers his target as Anita dresses Paul for success by buying him clothing identical with that of those who appear just a bit higher up the ladder. She then coaches him on how to behave at meetings, how to effectively deliver speeches, and how to conduct himself on various social occasions. Anita and Paul's juvenile relationship reflects the price of the certitude promised by an EPICAC XIV-run society. The theologian, Paul Tillich, observed

¹¹ [In a rough translation: "Utopias appear far more realisable than we had formerly believed. And now we find ourselves facing a question equally painful in a new kind of way: How to avoid their actual realisation?"] Quoted in Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World*. 1932. Harmondsworth, MS: Penguin, 1955, p. 5. Vonnegut "borrowed" the familiar utopian plot from *Brave New World*, as Huxley, Vonnegut claims, had in his turn "ripped [it] from Eugene Samiatan's *We*" (*Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloons*, p. 261). The publishing history of *Player Piano* reflects Vonnegut's fortunes as an author since of the original hardcover edition "less than a third of its first printing of 7600 copies was purchased (and most of these, Vonnegut insists, in Schenectady). The next year, however, the Doubleday Book Club prepared a cheap edition of 15,000 copies, which sold very quickly to its subscribers; a second printing of 5000 was soon ordered. And in 1954 came the book's greatest success [...] Outfitted with a luridly futuristic cover and re-titled *Utopia-14*, the Bantam paperback [...] hit the stands in numbers exceeding 248,000" (Jerome Klinkowitz. *Kurt Vonnegut*. New York: Methuen, 1982, p. 40).

that “men will quickly commit themselves to any cause that promises certainty in their existence.”¹² The all-knowing computer in *Player Piano* not only promises but delivers such certainty but at some cost. The Shah several times points to an obvious cost when he “equates American society with the noxious materialism suggested by the nephew’s name [...] Khashdrahr (‘cash drawer’) Miasma.”¹³ Another but not quite so apparent cost of this utopia lies in what is absent from the world of *Player Piano* and what is often overlooked in creating such a good life in a perfect world. The noted Irish writer, Francis Stuart pinpointed this lack when we wrote “Where everything is seen as making life easier for all, there is no room for grief, pain and doubt, in which are the roots of a thriving organic consciousness.”¹⁴ Stuart’s prescription holds true for individuals but it also proves important for fiction. As Kevin Alexander Boon emphasises, “Vonnegut’s fiction [especially in *Player Piano*] points to the confluent boundary between the morbid and the sublime where humor and grief are inevitably conflated.”¹⁵

In extrapolating from the present to create his future utopian society, Vonnegut includes a satiric, highly amused look at the morés of the corporate world as he had observed them while working for the General Electric Company. One of his prime satiric targets – on which he scored a direct hit – was the North Woods summer festival where General Electric executives had to go and play the silly games described in hilarious detail in *Player Piano* (see especially 181–194). “The island was shut down after the book came out,” Vonnegut boasts in various interviews.¹⁶ “So, you can’t say that my writing hasn’t made any contribution to Western civilization.”¹⁷

¹² Paul Tillich. “Critique and Justification of Utopia.” *Utopias and Utopian Thought*. Ed. Frank Manuel. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966, p. 307.

¹³ Sallye J. Sheppard. “Signposts in a Chaotic World: Naming Devices in Kurt Vonnegut’s Dresden Books.” *The McNeese Review* 312 (1986) 14–22, pp. 18–19.

¹⁴ Francis Stuart. *The Abandoned Snail Shell*. Dublin: The Raven Arts Press, 1987, p. 19.

¹⁵ Kevin A. Boon. *Chaos Theory and the Interpretation of Literary Texts: The Case of Kurt Vonnegut*. Lewiston, New York: Mellen Press, 1997, p. 111, n. 86.

¹⁶ Kurt Vonnegut. “A Talk with Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.” with Robert Scholes. *The Vonnegut Statement*. Ed. Jerome Klinkowitz and John Somer. New York: Dell Publishing, 1973. 90–118. Reprinted in William Rodney Allen. *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1981, p. 113.

¹⁷ Vonnegut, Kurt. “Two Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut” with Charlie Reilly, *College Literature*. 7 (1980) 1–29. Reprinted in Allen, p. 199. Vonnegut was chosen Man-of-the-Year on the 25th anniversary of the GE Alumni Association which is composed of people like himself who worked for GE then went on to other professions (Kurt Vonnegut. “A Skull Session with Kurt Vonnegut.”

