Kufa Journal of Arts
June 2026. No. 68, P 562-582
Faculty of Arts, University of Kufa.

مجلة آداب الكوفة
العدد ٦٨، حزيران ٢٠٢٦م، ص ٥٦٢-٥٨٢
كلية الآداب، جامعة الكوفة

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

The Cynical Turn: Irony and False Consciousness in Postmodern Fiction

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Abstract:
This paper analyzes the concept of irony in postmodern literature through Peter Sloterdijk's "cynical reason." Unlike traditional false consciousness—where ideology operates as an illusion that hides material reality from an unknowing subject—Sloterdijk's "enlightened false consciousness" describes a more resilient and insidious condition. In this state, individuals fully recognize the falsity of ideological claims and the gap between discourse and practice, yet they remain complicit, acting as if they believed. They know, but they do nothing. This paradox renders conventional critique powerless, for one cannot simply "expose" what is already known. The paper argues that postmodern fiction does not merely reflect this ironic condition but actively attempts to subvert it. Through key narrative strategies—metafiction, critical parody, and the destabilization of irony—postmodern texts force readers to confront their own detached knowingness. Using case studies of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the analysis demonstrates how these works employ self-reflexive form and exhausted irony to push through cynical paralysis. Rather than offering easy resolutions, they demand an uncomfortable reckoning with the mechanics of narrative construction, thereby opening a space for renewed ethical and political awareness. The "cynical turn" in literature thus signals not a retreat into nihilism or apolitical play, but a strategic effort to root out ideology from within—an effort that remains urgent in our own era of saturated irony and performative knowingness.
Keywords: Cynical reason; postmodern fiction; irony; false consciousness; Sloterdijk; ideology.

التحول الساخر: السخرية والوعي الزائف في الرواية ما بعد الحداثية

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الملخص:
يُحلل البحث مفهوم السخرية، الذي يعتبره أساسيًا لفهم أدب ما بعد الحداثة، مستخدمًا مصطلح بيتر سلوتريديك "العقل الساخر". وبعد هذا الوعي الزائف التقليدي، الذي لا يقل أهمية عن مفهوم ماركس الأساسي (بأن الأيديولوجيا ليست سوى قشرة زائفة تُطبق على الواقع، ووهم يقف بين الإنسانية والحقيقة الكامنة وراء كل ظاهرة، كبيرة كانت أم صغيرة)، يأتي "التنوير الزائف المستنير"، وهو تشخيص يطرحه سلوتريديك (١٩٨٧) لنوع آخر من الأيديولوجيا الناشئة، يصعب استئصالها. فعلى الرغم من أن الأفراد قد يُدركون زيف الخطابات الأيديولوجية والفجوة بين الأقوال والأفعال في سياقها، إلا أنهم ما زالوا يتفاعلون مع أوهامهم المسؤولة. إنه وضعٌ يُدرك فيه كلا الطرفين الآخر. وبعبارة أخرى، يُشير الباحث إلى أن الأعمال الأدبية لما بعد الحداثة ليست مجرد انعكاس لهذه الحالة الساخرة، بل هي محاولة جادة لتفكيكها. وذلك من خلال دراسة ثلاث استراتيجيات سردية محددة - ما وراء السرد،

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36317/kja/2026/v1.i68.23828

والمحاكاة الساخرة النقدية، وزعزعة السخرية - ومن خلال دراسات حالة لنصوص مثل "دون" في روايتي "الضوضاء البيضاء" لديللو (١٩٨٥) و"المسلخ الخمس" لكورت فونيغوت (١٩٦٩)، يُظهر هذا العمل كيف تتحدى الأشكال السردية ما بعد الحداثية قيود المعرفة المنفصلة، مُجبرةً القارئ على مواجهة ذاته. بل ويتجاوز هذا العمل الأدبي ذلك، إذ يطالب بمراجعة غير مريحة لآليات بنائه، دافعًا بذلك الشلل شبه الساخر والرضا الذاتي للعقل الساخر، ليُفسح المجال أمام وعي أخلاقي وسياسي متجدد، وإن كان محفوفًا بالمخاطر. وهكذا، لا يُشير "التحول الساخر" في الأدب إلى تراجع نحو العدمية، بل إلى جهد متقدم لاقتلاع الأيديولوجيا من الداخل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العقل الساخر، ما وراء الخيال، خيال ما بعد الحداثة، الوعي الزائف، الأيديولوجية، السخرية، ضجيج ديليلو الأبيض، مسلخ فونيغوت الخامس، نظرية السرد.

