

# Pynchon and Three Contemporary German Novelists

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In the 1990s, several literary critics, authors and editors complained that German prose fiction had become too theoretical and experimental.<sup>1</sup> These proponents of what was variously termed new realism, *Neue Lesbarkeit* (new readability) or new narrativity claimed that younger authors had shut themselves off from the world and alienated their potential readers. They called on writers to eschew such modernist and postmodernist strategies as fragmentation and self-reflexiveness and instead focus on plot, character and action. Novels were to resemble good reporting or gripping movies. Well-told tales and compelling narratives drawn from personal experience and observation were to replace language games and radical subjectivity. Solid craftsmanship was to produce realistic portraits of contemporary German society. Not least, a more consumer-friendly prose style was to win back readers and enhance the competitiveness of German literature in the international market. German authors were frequently referred to the model of internationally successful U.S.-American authors. In particular, practitioners of the so-called dirty realism of the 1970s and 1980s, Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff and Richard Ford, were held up as examples of literary pragmatism and craftsmanship.

The call for a return to realist conventions in prose fiction was more than a critique of certain excesses of experimental fiction in Germany. It amounted to a complete rejection of serious modernist and postmodern literature with its emphasis on formal innovation, fragmentation and the questioning of language and meaning. Essentially, the crisis of representation lamented by Hofmannsthal in his "Lord Chandos Letter" (1902) was declared over.

Since then, the realist mode has come to dominate German literature. In July 2004, *Der Spiegel* could state with barely concealed satisfaction that never before had so many examples of good storytelling been presented at the competitive readings for the Ingeborg-Bachmann Prize (Hage). The entry on German literature in the guide *Facts about Germany*, published by the *Auswärtiges Amt* (Foreign Office), claims, "Narrating is back in favor—inspired by American role models such as Raymond Carver" (149). "What counts . . . is authenticity in literature and describing the here and now—the more

merciless the view, the better. The author's own biography becomes the basis of the stories" (152).

This is the literary environment in which Nika Bertram's *Der Kahuna Modus* (2001), Tobias O. Meißner's *Starfish Rules* (1997) and Georg Klein's *Libidissi* (1998) were published. These very different debut novels stand apart from the German literary mainstream, each in its own way. They have in common, however, that their authors either have acknowledged a familiarity with Thomas Pynchon or have been assumed by critics and reviewers to be influenced by his works. In the main part of this essay, I will briefly summarize and comment on *Der Kahuna Modus*, *Starfish Rules* and *Libidissi*, and point out possible connections between these novels and Pynchon's work. But first, I want to take a look back to 1976, when Pynchon's stature in contemporary literature was first acknowledged by an important author writing in German.

The Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek, who has since become one of the most renowned (and controversial) novelists and playwrights in the language, was still working on her translation of *Gravity's Rainbow* into German when she published an essay on Pynchon, "kein licht am ende des tunnels" ("No Light at the End of the Tunnel"). In this introduction to Pynchon's work in general and to *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular, Jelinek provides essential information about the author, mentions such important sources as Henry Adams and Max Weber, and addresses the myriad plots of Pynchon's huge novel. As interpretative guides she uses Heinz Ickstadt's and Tony Tanner's relevant studies. In concluding her essay, Jelinek offers a political critique of the worldview she finds expressed in the novel. Pynchon's concept of history allows for only two possibilities, she says: Either everything is connected and history is predetermined, or nothing is connected and history is utterly insignificant. For Pynchon, she argues, history does not contain a redeeming force but is merely a movement toward death or entropy. Jelinek also criticizes the absence of a clear demarcation between oppressors and victims, exploiters and exploited. In her view, Pynchon fails to take into account the essential division between the owners of the means of production and the workers. Whether or not she is right about this failure, what Jelinek misses in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the Marxist point of view and the hope for a redemption of history it provides. Her critique is quite characteristic of the political climate of the day. (A few years later, however, Jelinek had come to suspect that her own worldview was bleaker than Pynchon's [Jelinek, AB n. pag].)

