

***Gravity's Rainbow:* A Portrait of the Artist as Engineer**

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The generic debate surrounding *Gravity's Rainbow* can be divided into two groups. On the one hand, there are critics such as Palmeri, Weisenburger (*Fables*), Seidel, Morgan, and Kharpertian, who have argued that Pynchon's novel fits in with the tradition of the Menippean satire. Drawing attention to the subtle and intricate ways in which Pynchon's third novel parodies and aggrandizes the discourse of the power elites, these critics see *Gravity's Rainbow* as the latest exponent of a long and particularly illuminating tradition of the literary gadfly, which runs from Petronius, over François Rabelais and Jonathan Swift, to Pynchon. The defining characteristic of *Gravity's Rainbow* for these critics, is, as Kharpertian puts it, "the critical exposure of official cultural institutions and demystification of power [as well as] the focus on the ugly, the painful and the ridiculous" (108-9). A second group of scholars, while hardly oblivious to *Gravity's Rainbow's* satirical dimension, defines Pynchon's generic affiliation instead in terms of the encyclopedic narrative. In the wake of Edward Mendelson's influential essay "Gravity's Encyclopedia,"¹ these critics, including LeClair and Hite, have pointed out that what is central to Pynchon's novel is the broadly conceived vision of the world that it offers. Like the original eighteenth-century *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert, Pynchon's novel bespeaks a summative gesture that tries to envelop all the variety and richness of the world between the covers of one book, complete with mathematical formulas, foreign alphabets, and explanatory illustrations. As Mendelson himself put it, "[e]ncyclopedic narratives attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge" (30). Whether or not this encyclopedic vision mirrors the summations fostered by the works of Dante and Shakespeare, as Mendelson originally argued, or whether *Gravity's Rainbow* should instead be read as a postmodern deconstruction of the very idea of summation and order, remains a topic of critical debate. Yet, what is clear to both groups, as well as to those who locate *Gravity's Rainbow* in the satirical tradition of Gargantua and Pantagruel, is that, when trying to define Pynchon's novel generically, size matters.

Yet megalomania is not the only aspect that satire and the encyclopedic narrative have in common. In fact, many of the abovementioned scholars employ some sort of hybrid categorization when trying to account for the generic loyalty of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Thus, Weisenburger reads *Gravity's Rainbow* as an "encyclopedic satire" (*Fables* 204) whereas other critics have acknowledged the permeability of genre in a novel which after all reminds us that "here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly" (303). What is less often made explicit in these analyses, however, is that both the encyclopedic narrative and the Menippean satire are also strikingly similar in the method of their categorization proper. Proponents for either genre rely on an *extradiegetic* parameter in order to determine *Gravity's Rainbow's* generic status, respectively that of organization and that of ironic distance. The decisive criterion for both genres is not *what* actually happens in the novel's plot, but rather *how* it is told. To be sure, *Gravity's Rainbow* abounds in taxonomyphiliacs and list-keeping characters not to mention its self-asserted fascination with Ulrich Zwingli, "the man at the end of the encyclopedia" (267), but what really determines the novel's status as an encyclopedic narrative is how it orders and reorders information. Similarly, Kharpertian notes that one of the main characteristics of *Gravity's Rainbow* as a Menippean satire is that it has "extratextual targets" (109).

In this essay, I wish to complement these existing genre studies with a categorization that relies instead on an *intradiegetic* element, namely the presence of artists and of the arts in Pynchon's third novel. I propose to read *Gravity's Rainbow* as a *Künstlerroman* for the manner in which it thematizes the creative process as a central element of its plot, much in the same way as the great artist-novels of European modernism such as James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (hereafter cited as *Portrait*) and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. At first sight, this may seem a rather counterintuitive or, to borrow a Roger Mexico-ism, "Odd, odd, odd" (85) claim to make since, contrary to these modernist novels, references to artists and art are rather scarce in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as they are in Pynchon's fiction in general. This absence is all the more striking when we compare Pynchon's novels to those of some of his contemporaries such as Don DeLillo, Gilbert Sorrentino, and William Gaddis, for whom the question of the artist appears as a central and ongoing concern. In Pynchon's fiction, on the other hand, references to the arts appear to be tangential rather than thematic, with, among others, brief interludes devoted to Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* in *V.*, the paintings of Remedios Varo in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and a returning musical debate in *Gravity's Rainbow* that pits the compositions of Beethoven against those of Rossini.²

