

## Contrapuntal Lines: Nostalgia in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on the modalities of nostalgia in a techno-saturated world. Nostalgia is a protean concept that maintains a strong relationship with technology. The latter can mediate, alleviate or trigger nostalgic feelings and discourses orientated not only towards the past, but also towards the present and the future. In this respect, this paper will investigate how nostalgia was used as a narrative tool by Kurt Vonnegut in his *Player Piano* at several important levels of the plot and how it becomes a character that acts obscurely in some key moments. Firstly, I will analyse the modalities through which nostalgia develops a subtle relationship with technology and progress. Secondly, I will examine how the occurrences of player piano work in the novel as clues that foreshadow the on-coming intrusion of this feeling in the current mood of the personages. Thirdly, I will discuss the nostalgia for humanity in the framework offered by postmodernism. The crisis of metanarratives does not drive nostalgia towards a simple past, but it steers it towards a set of *petite histoires* that blurs the temporal orientation of nostalgia.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, player piano, technology, postmodernism, simulacra, hybridity, postmodern humanism, Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano*

### Introduction

Nostalgia has become "an obsession of both mass culture and high art" (Hutcheon and Valdés 1998, 18), a versatile concept that "frustrates psychologists, sociologists, literary theorists and philosophers, even computer scientists." (Boym 2001, xvii) It maintains a strong relationship with technology; the latter can mediate, alleviate, trigger or collect nostalgic feelings and discourses orientated not only towards the past,

but also towards the present and the future. The literature represents another valuable archive of nostalgic approaches; even if not all of its works are documentaries, the ways in which this feeling is described in various fictions are relevant when we search for its deep understanding. Kurt Vonnegut's first novel *Player Piano*, published in 1952, represents a perfect illustration of blending the themes of technical progress, metaphysical inquiries, and nostalgia. With a non-homogeneous critical evaluation that ranges from a "condescending dismissal" to an "enthusiastic praise as an outstanding and original masterpiece" (Freese 2002, 158), with a constantly changing classification as utopia or dystopia, modernist or postmodernist work, *Player Piano* is revered as a milestone of the universal literature.

In this article, I will analyse how nostalgia was used as a narrative tool by Kurt Vonnegut in his *Player Piano* at several important levels of the plot and how it becomes a character that acts obscurely in some key moments. Firstly, I will investigate the modalities in which nostalgia develops a subtle relationship with technology and progress. Secondly, I will examine how the occurrences of player piano work in the novel as clues that foreshadow the on-coming intrusion of this feeling in the current mood of the personages. Thirdly, I will analyse the nostalgia for humanity within the postmodernist framework. The crisis of metanarratives does not drive nostalgia towards a simple past, but it steers it towards a set of *petite histoires* that blurs the temporal orientation of nostalgia.

### **1. Technology and nostalgia: the extension of a beautiful friendship**

The discourses about technology are highly polarized: on the one hand, technology has been interpreted as a factor of progress, of individual life enhancement and societal development. In this paradigm, we can find both moderate views and utopias. On the other hand, technology has been seen as an artificial element that turned the tide, reducing the human power in favour of machines and tools. According to this view, technology is the ominous factor that overbalanced the natural way of things and generated dystopias. Anyhow, the

technological dimension of human condition is hard to be avoided (Ferré 1995), being a consequence of the “homo faber” structure that we inherit. As Martin Heidegger (2010, 100) put it, “everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it.” Moreover, the techno-sphere put pressure in order to answer deep interrogations about humanity, community, power and the meaning of life.

As Svetlana Boym pointed out in her seminal book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), every new technology affects “the relationship between distance and intimacy that is at the core of nostalgic sentiment” (2001, 346). Moreover, nostalgia is profoundly dependent on mnemonic devices because we remember more often the mediated experiences (Davis 1979). In a fundamental way, the connection between these two concepts is that both “are about mediation” (Boym 2001, 346); they mediate among temporal axis, spatial locations, individual and group representations. For instance, media constantly redefine the past and select the events that may become landmarks of public memory. A latent danger for the mediated nostalgic content is the ideological bias brought by selection, organisation and presentation. Following Foucault, we have to support the claim that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers” (1981, 52). In this context, “the collapse of memory” (Hoskins 2004, 110) indicates the capacity of media to recreate a past that is presented as doubtless. Technological mediated experiences can also become *prosthetic* because “our perception of the past is merely an experience of the technical substrate.” (Barnet 2003) This primacy of technologies in the processes of creating and reproducing memories can be balanced by the perspectives that take into consideration “the items’ agency, the way they interact with the mind.” (van Dijk 2007, 36)

