

Power and Politics in Player Piano

An essay concerning power distribution in dystopian fiction

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Introduction

In 1952 Kurt Vonnegut's debut novel was published, it was called *Player Piano*. According to an interview in Playboy Magazine (July 1973), Vonnegut was working at General Electric at the time. At General Electric Vonnegut became inspired by a machine that cut rotor blades for airplanes. This machine was computer-operated and Vonnegut started wondering: What would happen if machines did all of our manual and routine mental labor? What if nobody is needed to operate these machines? In *Player Piano* Vonnegut portrays a society that has such machines. These machines have changed this society dramatically. In this society everybody has a reasonably good life, access to good health care, security, and access to a certain level of luxury. A small group of engineers and managers have an even better life, they seem to enjoy a greater wealth and power. At first glance this seems to be a nice society, however when looking slightly deeper the cracks begin to show. Since the machines have taken over all manual and routine mental labor there is no real dignity in most jobs, they are just there to give you something to do. Only the engineers and managers seem to have jobs that matter. In such a society meaning and dignity become scarce and you might even call such a society dystopian.

Kurt Vonnegut (1922 – 2007) was one of the great 20th century American writers. He has written novels such as *Cat's Cradle* (1963), *Breakfast of Champions* (1973), *Player Piano* (1952) and numerous short stories but is best known for *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). He grew up in a family of artists during the great depression and was warned to stay away from the arts; instead he should look for a real profession where money could be made. Because of this warning Vonnegut majored in chemistry when he went to college. However Vonnegut never became a chemist: before he finished his studies World War II broke out and, although Vonnegut was a self-professed pacifist, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor Vonnegut enlisted. The war would have a profound effect on Vonnegut and would strongly influence his writing. In particular the bombing of Dresden left a mark on young Vonnegut. During the bombing of Dresden Vonnegut was a prisoner of war and was held captive in a slaughterhouse turned prison in Dresden. Vonnegut's experiences during and leading up to the bombing of Dresden would later serve as the basis for the novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*. After the war Vonnegut returned to college and started studying anthropology. After his M.A. Thesis on 'The Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales' was rejected by the university's faculty commission he stopped his studies and got a job at General Electric, the job that would influence him while writing his first novel *Player Piano*.

Since *Player Piano* is Vonnegut's first novel it lacks some of the features of his later works. For example the recurring characters from his later novels, such as Kilgore Trout and Eliot Rosewater are not present in *Player Piano*. However Vonnegut's black humour and satire are present in *Player Piano*, the science fiction elements are there and so are most of the themes that nearly always play a role in his later works, themes such as social inequality, religion and war. Another typical Vonnegut feature of *Player Piano* is its protagonist. In *Player Piano* Paul Proteus is the protagonist and just like Eliot Rosewater in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) and Winston Niles Rumfoort in *The Sirens of Titan* (1959), Paul Proteus is dissatisfied with his privileged position and feels badly for the people who are worse off in life. This dissatisfaction leads in all cases to a transformation of the elite to rebel.

In 1954 *Player Piano* was rereleased under a new title *Utopia 14* because the publisher thought this would improve sales of the novel under science fiction fans. Since Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516) utopia has been the word used to describe perfect societies. However, as mentioned earlier, the society depicted in *Player Piano* is not such a great place and rather than a utopia it seems to be the opposite, a dystopia. Throughout the literary field there are many novels that play with dystopian themes but the most famous are probably George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and *Brave New World* (1932) by Adolous Huxley but there are many more dystopian stories out there. The dystopian societies depicted in these stories vary widely and it seems that there are an infinite number of possible dystopias. However they also share some similarities and in this essay I will focus on one of these similarities, namely structures of power distribution.

All dystopian novels depict dystopian societies and at the most basic level a society is a place where people live together under a common set of rules. This set of rules is also called a social contract in political philosophy and it is the basis for the authority or power a society has over its subjects. Every participant of a social contract hands in some of his freedoms and in exchange other participants of a social contract do the same. Within such a society people are given different amounts of power and different kinds of power. In our modern democratic society the police get the power to enforce these and our politicians get the power to write new rules and everybody gets the power to vote for in elections to choose our politicians. We call this structure of power distribution democracy but many other structures are possible, such as communism, socialism, fascism, anarchism etc. Within societies there are even more structures of power: for example, material wealth, social class, celebrity, knowledge and physical strength can all be sources of power with their own distribution structures. Sometimes these sources of power are coupled and at other times they are completely separate.

