

THERE IS A STORY TO GO
 WITH EVERY FIGURE IN THE PICTURE:
 KURT VONNEGUT TALKS ABOUT
 SCIENCE, FICTION, AND DYSTOPIA

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Kurt Vonnegut was interviewed by Francisco Collado in the writer's Manhattan residence on 15 November 1995. As humorous and satirical as his readers might expect, Vonnegut was ready to talk about his past and future fiction, and to comment on his current understanding of life and human beings.

Born on 11 November 1922, Vonnegut had just celebrated his seventy-three birthday when I approached him in his Manhattan house. I was charged with a full list of academic questions about his works and his personal views in 1995. As happens in his books, then and there I found out that truly life and fiction are separated only by a tenuous web: Vonnegut is himself a black comedian, sardonic and ironical, a chain-smoker in whose very moods and answers you can perceive traits similar to the ones present in his imaginary personages Kilmore Trout, Rabo Karabekian, or Eugene Debs Hartke. However, as he stated laughing, Hartke was a Lieutenant Colonel and Vonnegut himself only a private. My list of ordered questions soon dissolved among his chuckling and laughing: more than once I had to mentally reorder my views on his fiction to finally conclude that his own behavior simply mirrors that mystery of his prose: complexity but clarity, experimentation but simple results.

Some of the most remarkable events in his biography have been mentioned on many occasions; the son of a wealthy architect, he had to undergo the years of the Great Depression and later fight in the Second World War, where he was taken prisoner by the Germans. In Dresden he was among the few who survived –sheltered in a meat locker– the Allied air bombardment on the city. Out of that terrible and paradoxical experience and, as he puts it, also out of a pure genetic reason, he came a simple, helpless soldier who two decades later was to become one of the most successful American writers of the postwar period. His novels have been frequently described as experimental, sardonic, the product of black comedy and dystopia – and they certainly are all that since the first one, *Player Piano* (New York: Scribner's, 1952), which the writer still remembers as his earliest experiment to follow the scientific premise of *what if...?* Contemporary critics have also qualified his books as products of "historiographic metafiction," mixtures of real and fictional events and characters who inhabit different textual and metatextual universes, people who jump from one book into another, from written into plastic art, or who become lost in a time warp.

Vonnegut was among the first creatives in the postwar period to teach his readers about the implications of both relativity and quantum theories. He did it in such an apparent simple way that when reading some of his most popular novels, we may end up thinking that –as he also affirms– the new physics is something that now everybody knows perfectly about!

Almost by sheer chance, in his literary beginnings he was labeled as a science-fiction writer, but he then parodied this subgenre and his own early writings in his most famous

novels of the late 1960s and 1970s. What followed were novels that still mixed tragedy and comedy, books written in an apparent simple style that represented a complex view of life. More recently from the nostalgic but encouraging autobiography of painter Rabo Karabekian in *Bluebeard* (London, Cape: 1987 & Grafton 1989) readers witnessed again the triumph of dystopia in the near-futuristic *Hocus Pocus* (London: Cape, 1990). His own words by the end of 1995 do not disclose much optimism: humans, he says, do not want to go on living. Lacking the pianist, we hear again the music played by the player-piano: but the tune is sheathed in a comic –even if pessimist– halo. Let us hope that this time his predictions about the human race will never come true. So it goes.

QUESTION: Mr. Vonnegut, in the decades following the end of the Second World War you were one of the first successful American novelists to technically incorporate elements coming from popular culture into your books, you also assimilated the subgenre of science-fiction, and even went so far as to include drawings and other plastic resources in your narratives. You use very complex techniques to make us believe that something happens. Narrative levels are frequently blurred in some of your novels: stories within the story, writers as protagonists, characters which appear and disappear from one novel to the next, the narrator's voice interfering with the protagonists, time traveling... Have you used all this technical complexity as a conscious literary approach to fight realist fiction, as a way to metaphorize quantum mechanics, or simply because of the influence of pop art around you?

