Chapter 2
Transgressing ‘Earthling’ Dimensions: Time and Narrative in
Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five.

You’re the only ones who’ll talk about the really terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage, [...] the only ones with guts enough to ‘really’ care about the future, who really notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents, catastrophes do to us. [...] to agonize over time and distance without limit [...] (Vonnegut, God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater 27).

Kurt Vonnegut’s Slaughterhouse-Five holds three worlds in its fold: the ‘real’ world of Vonnegut struggling to write a book on the Dresden bombing; the fictional world of the protagonist Billy Pilgrim, and the aftermaths of his Dresden experience; also an ‘ultra-fictional world’ of Tralfamadore as part of Billy’s fantastic sojourns (Waugh 127). With these worlds Vonnegut plays the self-reflexive narrative games of SF, which definitely reveal a metaphysics of existence much relevant to our attempts at unmasking its postmodern context. The novel in itself thus serves as a document of culture giving insights into some alternate visions of self and world. It can be a vast sweep involving at the level of concepts “the metaphysical implications of the new physics”(Nadeau 13); some ruminations on ‘narrativizing’ or
‘telling stories’; humanistic, comic-ironic reactions to war; and attempts to evolve or effect a new Tralfamadorian’ escape from life’s tragedies. In fact Vonnegut, for all his seeming narrative simplicity, “for all his public acceptance, [. . . ] is deeply interested in epistemological questions of an impressive variety—the unreality of time, the problem of freewill, the nature of a pluralistic universe, and man’s ability to live with his own illusions” (Lundquist 16).

The strategy of structuring SF holds attention as much as its theme, both radical innovations in the ways of telling stories of wartime death. It is to be seen alongside our awareness of the new realization of authors like Ronald Sukenick in his In Form, that “the form of the traditional novel is a metaphor for a society that no longer exists” (qtd.in Klinkowitz, Structuring the Void 23). The new experiments in fiction thus become “structuring devices” to handle the otherwise unyielding postmodern phenomena. For the writers of the new order the ‘text’ undercuts itself: the book rather than being the seat of ultimate authority becomes just another ‘artifact,’ as arbitrary and imperfect as any form of language. Such is also the notion of time which these “acts of nonreferential structurings” (Klinkowitz, Structuring the Void 2) entail; time is also seen more as a system of differences than a ‘given’ Absolute existing in itself. The novel, with its episodic structure and Tralfamadorian philosophy exhibits an ‘ever
present' time, as a series of discontinuous moments existing simultaneously.

The writing of *SF* as he himself recounts, becomes a process, a 'becoming'—twenty years of Vonnegut's living with his Dresden experience. One has to note here the foregrounding of the “act of writing itself,” or what Sukenick calls “the truth of the page”: “The truth of the page is that there's a writer sitting there writing the page [. . .]” (qtd. in McHale, *PF* 198). The elusive subject and its rendering, what Klinkowitz calls “his own structuring of this void”(*Structuring the Void* 26) is a crucial point of his tryst with a reality which is relative. The stance Vonnegut adopts is such that he discounts his own posture as writer and lets his narrative devices undercut themselves (Klinkowitz, *Structuring the Void* 51) thus interrogating traditional devices of telling stories, especially war stories which tend to cloud the true nature of experience. The authorial 'frame-breaking,' the time-travel, the antichronological aspects of his narrative, the collage of moments, all such devices work to break the conventions of traditional linear narratives.

The novel abounds in suggestions both thematic and structural as to the futility of realism in fiction. The ninth chapter of *SF* has Billy Pilgrim participating in a radio talk show on the death of the novel. Literary critics variously dwell on the novel's 'function' in pornography and social training: “To describe blow-jobs artistically,”
“to teach wives of junior executives what to buy next and how to act
in a French restaurant” (SF 150). Then it is Billy’s turn to give what
one might take to be a new version of fiction, the Tralfamadorian
adventures in space and time.

Much of the opening chapter of SF is preoccupied with the
difficulties of handling the Dresden story “realistically” in terms of
causal and chronological sequence. Vonnegut sketches with
characteristic irony the inadequacies of a well-constructed story:

As a trafficker in climaxes and thrills and characterization
and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations,
I had outlined the Dresden story many times. The best
outline I ever made [. . .] was on the back of a roll of
wallpaper [. . .]. One end of the wallpaper was the
beginning of the story, and the other end was the end,
and then there was all the middle part, which was the
middle. (4)

Elsewhere, Vonnegut has no respect for the works of Beatrice
Keedsler, a novelist of his creation in the Breakfast of Champions:

I thought Beatrice Keedsler had joined hands with other
old-fashioned story tellers to make people believe that
life had leading characters, minor characters, significant
details, insignificant details, that it had lessons to be
learned, tests to be passed, and a beginning, a middle
and an end. (194)

Vonnegut's concern about the boundlessness and pluralities
of contemporary life and the impossibility of presenting an orderly,
coherent picture of reality is essentially a postmodern concern.
Bringing in the post-structuralist revelations on language, which posit
no one-to-one correspondence between words and things, language
can be seen as describing not the world itself but only differences
among linguistic signs. Vonnegut's frustration with trying to narrate
Dresden is an instance of "how any novelist in the postmodern world
would find his or her attempts to deal with a universally recognizable
content blocked by a supposedly unbridgeable chasm between word
and thing" (Klinkowitz, Reforming the Novel 7). Such writing, quite
cognizant of the limits tries to transgress or subvert the limiting
conventions. In SF one finds many a familiar convention of the novel
flouted, modified or overturned in the course of its "telegraphic
schizophrenic manner" (SF) of narration. The adventures of Billy
Pilgrim elude the linear categories of "past," "present" and "future,"
displaying a psychological condition of becoming "unstuck in time"
(17). All this can also be seen in the postmodern technological context
of the temporal, spatial and physical alterations of television and the
"nanosecond culture" (Heise 44).
**SF** is considered a milestone in postmodern American literature that, says Klinkowitz, created “a radical reconnection of the historical and the imaginary, the realistic and the fantastic, the sequential and the simultaneous, the author and the text” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 69). The blurring of the distinctions between different levels of ontology like history and fantasy, ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ is characteristic of postmodern fiction, with many worlds or levels of existence mapped on to each other. The coexistence of the ‘sequential and the simultaneous’ can be explored in terms of how postmodern ‘language games’ cannot do without sequential telling in their manifestations, for, “narrative, by its very nature is incapable of representing simultaneity except by sequence” (McHale, *CP* 76). Within the limits of such a realization, the discussion of **SF** would highlight such aspects of the text, which attempt a dissolution of linear conventional narrative, thus questioning the aesthetic and temporal philosophy of realism, to be seen in the light of the novel’s historical, cultural and theoretical contexts.

