ABSTRACT

Kurt Vonnegut was arguably the American twentieth-century specialist in ostranenie (also known as “defamiliarization” and “estrangement”). Nevertheless, this aspect of his work has received very little attention so far. The present article hopes to fill part of this lacuna, concentrating on the way war and religion are made strange in Slaughterhouse-Five (with some mentions of other works such as Breakfast for Champions). The analysis of these effects forms the bulk of the article (part II), flanked by considerations on ostranenie, particularly in the context of Vonnegut’s and Shklovsky’s war experience (part I), and an overview of Vonnegut’s precursors in the ostranenie of religion and war, such as Swift, Twain, and Heller (part III).

Shklovsky and Vonnegut

Some writers are or pretend to be disinterested in scholarly reception, but not Kurt Vonnegut. Shortly before his death, Vonnegut complained about insufficient academic attention (Shields 1; 4–5). He would have been gratified by the amount of research published in recent years. Considering the importance he ascribed to his German roots (describing himself on the title page of Slaughterhouse-Five, he begins by stating that he is “a fourth-generation German-American”), he might have been particularly flattered by the attention his oeuvre is receiving in Germany, such as Peter Freese’s opus magnum The Clown of Armageddon: The Novels of Kurt Vonnegut, or the recent decision to make Slaughterhouse-Five a must-read for “Abitur” exams in the federal state of Hesse, coupled with the appearance of a lavishly annotated edition intended for school use. But despite all critical engagement, one aspect of Vonnegut’s work has received very little attention: namely, his use of ostranenie.

Ostranenie, as described a hundred years ago by the Russian literary scholar and fiction writer Viktor Shklovsky in a paper entitled “Art as Device,” is a way to make things real by making them strange—to his mind, one of the main goals of art. The concept was inspired by Lev Tolstoy’s observation that habitual actions disappear from conscious memory. Instead of being glad to have mental

1 Original title: “Iskusstvo[,] kak priyom.” The article was first rendered into English as “Art as Technique”; this translation, though still widely used, exhibits an array of misunderstandings. Presently, I used the title as translated by Sher (“Art as Device”) and myself; in the publication in Poetics Today cited here I also used the comma that appeared in one of the versions of Shklovsky’s article. In the present article, Shklovsky is always quoted as translated by me unless stated differently.
space cleared up for writing, Tolstoy was dismayed at the loss of reality induced by automatization: “[I]f the whole life of many people is lived unconsciously, it is as if this life had never been” (354). Shklovsky suggests that art, and literature in particular, exists “to give back the sensation of life […] to make a stone stony. The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things” (“Art, as Device” 162). Ostranenie means making the habitual strange, often by describing it as if witnessed for the first time or from an unusual perspective. As Shklovsky put it sixty-seven years after first coining the concept, “ostranenie is seeing the world with different eyes” (“On the Theory of Prose [1983]” 334).

A note on my use of the concept might be useful at this juncture. Firstly, I regard ostranenie not as a device but as an effect which can be achieved by a variety of devices. Secondly, I am using the original term ostranenie rather than one of the many Anglophone near-equivalents (such as “making strange,” “defamiliarization,” “estrangement,” “enstrangement,” and “foregrounding”) in order to avoid misunderstandings such as confusion with Brecht’s Verfremdung (see Berlina, “Translating ‘Art, as Device’”). While Brecht seeks to curb identification and emotional involvement in order to promote critical reflection, Shklovsky argues for heightened involvement and emotional reconnection. I also use the expression “make strange” to refer to ostranenie. Thirdly, I try to differentiate (though Shklovsky himself does not) between ostranenie of the text and that of the world—i.e., between the foregrounding of textual features, aspects of parody, self-reference etc., which are meant to rejuvenate the text itself, and what he calls “making the stone stony” (see Berlina, “Let Us Return”). While Vonnegut’s work contains both kinds, the present article will concentrate primarily on ostranenie of the world, on what Vonnegut does when looking at human life with Tralfamadorean eyes. It is also important to remember that, as any effect, this one needs to be actualized by the reader. When I say that ostranenie takes place, please mentally insert “if the actual reader shares the implied reader’s cultural horizon.”

Only half in jest, a scholar calls ostranenie “the Amis effect” (Oatley 58). Martin Amis admired Vonnegut’s work and was inspired by it in much of his own strange-making. When I first opened The Vonnegut Effect (Klinkowitz), I half-hoped for the title to refer to ostranenie—but the book never mentions it. Ostranenie never appears in recent companions and collections dedicated to Vonnegut (e.g., Marvin; Thomas; Farrell; Simmons; Bloom). I do not merely mean that the original Russian term is absent from critical discourse—rather, Shklovsky’s concept is hardly ever discussed in reference to Vonnegut, not under any name. Related but fundamentally different ideas, on the other hand, surface frequently. Two articles on Slaughterhouse-Five published in 2014 are a case in point. Both discuss “estrangement”: one in the Brechtian sense (Diwany), and the other working with Suvin’s science-fiction-oriented concept of “cognitive estrangement” (Wicks) which derives from both Verfremdung and ostranenie without differentiating be-

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2 Several different books by Shklovsky bear identical titles, hence the year in brackets.