Apart from her objections on political grounds, Jelinek shows herself deeply impressed by the novel and calls *Gravity's Rainbow* "a masterpiece, a furious, grotesque, frightening piece of world theatre"

(KL 36).<sup>2</sup> Her admiration for Pynchon's writing has proved to be lasting. When she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2004, she called it a joke that she had received the Prize and Pynchon had not (IRK 37). How her familiarity with Pynchon's novels may have influenced Jelinek's own body of work as a novelist and playwright is a complex and rewarding topic for discussion in its own right but cannot be addressed here.

In 2001, Nika Bertram, a young novelist from Köln, published her first novel, *Der Kahuna Modus*. Bertram has frequently mentioned Pynchon as an inspiration for her own work.<sup>3</sup> She was kind enough to grant me an informal interview, during which I had the opportunity to ask her specifically about possible influences.

*Der Kahuna Modus* employs various narrative strategies, most notably those of a love story and a horror tale. In the Kafkaesque framing narrative, the novel's protagonist, a lesbian comic artist named Nadine, is being kept in a surreal prison-cell filled with a milk-like substance. A mysterious warden tells her that his boss wants her to write down her story, and Nadine complies. Her story is mainly a tale of horrifying metamorphoses initiated by her falling in love with her half-brother's girlfriend, Susan. In the course of events, Nadine is involuntarily transformed into various animals associated with darkness and night: a spider, a bat, Edgar Allen Poe's raven and, most significantly, a rat. At one point she also changes her sex. Nadine's metamorphoses are related to her feelings of desire, hate and jealousy toward Susan as well as to her gradual discovery of a conspiracy in her own past. In the shape of a female rat, she is raped in the sewers and gives birth to three children. In the second part of the book, these children enter the human world, are transformed from rats into *Doppelgängerinnen* (mirror images) of Nadine and attempt to kill her. In the third part Nadine learns to control the gift of metamorphosis and thus effectively turns into a witch. She then finds her presumably true family and origins. In the end Nadine seems to have become some kind of female archetype: She turns into a mermaid, and the last time we see her, she is sitting in a boat, accompanied by Botticelli's newly born Venus, heading for the open sea. The motto of the final paragraph is taken from probably the most famous description of metamorphosis in English literature, "Ariel's Song," in *The Tempest*: "Nothing of him that does fade . . . but suffer a sea-change" (Bertram 330).

At one point Nadine has an idea for a graphic novel she describes as a plot about "female self-discovery in the form of a horror story" (156). This is also a fair description of *Der Kahuna Modus*. Nadine's problems of gender and identity find expression in a succession of

metamorphoses that appear to be various stages of one comprehensive transformation from life to death and back again.

Neither a rational nor a supernatural explanation is given for the marvelous events of the novel, which places *Der Kahuna Modus* firmly in the genre of the fantastic. Bertram's characters refer to "the big P.," that is, *das große Phantastische*. In fact, Bertram announces her intentions from the start. As the novel's first epigraph explains, the title *Der Kahuna Modus* can be understood by reference to Eric S. Raymond's *New Hacker's Dictionary* or *Jargonfile*. In common usage, a Kahuna is a Hawaiian shaman, sorcerer or magician, who mediates between our world and the world of the gods. In hackers' lingo, the term refers to a computer guru or wizard. As for *Modus*, hackers use the term mode to describe various everyday situations: "Uh, I'm in breakfast mode right now; can I call you back?" for example. Also, computer games can be played in any of a number of modes: the "God mode," for example, lets the player become invulnerable, while the "Noclip mode" allows one to float through walls and ceilings. Like a computer game, *Der Kahuna Modus* is structured not into parts or sections but into levels. This suggests that events take place not only in a fictional but in a virtual world. The novel's second epigraph, an abbreviated version of the Third Law of Technology as formulated by Arthur C. Clarke, also points to a blending of the supernatural and technology: "Magic is only advanced technology."<sup>4</sup> The Kahuna mode, then, is a narrative strategy which not only participates in the genre of the fantastic—science fiction, horror—but also is modelled on computer games.