**SF**, deriving from Vonnegut’s own experiences in World War II, brings Billy Pilgrim the sensitive protagonist to the war front as a chaplain’s assistant, later to be taken as a prisoner-of-war by the Germans to Dresden where he has to witness the destruction of the city by American fire bombers. Billy, having to encounter so much death and annihilation, tends to take psychic refuge in an intense
fantasy which involves his being captured and sent to another
dimension, the remote planet of Tralfamadore. He also comes
"unstuck" in time when present moments give way to re-experiencing
past intensities or unexpected shifts to future life. The brief sections
of the novel describe Billy's life as a soldier, his relations with other
soldiers and prisoners-of-war, marriage with an optometrist's
daughter, his subsequent career as optometrist, his radio-talk and
writings on Tralfamadore prescribing "corrective lenses for Earthling
souls" (SF 21), his relation with his daughter, and so on.

The telling of these incidents strikes one with swift transitions
from one to the other. The two major time-streams in the novel, i.e.
from Billy getting lost in Luxembourg in 1944 to his being in Dresden
as a prisoner of war in 1945, and from 1968 to later in the same year
when Vonnegut is going through the writing-process, do not follow
any simple chronological development. The numerous time shifts
between these two sequences and to other times renders the narrative
"Tralfamadorian": the juxtaposition of time fragments to be read
simultaneously as "brief clumps of symbols" (SF 64), not as
consecutive sequences. In fact as Reed says, rather than triggering
any simultaneous reading, the book, by its splicing together of short
scenes "intensifies the sense of an interrelationship of events
transcending time" (180).
The novel is in fact Vonnegut's own confrontation with his Dresden experience. The narrative of Billy Pilgrim is buffered between or framed by an autobiographical prologue and a final section where contemporary historical events like the Kennedy assassination fix the time of Kurt Vonnegut writing on Cape Cod on a June evening in 1968. The two sections work to integrate the frame with the main narrative, augmented by the periodic 'authorial intrusions' or 'frame breaking.' Within the novel's fictive events Vonnegut makes three peripheral appearances—sick in a latrine, watching a captured American colonel looking for his troops, and comparing the as yet unbombed city of Dresden to the land of Oz. “Frame-breaking” disrupts realist strategies of reading by introducing a 'factual' being—“the author of this book”—into a fictional landscape (McHale, PF 197-198). A minor character sick in a latrine in Billy’s story is suddenly identified as Vonnegut himself: “That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book” (91). It would be interesting to see how these intrusions call many assumptions into question. “Rarely had an author placed himself or herself in the ongoing stream of patently invented, illusory narrative while at the same time maintaining his or her own absolutely verifiable historical presence as a compositional element,” says Klinkowitz (Reforming 21-22). One finds it in John Barth’s story “Dunyazadiad” in Chimera where ‘John Barth’ time-
travels to talk with Scheherazade about the used-upness of all viable stories.

The author occupying a level superior to the world he has created, by breaking the frame around that world foregrounds the 'act of writing' itself, or his own 'superior reality' (McHale, PF 197). This metafictional device however resists the reader's desire to assign a textual phenomenon to a particular ontological level, such as the level of real-world 'fact,' fictional 'fact,' or fictional 'fiction': "intended to establish an absolute level of reality, it paradoxically relativizes reality; intended to provide an ontologically stable foothold, it only destabilizes ontology further" (McHale, PF 197). By interjecting the narrator from the objective world to the fictive world "a harmonious relationship of dynamic tension is established between the worlds" (Somer 248). One might add to this McHale's notion of the postmodernist author as an "ontologically amphibious figure, alternately present and absent," functioning at two theoretically distinct levels of ontology: "as the vehicle of autobiographical fact within the projected world; and as the maker of that world, visibly occupying an ontological level superior to it" (PF 202).

The multi-dimensional narrative of SF rests on the dynamics of a relationship between the world of the 'actual' and that of the mind with another world of imaginative interaction. (Klinkowitz, Structuring the Void 54). The process is Vonnegut's search for proper
expression to the traumas of war—the significance of the destruction of Dresden. Vonnegut asks his own publisher in chapter 1, “what do you say about a massacre?” and the novel becomes ‘one’ way of answering the question. The unspeakable act of destruction is immersed in a silence, not confining it to any rational limits of language, time or history, thus rejecting his culture’s preferred ways of saying (Klinkowitz, Reforming 45,48). The postmodern emphasis is on the ‘productive’ or ‘constructive’ aspects of fiction, not on its ‘reflective’ or ‘mirroring’ properties. What is foregrounded here is the essentially ‘fluid’ nature of the novel form giving itself over to any experimental rebuilding suitable to postmodern times. Narrative time serves as one of the ‘malleable and elastic’ (Higdon 1) categories to be worked upon.

The study draws itself to how Vonnegut’s preoccupation with ‘reforming the novel’ corresponds with the very process of structuring of SF. The framing chapters of the novel have the ‘real’ and historical presence of Kurt Vonnegut, who has survived the Dresden bombing, musing on how he spent twenty years trying to give fictional ‘form’ to it. The story told in a voice that can be identified as his own, maintains Vonnegut’s own “absolutely verifiable historical presence as a compositional element” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 22), sometimes addressing the reader with “listen,” at other times unusually breaking into the illusory narrative frame creating ontological turmoil. The
novel as the record of a book taking shape, or a struggle with form, thus involves the reader also in the struggle, not as a passive observer, but “as a self-conscious participant in the act of putting this book together and forcing its completion” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 25).

Vonnegut opens it up to a student audience at the University of Iowa, how his own ‘structuring’ of the elusive Dresden experience brings the novel to shape:

Anyway, I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and wrote about it [. . .]. This thin book is about what it’s like to write a book about a thing like that [. . .]. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I’d head in again, I’d back off. This book is a process of twenty years of this sort of living with Dresden and the aftermath. [. . .] there’s this terrible hole in the middle. That is like my memory of Dresden [. . .]. (qtd. in Klinkowitz, Structuring the Void 36)

In the first chapter of SF he reveals “what this lousy little book cost” (2) him, how useless his Dresden memory has been. ‘Not many words come’ from him to language such a large-scale massacre. Death and destruction that lies before him is of colossal proportions which he cannot limit to any conventional structuring with traditional stereotypes or the heroics of war stories. Talking it out with his old
war buddy Bernard O'Hare, he tries to fix a climax for the story, and attempts crude outlines with beginning, middle and end. Nothing hinders him from the realization that "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre" (SF 14), that the unspeakable realities of post war existence do not fit into a story with "climaxes and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontations" (SF 4). Coupled with this is the post-structuralist realization of the limits of language and the relativity of 'reality.' Vonnegut's writing in its rethinking of the novel form and reconception of 'reality' is thus pregnant with postmodernist, post-structuralist concerns.