In dystopian novels the way power is distributed can be a reason why dystopia is so dystopian. It is a fascinating subject and therefore the main question I will try to answer in this essay is: to what extent do systems of power distribution play a role in dystopian fiction? In my search for an answer to this question I will focus on the novel *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut, but I will also bring in references to other dystopian texts including: *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) by Philip K. Dick and *The Sirens of Titan* also by Kurt Vonnegut. To support my arguments I look at the interplay between power and three elements of dystopian societies. The first is the elite: I will look at the questions why do some people get the power they get in dystopian societies? Is it good to be part of the elite in dystopia? Secondly, technology often plays an important role in dystopian stories and therefore a closer look at the interplay between technology and power is warranted. Here I will look at technology as the origin of the power structures of dystopia and I will look at the place machines can take themselves in structures of power. The third element of the dystopian narrative that is examined is revolution. Here I will look at the two revolutions of importance that take place in *Player Piano* and I will look at how revolution can be part of the begin end and status quo of dystopia.

The elite in dystopia

According to the Cambridge dictionary elite means: “those people or organizations that are considered the best or most powerful compared to others of a similar type”. Both the best and especially the most powerful seem to have an important role in dystopian fiction. This implies that there are others with less power; the word elite implies inequality. To find out why certain elites are more powerful than other people in a society I will have to look at the origin of a society, the social contract. Thereafter I will examine if it is a good thing to be part of the elite in dystopia?

From 1642 to 1651 England was in a state of civil war. This period is also known as the Great Rebellion or the English Revolution. The so called Long Parliament sought to overthrow the king and form a sort of Republic of England. Thomas Hobbes was a staunch supporter of the King and was even appointed mathematics instructor to the young Prince of Wales in 1646. (Tromp 12) With all this going on in the background Thomas Hobbes wrote the *Leviathan*, which was first published in 1651. *Leviathan* is a philosophical treatise concerning politics and power and is one of the first philosophical treatises about the theory of social contract. The ideas Hobbes has about the social contract and the way society should be organized can be summarized as follows. Before a society is formed people live in what is called the state of nature. This is a state of being that according to Hobbes is a war of all against all. Everybody has the right and the ability to kill anybody else if they choose to do so. Because this state of nature is rather harsh, people will want to form societies that offer them protection from this war of all against all. According to Hobbes there three possible types of societies that can be formed, namely democracies, aristocracies and monarchies. (Hobbes 225 - 237) These are three different structures that determine how the power of a state is distributed. The definition found in the Cambridge dictionary states that those who have the most power in a group of similar type are part of the elite and therefore these types of power distribution determine who are part of the elite in a society. In a democracy power is divided equally among all participants, here everybody or nobody is part of the elite. In an aristocracy a group within the population has been given power of authority, this is the more traditional elite, a small group within a larger group. Finally there is the monarchy, where the power of authority rests with one person. According to Hobbes, the best of these three forms of power distribution is the monarchy and he even argues that the monarch should be given as much power as possible.

The idea of an absolute monarch sounds dystopian to modern ears. Most people are reluctant to give that much power to a single person. An example of a monarch in dystopian fiction is Big Brother in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Although we never actually meet Big Brother and he could be dead or replaced by another leader, this really does not matter for even if he is not there anymore

society functions as if he was there anyway. It's not just the monarchy but all power structures described by Hobbes can and have been interpreted, in dystopian ways. For example, the small engineering and managing elite described in *Player Piano* can be interpreted as a Hobbesian aristocracy. The dystopian democracy seems to be a strange animal but there are actually two ways to interpret a dystopian democracy. The first is the dictatorship of the majority, if 51% of the voting population thinks that something needs to happen the other 49% have to accept this decision however horrible it is. Such a dystopia would likely oppress or destroy minorities and those deviating from the norm. An example of such a dystopia is hard to find but Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) probably comes closest. "*But remember that the Captain belongs to the most dangerous enemy of truth and freedom, the solid unmoving cattle of the majority. Oh, God, the terrible tyranny of the majority.*" (Bradbury 104) The second possible interpretation of dystopia as a democracy is given by Hobbes himself. He calls a failed democracy anarchy and anarchy in itself is nearly a return to the state of nature. The overlap between anarchy and dystopia can be found most strikingly in the *Transmetropolitan* (1997 – 2002) comics by Warren Ellis which portray a completely chaotic futuristic society where rules can change from day to day.¹