3 He appears to be right in cognitive terms: According to recent research, thinking is inseparable from emotion (see e.g., Storbeck and Clore). Many other problems and ambiguities are also associated with alternative translations.
tween them. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the two are far from identical. This paper argues that it is Shklovsky’s _ostranenie_, and not so much Brecht’s _Verfremdung_, that is central to Vonnegut’s work.

Vonnegut is arguably the American writer specializing in _ostranenie_. This does not mean, of course, that he was familiar with Shklovsky (after all, Sterne and Tolstoy, too, managed to create this effect without scholarly help). Still, he just might have heard of _ostranenie_: after all, his wife of twenty-five years studied Russian literature, his friend Donald M. Fiene was a Slavist, and Shklovsky’s work gained the interest of American academia in the late 1960s, just when Vonnegut was teaching at universities and working on _Slaughterhouse-Five_.

Freese, in a 2014 summary of his work on _Slaughterhouse-Five_, gestures toward Shklovsky’s concept, even if the term “alienation effect” is usually associated with Brecht:

> The daring combination of a massive historical tragedy with extraterrestrial aliens, which Vonnegut meant to have the same function as “the clowns in Shakespeare” (p. 235 ll. 9f.), makes his readers see the hectic scheming of Earthlings through the astonished eyes of the fatalistic Tralfamadorians. The Martian perspective is a highly effective instrument for creating an alienation effect, because it defamiliarizes events and attitudes which the readers are used to and take for granted and makes them perceive these events in a new light. ("Vonnegut: a Handout" 10)

The mention of clowns is of particular importance here. In 1983, Shklovsky published an essay entitled simply “Ostranenie,” which, to a large part, is a polemic against Bakhtin, or rather, an attempt to stake territory: Bakhtin’s carnivalization, claims Shklovsky, is actually his _ostranenie_. Satire is a method to make things strange. Let us keep this idea in mind; we will return to it later.

Not only carnivalization and satire but also the fantastic (as defined by ambiguity; see Todorov) is closely related to _ostranenie_. In the 2014 _Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers_, the first example of “defamiliarization,” defined with reference to Shklovsky, is _Slaughterhouse-Five_. This is one of the very few cases in which Shklovsky and Vonnegut appear on the same page. However, what follows is actually a description of Todorov’s _fantastique_ rather than of _ostranenie_:

> In _Slaughterhouse-Five_, the breakdown of a single reality drives the novel, with Kurt Vonnegut compelling the reader to question not only the novel’s realism, but reality itself; it leads the reader into a state of uncertainty, one of unfamiliarity, so much so that they are unsure where the real experience ends and the imagination begins. (Armstrong 144)

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4 Be it partly because of _ostranenie_ or not, Vonnegut gained immense popularity in the Soviet Union and continues to be one of the best-known American writers in Russia. Some scholars have found similarities to Russian literature in his work, a fact he was keenly interested in (Shields 54). Curious about a possible direct influence, I contacted Charles Shields, who had spent years reading Vonnegut’s correspondence, as well as critical writing on his work, as research for the biography _And So It Goes_. His response (in an email of October 26th 2015) was: “Shklovsky’ is not a name I ever ran across in connection with Vonnegut.”

5 Todorov, as it happens, was very much aware of Shklovsky, having translated and commented his work.
The confusion is understandable: One might argue (though Armstrong does not) that by shuttling between worlds, the reader has to look at the “real” world from the strange perspective of the “fantastic” world. Moreover, the heightened attention produced by the reader’s attempts to guess if what happens in the text is “real” serves to enhance the effects of ostranenie.

Still, neither Verfremdung nor fantastique is identical to ostranenie. I am painfully aware of having just used German, French, and Russian in a short English sentence—still, this seems better than conceptual confusion. Not only the term but the translation of Shklovsky’s work is a crucial matter. To use the example of Experimental Fiction again: giving the source as “Shklovsky, (Art as Technique 1917)” without ever mentioning the translators, Lemon and Reiss, it cites a highly problematic 1965 rendition of the essay entitled “Art as Technique”. In it, Shklovsky’s key phrase sounds thus: “[A]rt is the way to experience the artfulness of an object” (12). This makes Shklovsky appear like a tautology-prone l’art-pour-l’art-aficionado. A more recent translation by Benjamin Sher is much closer to the core, though it transforms Shklovsky’s manifesto style into polite academic discourse: “Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity” (“Art as Device” 6). A more literalist translation would be “Art is the means to live through the making of a thing” (“Art, as Device” 162). Arguably, Shklovsky is talking about the cognitive act here, about things being made by the reader’s and the writer’s minds.