As an experiment in novel form SF poses a challenge to the reader, how to make 'the unwieldy shapes of experience' portrayed cohere into consequence. (Klinkowitz, Reforming 29). Klinkowitz best appreciates the novel's formal achievement in this restructuring of the reading experience:

Like the putative Tralfamadorian novel, it allows its readers to come as close as humanly possible to experiencing all of its disparate episodes at once. Because of its briefness and nonchronological order, its effect is not steadily cumulative, its impact is not received as additive and progressive, but rather juxtapositional, as its episodes fragmented in time and space register
meaning not so much by themselves but rather in relation to one another. As such, SF is a system rather than an entity, a combination of differences rather than identities.

(Reforming 86)

The description echoes Frank’s formulation of ‘spatial form,’ which calls attention to the departures from pure temporal/casual sequence characteristic of modern literature. The novel form, essentially temporal and sequential, breaking free of its conventional chronological arrangement, effects a spatialization by juxtaposing narrative units in space. Though Frank has to do mostly with modern literature his critical language sounds postmodern. Only one has to keep vigil of those limits of the modern the postmodern transgresses. Analyzing ‘spatial form’ as a crucial technique of modernist literature in his 1945 study of Djuna Barne’s Nightwood, Frank concentrates on ‘the substitution’ of spatial relationships for temporal progression as a formal metaphor of thematic development (“Spatial Form in Modern Literature” 63). About a scene in Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, Frank argues,

[...]the time-flow of the narrative is halted; attention is fixed on the interplay of relationships within the immobilized time-area. These relationships are juxtaposed independently of the progress of the narrative, and the full significance of the scene is given only by the reflexive
relationships among the units of meaning. ("Spatial Form
in Modern Literature" 65)

The new form of fiction is primarily spatial in that it discards
conventional notions of thematic development and narrative sequence.
Key to the spatial form is the work's engagement of the reader in a
self-reflexive play, realizing the work as an artifact in itself. (Klinkowitz,
"Spatial Form" 39). Such a form foregrounds the 'materiality' of its
construction. Meaning becomes not a property of subject matter but
rather of the process of composition, says Klinkowitz, "composition
that in its spatial juxtaposition of parts enacts the system of differences
that structures the void of subject" (Structuring the Void 167).
Leitmotifs, frame stories, multiple narrative lines, the removal of the
temporal indicators, the scrambling of the time scheme, word play,
extended imagery, syntactic complication and incremental repetition
are all stylistic devices that retard narrative progression, and can
work as technical indicators to spatial form in narratives (Smitten
and Daghistany 25).

One aspect of the schisms in time rendered by Vonnegut's text
is its "visual-verbal" nature—what McHale terms the "schizoid text"
or the "dual-medium text" where there is no possible "fixed order of
reading" (PF 190). The illustrations in SF are pointers to the kind of
'simultaneous' reading of the text they invite, for 'ideally' the visual
and verbal components are to be “read” simultaneously (McHale, PF 190).

McGinnis points out how critics seem to attribute to SF the qualities of being ‘cinematic’ or ‘kaleidoscopic’ or ‘spatial’ in form (Mustazza 119). The novel in fact claims itself to be ‘Tralfamadorian’ in the title page itself: “This is a novel somewhat in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner of tales of the planet Tralfamadore.” Billy in his first encounter with a Tralfamadorian novel observes that its arrangement of “brief clumps of symbols separated by stars” (64) suggests a telegram. The Tralfamadorian explains it to him:

Each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message—describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn’t any particular relationship between all the messages except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (64)

Vonnegut comments in an interview that his books are “essentially mosaics made up of a whole bunch of tiny little chips,” showing how
very Tralfamadorian his writing is supposed to be (Wampeters 258).

While it is humanly impossible to read all the passages of the book simultaneously, the reading experience of SF's discontinuous and fragmented episodes, "its scrambled chronology, its deft juxtapositionings of different times to make thematic points, and its intricate patterns of imagery" (Allen 88) all make it approximate to the kind of novel called 'telegraphic,' 'schizophrenic' or Tralfamadorian. The overall effect is of chapters divided into short sections (clumps) which trip back and forth in time. Billy's condition of being 'spastic in time' which involves him in time-travel and enables what in our 'Earthling' perception of time we might call 'memories of the future,' and the narrative's own adoption of the time tripping, rather than lending any causal-temporal continuity to the events, creates a significant 'collage' of moments to be seen or read all at once.

This kind of "structural discontinuity [...] appeals to the imagination of an audience accustomed to the montage of television," says James Lundquist (11). Vonnegut's short chapters, fragmented idiom, sharp images and quick scenes make the reading of SF "a formal approximation of the experience of watching television" (Lundquist 11). 'Zapping,' or "the art of switching channels" (McHale, CP 115) becomes one of the most pervasive time experiences in the contemporary context when the individual is exposed to a 'visual
simultaneity' of scenes divorced from their geographical and historical specificities (Harvey 61).

The overtly spatial structure of SF with its circular songs like “My name is Yon Yonson, I work in Wisconsin” (2), and repetitious phrases like ‘so it goes’ which is as numerous as there are deaths in the novel, flaunts its status as an ‘artifact’ and echoes the philosophical beliefs inherent in the form (Waugh 128). SF is as much a novel about novel-writing as it is an account of Billy Pilgrim or Dresden, holding metafictional undercurrents within. The study has dealt with the metafictional strategy of the author ‘frame-breaking’ into the fictional matrix.

