

***Gravity's Rainbow, Operation Crossbow* and the Culture of Containment**

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The rocket is the weapon of tomorrow.
—General Linz, *Operation Crossbow*

Since its publication in 1973, *Gravity's Rainbow* has attracted critics interested in the representation of film in Pynchon's third novel. The novel contains numerous allusions to actual films and film actors and a fictional film community directed by Gerhardt von Göll and starring Greta Erdmann and Max Schlepzig. In one of the novel's more memorable moments, Slothrop and Greta re-enact a scene from von Göll's masterpiece, *Alpdrücken*, which re-enactment dissolves into the experience Franz Pökler had of viewing *Alpdrücken* when it was first released. Pynchon shows a special interest in film and in the play between the real and the reel. For some readers, the closing scene in the Orpheus Theatre signifies that we have always been at the movies in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Nonetheless, most of the previous critical work on film in *Gravity's Rainbow* has focused primarily on the films alluded to and on their relation to the thematic arguments in the novel. In this essay, I explore a different cinematic path and suggest some ways *Gravity's Rainbow* relates to a film released during the time of its writing, the 1965 film *Operation Crossbow*.

The era of *Gravity's Rainbow's* composition was the era of Vietnam and the burgeoning tension between the United States and the Soviet Union—between democracy and communism. Depending on how one imagines the writing of *Gravity's Rainbow*, a defining moment prior to or right at the early stages of composition was the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Just five years before, the Soviets had launched Sputnik, an act that not only seized for them a momentary lead in the race to explore space but also declared the Soviets' rocket capability. The discovery by spy-plane reconnaissance of missiles in Cuba replayed the same kind of discovery Constance Babbington-Smith had made of the V-2 rockets at Peenemünde. Although President Kennedy's response was different from the British response of bombing Peenemünde, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought home to Americans their vulnerability in an age of nuclear weapons and sophisticated rocket delivery systems. Films like *Dr. Strangelove* (1963; U.S. release 1964)

and the James Bond series helped define and fuel a cultural paranoia that stressed we might be only one madman away from the fatal triggering of an all-out nuclear exchange. Although the Cuban Missile Crisis brought Americans to a fever pitch of anti-communist fervor, the process of containing the Soviet threat had begun many years before.

As Alan Nadel astutely argues in *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age*, the politics of the Cold War led to a rhetoric of containment: America had to contain and protect against the communist threats that, if one believed Senator Joseph McCarthy, were infiltrating American society from top to bottom, but especially in its cultural productions of literature and entertainment. Within this context, many significant American literary and film narratives sought to tell stories of containment. Nadel pegs the origin of this rhetoric of containment in a close reading of George Kennan's 1947 essay in *Foreign Affairs* "The Sources of Soviet Conduct." A key passage Nadel focuses on has overtones that resonate with *Gravity's Rainbow*:

[Kennan argues that] the United States must do more than prevent [the] Soviet flow [of political influence] by "entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world" . . . ; it must also make the source of that flow "appear sterile and quixote" . . . not by counterforce, but by counterexample. (Nadel 16-17)

Nadel goes on to show how the trope of containment became the operative figure for representing the government's role in protecting domestic security. Significant for readers of *Gravity's Rainbow* is the mention of a "counterforce," yet Kennan's sense of the word, which can be inferred as a veiled reference to the developing Central Intelligence Agency, is quite distinct from Pynchon's use of the term to designate the characters who try to rescue Slothrop in the fourth section of the novel. But we should also consider that the Counterforce's personal and futile rescue efforts coincide with the birth of the Cold War, which can be marked by one of the United States's first "counterforce" actions: the postwar effort to secure rocket technology and scientists. This opening of the rocket race began one of the United States's most obvious attempts at a "counterexample": the race for supremacy in space and in rocket technology for military purposes.