This focus on perception is one of the reasons why Shklovsky’s concept deserves attention. Another original aspect of ostranenie, one which distinguishes it from earlier Romantic notions of art renewing the world, is Shklovsky’s wish to make strange and real not only the beautiful but also the mundane and the terrible, something Vonnegut’s writing is very much about. ostranenie is a remedy against “automatization” which “eats up things, clothes, furniture, [your] wife and the fear of war…” (“Art, as Device” 162).

These final words deserve particular attention. Partly because of the problematic 1965 translation, Russian formalism in general and the idea of ostranenie in particular are occasionally presented as cultivating art for art’s sake and dealing with artistic devices isolated from all context. This is rather astonishing, as most examples Shklovsky provides in “Art as Device” are socially relevant. War is of particular importance in this regard. Much of Shklovsky’s writing remains untranslated, so that only Slavists are familiar with statements such as “The world that has lost the sensation of life along with art is about to commit monstrous suicide. In our times of dead art, war circumvents consciousness; this explains its brutality, which is greater than the brutality of religious wars” (Shklovsky, Gamburgskiy schet [1990] 43). Ostranenie is a means against this death of feeling and, indirectly, real death. Shklovsky fought in WWI and the Russian Civil War; he was particularly horrified by his own lack of horror (see Berlina, “Make it Strange”). In 1920, he wrote: “Citizens, stop killing! People do not fear death anymore” (Shklovsky, Gamburgskiy schet [1990] 184).

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6 Shklovsky might well be termed a cognitivist avant la lettre (see Berlina, “To Give Back the Sensation of Life”).
Fighting at the front, hiding in a mental hospital, and preparing a coup, Shklovsky goes on with his philological and literary work. In *A Sentimental Journey*, he describes the death of his brother with chilling laconism:

He cried hard before he died.  
It was either the Whites or the Reds who killed him.  
I don’t remember. I really don’t remember. He was killed unfairly. (“A Sentimental Journey” 142)

Failing to remember the most terrible things is a leitmotif in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but this can hardly be called a literary parallel. Rather, it is a psychological one: “There is some device in our brain which switches off and prevents our remembering catastrophes above a certain scale. [...] I, in fact, remembered nothing about the bombing of Dresden, although I had been there, and did everything short of hiring a hypnotist to recover the information” (Vonnegut, “There Must be More” 128). The “device in our brain” might in fact not work quite this way (there is growing doubt regarding memory repression in contemporary psychology); still, a claim to having forgotten some of their most terrible war experiences unites Vonnegut and Shklovsky.

With the blackest humor reminiscent of Vonnegut, and in paragraphs even shorter than his, Shklovsky writes:

Lists of people executed by firing squad hung on the walls. Fifteen people a day. Batch-wise.  
The last five names were always Jewish. This was a measure against anti-Semitism. (“A Sentimental Journey” 144)

Shklovsky witnessed this; he saw children play football with a bloody head; he saw women smear themselves with excrement to avoid rape (in vain); he saw people, including his friends and relatives, starve to death. There was no shortage of violence and suffering in Shklovsky’s war experience. Despite all this, Shklovsky claims in *A Sentimental Journey* (the same book which describes all of the above):

I walked the Earth a lot and saw different wars, and still I seem to have spent all the time in a donut hole.  
I never saw anything terrible. Life isn’t dense.  
War consists of great mutual incapability. (142)

Here, Shklovsky might be talking about his own automatization and lack of horror, and perhaps also about the lack of “historical grandeur” in the suffering he encountered. This was a theme that troubled Vonnegut, too. In Part I of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he suggests that although he was always compelled to write about the bombing of Dresden, it took him twenty-three years to find the right words. This is true, “more or less,” as Vonnegut puts it—but it is also true that external evaluation prompted him to decide that his own experience was important: “I figured, well, this really was the most minor sort of detail in World War II. [...] Then a book by David Irving was published about Dresden, saying it was the largest massacre in European history. I said, By God, I saw something after all!” (Vonnegut, “The Art of Fiction No. 64”). By now, we know that *The Destruction of Dresden* (Irving) strongly overstates the number of fatalities; it is from this book that Vonnegut takes the number 135,000; elsewhere, Irving mentions up to
250,000 dead. According to a recent study commissioned by the Dresden city council, the actual body count was under 25,000 (Müller, Schönherr, and Widera 48). Deleting a zero at the end of a figure which describes people burned or boiled alive hardly makes the fact ten times less terrible—still, the scale of the event evidently mattered to Vonnegut.