A technologically supersaturated epoch constitutes the perfect frame for the nostalgic feelings and discourses about older forms of life, less technologically dependent and maybe more authentic. As Debord (1995) emphasised, technology produces isolation and alienation. Thus, the desire to overcome

them, the yearning for the past and the search for meaning become a natural way of reaction in times of change. The everyday techno-sphere shapes the practices of remembering, archiving and oblivion; it remains a nostalgic trigger and also a contributing factor to nostalgia. If technology is associated with speed, the nostalgia induces deceleration, the slowing down of the rhythm through reflection and contemplation. The progress exacerbates nostalgic feelings and in the eras of historical upheavals “nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defence mechanism.” (Boym 2001, xiv) In the same vein, we can notice that “our obsessions with memory function as a reaction formation against the accelerating technical processes that are transforming our *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld) in quite distinct ways.” (Huysen 1995, 7) Thus, the technologizing of life is accompanied with a kernel of nostalgia for times less dependent on technology or even for its obsolescent forms. But all the above prove that nostalgia is not just a retrospective force, but also a prospective one. Nostalgia can be “quite beneficial” (Wilson 2005, 7), and it has been “an important but rarely acknowledged aspect of the radical imagination” (Bonnett 2010, 1). Imbuing the past with meaning in order to change the present by thinking about the future seems to be the one of the fruitful axes of nostalgia. Thus, nostalgia has a progressive and sometimes a radical potential.

The development of cybernetics repositioned these issues in the centre of discussion; the comparison between machines and human beings became critical, especially within a deterministic perspective about technology. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* is the exemplification of “the tyranny of cybernetics” (Babae, Yahya, and Sivagurunathan 2014), where machines controlled everything in the society, replacing human labour. Cybernetics represents a controlling system that automatized everything, rendering the meaning of the traditional life pointless. As Paul Proteus, the protagonist of the novel, stated (directly referring to Norbert Wiener), there are three main revolutions which shape the society: the first revolution “devaluated muscle work, then the second one devalued routine mental works” (Vonnegut 2006, 14), while in the third one machines will devalue human thinking

(Vonnegut 2006, 15). When almost all the work and planning is done by computers and machines, the situation becomes an *aporia*: on the one hand, as Paul Proteus thought in the beginning of the novel, “things really were better than ever. For once, after the great bloodbath of the war, the world really was cleared of unnatural terrors – mass starvation, mass torture, mass murder.” (Vonnegut 2006, 6) On the other hand, the human being becomes obsolete while machines get newer and better; humans are reduced to useless bodies. Thus, *Player Piano* depicts the fulfilment of utopia and dystopia in the same time; the society touches a high level of efficiency and prosperity that the previous generation only dreamed of, while people are increasingly disappointed, belittled in terms of their dignity and meaningless. As Vanderbilt pointed out, *Player Piano* is “astonishing for the richness of utopian and dystopian matter in this first major outing of the writer who would soon own the best utopian imagination in American literature since World War Two.” (1983, 139-140) Moreover, Vonnegut throws out a warning in the beginning of the book that purports to be “not a book about what is, but a book about what could be”. The novel describes a totalitarian society economically and technically coordinated upon the principles of efficiency and quality. Besides the frequent connections with Huxley or Orwell, Mathew Gannon (2013) linked *Player Piano* with Marx’s political and sociological theories, but

whereas Marx saw history culminating in the concentration of technology for the benefit of the masses (wherein the coming revolution would use those technologies to liberate humanity), Vonnegut rejects the onslaught of history and cries for a halt to progress itself. Humanity’s liberation will not come through pure technological means but instead through a critical reformulation of its relationship to technology on ontological and epistemological grounds. Machines are slaves, one character notes, and “anybody that competes with slaves becomes a slave. (Gannon 2013)

Even if the idea of revolution flourishes throughout the novel, Vonnegut has a different outlook on history than Marx. Anyhow, in *Player Piano* the history itself is conceived as an automatized mechanism, predetermined by the objectives of industrialism and not by the choices of people. Babae, Yahya, and Sivagurunathan (2014) read the novel as a vivid critique of

the consumer capitalist society of 1950s America, dominated by computers and advertising industry. For cybernetics, the advertising communication is “an observing industry that controls the environment.” (Babae, Yahya, and Sivagurunathan 2014, 197)