VONNEGUT: Well, first of all, I must say that I can't plan what I'm going to do. I can't sit down like a scientist and say, "I'm going to do a scientific experiment." No, it is more like skiing, where you don't have the time to think, so you simply see what happens. However, one thing that did happen in my lifetime is electronics. There was a time when the novel was the only way for people to entertain themselves when nothing was going on, and so it was worthwhile learning to read. But, if you think what reading really is [he takes a book from the table and opens it]: here are lines, a various arrangement of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numbers, and eight punctuation marks... you would think that it's impossible that a literate person can recreate the battle of Waterloo or the Spanish Civil War with such very minimal stimuli. Impossible! But people used to do it because it was a way of learning and a big entertainment when absolutely nothing of interest was going on in their own lives. Nowadays, all you have to do is turn on a switch. Here in the house I think I have about seventy T.V. channels. There is professional actors, music, lecturers, and so... Take the role of the novelist now or of novelists at the end of the Second World War: there was already radio and there were movies, which already were more satisfactory entertainment than what you can get out of a book, you did not even have to be able to read. I think that, at that time I was responding to the obsolescence of the novel as a major form of entertainment [sneering and then laughing]. Modern art came into being about the turn of the century in response to the invention of the camera. At the time, there were dozens of painters in every town who could catch your likeness if somebody wanted a picture of you, or who could make a picture of your house or whatever, but they were no longer useful to a huge number of people because the camera did a very good job recording these things. Out of this situation came cubism and some genius painters like Picasso or Juan Gris... By the way, why is it that there are so many Spaniards who are great painters?

QUESTION: I don't really know, I'm not a painter myself and cannot answer that question.

VONNEGUT: [laugh]... Well, it's quite wonderful. Anyway, Picasso, Gris, and some other painters thought, "all right, there must be something new we can do with painting, some other service we may perform," and they created modern art.

QUESTION: Yes, but the artistic result at that time was also quite high-brow. Only a few people, the cultural élite of the time, could follow what those modern painters and artists

were doing. However when you read a book like, let's say, *Breakfast of Champions* [New York: Delacorte P., 1973] or *Slaughterhouse-5* [New York: Delacorte P., 1969], everybody can follow what is going on, and that despite the fact I was commenting on earlier: your novels may become highly metafictional constructs but still they are read and understood by a majority of people.

VONNEGUT: Yes, that's right. But I think, again, that painters –modern art– broke new ground for all of us. It is true that people would refuse to look at this art, they would refuse to think about it, to hear about it, but finally they started looking into cubist painting, into surrealist painting and into other manifestations of this new modern art, and then eventually they also liked to look at it, it was their nervous system responding, “this is good,” they'd say, “this is interesting.” But, anyway, despite the obvious effects movies produced in us, I think that members of my generation –I was born in 1922, my seventy-three birthday was only four days ago–, we were the last generation of American novelists to respond to novels rather than to film. Now, it's the other way round: the young novelists write books which are treatments for a movie, and if the book does not also become a movie to sell, then it's considered a failure. I continue to write what I call *book-books* [laugh]. I certainly like the idea of having a movie made out of a book, but I'm inspired by *Don Quijote* [*sic*] or by Rabelais, you see, I'm still responding to my age. I don't know if there are now other novelists responding to those books. But I'm not criticizing the young novelists, they are good people, I'm not talking about a moral issue here. They were born in a different era, that's all, and for them technology –film, in this case– means not to handle the novel as a novel, as an artifact in itself.

QUESTION: Presumably it is in *The Sirens of Titan* [New York: Dell, 1959] where we find one of the first metaphorizations of quantum particle/wave behavior applied to a human being and his dog [Winston Niles Rumfoord and Kazak]. Although some years have already passed since its publication, this novel still seems to be a very recent work. In a way, in this novel and later in works like *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965] or *Slaughterhouse-5* you were anticipating to a certain extent what in critical terms we now know as *cyberpunk*. You have parodied the subgenre of science-fiction, you have anticipated uses and abuses of new technologies and discoveries: you seem to anticipate everything. Mr. Vonnegut, are you a creative fortune-teller?