Vonnegut’s “I saw something after all!” sounds almost like a response to Shklovsky’s “I never saw anything terrible.” More strikingly, Shklovsky’s image of a “donut hole” instead of a war experience is strongly reminiscent of Vonnegut talking about Slaughterhouse-Five: “It’s like Heinrich Böll’s book, Absent Without Leave—stories about German soldiers with the war part missing. You see them leave and return, but there’s this terrible hole in the middle. That is like my memory of Dresden; actually there’s nothing there” (Vonnegut, “Interview with Bellamy and Casey” 163).

Shklovsky and Vonnegut have a number of things in common: Both often appear as characters in their own work; both tend to blur the boundaries between fiction, essay, and autobiography; both became university teachers of literature without ever completing a degree themselves; both had young followers who regarded them as gurus and then felt betrayed due to insufficient antiestablishmentarianism. However, selective looking makes parallels very easy to find. Rather than proceeding down this road, let us return to “this terrible hole.”

Ostranenie in Slaughterhouse-Five

As it happens, Slaughterhouse-Five (in the following: SF) is full of terrible holes. Weary shows Billy his trench knife which “makes a three-sided hole in a guy” creating “a wound which won’t close up” (SF 36). He also talks about “his father’s Derringer pistol” capable of making a hole in a man “which a bull bat could fly through without touching either wing” (37). Billy, in his turn, had opportunity to contemplate a life-like crucifix complete with “the holes that were made by the iron spikes” (38). In the famous backward film scene, “American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in

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7 The key word “massacre” also seems to derive from this book, which uses it very often; Irving’s chapter “Anatomy of a Tragedy” particularly stresses the deaths of young girls, as does Slaughterhouse-Five. Thus, this dubious source (later, Irving would also express doubts about the fact of the Holocaust) provided not only a significant nudge but also some elements of the book.

8 This description factors out the MA degree in anthropology awarded for Cat’s Cradle in lieu of a thesis—after Vonnegut specifically and repeatedly asked for it (though he did not like to mention this afterward).

9 Vonnegut’s father, too, had a large weapon collection in which he tried to interest his son. Autobiographical traits are not restricted to the narrator called “Vonnegut” and Billy Pilgrim (for a detailed differentiation between Billy Pilgrim, “Vonnegut” and Vonnegut, see Freese, The Clown of Armageddon 332-34), but appear even in such an unlikely and unlikeable protagonist as the sadist Weary. It is also worth noticing how this passage throws a sepulchral light on this innocent sentence: “The Caverns had been discovered by a cowboy who saw a huge cloud of bats come out of a hole in the ground” (SF 89).
England” (74).10 Derby is described as taking good care of his body—however, “that good body of his would be filled with holes by a firing squad in Dresden in sixty-eight days” (83).

This last phrase features prolepsis (time travel of the kind writers and readers often engage in), a touch of the oxymoron (“filling” opposes “hole”)—and ostranenie.11 It is reminiscent of a passage from Tolstoy’s “Strider” which Shklovsky cites as an example of the effect: “[T]he dead who bury their dead found it necessary to dress this bulky body, which had begun to rot so quickly, in a good uniform and good boots, to lay it in a new, good coffin with new tassels at all 4 corners” (Shklovsky, “Art, as Device” 165). In both cases, the humble adjective “good” contributes to a sense of strangeness and to the transformation of bodies into objects. Another strategy Vonnegut uses to create ostranenie here is circumscribing an event that usually would be named in one word: Instead of merely saying “shooting,” he speaks of filling a body with holes.

In “Art, as Device,” Shklovsky provides a similar example from Tolstoy’s “Ashamed”: Instead of saying that people are flogged, he describes them as being “denuded, thrown down on the floor, and beaten on their behinds with sticks” (163). The difference between using the “appropriate” word and these descriptions is not merely a matter of length and detail but of the reader’s activity in creating meaning. Instead of a top-down cognitive process (the word “shooting” or “flogging” is immediately recognized; the reader’s mind might or might not provide additional details), we are dealing with a bottom-up process here: The act of shooting is being assembled from separate words in the text and thus in the reader’s mind. The same holds true for “little lumps of lead in copper jackets […] crisscrossing the woods under the shellbursts” (SF 106) and many other descriptions—both of violence and of other matters—in the novel.