While these scattered references obviously bespeak *some* interest in the arts on the part of their creator, it is also clear that they do not, as in the fiction of Gaddis, DeLillo, and Sorrentino, offer a fully developed insight into the creative process proper. *Artists*, for that matter, seldom appear as central

characters in Pynchon's fiction, and when they do, they usually take on an equally whimsical form as ridiculous figures such as the Whole Sick Crew in *V.*, whose exercises in "catatonic expressionism" are, as one arts patron puts it, "nothing but talk and at that not very good talk" (297). For other characters such as "the quick-change artist" Herbert Stencil in *V.*, or "the old blithering gab-artist" Brigadier Pudding (GR 79), the epithet "artist" seems to have been chosen mostly for parodic purposes, or to illustrate the semantic conflation of the very term "art" in a capitalist society that uses it now only to denote the market categories of skill and competence. Even *Gravity's Rainbow's* most primary artist-character, the filmmaker Gerhardt von Göll, "once an intimate and still the equal of Lang, Pabst, Lubitsch" (112), now unapologetically courts Mammon rather than the Muse. As von Göll tells the Argentine cast of one of his current projects, his primary concern is to get the best "mileage" (387) out of his movies. And while the narrator assures us that "commerce has not taken away von Göll's touch" (112), his transformation from filmmaker into marketeer is far removed from the authenticity quest that otherwise typifies the *Bildungsprozess* in the traditional *Künstlerroman*.

Nevertheless, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the *Künstlerroman* does serve as a relevant generic model for how Pynchon bestows on the construction of a *technological* artifact—the rocket—all the characteristics traditionally reserved for artistic creativity. Throughout the novel, Pynchon foregrounds the aesthetic qualities of this particular technology, starting with Slothrop's teacher at the Casino Hermann Goering, Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck, who says about the rocket's radio transmission system, the so-called "Hawaii I," that "[t]here's a poetry to it, engineer's poetry . . . it suggests *Haverie*—average, you know—certainly you have the two lobes, don't you, symmetrical about the rocket's intended azimuth" (207). Dodson-Truck's folk etymology does more than facilitate Slothrop's learning progress through mnemonic aid. His evocation of the expression "engineer's poetry" suggests a bridging of two realms which Pynchon had earlier tackled in "Entropy" and *Lot 49*, and to which he would return more extensively in his 1984 essay "Is It OK To Be a Luddite?," namely art and science. In that essay, written as a response to C.P. Snow's famous 1959 Rede lecture, Pynchon argues that, far from having bifurcated into two different cultures, art and science have actually grown closer to each other, just as the very persona of Dodson-Truck, a technical instructor competent in thirty-three languages, would suggest such an interdisciplinary rapprochement. While the Luddite essay is, however, mostly written as a critique *ex negativo*, arguing *against* the widespread demonization of science and technology in Western culture, *Gravity's Rainbow*, to an extent not yet present in either "Entropy" or *Lot 49*, takes on the more challenging task of putting into positive terms these artistic qualities of technology. Its aim is not just to show us that "Technology only responds," as the Herero leader Enzian argues in a well-known anti-Luddite soliloquy from the novel (521), but rather to portray the rocket and the process

of its creation as matters of actual aesthetic value.

Comparing the rocket's assembly directly to one artistic discipline in particular, as Dodson-Truck does, is one way to achieve this goal, yet far more frequently than Pynchon scholars have been willing to acknowledge, the author is actually very critical of precisely this urge for analogization. Indeed, the celebrated Pynchonian "metaphor of God knows how many parts" (*Lot* 49 87) is one which, more often than not, subverts the very unity and harmony it is meant to suggest. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for instance, this subversion is apparent in the disturbing ease with which the idea of the rocket as artwork is taken up by some of the more troublesome characters in the novel such as Major Weissman or the Nazi architect Etzel Ölsch. The latter sees in the double integral formula, used to track the rocket's position while in flight, an affirmation of its belonging to *his* artistic discipline: "'Meters per second' will integrate to 'meters.' The moving vehicle is frozen, in space, to become architecture, and timeless. It was never launched. It will never fall" (301). The aestheticization of the rocket here perversely draws our attention away from the fact that this technological artefact of course *will* fall, causing death and massive destruction, as is indeed shown on the opening and closing pages of the text. Yet even there, Pynchon persists in using artistic references to frame the reader's perception of this technological artifact such as "the film that we have not learned to see" (760), whose eagerly awaited premiere on the novel's final page turns out to *be* the imminent blast of a V-2 hanging above the movie theatre. Similarly, the proceeding Evacuation that follows the explosion of a rocket on the novel's opening page is described as "all theatre" (3). We might even argue that the rocket's infamous screaming coming across the sky serves as a reference to Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream* (1893), with the Kierkegaardian anguish of modernity now substituted for the postmodern paranoia of the bomb.