1. Introduction

We are in an era of common knowingness. The average social media user can express how algorithms channel their attention; the average voter can idly wave a hand at the role of corporate money in politics; and the average consumer can complain about brand hollowness while wearing a logo. This strange condition — of seeing through the system while also remaining fully complicit in it — shapes our present ideological terrain. It is a condition that the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk so memorably diagnosed as "cynical reason", a state he famously characterized as "enlightened false consciousness" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 12). No longer ignorant of the contradictions typical for ideology, the modern cynic is hyper-aware: ‘they know what they are doing’, yet they do it anyway’ (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 44). With this construction, we make the paradox of someone who has shattered every illusion while finding in this very clarity the reason not to act.

This era, dominated by mercantilist/capitalist philosophies, is a prime example. In traditional Marxism, false consciousness was viewed as a form of cognitive deficiency. It acted as a veil obscuring practical reality, misleading the oppressed and guiding them toward what might serve their own interests (Eagleton, 1991). Engels and Lukács are considered pioneers of the theory of false consciousness. In this model, the critic's primary task was deception: to lift the veil and reveal what was hidden; to expose the truth; to awaken them from their slumber. But Sloterdijk's contribution

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

raises a problem: he transcended criticism itself. Is it conceivable that many souls, fully awakened, still chose to remain, even long after the veil had been lifted? This is the power of the cynical mind, a worldview that contains its own downfall, one that avoids reliance on illiteracy but instead clings to and revels in false resentment.

And this is the same cultural and philosophical moment at which postmodern fiction exists and that it interrogates. Emerging from the conditions of the mid-to-late twentieth century that Sloterdijk locates—the saturation in media, the obsolescence of meta-narratives, ecological suspicion vis-à-vis models of depth—postmodern literature does not only encounter cynical reason as mirror to our bemusement; it grapples with it formally as crisis. Postmodernism has been denigrated in terms of its ironic tendency, deadpan and self-reflexive characteristics which are frequently encountered as the symptomology for a chronic cultural malaise or political ambivalence (Jameson, 1991). But this study offers a different interpretation. It asserts, particularly in its most common narrative techniques, that postmodern literature demonstrates how this purposeful and intelligent argument aligns with Sloterdijk's ironic logic. These verbal things are not merely a physical exercise, indirectly and in a satirical context - they represent a deliberate step to use the form itself as an attack on this consciousness and to establish participation in real (albeit elusive) but still equally impossible communications.

To elaborate on this argument, this paper will be organized in terms of two halves: The first half establishes the theoretical framework needed to differentiate false consciousness—what it's often called—from one another through a Sloterdijkian ironic logic that is a mixture of Marxist theory and a little bit of Sloterdijk's own concerns. In the second half, the researchers identify some sets of narrative approaches — what I call metaphysics, critical parody and destabilizing irony — each one of which becomes an enabling instrument of subversion rather than simply representation. As the last section takes this paradigm and spreads it onto great postmodern writers, namely Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985) and Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five (1969). A careful reading reveals

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

how these tales embody a sense of constrained thinking brought on by ambiguity, yet simultaneously push the narrative to its limits—given its absolute presence—as a means of escape. Ultimately, the final chapters resolve the issues surrounding the political nature of the right-and-wrong judgments associated with this shift toward skepticism, acknowledging its significance and reminding us that the effects of irony still linger.

2 .Theoretical Framework: From False Consciousness to Cynical Reason

In order to arrive at a theoretical account that invites postmodern fiction to subvert the cynical reason that Sloterdijk constructs, this essay first lays down some clear ground. This will involve a double movement: first, a brief overview of the classical notion of false consciousness as it emerged in Marxist thought; second, a thorough exegesis of Sloterdijk's diagnosis of cynical reason as the peculiar ideological formation of late modernity. Only by recognizing the break from one model to another can one understand the distinctive problem cynical reason poses for critique—and the innovative response any literature that attempts to oppose it must work through.

3. False Consciousness: The Traditional View

False consciousness is a concept stemming from the Marxist tradition that attempts to explain why class inequalities persist despite the existence of objectively contradictory material interests on behalf of the proletariat. Although Karl Marx used this term specifically, the basis of what he wrote on ideology set the foundations for its future understanding. Marx and Engels (1988) famously suggested in The German Ideology that: "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (p. 67). In other words, it indicates that the ruling class is not a simple one, which holds its rule over society more through direct and material coercion than through intellectual domination, but rather an entity that constitutes the categories in perception by which oppressed groups understand their world.