VONNEGUT: I would –incidentally– be a good fortune-teller, I mean, you have to be something like that when writing. But there is a word in English for people who make their living like this: they are *futurologists*, you know, that's how they are presented on television, they say what the year 2000 will be like, what the year 2,500 will be like, anything... As for my writing, I've simply been lucky! Look at my house! Outside there are people sleeping outdoors, people sleeping under a piece of cardboard, they are unlucky, I am lucky. I guess and guess when I write about something, it's a thing that I have to do. My best guess, I think, was in *Player Piano*, which was what the machine was going to mean for us. Machines do much better work, they are much better employees than people; they don't make mistakes, they don't get sick. The word *robot* was invented around the year 1931 or 1932, when I was ten years old, and there it all started. As for being a writer-futurologist, I think that anybody could do it. If I were to ask you, “Please, tell me what the year 2,500 would be like, what human life would be like,” and make it worth your while, you would be able to extrapolate from what is going on and guess. What simply happens is that most people don't do it as I do, as most people don't have a job like mine, but that's what I did, I did extrapolate. Now I've also been asked to do it too, to write a book about what the next one thousand years are going to be like, but anybody could do it, sitting down and thinking: it's only that most people don't do that with their days!

QUESTION: I'm afraid I cannot coincide with your views about how easy it is to write the type of books you write. Anyway, despite all the techniques and disparate elements that amalgamate in Kurt Vonnegut's fiction, and despite the fact that you have been qualified as a highly experimental writer by many critics, however your style and, within it, your narrators frequently approach things in a way that apparently is very simple and straightforward, the result being that we end up reading a comic style being applied to very serious matter, such as death or human misery. Your art has been defined as burlesque, or black humor, but how did you come to acquire this peculiar style of yours that involves a high level of complexity when, at the same time, it looks so simple?

VONNEGUT: Well, during the Second World War I was a private, I wasn't a colonel [laugh], I was a gun-soldier and my only defense was provided by a rifle. And so it came this simple, essentially helpless way of looking what was going on [bigger laugh]. It may sound like a joke, but my characters are helpless because I was a foot-soldier. What was going on in the war was, for me, ridiculous, grotesque, terrifying, but then on the higher levels of the Army there was all this solemnity about what it all meant so... sure, anybody who's been a foot-soldier in times of war knows there is no sense to do it.

As for the apparent simplicity of my style, it is obviously related to all this but also to the fact that I was trained as a scientist, never as a writer. I set off to be a biochemist because my father told me to be one, then I finally took a master degree in anthropology but I never made a systematic study of literature. As a writer, I am actually self-taught but I bring scientific logic to my subjects. My brother, who is ten years older than I am, is a distinguished scientist, Dr. Bernard Vonnegut. He is a physical-chemist who got interested in the weather; he probably knows more about tornadoes and the electrification of storms than anybody else on earth now. I've spent a lot of time with him and his friends and so I'm used to thinking as they do: they would start thinking about a premise, "what if...", to then set up an experiment. Another attitude of good scientists is what in English is called the *Law of Parsimony*, that affirms that "the simplest explanation is probably the truest one." And this is essentially the attitude that I favor when I write something, I'm not going to get Freudian, I'm not going to get Marxist [laugh]...

QUESTION: Yes, I understand. However, in your novels you frequently refer to very complex scientific theories, such as relativity or quantum mechanics. Anybody would think that you cannot refer to those theories—even in a parodic way—and expect to be understood by the average reader: but people can follow the stories in your books. Don't you think it is very surprising?

VONNEGUT: Uh, I see. But relativity and quantum mechanics and so forth are ABCs now, they are not bizarre speculations of the order of Freudianism, or Marxism, or any other fashionable culture *additive* [laugh].

QUESTION: [Maintained laugh] Coming back to literary grounds, can you mention any authors that may have influenced that peculiar style of yours?