The reading pauses at some striking characteristics of the novel’s spatial form. In his rethinking of the artistic form Vonnegut brings himself to reordering the structural elements of time and space. In chapter 1 itself one finds the author going through a “timeless condition” stimulated by alcohol and his Dresden dilemmas, which in fact anticipates Billy Pilgrim's condition of being “unstuck in time.” Klinkowitz notes how Vonnegut seems to

[. . .] live in a continual present, his interests wandering from place to place while he himself remains static, seemingly eternal in the timeless condition of late-night randomness he shares with long-distance operators, a
canine friend, and distant conversations he can monitor but not join. (*Reforming* 32)

It is the anarchy of being a late night telephoner, trying to get connected to old girl friends, talking to the dog at times, or listening to talk programmes from Boston or New York. So also is the way we are given fragments of his life—his visit to Dresden in 1967 with O'Hare, writing on Dresden, war fragments, mentions of his family, his late night maundering, education in anthropology, experience as news reporter, his “scrawny years” as a war veteran, encounter with Mary O'Hare, and the books he happens to read. Reading through the anecdotes gives a subtle sense of order, which does not depend on any sequential explanation, but on their associational juxtaposition as impressions of a war veteran struggling to tell it. In this instance of things hanging together, with no linking chronology or geographical space, there is no apparent causal connection. We find a rethinking of the very notion of causality in such random associations (Klinkowitz, *Reforming* 32). Key to the work’s structure are its repetitious phrases like “and so on” used after many happenings. As a structural principle, “and so on” is a denial of causal order, allowing things to go on “as the accident will” (Klinkowitz, *Reforming* 33).

As he engages with structure for his war book, Vonnegut plays with a continuously recycled song that goes like this:
My name is Yon Yonson,
I work in Wisconsin,
I work in a lumbermill there.
The people I meet when I walk down the street,
They say, 'What's your name?'
And I say,
'My name is Yon Yonson
I work in Wisconsin . . . . (2)

"And so on to infinity," he adds. The song which repeatedly peeps in the narrative works almost like a "theme song of Vonnegut's life" (Klinkowitz, Reforming 35), which has through the years been working on (and on) possible configurations of life/literature. When people ask him what he is working on, Vonnegut says he has been trying for years to write a book about Dresden—fated to repeat the answer endlessly like Yon Yonson.

Lundquist gives a new structural, interpretation to the song (77). The song crudely suggests a theory of time based on infinite repetition. The wallpaper outline of the story Vonnegut attempts with an essentially linear time scheme does not work for the subject matter. Like Yon Yonson, or like Billy Pilgrim, the characters must move back and forth on their lines. Lundquist conceives of a structure that includes both the Yon Yonson story and the wallpaper outline for Vonnegut's narrative:
It is as if he rolls the wallpaper into a tube so all of the characters and incidents are closely layered, so they are in effect one unit, and the reader must look at them from the side. The tube then becomes a telescope through which the reader looks into the fourth dimension, or at least into another dimension of the novel. The story goes around and around, yet it still leads somewhere, and yet the end is very close to the beginning. (77)

Such a structural explanation will come within our purview when we deal with the Tralfamadorian philosophy of time, death and the novel form.

The narrative of Billy Pilgrim running from chapters 2 to 9 shows the extremes of narrative tropes, the banalities of an American middle-class life and the science fiction topos of time-travel and outer space. The first page in fact gives a straight chronology listing all significant details of Billy’s humdrum life. But the first thing revealed about him is that he “has come unstuck in time” or “spastic in time,” having no control over where he is going next. Here is a specimen summing up of all that such a ‘timeless’ existence means to the narrative’s structural and thematic specificities:

Billy has gone to sleep a senile widower and awakened on his wedding day. He has walked through a door in 1955 and come out another one in 1941. He has gone
back through the door to find himself in 1963. He has seen his birth and death many times, he says, and pays random visits to all the events in between. (SF 17)

Vonnegut thus sketches out the premise for the novel's entire development, that there is no chronology to Billy's experiences, a condition identical to what a movie actor would experience in the process of its making. The shooting schedule is mostly out of sequence; the end or middle of a film may be shot before the beginning, just as it happens in Billy's time-tripping. And the end product would have undergone a lot of editing, splicing together of the fragments producing more violations in time (Klinkowitz, Reforming 55). The narrative rendering of Billy's experience thus happens to be as in the "shifting time frame of a film" (Klinkowitz, Reforming 54). It is almost as if Billy were living in what appears to be a movie. Klinkowitz elaborates on the 'continual present' of a movie:

Whether conventional or experimental, all movies are physically expressed in an ongoing present tense; unlike the grammar of language, which allows a vide variation among present, past and future—including such refinements as past perfect, [. . .] subjunctive for a hypothetical action, and optative for actions one hopes will develop—film passes before the viewer's eyes as a continual present. (Reforming 54)
Vonnegut gives a Tralfamadorian explanation to these experiences only later in the narrative, (and that too in the form of Billy's own letters to the newspaper or his radio talk). Despite such philosophical or metaphysical reasoning the novel provides itself with, what immediately strikes is a possible reading in the context of the postmodern media and the technological boom. George Steiner in *Language and Silence* concludes that the technological culture will "radically alter the milieu of human perception, the reality-coordinates within which we apprehend and order sense data. Experience will not present itself serially in atomized or linear patterns of causal sequence, but in 'fields' or simultaneous interactions" (253). SF's narrative experience can find parallels in postmodernity as a condition of existence variously elaborated by theorists like Harvey and Jameson. One of the contexts is of contemporary vision technology where viewers are given infinitely more varied and detailed access to times and spaces, without any sense of distinction or historicity. Television gives the feel of "a stitched together collage of equiimportant and simultaneously existing phenomena" (Harvey 61). In the 'flipping through channels' vastly different times and spaces are juxtaposed in visual simultaneity.

Vonnegut affirms the 'simultaneity' of the fragmented episodes of his narrative by providing the reader with obvious linking devices to hold things together. Klinkowitz makes mention of the "verbal
and visual linking devices" in *SF* (*Reforming 78*) The recapitulated imagery, the repeated phrases and the possible associations between them become the inherent form of time in the narrative. One such instance of a visual association may be that of a ghostly glow emanating from the radium dial of the wristwatch of Billy’s father at the Carlsbad Caverns (when Billy is twelve), an image used years later to describe the pale faces of Russian prisoners of war (*SF*65). A sense of meaning is created in a space of simultaneous interaction between the two images. In this sense Billy’s time travels are structured like ‘cinema montages.’ *SF* forms itself and gets realized as a Tralfamadorian novel within the reader’s hands, says Klinkowitz, “as from page to page its associations are formed on the levels of language and image rather than just from chronological history and theme” (*Reforming 79*).