What is the purpose then of this ambiguous game which Pynchon plays with the reader, alternately showing us the aesthetic qualities of the rocket's machinery parts—"Its steel hindquarters bent so beautifully" (750)—while never failing to keep us attuned to the destructive nature of this artifact?³ In *Postmodern Sublime*, Joseph Tabbi offers one possible answer to this question by identifying in rocket engineers such as Franz Pökler, Kurt Mondaugen, Horst Achtfaden and Klaus Nürisch the intimations of a technological sublime which attributes to machinery the same mixed response of awe and terror which the Romantics formerly perceived in nature and in art. In spite of their far-reaching expertise in ballistics and differential calculus, these characters come to regard the rocket as "a figure representing forces and systems that the human mind and imagination cannot hope to master or comprehend but for which we are nonetheless responsible" (20). This is the essence of what Tabbi, in another essay, terms "Pynchon's psychology of engineers," namely *Gravity's Rainbow's* detailed

dramatization of the technologists' mental bafflement when, like the artist or the nature mystic before him, he sees himself confronted with an object that resists any form of representation or control.

Nevertheless, there is something distinctly ironic about interpreting *Gravity's Rainbow's* descriptions of the rocket through reference to a scientific discipline that the novel itself notoriously satirizes and ridicules. From the obviously defective psychological practices of Ned Pointsman and Kevin Spectro at the St. Veronica hospital to the novel's blatant dismissal of human consciousness as "that poor cripple, that deformed and doomed thing" (720), *Gravity's Rainbow* abounds in disparaging remarks about a discipline which writers such as James Joyce and William Gaddis had earlier ridiculed through the neologism "psychoanalosing."⁴ In Pynchon's novel, such dismissive remarks can in part be read as Pynchon's attempt to distinguish *Gravity's Rainbow* from the stream of consciousness acrobatics favored by modernist precursors such as Joyce, an attempt which, as Brian McHale has shown,⁵ is already present in a lesser form in *Lot 49*. On the other hand, these passages are also clearly intended as a criticism, reminiscent in some ways of the falsifiability hypothesis of Karl Popper,⁶ of the reductive approach that characterizes psychology, both in the behaviorist sense favored by Pointsman and Spectro *and* in its aesthetic-philosophical counterpart of the sublime. Both approaches reduce the human experience to a question of mental control (or the lack thereof), whereas Pynchon, perhaps more than any novelist before him, focuses precisely on the aspects of human existence that lie outside of the psychological atmosphere, not in order to capitalize on this incongruity, as Tabbi does in *Postmodern Sublime*, but rather to offer a much broader perspective on human experience that includes the sensory as well as the extrasensory.

It is doubtful, therefore, whether Pynchon intends the earlier cited aestheticizations of the rocket to be read as psychological effects only. Such an approach, it would seem, still "puts us in with the neutered" (521), that is, with the likes of *Lot 49's* Randolph Driblette who has domesticated reality to such an extent that he now regards his own consciousness as "the projector at the planetarium" (62). Neither does such a psychologistic perspective allow us to fully exhaust the moments of personal crisis that frequently befall the Peenemünde engineers, including Pökler's fear that, as his wife Leni never tires of telling him, "[t]hey're using you to kill people . . . That's their only job and you're helping them" (400). Pynchonian paranoia, after all, does not refer to a *psychic* condition but rather to the much more general "discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation" (703), a moment of ontological crisis, in other words, which far exceeds the realization of epistemological failure on which hinges our intuitions of the sublime.