VONNEGUT: No, but I do more than read books, as I hang around with my brother and my brother's friends. And they talk! I was a terrible scientist, I had no gift for what-so-ever, but I understood their attitudes and I found them very interesting. And my brother and I actually do the same thing: as I've already told you, he is a great experimentalist with the weather, experimenting with airplanes, putting electrical charges and all that; his are practical jokes on nature. "If we do this to Mother Nature," he will say, "what will she do?" You know, in a sense it's like putting a bucket of water over the door and having Mother Nature come in! [big laugh]: the water falls down but, what's she going to do? So, my brother does that, he disturbs the atmosphere one way or another to see what's going to happen. And I also have the premise of a book in the formula of this "what if ...?"

argument. For instance, the premise for *The Sirens of Titan* was something like “what if there is Somebody up there [laugh] who really cares about what we are doing and very much wants us to do something?” And so I put somebody up there, I put some other beings [big laugh]. Now, what would this *person* or *persons* want, and why would they be making us do this or that? Do they like us or not, do they care what happens to us or not? That was the premise, a very primitive one, indeed! Or, take the one in *Player Piano*, “what if people don’t have to work anymore?” And then, I run out the experiment on paper.

QUESTION: However, in those experiments you run on paper you also mix real historical events and personages with your own invented characters and events. Can creative literature be more truthful than historiography, Mr Vonnegut? Where is the border between them?

VONNEGUT: Well, they are both story-telling, in any case. Imagine the various histories that have been written about the Spanish Civil War, they are very different stories [*sic*]. Or, to take another case: Mussolini, you know, at one point at the height of his power had a historian write the history –that was to be widely distributed– that the Roman Empire had never ceased [big laugh], it was still going on, and he was yet another Roman emperor! Well, I never told a story that grotesque. I do think novels would stay closer to the truth than histories written by dishonest historians.

QUESTION: Your words take me to another of your novels because, how can you find out who is and who is not a dishonest historian? or a dishonest spy? Is there any way out for a character like Campbell in *Mother Night* [Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961] or we are finally condemned to be trapped by the forces of History?

VONNEGUT: No, there isn’t. Incidentally, they just made *Mother Night* into a movie, featuring Nick Nolte. They just finished about a week ago. Well, everybody finds himself in an ambiguous position, just imagine being born in Germany, as a cousin of mine was. My ancestors had been over here since the 1830s or so, but I had an aunt of mine who grew up in Indianapolis –where I also grew up– and she married a German. She lived in Germany during the Second World War and had a son my age. He comes into the world and eventually becomes a member of the Hitler’s Youths; he goes camping out with many other young men, they are at camp-fires with their uniforms and all that. They were thousands and thousands of Germans who were raised this way. My cousin finally wound up on the Russian front as a radio operator and the Russians captured him. Now, when I was a prisoner of war in Dresden I got to know our guards pretty well; some were old men, some were only boys, but several of them were soldiers who’d been severely wounded and were on very limited service, and when the war ended we were simply turned loose by our guards in what became East Germany, and so we wandered around for a couple of weeks before we could get back to our own lines, and we found one of our own guards. He could still buy beer [laugh]! We found him sitting in a little country café with a beer in his hand, and he said, “I’ve just wasted the last fifteen years of my life.” And, you know, it was millions of Germans who, you could say, just had it utterly wasted. They had been terribly misled, and there was no way out for them. But then, you also asked how you tell an honest historian from a dishonest one... Once I asked a friend of mine, a painter, “How can you tell a good painting from a bad painting?” and he said, “If you look at a million paintings, you can never be mistaken.” That’s a wonderful statement. If you read a million books and then read somebody’s history, it’s easy then to think, “o dear, dear, this cannot really be like that...” [laugh].

QUESTION: Allow me a little jump into your novels again to formulate my next question: is History nothing but the manipulative invention of the Trafalmadorians? And if so, can you let us know, at last, who are these Trafalmadorians?