All the different forms of societies described by Hobbes are possible dystopias and every one of them has its own elite. However the elite in a democracy might technically be an elite: if everybody is part of the most powerful class, then nobody is really part of the most powerful class. In the case of the monarchy one must consider the fact that one man can't do all the ruling by himself; he will most likely need to appoint others to pass on his orders to others and advise him and thus forming a layer between himself and the true lower class. Throughout history this layer has usually been called the aristocracy. Therefore it is safe to assume that power structures of the elite often function as a Hobbsian aristocracy. This also corresponds with the sociological definition of the elite C. Wright Mills gives in his book *The Power Elite* (1956) "*For they are in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society. They rule the big corporations. They run the machinery of the state and claim its prerogatives. They direct the military establishment. They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they enjoy.*" (4) Mills gives a very loaded definition of the elite for he firmly places them in the position of the other. In dystopian novels this often happens as well because those who have power in a society are also presumed to have the power to change that

¹ Other possible candidates that have anarchic systems of power distribution could be post-apocalyptic novels, stories such as *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. However I am not sure if such stories should be placed within the dystopian spectrum. Post apocalyptic worlds might be hopeless and bad places but to be honest I think they fit within their own category rather than the dystopic discourse.

society. Since dystopian societies are by definition bad places the reader of dystopian novels should feel a certain disconnection when reading about the elite in these societies.

In *Player Piano* Paul Proteus is the manager of the Ilium works in New York; this made him, at the age of 35, the man with the highest income in all of Ilium (23) and he also has an academic degree: this makes him part of the elite in two ways. Firstly he seems to fit the definition of the elite made by C. Wright Mills for he is wealthy and runs a big factory and secondly he fits the second part of the definition of elite given by the Cambridge dictionary, namely he could be considered to be one of the best. This is also expressed in the novel in the following sentence: *“But now this elite business, this assurance of superiority, this sense of rightness about the hierarchy topped by managers and engineers – this was instilled in all college graduates, and there were no bones about it.”* (6) Paul Proteus is even part of the elite in the more traditional aristocratic way, because his father was more important than the president of the United States. Paul’s father had been the nation's first National Industrial, Commercial, Communication's, Foodstuffs, and Resources Director, a position approached in importance only by the presidency of the United States. (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 2)

Another interesting thing about Paul Proteus is his surname. Proteus is not only the surname of the protagonist of *Player Piano* but it's also the name of a Greek god. Proteus, the god, is known to be an attendant or son of Poseidon, he is able to change his shape and predict the future (Morford and Lenardon 157). These qualities also manifest themselves in some way within Paul Proteus. Paul is a shape shifter in the sense that he undergoes a major change, from elite to rebel and Paul’s story is situated in a ‘near future’ and shows its reader a possible future and therefore in a way he tells us about the future.

Paul Proteus is a part of the elite, he has the wealth, celebrity and power described by C. Wright Mills, his life should be good. However Paul Proteus doesn’t seem to be a happy person. He is in a loveless marriage. His wife might have married him just for the elite lifestyle, she faked a pregnancy to get him to marry her and when he leaves the elite lifestyle she leaves him. His job, although it is the best paying job in Ilium, is quite boring, for he actually doesn’t seem to have to do all that much. At work he is just playing with a cat or reading books about vigorous heroes who live in nature, such as woodsmen, sailors and cattlemen. (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 137) Gradually Paul’s resentment towards society increases, he wants everything to change. He doesn’t want to become the plant manager in Pittsburgh; he wants to live on the farm he bought. However Paul Proteus can’t have what he wants. Even though Paul Proteus is in a position of power, he is unable to effectively change his own life. The changes he does go through from elite to rebel are forced on him. On one side Dr. Gelhorn, Paul’s father’s successor, and Kronor, his surrogate father, who are both part of the elite,

force him to join the Ghost Shirt Society, a revolutionary organization, by firing him from his job, and telling him that he must infiltrate the Ghost Shirts Society. On the other hand his friend Finnerty forces Paul to join this rebel group by making Paul's position at Ilium plant unstable, for example by losing Paul's illegal gun. Later the Ghost Shirts even drug and kidnap Paul and force him to join. In the Ghost Shirt Society, the group of rebels, Paul Proteus is again in a way thrust into a leadership position, the elite among the rebels. Paul's role in the Ghost Shirt Society will be explored more thoroughly in chapter three. However here I would like to say that although Paul becomes a part of the elite amongst the rebels, his ability to effect change hasn't grown. He is a leader in name but in reality the rebel organization does what it does, with or without Paul Proteus.