As Bertram told me in our interview, the episode involving rats in the sewers was inspired by the scene in Pynchon's novel *V*. in which Father Fairing attempts to convert New York's rats to Roman Catholicism (V 117–21). In *Der Kahuna Modus*, a young man who lives in the Paris catacombs knows each rat personally, welcomes them when they appear at night and buries their mortal remains to the accompaniment of his own verse (Bertram 130). More generally, in contemporary or postmodern literature, popular genres often not only become part of the characters' knowledge and so influence the way they perceive the world (as happens, for example, in *Madame Bovary* and *Don Quixote*), but literally enter the action (as happens when the "Captive's Tale" enters, or takes captive for a while, Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* [M&D 511ff.]). This is exactly what happens in *Der Kahuna Modus* whenever Nadine undergoes a metamorphosis: the narrative itself gradually shifts from the realist mode to the marvelous. The world of popular culture does not stand apart from the reality of the novel but, on the contrary, molds its action—much the way German

Expressionist movies, *King Kong*, the western and the spy novel function in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Bertram draws mainly on the Gothic or *Schauerromantik* tradition, which for her includes *The Castle of Otranto* as well as songs by The Cure and Nick Cave, and movies like *Blade Runner*, *Alien* and *Night of the Living Dead*. It is in the darkly humorous and often quite self-ironic use of themes, motifs and plot elements from this segment of popular culture that Bertram's textual strategies bear the strongest relation to Pynchon's poetics.

When Tobias O. Meißner published his first novel, *Starfish Rules*, in 1997, most of the critics who took notice of it felt reminded of Pynchon. The purported influence has even found its way into the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Perhaps the most important novel by a young author in 1997 was Tobias O. Meißner's cult hit *Starfish Rules*, an unwieldy, apocalyptic fantasy set in a mythical U.S. in the years 1937–39 but including anachronistic characters like Jimi Hendrix and the rap group Public Enemy. . . . Heavily influenced by the paranoid brilliance of Thomas Pynchon, Meißner here attempted a postmodern pastiche of pop culture and grand narrative. (Literature)

The action of *Starfish Rules* begins at exactly 19:37 (7:37 pm)—the time meant to evoke the year 1937—with the arrival of the German student Robert Tondorf in Philadelphia. Tondorf carries a *Wunderwaffe* (wonder-weapon) with him, which he has brought across the Atlantic in order to prevent the Nazis from obtaining it. The weapon is much smaller yet far more devastating than the V-2: Tondorf's red suitcase contains Aeolus's bag of unfavorable winds from the *Odyssey*.<sup>5</sup> Tondorf's mission is to hand the weapon over to a certain Raoul Sanguinet, who turns out to be much more powerful than the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt. As the head of the mysterious scientific research institute SanguINET, Sanguinet has made some enemies: a certain Cordwainer Smith, part genius and part demon;<sup>6</sup> Coltrane Dwyers, leader of the black New Pride Movement, which in the course of events conquers and burns to the ground, not accidentally, Nashville, Tennessee; and the SinKing, formerly a gifted young poet, now the most ruthless mob boss in the country, who, according to Sanguinet, represents America—freedom, individualism, capitalism, the breaking of rules (Meißner, SR 50).

Following the twisted plot we come to know a number of other, equally weird characters—the almost invincible, self-righteous avenger Johnny December; the immortal FBI agent Dominic Conmee, who is

trying to track down a sadistic serial killer; a gang of juvenile killers; various Native-American and Afro-American warriors—as well as some historical personages, among them Jimi Hendrix, Walt Disney, Charles Manson, Orson Welles, Robert Johnson and John Wayne. Tondorf comes in contact with all of these people and their organizations. He is knocked around the United States like a billiard ball, changes sides again and again, and survives all of his companions through many violent and gruesome events. In the end, Tondorf kills his former boss Sanguinet and destroys his empire. Unfortunately, during the final shootout Aeolus's bag is opened, and North America is devastated by tempests and tornadoes. Tondorf alone, like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, survives the apocalypse, sailing on the hull of a burning zeppelin through the eye of the storm.<sup>7</sup>