In this totalitarian system, people manifest constantly their nostalgia for the past and their anxiety for the future. Mechanical progress induces new rules in everyday life (leisure), as well in education (the supremacy of the intelligence quotient) or work. The theme of children that do not pass the tests and remain unemployed is recurrent and takes one step further towards the paroxysm of the actual system. Many characters depict – in exquisitely written parts – the old times and also the traditional jobs that humans had before. The farmer Haycox, for instance, is a humorous personage that shows a very healthy mind when he caricaturizes the men of the moment, which were recipients of mandatory PhD degrees. His unaltered relationship with nature, animals and physical work portrays him as an outdated prototype of man, on the verge of extinction. Also, the train conductor that “runs out of examples of man’s superiority over machines” (Vonnegut 2006, 253) bewails another kind of job that disappeared in an age bereft of its aura. Moreover, Bud Calhoun’s case adds tragedy to this melting pot of uselessness of the human condition: the brilliant engineer was fired because he invented a machine that can work better than himself. This situation illustrates that in competition with technology, humans will lose every time, even if the ideas had been generated by the people in the first place.

A very emotional moment of the novel happens when Paul Proteus remembers the recording of the movements of a machinist, done for the goal of creating a fractional horsepower motor. This tape was “the essence of Rudy as far as his machine was concerned” (Vonnegut 2006, 10), “the essence distilled from the small, polite man with the big hands and black fingernails; from the man who thought the world could be saved if everyone read a verse from the Bible every night” (Vonnegut 2006, 11). The copying of Rudy’s actions in order to transform them in a programme for a machine that will replace the human being is a perfect token of Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra and

simulation. The simulacra become the truth, and its origin remains unknown (only Paul Proteus recalled the act of copying the human gesture, and its human origins, while all the other people had considered the machine as a new thing, an invention), thus “it is not a question of imitation, or duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes.” (Baudrillard 1994, 2).

The protagonist of the novel is a restless nostalgic and his actions are ingrained deeply in this feeling. At the beginning of the novel, Paul visits the Building 58's north, “the original machine shop set up by Edison in 1886” (Vonnegut 2006, 7), “the oldest building in the plant” (Vonnegut 2006, 7) that he saved from demolition for his own pleasure. His visits here have a therapeutic existential role – Paul comes here every time he feels depressed. He wants to check the past in order to reshape the future. In this double movement we recognize a few fundamental characteristics of nostalgia. On the one hand, the triggers of nostalgia are, in generally, negative feelings, loneliness being the most reported one. All the same, nostalgia might be considered today a positive feeling, “a fundamental human strength. It is part of the fabric of everyday life and serves at least four key psychological functions: it generates positive affect, elevates self-esteem, fosters social connectedness, and alleviates existential threat. By so doing, nostalgia can help one navigate successfully the vicissitudes of daily life.” (Sedikides et al. 2008, 307) On the other hand, the nostalgia is “not only directed toward the past, but also the future” (Wilson 2015, 478), highlighting the complex nexus of time and space that it supposes. The recursive and also the prospective features of nostalgia are visible in Paul's case, which visited Building 58 as “a vote of confidence from the past (...) where the past admitted how humble and shoddy it has been, where one could look from the old to the new and see that mankind really had come a long way. Paul needed that reassurance from time to time.” (Vonnegut 2006, 6)

The presence of a photo with the shop as it had been in the past on Paul's office or the fact that he preserved his old car (with his old jacket in its trunk) in spite of his social position in Ilium represent other eloquent nostalgic markers.

