



Negative emotion as political performance in Kurt Vonnegut's works: Affective forms of resistance in science fiction

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 22nd November 2022, revised 19th April 2023, accepted 2nd May 2023

Abstract

The world of science-fiction articulates itself through its inherent 'estrangement'. It is in the same vein as Darko Suvin's idea, wherein, he states an 'imaginative alternative to the author's empirical experience' as the main device of a science-fiction narrative. Furthermore, the narrative in science-fiction works deeply engages itself with emotions alongside the speculative elements. This paper examines negative emotions and their political affect, as portrayed in the works of Kurt Vonnegut. It investigates 1) the relationship between the ontology of state power and the fearful emotions of terror and control, and 2) the role of these emotions as instruments of resistance against the incontrovertible state. It studies political inertia of negative emotions under authoritarian State in Vonnegut's works. Characters in these select Vonnegut's short stories (Welcome to the Monkey House, Harrison Bergeron, 2BR02B) exercise extensive affective agency in their inner and social lives. In Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut engages Billy Pilgrim's emotions (a reaction to State violence) to create a political subject out of him. The paper also focuses on how the affective life of characters may become a political tool for the transformation of political scenario through its resistance of biopower networks, taking from the ideas of Foucault (biopolitics) and Deleuze and Guattari (micro-politics).

Keywords: Affect, biopolitics, emotions, science-fiction.

Introduction

Tom Moylan holds the horrors and terrors of 20th century responsible for the proliferation of the radical elsewhere in literature and new media; 20th and 21st century with their capitalist, bourgeois modernity and alarming regimes bordering on totalitarianism, opened up a new space for desired ideal futures¹. The sordid present has also witnessed a burgeoning demand and supply chain of science-fiction works in popular culture (and counter-culture). It is in these virtual landscapes (of science-fiction) with constricting political and material

modes of life, wherein this paper questions the active affective dimensions of bodies.

The world of science-fiction articulates itself through its inherent 'estrangement'². It is in the same vein as Darko Suvin's idea, wherein, he states an 'imaginative alternative to the author's empirical experience' as the main device of a science-fiction narrative³.

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Furthermore, the narrative in science-fiction works deeply engages itself with emotions alongside the speculative and fictive elements; language and bodies are also crucial for articulation of this world. The virtual space of science-fiction, an illusory negation of earth, may become a place for effectively realising connection between bodies, and emotions may help us navigate through the landscapes of this virtual space.

Subcomandante Marcos, the leader of the Zapatista Political Movement (Emiliano Zapata Liberation Front) in his *Letter to the World* details the necessity of building 'a new world which can contain all the worlds'; Haraway is also keen on material reworlding via heterogenous imaginaries. Like Zapatistas in Mexico promise a space for possibilities (an almost utopian hope), science-fiction, despite its infinite improbability offers a space for performance of radical politics and further realisation of hope in a repressed society (looking for a sustainable present in the impossible, in a Harawayian fashion). Likewise, Spinoza considered freedom as a motivation for politics. Additionally, his treatment of bodies and minds (and their exhibited parallelism) indicates his affect to be proto-political, and his bodies capable of resistance. This affective turn, when fused with a narrative of agency promises performative emotions within and without the text.

This research paper is an encounter between Spinoza's theory of emotions (which has gained significant ground in contemporary scholarship), and Foucault's truth games (which discuss self-technologies as practices of freedom). From this staged encounter, a line of flight emerges, with a dawning realisation, that, Foucault's concerns about self, freedom and power in governance hint at a particular form of affinity between him and Spinoza. For Spinoza freedom had been the point of politics; there existed an affective dynamic relationship between bodies and their political life.

Therefore, for this paper I have decided to pair Spinoza's theories of emotions with Foucault's interest in sovereignty and resistance to evaluate instances of emotional negativity.

Literature Review

On the matter of contemporary scholarship in Affect Studies in literature, especially emotional negativity: Sianne Ngai has studied the impact of 'ugly feelings' in her research⁴. John Protevi's research on 'aggressive frenzies', their bio-social history and production of special affective structures as bio-cultural body politic is central⁵. He has also written on affect's agency and response-ability, subtitled *The Act of Killing in the Age of Cyborgs*. This frames a pathway to explore new affective frames that shall help us and shape our ethno-ontology of bodies, their antagonistic relation with capital and practices of violence (physical and psychological) for social control by the State.