Meißner eloquently mixes standard plots, stereotypes, fictional characters and real figures from U.S.-American history, literature and popular culture. He looks at the U.S.A. through the prism of its popular culture just as Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* looks at Germany through the prism of its popular culture ("Hänsel and Gretel," for example). But behind the exaggerated violent and comic-like action of *Starfish Rules*, behind the rapid-fire succession of stock motifs taken from U.S. pulp fiction and film, sometimes the very real violence of U.S. history becomes palpable. To mention only one example, after the disintegration and defeat of the African-American New Pride Movement, Chief Owl Tree Watcher announces an uprising of Native Americans and tells a newspaper reporter that his people will never forget the Sand Creek massacre (203). The specific reference suggests that Meißner is not satisfied with gratuitous parody and pastiche but well aware of the fact that the clichés and stereotypes of popular culture he uses are inexorably entwined with historical reality. Similarly, historical events in Germany are more important to the novel than they may seem at first.<sup>8</sup> The novel's alternative history comes to an end on August 31, 1939, one day before the Wehrmacht invaded Poland.

Many features of *Starfish Rules* are reminiscent of Pynchon's poetics: the various secret organizations and real or imagined conspiracies; the references to Greek and Christian mythology; the countless allusions to U.S. popular culture; the plot elements, stock motifs and characters derived from comics and B-movies; the use of parody and pastiche. Popular music, too, is important in Meißner's novel. We meet the most enigmatic of all blues singers, Robert Johnson, in a state of professional jealousy concerning a certain Jimi Hendrix, whom he correctly suspects to have come from another time. We meet a band that is a thinly disguised version of the hip-hop outfit Public Enemy, that took its name from a James Cagney gangster movie.

One of Meißner's plot devices in particular seems clearly influenced by Pynchon's narrative strategies. It concerns the various interpretations of the Starfish of the novel's title. At the beginning of the novel, somebody ominously says of the U.S.A., "'This is Starfish's Land, Mister. Here we live under Starfish's rules'" (3). Later, a fictitious entry in the *Encyclopædia Americana* tells us that the Starfish represents the notion that the situation as it is is chaos, and vice versa (67). From Sanguinet we hear that the legendary Starfish is only a construction, like god or the devil, yet more powerful than either. Everybody, Sanguinet explains, sees in the Starfish the thing he fears most (50). We also learn that the five points of the Starfish represent hate, violence, chaos, sex and revolution (15). Near the end of the novel, the Starfish is also identified with Moby-Dick (190). Somebody begins to see the five-pointed Starfish symbol everywhere, just as Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* eventually begins to see muted post horns all over the place: "With coincidences blossoming these days wherever she looked, she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them together" (CL 109). As a mysterious, perhaps even mystical force that may or may not drive history, may or may not announce the apocalypse, the Starfish myth is reminiscent of the Trystero in *Lot 49* and the character V. in *V.* Also as with Pynchon's novels, the reader accompanies the protagonist in his search for an overall meaning to the chaotic events and has to decipher the various clues pointing to the existence of the Starfish.<sup>9</sup>

As much as *Starfish Rules* appears to have been influenced by Pynchon, according to Meißner it was not. Meißner claims that he read his first Pynchon novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, only after numerous reviewers of *Starfish Rules* had pointed to Pynchon as an influence, and that he didn't like it at all (B 13).

Georg Klein's debut novel, *Libidissi*, was published in 1998. Two years later, he was awarded the Ingeborg-Bachmann Prize for literature in German. When the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, in 2000, asked several contemporary German authors who they thought should receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, Klein wrote a short essay arguing in favor of Pynchon.

