

# Acts of Observing

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*Lesen—Beobachten: Modell einer Wirkungsästhetik mit Thomas Pynchons Gravity's Rainbow*, by Bruno Arich-Gerz. Konstanz: UVK, 2001. 178 pp. 29 EUR.

The game of watching and being watched in the Nausicaa episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* may serve as an analogy for any act of reading *Gravity's Rainbow*. At least that is what Pynchon's text seems to suggest. The ingredients of the scene (the seen and the seer: Gerty MacDowell willingly showing her legs, Leopold Bloom staring his eyes out and masturbating with the fireworks in the background) make Sandymount Beach into an all too concrete manifestation of "the Zone, with somewhere in it a Text, to be picked to pieces, annotated, explicated, and masturbated till it's all squeezed limp of its last drop" (GR 520). Bruno Arich-Gerz intensifies and raises this critical Bay Watch to the fourth power. The aim of *Lesen—Beobachten* is to revise issues in reader-response theory. Based on Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, this revision focuses on four levels in the reception process to reformulate the role of the reader by means of the concept of the observer [*Beobachter*]. Readers, as Luhmann notes, cannot be observed like partners in oral communication. Arich-Gerz cunningly tackles this problem by observing critics, who present their readings as observations, which can in their turn be observed. The four levels to which this strategy is applied are the act of reading literature in general, the acts of reading *Gravity's Rainbow* in particular, Wolfgang Iser's *Akt des Lesens* (and other theories of reading), and finally the—in their turn observable—acts of reading *Der Akt des Lesens*.

In part 1, Arich-Gerz translates the act of reading into Luhmann's systems theory. Luhmann's distinction between *Information* and *Mitteilung* is a tool to describe an alternative to the traditional "logocentric" mode of thought focused on eliminating the difference between information and communication and characterized by the expectation of understanding [*Verstehen*]. When the unification of *Information* and *Mitteilung* does not take place, the discrepancy falls short of readers' expectations. This creates potential annoyance, but may also result in a form of observation with a higher degree of self-referentiality.

Iser uses *Ulysses* to exemplify how twentieth-century literature increasingly counteracts hermeneutic unequivocalness, resulting in an increased self-reflexive involvement of the reader in the act of reading. This self-reflexive movement or “self-observation” (Luhmann) caused by the paradoxical relation between the reader’s expectations and the text’s refusal to come up to them can lead to a surplus value as it draws attention to the “how,” that is, the way the observed observer deals with the paradox. In Arich-Gerz’s translation of Luhmann’s triadic scheme (*Information—Mitteilung—Verstehen*), the result is not understanding, but reflexive observation.

Arich-Gerz wittily applies this model to the interpretation of *Gravity’s Rainbow* by means of “two cases in Pointsman,” arguing that the behaviorist Ned Pointsman is not only a conditioner (of both laboratory animals and plots) but also a conditioned character with a “Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible” (GR 188). This is only one of several reversal effects, which apply to many levels of Pynchon’s text. The simultaneous occurrence of the V-2’s (apparent) anticausal scheme and the V-1’s expected causal succession serves as a pattern for omnipresent bilateral stimuli, such as the erectile relation between cause and effect in Slothrop’s case. Since Pynchon also uses the cinematic metaphor to illustrate the V-2’s supersonic effect (“The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out [. . .] a few feet of film run backwards” [GR 48]), the projector bulb that procures this effect is an important element in Arich-Gerz’s discussion of reading and “the” reader in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In several instances, Pynchon’s text seems to address its readers directly and to make fun of their paranoid readings (“Well, you’re *wrong*, champ—these happen to be towns all located on the borders of *Time Zones*, is all. Ha, ha!” [GR 695]). This “you,” Arich-Gerz argues, is not so much an anonymous collective readership as an expression of the effect that characterizes any reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This effect is implied in the warning at the very beginning of the book: “No, this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive *knotting into*” (GR 3).

