

# Measuring the World Anew

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*Miller & Pynchon*, by Leopold Maurer. Vienna: Luftschacht, 2009. 176 pp. €20.

"How much?"

"Twelve meters."

"Sure?"

"Sure."

"Add six meters, and we land on . . . three hundred and sixty meters."<sup>1</sup>

This sober exchange between the two title characters marks the beginning of Austrian Leopold Maurer's new graphic novel, *Miller & Pynchon*. The two characters are measuring the world, like the characters in another recent Germanic work, Daniel Kehlmann's wonderful novel *Measuring the World* (2005, English translation 2006), a story of the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss and the explorer Alexander von Humboldt. Through a fictionalized account of their travails in the early nineteenth century, Kehlmann's bestseller tells the story of how during the Enlightenment scientific rationality conquered the world and changed it forever.

In interviews upon the publication of *Measuring the World*, Daniel Kehlmann granted that his novel had been very inspired by *Mason & Dixon*, and it is certainly not difficult to spot the many thematic similarities between Kehlmann's and Pynchon's accounts of scientific expeditions and the "corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick" (*M&D* 487), which according to both authors took place during the Enlightenment. This historical process was first discussed by Pynchon in his essay "Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?" and of course treated much more extensively in *Mason & Dixon*, for instance in the story of Dixon's fantastic journey to the inner surface of the earth. The inhabitants of this mythical realm greet Dixon cordially, even though his presence may threaten their very existence. As Dixon recounts, "Once the solar parallax is known," they told me, "once the necessary Degrees are measur'd, and the size and weight and shape of the Earth are calculated inescapably at last, all this will vanish. We will have to seek another Space" (741). From a purely scientific standpoint, the measuring of the world is a more or less inevitable process which carries along many benefits, but Pynchon's novels argue that it also contributes to the marginalization and eventual disappearance of those magical and fantastical realms that have always played an important part in

human imagination and culture. Indeed, when The Chums of Chance revisit the hollow Earth in *Against the Day*, the entrance seems to be shrinking:

Skyfarers here had been used to seeing flocks of the regional birds spilling away in long helical curves, as if to escape being drawn into some vortex inside the planet sensible only to themselves, as well as the withdrawal, before the advent of the more temperate climate within, of the eternal snows, to be replaced first by tundra, then grassland, trees, even at last a settlement or two, just at the Rim, like border towns [. . .].

On this trip, however, the polar ice persisted until quite close to the great portal, which itself seemed to have become *noticeably smaller*, with a strange sort of ice-mist, almost the color of the surface landscape, hovering over it and down inside [. . .]. (115)

While Kehlmann's novel in its appropriation of such ideas is loosely inspired by *Mason & Dixon*, Maurer's *Miller & Pynchon* is not so much inspired by, as a regular rewriting and remediation of Pynchon's novel. On the whole, Pynchon's novels lend themselves naturally to graphic adaptations. Like Chu Piang's opium dreams, they are filled with "situations, journeys, comedy" (*GR* 347)—all traditional staples of the comic book genre—and the rich imagery and descriptive prose of the novels often seem to have been composed with a painter's brush. A quick image search on Google reveals that a number of artists have created illustrations to Pynchon's work, especially the endlessly inspiring *Gravity's Rainbow*. The crowning achievement so far is of course Zak Smith's impressive *Pictures Showing What Happens On Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow* (2006), originally exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2004, and now in the permanent collection of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

Leopold Maurer (born 1969) is an Austrian artist who studied Sociology at the University of Vienna and attended the Academy of Fine Arts, also in Vienna. In addition to his studies, he obviously found the time to read a lot of fiction, since *Miller & Pynchon* is unusually rich in intertextuality and literary references. Two minor characters in the book are named Thomas and Bernhard, after the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-89), whose work inspired William Gaddis' *Agapē Agape*. Another character in the book—a crocodile, no less—is called Hoffmann, in honor of the German Romantic author E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822). Furthermore, we meet a Coraghessan (after T. Coraghessan Boyle), and the hedonistic womanizer Miller is clearly inspired by Henry Miller.