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The term “false consciousness” is itself usually credited to Friedrich Engels, who used it in a letter to Franz Mehring to refer to the processes by which illusions of ideology are produced and sustained. Engels (1968) states that ideology is a false consciousness because the thinker does not recognize what social and economic forces form his or her own thoughts (p. 697). According to this view, the partisan also suffers from a sort of cognitive blindness: He mistakes static arrangements within his society for eternal truths, and mistakes the interests of the ruling class for those in service to human flourishing.

Later Marxist theorists, especially Georg Lukács developed and refined this model further. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács (1971) introduced "reification" to explain the process by which the commodity form permeates every aspect of consciousness in capitalist societies—producing a world that appears to be solidified, calculable and permanent —a "second nature" that hides its own historical and social mediation from view (p. 86). For Lukács, the task of revolutionary theory was to penetrate this reified surface; it consisted in exposing the dynamic social relations hidden beneath it, and thus awakening the proletariat to its historical mission. As Terry Eagleton (1991) summarizes it, ideologies within this classical framework are a question of ‘false consciousness’ as in some more or less systematic misperception of reality, which can be theoretically exposed and practically dissipated (p. 182).

The essential operation indicated by this model is hermeneutic and pedagogical. Either the theorist or the vanguard party occupies a position of privileged insight, wielding the conceptual instruments needed to lift the veil of illusions and reveal truth before those still enmeshed in falsity. This operation presupposes, however, a certain amount of ignorance on the part of the subjects of ideology and that knowledge will be enough to volition action. It is this very presupposition that Sloterdijk’s analysis of cynical reason calls into question.

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4. Sloterdijk's Cynical Reason: The Enlightened Subject

One of the most monumental attempts to think again about the role of ideology in daily life as the disappointments of the twentieth century became apparent was Peter Sloterdijk's Critique of Cynical Reason, published in German in 1983 and translated into English four years later. In it, the work begins with a bold diagnostic that this old false consciousness has now turned into what is an insidious new integration of cynicism (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 5). This "integrated cynicism" does not simply mean we return to pre-critical naivety; in fact, it is the opposite of that — through a consciousness that processes Enlightenment lessons, that saw through every ideal and value, yet goes on acting as if it hadn't.

There is distinction between two types of cynicism orthographically in German. On one end, there's classical Cynicism — the brash, embodied, anti-philosophical provocation of figures like Diogenes, who relied on coarse physical gestures to puncture the pretensions of Platonic idealism. If it is, however, a pre-modern, subversive practice, a kind of "cheekiness" that defies power from below, then what? Conversely, we also have the postmodern Zionism's —the "illuminated false consciousness" of late capitalist subjects, a "twilight of the idols," which yields not liberation but a meekness, a functional adaptation to whatever is and how things really are (Sloterdijk, 1987. pp. 5-105). As Sloterdijk explains:

> The new, integrated cynicism has the double ability, on the basis of enlightenment, to see the falseness of conditions and at the same time to find the strength and cleverness to survive in them. The cynical consciousness is the modern, enlightened false consciousness, armed against any idealism and any form of moral appeals (p. 5)

This is precisely what Sloterdijk offers here. The pessimist wasn't deluded by utopian illusions; he survived unscathed after a harsh reckoning. Historical revolutions collapsed (literally) before they could be completed. Ideals became excuses. Moral arguments are no longer convincing, so autocratic rulers dictate the course of language

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development. Growth provides large institutions with relative benefits far exceeding their expenditure. The individual is treated as a commodity of individual labor, and this understanding goes unchallenged. Instead, a veneer is formed—reasons for participation, presented as actions that confer meaning (Sloterdijk, 1987).

Doubt weighs heavily on them, like the shadow of sorrow (Sloterdijk, 1987). Things are not going well, but it is not the rejection itself that is worsening, rather the silent fear that creeps in. Change is difficult now; what they know is too painful. They are not easily swayed by the judgments of others; they have seen the truth for years without complaint. When lies are exposed, the pessimists do not flinch. They have paved the way for deception long before it occurs. Their strength lies in a quiet clarity, accompanied by a kind of passive resignation.