Describing phenomena as if the speaker or the reader knew no word for it, and thus as if these phenomena were alien, is a crucial strategy of ostranenie. These circumscriptions resemble definitions for language learners—and thus, their effect is unwittingly but fascinatingly multiplied in the 2013 Klett edition of Slaughterhouse-Five intended for German schoolchildren. Up to a dozen words and expressions are explained at the bottom of each page. Accompanying the novel’s first two pages are, for instance, the following explanations:

- **hired gunman** a professional killer (Slaughterhouse-Five [Klett] 6)
- **anxiety** [ˌæŋˈzɪəti] feeling of uneasiness and fear (7)
- **old fart** (informal) an elderly person (7)

I realize that not everybody is a compulsive footnote reader like me; still, among literary scholars this affliction is frequent enough. Imagine, then, that you are reading this edition of Slaughterhouse-Five and dutifully perusing every footnote. For a reader who does not require these explanations, their self-evidence makes

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10 This passage could be described as diegetic estrangement/ostranenie (see Spiegel).
11 Such aspects of Vonnegut’s writing are often lost in translation. Neither the German version (Schlachthof-5 91) nor the Russian one (Boynya nomer pyat’ 53), for instance, literally recreates the oxymoronic “filled with holes”; moreover, the Russian version directly says “he was shot,” diminishing ostranenie.
the text strange; the phonetic transcription tempts to read the words out loud. The process of reading is slowed down (deceleration, to Shklovsky, is one of the crucial instruments of ostranenie; see “Art, as Device” 73), and the annotated words become less self-evident. This makes the edition (unabbreviated, uncensored, and featuring helpful additional material) useful for teaching the novel at university level, too: Though we can hope, somewhat unrealistically, that university students have little need for such explanations, their effects can be fruitfully discussed.

Vonnegut himself uses explanatory notes separated from the body of the text in Breakfast for Champions, along with illustrations. “There were one quadrillion nations in the Universe, but the nation Dwayne Hooper and Kilgore Trout belonged to was the only one with a national anthem which was gibberish sprinkled with quotation marks. Here is what their flag looked like:” is followed by a faithful rendition of the flag of the United States (8).

As with many literary effects, the discussion of ostranenie can be usefully complemented by such matters as editions, footnotes, and illustrations. The audiobook version of Breakfast of Champions is of particular interest in this regard. A brochure with illustrations is provided; still, the reader or publisher could diminish ostranenie by not mentioning them, or else enhance it by describing the image of the flag as, say, “a rectangle with stars and stripes on it” (after all, the reader is asked to pretend to be unfamiliar with it). In the case of Breakfast of Champions as narrated by John Malkovich and released by Audible, the amount of ostranenie remains close to the printed version: In Shklovsky’s terms, Malkovich describes pictures as things he “recognizes”; more than that, as things he recognizes from the text. For instance, when the text refers to a “serpent which eats its tail,” Malkovich proceeds: “and here is indeed the drawing of a serpent,” even though he would in all probability have said “snake” describing the image on its own (Breakfast 200). The only exception is the picture which Vonnegut later came to use almost in lieu of a signature, the one he designates as “an asshole” (5). In this case, the audiobook hesitantly describes the image as an “asterisk.”

Vonnegut is famous for his obscenities. Very often, he uses them to create ostranenie of the text, to bring dead metaphors to life, making them funnier, or sexier, or more offensive, depending on the audience. Shklovsky, as it happens, reissued his “Art as Device” a year after the first publication, adding material on sexual ostranenie. In an earlier essay, he writes about this particular form of ostranenie (he hadn’t coined the term yet)—intensification of language experience, or, as the essay’s title puts it, “Resurrection of the Word”: “Today, words are dead, and language resembles a graveyard, but newly-born words were alive and vivid,” claims Shklovsky (63). One of the goals of literature, to him, was to resurrect words.

“Asshole,” for instance, has become tame enough as a term of general abuse and does not normally bring to mind the image of a sphincter—unless one is provided, albeit it in the abstract form of an asterisk. Similarly, in Slaughterhouse-Five, Weary shouts at Billy: “Get out of the road, you dumb motherfucker.” We learn that “the last word […] was fresh and astonishing to Billy, who had never fucked anybody” (34). This time without a drawing, Vonnegut uses the same method as with “asshole”: reasonably competent English speakers, unless perhaps
they are very old or very young, don't usually think of actual sexual consort with one's parent when hearing this word. But when we share Billy's perspective, the word becomes “fresh and astonishing” (Vonnegut), “alive and vivid” (Shklovsky).

Let us now return to ostranenie not of the word, but of the world. As already mentioned, Weary loves to share his sadistic fantasies with Billy. Billy, innocent as he is, fails to be shocked: After all, he “knew a thing or two about gore,” having “contemplated torture and hideous wounds at the beginning and the end of nearly every day of his childhood.” Before we wonder about his cruel and unusual childhood, the experience is explained: “Billy had an extremely gruesome crucifix hanging on the wall of his little bedroom in Ilium” (SF 38). Looking at such an image every day has desensitized Billy, an effect ostranenie is intended to combat—at the same time, the reader is resensitized. The description of “torture and hideous wounds” brings to mind another passage from Shklovsky: “This method of seeing things outside of their context led Tolstoy to the ostranenie of rites and dogmas in his late works, replacing the habitual religious terms with usual words—the result was strange, monstrous […] Tolstoy’s perception unraveled his own faith, getting to things he had been long unwilling to approach” (“Art, as Device” 167).