First and foremost, though, *Miller & Pynchon* is an extended and elaborate homage to *Mason & Dixon*. When we first meet Miller and Pynchon they are measuring a demarcation line between North and South in some nameless country. Like Mason and Dixon, they go about their work with traditional

surveyor's instruments like rods and chains. Initially, this seems only natural, but later we learn that the two characters live in a modern day and age rife with high speed bullet trains, glass-fronted skyscrapers, and, one would suppose, modern surveying equipment. Maurer's book thus has a different slant than *Mason & Dixon* and *Measuring the World*, which are both set in the past. *Miller & Pynchon* is set in our present, but the protagonists proceed as though it was set in the past. The two characters are indeed measuring the world, but they are measuring a world which has already been measured through and through. As opposed to Mason and Dixon, then, Miller and Pynchon are not really instrumental in the "corruption and disabling of the ancient Magick." They are carrying out work which has already been done, and this meaningless repetition identifies them as anachronisms on a fool's errand.

Early in the book, the anachronistic couple meet two young women and let them in on their important mission. The women curiously inquire whether they are surveyors, but the bumbling and sweating Pynchon quickly retorts, "Not quite, gracious madam. Your humble servant is an astronomer and a mathematician. My colleague Miller is a surveyor" (13). In other words, we are firmly in *Mason & Dixon* territory, with the melancholy astronomer Pynchon standing in for Mason, and the "draufgängerisch" Miller for the cheerful Dixon.

Pynchon's melancholy stems from having lost his wife Helene ten years previously. The astronomer can't seem to put the loss behind him and move on with his life, and even a decade after her death, he stills finds her face in the comets he observes in the night sky. Once again, *Miller & Pynchon* more or less seems to conform to the pattern set by Thomas Pynchon's novel, but Maurer has several surprises in store for his readers. Helene did not die in childbirth, as readers of *Mason & Dixon* would expect, but in a terrible tragedy where she was steam-rolled by a gigantic runaway cheese. Maurer may include many well-known elements from Pynchon's novel, but the way in which he employs those elements is refreshingly irreverent. He playfully reshuffles them and forges something new in the process. Occasionally he even turns matters on their head, as in the title of his book, where the honorable astronomer Pynchon has to suffer the indignity of having his name mentioned after his lowly surveyor partner. Imagine the agony Mason would have gone through if subjected to a similar insult.<sup>2</sup>

Maurer's mismatched protagonists proceed on several adventures together ("enough to fill several winter evenings"), during which they drink a lot of coffee and eat their fair share of bananas (and, inevitably, slip on the peels and fall on their asses). During their travels they employ sturdy axmen, encounter a mechanical duck, and upon entering a cave during a storm they discover a cut-off ear with magical properties (recalling Mason's encounter with Jenkin's Ear). Furthermore, they acquire a faithful sidekick, the speaking sewer crocodile Hoffmann, who has escaped from the sewers to go search

for his father. Apparently, Maurer read more than one Pynchon novel, which further becomes evident when the protagonists run across (and fall into) a giant footprint, reminiscent of the scene with Takeshi at Chipco Labs in *Vineland*.

Two thirds through the book, our intrepid explorers assiduously climb a mountain, only to be met at the top by Coraghessan, an emissary from the Consul General who hands them a new assignment. They are to proceed to the Cape of Good Hope to observe the Transit of Venus, in order to help obtain the solar parallax—as if the distance to the sun hadn't already been measured down to within the last inch in the age of bullet trains! Once again, Miller and Pynchon are portrayed as anachronisms on a fool's errand, and the atavistic nature of their endeavors is underscored when the two friends prepare to climb down the mountain again. From his perch atop Miller's shoulder, Hoffmann curiously asks how Coraghessan managed the strenuous climb to the top, only to be told that he naturally took the cable car. Mason and Dixon may have been at the vanguard of modern science; Miller and Pynchon are clearly stranded in the wrong century. Nevertheless, as good, obedient soldiers in the service of Scientific Progress, the two embark on an ocean liner to South Africa, accompanied by their new trigger-happy bodyguards, Thomas and Bernhard. What they discover beneath the scorching sun of South Africa, however, is not so much scientific truth as deep personal truths, on a par with those Kurt Mondaugen found at Foppl's villa in V.

In my introduction to Maurer's book I have naturally focused on the many connections to Pynchon which, after all, are the sole reason *Miller & Pynchon* is reviewed in the present journal. This approach may give an impression of a derivative or even parasitic work, which is entirely dependent on its host and can't stand on its own. And sometimes *Miller & Pynchon* does seem to be constructed of nothing but allusions, not only to Pynchon, but also to other figures from literature and art history. Some of Maurer's landscapes are very reminiscent of Van Gogh's swirling landscapes, and some of his persons seem to be taken right out of Picasso. Multi-allusive works like *Miller & Pynchon* usually carry their own pleasure for the well-read reader, who can amuse himself by catching and mapping the many references. It is often the case with such works, however, that this mapping of allusions is the primary, if not the sole, pleasure. Such works have a tendency to sink under the intertextual burden and never really succeed on their own terms, as works with a clear identity. The truth is, however, that Maurer's book functions surprisingly well on its own terms. Even at its most similar to Pynchon's novel, it never seems merely derivative, and the action frequently shoots off in unexpected directions, as when Miller turns out to be a werewolf.