But perhaps it is useful to look to another group of artist-engineers in *Gravity's Rainbow* in order to get a better idea of these extra-psychological

similarities which for Pynchon connect art and technology with death and destruction. First introduced in *V.*, the Hereros are a tribe of South-West Africans enslaved in Germany's rocket industry who have drawn attention from critics mostly for the racial and postcolonial issues which they introduce into the novel. Yet they are also a group of engineers who, after their Nazi superiors have fled before the advancing Allied forces, set out to construct a rocket of their own. The assembly of this artifact, the so-called 00001 rocket, is not only introduced to the reader in artistic terms as "the most immacinate of techniques" (728) but it also evokes a link between art, technology, and destruction. As so often in *Gravity's Rainbow*, this new element emerges as the result of an initial misunderstanding, a Freudian lapsus in reverse that takes place during a conversation between the two Herero leaders Enzian and Josef Ombindi:

"You know," Ombindi's eyes rolled the other way [...] "there's . . . well, something you ordinarily wouldn't think of as erotic—but it's really the most erotic thing there is."

"Really," grins Enzian, flirting. "I can't think of what that would be. Give me a clue."

"It's a non-repeatable act."

"Firing a rocket?"

"No, because there's always another rocket. But there's nothing—well, never mind." (319)

The topic that Ombindi is hinting at here is racial suicide, the "program" (317) which he and the so-called "Empty Ones" have come to embrace as the only solution to half a century of continued colonial oppression by the West. Enzian's misunderstanding, however, is most suggestive in that it makes us initially think of the launch of the rocket, rather than death, as a non-repeatable act. In juxtaposing the two, Pynchon draws the reader's attention to a thus far unexamined parallel, namely between the absolute singularity that characterizes the (technological) work of art—by definition a unique feat of expression—and the moment of death which is not only non-repeatable but which is also, as Martin Heidegger famously argues, the only thing that nobody can assume for me (221-24). Immune to both the forces of mechanical reproduction and exchangeability, the creative gesture and death thus share what Pynchon calls a "movement toward stillness" (319), a countercultural attempt to regain a locus of sedentary permanence in a world that, as the Herero leaders both acknowledge, tends more and more towards all-encompassing mechanicity and acceleration. This is what underlies the "strange rapprochement" (319) that exists between Enzian and Ombindi, with the latter trying to recover this locus of singularity through racial death while the former tries to do so through artistic creation. Enzian's strategy ultimately

emerges as the victorious one, reuniting both Herero factions in the assembly of the 00001, but not without Pynchon reminding us yet one more time, both in the passages described above as well as in others, that the artwork's quality of singularity is essentially the same as the inalienable authenticity that characterizes the moment of death.

It is this aesthetic paradox—neither a celebratory nor a bleak one—which explains why death and artistic beauty appear so often paired in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and which Pynchon brings to an unprecedented, some might say perverse, extreme by making the very epitome of destruction—the Bomb—into a work of art. If dying is, as Sylvia Plath wryly acknowledges, “an art”—one which she self-professes to “do extremely well” (“Lady Lazarus” 245)—then Pynchon provides us in his third novel with the mirror-image of that Plathian oxymoron by showing us how also art itself, like those buried carbon molecules discussed by Walter Ratheneau, is one of the “structures favoring death” (167). It is perhaps only fitting, therefore, that the novel's most often-cited verdict regarding the rocket's absolute singularity, namely that “it really did possess a Max Weber charisma . . . some joyful—and *deeply* irrational—force the State Bureaucracy could never routinize, against which it could not prevail” (464), should come from an artist-character named Miklos Thanatz, a subtle yet powerful reminder of the paradoxical ways in which singularity lies entwined with death.

Of all the creative characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, no group can be more aware of that entwinement than the Hereros, a people nearly exterminated by a German colonial campaign in 1904, who now embrace the assembly of the 00001 rocket as a way of recuperating a sense of identity: “One reason we grew so close to the rocket,” Enzian explains to Slothrop, “was an awareness of how contingent, how much like ourselves, the A4 could be—how at the mercy of small things” (362). This quotation marks the first in a series of statements that establish a direct link between the 00001 rocket and the process of identity formation. In themselves, such identifications are nothing peculiar; they are echoed by other characters such as Slothrop, who goes on to become “rocketman,” or the amalgam of rocket-cosmologists mentioned at the end of the novel which leads the narrator to conclude that “Each will have his personal rocket” (727). What sets the Herero identification apart, however, is that in their case it is the creative *process* rather than the artifact itself that establishes this sense of unity. As Enzian sees it, the assembly of the 00001 is “the only Event that could have brought them together,” adding in humility, “I couldn't” (673).