One of the most interesting dystopian hierarchies of power is found in *Brave New World*. Social hierarchies are maintained and the elite are formed by means of eugenics and special breeding techniques. Everyone is part of one of the five social classes, Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and Epsilon respectively and every class has its own function². *'We decant our babies as socialized human beings, as Alphas or Epsilons, as future sewage works or future... 'He was going to say future World Controllers, but correcting himself, said 'future Directors of Hatcheries' instead.* (Huxley 10) The Elite in *Brave New World* are the Alpha's and they are the only ones that are bred to have the intellectual capacity to analyze the society. This intellectual capacity also gives them a reason to doubt the society they live in and actually feel trapped. This goes against the readers' expectation because one would expect that those without power are the ones that are stuck and unhappy, not the elite. However in *Brave new world* the lower classes are kept as happy as possible by any means possible. All the while, the Alphas might actually worry about the dystopian society they live in.

Power, wealth and celebrity are hallmarks of the elite. They would seem to be useful if you want to change the world. However they often are not enough to make any changes. In dystopian fiction the world is often a bleak and nasty place, or at least a world you wouldn't want to live in. Although dystopian societies are bleak and harsh places, the people that are part of the elite don't seem to do anything about it. The only reasonable options why they do not change things are because either they cannot or they do not want to change them. If they enjoy the current status quo or if, for whatever other reason they do not want to change the dystopian society they live in, it gives the dystopian experience a certain humanity. One could get the feeling that although these members of the elite won't change the situation, future members of the elite might, there would be a possibility of escape, there would be hope. If the elite in spite of their wealth, power and fame are unable to change the dystopian situation; this inability implies a certain helplessness and hopelessness. In this

² Interestingly social hierarchies that have specialized bred classes with different functions are sometimes called Eusocialities and are often found with insects such as ants and bees. These Eusocialities often feature whole groups of insects that are purposefully unable to reproduce, just like the Freemartins in *Brave New World*.

situation the elite are just as chained by the dystopian society they live in as the people that are part of the lower social classes in those dystopian worlds. In *Brave New World* Bernard Marx, and the elite he is a part of, are mostly unable to change the world they live in and although he is given the option to leave the dystopian world or to run it, at the end of the novel, the dystopian society has to stay the way it is. The elite in *Player Piano* also seems to be the second kind of elite, an elite that is unable to really change the world they live in. Paul Proteus cannot even make fundamental changes in his own life. It seems that in dystopia the elite are just as trapped by the constraints of their society as everybody else.

Technology and power in dystopia

In his autobiographical work, *A man without a country*, Vonnegut writes the following: “I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex”. (25) Therefore it is not surprising that technology plays an important role in *Player Piano* and many of his other novels. In dystopian fiction technology is often very important, it goes so far that dystopian novels are often categorized as science fiction. In this chapter I will analyze the role technology plays in the origin of dystopian societies and where technology and machinery can be placed in the power structures of dystopia.

A dystopian society is often very different from our own. We live in a world that according to Leibniz is the best of all possible worlds while dystopias are by definition bad places. Although dystopia is a bad place, its participants might actually enjoy themselves. For example in *Brave New World* most participants of society live quite happy lives. The same goes for Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*: life in the society portrayed in this novel is not perfect but it is not an oppressive hell such as society in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However as a reader you get an immediate feeling of alienation and a sense that there is something wrong with this society. This could be because we empathize with Paul Proteus who also feels alienated in his own world, however there is more to it. According to Gorman Beauchamp dystopia fuses the fears of the perfect society of Utopia with a fear of technology. (Beauchamp 53). In a sense this is true for many dystopian novels feature new technological innovations that help shape society. In *Player Piano* the new technological innovations of the second industrial revolution allow society to take shape. However as Beauchamp points out that technology does not lie at the root of every dystopian society and it does not play an important role in every dystopia (Beauchamp 55). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* most technology used in the dystopian society is relatively simple, the most prominent being the cameras that watch everyone. In *Fahrenheit 451* there are a few technological innovations such as robotic dogs and television walls, but these innovations seem unnecessary for the dystopian core of the novel, the suppression of knowledge and minorities. So if technology not always necessary in dystopia why are they so closely linked? Why do so many dystopias have technological innovations that function as a catalyst for their formation? Because technology represents possible change, a change from our real society, which is just one technological innovation away. If the source of change is something that is already present in our society the reader could ask, why hasn’t this happened yet? And if the change was supernatural it would take away some of the realness of the story. However these other kinds of dystopia are possible, for example there is a certain supernatural quality to the talking animals of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945). Technological innovations however combine possibility of the supernatural with a sense of realness. Finally the fear of technology Beauchamp describes can be