This ‘visual simultaneity’ can be further worked upon. Throughout the novel there is great significance attached to the way Billy ‘sees’ things, how Earthlings miss things in a fourth dimension, how Billy finds himself obliged to ‘prescribe corrective lenses.’ Billy is forced to see many things in a new light like the St.Elmo’s fire round the heads of the guards and fellow prisoners (*SF*46). The novel’s “recapitulating imagery” is one of the most telling instances of the simultaneous relationship of whatever Billy sees and experiences (Lundquist 80).
Such imagery is abundant in the novel, but the best example would be the late-night movie he sees backwards and then forwards, as he is waiting for the flying saucer from Tralfamadore (SF 52). The movie is about American bombers in Second World War. The fire and the bombs are sucked back into the bombers; the bombs are shipped back to USA, where factories dismantle them, separating the dangerous contents into minerals. The American fliers become school kids. Billy extrapolates a further vision, supposing Hitler and everyone else turning into babies. The narrative adds: “and all humanity, without exception, conspired biologically to produce two perfect people named Adam and Eve, he supposed” (54). The vision revolts against the irreversible arrow of time by reversing its flow, questioning the Western Christian conception of a linear time progressing forward. SF along with Vonnegut’s intertextual persona, Kilgore Trout is proposing a “New Gospel” of time and being. The reference to Adam and Eve in fact recapitulates Billy’s earlier vision in the German Corporal’s boot, of Adam and Eve, naked, innocent and lovable (39).

In another instance of recapitulation, what he thinks the cry of a ‘melodious owl’ turns out to be the whine of the flying saucer. The ‘owl’ that repeats itself in Billy’s life is Billy’s optometer, a jade green mechanical owl hanging upside down from a steel rod, to detect and correct faulty vision. The sound of the flying saucer foretells a major
breakthrough in Billy’s Earthling vision of existence, for he is soon to get exposed to the ‘other’ dimension of Tralfamadore.

Billy’s revisioning or ‘reinventing of himself and his universe’ (SF 73) is given structural augmentation by all the devices we have dealt with—short, abrupt sentences describing time shifts like “Billy, blinked in 1965, traveled in time to 1958” (SF 33); the repetition of imagery and phrases, and the juxtaposition of disparate episodes. The study shifts focus to how the new conceptions of time and narrative get fantastically realized in Tralfamadorian philosophy.

In one of his episodes of time travel in 1948 Billy is left with mental patients in a veterans’ hospital near Lake Placid, New York: “he was going crazy” (SF 73). There happens the pathbreaking encounter with Eliot Rosewater, who introduces Billy to science fiction, particularly to the works of Kilgore Trout—what is to become “the only sort of tales he could read” (SF73). Billy and Rosewater (Vonnegut also, we gather) are “dealing with similar crises in similar ways” (SF 73). They find life meaningless, partly because of their war experiences. Science fiction, the narrative says, is a big help, “to re-invent themselves and their universe” (SF 73)—what might be a treasure trove of “wonderful new lies” to dilute their existential dilemmas, in order to make people “want to go on living” (SF 73). The new religion of Bokononism in Vonnegut’s Cat’s Cradle is premised on the notion that all so-called truths, religious or scientific are
relative, simply metaphor's for life processes which they cannot fully contain, which however are necessary in providing conceptual ground for human interaction (Nadeau 126). Science fiction becomes Vonnegut's most frequent mode of fiction, the form with which he is more consistently fascinated than others. Vonnegut himself, however seems not very comfortable with this categorization, and complains in *Wampeters, Foma, and Granfalloons* that for too long he has been "a sore headed occupant of a file drawer labeled 'science fiction'," and that he would like out, for "many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal" (qtd. in Lundquist 85)

What the 'file drawer' holds in store would be the next concern, as we explore SF for its science fiction motifs, and their metaphysical significance which lies beyond simple fantasies or any genre limits, whatsoever. McHale in his *Postmodernist Fiction* extends to science fiction the status of "ontological genre par excellence" (as the detective story is the epistemological genre par excellence) (16). He elaborates on their respective pertinence to postmodernism and modernism. Postmodernism is characterized by an ontological indeterminacy where there is no single 'given' world or 'reality' of experience. Science fiction, by projecting a world different from our own, places different worlds in confrontation, foregrounding their structures and the disparities between them, thus obeying the same underlying principles of postmodernist fiction's ontological poetics (McHale, *PF* 60).
SF shows one of the most typical science fiction attributes: “displacement in space” and “displacement in time” (McHale, PF 60) in Billy’s travel to another planet through the “fourth dimension” of time. The flying saucer from Tralfamadore is described as “navigating in both space and time, therefore seeming to Billy Pilgrim to have come from nowhere all at once” (SF 54). The Tralfamadorian answer to Billy’s startled queries is that “we are where we have to be just now—three hundred million miles from Earth, bound for a time warp which will get us to Tralfamadore in hours rather than centuries” (SF 61). The ontological confrontation worked out is between the Earthling world and an alternate world of Tralfamadore, what may be in McHale’s terms a “parallel-world topos” (PF 61). Parallel or multiple worlds also entail “parallel times” as with Borges’ story of “forking paths” where there is premised “an infinite series of times in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging and parallel times” (100).

SF has many simultaneously existing worlds, narrative levels, juxtaposed images/events, intertextual elements and disrupted chronology to effect ontological uncertainty. The conflation of science fiction motifs with postmodern ethos thus engenders a reaction against the aesthetics and philosophical assumptions of realism. Victorians defined reality as “a rigid Tinker Toy construct,” writes
Norman Spinrad in his introduction to the anthology, *Modern Science Fiction*. He adds,

> We know that a literature which pretends that it is somehow more relevant to the 'real world' [ . . . ] because it deals with the 'here-and-now' is putting itself on. There is no fixed 'here' and no fixed 'now,' only the continuous kaleidoscopic explosion of the evolving human mind in a total space-time universe that is itself revolving new realities around us faster than we can catch our breath.

(4-5)

What gains prominence when one thus considers SF in terms of science fiction criticism is the nature of the subjects it delves in, as with the many Kilgore Trout novels Vonnegut summarizes for their new ideas. The science fiction motifs Vonnegut employs in fact serve as metaphors complementing his own "cosmic ironic" vision (Lundquist 86) of life's absurdities and the possibilities of redemption. The "intergalactic scope that science fiction affords" (Lundquist 86) inevitably strengthens the cosmic and universal implications of his vision, which includes speculations on time, existence, reality, free will, death, and above all their representation in fiction.