A nostalgic pillar of the novel is represented by the protagonist's desire to buy a farm, an incomprehensible situation for Doctor Pond, the Ilium Real Estate manager, who tries desperately to offer him another house, according to Paul's status. For Doctor Pond, "the way a man lives can destroy or increase the stature of his job – can increase or decrease the stability and prestige of the entire system." (Vonnegut 2006, 151) While the farm wanted by Paul Proteus was an "authentic microcosm of the past" (Vonnegut 2006, 153), a "completely isolated backwater, cut off from the boiling rapids of history, society, and the economy. Timeless." (Vonnegut 2006, 151), without electricity and, completely hilarious, with no key, but with an ancient latchstring, the prototype of a decent house was one who holds "electronic door openers, thermostatically controlled windows, radar range, electrostatic dust precipitators, ultrasonic clothes washer built in, forty-inch television screens" (Vonnegut 2006, 149). The conflicts between past and present, progress and authenticity, nature and civilisation are all stressed in this comparison between the old farm and the new super-technologized houses. Paul wished to put an end to his relationship with society and to deal "only with Earth as God had given it to man." (Vonnegut 2006, 137) The nostalgia for primitive and fundamental forces is observed also in his reading preferences, populated with heroes that live in harmony with the nature, depending on physical virtues, such as sailors, woodsmen or cattle breeders. The nostalgic effects prove to be extremely powerful and they have been extended in the direction of the way of living (simple, authentic, natural versus mechanized, artificial, urban). The ideas of progress and adaptation are strongly criticized and they are perceived as aggressive for the inner structure of the human being. As Paul Proteus summarized it, "it's just a hell of time to be alive, is all-just this goddamn messy business of people having to get used to new ideas. And people just don't, that's all." (Vonnegut 2006, 37) The revolution develops itself as a

normal reaction in this context; for Paul Proteus, the first step was a detachment from all previous things, and entertaining the idea of his future resignation. This separation from the oppressive society gave him a Shakespearian perspective about the world seen as a stage (Vonnegut 2006, 137). The escape from the totalitarian and deterministic technocratic society was found in a set of practices and reformulations of life perspectives such as societal and professional disengagement, secret plans or rebellion. The basis for the latter lays in the obstinate search of the meaning of life and of the human being.

## **2. Player piano as a symbol of nostalgia and a contrapuntal narrative factor**

*Player Piano* is a novel where music is intertwined at different levels of the story, and a Pavlov-like device meant to awaken the reader to the presence of meaningful material. From the very beginning, Paul Proteus appears in the posture of listening to the music of the old Building 58 – the music of the past when the new, the change, the progress were just ideas. He has imagined a suite composed by “wild and Latino music, hectic rhythms, fading in and out of phase, kaleidoscopic sound” (Vonnegut 2006, 11). This kind of music synthetises in another way the relationships with technology: the enthusiasm of innovation, its diffusion patterns, the acceleration brought in society, the change of rhythm in human ties, and its permanent movement that shapes itself and all the things around. The music, as much as the technology, transforms radically its environment, the mentality and the moods of people. As music diffuses intrusively and sweeps everything into its net, likewise the technology (according to the deterministic standpoint) encapsulates the same power of change driven by the technical innovations. The instrumentalism is also mentioned in an interesting approach about knowledge and its use. Thus, scientists are exonerated by every responsibility of their findings or innovations – as Lasher affirmed, they “simply add to knowledge. It isn't knowledge that's making trouble, but the uses it's put to.” (Vonnegut 2006, 92) Knowledge seems unstoppable, and every new achievement is a victory, but

managers and engineers are held accountable for its use, orientation and dissemination.

The music accompanies differently the lives of people in terms of their social status. Thus, the triple division in managers, engineers, civil servants and professional people that live in northwest, the regular people, which live in Homestead and the machines, located in northeast, implies a dissimilar background music. The music of Homestead is more upbeat – the fanfare is echoing on the streets – but in the pubs the music becomes an underground way of obtaining money (placing bets and guessing the soundless tunes played at TV). The week that the most important men spent on Meadows is full of ardent, enthusiastic and group motivational music. Also, a Song Book is a relevant obligatory piece for everybody present, in order to develop an authentic team spirit and a steady corporate identity (in this point, Vonnegut's experience as a former employee at General Electric proves helpful). Also, while people from Ilium use phonographs, people from Homestead use player pianos – an interesting dialectical auctorial choice that will be discussed below.