very dystopian, however it is the feeling that dystopia is just one innovation away that makes dystopia and technology so closely linked.

Player Piano opens with the following: 'Ilium, New York, is divided into three parts. In the northwest are the managers and engineers and civil servants and a few professional people; in the northeast are the machines; and in the south across the Iroquois River, is the area known locally as Homestead, where almost all of the people live.' (1) It seems that social class is spatially organized in *Player Piano* and the machines have their own place. Strikingly this place is closer linked to the elite than to the lower social class because of the river that separates the machines and elite from the lower class. This tells us a few things about the world of *Player Piano*. It tells us that the upper- and lower social classes live in separated worlds and that machines have their own separate space. Does this mean that the machines are part of the social hierarchies in *Player Piano*? And if so where do they rank? The argument can be made that the machines actually rank above the lower class and possibly above the elite.

In *Player Piano* there is a super computer named EPICAC XIV. This computer is so powerful it can calculate and decide how many refrigerator backs are needed (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 9) and many other things and is also involved in the thinking and planning process of the National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs and Resources Board.³ (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 119) It never forgets anything and is supposedly always right. (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 117) Its name EPICAC XIV can be interpreted as grand alternate current or great power and the number after its name reminds one of the great kings of the past such as Louis XIV of France⁴. The Shah of Bratpuhr, a visiting dignitary, even seems to regard EPICAC XIV as the leader of the United states when he ignores the President and asks EPICAC XIV to answer a riddle to find out if EPICAC XIV is the prophesied all-wise god. (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 122) Although EPICAC XIV does seem to answer, we cannot understand his answer so we can't be sure if he is this all-wise god. The Shah however seems to think that EPICAC XIV is not the prophesied all-wise god and leaves.

It is also interesting to look at the name of the novel *Player Piano*. A *Player Piano* is another name for a Pianola, a self playing piano. This title indicates a role reversal, for a reader would expect a piano player. At one point in the novel the character Finnerty actually starts playing a player piano. (105) This image of a man playing a self playing piano raises questions: does Finnerty have the illusion of

³ The director of this organization is cited to be more powerful than the president of the United States (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 2)

⁴ Also known as Louis the Great

control over this self playing machine? Or is he trying to ridicule his fate as a puppet in a machine controlled society?

So the machines can do all the routine manual and mental work and the computer EPICAC XIV seems to be making a lot of the important decisions. Machines might actually be the ruling elite in *Player Piano*. In his second novel *The Sirens of Titan* Vonnegut examines the strange interactions between man and machine even further in a short story about the origins of the robots of the planet Tralfamadore (166). In this story he asks what would happen if machines did everything. The story is as follows. Once upon a time there were creatures on the Planet Tralfamadore that were obsessed with the concept of purpose. They tried to find their own purpose but every time they found something, they found it to be beneath them. For every purpose they found this way, they made machines that could fulfil these things so that they themselves could strive to fulfil a higher purpose. When they could not find a higher purpose they asked the machines to find a higher purpose for them, they were told that they had no purpose. Upon hearing this news the creatures asked the machines to destroy them because they could not live without purpose. Although the world of *Player Piano* is not at the point of the end of humanity, it seems to be heading the same way. Human work is being replaced by machine work and the people are losing their sense of purpose because of it. The lower social classes are composed of the army and the Reeks and Wrecks, who both seem to be living boring and useless lives. This is demonstrated in this example about members of the Reeks and Wrecks: "About forty men leaning on crowbars, picks, and shovels blocked the way, smoking, talking, milling about something in the middle of the pavement. They looked around at Paul with an air of sheepishness and, as though there was nothing but time in the world". (*Player Piano* 24) At the same time the people that are part of the elite are leading lives that seem to be just as meaningless, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. While in *The Sirens of Titan* the people of Tralfamadore wanted to have noble purpose and strove towards the highest possible purpose, the people in *Player Piano* seem to nearly have given up on having a purpose. However not all hope is lost in *Player Piano* for some people seem to find meaning in resisting and fighting against this hierarchy of power. Especially the Ghost Shirt Society seems focused on overthrowing the status quo, but more on that subject in next chapter.