VONNEGUT: I don't know [interviewer thrown into the greatest distress]. I talked earlier about Freudianism or Marxism being discredited now, and I simply suspect that another thing which is also falling apart is the Theory of Evolution. This theory has been comforting for a long time but it doesn't make much sense now. I cannot believe any longer that natural selection will produce these amazing life-forms, for me it's almost like giving up Catholicism if you've been raised a Catholic, you know. We are totally ignorant as to what is really going on and it's very hard to live under these conditions. In a sense, I think that people are quite wonderful to put up with it. You would think that suicide would just be happening all the time, you know, everyday they'd be cleaning up the street, taking bodies away [big laugh]. However, everybody keeps going on, without any clear idea of what it's all about. And so, who are the Trafalmadorians? I don't know. I think we are manipulated by television now because it holds our attention. All of us watched the O.J. Simpson case, for instance, but then there are terrible things happening in Indonesia or in Sri-Lanka, and they don't show it on television...

QUESTION: And is it external fate or our own dark side? Is it, as Thomas Pynchon would put it, *They*?

VONNEGUT: It is all the people around us. We will do all we can to get along with our neighbors, no matter how objectionable they become. We can be corrupted that way. Mark Twain in his essay *What is Man?* [1906] says, "What is it we want more than anything else? It's the good opinion of our neighbors." And we will do almost anything to get along with whoever our neighbors are.

I don't really know whether this comment is of any help to you because, as a critic, you know and see things in my work that I had never thought about, we think differently when looking at the same book.

QUESTION: Yes, probably we do, but you have just offered me a very good excuse with your words to go back to the grounds of literary criticism and interpretive theory. There are now some contemporary schools of criticism –I suppose you have read about them– which defend ideas about historiography and truth that are remarkably similar to the ones you have defended here. What is your opinion about contemporary criticism of this kind?

VONNEGUT: Yes, deconstruction and all this. Well, again, I'll answer this question by referring to the Law of Parsimony, the simplest explanation is probably the truest one: every book is a practical joke, nothing in it is really happening, you can make somebody cry, or laugh [and he laughs], or be surprised, but absolutely nothing is going on! As you read, nothing is really happening, yet we writers found out that we can make you think that something is happening [laugh].

QUESTION: Your opinions may coincide, to a certain extent, with contemporary ideas defended by different cultural critics but how are you coming to terms with your own art in 1995? Are we going to witness the end of experimental techniques in Vonnegut's fiction, as your latest novels seem to imply? Are you going back to realist grounds?

VONNEGUT: Well, I think that conventional story-telling focuses on one or two people to exclude everyone else and for me this is a misrepresentation of life. If there is so much going on but all you can talk about is, let's say, the relationship of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza, all right, that's wonderful, or the great novels of the sea: *Moby Dick* takes place on a ship and everybody is confined there, so the cast is kept very small, but I think, "No, life isn't really like that!" There is so much going on in life... And then I think –what the hell, I've got nothing else to do!–: is there any way in which I can represent life in its complexity and get away with it? I don't know, so I'll simply try it. In one book of mine, in *Bluebeard*, there is this guy who finally paints this enormous picture with hundreds of people in it [actually, 5,219 people]: the Second World War has just ended and everybody

is in this goddamn valley, gypsies, Jews, SS guards, all of them... And I saw that valley, I was in that valley, and for me to write a story of one person coming into the valley, talking to his friend and, maybe, meeting a woman and hearing her story, and all that, well, ALL this: life really looks like this in the painting. And that's what I'm trying to do now¹ but, listen, the Government didn't pay me to do the job, you know [laugh]. I can try and if this cannot really work, to hell with it. For the past five years, at least, I've been trying to write a novel like that, and it is hard because the reader has got to be able to stay with you, you can't write a cubist novel or an abstract expressionist novel because the reader can't read it. This book I've been working on has conventional paragraphs, conventional spelling, the pages look like the pages in any other conventional novel, but it is very hard to write. In fact you have to write this book as an experimental one, you have to be a teacher and prepare the reader for what's going on, you cannot suddenly switch the time or the leading character whenever you want.

QUESTION: Can you be more explicit about this new book? How is it going on?