Moreover, we have to point out an interesting aspect of the structure of the novel: from 35 chapters of the book, 24 chapters are focusing on the life of the protagonist and 8 chapters introduce an external point of view, portraying America through the eyes of the Shah of Bratpuhr. His curiosity reveals the differences in terms of religion, culture, civilization, mentality and way of living between Americans and his people. These chapters are priceless questionings of the well-established norms of a developed society, proposing a fresh perspective, ideologically free, nonbiased. In the narrative logic seen as a whole, this perspective plays a meaningful role that stresses the structure of the novel conceived in musical terms. Thus, these chapters create “an effective contrapuntal narrative as in music. These two narrative lines reach the same scene of the unsuccessful revolution at the end of the novel, where we are strongly stimulated to think about our possible future.” (Magome 2004, 376) The lines of novel seem at a first glance to move separately and the polyphony is not successfully realised till the end, still harmonizing in the subtext the profound

doubts of the protagonist with the Shah's perplexities or the critiques of the Ghost Shirt Society. The "melodic" narrative lines communicate with each other and the counterpoint is fully achieved.

The player piano constitutes a powerful symbol of the entire book, because it does not represent a simple object that problematizes only the mechanical reproduction of sound, but such as Jacques Attali, Friedrich Kittler or Theodor Adorno pointed out, there is a profound interconnectedness among music, technology, and power (Suisman 2010, 14). Playing an instrument or listening to a certain musical genre are cultural practices that indicate more than the act itself: they talk eloquently about the social and professional status. Moreover, the way in which an instrument was assimilated in everyday life moments and routines speaks about the adaptability of certain lifestyles and also about their underlying ethics and politics. Also, the modalities in which the history of music throws into sharp relief an instrument or explains its evolution can represent an ideological manner of presentation that shapes the entire perspective on this phenomenon. As Suisman emphasized, if we keep in mind only the rise of the phonograph and the passing of the player piano, we will misunderstand the sound developments of the early twentieth century, obfuscating the complexity of the changes involved. In 1900, "many more people saw the player-piano as a revolutionary cultural force and the phonograph as a mere trifle than the other way around." (Suisman 2010, 13-14) Their evolution was closely linked, belonging to the same historical moment as competitors and raising similar cultural interrogations. Rather than a linear development of the economy of sound recording, "a dialectical progression" is more adequate to explain "the objectification of time" based in the phonograph and "the rationalization of knowledge", based in the player piano. Moreover, the player piano let us the possibility to recognize "not just the epochal rupture wrought by the advent of sound recording but also its connection to a longer more evolutionary history of music and capitalism." (Suisman 2010, 14) The player piano has influenced not only the American home life, but also the literature, and in this context Kurt Vonnegut and Philip K.

Dick are often mentioned for their “unusual obsession with the image of player pianos as an effective musico-cybernetic symbol.” (Magome 2004, 370) The player piano becomes an extremely fruitful and deep symbol because it expresses the idea of hybridity that we find in society, technology or everyday life. In Vonnegut’s novel, the player piano is the symbol of a melange “between man and machine, between art and technology, between visual and auditory, and between original and copy.” (Magome 2004, 370) These binary items compose themselves into an equivocal manner that leaves room for interpretations and for the insertion of nostalgia. Seen as a domestic instrument, the player piano represents the fascination for an automatic tool that replaces the human effort. The elimination of the practicing the piano (which gets rid of both hard work and pleasure) opens the era of *copying* and *reproduction*. Live concerts are replaced with recorded ones that even changed the original performances by adding or correcting notes; this distortion of the original and its positioning as standard illustrates one more time Baudrillard’s concepts of simulacra and simulation. This takes matters even further, and even the fundamental opposition original – copy is, in this particular case, shattered. The decreasing of quality and of the importance of artistic values are also emphasised in the novel, when these topics enter the discussion between Paul and Anita: “You’ve got something the tests and machines will never be able to measure: you’re artistic. That’s one of the tragedies of our times, that no machine has ever been built that can recognize that quality, appreciate it, foster it, sympathize with it.” (Vonnegut 2006, 178)

In *Player Piano*, this instrument does not evoke only the *trace* of its predecessors, but also alludes to the future and the present of the computers. Having a privileged position (a *hybris* of past and future) on the technological scale and history, the player piano becomes a kind of tocsin about the technologic metamorphoses and their meanings. Being at the interface between old and new, the player piano demonstrates ostensive value and it functions as a strong significant in the entire novel, being a voice for the past, present as well as for the future of humankind.