The first Tralfamadorian idea that dawns upon Billy is the utter lack of any cosmic purpose or causality. The Tralfamadorian answer to Billy's 'whys' is: "Why anything? Because the moment simply is [.}
here we are, Mr. Pilgrim, trapped in the amber of this moment. There is no why” (SF 55). The Tralfamadorian calls Billy’s questions “Earthling questions” (55) which it would take an Earthling to explain. To the Tralfamadorian there is no explanation why any event is structured as it is. He says: “I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. [...] we are all [...] bugs in amber” (62). He adds that among all the inhabited planets he has visited, “Only on Earth is there any talk of free will” (62). The repeated phrases of the novel “so it goes,” “and so on” become part of this Tralfamadorian resigned response to death and atrocities. Billy is exposed to an entirely different attitude to the tragedies of ‘Earthlings’ who live in an irreversible, linear time. He is introduced to a different conception of time in which all things from the beginning to the end of the universe exist in a sort of “eternal present.”

Earlier in the narrative, as part of his first chapter tribulations with writing the Dresden book, Vonnegut recounts a time when time would not pass, “within the fractured time and displaced spatiality of an airline layover caused by a fogged-in airport” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 37). He feels that somebody is playing with the clocks, tampering with time. There is nothing he can do about it. Even in these light moments and laments Vonnegut seems very much preoccupied with
the regimented, limited, and measurable clock time that determines one's life. His characteristic comment is, "As an Earthling, I had to believe whatever clocks said—and calendars" (SF 15).

The two books he involves in during this interval of time are significant in this regard: Theodore Roethke's *Words for the Wind* and Erika Ostrovsky's *Celine and His Vision*. This is what strikes him of Roethke's *Words for the Wind*: "I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow. / I feel my fate in what I cannot fear. / I learn by going where I have to go" (15). "Waking slow" and calm to the contrary circumstances of life, not fearing fate which is anyway determined, the way out for the individual is to learn by going where one has to go. Vonnegut overcomes the war veteran writer's dilemma by making a go, moving from page to page, building up new fictional shapes and ideas towards 'where he has to go.' The sleep to which one wakes might be the ultimate sleep of death; man's learning is to be face to face with his mortality.

Ostrovsky's book on Celine foregrounds how 'time' and 'death' obsessed Celine, the French soldier in the First World War with 'a crack in his skull and noises in his head,' doctoring poor people in day time and writing grotesque novels all night. It is easy to find parallels of Celine in Vonnegut himself and Billy Pilgrim, and the many war veterans who had been closeted with 'death.' No art is possible, writes Celine, without a "dance with death"—one of the titles
given to SF is *A Duty-Dance with Death*. For Celine death is too common and predictable to lose oneself in grief, eliciting only a 'so it goes' as response. "The truth is death," Vonnegut quotes from Celine (15).

From another pole he reprints an amazing scene from Celine's *Death on the Installment Plan* where Celine wants time to stop, the bustling of a street crowd to remain frozen forever, never to disappear. Man being a prisoner of death and time, the narrative artist aspires to manipulate time to serve his purposes, here to bring time to a standstill in its steady progression towards death (Klinkowitz., *Reforming* 39). This has been a recurring motif in art, to stop the sun so that the day would not pass, to capture beauty or essence in some eternal work of art.

The 'ever-present' in SF, rather than intending to bring eternal order to chaos, attempts to adapt to the chaos. Billy Pilgrim comes 'unstuck in time'; the narrative goes berserk in its fragmented path. It would fit the context to bring Vonnegut's reformulation of the novel in the *Breakfast of Champions*: "[.. . .] I resolved to shun storytelling, I would write about life [ . . . ] . Nothing would be left out. Let others bring order to chaos. I would bring chaos to order [ . . . ]" (195). Vonnegut assigns to the artist the duty to break the American habit of ordering experience in terms of the old cosmology informing the works of old-fashioned storytellers. Tralfamadorian fantasy becomes one such attempt to discard conventional realistic storytelling in the
wake of experiences like Dresden that invalidate such assumptions of realism like linear history, liberal humanism and the possibility of free will (Waugh 128). Vonnegut repeatedly suggests by way of his telling that there are “no characters in this story” but only “listless playthings of enormous forces” (SF 119) or “bugs caught in amber” (SF 64).

The Tralfamadorians impress upon Billy a view of time and death that suits his escapist fantasies. For them all moments exist simultaneously and nothing can be done to change the past or future, for there is neither past nor future. When someone is dead, it is only that he is in a bad condition at that moment; in many other moments he is alive and kicking. As a time-traveler Billy sees his own death many times and records it in tape: “I, Billy Pilgrim, will die, have died, and always will die on February thirteenth, 1976” (SF 103). A Tralfamadorian test pilot has “always pressed” (SF 84), “always will press” the button to bring the end of the Universe. Nothing can prevent this end, or war on earth, because the moment is “structured” that way (SF 84). The Tralfamadorian advice to Billy is to ignore the awful moments and concentrate on the good ones. There is also a prayer which repeats itself in the narrative, implying what Billy learns and Vonnegut suggests: “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 153). Among the things
Billy cannot change are ‘the past, the present and the future,’ the narrative confides. There is also a possible pictorial epitaph Vonnegut draws for Billy: “EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL, AND NOTHING HURT” (SF 88).

What time looks like to Billy and the Earthlings is gibberish to the Tralfamadorians. To explain as best as he could the limited, straight jacketed nature of Earthling time, the guide at the Tralfamadore zoo gives a physical demonstration. The metaphor of a limited vision is materialized with Billy strapped to a steel lattice that is bolted to a flat car on rails. His head encased in a steel sphere neither can be taken off nor turned. The only thing he can see through one eyehole is the narrow passage of a pipe, and all he sees is a little dot at the end of the pipe. But the vast spectacle in bright daylight that is supposed to lie before him across a desert is a mountain range, birds, clouds, stones and canyons. Neither aware of this panorama, nor of the moving flatcar that has fixed him, nor of his peculiar limitation, Billy has no choice but to say “That’s life” (SF 83).

It is failure to see in the other dimensions of Tralfamadorian vision. Meanwhile in Tralfamadore sex differences are all in the fourth dimension and they try to help Billy imagine seven sexes on earth in the invisible dimension, something he cannot conceive.

After his corrective phase at Tralfamadore, Billy is eager to share his understanding of time, with generous motives, to relieve humanity
of the fear of death, and what is to him an unnecessary bondage to the “inexorability of conventional time” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 57).