VONNEGUT: All right. There is an awful lot on every page, as you cannot fill it with *he said*s, *she said*s, and so forth because the dialogue doesn't take up much space. You can't keep turning the pages, you know, a hundred pages, two hundred pages with people talking back and forth. As I told you, I'm using conventional paragraphs when the people do talk but as for how I'm going on, I must answer that all at once! As I stop looking at one thing that's going on and look at another I don't want to have the reader look at something else, but everything you ask the reader to look at should be interesting, and so it's a very hard kind of book to write because in a conventional book you have to read terribly [laugh], you just go on and on and on, and characters go on talking and looking into themselves when they are in front of the shaving mirror and all that. When I teach writing I tell my students, "You don't have to provide your characters with transportation, as the reader is perfectly willing to believe [laugh] that this person got up in the morning and drove to the office, and went up the elevator. You don't have to take him there and make sure that he gets there and everything."

QUESTION: Have you already chosen a title for this new book?

VONNEGUT: Uh, it was in the catalogue at one time, but I just didn't like it the way it was. It's been called "Timequake," like in earthquake, but I might never finish it unless the world survives! [laugh]

QUESTION: So, it's all over for Billy Pilgrim and people unstuck in time?

VONNEGUT: Well, you see, that book [*Slaughterhouse-5*] started in high school this year but most people can't read it because it's very hard to do it. People cannot read it very well when they are only fifteen or sixteen years old. They have a hard enough time reading a novel that isn't sequential, that doesn't go from beginning to end.

QUESTION: The reader who is interested in the complexities existing in your novels may at times also be reminded of some other writers who perhaps use different styles but who also refer to similar problems and human obsessions. I know that you have been asked this question in some other occasions but what's your opinion about the fiction written by Nabokov and Borges?

VONNEGUT: Uh, I just recognize them as brothers, in the same way as I recognize Italo Calvino, Swift, and Voltaire as brothers because they look at the world as I do, and the reason I look at the world as I do is because I came into the world this way. I think it is

¹ Or, as Rabo Karabekian puts it in *Bluebeard*, "There is a ... story to go with every figure in the picture, no matter how small. I made up a story, and then painted the person it had happened to." (1989, 242)

genetics. When you have a child you realize it has to do and be what he or she is, it's inevitable children turn out the way they do. I was lucky because I could read and write at a very early age, but I also talk to musicians and I don't know how the hell they do as they do, it's absolutely impossible [laugh]!

QUESTION: Now, who is your alter ego in *Slaughterhouse-5*? Is it really the narrator or Kilgore Trout? or perhaps you also see yourself reflected at times in Billy Pilgrim's helplessness?

VONNEGUT: I had one already going on in the figure of Trout but, as for Billy Pilgrim, he was a real person who died in Dresden and was buried there. He did what prisoners of war did sometimes: to stare off in the distance, starve to death, and die. He just didn't want to go on. His parents went over to Dresden and found out where he was buried and brought him back. He's now in Rochester, New York. I've visited his grave. Yes, he was a real person.

QUESTION: Despite the fact that you frequently confuse human logic and expectations in that novel, *Slaughterhouse-5* still proves to be your most successful book, how can you explain this?

VONNEGUT: Well, at times you can get away with it or you can't. In *Slaughterhouse-5* I got away with it. I've been very lucky that readers understand what I've been doing. But, again, jazz musicians play on a theme and then stop, they think it's enough of that and they start playing very different, there is no way to play the same music twice.

QUESTION: But, why is that huge realistic painting that we find in *Bluebeard* what you are trying to create now? Isn't realism something impossible to do for a writer like Kurt Vonnegut?

VONNEGUT: Well, I hope that everything I describe in a book becomes visible, so that the reader can see it. When I teach writing – and I do so sometimes, I've done it in Harvard, I've done it in the City College here in New York, I did it in the University of Iowa, years ago – I teach people how to be sociable, how to be nice to the reader because the young writer simply wants to vomit, you know, to spit all the stuff out. So I say, “No, no, a stranger can stop reading the book at any time so you have to think about this person all the time. Is this person going to understand this?” So, I always hope my books are polite, I hope I don't do something that a really good reader would be confused by. I try to be didactic. When a character speaks, he doesn't stammer, he doesn't fail to come up with the thoughts which the reader is supposed to supply. You say what there is to say under those circumstances.

