

Hit and Miss

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Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion. By David Cowart. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980. 154 pp. \$10.95.

Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information. By John O. Stark. Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1980. 183 pp. \$12.95.

David Cowart's Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion is so fluent, informative and obviously correct in many of its demonstrations that one may scarcely mind that explicating allusions is perhaps not of the most immediate critical relevance to Pynchon's postmodern texts. As a timely and necessary "counterweight to the numerous studies of Pynchon's use of science" (the importance of which use Cowart admits to having formerly underrated, though indeed most of those studies of it can hardly be underrated), Cowart examines Pynchon's use of painting, film, music and literature. He divides both Pynchon's artistic development and the criticism which mirrors it roughly into two phases: an early pessimistic or nihilistic phase in which Pynchon and his critics were concerned largely with entropy and decline, and a later, more optimistic, melioristic, speculative phase. Cowart "seeks to augment and consolidate" the latter trend in Pynchon criticism. Toward that end, he elaborates a dichotomy similar to the nihilistic/melioristic one in order to characterize Pynchon's deployment of allusions to the various arts. He asserts that Pynchon's allusions to the arts (as well as to the sciences) form patterns which "adumbrate an antinomy between the entropic, voidward drift implicit in a materialist view of things, and the possibilities for transcendence implicit in a spiritual view." Pynchon "limns a nihilist world picture with allusions from painting and film, and a more speculative one with allusions from music and literature. The two-dimensional pictorial arts furnish emblems of life's appalling insubstantiality . . . [and teach their viewers that] life masks a void." By contrast, "musical references seem

always to hint at the extra dimensions of experience that we miss because of the narrow range of frequencies --physical or spiritual--to which we are attuned. . . . Music in Pynchon . . . is associated with rich new possibilities beyond our normal powers of observation. . . . The majority of the literary allusions abet and extend the almost mystical tendency observed in the musical allusions." Cowart's thesis is attractively and suspiciously neat. But the first part of his argument's emphasis on nihilism is unconvincing and has a disproportionate influence on the study as a whole. The thesis also promises more than the study can ultimately deliver.

The argument's weakness results from Cowart's possibly inadvertent treatment throughout his study of the nihilist world picture as more credible, more weighty, more serious than the more speculative one. One may entertain, may need to entertain a speculative, spiritual view of life and possibility, but the void is the "brutal," "final truth to which one who takes the broadest and longest view inevitably comes." Accordingly, "Pynchon argues life's substantial inferiority to its own aesthetic projections." This claim is made specifically in regard to the filmic devices, imagery and allusions in Gravity's Rainbow, but informs Cowart's treatment of pictorial allusions in V. and The Crying of Lot 49 as well. It is true that many of Pynchon's characters entertain, arrive at, even cultivate such a belief or a kindred vision of life as colorful and diverse, but ultimately, appallingly insubstantial, or have a vision of "the voidward drift of all life into a wholly inanimate condition." We may doubt, however, whether Pynchon himself endorses such "nihilistic truth" about "the void that mocks all human ideals and aspirations." He obviously takes the idea of life's insubstantiality quite seriously in his fictions. But he also portrays the hazards, the often terrible ravages of too single-mindedly embracing, whether in sorrow or in joy, such a nihilist vision of life. If Cowart manages to "augment and consolidate" the critical trend he seeks to, he does so almost in spite of himself. For to treat the materialistic/nihilistic vision as Pynchon's fundamental truth is to render somewhat meretricious the spiritual or mystical vision, whatever nice things one may say

about it, and to deprive of authenticity Pynchon's portrayal of expanded perceptual, emotional, spiritual and political possibilities. What is wanted, however, is not to choose a world view to ascribe to Pynchon, but to appreciate his novels as artistic juxtapositions, clashes or possibly syntheses of disparate world views.

