



The Hyperreal in Select Short Fiction of Kurt Vonnegut and Robert Sheckley

Mibdah Aijaz

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Kashmir

Received: 01 Aug 2026; Received in revised form: 27 Aug 2026; Accepted: 01 Sep 2026; Available online: 07 Sep 2026

©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper proposes an examination of two postmodernists who incorporated many existential questions in their portrayal of other-worldliness: a world torn between humans and sub-humans and other entities. While Vonnegut's larger and more profound works center on the questions of war and humanity faced with destruction, in some of his shorter works he examines other designs meant to confound humanity. Those challenges to humanity include using advanced technological means through which to control pleasure, breach privacy, inhibit thinking, and so on. Sheckley, on the other hand, puts the problems of alienation and identity-formation, or the lack thereof, at the core of his investigation. He offers alternative realities where man gets to flee from the tyranny of being alive in the world that he himself made uninhabitable. While Vonnegut swirls from past to present, or even blends flashbacks with fast-forwards such that there are no certain points from which to begin or at which to stop, Sheckley tends to be more linear, even as he inserts flashbacks here and there. Both authors, in writing short fiction, demonstrate their mastery of the form, but they approach it from different angles, albeit sharing some characteristics. Interestingly, whereas Kurt Vonnegut rose to fame for his mind-boggling visions of a possible future, Robert Sheckley remains lesser known, notwithstanding that he is an excellent futurist.



Keywords— *Hyperreal, Vonnegut, Sheckley, postmodernism, otherworlds*

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper demonstrates the Baudrillardian hyperreal as it emerges in postmodern (con)texts. For this purpose, this study examines some short stories by the *Slaughterhouse-Five* fame Kurt Vonnegut and his more obscure contemporary Robert Sheckley. Kurt Vonnegut's straightforward and conversational tone and a hovering sense of absurdity as employed in his works is blended with his use of satire, dark humor, wit, and irony. Robert Sheckley, again a great witty storyteller, works his way around creating a light-hearted or even surreal atmosphere which might sound bizarre and absurd.

The concept of *simulation*, *simulacrum*, and the *hyperreal* was proposed by Jean Baudrillard. The French thinker adopted Marshall McLuhan's axiom that the 'medium is the message,' a phrase he pushed to its limits, whereby he announced the end of both the *medium* and the *message* in the wake of the hyperreal.

Hyperreality, according to Baudrillard, "is the generation by models[] of [a] real without origin or reality" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 3). It implies how, in today's world of excesses, there are only simulations without any referents to point to. The concept of simulation refers to the proliferation of signs and symbols that precede actual reality. A system constituted of these representations exists such that there are endless signs or images, imploding into one another, each losing touch with the (illusory) *Real*, in the Deleuzian sense of the term. Perceptions, thoughts, and feelings undergo a similar implosion, each fragmentarily woven into the other and yet as disparate. In this hyperreality, it is not surprising to find (one)self as fragmentary as one's objects of consumption are scattered. Existence is therefore a huge simulation of its own, whose essences are not determinable, owing to the inconsistencies inherent to the postmodern condition.

Baudrillard's theory also intersects with the characters' struggles with identity formation. Technology

plays a vital role in shaping perceptions and experiences, which in turn leads to a simulation of all existence. Michel Foucault importantly paired knowledge with power so that having one implied having another. He espoused and complicated Jeremy Bentham's architectural brainchild, the *panopticon*, a means to maintain surveillance without being seen. This knowledge of the subjects imprisoned within a framework or tied to a society empowers the State, which asserts itself by record-keeping and observation: an indefinite gaze. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1995) established that "the panopticon . . . must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men" (p. 205). He calls it "a figure of political technology" (Foucault, 1995, p. 205) whose use extends beyond the walls of the prison.

II. DISCUSSION

Harrison Bergeron and The Prize of Peril

In Kurt Vonnegut's story *Harrison Bergeron*, mental handicaps are used to prevent thinking or to punish it by releasing hurtful sounds. This is so that one may not "take unfair advantage of their brains." Here, thinking, feeling, and remembering happen in bursts and are lost track of before they become meaningful. The brainwashing is evidenced by the characters' acceptance of who they are (not). Momentarily, the titular character takes on the role of an Emperor, who sheds all the weights and fetters and strips free of the collective memory (loss). However, in a sudden relapse, the (dis)order is restored by Diana Moon Glampers, whose shotgun puts the rebellion down, for good. This incident causes a power blackout. Soon the moment that killed our rake, the emperor, is forgotten, even as tears are shed over it. The sadness, too, is to be forgotten (Vonnegut, 1961).