On the topic of science-fiction, much of the current discourse and critical treatment of various works reflects upon the content (utopian and dystopian) for its reformist solutions through a historical materialist lens. The recent debates also examine the history and politics of the birth of the genre of science-fiction and the social significance of the textual forms of utopia and dystopia. The preoccupation of science-fiction with re-inventing and re-visioning society in all its forms, from its economy to its politics and to its mental climate, highlights certain features of the existing scholarship in science-fiction. Additionally, the current scholarship touches upon the post-human and transhuman elements in various science-fiction works and discusses cognitive agency, human exceptionalism and technology's teleology and epistemology. This paper looks at how one may introduce negative emotional experiences into discourse and subsequently into action, and how these affects may be deployed as a useful force in the socio-political domain, to offer a strategic outlet for 'powers unknown to us'⁶.

What's to be done: Do bodies immersed in difficult affective states such as depression, melancholy and anxiety cede all their power to the State? Or do they remain capable of resistance against the tyranny of the State? Can science-fiction's alternate imaginings of our universe offer a space to trace the unstructured political potential of negative emotions? These are the questions that drive this research paper. This research endeavour is a promise to map the emotions and the resulting active agency of bodies, in imagined spaces. It also visits the politics of life through multifarious

dimensions of negative emotional experiences. In this paper, the articulated and affective bodies in science fiction are studied to explore etho-ecological alternatives.

In this research paper, the exploration of politics of life and bodies through emotionstakes place in 'imagined elsewhere'⁷. As science-fiction creates multiple possible contexts for exchange of emotions, these represented emotions disrupt the defamiliarization created by the imagined landscape. The research recognises these emotions as portable and capable of producing embodied connections with us that may rouse responsible actions. This *being-affected* to act may be interpreted as political agency. Therefore, this research paper examines negative emotions in the works of science-fiction, keeping in mind Deleuze and Guattari's use of R.D. Laing's expression 'from breakdowns to breakthroughs'⁸. In doing so, the research theoretically investigates a dimension of emotions whose socio-political aspect in science-fiction has been overlooked so far.

On a more specific note, this paper investigates the debate around sovereignty, governmentality and biopower, and where it leads to, in select science-fiction works. This research paper also questions the role of fear and terror against the State and its control mechanisms. Further, the paper dwells on the negative emotions such as despair in subjects (under state control) as instruments of resistance. Finally, as research on political affect gains significance as an investigation of various relationships and subjectivities between bodies in recent times, the research paper studies these political subjects as a part of an eco-social matrix, theoretically harnessing negative affective assemblages as functional body politics, in possible futures of dystopias disguised as utopias.

A point of departure for this study of emotions and their political affect is the investigation of the relationship between the ontology of state power and the fearful emotions of terror and control, and the role of these emotions as instruments of resistance, and as the enemy of the incontrovertible state. Herein, the paper examines the effects of increasing biopower networks in our imaginative life (in sci-fi) as

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remarked by Hardt, Negri and Lazzarato, and methods of escape from the present logoi of biopower. The research paper focuses on how the affective life of the characters may become a political tool for the transformation of political scenario through its resistance of biopower networks, taking from the ideas of Foucault (on movement and biopolitics) and Deleuze and Guattari (on micro-politics). It also discusses the interest of state in using techniques of discipline and regulation, state's ascent to (techno)biopower, and how these techniques strengthen the hegemonic foundation of the authoritarian state/polis (at times under the guise of a civil society).

Evoking Affect and Subsequent Action in Vonnegut's Narrative

The process of writing may be construed as a working assemblage, where the writer practices a nomadic discovery, so that the world of writing is wrought out of both, fiction and fact. Vonnegut's writing weaves close-knit communities where interactions between subjects unfolds to highlight their estrangement from humane values. This estrangement is deeply embedded in the narrative, and often reaches its zenith through the protagonist.

Harrison Bergeron in the eponymous short story *Harrison Bergeron*, Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* are a few examples how the central characters in Vonnegut's writing become the intermediary means to highlight the totalitarian States (which have been dubbed utopias), and their controlling practices. The estrangement experienced by these characters is an extremely political act, as viewed through a Brechtian lens, and doubles as a cautionary tale for a disciplinary society.