Vonnegut grew up in a family of skeptical freethinkers and later became honorary president of the American Humanist Association. Though he was sympathetic to Christianity, he had no faith of his own to unravel—but a practicing Christian might well stop in her tracks considering how strange it is to expose children (and grown-ups, for that matter) to sculptures of a brutally tortured man in the name of love and kindness. Had Vonnegut begun by calling the crucifix by “the habitual religious term,” its ostranenie wouldn’t have been so effective (“Art, as Device” 167). It is the hint of a riddle which makes Christian symbolism strikingly strange. Shklovsky argues that riddles are akin to ostranenie, as “every riddle describes an object with words which define and depict it but are not usually used in reference to it” (“Art, as Device” 169). Every riddle makes us wonder about its object, mentally constructing it bottom-up, heightening our awareness.

Having shared his sadistic preoccupations with Billy, Weary soon begins to put them into practice: “Weary drew back his right boot, aimed a kick at the spine, at the tube which had so many of Billy’s important wires in it. Weary was going to break that tube” (SF 51). This time, “spine” appears before the riddle-like description. Still, the image of a tube filled with important wires makes the threat more salient. But who is speaking here? Where does this robotic image come from? So far, we have only talked about such methods of creating ostranenie as “superfluous” descriptions and literalizations of expressions—not yet about perspective, which is often crucial. The reaction to the word “motherfucker” and the memory of a tortured man on his bedroom wall are Billy’s. Billy is alienated from his surroundings (later, he will be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and hospitalized). In his head, at least, he is a time-traveler who would later encounter Tralfamadorians. “Later” only applies to our view: For him, time is fluid, and his perspective might already be Tralfamadorian. “Tralfamadorians, of course, say that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine. It amuses them that so many Earthlings are offended by the idea of being machines” (SF 154): This might explain the image of a tube with wires.
Except that this image is not presented from Billy’s perspective. He does not know that Weary is preparing to kick him. There is no reason to assume that the image of a tube full of wires “belongs” to Weary, or any of the five German soldiers looking at both of them. Rather, it seems to issue directly from the narrator, “Kurt Vonnegut.” He, too, is rather Tralfamadorian; he begins using the refrain “so it goes” (first appearance: SF 2) long before explaining its alien provenance (27), and the novel itself is meant to resemble Tralfamadorian literature. “Vonnegut” also talks about tubes when describing his work as a police reporter: “We were connected to the institutions that supported us by means of pneumatic tubes […] [T]he stories were mimeographed and stuffed into the brass and velvet cartridges which the pneumatic tubes ate” (8). While the human body with its tubes is described as machine-like, these pneumatic tubes are depicted as alive, feeding on mail. When the two descriptions are considered side by side, the similarity of the human body and a city network can make both strange.

Following Freese, I have used quotation marks for Vonnegut-the-narrator as opposed to Vonnegut-the-person; helpful as the distinction is, it is fluid, particularly considering the artistry of Vonnegut’s public persona. In the preface to Breakfast of Champions, Vonnegut or “Vonnegut” says: “I tend to think of human beings as huge, rubbery test tubes, too, with chemical reactions seething inside” (4). This is strikingly reminiscent of the image in Slaughterhouse-Five. In Breakfast, Vonnegut provides an explanation which includes his awareness of the chemical nature of human thought and emotion, an awareness partly based on experience with depression and antidepressants, both his and those of his relatives.

For a reader familiar with Breakfast of Champions, the description of a human spine as a tube with wires is psychologically justified by (“Vonnegut’s(”) perspective. Otherwise, as Shklovsky puts it, “the method is liberated from the accidental motivation for its use” (“Art, as Device” 165). Vonnegut starts out by depicting things as strange because this is how Billy and the Tralfamadorians see them. He ends up depicting things as strange simply to make them strange to the reader, without providing a reason for this strangeness. Russian formalists also call this “laying bare the device” (see Berlina, Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader 13). In Slaughterhouse-Five, not only the device but also Billy’s back is laid bare, and a murderous kick is literally a foot away.