Billy, and Vonnegut himself, in self-conscious repetition provides a text to utter in the face of death: “so it goes,” what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people. “Much of Slaughterhouse-Five,” says Glenn Meeter, “is a litany for the dead and dying—including bacteria, Jews, Germans, a glass of champagne, and the novel—all of these deaths followed by the ritual phrase ‘so it goes’ (208). The redeeming Tralfamadorian vision of time is “that time is not a systematic progress of events, marching forward in orderly lockstep, but is in fact a fluid and flexible range of moments that can switch around” (Klinkowitz, Reforming 56). This mobility across all time frames lends a “timeless present” in which we all exist, “always have existed, always will exist” (SF 19).

The manifestation of this time in the Tralfamadorian novel, and the possibilities of such a reworking in an Earthling novel like SF have been negotiated in the analysis of the novel’s form. Billy and Eliot Rosewater’s talks on the role of new fictional constructs and Kilgore Trout’s summarized works go along with the Tralfamadorian literary theory in reinterrogating the novel form. Vonnegut enlists the aid of the persona Kilgore Trout in his other novels also, like Breakfast of Champions. Trout, and Rosewater, who is carried over from God Bless you, Mr. Rosewater achieve intertextual status in SF.
Trout’s science fiction, briefed at many instances in the narrative, supplants the work with many more fantastic constructs substantiating Vonnegut’s new approach. Trout, who is singled out as America’s greatest prophet in *God Bless You*, is introduced as Rosewater’s favourite author, and later Billy’s. The presence of Trout’s fiction expands the novel’s formal and thematic dimensions “with a thematic reinvention complementary to its formal achievement” (Klinkowitz, *Reforming 80*).

Klinkowitz finds that with the anthologizing of Trout in *SF* “the readers’ world of reference is multiplied exponentially—a formal implosive technique of Vonnegut’s fictive form falling in upon itself, only to explode outward with a rich multiplicity of meaning” (*Reforming 80*). Trout’s *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* is about people whose mental diseases cannot be treated because the causes of the diseases exist only in the fourth dimension, which the three dimensional Earthling doctors cannot imagine (*SF 75*). The situation is a comic parallel to Billy’s own condition incomprehensible to human perception. Another key Trout story is *The Gospel from Outer Space* about a visitor from outer space who attributes the cruelty in Christians to the “slipshod storytelling in the New Testament” (*SF 78*). He suggests a new Gospel in which Christ really is a nobody, and not well connected as in the old story, whose only lesson therefore is, “Before you kill somebody make absolutely sure he isn’t well
connected" (SF 78). What is intended is a Humanistic Christianity with a new turn in which God adopts the bum as his Son only after the execution, warning humanity against any such cruelty. There is also a short Trout novel about Christ that describes how a man built a time machine to go back and see Jesus. He sees Jesus as a twelve-year old learning carpentry, and towards the end curiously examines Jesus on cross with a stethoscope to discover that the five-feet-three-and-a-half inch Jesus “was dead as a doornail” (SF 148). With such repudiation of the massive religious institution, Vonnegut seeks to replace it with something more human.

The more significant utterance on Trout’s fiction is that most of it deals with “time warps and extrasensory perception and other unexpected things” (SF 127). Trout is greedy to prove their existence, as when he attributes Billy’s peculiar psychosomatic response to the barbershop quartet of optometrists on his wedding anniversary, to time travel. Trout is the one who makes the guess that Billy has seen “through a time window” (SF 126), suddenly seeing the past or future. Trout explores the inter-planetary travel through space and time in The Big Barrel, with an Earthling man and woman kidnapped by extraterrestrials to a zoo on planet Zircon-212, manipulated to various stimulus-response at the zoo. The situation replicates the Billy-Montana Wildhack stay at the Tralfamadore zoo, and reiterates
Vonnegut's theme of man's absurd existence as "listless play thing" of destiny or time or mortality.

The interest in Vonnegut's alternate metaphysic (Nadeau 14) and its impact on the narrative technique of SF at some point journeys into the domain of new physics. Postmodern novelists have experimented with the metaphysical implications derived from the new concepts in physics like Einstein's theory of relativity. Many of them like Pynchon (entropy) have acknowledged this acquaintance with overt allusions to these concepts, which condition their conception of reality. The intention is not to draw any direct causal connection, but to identify the possible relationship and to place it side by side in the study with other pertinent cultural determinants. As Robert Nadeau concludes in his introductory segment of Readings from the New Book on Nature,

[. . .] civilization, like all processes in nature, is a complex interplay of forces within which it is impossible to isolate a particular idea and determine its fixed and final relationship to any other idea. [. . .] but are happenings in the vastly more complex field of forces called culture. [. . .] concepts from physics [. . .] constitute one such force among the many overlapping and blending currents of our time [. . .].(16)
The bizarre and fantastic of Vonnegut's science fiction motifs dally with many authenticating scientific insights. The notion of time travel and the new philosophy of time in SF derive from the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics. Vonnegut's Tralfamadorian opposition to man's everyday conception of linear time finds resonance in the new revolution in space-time conception that rejects the classical Newtonian physics of Absolutes. This classical 'common sense' assumption of time as an irreversible arrow constituting the existential rhythm of Western man is no longer considered an apriori truth. What Vonnegut realizes in SF is the Einsteinian possibility of time travel, of a time which can be closed like a circle (as in the circularity of the Yon Yonson poem), or a time which can be lived in the reverse, best illustrated in the television movie run backwards in one of Billy's time-charged moments.

About the 'timeless present' or simultaneous existence of all moments, past, present and future, it is said, "If the energy represented in the equation \( E=MC^2 \) contains within itself all possibilities for the configuration of matter, then it is conceivable [. . .] that other aspects of its being configured as other moments in time could somehow be known to us" (Nadeau 127).