This technique works brilliantly in science-fiction. For, science-fiction is a genre characterised by its 'narrative dominance' and a fictional, hegemonical novelty in terms of cognitive logic, as elucidated by DarkoSuvin and Veronica Hollinger³. Vonnegut's societies aren't simply disciplinary societies as discussed by Foucault. The government in Vonnegut's works, especially the ones chosen for this paper—*2BRO2B*, *Harrison Bergeron*, and *Welcome to the*

Monkey House—utilises mechanisms of power to function as a disciplinary society alongside a control one.

Through the use of this new society, which operates using a dualistic model of techniques of power—disciplines and control—Kurt Vonnegut captures the transience of the disciplinary societies, which Deleuze (1992) highlights in his prophetic essay “Postscript of the Societies of Control”:

Foucault has brilliantly analysed the ideal project of these environments of enclosure, particularly visible within the factory: to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time; to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces. To further the same agenda, Vonnegut masterfully synthesises the various techniques of disciplinary and control power, as antagonisms (to freedom) in these short stories, as they enforce and restrict freedom and agency of a subject⁹.

Foucault’s concept of sovereign power is clear in the chosen short stories of Vonnegut’s from the very start; it is the government’s right to take a life or letting its subjects live. The characters are often to be found in a future, an American city, riddled with hyper-capitalism, no standard year and date, yet the society and the government in these stories appear identical with very few variations.

Harrison Bergeron begins in the year 2081, and every citizen possesses a similar IQ, holds a similar skill-set or lack thereof. The society seems to have reached an ideal, normalised set of values—an abject reality. In the year of 2081, everyone was equal. They were not only equal in the eyes of God but the law as well. Everyone was equal in every way. No one was smarter than anyone else. No one was more attractive than the other. No one was tougher or faster than the others. All of this equality was made possible by the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, as well as the unwavering vigilance of United States Handicapper General agents¹⁰.

In *Welcome to the Monkey House*, Vonnegut writes about a World Government and how its techniques of control work upon the citizens. The World Government was fighting

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overpopulation in two ways. One component was the promotion of ethical suicide, which entailed going to a Suicide Parlor and requesting a Hostess to kill you gently while you rest on a Barcalounger. The other point was mandated ethical birth control¹⁰. *2BR02B* holds similar themes with ethical, government-assisted suicide in a picture-perfect United States of America, where the number of souls is a constant number of 40 million and someone must die for a new life to be born. This new state law, cures the problem of overpopulation faced in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, and creates a dilemma of the greater value of a new, young life over an old one. “What man in my shoes wouldn’t be happy?” says Wehling. He makes a gesture with his hands to represent light-hearted straightforwardness. All he is tasked with is to choose which of his triplets shall live, then bring his maternal grandfather to the Happy Hooligan and return back to the centre with a receipt¹¹.

These three aforementioned accounts of administrations fall in line with Foucault’s model where reforms are being prescribed by various institutions such as the Federal Bureau of Termination in *2BR02B*, Ethical Suicide Service in *Welcome to the Monkey House*, and United States Handicapper General in *Harrison Bergeron*. This does not end here. The techniques of discipline and social control in these stories resemble disciplinary societies less and are more indicative of control societies as in there. In these disciplinary societies, one was always starting over “from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory,” whereas in the new control societies, nothing is ever finished—the corporate entity, the learning environment, and the military services all being metastable states intermingling within the same modulation, like a shared system of displacement⁹.

Vonnegut is quick to realise this new paradigm of power present in Foucault’s discussion of bio-politics and its nature of social control. It is evident as these short stories complicate the state’s ownership of its subjects (the bodies). The recurring theme in the aforementioned works is the idea of one’s body as individual property. And through these three instances, wherein Vonnegut questions and parodies the extent of government control over our bodies, he simultaneously posits for the rethinking of agency exercised via biological functions and desires.

Both Foucault and Agamben find mechanisms of power intricately linked with biological life. It is in the same biopolitical body they find affirmations of resistance via its transformative power. Agamben’s genealogy of immanence finds its roots in Spinoza, for whom freedom is always a social affair. Here, I’d like to introduce affect theory to the mix and understand biopolitics and its related resistance. Spinoza believes that an individual is never at complete behest of a

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political body. For him, power is a capacity enshrined in all bodies. This power may govern or resist.

Further, it is the affect that increases or decreases this capacity through affective resonance or dissonance. Massumi believes that Spinoza rallies for a 'thought in the act' or a 'research-creation' when discussing relations of power and affective bodily capacities¹². This 'thought in the act' represents a moment of unstructured potential which may amplify or dampen resistive powers of a dynamic political body¹².