In *Player Piano* the machines seems to be at least part of the elite. In other dystopian novels, technology takes on the role of the oppressed. For example in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick, the main character Rick Deckard 'retires' rogue androids, robots that look like humans, for a living. The Earth portrayed in this novel is a dark place, highly polluted and damaged after a third world war. Humans are urged to emigrate to Mars, and to entice people to leave;

everybody who emigrates to Mars gets a free personal android servant. These androids are starting to become indistinguishable from humans, thanks to rapid technological progress. There are only two ways to distinguish androids from humans. One way is through the Voigt-Kampff test, a test that measures emotional responses to a series of questions. The other way is the long process of thorough biomedical research. (*Do Androids Dream 38*) In this strange world, where machine and human start to look more and more alike, humans still treat the androids as inhuman machines who have no inalienable rights. In this dystopian novel machines are clearly lower on the social ladder.

Technology and dystopia are strongly linked, for technology is often a catalyst for dystopian fiction and can have its own place in the dystopian hierarchies. When technology is placed in a hierarchy it can have profound influence on the messages contained in the novel. When technology is portrayed as elite, it can confront us with our laziness and the meaninglessness of human existence. When technology is portrayed as a lower class it can again confront us with our laziness but also with how we treat others that we conceive to be less worthy, it can portray themes of injustice and discrimination. In the words of Finnerty: *It's this Damn hierarchy that measures men against machines. It's a pretty unimpressive kind of man that comes out on top.* (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 86) Most of all, technology in dystopian fiction confronts us with a dark side of ourselves that is just one small technological innovation away.

Revolution in dystopia

The structures of power in dystopian fiction are often harsh, oppressive and divisive. The elite live in wealth and prosperity while lower classes live harsh and cruel lives. The Reeks and Wrecks in *Player Piano* have unfulfilling jobs and live meaningless lives, the androids in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* have no rights at all and the Epsilons in *Brave New World* live in a world where their birth, and the eugenics used to create them determine their place in society, and there is no way for these Epsilons to change their standing in life. The power structures that enable these conditions are part of the foundation of dystopia. Change them, and a society might stop being dystopic. Such a change could happen gradually over time, but gradual changes often seem unlikely in dystopia, for there are powerful forces that profit from the status quo. These changes could also happen very suddenly; such a sudden and immediate change is called a revolution. In the novel *Player Piano*, two revolutions play important roles. The first is the second industrial revolution, a revolution that happened before the start of the novel where most routine mental jobs are replaced by machines. The other revolution of importance is the revolution of the Ghost Shirt Society, a revolution against the institutions, machinery and engineering elite that rule society in *Player Piano*. In this chapter I will examine these two revolutions more closely and I will look at how revolutions can make lasting changes to the power structures of dystopian societies.

“It seemed very fresh to me – I mean that part where you say how the First Industrial Revolution devalued muscle work, then the second one devalued routine mental work” (Vonnegut, Player Piano 14) The second industrial revolution in *Player Piano* made people performing routine mental work unnecessary, all their work could be done by machines. This shift gave engineers and machines a very important place in this society. The second industrial revolution and the changes it made to the social hierarchies made the dystopian society of *Player Piano* possible. It changed the social contract of this society and made a new hierarchy possible. Three things make this change to the social contract possible, namely, technological knowledge, the necessities of war, and benefits for the lower class and the elite. The benefits for the newly created managing and engineering elite are power, wealth and celebrity. The benefits for the lower class in this society are shown in the following quote: *“Thirty dollars, John – yes, that is how much money you make. But, not with all his gold and armies could Charlemagne have gotten one single electric lamp or vacuum tube! He would have given anything to get the security and health package you have, John. But could he get it? No!” (Player Piano 216)*