Juxtaposed to the corporate world in *Player Piano* lies Homestead where ex-workers and those with minimal jobs live and where revolt may be incipient but life itself is as dead as it is at the top of the corporate organisation chart.¹⁸ Here there is no dignity in labour, no virtue in an honest day's wages, no reward for exceeding expectations. Instead, people realise that the corporate world wishes to use their labour as cheaply as possible and will replace them with more reliable machines whenever and wherever possible, not stopping to count or even acknowledge the human cost of those dismissed, fired, or forced to quit. This point becomes clear early in the novel when Bud Calhoun is fired because he had invented a machine to replace him and so made himself redundant (62-65). Much of Vonnegut's theme of the exploitation of human workers and of machines that make people redundant leaving behind a pile of human rubble with little or nothing to do appears familiar from some nineteenth- and many twentieth-century British and American writers. John Ruskin, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, E. M. Forster, and J. R. R. Tolkien, and American writers from Mark Twain through the muckrakers and after – all attacked the human waste caused by technology and Big Business. Like the best of these writers, Vonnegut goes beyond speculation and like most of them, describes both the atmosphere of the corporation and the ethos and values it promulgated based upon careful observation. "It was a genuine concern that drove me to write my first book," he claims.¹⁹

While working at General Electric, he recalls

One day I came across an engineer who had developed a milling machine that could be run by punch cards. Now at the time, milling machine operators were among the best paid machinists in the world, and yet this damned machine was able to do as good a job as most of the machinists ever could. I looked around, then, and found looms and spinning

Interview with Hank Nuwer. *South Carolina Review*. 19 (1987) 2-23. Reprinted in Allen. 240-264, p. 247). Paul Keating, in *Lamps for a Brighter America* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954), claims that General Electric's Association Island, the model for Vonnegut's The Meadows was used extensively between 1910 and 1930, but by the 1950s was no longer in use (see David Y. Hughes, p. 110). Whatever the historical facts, Vonnegut's satire on corporate culture and its excesses succeeds admirably.

¹⁸ While there is no evidence Vonnegut is echoing Emily Dickinson in using "Homestead" ironically as the name for a lost Eden, their use is strikingly similar: "The Bible is an antique Volume – / Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres – / Subjects – Bethlehem – / Eden – the ancient Homestead..." (Emily Dickinson. "The Bible is an antique Volume –." *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. [Vol. 1-3] Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958, Vol. 1, pp. 1065-1067, ll. 1-5).

¹⁹ Kurt Vonnegut, "Two Conversations," p. 4.

machines and a number of textile devices all being run the same way and, well, the implications were sensational.²⁰

These sensational implications are realised in *Player Piano* as this future, electronically run society places the good of the corporation and the *full employment of machines* ahead of human needs and desires, including the human necessity for meaningful work. “[T]he only safeguard of order and discipline in the modern world is a standardized worker with interchangeable parts. That would solve the entire problem of management,” says The President in *The Madwoman of Chaillot* by Jean Giraudoux²¹ – a sentiment echoed and re-echoed throughout this novel. In *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Vonnegut explores this issue further through the ultimate machine-run civilisation of Tralfamadore, whose people originally made machines in order to free human beings from work:

This left the creatures free to serve higher purposes. But whenever they found a higher purpose, the purpose still wasn't high enough.

So machines were made to serve higher purposes, too.

And the machines did everything so expertly that they were finally given the job of finding out what the highest purpose of the creatures [humans] could be.

The machines reported in all honesty that the creatures couldn't really be said to have any purpose at all.

The creatures thereupon began slaying each other [...] And they discovered that they weren't even very good at slaying. So they turned that job over to the machines, too. And the machines finished up the job in less time than it takes to say, "Tralfamadore."²²

As Zoltán Abádi-Nagy notes “Tralfamadore turns out to be a dehumanized planet with a machine civilization: what they can teach man is that man should not learn from them.”²³

Against nineteenth century popular belief, Ralph Waldo Emerson vigorously and correctly maintained that “society never advances,”²⁴ yet there are

²⁰ Kurt Vonnegut, “Two Conversations,” p. 200; cf. *Wampeters, Foma & Granfaloons*, p. 261.

²¹ Jean Giraudoux. *The Madwoman of Chaillot*. Trans. Maurice Valency. In *Jean Giraudoux: Four Plays, Adapted, and with an Introduction by Maurice Valency*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958, p. 17.

²² Kurt Vonnegut. *The Sirens of Titan*. New York: Dell, 1959, pp. 274–75.

²³ Zoltán Abádi-Nagy. “Ironic Historicism in the American Novel of the Sixties.” *John O'Hara Journal* 5.1&2 (N.D.) 83–89, p. 87).

²⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Self-Reliance.” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures*. New York: Library of America, 1983, p. 279.

always those, such as the twentieth-century behaviourist psychologist, B. F. Skinner, who promise societal advancement in return for merely surrendering unwanted human dignity and unneeded individual freedoms. As the Shah of Bratpuhr keenly observes in *Player Piano* surrendering such freedoms in the name of "progress" or comfort or efficiency reduces people from their once proud status as free citizens in a democracy to "takaru" or slaves. But those who believe and belong to the Skinnerian utopia, *Walden Two* (1948) "entertain no nonsense about democracy." "This is a totally planned society, structured so that a self-perpetuating elite shapes to their specifications the inhabitants of the world they control,"²⁵ and those inhabitants should be grateful. John Pierce invented an excellent term for this kind of thinking. He called it "the hubris of altruism;" that is, the "blind pride in seemingly benevolent ideals," which must be imposed on humanity "for its own good."²⁶ From a wealth of historical examples of this kind of utopia Pierce selects John Calvin's Geneva and Pol Pot's Democratic Kampucheatwo where "the practical consequences of the hubris of altruism" were much in evidence. "It is important," Pierce adds, "to remember that both might still be regarded as noble ideas had they not succeeded so thoroughly."²⁷ Hence the imposition of Skinnerian values and techniques on a population essentially not consulted either about the values themselves or about participating in such a noble experiment. Had they been so consulted, there might have appeared that lone individual or even a group who like Bartleby would "prefer not to" participate in the noble experiment. It is against this kind of planned society dedicated to a certain set of values however benign or well meaning, that anti-utopian literature, such as *Player Piano* is often written. Vonnegut, in contrast to Skinner but much like Emerson, remains a non-believer when it comes to societal progress or the necessity for controlling society.

If Vonnegut continues very much aware of the almost absolute centrality of machines for late twentieth-century American society, he also insists on their right use. In his view, machines are both a proper and a necessary subject for the contemporary American writer. "Machinery is important. We must write about it,"

²⁵ Robert C. Elliott. *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in a Literary Genre*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 150. All references to *Walden Two* are to Skinner, B. F. *Walden Two*. New York: Macmillan, 1948.

²⁶ John J. Pierce. *Foundations of Science Fiction: A Study in Imagination and Evolution*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987, p. 168.

²⁷ John J. Pierce, p. 168.

he affirmed in one of many interviews.²⁸ But Vonnegut's point in *Player Piano* so familiar from American history, philosophy, theology, politics, and literature is that machines and technology are or should be the means by which humans gain – not lose – their freedom. Machines are not now nor should they ever become simply ends in themselves. Ralph Barton Perry argued that “even ideas and skills do not suffice unless they are linked with the purposes for which they are used, or the feelings which give them value.” He continues, “It is necessary, furthermore, that these purposes and feelings should be shared, in order that they may afford a basis of reciprocal action. When thus socialized and charged with emotion, durable ideas constitute the essence of culture and of civilization.”²⁹ Machines, therefore, do not need to be “preserved from dissolution” only their “essential formulas and aptitudes should be remembered, in order to be re-embodied in new machines.”³⁰ Not any specific machine itself then but *the idea* of that machine should remain paramount. At the end of *Player Piano*, for instance, bitter irony resides in Bud Calhoun's immediate repairing of the orange soda machine. Those repairs, made as the revolution has barely concluded, become Vonnegut's sharply etched image of the failure of this individual and all like him to distinguish between the means and ends for which this machine and every machine was invented. He is about to do himself out of a job once more by preserving this specific machine rather than internalising his knowledge of it. Bud has become a true *takaru* or the slave of the machine. As such, he exemplifies Lewis Mumford's contention that Europe and America became unlike other cultures that “had machines; but [...] did not develop ‘the machine.’ It remained for the peoples of Western Europe to carry the physical sciences and the exact arts to a point no other culture had reached, and to adapt the whole mode of life to the pace and capacities of the machine.”³¹ In Ilium this process reached its zenith in the machine-run society.

The novel's title, *Player Piano*, derives appropriately from a machine, the player piano, invented in the nineteenth century and perfected in the twentieth. The late Tony Tanner most succinctly summarised the ominous quality of this symbol for the novel. “A piano player is a man consciously using a machine to produce aesthetically pleasing patterns of his own making. A player piano is a

²⁸ Kurt Vonnegut. “Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.” Interview with John Casey and Joe David Bellamy. *The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers*. Ed. Joe David Bellamy. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974. 194–207. Reprinted in Allen. 156–165, p. 157.

²⁹ Ralph Barton Perry. *Puritanism and Democracy*. New York: Harper, 1944, p. 27.

³⁰ Ralph Barton Perry, p. 27.