In this article, "Gott in Schweden oder 'Wem ich den Nobelpreis für Literatur geben würde'" ("God in Sweden, or, 'To Whom I Would Award the Nobel Prize in Literature'"), Klein says that Pynchon should have received the Prize in 1975 for *Gravity's Rainbow*. That this was not the case, he suspects, is due to quite specific expectations Europeans have of U.S.-American authors. Europeans, Klein says, want "noble white savages," "natural men" who fulfil the age-old dream of

a New World in which man once again lives in harmony with nature (GS 60). Although Klein does not mention the name, Hemingway is the prototype of this kind of U.S. author. Pynchon is obviously not the writer to fulfil these slightly condescending hopes for a naive and vitalist American fiction. In Klein's words, "Pynchon's prose does not come to Europe in a gaily patterned Hawaiian shirt or in a guilelessly checked flannel jacket but more like the impact of a V-2" (60). Continuing this risky metaphor, Klein says that Pynchon's American perspective has hit the European dream of its own past like a rocket and that Pynchon's writing turns all those historic monuments, the tragic rubbish of our history, and contemporary history into mobile movie sets. In other words, Klein reads *Gravity's Rainbow* as a dream of Europe, a dream rendered through Hollywood editing techniques and crammed full of Hollywood stereotypes, a movie version of a dream in which even the most sinister characters turn into cartoons. It is, he writes, as if Pynchon said, "Thus we are dreaming Europe! Dream harder, if you can!" (60). Klein concludes that Pynchon provides us with the frightening image of an American author we cannot smile about any longer but have to admire, whether we like it or not.

Klein's admiration for Pynchon has left apparent traces in his own works, notably in the book that brought about his well-deserved breakthrough. *Libidissi* is a spy novel, set in an unnamed fictitious country of the Middle East or Northern Africa. Libidissi is the name of the capital, and the word is plainly intended to evoke notions of sexual desire. In *Libidissi* a German agent named Spaik is waiting to be replaced after decades of service to the ominous *Bundeszentralamt* (Federal Central Office). His successors are two young and determined agents whose relation to each other has notable homoerotic undertones. Through an ancient secret underground pneumatic-tube communication system, Spaik learns that his successors have been ordered to eliminate him before they take his place. A chase begins and leads through various places in Libidissi: Freddy's Steam Bath, the hotel Esperanza, the Naked Truth Club. Near the end of the novel, the Germans also enter the capital's forbidden quarter, ironically called Goto. The story is narrated mostly from the alternating points of view of Spaik himself and one of the two new agents, but toward the end a third-person narrator abruptly appears. Although the young German agents have been prepared for their task by photographs and video tapes, they do not recognize Spaik when they meet him by chance. The outward appearance of their target has changed considerably during his stay in the country: Like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Spaik has gone native.



The theme of Klein's novel is provided not by the spy plot, exciting as it is, but by the weakening and transforming influence the exotic yet strangely familiar country and its capital exert on the minds and the bodies of the white male European protagonists. Libidissi threatens their sense of identity, a threat highlighted by the way Spaik, in a formula typical of the local pidgin, constantly refers to himself as "ich = Spaik." Like Pynchon in "Under the Rose," *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, Klein uses the spy genre for his own ends. The most impressive quality of *Libidissi* is the atmospheric detail in which Klein brings his fictitious country to life: its colonial and postcolonial history, the ethnic and religious conflicts tearing the country apart, its geography, the local pidgin, its various traditions and customs, and its rather dubious alcoholic beverages. Looming in the background of the story is a mysterious character, the Great Gahi, who used to be the head of a radical fundamentalist movement before he committed suicide in front of a video camera exactly nine years before the last day of the novel's action. (Nine, incidentally, is a holy number for the Gahists.) *Libidissi* ends with the Gahists' bloody uprising against the government and the foreign troops still present in Libidissi, as well as with the final confrontation between Spaik and his successors.

The issues *Libidissi* deals with have been prominent for decades in the literature and literary theory of most countries with a colonial history: relations between Occident and Orient, between former colonizers and former colonized, between Western civilization and its Other. But they have rarely been addressed in recent German literature, probably because German colonial history came to seem rather insignificant compared to the Second World War and the Holocaust. However, since German businessmen and secret agents nowadays are spread all over our purportedly postcolonial world, it is appropriate that this situation should finally find its reflection in serious German fiction. Klein takes up a number of concerns and motifs characteristic of postcolonial literature: the influence of the climate, mysterious illnesses, the issue of mapping a foreign country (there is no reliable map of Libidissi), etc. Above all, Klein seems to be interested in all forms of hybridity, the reciprocal influence different cultures and their representatives exert on each other. There is no "pure," "uncontaminated" tradition or culture in *Libidissi*, the most important example being the local pidgin, Piddi-Piddi, which has incorporated "a few hundred words" (L 21) of various local languages. A close reading of the novel shows how this interest in hybridity manifests itself in the very words on the page.