These references to the tribe's ongoing reintegration constitute not only the dialectical counterpart to the gradual effacement of the soon scattered Tyrone Slothrop,⁷ but in their insistence on the close relationship between the creative endeavor and identity, they also mimic one of the primary characteristics of the *Künstlerroman* genre. As Herbert Marcuse explains in *Der*

Deutsche Künstlerroman, this narrative structure is “a novel in which an artist appears as the representative of a life form of his own in society” (10). Distinctive for the *Künstlerroman* genre is, according to Marcuse, the development of the artist-character’s separate self-consciousness which marks a break with the epic tradition where the artist still appears subsumed by the society surrounding him. It is this “epic” context of impersonal submersion that still characterizes the Hereros when assembling rocket parts in the Nazi factory at Nordhausen and “wheeling them out by hand, a dozen of you [. . .] all your faces drowning in the same selfless look” (725). The construction of the 00001, on the other hand, marks an emancipation at once of the creative act from this kind of commodified industrial labor and of the Hereros themselves who, as one former Nazi engineer puts it, “now constitute a nation of their own” (451). Their former rote labor on the rocket is now transformed into a self-conscious gesture of identity politics which closely mirrors the emancipation process gone through by other *Künstlerroman* protagonists such as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, Woolf’s Lily Briscoe, or the various Thomas Mann characters which Marcuse himself discusses. “Perhaps,” so Pynchon’s narrator muses regarding the Hereros’ rocket, “just before the firing, it will be painted black” (724). As with Stephen Dedalus and Lily Briscoe, the final outcome of this *Bildungsprozess* towards self-realization is the powerful assertion of an artist’s individual vision forged in the smithy of the soul, namely to get “the first African rocket fully assembled and ready for firing” (326). Through the assembly of the rocket, the Hereros manage to wrest themselves from the epithets formerly attributed to them by the West. The term Schwarzkommando, for instance, a neologism originally coined by a London agency to refer to a group of *fictionalized* Hereros, is at present “no longer a title, they are a people now, Zone-Hereros in exile for two generations from South-West Africa” (315).

Nevertheless, *Gravity’s Rainbow* is also markedly distinct from the modernist *Künstlerroman* in that the subject of this process of art-mediated identification concerns a group of people—the Herero tribe—and not an individual as in the novels of Joyce, Woolf, and Mann. This is a significant divergence since each of the latter novelists advocates the incompatibility of artist and community, a dictum that is perhaps best expressed by Lily Briscoe’s definition of the painter as a figure “drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people” (236).⁸ Neither do Pynchon’s artist-engineers partake of the cult of originality that is at the heart of each of these modernist *Künstlerromane*. For, notwithstanding its earlier cited qualities of singularity, the Hereros’ 00001 is itself already a copy of another rocket, the so-called quintuple zero that was fired under the direction of Weissman from the Lüneburg Heath during the spring equinox of 1945. Referred to as “the second in its series” (724), the 00001 is not only modeled after this original rocket but it also uses the same infrastructures, “sliding like an oiled bolt into the receivership of the railway system prepared for it

last spring" (728). As such, both the reproductive character of the 00001 and the tribal integration that it effects, serve as reminders of the communal context within which every artwork and technological artifact operates. They indicate that for Pynchon, as for Jacques Derrida, "invention is invented only if repetition, generality, common availability and thus publicity are introduced or promised in the structure of the first time" (Derrida 28). This is the postmodern aesthetic that underlies the creative endeavor of the Hereros in *Gravity's Rainbow* and which distinguishes it from the solitary experience of their precursors in the modernist *Künstlerroman*.

It is this same communal approach to art that also appears at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* where Pynchon has the lyrics from a centuries-old William Slothrop hymn sung to a contemporary movie audience in Los Angeles, followed by the priestly envoy "Now everybody—" (760). Like the falling V-2 rocket that is at the same time nearing its "last delta-t" above this movie theater, the completion of the Slothrop song is left "hanging," that is, waiting to be affirmed by the sing-along recognition of a live audience. At the same time, Pynchon ends his own artistic feat of engineering, *Gravity's Rainbow*,⁹ on the self-effacing presence of the Dickinsonian dash, thus similarly urging his reading audience to recognize themselves in the tale which they just finished reading and to reproduce it in writing, in speech, or any other form of human expression.