In its constant oscillation between low-key storytelling and foregrounded allusions to various figures from pictorial art and literature, Maurer's graphic novel constitutes an intriguing combination of the two principal

styles of remediation discussed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their influential book *Remediation*, namely transparent immediacy and hypermediacy. The strategy of transparent immediacy aims to ignore or deny the presence of the medium, whereas the strategy of hypermediacy evinces a clear fascination with the medium itself. As a result of the able deployment of this double strategy of remediation, the reader of Maurer's work is constantly shuffled back and forth between absorption and estrangement, between a willing suspension of disbelief and a total annihilation of the illusion of reality.

The Austrian and German reviews of the book demonstrate how well *Miller & Pynchon* succeeds on its own terms. Most of the reviews were resoundingly positive, but interestingly they often failed to notice, or at least to mention, any sort of connection to *Mason & Dixon*. It undoubtedly provides an extra *frisson* to identify the many allusions in *Miller & Pynchon* and to discover the extent of Maurer's subtle dialogue with Thomas Pynchon, but it is clearly not necessary to catch all the references in order to enjoy this original graphic novel.

"Graphic novel" may in fact not be the right name for what Maurer has created. The term has gradually come to be an accepted label for a medium which also includes such works as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-04), and Posy Simmonds' *Gemma Boverly* (1999), but the term is still a contested one. Critics of the genre feel that the "novel" part of the term is a blatant attempt to elevate a genre which should not be elevated at all, and even from within the medium there appears to be a widespread dissatisfaction with the term. The author of *Watchmen* (1987), Alan Moore, dismisses the term as "something that was thought up in the 80s by marketing people," and says that "the term 'comic' does just as well for me." Art Spiegelman likewise prefers the term "comics" (even though his gloomy masterpiece *Maus* must be one of the least comic comics in existence). In an interview with *The Economist*, Spiegelman quipped, "I'm called the father of the modern graphic novel. If that's true, I want a blood test. 'Graphic novel' sounds more respectable, but I prefer 'comics' because it credits the medium. ['Comics'] is a dumb word, but that's what they are" (Moskowitz).

Leopold Maurer also refers to his own book as a comic, and his (and Moore's and Spiegelman's) preferred label is admittedly a fitting one for *Miller & Pynchon*. Despite its bleak sounding board, the entire work is shot through with a subtle, bitter-sweet humor, which binds the chapters together and sets Maurer's book somewhat apart from its model. The black-and-white drawings are at once simple and very expressive, and support the low-key tone of the book very well.<sup>3</sup> While not without its runaway cheeses and moments of hilarious slapstick, Maurer's comedy is much less expansive than Pynchon's zany humor. He has created a subdued, touching and subtle story of two men adrift (wonderfully captured in Maurer's cover image of the two friends

caught naked in a lake, after having their clothes pilfered by those two Eager Fräuleins), who travel the world together and gradually learn to accept and respect each other. This may once again sound very much like *Mason & Dixon*, and the similarities are obviously many and intended, but Miller and Pynchon nevertheless gain a life of their own as they toil away on their hopelessly anachronistic missions, measuring the world anew.

One can only hope that *Miller & Pynchon* will be translated. As a self-contained, albeit intensely allusive, comic book (or graphic novel) it is very successful; as an addition to the ever growing canon of works inspired by Thomas Pynchon, it is supremely interesting, and it deserves to reach a much wider audience.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Miller & Pynchon*, p. 9-10. All translations from the original German are mine.

<sup>2</sup> Early in *Mason & Dixon* we learn that Dixon's gaudy uniform "often caus[ed] future strangers to remember them as Dixon and Mason" (16), but posterity—and the very name of the line they measured—have put matters to right, whereas Lepold Maurer teasingly places surveyor before astronomer.

<sup>3</sup> A representative reading sample can be downloaded from: [http://www.leopoldmaurer.com/download/leseprobe\\_mup.pdf](http://www.leopoldmaurer.com/download/leseprobe_mup.pdf).

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