The second industrial revolution made the society of *Player Piano* possible; the revolution of the Ghost Shirt Society tries to change it again. The name of this revolutionary movement is a reference

to the Ghost Shirts worn by members of the Ghost Dancer movement of 1890. This movement was a Native American spiritual and resistance movement that tried to preserve the Indian culture and beliefs in a country that they now had to share with the white man. Some of these Ghost Dancers even believed that one day all elements of white civilization would disappear including guns and whiskey. They were known for a sacred dance, the so called Ghost Dance, and they wore sacred shirts that they believed would resist the white man's bullets. (Norton, Sheriff and Katzman 476). Just like the Ghost Dancers the members of the Ghost Shirt Society feel threatened by a newcomer, in this case the Machines, and they want to return to the ways of the past. *"The Machines are to practically everybody what the white men were to the Indians. People are finding that, because of the way the machines are changing the world, more and more of their old values don't apply any more. People have no choice but to become second-rate machines themselves, or wards of the machines."* (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 289-290). Paul Proteus is forced into the revolutionary movement. His boss fires him to force him to infiltrate the Ghost Shirt movement and spy on them. (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 230) While the Ghost Shirt revolutionaries poison him, kidnap him and later force him in a symbolic leadership position within the movement because of his fame. (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 270, 296) After Paul integration in the movement, an unsuccessful revolution follows. For although a lot of machines in Ilium are destroyed there is not lasting change, there is no massive national revolution and when the authorities step in the revolution is over and the dystopian society remains.

Another view on revolution in *Player Piano* is found in a parable in the novel about an old man⁵, a young engineer, a radical and John Averageman (*Player Piano* 211-219). In this story the old man is the Sky Manager, it is his job to examine the stars that represent social structures of power, such as Socialism, Fascism, Free Enterprise, Rugged Individualism etc. He is supposed to take these stars down when their time to shine is over. When the Sky Manager is about to take down the star that represents the social structures as represented in *Player Piano*, a young engineer stands up and tells the Sky Manager to stop, while a radical tells the Sky Manager to take the star down. To resolve this conflict, a trial is held where the young engineer and the radical both plead their case to the Sky Manager. The main part of both of their arguments is built on the testimony of a man called John Averageman.

When the radical asks John questions, it leads up to John saying the following: *"Kind of summing up, seems like these days the engineers and managers and the like are everything, and the average man is just nothing anymore."* (*Player Piano* 215) This sentence sums up a major feature of the dystopian

⁵ In *Player Piano* another old man plays an important role namely Dr. Francis Eldgrin Gelhorne, who is the National Industrial, Commercial, Communications, Foodstuffs and Resources Director and is the most powerful man in America. The comparison between the old man in the story and Dr. Gelhorne who are both very powerful men is an interesting comparison to make.

experience in *Player Piano*, the meaninglessness of life. During the cross-examination of John, the young engineer tries to refute everything that the radical and John Averageman said earlier. His style of questioning John is very controlling. The young engineer never lets John finish his sentences; he wants to hear John say yes and no in response to his questions but nothing else. Even though this makes the young engineer come over as dishonest and manipulative, he does have a few interesting views. First and foremost, the lower classes do benefit from all the technological progress; he argues that the lower classes are better off than Charlemagne in this society (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 216). The second point the young engineer makes is not about the society they live in but about its opponent, the radical: *"He'd like to take advantage of your good nature. He wants Power, and he doesn't care about anything else. He'd like to make you swallow his half-truths, John, and get you to help him pull down the star, and put himself in power, and the whole world back in the Dark Ages!"* (*Player Piano* 217) The young engineer tells us something about the darker side of revolutionaries. Those who initiate a revolution or those who lead it have most to gain when it is successful. These leaders of the revolution often become the elite of the new hierarchies that are formed after the revolution. They might not be organizing a revolution for the benefit of the average man, but for their own benefit. In the story the young engineer wins the trial, but his victory is questionable, as it is a story told to a group of engineers. However the important question might not be who wins this trial but who loses. Whether the young engineer wins the trial or the radical wins the trial, John Averageman seems to lose.