Long acknowledged as a source text for rocket information in *Gravity's Rainbow*, James McGovern's *Crossbow and Overcast* (1964)

tells the story of the V-2 from development to deployment and of the American mission to bring Wernher von Braun, his rocket team and one hundred V-2s to the United States—a journey that brought the rockets through the port of Antwerp. In a story familiar to all of us who have wandered in the Zone, the politics of the postwar Zones allowed American forces access to Nordhausen and the Mittelwerke until the end of May 1945, when this still operational rocket factory would become part of the Soviet zone. The Russians who drink with Marvy's Mothers in Stollen 41 of the Mittelwerke (307) should be read as observers sent to Nordhausen to ensure that the Americans do not destroy valuable spoils of the war. We might even read this scene of relentless drinking as part of the American plan to keep the Soviets unaware of how much rocket equipment was being shipped out to America in contravention of the Yalta agreements.

McGovern's book, however, is more than a history charting rocketry from the V-2 to the Saturn launch vehicle that would ultimately take American astronauts to the moon—a feat that was still only a Presidential boast when McGovern was writing. *Crossbow and Overcast* is also an example of what Nadel calls "containment culture"—the political dimension of cultural formation in the atomic age. McGovern's book tells the story of how American ingenuity gave the United States a huge containment advantage in rocket technology by acquiring the cream of the German rocket program along with one hundred unfired rockets and the complete technical documentation for the V-2. In the spirit of the American classic *Huckleberry Finn*, *Crossbow and Overcast* tells the tale of how we put one over on the other guy. However, McGovern also reports the early Soviet successes in space flight, and sounds a warning that America must forge ahead with its rocket program to contain effectively the threat the Soviets posed to America's assumed right to dominate space. McGovern's text, objective as it is, clearly partakes of the rhetoric of containment, arguing for America to place a priority on its rocket development. But what concerns Nadel in his study is the rhetoric of containment in the cultural productions of literature and entertainment. In this context, many significant American literary and film narratives can be shown to tell stories of containment.

So pervasive is this rhetoric of containment that Nadel does not have to limit his inquiry to overt Cold War narratives like *Dr. Strangelove* or the early James Bond films. At the same time these films were being released, Nadel argues, a broader culture of containment was emerging, particularly in popular forms of narrative such as Disney films and Cecil B. De Mille's *Ten Commandments* (1956).¹ This containment culture sought to enforce patterns of

domesticity that had been in place before the dawn of the atomic age and to contain the sexual, economic, and racial forces the Second World War had made manifest, which by the late 1960s could no longer be contained. In the end, Nadel writes ironically:

[T]he pursuit of containment must always claim to be about the interests of the free world—the spreading of democracy—not about the interest of the United States in preserving its authority to make rules in the name of the free world; it must appear to be about the story of democracy, not about claiming the authority to tell the story. (206)

Narratives exhibiting the rhetoric of containment reveal a double nature, a duplicity ripe for deconstruction. The issue is not whether the United States was always or sometimes wrong or nefarious in disseminating its story of democracy; instead, the point is the cultural effect of such narrative hegemony in foreclosing other options. Nadel argues that although the culture of containment is being resisted on various fronts overtly, we must learn to read against the trope of containment, to expose its functioning within the dominant discourse.

It is just such a reading to which I propose McGovern's book is now open, but rather than pursue that reading, I want to turn to the film McGovern's book seemingly inspired: *Operation Crossbow*.² *Operation Crossbow*'s title stems from the code name used by the British in their efforts to combat the V-1 and V-2 rockets ("Overcast" was the code name for the postwar American rocket-collection activities), and the film just barely reaches the end of the Second World War. The first third of the film is historically quite accurate in detailing British efforts—Sir Duncan Sandys meeting with Churchill, Constance Babbington-Smith examining aerial photographs, and the German military testing the rocket at Peenemünde. Once the bombing of Peenemünde has occurred, however, the film veers away from history and into the spy thriller genre that was a staple of Cold War films. Even if the literal enemy is Nazi Germany, the figurative and real enemy of the 1960s is the Soviet Union. Producer Carlo Ponti and Director Michael Anderson appear more interested in telling a tale of espionage and heroism than in telling the tale of boxing up rocket parts and hunting down rocket scientists for transport to America.