Societal control is propagated through use of media and governmental announcements and advertisements that engage people, also inviting them to participate in disseminating the propaganda of (enforced) equality. The *medium* has a significant impact on the content and meaning of the *message* being conveyed. Here, it is the message of conformity, which is sent out not only as information but as a yardstick against which to limit one's perceptions, or else. The representations broadcast on the TV then become the natural and actual part of these people's lives. Hyperreality in the story is evident through the society's obsession with achieving absolute equality, disregarding those with exceptional characteristics. In so doing, the idea of absolute equality is simulated, surpassing any genuine sense of reality that would distinguish individuals. Media and technology help perpetuate this

hyperreality by disseminating images of uniformity and normalcy, presenting a distorted version of reality. The mental handicaps act as the simulacra symbolizing the supposed ideal of absolute equality by creating a simulated version of equality. Consequently, the distinction between the image and reality is obliterated, and individuals are reduced to mere representations of the government's utopian vision of equality (Vonnegut, 1961).

The implosion of the real and the medium in the story shows in the overwhelming influence of media and technology on the society. The constant bombardment of propaganda and messages promoting the virtues of absolute equality creates a state in which individuals are unable to discern reality from the hyperreal simulacra presented to them. This reflects a critique of the dehumanizing effects of mass media and consumer culture. We can also see how Baudrillard's notion of the 'ecstasy of communication' manifests as the media invades every aspect of people's lives, leading to a crisis in individuals' ability to tell manufactured desires from their actual ones.

The story also demonstrates how disciplinary power operates in such a society. The government exercises power over individuals by enforcing handicaps, thereby encouraging self-regulation and conformity. The constant surveillance through the Handicapper General's agents reinforces the idea of a panopticon, compelling people to suppress their unique abilities and conform to the imposed norms of equality. People have internalized this discourse, which stresses forming a collective identity while negating individuality and true potential. However, there are moments of resistance, exemplified by Harrison Bergeron himself, who rebels against the imposed limitations and challenges the hyperreal norms, seeking to reclaim his individuality and freedom. It signifies a temporary rupture in the carefully constructed system of power and control. Even though Harrison briefly challenges the hyperreal, the system eventually reasserts itself, reinforcing the discourse of enforced equality and suppressing individuality once again, maintaining the hyperreal simulation (Vonnegut, 1961).

In Robert Sheckley's *The Prize of Peril*, everything is being watched over, gazed at. There is a constant noise coming from a pocket TV. Raeder had, on someone's suggestion, entered thrill shows. It was in the public's interest that he fight dangers and possibly emerge alive out of them. By the second and third game he had "lost some of his innocence." He looks back and regrets signing up for the deadly game. But he is in the game and must finish it. Toward the end, he finds himself in a graveyard and is received into a grave (of his own making?). A gang approaches him to end the chase and the game, but it is

announced that the time had passed and Raeder had completed his sentence, as it were. This moment where he is 'saved,' the *salvation*, makes him fall silent — his response to death's inefficacy (Sheckley, 1958).

The story takes place in a futuristic society where media and information technologies dominate people's lives. The "Prize of Peril" game show, in which contestants must evade hunters for a cash reward, exemplifies the hyperreal nature of this society. The show is a simulation of danger and excitement, and the simulacrum thus created denies the difference between the image and the real, since the danger in the game is all staged and regulated for entertainment (Sheckley, 1958).

The story also reflects Baudrillard's idea that information devours its own content: the focus on spectacle and entertainment absorbs the true meaning of peril, turning it into mere consumable content for the masses. The medium and the message have, through a circuit of communication, imploded into a hyperreality, creating an indistinct mass.

The power structures in place are paralyzing, even as they are as small as a pocket TV, which features spectacles, encourages thrills, and invites a participatory audience. The human potential to grow out of the stage and the role has been stunted in an effort to instill excitement in people as they *collectively* participate in the system's program of manipulation. All desires, ambitions, aspirations, and even thoughts are commodified and conditioned into seeking thrills and spectacle, as the audience has become desensitized to the actual consequences of violence and death.