Spinoza's thoughts, derived from *Ethics*, on affect theory may be differentiated into three major types of affects (*affectus*): active, passive and desire (*conatus*)⁶. All these affects are affects of mind later transformed into physical actions, as Spinozist thought entails surpassing Cartesian dualism. In the same vein, Spinoza argues for the presence of an active power in each body by which the things strives. Here, desire is most important for us as it corresponds to a cognizant endeavor to keep "being," which equals an attempt to strengthen the power of acting. The degree of human acting ability and the objects of desire, on the other hand, are completely reliant on affections caused through other actors and affects that articulate the characteristics of these affections¹³.

This desire is omnipresent in the Vonnegut's fiction especially the three short stories. It is often coupled with the ambivalent hope which Moira Gatens locates in Spinoza's works: hope and fear existing only in tandem with each other and never without¹⁴. And, Vonnegut's protagonists embody such political hope; they resist state control as they mobilise their desire. Vonnegut makes his characters act on their desires fuelled by negative emotions. One may be quick to dismiss as potentially useless or ambiguous. Harrison Bergeron, Billy the Poet and Edward K. Wehling, Jr., inhabit a space where they are free to exercise their political agency, overtly challenging the status quo of the State. They are categorically different from the rest in some way of other.

For a fourteen-year-old Harrison Bergeron, it is his genius, athleticism, good looks, and his ability to outgrow the hindrances which are custom made by Handicapper-General. According to Spinoza, it is owing to the causal power which are embodied in humans that such resistance is capable. Yet, what makes Harrison 'extremely dangerous' and a threat to the ruling Government, is his inability to suppress the negative emotions of rage, pain and anger¹⁰. That is what truly sets him apart, it is not just his intelligence. He is smart akin to his father, but the latter is easily dissuaded by the different voices ringing in his head. George Bergeron's is more disaffected than his wife, thus making him an imperfect choice for yielding great political agency. Hazel Bergeron, Harrison's mother, foregrounds the potential and agency which Harrison later

mobilises. She does so by emoting despite being the most normal one. Throughout the story, she repeatedly expresses grief, hate and sadness. Similarly, Harrison is overcome with emotions when he storms the studio and declares himself the emperor. This cry for freedom is an embodiment of possibilities of a new era, and transformation of the current regime.

His emotions direct his intentionality which helps him exercise his political agency and politics. Even though, Harrison isn't successful in his attempt, it becomes a symbol of hope despite fear and against control.

Welcome to the Monkey House also follows the paths of desire (*conatus*), using sexual liberation as a tool, which may or may not lead to a regime change. Billy the Poet is a 'nothinghead' and wanted by the police¹⁰. This was so, because, he refused to take ethical birth control pills which made every sexual activity devoid of all pleasure; this made him a 'nothinghead'. From start to finish, Billy's methods to take an Ethical Suicide Service nurse hostage are made apparent yet he eludes all government officials i.e., the police force and the nurses. He frequently uses poetry to charm his target, trying to rouse emotions from the beautiful, virgin Suicide Hostess. This trick fails almost always as the nurse, the intended target, was consuming the ethical birth control pills. The delinquent Billy the Poet claims, "A woman's not a woman till the pills wear off¹⁰." He further states the pills make women into an object. It may be noted that poetry, an outpouring of emotions or as Wordsworth put it 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', doesn't move Nancy, the Suicide Hostess, until her ethical birth control pills wear off which make her a 'nothinghead'¹⁵.

It is evident, once again, the powerful state challenges the will or the appetite of its subjects' desires. This proves sufficient to instil the hegemonical narrative against the 'nothingheads' or freethinkers in this short story. Once again, it is the affections of the body which transform ideas of the mind to corresponding political action against tyrannical State.

Lastly, is the case of *2BRO2B*. The story poses the enigma of moral and ethical state-assisted suicide, population control. The characters are aware of the running undercurrent of satire throughout the story. It is evident as Leora Duncan insists on referring to the government-run suicide booths by an alternate name, as the ones used are misnomers.

"I wish people wouldn't call it 'the Catbox,' and things like that," she said. "It gives people the wrong impression."

"You're absolutely right," said Dr.Hitz. "Forgive me." He corrected himself, gave the municipal gas chambers their official title, a title no one ever used in conversation. "I should have said, 'Ethical Suicide Studios,'" he said.