The film veers off its historical course with the entrance of its American hero, played by George Peppard (although he receives second billing to Ponti's wife, Sophia Loren). As Lieutenant John Curtis, Peppard's character enters the movie by assuring the two military women in the back seat of his London cab that he will return as quick as he can. In his over-sexed irreverence for the military purpose of his

presence in London, Curtis suggests a Slothrop prototype, a suggestion supported by his comment that he only agreed to come to London to spend a day in the city. Curtis has been summoned to London along with others to interview for a secret mission to infiltrate the underground rocket factory at the Mittelwerke. While waiting to be interviewed, he meets his two fellow agents, Robert (“Bob”) Henshawe (played by Tom Courtenay) and Captain Phil Bradley (Jeremy Kemp). A fourth potential agent (Anthony Quayle) is turned down; his scientific knowledge is not up to standard. As the film unfolds, this potential agent is revealed as an SS official who becomes the nemesis of the three allied agents as they pursue their mission. We see the signs of the rhetoric of containment in this German spy in the very fact that he is unsuccessful in his attempt to infiltrate the Allied espionage forces because his scientific knowledge is inadequate. He will ultimately compensate for that lack by brutally executing both Henshawe and Bradley before the film ends. Literally a Nazi, but a metaphor for the spy who might be among us (he reveals that he is half British and half German and that he has chosen the Nazi side), this SS agent represents both the threat, the inhuman brutality, and yet the fundamental inadequacy of the enemy. The allied agents are selected for their engineering knowledge and for their fluency with languages. Henshawe is Dutch and Bradley British—trusted allies, but not the complete hero Curtis represents. Although Curtis gradually drops his wise-cracking, easy-going ways, he will, like Slothrop, be sent into the Zone with a new identity, and after a difficult journey find himself at Nordhausen with a mission to complete.

Both Slothrop and Curtis are ostensibly in search of information. Slothrop is looking for the S-gerät, a special component of rocket 00000, but discovers much more even if his grail eludes him. Curtis’s mission is clearer: the Allies need him to infiltrate the rocket factory to provide information that will help the British fight the rockets. Both have tense moments when they are threatened with exposure. For Slothrop, these moments—such as his first meeting with Geli Tripping—mostly turn comic, while for Curtis, still in the midst of the war (his mission begins before the first V-1 launch at London), the threats are real. For instance, while waiting at a hotel for transport to Nordhausen, Henshawe, impersonating a Dutch engineer named Jacob Bijus, is detained by the SS agent who tortures and finally executes him for not betraying his confederates or his mission. For Curtis, also impersonating a Dutch engineer, Erik van Ostamgen, the threat comes from the appearance at the hotel of van Ostamgen’s former wife, Nora, played by Sophia Loren. Slothrop, we know, has frequent girl trouble, but Pynchon usually opts for the comic rather than the melodramatic.

Nevertheless, the novel and the film include similar scenes of false-identity-recognition. In *Gravity's Rainbow* the scene occurs when Slothrop informs Greta that he has been given the identity papers of her former co-star and lover Max Schlepzig; in *Operation Crossbow* it is between Curtis and Nora when he has to state his identity before the police. Both scenes reveal that the real person must be dead, but whereas Slothrop and Greta engage in a sadomasochistic romp, the characters in *Operation Crossbow* play for higher stakes, and again we sense the rhetoric of containment structuring the cinematic narrative.

Nora has stumbled into a dangerous situation. She has come seeking her former husband's signature so she can take their children to Italy, but now that she knows her husband's identity is being used in some sort of spy activity, she also knows her life is in danger because she knows too much. Her fate and the fate of Curtis's mission hinge upon the question of trust: can he trust her promise not to reveal him; can she trust his promise to find a way for her to return to her children? In all spy thrillers the theme of trust and betrayal is standard. Henshawe as Bijus keeps the trust among comrades by not betraying Curtis or the members of the underground assisting them. Curtis extends what must be read as an American trust in Nora's promise not to betray him or Frieda (Lilli Palmer), the hotel's landlady, who is part of the underground. In exchange he forges van Ostamgen's signature, witnessed by Frieda, on the document that will let Nora take her children out of Holland. However, in an execution parallel to Bijus's, Frieda kills Nora once Curtis is on his way to Nordhausen. Although Frieda as a member of the underground is a trusted ally, her foreignness is represented by her inability to trust Nora. Once again the threat presented by even Allied collaborators is underscored in this execution. It might be argued on purely narratological and genre grounds that Nora must die, but it is a sacrifice that falls outside the bounds of the mission. In some ways Frieda's action can be likened to Katje Borgesius's sacrifice of Jewish families to preserve her cover within Blicero's rocket unit. Moreover, the theme of trust runs throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*. Another parallel occurs with Slothrop's betrayal of Greta and her daughter, Bianca, aboard the *Anubis*.³