Like other postmodern American novelists before and after him, Pynchon thus undoes the solipsistic cul-de-sac into which the modernists had landed the *Künstlerroman* genre. Like the re-cognitive forgeries of Wyatt Gwyon in William Gaddis's *The Recognitions*, like the snapshots of the people's photographer August Sander in Richard Powers's *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, and like the "quoting Bill" passages in DeLillo's *Mao II*, Pynchon's endorsement of art as copy is less a pessimistic verdict on the impossibility of creating original art, however, than that it serves as a reminder of the distinctly communal horizon within which every artwork operates. The idea of creation *ex nihilo* is rejected by these novelists, in other words, not to bemoan "the waning of affect" which Fredric Jameson sees at work in the reproductions of Andy Warhol (10), but to emphasize the traditions—cultural, historical, and philosophical—within which each artwork operates. And of these authors, Pynchon is certainly the one who goes furthest in exploring this communal horizon, not because he extends the scope of tradition to include the engineer as well as the fine arts practitioner, but because in *Gravity's Rainbow* he returns the artwork to nothing less than its very historical *ne plus ultra*, namely the context of ritual which, according to Walter Benjamin, forms the origin of all art.¹⁰ This is at least how the Hereros' rocket assembly is perceived in a daydream of Slothrop's where the tribe's unearthing of an unexploded warhead from its "grave" (361) displays all the characteristics of a festival-like ritual. While some Hereros are busy getting the warhead out, others

sit on a hillside eating bread and sausages [. . .] Someone has set up an army tent, someone has brought in beer kegs. A scratch band, a dozen brasses in tasseled, frayed gold and red uniforms play selections from *Der Meistersinger*. Fat-smoke drifts in the air. Choruses of drinkers in the distance break from time to time into laughter or song. It's a Rocket-raising: a festival new to this country. (361)

Like the cave paintings in Lascaux, or the fertility sculptures of the Neolithic era, the artistic endeavor appears couched here in what is obviously a ritualistic context, in a "rocket-festival" that serves to embolden the community spirit of the tribe. Like these prehistoric artifacts, there is a quasi-religious impetus to the Hereros' assembly of the rocket, which in their case does not serve the purpose of guaranteeing a fruitful hunt or abundant progeny, but rather the cultural reanimation of a people already twice passed over by death. As other critics have noted, the rocket becomes for the Hereros a totem, a "True Text" (525) onto which they transfer all the powers of magic formerly associated with the so-called "Erdschweinhöhle," the pig's hole in the earth which "back in Südwest . . . was a powerful symbol of fertility and life" (316). The assembly of the rocket thus assumes a clearly ritualistic function as "the key that will bring us back, restore us to our Earth and to our freedom" (525), an artwork, in other words, that connects with the original social function that art fulfilled before its post-Renaissance conception as self-expression and autonomy.

Yet the Hereros' rocket ritual is also more than a genealogical inquiry into the origins of art. In presenting a group of South-West Africans as the torchbearers of art's original legacy, Pynchon is at the same time deflating a powerful Western myth—one particularly popular in the modernist *Künstlerroman*—namely the frequent identification of art with Europe. It is the Berlin composer and Beethoven devotee Gustav Schlabone who first draws attention to this particular ideology. After having been informed about the untimely war death of one of his colleagues, the German composer Anton Webern, Schlabone tells Slothrop,

Shot in May, by the Americans. Senseless, accidental if you believe in accidents—some mess cook from North Carolina, some late draftee with a .45 he hardly knew how to use, too late for WW II, but not for Webern [. . .] Do you know what kind of myth *that's* going to make in a thousand years? The barbarians coming in to murder the Last European, standing at the far end of what'd been going on since Bach, an expansion of music's polymorphous perversity till all notes were truly equal at last . . . (440)

Although extrapolated to a far future, the "myth" to which Schlabone alludes is an all too familiar one, and by no means confined to the novels of Henry James. I am referring, of course, to the stereotypical dichotomy of the barbarian American versus the civilized European, the former's artistic

aspirations forever denied to him or paternalized as, in the words of one character, “a fascinating combination of crude poet and psychic cripple” (738). Yet Pynchon does not content himself with simply exposing the persistent specter of European cultural supremacy. Rather, in presenting a group of high-tech engineers of African descent as artists *par excellence*, he also deflates the common depreciation, shared by both Europeans and Americans, of that continent’s artistic production as primitive. Much to the contrary, the Hereros’ rocket, created during those uncertain and hectic post-war summer months of 1945, offers us an early example of the soon omnipresent postcolonial tactics of the Empire firing back. If the original German colonization of the Hereros marked, as Pynchon wrote in a 1969 letter to David Hirsch, “the imposition of a culture valuing analysis and differentiation on a culture that valued unity and integration” (241), then the Hereros have now successfully inverted that process by returning the individualist aesthetic of the modern artist-protagonist to the integrated context of art as ritual.

