

Mindless Pleasures

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Welcome to all the pleasures that delight
Of every sense the grateful appetite.

(Purcell, *Welcome to All the Pleasures* [1683])

Many essays on Pynchon's epic *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) begin by commenting on the increasing pile of books, articles and dissertations the novel has generated. Add to this heap paintings. I was quite pleased to see Paul Coleman's *Gravity's Rainbow*-inspired paintings in recent issues of *Pynchon Notes* and *Smart*. It is satisfying to know I am not crying in the wilderness. I have also been inspired by *Gravity's Rainbow* and have produced a number of paintings based on the book. Where Pynchon has proved most beneficial to me, however, is as a secondary source.

Like the majority of high school students', my liberal arts education was neither liberal nor an education. I had been exposed to little of merit. But *Gravity's Rainbow*, which I discovered as a sophomore in an art college, proved a unique tutor. The book introduced me to a number of concepts and people, and dovetailed with my interest in the theories of the expansionist rhetorician Kenneth Burke. *Gravity's Rainbow* seemed to me a Burkean novel, and reading Pynchon as I was interpreting Burke was invigorating.

My work has since alluded heavily to the work of Pynchon and two artists to whom he refers, Anton Webern and R. M. Rilke. (I also lean heavily on the work of another poet, who, as far as I am aware, has never been mentioned by Pynchon--Wallace Stevens. This omission has always surprised me, as Stevens would seem an obvious referent for Pynchon.) I had never heard of Rilke until *Gravity's Rainbow*, and after reading the last lines of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* in what would become my favorite section of the novel (622), I immediately read Rilke's poems. His poetry has figured greatly in my work ever since. Pynchon's more oblique reference to Webern--"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 WWII, but not for Webern" (440)--piqued my interest, and I again raided the library, this time for all I could find on Webern--which wasn't much until

Moldenhauer's *Anton Webern: A Chronicle of his Life and Works* was published in 1979. I have based a number of pieces on Webern's life and works, and have found the composer to be an interesting and complex man. I have also developed a project based on the sad life of Webern's accidental killer, Norman Bell, who was as much a victim of circumstance as Webern.

Gravity's Rainbow reinforces what Jung argued: Everything is interrelated. You cannot research too much, know too much or gather too many facts, because everything is symbiotic. The more layers you incorporate into a work, the more potential power your communication will have. Harry Steven Keeler (a bizarre American writer whose work I collect) writes in one of his books about poly-incidence as opposed to co-incidence. The more you know, the more you can build a Jungian (or Keelerian) relation among facts. As an example of my technique, I will describe in detail a painting entitled *Mindless Pleasures* (1987) that is based both metaphorically and physically on *Gravity's Rainbow*.

I consider *Mindless Pleasures* to be, like everything I create, essentially rhetoric, an act of persuasive communication. The foundation of *Mindless Pleasures* is three pages from *Gravity's Rainbow*. After looking at available editions to find the page composition I desired, I enlarged the 4" x 7" pages from the Bantam paperback 1000% to 40" x 70". These blown-up pages became my canvas, and I painted with acrylics directly on the photographic film.

The three pages, 721-23, represent the beginning of "The Counterforce," a section I consider the turning point in the novel. The description of Pirate Prentice zipping over Germany captures the excitement and exhilaration inherent in the employment of military equipment. This mindless pleasure is as addictive and dangerous as drugs; indeed, Pynchon parallels the flying episode with a scene involving cocaine. The details of my painting reveal the thrust of my arguments. The colors used represent an abstract landscape as seen from a low-flying aircraft. Collaged on the painting is a firearm tag warning that we risk death or injury by handling this weapon. (I pulled this tag off one of my own handguns; I am not immune to the siren call of this particular mindless pleasure.)

The painting is signed John Rocket. I rarely sign my work, and when I do, it is never with my legal name. This alias is an allusion to *Raketemensch*, the Rocketman Slothrop metamorphoses into. John Rocket is culled from Stevens' "Certain Phenomena of Sound" (1947):

And old John Rocket dozes on his pillow.
It is safe to sleep to a sound that brings time back.

"ACCORDIAN WALK" is stenciled across the three panels. The style is based on similar stenciling in the early works of Jasper Johns. The phrase is both a pun on the title of one of Johns' major paintings, *According to What*, and an allusion to the hinged construction of the triptych.

The checkerboard motif is my yin/yang symbol, often used to represent time and history. One of my major interests is our tendency to subjectively reorder the past to suit a present world view. Historically, a checkerboard pattern was often used to decorate the rudders and cowls of P-47 Thunderbolts used in Europe during the Second World War. The other pattern with black lines is a camouflage system called Crazy Paving or Stick. An extremely effective pattern, it was used extensively by both sides in the War. I often incorporate camouflage patterns in my work as a symbol for the critical superiority of function over aesthetics. A camouflage pattern, while ostensibly based on a traditional landscape aesthetic, is evaluated solely on pragmatic virtues. As one influenced by Burke, I evaluate art not as a system of aesthetics but by how well it functions as argument.

The male silhouettes, traced from the covers of Doc Savage pulp novels of the Depression era, function as icons in *Mindless Pleasures*, symbolizing the secularization of faith. A society's popular icons are barometers of that culture, and Doc Savage was the most popular hero of his day. The period 1920-30 marked the apogee of the transformation of theism into the worship of science and materialism.

This leads me to my final point, the title of the work. As most readers of *Pynchon Notes* know, *Mindless Pleasures* was the working title of *Gravity's Rainbow*. While the novel is "biblical" in the sense that one can seemingly pull any moral out of it, I view *Gravity's Rainbow* as a dire description of how we forget our place in the universe by wrapping ourselves in the mindless pleasures of materialism. This theme is evident in the contrast between the two episodes involving harmonicas and water. Near the beginning of the book (63), a bloated Slothrop hangs over a filthy toilet in the Roseland Ballroom; vomiting the garbage he has ingested, he drops his harmonica into the toilet. He becomes paranoid and victimized as he struggles to retrieve his harp. Near the end of the book (622), Slothrop, easily fetching his harmonica from the river, is transfigured by the knowledge that there are "harpmen and dulcimer players in all the rivers." His redemptive transformation to a oneness with Nature is well underway.

A fascination with the weapons of destruction is only one of the many manifestations of materialism. Anything that diverts us from our true potential, anything that we prostitute ourselves for, is a mindless

pleasure. Like an addict, we waste our time supporting our habit, looking inward rather than outward.

The World is only pleasure
To those who don't know love.

(Verdi/Piave, *La Traviata* [1855])

--Stanley Bridge, Prince Edward Island



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