But Weary doesn’t dare kick Billy in front of German soldiers and their dog. For a reader who associates German shepherds with fierce dogs from war films, this one is a potential source of ostranenie: “She was a female German shepherd. She was shivering. Her tail was between her legs. She had been borrowed that morning from a farmer. She had never been to war before. She had no idea what game was being played. Her name was Princess” (SF 52). Vonnegut’s Galapagos, too, features an unhappy female German shepherd. In both cases, the indication of gender provides a touch of personality, but the dog’s perspective is only used fleetingly.

Ostranenie is very often constructed through the eyes of animals and aliens; the latter are more prominent in Slaughterhouse-Five. Vonnegut uses extraterrestrial perspectives even when Tralfamadorians are not involved, ascribing them not only to his namesake and to Billy, but also, for instance, to Derby—a captive
English soldier who is neither in touch with aliens nor alienated. He is said to describe a bombing as “the incredible artificial weather that Earthlings sometimes create for other Earthlings when they don't want those other Earthlings to inhabit Earth anymore,” but when speaking directly, he speaks “normally” (SF 106). Presumably, it is the narrator who translates “people” into “Earthlings,” making strange the practice of mutual murdering by virtue of unusual word choices and weirdly detailed descriptions.

Not only physical objects (such as the human body) and phenomena (such as war) can be the subject of ostranenie; ideas and philosophies, too, can be questioned by similar means. This holds true for the prayer in Billy's office, a mildly religious object which came to replace the gruesome crucifix of his childhood as wall decoration:

GOD GRANT ME
THE SERENITY TO ACCEPT
THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE,
COURAGE
TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN,
AND WISDOM ALWAYS
TO TELL THE
DIFFERENCE
(SF 60, Vonnegut's capitalization and line breaks).

I would like to thank my student Jessica Haller for pointing out the skull into which Vonnegut has shaped this well-known text. Replacing the crucifix is yet another reminder of death; besides, Pilgrim's fatalism could be regarded as death in life. The prayer, in all probability authored by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930s, was circulated by the United States armed forces during World War II. Billy might have learned about it as a chaplain's assistant. The prayer is so well-known that its wisdom tends to be taken for granted. In Slaughterhouse-Five, it is made strange by the following comment: “Among the things Billy Pilgrim could not change were the past, the present and the future” (60). From this view, the prayer can be abbreviated to “God grant me the serenity to accept everything”—a strange breed of fatalism and optimism. Or perhaps “optometrism,” considering that Billy regards this view as “corrective lenses for Earthling souls” (29).

The saying reappears at the close of the novel, handwritten on a heart-shaped pendulum hanging above two childishly drawn breasts (SF 209): A hackneyed saying transformed into a question about free will poses both as a heart and a skull, both as Eros and Thanatos.

Ostranenie of War and Religion in Anglo-American Literature:
Vonnegut’s Precursors

Considering prayers made strange in American literature, one can hardly avoid thinking of Mark Twain's “The War Prayer” (1905). The image of Vonnegut as Twain's heir is an academic cliché supported “by virtue of his birthplace, hair, and
sense of humor” and consciously perpetuated by Vonnegut (Shields 301). Still, the similarity between the ways Twain and Vonnegut make strange war and religion is worth observing. _Ostranenie_ of war is most needed and most potent when the dominant view is war-glorifying; when praying for victory is a widespread ritual, translating such a prayer into a description of all its implications can be highly effective. Imagine a devout Christian with the experience of praying for victory reading:

> O Lord our God, help us tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire. (Twain)

The deadpan ending of “The War Prayer” could have been written by Vonnegut: “It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.” Twain’s “Letters from the Earth,” too, uses _ostranenie_ in a similar fashion; even the title could be Vonnegut’s.

Vonnegut, a dedicated practitioner of _ostranenie_, in all probability did not glean the concept from Shklovsky. What, then, is his source? Apart from his psychological idiosyncrasies and artistic creativity, literary predecessors have probably played a role. Jonathan Swift, like Twain and Vonnegut after him, makes strange war and religion in one breath:

> He asked me, “what were the usual causes or motives that made one country go to war with another?” I answered “they were innumerable; but I should only mention a few of the chief. Sometimes the ambition of princes, who never think they have land or people enough to govern; sometimes the corruption of ministers, who engage their master in a war, in order to stifle or divert the clamour of the subjects against their evil administration. Difference in opinions has cost many millions of lives: for instance, whether flesh be bread, or bread be flesh; whether the juice of a certain berry be blood or wine.” (Swift 280)

Just like in “The War Prayer,” the list goes on. Lists can be an effective method of satire, and so can _ostranenie_. Presenting a theological debate like a nonsensical quarrel, “replacing the habitual religious terms” (Shklovsky, “Art, as Device” 167), Swift does what Tolstoy, Twain and Vonnegut (to name but the writers mentioned so far) did later: he makes strange what he describes, opening it for questions. Placing Vonnegut in the tradition of satire, Marvin writes: “Like Jonathan Swift in _Gulliver’s Travels_, Vonnegut imagines future worlds and distant places not for their own sake, but for the power they give him to point out what is wrong back home” (14). Houyhnhnm Land and Tralfamadore are not necessarily better in all respects than the world we live in (the selective breeding practiced by the Houyhnhnms sounds rather dystopian, at least to a modern reader, and not everyone wishes to share Tralfamadorian fatalism), but they do arguably provide a kind of _ostranenie_ by proxy: Comparing their habitat to ours, we might perceive the latter as strange. More to the point, Houyhnhnmian and Tralfamadorian views of our world are a source of direct _ostranenie_.