Also, its evocation points to the disequilibrium of the binary elements that constitute the hybrid – the machine, the technology or the copy putting the man, the art or the original into the shade. When Paul crossed the river, symbolically violating the social split between the elite and the rest of the people, and then entered a saloon, “his back was against an old player piano” (Vonnegut 2006, 25). The contact with this instrument metaphorically conveys the idea of getting in touch with a complex social, moral and temporal crossbreeding. Moreover, when the music is dissonant, the player piano becomes a symptom of an aggravating situation: “he folded his arms and leaned against the keyboard of the player piano. In the silence of the saloon, a faint discord came from the piano, hummed to nothingness.” (Vonnegut 2006, 30) Right after that, Paul Proteus has experiences that finally crack his confidence in the righteousness of the system. All the occurrences of the player piano are triggers of metaphysical interrogations, worsening the quandaries of the protagonist. Anyhow, the economic relationships are also outspreading towards the human seen as ghost, since you have to put a nickel into the player piano in order to see the moves of the keyboard and to imagine the pianist that performed them in the past. The player piano is conceived only as an object, deprived from other traits in the particular scene when Lasher “picked up a hard-boiled egg at the bar, crackled its shell by rolling it along the keyboard of the player piano, and walked out into the evening.” (Vonnegut 2006, 96)

In another well-known scene, the player piano equates the human being (the former pianist) with a ghost, pointing out the disappearance of the human, its transformation into a shadow in a powerful techno-sphere: “Makes you feel kind of creepy, don't it, Doctor, watching them keys go up and down? You can almost see a ghost sitting there playing his heart out.” (Vonnegut 2006, 32). The invisible master of the piano seems to be hidden inside, a situation that is similar to the ancient times when people felt they had been left alone by a God that has gone. Moreover, Magome thinks that Vonnegut, as Philip K. Dick, “relate the ghost to God or something religious” (2004, 373). As we will see in the next section, God, like a human

being, functions as a metanarrative in a time when only the micro-narratives may be plausible; as a consequence, the metanarratives complicate the logic of things and create rifts in the system, rifts that prove sufficient for the insertion of nostalgia. The nostalgic perspective derives from the comparative view that the binary composition of the hybrid allows. A relevant scene is that when the ghost was “embodied” by Finnerty, which “sat at the player piano, savagely improving on the brassy, dissonant antique.” (Vonnegut 2006, 105) We observe that the dissonance is again the keyword of the fragment, a false music that indicates the lack of congruence among the elements. Moreover, when a human plays the piano, in a way restoring the old state of affairs, the music isn’t any better, but on the contrary it is perceived as “hellish music” (Vonnegut 2006, 105). The disequilibrium is too deep to be solved with a return to the earlier stage and the end of the novel reaffirms it by the lack of solutions that speaks volumes about the absence of the overall perspective.

### **3. Nostalgia for humanity: “would you ask EPICAC what people are for?”**

The postmodern framework may be successfully applied to *Player Piano*, which represents also a work in which Vonnegut deconstructed the myths of the American culture and raised profound philosophical questions about human beings, technology, community and the future of humanity. Vonnegut is “a postmodern Mark Twain” (Boon 2001, x), who combines humour, irony, nihilism, deconstruction of essentialism and ethics in a subtle way, indeed. As Morse stated, the belief “in the humanness of human beings” (2004, 24) is a constant in all of Vonnegut’s novels. His work genuinely provokes reflections upon human metaphysical angst, especially when it is linked with the role of technology in the contemporary society. Davis (2001, 151) enumerates some of the directions considered essential for Vonnegut in the opinion of several critics: “essential humanism”, “affirmative humanism”, “dreamily humanist nihilism”. But

“while much has been written about Vonnegut’s place in postmodern literature, as well as his position as a sardonic moralist for several

decades of fans, these two visions of one of this century's most important writers remain unwed. Because Vonnegut joins postmodern metafictional techniques with what upon first glance appears to be a modernist humanism, he remains an enigma and an anomaly in contemporary literature – a writer who bridges two disparate worlds, demonstrating the viability of a postmodern humanism. (Davis 2001, 150)