The game-show producers have the power to manipulate the scenarios, control the narrative, and shape public opinion. They create an illusion of free will for the contestants while carefully engineering every aspect of the show. The manipulation of reality raises questions about the ethical implications of media corporations prioritizing sensationalism over human lives. Foucault's analysis of power and the spectacle of media is applicable to the game show's context: how the media broadcasts and frames the game creates a spectacle that captivates the audience and reinforces their passivity. Foucault's concept of panopticism is also relevant in the story, where power is exercised through surveillance and visibility. Foucault emphasizes the significance of discourse in shaping power relations. In the story, the discourse surrounding the game show portrays it as an opportunity for contestants to win a prize. However, this discourse conceals the underlying power dynamics and control exerted by the media. This manipulation of discourse, in a way, legitimizes the power held by the

organizers and perpetuates the system of exploitation and violence (Foucault, 1995; Sheckley, 1958).

Welcome to the Monkey House and The Store of the Worlds

Vonnegut's *Welcome to the Monkey House* features a nothinghead, "Billy the Poet," who wouldn't take the "ethical birth control pills." He detests the friendship between science and morals, which has taken pleasure out of humanity while adding to the pile of moral automatons who can't feel anything from the waist down. No one has seen Billy, nor does anyone remember what he looks like. All they know is that Billy deflowers hostesses at the Ethical Suicide Parlours. A letter from Billy reaches the parlour, and its vulgar contents inspire anger and disgust in everyone. As Nancy, an angry hostess, stands ready for a confrontation with Billy, a customer enters the suicide booth. The customer, "Foxy Grandpa," soon reveals himself to be Billy. He takes the hostess away without anyone noticing. They pass through a museum preserving artifacts and memories from the past 'and more expansive times.' In his cave, Billy waits for the drug to wear off so Nancy could *feel something* as he deflowers her. Soon she is deflowered, "with a clinical skill." Billy promises her that he was sorry that "there was no other way." Nancy is humiliated, ashamed. He tells her how, even if sexual encounters nauseated or disgusted a woman, frequent sexual encounters would make her a sexual enthusiast. Billy had just tried to restore the pleasure of which the world has so little (Vonnegut, 1968b).

The society portrayed is a hyperreal one saturated by media and information technologies. In this futuristic world, people are conditioned to consume drugs that suppress their sexual urges, effectively erasing any genuine sense of desire and intimacy. The state controls and regulates the citizens' sexuality, creating a simulated imagery of a harmonious society. This causes the difference between the *regulated* and the *real* to blur. The birth control pills and their *ethicality* are the simulacra used to represent and impose an idealistic society where natural human instincts have no place. The implosion of the real and the medium shows in how advertising and propaganda invade every aspect of people's lives, leaving them confused and uncertain as to their genuine desires. Because of this ambivalence, individuals struggle to differentiate between the manufactured desires propagated by the media and their authentic selves. The story thus critiques the dehumanizing effects of media and state control on individual autonomy and genuine human connection. It highlights the negative consequences of hyperreality and the erosion of authentic experiences in a world dominated by simulacra and mediated communication (Vonnegut, 1968b).

The hyperreal world is constructed through the simulation of desire, as the Ethical Suicide Pills negate natural human instincts and replace them with a regulated, manufactured version of reality. The pills create a simulacrum of satisfaction, where true human desires are denied and individuals live in a state of simulated harmony. The story presents a hyperreal society where the boundaries between real desires and manufactured satisfaction are blurred.

The pills are also a means for the government to impose strict control over its citizens. This demonstrates Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, where state control manifests in the regulation and normalization of behavior. The government dictates what is considered ethical and uses the pills to suppress any form of dissent or resistance to the established norms. The distribution of the pills controls not only individual behavior but also the very essence of human desires and emotions. Even the manipulation of information and language is regulated to propagate the idea that the pills are a form of liberation and progress, creating a discourse that justifies the suppression of natural human instincts as a means to achieve a *Utopian* society. This manipulation of language and information further furnishes the hyperreal construct, where the distinction between truth and fiction is erased. The society thus created is one where individuality and authentic emotions are negated, resulting in all-encompassing power structures that regulate and shape human behavior according to the government's agenda. Foucault's concept of normalization is evident here, as the government enforces a standard of behavior that denies any deviations from the norm (Foucault, 1995; Vonnegut, 1968b).

In *The Store of the Worlds*, Robert Sheckley depicts Mr. Wayne, who is lured into a strange deal in exchange for experiencing the world of his desires. To enter such a world he has to make a risky bargain, so he decides to rethink the offer and goes home. For a while, he shelves the thought and returns to his responsibilities. Over the course of a year, he saves up some money while tackling family problems. Eventually, he finds himself in the store again, holding the parcel and ten years of his life to give away in exchange for a much-needed reverie. He sleeps, dreams, and awakens to a world ten years older. He steps out to find that the real world has turned moon-faced, gray, and decayed (Sheckley, 1959).