Satire can work without _ostranenie_, and _ostranenie_ does not need to be employed satirically (it can question and ridicule, but it can also, in the Romantic tradition, direct the reader’s attention to beauty) —but the two do often go hand in hand. In American satirical writing, _ostranenie_ is a much used tool (though it is
more productively defined as an effect rather than a device, this effect, in its turn, can serve a particular function at a macrotextual level). To stay with the theme of war and religion—not only Twain but also Heller, whom Vonnegut met and whose work he admired, uses ostranenie, often for satirical means, in *Catch-22*. Just like Billy in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Corporal Whitcomb in *Catch-22* is a chaplain’s assistant. In his war experience, “there were terrifying, sudden moments when objects, concepts and even people that the chaplain had lived with almost all his life inexplicably took on an unfamiliar and irregular aspect that he had never seen before and which made them seem totally strange: *jamais vu*” (Heller 195).12 Both alienation as experienced by Billy and *jamais vu* are psychological conditions whose effect is closer to *Verfremdung* than to ostranenie: the familiar is perceived as strange, accompanied by a feeling of emotional disconnection. The reader, on the other hand, might share in Billy’s or Whitcomb’s perspective, but experiences ostranenie proper.

*Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Catch-22* are not just two experimental (metafictional, nonchronological) antiwar novels on WWII published by American writers in the 1960s and featuring numbers in their titles; they feature a great deal of more particular similarities. Many of these have been observed—one article dedicated to the two novels makes intriguing observations on structuralist aesthetics (Cacicedo 363)—but formalist ethics remain unmentioned. Though “Art as Device” never discusses ethics directly, almost all Tolstoian examples Shklovsky provides make strange morally and socially relevant concepts and institutes, such as property, religion, and war. In American literature, writers such as Twain, Heller, and Vonnegut also employ ostranenie, among other things, for ethical purposes.

After his return from the war, Vonnegut published five novels—but he never stopped saying that the Dresden book was his most important project. The much quoted passage in *Slaughterhouse-Five* largely corresponds to the biographical facts: “I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. When I got home from the Second World War twenty-three years ago, I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen” (5). Why didn’t he? Why add aliens, madness, failed writers, optometry, meditations on the nature of time, and a porn star? Because, for Vonnegut, documentary realism didn’t make his war experience real. Self-reference, nonchronological narration, and ostranenie did. Self-reference provided a sense of immediacy, involuntary time travel mirrored what post-traumatic stress disorder does to memory, and ostranenie pierced the insulating layer of habit with which we protect our emotions from exposure to violence, albeit fictional.

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12 *Ostranenie* is little understood outside of Slavic studies, and confusion abounds in American literary criticism. One article on *Catch-22*, for instance, describes “defamiliarization” as its very opposite, “the process where ‘the unfamiliar’ becomes the norm” (Hidalgo-Downing 222). It proceeds: “Or, as the chaplain, a character in the novel, puts it, it is a type of cognitive illusion called *jamais vu*, the experience where strange and unfamiliar situations acquire a feeling of uncanny familiarity.” But what Hidalgo-Downing describes is *déjà vu*, while *jamais vu* (lit. never seen) refers to the opposite—the non-recognition of what should be familiar, a phenomenon akin to ostranenie.
Vonnegut’s metafictional devices and chronological experiments make us co-create the plot on the macro level, just as instances of ostranenie such as “terrible artificial weather” instead of “bombardment” make us cocreate single semantic units. These bottom-up cognitive processes confront “the puzzled reader with the task of co-authoring the shocking meaning of a tale which is an accomplished example of how a historical event can be imaginatively storified by means of advanced metafictional strategies” (Freese, “Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five” 31). Martin Amis would learn this strategy (at least partly) from Vonnegut, borrowing the plot of Time’s Arrow from the backward film scene in Slaughterhouse-Five (74) and interweaving ostranenie and nonchronological narration even closer by making the reader imagine the Holocaust while the narrator remains innocent of the terrible knowledge. Such texts let one question the dichotomy of “ostranenie of the text” and “ostranenie of the world”—making strange the text is, after all, making strange the world by proxy.

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