2.3. From Theory to Literature: The Postmodern Bridge

After World War II, novels began to appear at an accelerated pace, coinciding with Sloterdijk's observations of societal transformations. Politics not only gained a glimmer of hope, but its imagery permeated the details of daily life, while faith in grand ideas waned. Writers like Vonnegut and Pynchon adapted their styles in response, reflecting a reality in which truth seemed fragile. Over time, their books aligned with his views and then evolved alongside them. From this familiar form emerged the bitter tone he observed, those unsettling passages grappling with the reality of things. Television distorted reality, yet novels piled upon one another, making everything more unsettling with each layer. Although built upon old patterns, his vision cracked under the weight of endless possibilities.

What characterizes postmodern culture is not depth of feeling — but diffused flatness penetrates into it, shaped by operation of late capitalism. Intersubjectivity in art here also fails as postmodern works become the blank copy (parody), pastiche or mimic of the forms without resistance or meaningful message (Jameson, 1991). Viewed through this

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

lens, though, stories from that period may not be countering chilly reason at all; rather they demonstrate what happens when such thought processes seep into the words themselves: prose goes numb even as it describes its own vacuity.

In another perspective this piece shows something else. And while Jameson's take packs a punch, what appears in many of the century's greatest postmodern works is not just indifference to or cannibalization of intellectual resources, but actual struggle against it. These stories rattle the comfort readers feel about thinking they already understand what is out there, with metafiction, parody or even sarcasm. So because cool skepticism resists its blunt truth like a shield, something sideways becomes necessary. Only writing that turns reflection inward can break such armor. However, these audacious novels operate with the instruments of their own manufacture, rebelling, in turn, as a mirror held to doubt.

3. Narrative Strategies of Subversion: The Postmodern Toolkit

Having established the theoretical distinction between misunderstanding and ironic rationality, this section moves to the concept of writing style. If ironic rationality is an enlightened false consciousness that has evolved to resist direct propaganda exposure (Sloterdijk, 1987), then any literature that seeks to undermine it must do so indirectly. A story built on a pristine surface and profound intellect presents reality to the stranger, but it ultimately fades before indifference.

When the information we have is present but irrelevant, the coherence of reality weakens. Clearly constructed narratives find their vitality elsewhere. Instead of presenting reality without distortion, these narratives distort it. In this way, they offer a glimpse beneath the surface, assuring you that these are merely words. Others take on the role of voices to distort them in reverse, revealing gaps in our perception. Some ideas are so distorted that they lose their certainty. Each of these actions undermines perfection, not authority, and leads to complacency. What grows here is a

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tool, not a prize. The sense of comfort is pushed back by a force greater than the force of form.

3.1. Metafiction and the Shattering of Illusion

Metaphysics is a text that consciously and systematically confronts the mechanisms of fiction, relying on literary allusions (Waugh, 1984). Despite its decline, metaphysics is still prominent in postmodern texts. Rather than treating the structure as a self-parody play, these writers shape readers ' response through this self-awareness.

In metaphysical literature, there is a transformative power in its ability to dismantle the illusion of openness upon which traditional responses are based. When a writer emerges from behind the veil to deliver information directly to the audience, or when a book reveals part of its compositional mechanisms, the reader is compelled to move from a state of passive consumption of the story to a conscious awareness of the text as a text. This is especially potent disruption in terms of cynical reason. The jaded reader who has mastered the art of remaining at a distance, knowing, detached, finding that detachment inverted upon itself. They are not even able to watch the illusion from a safe distance, as the text denies the possibility of propping up an illusion (Solterdijks, 1987, p. 453).

Take John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which self-consciously calls upon the conventions of Victorian realism only to systematically transgress against them. The narrator interjects to assess the characters, to argue the philosophy of fiction and, in the end, to present the reader with a handful of conflicting conclusions. As Fowles (1969) writes — remarkable prose that addresses the reader's wish to possess our authors: "You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it. fictionalize it (p. 97). This metafictional gesture not only reveals the artifice of the narrative, but also implicates the reader in that artifice, implying a parallel between the processes of selection and suppression at work in it and those on which our comprehension of reality itself relies. The sophisticated reader, who can see behind the curtain of his movie-magic fantasies, must

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contend with the fact that their own consciousness is generated by other fictions of equal complexity and plausibility.

Italo Calvino (1979) takes this strategy to its logical extreme in If on a winter's night a traveler. What the novel offers, and all it offers, is a structure that is built up entirely around the reader's desire for story — and the constant frustration of that desire. Each chapter opens with the same reader, addressed directly as "you," attempting to read Calvino's novel only to be thwarted by interruptions and misprints and narrative digressions that guide him into other fictions — equally unfinished ones. You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel If on a winter's night a traveler, which is being published today by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. Words cut through the world outside Words that say "let the world around you fall away" (p. 3). The mandate to "relax" and "concentrate" is promptly undermined by the novel's refusal to fulfill the very desire it kindles. The reader, like the cynical subject, can feel they're being manipulated but keeps reading: a model enactment of Sloterdijk's formula. By revealing this mechanism, Calvino asks the reader to examine their cooperation in responding to and understanding the narrative, and this may create a space for many ideas that are not allowed by the smooth illusion.