The store is itself a hyperreality, offering a plethora of probability worlds as simulations of reality. In each of these worlds of differing possibilities, desires are lived out in perfect representations but lack authentic human experience. People like Mr. Wayne are driven by their desire for simulated experiences, seeking to construct

identities through immersion in alternate worlds. The quest for a hyperreal experience challenges the stability of core identities.

The process of choosing a world and experiencing it through the mind's liberation creates hyperreal scenarios, where the boundaries between reality and simulation become indistinguishable. It offers a critique of a society that prioritizes simulated pleasures over authentic living and raises questions about the implications of technology-mediated escapism.

Foucault's theory suggests that power operates through the normalization of certain behaviors and practices. In the story, Tompkins normalizes the idea of accessing alternate worlds as something feasible and desirable, making customers believe that this is a legitimate choice to fulfill their desires. He therefore manipulates the desires of customers to maintain control and regulate their choices. He claims that the process will cater to their deepest desires, whether positive or negative. This regulation of desire shapes the customers' identities and influences the paths they take in the alternate worlds. To make himself more plausible, he offers a refund in case the experience is unsatisfactory, keeping customers under control. The alternate worlds offered by the store are simulacra — representations that deny the difference between the image and reality. The experience of living in these worlds becomes hyperreal, as customers cannot distinguish between their actual reality and the simulated experience. While the store creates an illusion of choice and freedom, it also reinforces the loss of authenticity as individuals chase simulated experiences instead of engaging with the actual world (Foucault, 1995; Sheckley, 1959).

The store serves as the medium through which customers access these hyperreal experiences. As Baudrillard (1994) suggests, the medium (the store) and the message (the alternate worlds) implode into a hyperreality, where the boundaries between real and simulated become indistinguishable. This causes the customers to lose the ability to measure the image against reality, blurring their sense of identity and destabilizing their understanding of self. The perceptions of reality are changed or challenged in their (re)creation of alternate worlds and newer possibilities, which again are a product of a collective memory.

The store's function of providing alternate probability worlds creates cognitive estrangement for the characters in the story. The concept of choosing different realities challenges their understanding of a singular, stable reality, leading to a sense of cognitive dissonance and estrangement.

EPICAC and The Language of Love

Vonnegut's titular *EPICAC* is a machine designed to assist in the government's destructive projects. The war armament had been made to work 18 hours a day. The hero, however, uses it for an alternate purpose. He confides in the machine how he couldn't find the *right words* with which to impress his lady-love. In turn, it produces poems that are profound. This lands our hero his chance to marry Pat. He has given up on his potential as a creative being and instead relies on a computer to manage his friendship and life (Vonnegut, 1968a).

EPICAC represents the hyperreal and simulation. Its calculations surpass human capacity, thus creating a world of simulated emotions and expressions. The poems are hyperreal: only appearing genuine but lacking the personal, authentic subjectivity that is central to human expression. So the poems are the simulacra — copies without an original referent. In fact, the genuineness of love is compromised here, as is the protagonist's subjectivity. He is disconnected from the poems and the process of creation that went into their making. EPICAC's poetry is, then, just a simulation of human emotions and expressions, blurring the lines between authentic human creativity and artificial intelligence.

The power dynamics in the story revolve around the control exercised by the scientists and the military over the supercomputer. In turn, it also reflects how the poems produced by the computer shape the protagonist's relationship with his lover. EPICAC, as an artificial intelligence, is subordinate to the humans who control and utilize it. This relationship reflects Foucault's concept of power as a network of relationships and the ways in which power is exercised through various institutions and social structures. In this network, the protagonist has surrendered his agency and creativity, giving precedence to the computer's manufactured set of expressions on which he helplessly relies. The machine delivers as ordered, since the control works both ways. While the machine doesn't end up carrying out the government's orders to their end, it does exert control on the relationship between the protagonist and his lover for years to come (Foucault, 1995; Vonnegut, 1968a).

Robert Sheckley's *The Language of Love* depicts Jefferson Toms, who lives in a world where everything has been limited: rains fall in quotas, sunsets are programmable, and so on. Toms falls in love and experiences difficulty turning his feelings into words that would rightly describe how he feels. Toms goes looking for a professor who had taken up the study of love. From him, he learns “unflattering truths” about love. He is trained into the stage of Love Proper, whose knowledge it was dangerous to acquire.