It is a bit misleading against this background for Arich-Gerz to refer to “the” reader as if it *were* an anonymous collective readership. His discussions of reading and “the reader in *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (95) are headed by the titles, respectively, “bulb fiction” and “‘bulb fiction’”—in the style of John Barth’s “Menelaiad.” The danger that a reader can get “lost in the funhouse” of this study may be a critical drawback, but of course that is always already obviated by the reversal effects of Arich-Gerz’s metatheoretical approach. In this sense, *Lesen—Beobachten* illustrates Derrida’s thesis that any secondary text sponges on its primary text like a parasite. Based on Derrida’s *Deux mots pour Joyce*

and *Ulysse Gramophone*, Arich-Gerz's analysis shows how the bilateral stimulus applies not only to preterites on the intrafictional level but also to "pretereaders" on an extrafictional level. The progressive knotting into continues and the whole Pynchon industry takes place in the "sound-shadow" of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the way Joyceans can write only in the wake of the *Wake*. Nevertheless, Arich-Gerz duly notes that this "hypermnesie" does not imply that critics can only keep embroidering on the novel's "paradoxical-paranoid potential" (120). *Gravity's Rainbow* offers an alternative. The reflexive reading it suggests implies a reflexive movement, both from the text back to the text and from the reader to his or her own situation as reader: "He is hearing, for the first time, the mighty river of his blood, the Titan's drum of his heart" (GR 697).

In the third and last part of *Lesen—Beobachten* we are immediately reminded that we're not in Kansas anymore. With the extreme metatextual sensitivity that characterizes his whole study, Arich-Gerz appropriately draws attention to the reading that preceded any reading of the published text, mentioning his proofreader's comment "Exit Pynchon . . ." on the final manuscript page of part 2. At the very end of the book, Arich-Gerz returns to Pynchon to illustrate the model of reading he designs in part 3. This model is focused not on an ideal of objective interpretation but on the individual act of reading/observing. While the theories of Stanley Fish (reader-oriented) and Iser (text-oriented) are played off against each other, Arich-Gerz finds an invigorating perspective in Gregory Bateson's double-bind theory, which originated in research into the causes and structures of schizophrenia. A double bind involves the inability to distinguish between "logical types," such as "level" and "metalevel" (which Luhmann links with the usual content/form dichotomy). Bateson distinguishes three types of defensive reaction to finding oneself in a double bind. The third—the paranoid type—is especially interesting with regard to *Gravity's Rainbow* and the so-called second phase of Pynchon studies, characterized as "paranoid criticism."

This succession of phases is a crucial element in Arich-Gerz's model. The starting point is Hans-Robert Jauss's observation that a text can collide with its readers' familiar horizon of expectations to such an extent that an audience for this kind of text can build itself only gradually. Jauss developed this theory three years before the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow*, which proved to be exactly the kind of text Jauss had in mind. Arich-Gerz shows how the "change of horizon" can originate in the confrontation with the old one. To draw the border between these two phases, Alec McHoul and David Wills have recourse to the notion of logocentrism, which Derrida links with

the encyclopedism inherent in the concept of the book format. *Gravity's Rainbow* deliberately falls short of the expectation of hermeneutic unequivocality created by the linearity of its book format. In the meantime, this linearity and the corresponding idea of cause and effect are somewhat neglected in the second phase of Pynchon research. Nevertheless, Arich-Gerz argues (together with Jonathan Culler) that the causality principle cannot be rejected completely, for, paradoxically, one needs it to deconstruct it. Especially with regard to the interaction between text and reader, the deconstructed causality principle becomes operable again in the form of a "second-degree aesthetics of cause and effect" (164). After all, *Gravity's Rainbow* is still a book, even though its complex structure of endless referability may create the illusion of hypertextuality.

To distinguish the book from the hypertext format, Arich-Gerz starts from Luhmann's criterion of quantitative-combinatory complexity and the reduction of this complexity by any system of observation. Each reader of hypertext fiction transforms the quantitative-combinatory into qualitative-interpretative complexity by creating his or her own individual path. Arich-Gerz illustrates this process by means of Jay D. Bolter's and George Landow's readings of Michael Joyce's *Afternoon*. A long footnote follows the contingent path from Michael Joyce's *Nausicaa* to James Joyce's episode of the same name via Bolter's and Landow's associations, which only increase the qualitative-interpretative complexity. This path leads back to the game of watching and being watched with which this reading of *Lesen—Beobachten* began. By carefully observing the reductions of *Gravity's Rainbow's* complexity, Arich-Gerz convincingly shows how Pynchon's text challenges traditional reader-response theories. For while "we assumed—natürlich!—that this holy Text had to be the Rocket" (GR 520), Arich-Gerz was watching us. His sharp observations build up a concentrated study, highly conscious of the fact that it will, in its turn, be observed—and deservedly so.

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