3.2. Ideological Critique: Pastiche and Parody

The distinction between parody and imitation is historically significant, and this has been a focus of postmodernist discussions. Perhaps the most prominent example is their inclusion within what is known as "blank parody," where it represents the medium itself, not a conventional art form—a "statue with blind eyes" that merely reproduces past methods without any satirical or critical dimension. Jameson argues that this is a pattern of cultural logic rooted in late capitalism: a loss of historical depth and critical capacity, leading contemporary artists to work only "through dead forms" (1991).

Although Jameson's research is profound, it doesn't address the role of postmodernism inherent in mimesis. This is where Hutcheon's (1988)

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proposal in "metaphysical historical novel" comes in, offering a framework for distinguishing between stereotyping and satire. She adds that parody is not simply mockery, but rather a repetition imbued with its own satirical element, thus revealing the weaknesses of mimesis. This type of satire doesn't abandon old tools; instead, it builds upon them, exposes their flaws, and makes stereotyping seem strange through internal analysis.

This approach is essential for understanding the conflict between election campaigns and cynical rationality in detail. Not all aspects of parody are effective; some trace the past, destined for oblivion, but are like a fish trapped in a glass tank. On the other hand, skillful parody uses imitation to reveal the messages hidden within familiar images. Echoes of government documents, a modern tale disguised as a Victorian narrative, or detective allusions—these melodies transcend the boundaries of mere echo, transforming ordinary forms into mirrors. Under pressure, these concepts of self, truth, and time, come to the fore.

Hutcheon (1988) suggests that this move is inherently political: "Parody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it ironically both includes and contests what it parodies [...]" (p. 11). This double movement corresponds precisely to the form of subversion demanded by cynical reason. The cynical subject cannot be reached by a pure exteriority, however, since they have seen through such moves. By writing from within, by mimicking the conventions it critiques, parody provides a means of stuffing critique into the very cognition that has vaccined itself against direct assault.

3.3 Irony as a Double-Edged Sword

Any discussion of postmodernism must touch on the question of irony, which has become arguably the dominant mode of contemporary cultural expression. Irony, at its most abstract, is saying one thing while meaning another which opens a gap between surface and depth the reader is invited to cross (Nicol, 2009, p. 13). This is an obvious structure of cynical reason itself, which maintains a chasm between knowing and doing; between knowledge of falsity or contradiction and behavior that

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remains untroubled by it. The question is simply whether irony (as it has been understood) can ever be a tool for subversion — or whether it will remain forever shackled to precisely the kind of detachment that it might make an effort to transcend.

Identifying the philosophical lineage of irony from Socrates through German Romanticism to contemporary theory, Claire Colebrook (2004) describes the types of irony, one functioning as a vehicle for transcendent truth and another undermining all claims to truth at all. The problem with irony in its postmodern variety is that it can take on an "infinite, absolute and radical," character that denies any stable ground upon which critique could work (p. 153). This infinite irony is the structure of cynical reason: It knows everything, nothing is worth committing itself to, and it finds in its own knowingness an excuse for perpetual suspension.

But some theorists and practitioners have sought to move beyond that impasse. Contemporary literary fiction, which wriggles into the legacy of postmodernism, evokes what he calls a "post-ironic" sensibility. Post-irony formulation does not deny irony as such but rather “works through” it, acknowledging the inevitable power of ironic critique and yet finally aspiring toward modes of commitment and sincerity (Konstantinou, 2016). This “post-ironic” movement is not a return to naïveté, pre-critique, but an advanced kind of awareness, shaped as learning from deconstruction without relinquishing the possibility of belief.

The writers of postmodernism who are most relevant to this study can be considered predecessors of this post-ironic sensibility. They use irony not as an end in itself but to undercut it, to send it up the flagpole far enough that we can recognize its limits. When Kurt Vonnegut (1969) asserts “So it goes” each time a character in *Slaughterhouse-Five* dies, the refrain becomes ironic and builds to an intolerable degree. The reader is capable of achieving this — maintain a withdrawn, ironic position as it applies to the Tralfamadorian belief in enduring pleasure in the realm of death — but has a progressively hard time preserving that mentality as the dead mount up. The absurdities are reflexive, requiring consequences that simple delay won’t bring about.

