

## Movie Music in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Most of the songs in *Gravity's Rainbow* appear to be based, some closely, some loosely, on already existing songs to which Pynchon has written new lyrics. Appropriate to the nexus of film allusions and images in the text, some of Pynchon's songs are based on music written for the movies. I have identified specific sources for two songs that have not previously been accounted for. Together, the two allusions illustrate the contradictory ways the narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* uses film references.

During Slothrop's sodium amytal session at St. Veronica's, the narrator sings a song enumerating Crutchfield's conquests: "One little hustler from San Berdoo [. . .]"<sup>1</sup> This song seems to be inspired by and based loosely on "Five Little Miles From San Berdoo," by Sam Coslow, from *His Kind of Woman* (1951). In that movie, Robert Mitchum plays a gambler who is lured to a Mexican resort so that deported organized-crime leader Raymond Burr can use his identity and passport to re-enter the U.S. On his way to the resort, Mitchum stops in a cantina where golddigger Jane Russell sings:

Five little miles from San Berdoo  
I woke up humming and thought of you.  
I looked out the window, what a view!  
Five little miles from San Berdoo.

The song continues according to the same scheme, each verse bringing the singer a mile closer to San Berdoo, until at last she sees her lover at the railroad station.

Later, in the Zone, as Slothrop goes to warn the Schwarzkommando about Tchitcherine and Marvy's planned raid, his wandering mind wonders how he has become so distracted from his quest for the Schwarzgerät:

but now aw it's JUST LIKE—  
LOOKING-IN' FAWR A NEEDLE IN A HAAAAY-STACK!  
Sssss—searchinfrasomethin' fulla moon-beams,  
(Something) got ta have yooooou!

Feet whispering through weeds and meadow grass, humming along exactly the breathless, chin-up way Fred Astaire did, reflecting on his chances of ever finding Ginger Rogers again this side of their graceful mortality. . . . (561)

Weisenburger notes the Astaire-Rogers reference and connects it generically to their RKO musicals, which almost always involved some sort of separation due to misunderstandings or mistaken identities.<sup>2</sup> But, in fact, this is a much more specific reference. In *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), Astaire meets, is smitten by, and offends Rogers, who will tell him neither her name nor her address. Faced with the prospect of searching all over London for a woman whose name he does not know, Astaire dances to and sings a Con Conrad-Herb Magidson song beginning:

It's just like looking for a needle in a haystack,  
Searching for a moonbeam in the blue,  
Still I've got to find you.

Slothrop's memory is spotty, but this is clearly the song he has in mind.

These two allusions reinforce both the notion that Slothrop's experience of the world is constructed by various ideological, cultural, and pop-cultural systems, and the narrator's problematization of the organizational conventions of various narratives. The second allusion illustrates that Slothrop, like many of the novel's other characters (from Pirate Prentice, who recognizes the vapor trail of an incoming V-2 because "He has seen it in a film" [6], to Franz Pökler, who fathers his shadow-child after seeing *Alpdrücken* [397], to the readers, who finally discover that they have "always been at the movies" [760]), relies on structuring narrative elements and rhetorical devices of representation drawn from his movie-going to organize and interpret his experience of the world. His experience/sense of reality is constructed and perhaps determined by, among other things, a Hollywood narrative tradition with which his consciousness has been infused. The implications of the second allusion, however, are qualified by the first. The narrator (the narrative voice seems separate from Slothrop's consciousness in much of the sodium amytal sequence), while critical of a film-influenced construction of reality, uses many of the same film-based narrative elements and rhetorical devices, from cute meets, to bridge music, to, as here, movie music. This is one of the many ways *Gravity's Rainbow* problematizes both itself as a narrative as it seeks to narrate and, by extension, our experience of the text as we read.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973; Penguin, 1987) 68.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Weisenburger, *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) 241. Weisenburger's thumbnail sketch contains some misstatements about Astaire and Rogers's partnership. They appeared together in nine films (not ten) for RKO between 1933 and 1939, and they did "team up again," for MGM's *Barkleys of Broadway* in 1948.