³¹ Lewis Mumford, p. 4.

machine which has been programmed to produce music on its own, thus making the human presence redundant."³² In an early chapter of the novel someone observes that "watching them keys go up and down [...] You can almost see a ghost sitting there playing his heart out" (28). David Hughes, in developing the player piano as an ideal image and symbol for Vonnegut's satire, discovered that "the heart of a player piano, the perforated music sheet, was invented in 1842 [...] and by about 1890 it was brought to perfection in the United States." He concludes that this image "affords Vonnegut the blend he wants of nostalgia, technical proficiency, and corporealization of the spiritual world."³³ This blend will reappear even more poignantly in *Galápagos* (1985) when Zenji Hiroguchi programs Mandrax, the super computer, to reproduce the intricacies of ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging which his wife, Hisako teaches. Hisako loses not only her pride but also her very reason for existence. "Her self-respect has been severely crippled by the discovery that a little black box could not only teach what she taught, but could do so in a thousand different tongues [...] ikebana turned out to be as easily codified as the practice of modern medicine."³⁴ Vonnegut thus makes crucial to *Galápagos* his argument and its consequences about the uselessness of human beings first outlined in *Player Piano* and which later became central to several short stories as well as *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965).³⁵ The Shah in *Player Piano* wishes to pose a simple question to the giant computer, "What people are for?" (277). What indeed are humans for if machines can duplicate not only their music and work, but also their arts and sports?³⁶ This question haunts all of Vonnegut's fiction from *Player Piano* to *Timequake* (1998). But for Vonnegut there is no going back on technology, unless nature itself, deciding it has had enough of human destruction should enter the picture as it does in *Galápagos*. In *Player Piano*, perhaps more acutely than elsewhere in Vonnegut's fiction, this issue of the right role of machines and their right relation to people illustrates the difficulty American society has often shown in identifying clearly right means to achieve good ends. *Player Piano* as a mid-century anti-utopia, illustrates, albeit negatively, the right role of technology and machinery

³² Tony Tanner. *City of Words: American Fiction, 1950-1970*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, p. 182.

³³ David Y. Hughes, p. 114, n. 20.

³⁴ Kurt Vonnegut. *Galápagos*. New York: Dell, 1985, pp. 68-69.

³⁵ Kurt Vonnegut. *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*. 1965. New York: Dell, 1970, see especially pp. 21-22.

³⁶ Kurt Vonnegut, *Galápagos*, p. 71.

within the goals and values of human civilisation while at the same time arguing passionately for the sacredness of human beings.

Robert Elliott contends that after World War II, the Bomb, and the holocaust "we will never again be able to create imaginative utopias with the easy confidence of the nineteenth century; the terror to which the eschatological vision applied to human affairs has led in our time forecloses that possibility."³⁷ Yet at the end of the twentieth century the American public and its leaders still fall prey to imagining that society or its organisation can be perfected. Many still believe naively in that recurring human delusion which the poet, e. e. cummings so graphically called: "the foetal grave / called progress."³⁸ "[T]he dystopia in *Player Piano* looks much more ominous to us in the 1990s than the ones in Huxley and Orwell."³⁹

In the second half of the twentieth, as in the first years of the new twenty-first century American society appears dominated by the multinational corporation, "the only social unit of which our age is capable,"⁴⁰ and clearly needs to heed the warning embedded in *Player Piano*'s extrapolation from current trends and values. Not to do so may well mean being condemned to live in a city much like Vonnegut's Ilium – something that appears an all-too-real prospect for millions of Americans. *Player Piano* thus remains Vonnegut's plea for bringing into being an American society composed of individuals who have discovered shared purposes and feelings, who distinguish clearly between means and ends, who affirm the truth that American culture is neither true nor utopian, but partial and imperfect. Above all, this society must be run not by corporations or by machines but by and for free citizens.⁴¹ These themes emerge again and again in Vonnegut's later novels and stories, as they will preoccupy Vonnegut for the rest of his writing career.

³⁷ Robert C. Elliott, p. 101.

³⁸ e. e. cummings. "you shall above all things be glad and young." *Poems 1923-1954*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954, p. 345, lines 12-13.

³⁹ David Rampton. "Into the Secret Chamber: Art and the Artist in Kurt Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*." *Critique* 35 (1993) 16-26, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁰ Jean Giraudoux, p. 17.

⁴¹ Yet, as his introduction to *Slaughterhouse-Five* some fifteen years after *Player Piano* makes abundantly clear, Vonnegut cannot be overly optimistic about the prospects for American society and culture. "[...] I crossed the Delaware River where George Washington had crossed it [...] 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" (Kurt Vonnegut. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dell, 1969, p. 18).