"That sounds so much better," said Leora Duncan¹⁰.

It is also the only story where the question of resistance is creatively ambiguous than others, and change in status quo appears to be a far-fetched ideal notion. It is so, as laws for assisted death, as in a case of murder, are unclear. No prisons exist. No institutions. This story does not hold onto any disciplinary etiquettes or related techniques of power.

The only constant is the numbers of souls. The state functions in a rather nefarious manner. The control mechanisms resemble those of psychopolitics and a 'smart power', as theorised by Byung-Chul Han, a society more brutal, where power is not exercised via violence, rather self-exploitation. Since it necessitates a great deal of effort to make people believe into the repressive society of precepts and restrictions, disciplinary power seems to be quite ineffective.

A substantially more effective power technology makes certain that individuals subordinate themselves to hegemonic relations of power on their own. Such an interplay intends to stimulate, motivate, and maximise rather than impede or suppress. It works so effectively because it appears pleasurable and fulfilling rather than a means of barring or depriving. It aims to render people dependent rather than compliant¹⁶.

Such is the case of the painter, who is gradually convinced of the state agenda, despite his earlier dissatisfaction and disillusionment, and takes his own life by calling the number '2 B R 0 2 B' (to be or not to be) for municipal gas chambers. It is hard to determine whether he wields any tangible political agency or acts as a cautionary tale for any subject living under a control society. Mr. Wehling, the father of the new-born triplets momentarily disrupts the illusion of the "perfectly swell" society by shooting the doctor (the very obvious yet misleading symbol of state's presence), Mrs. Duncan (substitute of an everyman/an object), and lastly himself (his self/the subject), to make room for his new-born babies¹¹.

Mr. Wehling seems to understand the obscene cycle of forced life and death, sprinkled with an illusion of freedom. The State has already extracted the liveliness from life and there is no space to associate vitality with or an end with death. Life exists for the mere purpose of exhibition, and it lacks all functionality. To reiterate, the number of souls remain the same. It was as it had begun. This is consistent with Deleuze's remarks on control societies as mentioned before.

Yet, the actions of Mr. Wehling and the painter to take their own lives maybe read as a form of resistance to being governed any longer. Both of them are sardonic and never fail to see through the mechanisms of power that keep the wheel

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turning. They meet a similar fate. Their case the power to be affected/ suffering surpasses the power to affect/acting, thus, power of action necessitates the end of the other. This is made possible by taking their own lives.

Finally, the four figures, namely, Harrison Bergeron, Billy the Poet, Mr. Wehling, and the painter, in the three aforementioned short stories may be compared to the figure of sage in Spinoza's work. Spinoza's sage is socially conditioned; this provides the sage with the tools to subvert existing system, and mobilise a collective towards emancipatory politics. These aforesaid protagonists fulfil the role of sage, and carry the power to bring about affective political changes.

Conclusion

Spinoza holds power of suffering and power of action essential to each subject. This becomes the foundation of the capacity for emancipatory politics that is believed to be inhabited by the subjects under authoritarian rule. The relationship between affect and agency of bodies stems from the viewpoint championing opposition of the Cartesian mind-body duality that Spinoza discusses in *TTP* and *Ethics*. This is in addition to his expansive understanding of the social and political life in a state, where politics is practiced and studied for the preservation of the State. In other words, for Spinoza, affects influence the ideas of mind which in turn stimulate some form of action. This entire process is revolutionary as a desire for freedom corresponds to an effort towards the same motive. This intentionality in thinking and action becomes the very essence of any subject under subjugation. From this, one may infer an idea of progress, of untamed human thought, to contribute to a world though emotions.

Vonnegut's short stories serve as an excellent example to situate a *vitalpolitik* for the use of the genre of science-fiction proves useful to bridge the gap between the individual and collective consciousness. The near future portrayed in Vonnegut's short stories works as a portal to our present-future. Emotions which bind us to the characters in these stories, also articulate their anxieties. Later, they transform the same anxieties into productive action. Science fiction narratives of Vonnegut aren't about matters distant from our lives and our bodies. The air is suffused with affective action in these stories of an imagined elsewhere as theorised by Haraway in the essay "Promise of Monsters". This produces an embodiment of connection and responsibility in us, finally, leaving us with no choice but to look for political alternatives.

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