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

Perhaps this unusual cycle of expansion is the most lethal tool of postmodernism against rational thought. Instead of discriminating against irony, it embraces it from within, expanding the scope of contempt to the point of fracturing. Yet, as Sloterdijk (1987) himself points out (1987), the pessimist's perspective is inherently unstable, producing a "marginal melancholy" that cannot last forever (p. 126). The most extreme forms of postmodern irony exacerbate this situation, rendering the pessimistic consumer anonymous in a state of perceiving reality without acting.

4 .Case Studies: Fiction in the Crucible of Cynicism

For a closer look at contemporary examples, the study explores two prominent novels heavily influenced by postmodern thought: Kurt Vonnegut's (1969) Slaughterhouse-Five and Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985). These novels are not isolated from one another; each offers a new area of exploration and a form of writing that resists the cold pragmatism masquerading as wisdom. One captivates with the awe of shopping, the other with a fast-paced tragedy, but both draw inspiration from the emotional hurdles they overcome.

Instead of employing clear narrative structures, they develop fragmented forms that gradually undermine confidence in understanding what is happening. Upon careful reading, it becomes clear that they not only express irony but also violate its tendency to establish a foundation of authenticity. What begins as irony ultimately empties irony of its substance. Their structure is not conducive to confusion; rather, it embraces ambiguity, leading to a loss of solutions. As for providing answers, the narratives diminish the desire to know anything for certain. Even the strongest doubts lose their grip when every pillar is shaky. Ultimately, the separation becomes meaningless, and what seems sharp or clever becomes mere monotony.

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5. Don DeLillo's *White Noise*: The Paralysis of Hyper-Awareness

Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) is a work of the most penetrating literary examination of contemporary consciousness under late capitalism. The story centers on Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies at a small liberal arts college, and his family as they navigate — through a comical set of experiences — the signature phenomena of American life: academic pretension; consumer culture; media saturation; the ever-encroaching threat of death. But what makes *White Noise* different from the average social satire is its immersion in the very organization's structure of cynical reason. The Gladneys — and their world — don't suffer from ignorance; they suffer from a paralyzing surplus of awareness.

From its opening pages, the novel creates a world where characters are super-aware of the ideological forces which act on them. At the College-on-the-Hill, its students and faculty converse in the fluent jargon of academic theory, dating back at least to the postwar era, deconstructing with ease the very cultural artifacts they study. This knowingness is explicitly articulated by Jack's colleague Murray Siskind when he describes the supermarket as a place of great spiritual significance: "Everything's hidden in symbolism, covered over with veils of light and language but there is something simple here, honest, basic truth" (DeLillo, 1985, p. 38). Murray's commentary exposes the cynical posture: he sees through superficial banality of the supermarket to deep meaning, and yet this insight leads him to no change in behavior. He shops, he consumes, he participates.

The Gladney's relationship to television is perhaps the very embodiment of Sloterdijk's ever-relevant observation that "they know what they are doing, but they do it anyway" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 5). The purpose that excites Jack is not to express a sense of fear, but rather to allow his pain to sink into the deepest layers of thought, a process fraught with its own crisis. Books feed his ideas about death, and all his conversations with his peers periodically descend to this depth, like hazy glimpses of a phenomenon on the horizon. Death is seen as stemming from

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

the many accumulations of civilization and demands serious study. However, knowing all its details and requirements offers no new solace, nor does it motivate anyone to accomplish anything significant. All the characters who populate Dello's novels find themselves caught between understanding and inability, revolving in two orbits: the ability to see clearly and the unwillingness to play any significant role (Lentricchia, 1991). If given the opportunity to imagine it, they would not truly fear death: they are aware that it is inevitable; they have long known how the capitalist system exploits this unsettling feeling, and they understand that attempting to achieve complete immortality through fame, family, or wealth is futile. Nevertheless, they continue on their way, clinging to those winding paths.