Before we move to the film's final third at the Mittelwerke, one last exchange between Curtis and Nora is worth noting. He asks her what van Ostamgen was like, and if he willingly worked for the Germans, and she responds: "Erik believed that he could get through life without ever being hurt; when the Germans came, the way not to get hurt was to work for them." Although Nora is not quite a Leni Pöckler, it appears her husband had something in common with Franz. But unlike *Gravity's*

Rainbow, *Operation Crossbow* avoids over-personalizing its characters—they exist only to serve this story of containment.

At the Mittelwerke, the film begins to look more like so many of those in the James Bond series in which the villain has a high tech mountain fortress that cleverly conceals a rocket-launching pad. In a number of the Bond films, the villain believes world domination will come from the control of space or from the controlled launching of a nuclear weapon (once again the rhetoric of containment is unmistakable in these films). Conspicuously absent from the scenes at the Mittelwerke are the concentration-camp workers from Dora who labored and died building the rockets; by the mid-sixties, West Germany was too important an ally in the global politics of containment for moviemakers to represent the Holocaust accurately.⁴ Also absent is Wernher von Braun, or any character who could plausibly represent him (there are an apparent civilian involved in the test launches of the V-1 and at the Mittelwerke an elderly scientist, Professor Hofer, for whom Curtis works on engineering problems). As mentioned above, *Operation Crossbow* includes many historical figures as characters. Winston Churchill, Duncan Sandys and Constance Babbington-Smith represent the British effort, and Hanna Reitsch, a German test pilot, is also represented. The absence of von Braun suggests an interest in keeping him at a distance from his considerable involvement with the wartime rocket—a containment of his life story so as not to overshadow his second career at the forefront of the American space program. Although exaggerated, one historically accurate item from McGovern's account of the work done at Nordhausen is the plan for an eventual A9 rocket that would be the first intercontinental ballistic missile. Dubbed in *Operation Crossbow* the "New York Rocket," this weapon is the locus of the film's climactic rewriting of history and of its rhetoric of containment.

As McGovern's book amply shows, the Mittelwerke survived the war not only intact but fully operational; in fact, it became the initial center of Soviet rocket research until October 1946, when everything, including the remaining German rocket scientists, was packed off to the rocket works outside Moscow. In *Operation Crossbow*, the threat of a long-range rocket prompts the order to bomb the Mittelwerke. In the climactic scene, Curtis and Bradley must open the "launch doors" for the Allied bombers to sight their target and destroy the Mittelwerke. The message is hard to miss: through espionage, particularly American and British, and through the heroism and sacrifice of secret agents, the threat of the first ICBM was contained. And to make sure we don't miss the point, the voice of Churchill articulates the message of containment at *Operation Crossbow's* close:

It is time we begin to think about reconstruction. . . . Let us start at once; let us clear the rubble and lay the bricks; and let us do so in the firm conviction that we are building for the future. That never again shall we have to embark upon such a conflict as we have recently endured. I solemnly believe that the price of such a folly would be far more than mankind could afford to pay.

At this point in my research, I cannot tell whether Churchill actually said any of these words (the cadence is very like Churchill's, and the brick-laying metaphor certainly fits his character), but if they are based on the supposed destruction of the Mittelwerke, these words are both pure fiction and a deep irony. By 1965, the world was hardly safe from ICBMs capable of delivering atomic weapons of mass destruction to any part of the Earth. The irony would not have been lost on Pynchon.