Finally, he is ready to experiment with what he has learned. Even with all his knowledge about love, he only disappoints his beloved with a mediocre expression. Toms realizes what had caused his fieldwork to go wrong: the language engineers had never had time to test their various hypotheses. They had “wasted energy” and not found a thing about love (Sheckley, 1957).

The medium of expression here is language, “of [a] particular class and quality,” in which to declare love. Toms's search for the right words leads him into a multiplicitous network of languages, conveying different cultural meanings and carrying different nuances. It is interesting to note how many factors shape the language of love, thus affecting the authenticity of expression.

The hyperreal and simulation are expressed in the portrayal of love languages and signs, which stand for the constructs that determine the expression of love. The languages are merely cultural representations of love and not authentic signifiers. Toms fails to recognize that the perfect words would only produce a hyperreal representation of love, disconnected from genuine human connection.

Foucault's theory highlights how language and discourse are powerful tools in constructing and maintaining social norms. It underscores the idea that individual expressions (here, of love) are not entirely free but are influenced by the prevailing discursive practices that govern emotional communication. The setting of the story, where everything is regulated, foreshadows Toms's attempts to regulate the expression of his feelings (Foucault, 1995).

His initial attempts to conform to the dominant discourse by using common phrases leave him feeling dissatisfied, as these words fail to capture the depth and intensity of his emotions. So he contends to replace the prefigured discourse with a “particular quality and class” of discourse, or *language of love*. In subscribing to this specialized language, he surrenders his agency altogether, relying far too much on external factors rather than internal experience. The need to manipulate language to fit a supposedly genuine expression betrays Toms's true emotions. He finds himself trapped in a linguistic framework that doesn't accommodate the complexities and uniqueness of his feelings. His genuine feelings become overshadowed by the performative aspects of the language he has learned. The pressure to adhere to linguistic norms hinders the free flow of emotions and the expression of his true self (Sheckley, 1957).

III. CONCLUSION

Taken together, these six stories show Vonnegut and Sheckley converging on a shared diagnosis even as they arrive at it by different routes. Both writers imagine worlds in which a governing medium, whether a state broadcast, a game show, a pill, a store, a machine, or a specialized vocabulary, has come to stand in for the experiences it was meant only to convey. In each case the simulation does not simply distort an underlying reality; it replaces it, so that characters such as Harrison Bergeron, Raeder, Nancy, Mr. Wayne, the EPICAC-dependent suitor, and Jefferson Toms lose the very ground from which authentic feeling, desire, or thought might be judged genuine. Read alongside Baudrillard's account of simulacra and Foucault's account of disciplinary power, the stories suggest that hyperreality and surveillance are mutually reinforcing: the manufactured equality, spectacle, pleasure, escapism, affection, and language examined here all double as mechanisms of control, requiring characters to internalize norms they experience as freely chosen.

The two authors nonetheless differ in method as much as they agree in critique. Vonnegut's fiction tends to compress its critique into a single, almost fable-like reversal, delivered in a flatly conversational voice that lets the absurdity of the premise carry the satire. Sheckley, working in a more linear, extended narrative mode, lets his protagonists accumulate experience and self-knowledge only to discover, often too late, that the systems they inhabit were never designed to reward that knowledge. Where Vonnegut's characters are undone almost instantly by a machine or an announcement, Sheckley's are undone gradually, by their own participation in a bargain they entered with open eyes. This distinction in pacing and tone may help explain the disparity in the two writers' reputations: Vonnegut's economy of form produces immediately memorable images, while Sheckley's more patient unraveling of the hyperreal demands a slower kind of attention that has, perhaps unfairly, kept him in Vonnegut's shadow.

What emerges from reading the two together is a shared postmodern concern with what happens to the human subject once every register of experience — political, sexual, romantic, and cognitive — has been made available as a simulation. Both writers ultimately resist offering their characters a way back to an unmediated reality; the hyperreal, once established, does not release its hold. In this sense, the stories function less as cautionary tales about a possible future than as diagnoses of a present already saturated by the very media, institutions, and discourses that Baudrillard and Foucault describe.

REFERENCES

- [1] Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. University of Michigan Press.
- [2] Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1975)
- [3] Sheckley, R. (1957). The language of love. *Galaxy Science Fiction*.
- [4] Sheckley, R. (1958). The prize of peril. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.
- [5] Sheckley, R. (1959). The store of the worlds. *Playboy*.
- [6] Vonnegut, K. (1961). Harrison Bergeron. *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.
- [7] Vonnegut, K. (1968a). Epicac. In *Welcome to the monkey house*. Dial Press.
- [8] Vonnegut, K. (1968b). Welcome to the monkey house. *Playboy*.