*Libidissi* contains a number of stylistic features and motifs we can (but do not have to) associate with Pynchon's fiction: secret

communication systems; significant or pseudosignificant names, such as Spaik and Goto; grotesque and absurd situations; strange characters, such as a Jewish doctor who happens to be an adherent of Darwin and a racist. And, of course, both writers are preoccupied with the consciousness of the Western white male attempting to come to terms with a different culture. More generally, the Klein of *Libidissi* belongs to a literary tradition whose lineage includes Joseph Conrad, Jorge Luís Borges, Franz Kafka, J. M. Coetzee and Paul Auster as well as Pynchon. Klein's novel is a subtle, complex and mysterious fictional game with a number of shadows lurking around the corners, German history being only one of them. It is also simultaneously an entertaining spy novel and an exploration, from a decidedly German point of view, of the relation between the Western mind and the Other under postcolonial conditions.

Of the three novels discussed here, the one that seems most obviously influenced by Pynchon is *Starfish Rules*. As Pynchon looks at Germany through the prism of German history and culture, Meißner returns that gaze. One narrative strand of *Der Kahuna Modus* was inspired by *V.*, and there are similarities in the way Pynchon and Bertram use popular culture to mold the action of their respective novels. Klein uses textual strategies comparable to those of *V.*, and Germanizes the Anglo-American tradition of postmodern and postcolonial fiction.

All three novels are untypical of the contemporary literary scene in Germany. Bertram, Meißner and Klein neither ignore the lessons of modernism by answering the calls for a "new realism" nor are given to gazing at their own subjective navels or merely illustrating theses from Foucault, Derrida and Baudrillard. Instead, they have turned to the fantastic, the absurd, black humor, alternative history, pastiche, parody. *Der Kahuna Modus*, *Starfish Rules* and *Libidissi* manage to unite the structural complexity of serious literature with the entertainment value of traditional popular genres. In doing so they mirror important aspects of Pynchon's fiction, whether or not they have been directly influenced by his writings.

—Berlin

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the debate, see Köhler and Moritz.

<sup>2</sup>English translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup>Bertram mentions Pynchon as one of her sources on the website for the novel (q.v.).

<sup>4</sup>Clarke's Third Law of Technology claims that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (26).

<sup>5</sup>In the tenth book of Homer's epic, Odysseus's companions open Aeolus's bag, and the ensuing tempests drive their ship away from Ithaca and back to the isle of Aeolus; Odysseus is forced to start all over again.

<sup>6</sup>Cordwainer Smith is the pseudonym under which Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913–1966) wrote science fiction.

<sup>7</sup>This is just one of several pointed allusions and explicit references in *Starfish Rules* to *Moby-Dick*, clearly a major literary influence. For example, Meißner frequently associates America with a ship on a tumultuous, doomed sea-voyage.

<sup>8</sup>The few Nazis that appear in *Starfish Rules* are subject to parody and pastiche. In a chapter called "Swastika Swing" (81–84), Tondorf and his companions from the New Pride Movement raid a mansion in Atlanta, Georgia, inhabited by expatriate Nazis. The name of the villa is Rheingold, and a Furtwängler recording of German classical music—"Bach or Beethoven or Wagner or some other bombasticker" (81)—is on the gramophone during the shootout. The scene may well be the first example of a pastiche of British and U.S.-American B-movie clichés about Nazis in German literature or film. In any case, it is a rare violation of the unspoken consensus that Nazis are not funny.

<sup>9</sup>For a more detailed discussion of *Starfish Rules*, see Eckhardt.

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