The argument of the young engineer, that the radical just wants power for himself, is reinforced by the fact that revolutionaries often start acting like they are better than others, as if they were already part of some new elite even before the revolution. A good example is the way Paul Proteus treats his wife Anita in *Player Piano*. She says: *"I'm sick of being treated like a machine! You go around talking about what engineers and managers do to all the other poor, dumb people. Just look at what an engineer and manager did to me! [...] You talk about how wrong it is for smart people to lord it over people who aren't so smart, and then go around our house showing off your great big I.Q. like it was on a sandwich sign. All right, so I'm dumb."* (*Player Piano* 249) In a way the new elite is already acting like the old elite. Therefore it seems that these revolutions against the structures of power in dystopia often just create new dystopia. A strong example of the cyclical nature of revolution in a dystopian society that leads to a new dystopia is the novel *Animal Farm* by George Orwell. In this novel a revolution takes place on a farm and the human overlords who oppressed, imprisoned and ate the animals that lived there are driven away. A new society is created where all animals are equal, but slowly but surely the new society starts to change and becomes more and more like the old. Finally the pigs become indistinguishable from humans. *"No question, now, what had happened*

to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which" (Orwell, *Animal Farm* 95) In *Player Piano* this cyclical tendency of revolutions in dystopia takes an interesting turn. There is a certain cyclical quality to the idea of another revolution involving Ghost Shirts. The *second* industrial revolution is also seems to be a repeating cycle with a possible third industrial revolution on the way.

When the Ghost Shirt revolution is over, its leadership sees a couple of fellow revolutionaries fixing an Orange-O Machine. These revolutionaries seem to be happy. *"Now he was proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what they liked to do best, Paul supposed – replacing men like himself with machines"* (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 338) Apparently it is not just the leaders who keep the dystopian society in place, everybody helps in keeping it going. We also find out that not everybody joined revolution expecting to truly change anything, for Lasher states *"It doesn't matter if we win or lose, Doctor. The important thing is that we tried. For the record we tried!"* (Vonnegut, *Player Piano* 333) Apparently for Lasher the entire revolution was just symbolic. In the article *Vonnegut's Humor and the Limits of Hope* John R. May said the following about this situation: *"And even if it is inevitable that man will continue to replace himself, it is worthwhile resisting mindless progress, thereby affirming the value of imperfection, frailty and even stupidity."* (May 33) Since one of the main features of the dystopia in *Player Piano* is its sense of meaninglessness, although the revolution failed, it might have succeeded by just trying.

There are a lot of things to be said about revolutions and dystopia. Revolutions can be a catalyst for dystopia, such as the industrial revolution that made *Player Piano* Possible. Revolutions can also be part of the downfall of dystopia. However, as I argued, this downfall is not the real end of the dystopia but just an interbellum between dystopias, as it is in *Animal Farm*. More often than not these revolutions in dystopia are unsuccessful but sometimes they do not need to be successful to achieve their goals. The leaders of dystopian societies are manipulative and rule over their subjects, but revolutionary leaders do the same thing, and although they might not know what they are doing, they could very well turn into the next dystopian elite.

Conclusion

Structures of power are a necessary element to dystopian narratives such as *Player Piano*. Every dystopian story takes place within a society, every society has a social contract and every social contract deals with power distribution. Power structures, in dystopian fiction, will sometimes be described within the novel to the finest details. However sometimes the power structures are left vague, but they are always there. Power structures function as a framework and, as I have argued, they trap everybody inside them, elite and lower class alike. This framework is usually created by introducing a small change, such as a technological innovation, to society, showing how extreme the consequences of this small change can be and how they can transform our social contract and introduce new hierarchies of power. The changes in society might not always be bad for its participants: for example, life in the society of *Player Piano* does not seem to be so bad. However as a reader of novels such as *Player Piano* one immediately gets feelings of alienation that are so typical for dystopia. These structures of power in dystopian fiction are strong and stable. They are hard to break and struggles and revolutions against them usually fail; when they are successful, they seem to have a way of luring inhabitants back in, trapping the society again in dystopia. Sometimes there are even repeating cycles of revolution within dystopia. These cycles can be interpreted as one of the horrors of dystopia, showing us just a little hope before crashing us down even deeper in the pit of despair. However we can also argue that however bleak and horrible a situation is, humanity will keep on fighting. There is a disparity between the apparent perfection of dystopia and its disturbing and alienating qualities. It should come as no surprise that structures of power in dystopia can be perfectly horrible and at the same time ensnaring in their splendor.

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