Although I have no proof, I find it hard to believe Pynchon would have missed *Operation Crossbow* when it was first released. There are enough signs in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* to indicate that work on *Gravity's Rainbow* had begun well before *Lot 49* was published. However much Pynchon might have been influenced, if at all, by *Operation Crossbow*, his project in *Gravity's Rainbow* was clearly not in support of the conventional narrative of containment culture. If anything, the figures formerly contained are all let loose. Tchitcherine moves from being an imposing Soviet agent bent on destroying his half-brother, Enzian, to shaking his brother's hand by the side of the road after deserting. Enzian and the other Hereros emblemize an African culture, long contained by white oppression, emerging into its own destiny. And the women in *Gravity's Rainbow* represent a complete breakdown of the sexual constraints that had largely held sway since the nineteenth century. But ultimately it is Pynchon's representation of the rocket that marks his departure from the culture of containment.

As Nadel argues, the "containment narrative" becomes a metanarrative that functions to "separate 'substance' from 'waste,' to select events that will be represented as history, and to effect the repetition of privileged narratives" (4). The goal of this metanarrative is always already to promote the desirability of democratic ideology. *Operation Crossbow* fulfills this metanarrative function; *Gravity's Rainbow*, on the other hand, with its celebration of "waste," puts into question any possibility of a desirable outcome that would confirm the dominant discourse of containment. Although the Nazis are nominally the enemy in the historical background of *Gravity's Rainbow*, their defeat in the Second World War appears hardly the issue; moreover, the nascent Soviet presence in the novel is by no means up to its Cold War proportions. The real enemy in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the corporate

forces that have profited from the war and will profit from the peace—a military-industrial complex that requires a culture of containment to make safe the illusion of open markets. Represented as an enigmatic Them, the real enemy in *Gravity's Rainbow* tries to use a strategy to contain Slothrop—a free agent who knows just enough to be valuable but not enough to really know anything. When the Counterforce decides to try to rescue Slothrop, They willingly let this collection of the disaffected take over the search: better to keep the Counterforce busy on a trivial pursuit rather than busy uncovering the truth about the already emerging postwar accommodations. The unease the reader feels at the close of *Gravity's Rainbow* is not just the planned effect of a postmodern narrative strategy; it is also a result of having glimpsed another image beyond the rainbow—the image of the coming rocket state.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the rocket is a symptom of a force larger than any particular ideology. The technology that produced the rocket has, by the late 1960s, begun to spiral out of control. In an irony Pynchon evidently appreciates, the rocket, born out of scientists' dreams of one day traveling into space, became, in the words of *Operation Crossbow's* General Linz, "the weapon of tomorrow." At the moment of America's greatest space triumph, the 1969 moon landing, the Vietnam War had the world teetering on the brink of a nuclear exchange between superpowers. Whose rocket is it that descends on the Orpheus Theatre at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*? If it finally passes that last Δt , will it even matter? The myth of containment culture is that the threat can be forever contained; moreover, the narrative of containment has likely been a fiction all along, deflecting our attention from the real business of buying and selling. As Pynchon and his readers well know, it is only a matter of time, "Though thy Glass today be run, / Till the Light that hath brought the Towers low / Find the last poor Pret'rite one . . ."

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Notes

¹One recalls Pynchon's elaborate set-up of the pun "'For De Mille, young fur-henchmen can't be rowing!'" (559). In the context of this essay, the pun hints at an awareness that De Mille's blockbuster productions had coded within them a culture of containment and repression of childhood.

²The credits for *Operation Crossbow* do not mention McGovern's book at all; however, even if the film project was begun long before *Crossbow and Overcast* was published, it is hard to imagine that McGovern's book did not have some impact on historical elements of the film.

³A curious contrast could be drawn between Sophia Loren and Greta Erdmann in that Sophia Loren is always already “Sophia Loren”—a movie star. In her limited “starring” role in *Operation Crossbow*, Loren barely has time to get into character, to transcend her public persona. On the other hand, Greta (and, by extension, Bianca) is unable to emerge from the cinematic identities she played on film.

⁴McGovern reports that there were two camps that supplied workers to the Mittelwerke: one was at Nordhausen, and the other was Dora, which was two and a half miles from the Mittelwerke (110). Dora was, nonetheless, part of the factory, and McGovern reports the rampage the surviving inmates went on after their liberation by American troops, including the detail of their stealing lightbulbs (156).

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