Yet one question still remains: why does Pynchon choose to reallocate this originary ritualistic quality in a technological artifact rather than in say sculpture or song? Given the disempowered and ridiculed artist-figures that populate Pynchon’s other novels, one cannot but conclude that this choice follows from a profound skepticism regarding the social power of the traditional arts in the contemporary world. Unlike an author such as Gaddis, for instance, who in his 1955 novel *The Recognitions* could still believe in some lingering empathetic appeal of the fine arts, Pynchon locates such communalizing potential now only in the realm of technology. When the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* tells us that “now [. . .] the real and only fucking is done on paper” (616), then he is no longer referring to the painter’s etching sheet or the composer’s music score, artifacts whose political efficacies have long turned sterile, but to the engineer’s quadrille paper on which Pynchon hand-wrote his own draft of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.¹¹ Like Don DeLillo’s artist-character Klara Sax, Pynchon recognizes the contemporary world, in other words, as a “postpainterly age” (*Underworld* 393), and, like Klara, who repaints defunct airplanes in the American desert, Pynchon implies that the aesthetic qualities, formerly attributed to the fine arts, appear now only in the realms of technology and science.

In assigning this aesthetic quality to machinery, Pynchon’s Hereros, finally, offer not only an alternate way for thinking about technology but they also wrest *their* rocket from the war context in which the original quintuple zero rocket originated. If the success of the latter was from the very beginning contingent upon military conflict, was “something that needed the energyburst of war” (521), then the Hereros manage to channel this creative energy through a different route by letting it pour forth through the aesthetic experience of the artist-engineer. This, it should be noted, is also how Benjamin perceived the relationship between technology and the arts.

Unless we allow technology into the arts, so Benjamin famously argues, then “the increase in technical devices, in speed, and in the sources of energy will press for an unnatural utilization, and this is found in war” (244). Or, as one of Pynchon’s own literary successors, Richard Powers, puts it in his rephrasing of Benjamin’s argument, one that equally befits *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “The choice is clear: shoot snapshots, or shoot rifles” (256).

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Notes

¹ Mendelson was not the first critic to note the relevance of the encyclopedia for analyzing *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Already in an essay published in 1975, Morgan Swigger drew attention to the “fictional encyclopedism” that structures Pynchon’s third novel.

² For a discussion of the Beethoven-Rossini polemic as well as of Pynchon’s use of music in general, see David Cowart’s *Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion*.

³ In the last quotation, this injurious feature concerns the boy Gottfried who, as the narrator lavishes superlatives on the beauty of steel, is being inserted into the rocket to be launched into space and into a certain though never precisely known death.

⁴ For Joyce and Gaddis’s usage of this neologism, which they seem to have arrived at independently from each other, see *Finnegans Wake* (522) and *The Recognitions* (183, 453).

⁵ In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale defines the shift from modernism to postmodernism in terms of a change of dominant from epistemological to ontological uncertainty. According to McHale, *Lot 49* still falls for the most part within the modernist category although it already contains some moments of ontological crisis.

⁶ In *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945), Popper argued that psychoanalysis—like Marxism—cannot be considered a scientific doctrine because in reducing everything to one single impetus—desire in the former; class struggle in the latter—it cannot be proven wrong.

⁷ This contrast that is reinforced when Slothrop tells Enzian that “I don’t have any people” (363).

⁸ Another example of this felt incompatibility is, of course, Stephen Dedalus’s view of the artist as a *deus absconditus* who “remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce, *Portrait* 217).

⁹ Joseph Tabbi was the first critic to note that Pynchon’s writing style mirrors the trial-and-error method of the engineer (*Postmodern Sublime* 103).

¹⁰ In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin argues that “the earliest artworks originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind” (*Illuminations* 223).

¹¹ This detail about the textual genesis of Pynchon’s novel is noted in Steven Weisenburger’s *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion* (1).

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