The novel's overall narrative style on this subject contradicts the reader's sense of ironic alienation. DeLillo's style is reflective, contemplative, and deeply rooted in the language of the mainstream media he represents. His pronouncements echo the rhythms of advertisements, the superficiality of television programs, and the convoluted details of academic lectures. For example, when Jack Gladney reflects on his academic celebrity, DeLillo writes: “I am the false character that follows the name around. The name is the thing, the real thing. Hitler is the name, the thing, the reality. I am the false character that follows the name around. The force of the name is absolute. The name is the source of all power, all meaning, all truth” (DeLillo, 1985, p. 17). Here, the staccato repetition, the pseudo-profound declarative sentences, and the self-canceling logic, the false character that follows the name around, mimic both the empty authority of advertising slogans and the jargon-laden circularity of academic theory. The reader, like the characters, listens to and decodes this text, feeling a sense of superiority. Yet, the novel clearly suggests that there is no independent perspective from which to view it. LeClair (1987) defines it differently, declaring that DeLillo engages the reader in the very systems that create the representations the novel aims to target (p. 112). We were not immune to the white noise, but within it, our own experience faded into just another echo.

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This narrative technique culminates in the novel's dramatic setting, inside a department store. The characters, like the readers, have experienced tragedy; they have gained knowledge, or so we are supposed to believe. Yet the store remains standing; its shelves rearranged, its symbols distorted, and the customers still bewildered, but steadfast. Only the book offers opportunities for atonement, redemption, or periodic reconciliation. On the contrary, the book traps the reader in the dilemma it has identified, forcing them to confront the limits of critique without the slightest hope of resolution or compensation.

6. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Trauma, atalism, and the Exhaustion of Irony

From the ruins of Dresden, Germany, Vonnegut built his novel Slaughterhouse-Five (1969), drawing on his own experience under enemy lines during World War II. The protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, observes the devastation wrought on the urban environment but suddenly becomes isolated, drifting between fragments of his memories. His breath fades in moments, and the past and future blur together until creatures from Tralfamadore arrive to destroy everything. Instead of escaping the torment, the narrative takes strange turns to accompany him, allowing the imagination to interact with the memories. What happens in the mind after the tragedy is not revealed in conversations, but in moments of silence and gaps. How the characters allow the pain to surface, then transform it into something else, hidden, deeper than their daily lives or beliefs—this is also part of the novel.

Billy Pilgrim casts a disturbing glance at the wreckage beneath him, his silence more eloquent than any scream. The inhabitants have seized what they have seized, and those who hover in the place transcend reason, and as a result, their unspoken logic gathers like a sponge gathers water. The people of Tralfamadorians do not experience time as a river, but as an environment. Everything is diffused, ever-present; the present, the future, and the past are mere ridges on a map they can stare at any moment. A corpse? That's just one image of humanity—they live

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somewhere, so who cares? Every time death is mentioned, explicitly or implicitly, the words float by: “So it goes” (Vonnegut, 1969, p. 27), first encountered this almost on page 27 of Vonnegut's earlier long novel. The statement emerges bit by bit, caught between explosions, obstacles and small twists - it essentially prevents the loss from being seen while darkness catches up with the form.

There's something Billy focuses on: he's burning inside without any sign of it. Not in his appearance, not a tear on his brow, just a silent surrender. He goes through life as if everything is influenced by what he sees in that Western narrative. Symbols clustered nearby, and then environments between oases of imagination, which in turn form clusters that appear later. He can't express them with words, yet their form makes things somewhat structurally logical without any need for explanation. That silence between the riddles? Could it be more eloquent than words? The tenderness of his surrender isn't weakness; it complements how things take shape. Often, pain becomes something we live with when we stop resisting it. Moments accumulate like an unread narrative where meaning lies in the place, not in the sound. The most painful situations become manageable if you can see them as analogies. Narratives need interruptions, just as language expands, so too must existence.

When one looks closely at Billy's arrangement of consciousness, the similarity to Sloterdijk's cynical logic appears clear and unmistakable. Billy has known the truth about Dresden. He has witnessed it firsthand, pulled dead bodies from the rubble, and survived to tell about it. This knowledge, however, brings no political response, no moral outrage, no promise of prevention. Instead, it yields a gentle, melancholy detachment, an acceptance of future atrocities with the same equanimity. Billy has reached enlightenment and found it unbearable. As Sloterdijk (1987) writes: “The cynical consciousness is the modern, enlightened false consciousness, armed against any idealism and any form of moral appeals” (p. 5). Having seen through all ideals, Billy immunizes himself against further moral claims. As Sloterdijk (1987) would put it, this moment leads Billy to retreat into a cynical legibility where he is untouchable.

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Vonnegut's most radical formal act in the novel is to insert himself as a character. This is a circular chapter, in which we start with the author wrestling with how to write about Dresden and then mostly watch him hang out with war buddies, drink alone or otherwise fail to find form for his trauma.