The presence of modern beliefs acts as a presupposition that reinforces Vonnegut's characters and the plot, creating layers of meaning. Also, the nostalgia appears fruitfully at the crossroad between modern and postmodern paths, offering clues about their discontinuity and differences. That's why Davis thinks that despite the similarities with the perspectives portrayed by Orwell or Huxley, Vonnegut actually differs from them in quite significant fashion. Vonnegut is to be found much closer to postmodernism, and I think it would not be a mistake to claim that *Player Piano* may be depicted as a form of Lyotard's incredulity towards grand narratives. Nevertheless, *Player Piano*'s themes are postmodern in nature, but its form remains modernist. For Lyotard, the metanarratives have a legitimating function, and Vonnegut does not cease to question the validity of the structures and myths of the American culture. If we remember the examples of metanarratives offered by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982-1985*, we can easily observe that they are called into question in the novel: "the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive or catastrophic emancipation of labour (source of alienated value in capitalism), the enrichment of all humanity through the progress of capitalist technoscience." (Lyotard 1997, 17) The emancipation of people from the tyranny of work is negatively felt by *Player Piano*'s personages that declared themselves as useless. The actual work was eliminated, but instead of celebrating a free life of leisure, people are unhappy, meaningless and depressive. The body itself became an obsolete accessory that is scantily used. The mechanization of work was conceived as a rescuer force, because when they worked, "people stuck in one place all day, just using their senses, then a reflex, suing their senses, then a reflex, and not really thinking at all." (Vonnegut 2006, 14) In

fact, the things stand exactly opposite and the dialogue between Paul and Lasher is emblematic for this issue:

– If they were so fond of the old system, how come they were so cantankerous about their jobs when they had them? said Paul.  
– Oh, this business we’ve got now – it’s been going on for a long time now, not just since the last war. Maybe the actual jobs weren’t being taken from the people, but the sense of participation, the sense of importance was.” (Vonnegut 2006, 91)

The progress obtained by cybernetics has been transformed in a kind of totalitarian, deterministic force that eluded the humans from the entire equation. The progress is labelled as a myth, properly presented for masses through the means of advertising and other communication facilities. There is a dark side of the progress and those three revolutionary phases outline a descending perspective for the human kind: the devaluation of muscle work, then the decay of routine mental work, followed by the decline of human thinking. The machine-dominated society determines alienation and unhappiness: “machines, organization and the pursuit of efficiency have robbed the American people of liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Vonnegut 2006, 314). In this context, the definition of the human being is profoundly questioned, as well as the subsequent role in the world. As Shah from *Player Piano* asked, “before we take this first step, please, would you ask EPICAC what people are for?” (Vonnegut 2006, 320). EPICAC, the big computer or the “brain” is laudatory presented as “the greatest individual in history, that the wisest man that had ever lived was to EPICAC XIV as a worm was to that wisest man” (Vonnegut 2006, 120), but also as a “false god” (Vonnegut 2006, 123). The decline of human being is obvious, and the external perspective brought forward by Shah stressed this poor condition. Shah thought that the Americans were “slaves”, depicting the image of the marginalization of human kind.

All the same, the perspective about technology and human beings is deeply ambivalent, emphasising its postmodern indeterminacy. The end of the novel describes the rebellion conducted by The Ghost Shirt Society and the chaos that freedom can produce. The rebels cannot decide which machine should be destroyed and which should be preserved,

while some personages already thought how to recreate some of them. In this point nostalgia is again powerful, because of its paradoxical structure as progress and return, departure and comeback (Olivier 2011, 135). The myth of the human being as the wisest inhabitant of Terra is also deconstructed; Paul Proteus looks with sympathy but also with scepticism at his fellows that, after the rebellion, are “eager to recreate the same old nightmare” (Vonnegut 2006, 295) that they struggled with before. The conjunction of nostalgia and irony is another trait of postmodernism that Vonnegut used in this novel. As Hutcheon pointed out, irony is not a simple way of defending against the nostalgic waves, but it represents rather “the way in which nostalgia is made palatable today: invoked but, at the same time, undercut, put into perspective, seen for exactly what it is – a comment on the present as much as on the past” (Hutcheon, Valdés 1998, 23). This combination among nostalgia (for a certain past, a desired present, and an alternate future), black humour, irony, scepticism represents a strategy that Vonnegut used in order to deconstruct our certainties and to indicate the complex network that supports our understanding of things. Thus, an interpretation of *Player Piano* only in the terms of longing for a simpler past is just a partial look inside more complex content. Moreover, introducing the instability of interpretation, Vonnegut put into question the validity of our understanding about the order of things. Thus,

it is humanity's desire for assurance that Vonnegut points to as the cause for grand narratives, but his understanding does not soften his scathing attacks. Long before Derrida and the theoretical project of deconstruction reached its peak in English departments in American universities, Vonnegut subverted the structures of his culture, as he showed the absence of any real center behind the truth espoused in worker manuals and newspapers, in the speeches of CEOs and ministers. (Davis 2006, 42)