QUESTION: But, is life so clear-cut?

VONNEGUT: Well, life isn't. No, but again this is politeness. The character cannot be inarticulate because I think it's fun to finally state what is going on, what this person thinks. I'm being polite to the reader. I would consider, for instance, an experiment like *Finnegans Wake* a complete failure. You mentioned Pynchon earlier: when I was a regular in *The New York Times*, they used to ask me to review the latest Pynchon book, and so I did. But then they sent me a copy of *Gravity's Rainbow*; it was all packed up and it arrived in a moment in which I had many other things to do. So I finally opened the package and ... it was a cement block [laugh]! It was a book completely impenetrable [laughing again]! I was too dumb to understand it, so I called *The New York Times* and said, “This is an emergency: I cannot read this stuff [bigger laugh].”

QUESTION: Let's forget about Pynchon now and go back to *Bluebeard*. In this novel we find the portrait of a very energetic and, at times, also inquisitive woman, Circe Bergman. In the light of this novel, is woman allotted a new position and importance in contemporary life or Circe is simply an enchantress who bursts in Rabo's life?

VONNEGUT: Well, really, there isn't much here. This town is full of very smart Jewish women, attractive and proud, and so Circe was such a person, that's all.

QUESTION: All right, I'll paraphrase my question: what do you think of the social role of woman and of feminist cultural criticism in 1995?

VONNEGUT: I don't pay too much attention to it. Women have had some success. Well, as a photographer my wife probably could have succeeded thirty years ago, when being a woman wasn't a problem for a person of resort. One thing that is happening among poor families now is that both husband and wife have to work because they don't have enough to live on, and that's new. Women are forced to be more like men in the work-place because they really need the job, but it's not a *spiritual* matter, it's a way of dealing with poverty.

QUESTION: Let's finally turn to your present views on society. When I finished reading *Bluebeard* I thought that there was still hope left for the human race in Vonnegut's fiction. But this impression was completely changed after reading *Hocus Pocus*: we were back into the realm of dystopia and the burlesque. Mr. Vonnegut, isn't there any hope left for humans in 1995? Are you coming back to a more pessimistic view of life?

VONNEGUT: Yes, I am. But it's not simply a matter of attitude on my part. It is a matter of what is really going on. With respect to the environment, what these Republicans in Congress now want and DO is perfectly terrible! All the effort we made to rescue the environment seems now to have been completely worthless. Or, when I went to the Warsaw Pact countries: what they have done to the forests, to the rivers, to the lakes! It breaks your heart, you cannot do that to the planet! Or the Amazon rain-forest... I've concluded, from the way people act, that they don't care that life may go on. I think that most people are embarrassed by life: they can't dance, they can't sing, they are not good lovers, they don't make much money, they feel defeated, and don't give a damn if it all ends. Almost nobody cares now about these things. If we had a rally to save some natural treasure in our own country, the same eight people would protest about the waste from nuclear energy plants or whatever, the same eight people in the whole country, nobody else cares about it [Vonnegut is laughing all along his words but his laugh has turned now bitter and sarcastic].

QUESTION: Don't you think that we can still find a solution coming from scientific grounds?

VONNEGUT: Uh, I think that problems can still be solved, yes. But the issue here is that people do not care. Well, in Alcoholic Anonymous Twelve Steps formula you live one day at a time and, at the end of the day, you say, "All right, I did pretty good, I got through today" and you do not care about the future. The same happens here. Did you ever see the movie *Dr. Strangelove*? I think that what people really like about that movie, without realizing it, is the end, when the whole planet is exploding as the hydrogen-bombs fall all over the world, and there are those creamy white clouds coming up from the explosions, and the Glenn Miller's Band is playing "We'll meet again, 'don't know where, 'don't know when" [singing and laughing] – it's just so cute...

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