Vonnegut (1969) says: "I would hate to tell you what this lousy little book cost me in money and anxiety and time. But I always knew in the end I was going to do it" (p. 2). This metafictional frame destroys any illusion that the novel offers a dispassionate, ironic take on its subject. The author is there, naked, complicit. When you read it like a document, stepping back doesn't play - there is no soft distance to spare the space into which Billy fades. Even if we understand every instant, as Georges Clemenceau gazes through his glasses at the remnants of war (now and then he grumbles, "A lunatic can sleep"), the writer struggles against that stillness as well. By no means pretending this is a fictional drama. It lives beneath the skin. Real dread and not imagined.

The problem of how things get shown comes to the front - Vonnegut isn't going to let anyone pretend that words create a clear pane into the past. Beneath each sentence lies an unconventional novelist and reader: when imaginative discourse falters, traditional narrative forms collapse, and a painful, almost unbearable sense of doubt takes hold. This novel does not provide a satisfying ending; rather, it makes us intensely focused on continuing the search, and on the current situation.

4.3 Comparative Reflections

It is truly remarkable how precisely Dello captures the noise hidden behind advertising, the simultaneous flow of screens, and the relentless obsession with daily consumption, as if we are all looking with wide eyes yet powerless. There is no escaping what he means, no turning back; we are clearly living what he depicts. Then there is Vonnegut: memories are unleashed, ancient tragedies are transformed into sarcastic remarks, and conflicts are reduced to mere absurdities. But his narrative, however confusing—spinning like a distorted cassette tape—offers no respite. One

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traps us in the gloom of the present; the other carries the devastation of the past forward—and neither allows us to easily escape. Billy's hardened nature is not an inherited trait, as in Vonnegut's works. It is the abuse of everything available for resistance that fractures the narrative, not a tranquil surrender as the Tralfamadoriansare supposed to teach. Through the repetition of events, their unusual stillness draws attention. The phrase "So it goes" is not used to alleviate suffering, but rather to highlight it. Memories of tranquility vanish wherever that inescapable death is invoked.

However, both literary works are also characterized by a kind of dedication to undermining, rather than merely expressing, pessimistic rationality. In an atmosphere of enlightened false consciousness, direct perception becomes entirely futile, since revealing hidden truths only confirms the pessimist's prior knowledge of reality. Instead, they employ formal techniques that fold understanding in on itself, forcing the reader to question the limits of detachment. As Nicole (2009) clearly suggests, the postmodern novel is not merely a reflection of keeping up with late modernity, but also an impulse that involves a struggle against this hegemony, using its form as a tool for critiquing the bitter reality.

The conflict persists, out of control and chaos. It remains perpetually beyond the reach of any authority, and no single narrator issues a command to act against these cold, inert ideas, let alone provide any guidance for translating thought into action. Yet, this very clarity resonates with what is at stake. A new text promising answers that dispel doubts will either be suppressed or will crumble upon release, revealing nothing but a mirage in the desert or smoke in a transparent glass gallery. By denying such false resolution, DeLillo and Vonnegut keep alive the pressure of critique that an attitude of knowing cynicism would prevent us from pursuing in some interesting way.

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5. Conclusion

This paper has argued that double-coded postmodern fiction does not merely mirror cynical reason but actively subverts it. Sloterdijk's (1987) "enlightened false consciousness" describes a subject who knows their condition yet acts complicitly, their very awareness shielding them from critique. Against this resilient ideology, traditional exposure fails. What is needed is an oblique critique that turns knowingness back on itself, using both form and content .Metafiction, critical parody, and destabilized irony provide such a critique. In DeLillo's White Noise, prose saturated with media language refuses exterior judgment. In Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse-Five, fragmented structure and metafiction block fatalistic detachment. Both novels use form to unsettle cynical consciousness. The cynic is over-enlightened, not ignorant. Postmodern fiction cultivates a different relation to information by rejecting easy consumption. Moving past cynicism requires a cynical practice that re-embodies thought. The reader emerges unsettled, not liberated. This modest achievement clears the ground for renewed engagement, even if it cannot by itself bring it into being.

1- Data Availability Statement: (The manuscript includes all the data used in the study.)
2- Conflict of Interest Statement: (The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest that could affect the content of this research.)
3- Funding Statement: This research was fully funded by the authors without any financial support from other entities.

ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317

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ISSN (Print): 1994-8999, ISSN (online): 2664-469X. DOI Prefix: 10.36317