The gay postmodern relativism and also a bit of carnivalization are decrypted in the end of the novel; in the same time, a typical postmodern affirmation of impurity came to light: humans, as the entire society, are hybrid forms that perform hybrid actions. Everything seems to be contaminated and no truth cannot be experienced in an ingenuous way, from which we can notice that the deconstruction of essentialism is a

prolific method at work in the novel. But the constructivism or other philosophical perspective do not absolve us from the creation of narratives. Thus, Lyotard's insights about the circulation of narrations have found a formulation in *Player Piano*, because the decline of metanarratives "does not stop countless other stories (minor and not so minor) from continuing to weave the fabric of everyday life." (Lyotard 1997, 19) Vonnegut is concerned with the effects of believing in grand narratives and the end of his novel concentrates this worry. Rather than raising a toast to a great future, Paul Proteus realizes that everything is a construct and cuts the toast shortly. Consequently, no utopia was developed and no narrative was upgraded to the status of constitutive and legitimizing metanarrative. The revolutionary road was then seen just as another narrative, equally fallible as any other. Briefly, *Player Piano* "offers no grand narrative to replace those that have been deconstructed; there is only the awareness that truth remains no more than a construct, a most unusual idea to be found in a popular novel in 1952." (Davis 2006, 44-45)

Moreover, the deep nostalgia in *Player Piano* is that for humanity, illustrating the existence of a moral dimension into a decentralized world. Its protagonist asserted: "the main business of humanity is to do a good job of being human beings, not to serve as appendages to machines, institutions, and systems." (Vonnegut 2006, 273) The ethical nature of Vonnegut's postmodernism represents his own signature and – ultimately – a new form of *aporia*: to give a response to a postmodern reality avoiding the binary oppositions system and, finally, to introduce hope in this hybrid and pointillist world. In this vein, Vonnegut is considered a postmodern humanist and his postmodern ethic represents a key perspective for the understanding of his work. As Davis emphasised, Vonnegut is "more concerned with our response to existence than with the philosophical nature of that existence" (2001, 151). This pragmatist insertion does not give a final answer, but orientates the story to the urge of thinking about it.

In the same time, the mixture between modern and postmodern traits in this novel creates another subtle kind of nostalgia: *the nostalgia for impossible*, very well described in

the end of the novel. As Lyotard affirmed, “the postmodern would be that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible.” (Lyotard 1997, 15) The localised truths, the indeterminacy of the *petite histoires* make impossible a unitary vision about the meaning and the role of the human being.

#### 4. Final remarks

The multi-layered analysis applied to *Player Piano* stressed a plethora of modalities in which nostalgia works inside the novel, connecting temporal, spatial and paradigmatic ideas and fragments. The people that live in over-technologized societies interrelate nostalgically with diverse events or with the interpretation of their lives. In the same time, as the history of technology shows us, diverse old forms of technologies are recalled into the subsequent discourse of a new one, indicating their inner convergence. The paradoxical structure of nostalgia as progress and return makes possible its connection with the technologic development. The depiction of nostalgic moments correlated with the cybernetic advance at the level of jobs, leisure, and life style pointed out the nostalgia as a defence mechanism, as well as a prospective force.

The player piano represents a symbolic hybrid between man and machine, original and copy, art and technology, and the moments in which it appears in the story became significant clues for the proximity of nostalgia, disequilibrium and dissonance. The musicality of the novel and its contrapuntal structure are relevant elements in order to capture its subtleties and its inner forces that construct its polyphony.

The last investigation put nostalgia in the complex postmodern framework. Thus, *Player Piano* re-traces Lyotard's incredulity in metanarratives, emphasizing Vonnegut's “postmodern humanism”. The indeterminacy and the absence of a unitary perspective is accentuated through the final act of denying a legitimizing grand narrative for the future. Thus, the nostalgia for impossible infiltrates in the deep texture of the novel. In the same time, the nostalgia for humanity and

authenticity come to light as another example of the struggle between Vonnegut's modernist and postmodernist views. Through this great variety of meanings and correlations, the nostalgia has an important role in the fabric of ideas and interrogations raised by *Player Piano*.)

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