Vonnegut has attempted a similar formulation in his *The Sirens* of *Titan*, where the protagonist Niles Rumfoord steers his spaceship into the "chronosynclastic infundibula" that allows Niles and his dog
to appear as "one node of a wave phenomenon extending all the way from the sun to Betelgeuse" (qtd. in Nadeau 122). The 'infundibula,' that like a black hole consumes Niles, is an "immaterial wave scattered through space-time" (Nadeau 123), the shape of Niles and the dog 'materializing' at some points in the field. There the sudden mystical insight dawns on him that "everything that ever has been always will be and everything that ever will be always has been" (qtd. in Nadeau 123), almost like the Tralfamadorian ability to view all time simultaneously. Vonnegut, according to Nadeau, is here obviously drawing Einstein's theory of matter as simply a point in the space-time continuum where the gravitational field is extremely intense (123). There is also a not so apparent use of the conception of matter-energy relation. Nadeau explains:

[. . .] if all the configurations of matter existing in what we term past, present, and future are manifestations of the energy represented in the equation $E=MC^2$, and if all that energy can be said to fully exist in the now, then

Niles is in some sense correct in claiming that 'everything that has been always will be.' Since energy is never lost but merely transferred, the universe is perpetually full and can never be anything but itself. (123)

Later Niles is able to predict future events in detail, something impossible to the Newtonians.
In SF the limited Earthling realization of Newtonian time is appropriated in the metaphor of a physical demonstration of what time looked like to Billy at the Tralfamadorian zoo (83). Though the flatcar to which Billy is strapped moves at various speeds, angles and directions, he sees only the little dot at the end of the six feet pipe welded to the only eyehole through which he can look. From past memory to imagined future, human time conception is a linear and causal sequence of events. The metaphorical “dot at the end of the pipe” becomes the future time to which our vision is narrowed down, whereas the new revelations posit a time “which is the condition of our being in the space-time complex that is the cosmos” (Nadeau 128). Nadeau assumes that if man can somehow perceive that relationship in time like the Tralfamadorians, he can sense his involvement in all space-time, in every event (past, present, future) everywhere in the cosmos (128).

A key term in the study of SF is “schizophrenia,” which occurs in the very front-page announcement that ‘this is a novel in the telegraphic schizophrenic manner.’ Several Vonnegut characters have schizoid selves, Howard Campbell of Mother Night calling schizophrenia a boon to mankind. Neither Billy, nor Vonnegut, nor the usual realistic conventions of story telling can ‘bear’ the reality of a Dresden holocaust, which might explain Billy’s ‘spastic in time’ condition or the schisms in Vonnegut’s representation of experience.
Vonnegut uses the word schizophrenia in his *Breakfast of Champions* in a context of frame-breaking or "leaks," the term used for a crossing of ontological boundaries between different worlds. Vonnegut's intertextual persona Trout calls mirrors "leaks": "It amused him to pretend that mirrors were holes between two universes" (*Breakfast of Champions* 27). The authorial voice says:

There in the cocktail lounge, peering out through my leaks at a world of my own invention, I mouthed this word: schizophrenia.

The sound and appearance of the word had fascinated me for many years. It sounded and looked to me like a human being sneezing in a blizzard of soap flakes.

I did not and do not know for certain that I have that disease. This much I knew and know: I was making hideously uncomfortable by not narrowing my attention to details of life which were immediately important, and by refusing to believe what my neighbors believed. (180)

Robert A. Baron explains the condition in *Psychology* in a section titled "Schizophrenia: Out of touch with reality." Schizophrenia is characterized as a psychological disorder involving "disorganized modes of thought, affect and perception" (553). Manifest as a language disorder, the schizophrenic's words jump about fragmented and
disorganized. Ideas do not follow logical associations and seem totally unconnected. They often create neologisms of their own like ‘littlehood’ for childhood, “belly bad luck” for indigestion, etc, and in extreme cases their words seem to form a totally jumbled “word salad” (553). The problem seems to be rooted in their incapacity for selective attention, that is, to focus their attention on certain stimuli while largely ignoring others, as with a normal person. Anything, even the sound of their own utterance may distract, disrupt their train of thought and send them wandering off into a mysterious world of their own creation, experiencing delusions of persecution (paranoia) or grandeur and hallucinations that have no basis in physical reality (553).

‘Schizophrenia’ becomes one of the key concepts of postmodernism effectively linking the revolutions/revelations in narrative to culture at large, as pursued by its several commentators like Fredrik Jameson, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and David Harvey. Primacy is given to the links established “between states of mind and cultural processes,” between “narrative self-consciousness and schizophrenia” (Currie 102). Taking cue from Jacques Lacan’s definition of schizophrenia as a kind of linguistic disorder, poststructuralists consider it as different ways of construing reality and experience, language being the primary organizing principle for reality (Currie 102). This disunity in the personality is analyzed by
Lacan as an inability to unify the past, present, and future of one's experience, as "a break down in the temporal chain of signification [. . .] an inability to sustain the linearity of things—the suspension of language in time, the order of narrative linearity, a sense of sequence" (Currie 103). For Jameson it generates a "rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" without any meaningful order or sequence (27). What the schizophrenic lacks is thus a linear concept of time, which effects a temporal unification of his self and life.

Billy Pilgrim or Vonnegut's narrative with their fragmented nature register a schizophrenic experience where both the 'narrative of personal identity and the experience of selfhood are at stake' (Currie 103). The study has already emphasized the schizoid nature of Vonnegut's narrative and the way the protagonist encounters experience with his 'spastic in time' sensibility. SF breaks new ground with this parallel existence of narrative form and an individual mind in the larger context of a schizophrenic cultural experience.

War and its story is 'history,' usually told in conventional modes of narrative. What is unusual in Vonnegut's telling of the war story in SF can be studied in the postmodern context of the end of 'History,' and the new theoretical insights into history as narrative. It is obvious that postmodern theory in its eagerness to claim the demise of 'metanarratives' (Lyotard) and linear time is as well antagonistic to notions of history (Earnshaw 59-81). In the light of the changes in
the cultural time-sense in the postmodern context one can draw the implications of ‘simultaneity’ or ‘a perpetual present’ on the earlier sense of history as linear, progressive and teleological. With the “ideological unmasking of narrative,” (Currie 12) history, which is as much a selective sequential construct as fiction, loses its status as an objective organizing principle or account of prior events.

Thus when Vonnegut is reworking on the form of narrative and envisioning an alternative to ‘Earthling’ time and causality in the form of a Tralfamadorian time of ‘all moments existing simultaneously,’ it holds important inferences for ‘history’ also. History in its postmodern fictional reworking is open to the present, not “conclusive and teleological” (Hutcheon, Poetics 110). SF, in its self-reflexive account of constructing a narrative out of the Dresden bombing therefore approximates to the spirit of “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon, Poetics 111).

Vonnegut’s comic ironic reformulation of the momentous concepts of time, death and history is almost like a casual breeze effecting stormy irruptions in the complacent conventions of narrative. The other two texts can be read for analogous disruptions, not however with the kind of leisurely ease that surrounds Vonnegut’s ‘wonderful new lies’ and ‘big simple ideas’ (God Bless You 27).