Despite the dubiety of the general argument underlying them, Cowart's detailed analyses of allusions to painting and film in Pynchon's novels are often insightful and informative. Cowart demonstrates how, in V., "Botticelli's Birth of Venus functions as a kind of cultural touchstone by which readers may gauge the awful significance of another, more apocalyptic birth, that of V. herself." He argues that in The Crying of Lot 49, the "solipsistic theme" of Remédios Varo's Bordando el Manto Terrestre "complements that of Pynchon's novel." He makes a persuasive case for an influence on the novel's imagery and theme of Varo's iconography, including "an evidently necromantic post horn," and perhaps also of information about her life. The wide-ranging chapter on film in Gravity's Rainbow explores the manifold ways films and extra-cinematic (though not necessarily extra-textual) reality, dreams and waking life, films and dreams complement, interpenetrate and cross-fertilize one another. Cowart discusses such actual films as King Kong and such imagined ones as Alpdrücken and "the phony Schwarzkommando footage". He examines a number of both ontological and epistemological problems and possibilities or difficulties and opportunities raised by the film-reality-dream interrelationships. (Even so, the fact that the "real life" at issue here is obviously artificial--doubly so, presented as it is in a novel which imitates a film--adds another layer to the complexity, and ought to add another step to the analysis.) He discusses, too, the novel's ostensibly being a movie and, in particular, the significance of the filmlike structure and status of its ending. Valuable as so much of his discussion is, Cowart may be too engrossed in Pynchon's undermining of the distinction between film and reality to take sufficient account of Pynchon's occasional undermining of his own undermining by reminding us, for example, that film is a "pornograph[y] of flight." Cowart also

continues his denigration (imputed to Pynchon) of reality as illusory, insubstantial, superficial, "cosmetics for the void." Perhaps he means to denigrate only a complacent, superficial, positivist, so-called common sense view of reality. However that may be, to denigrate reality wholesale is, willy-nilly, to devalue the cinematic art Cowart characterizes as its imitation or counterfeit. That fact may account for his seemingly defensive insistence at times that film is "respectable as a mode of reality," and that it "is not to be patronized as life's two-dimensional imitation." But at his best, when responding more directly to the novel, rather than attempting to make it illustrate the more dubious part of his thesis, Cowart is more judicious: "Pynchon uses film as a critique of life, insisting that the one is not more or less real than the other." "The words with which Pynchon describes the film [Alpdrücken] imply that it is an interface between two realms of being, neither of which is illusory." And it may be well to emphasize that the chapter on film in Gravity's Rainbow offers much insight and much sensitive analysis, not just of the novel's specifically cinematic allusions, motifs and devices, but also of their attendant and broader psycho-analytic, mythic, cultural and socio-historical significances.

Cowart's penultimate chapter on musical allusions is his best. Its first half especially is a triumph of meticulous explication. Cowart argues that Pynchon's allusions to classical rather than to popular music "reveal the most coherent and finely wrought pattern . . . [indeed] reveal Pynchon's artistry most impressively." He examines how, in "Under the Rose," Puccini's Manon Lescaut serves as "the story's central thematic thread, the chief referent for Porpentine's character and the story's action." In the Egypt episode of V. into which the presumably earlier "Under the Rose" was transmuted, the opera, though referred to only briefly twice, "resonates with [Pynchon's] own theme and characterization, and foreshadows subsequent developments in the novel." These allusions, as well as Pynchon's travesty of Stravinsky's Le Sacre du Printemps, which Cowart also discusses, "support ironic variations on the theme of love and death" in V. In his discussions of Pynchon's other two novels,

Cowart deals more with composers and music theory than with individual compositions. He shows that music--even Muzak on the one hand, and silence on the other--offers to those suffering from atrophied, habit-dulled or repressed senses and spirits the possibility of new or renewed perception of "extra dimensions of experience." The work of electronic composers like Stockhausen, mentioned in The Crying of Lot 49, "complements Pynchon's theme. For, in a sense, his heroine also attempts 'a breakthrough to some new scale of pitches.'" Similarly, the twelve-tone music of Anton Webern is invoked in Gravity's Rainbow "to suggest the extra, unexpected possibilities all around one," "the spectra that we normally fail to perceive." Cowart examines the various thematic implications of the on-going controversy in Gravity's Rainbow over the relative merits of traditional and serial music. He also considers those allusions which identify Slothrop with Orpheus, and the increasing thematic prominence of music's subversive potential.

After his best chapter, Cowart's final chapter on language and literature comes as an anti-climax. The symmetry of his thesis requires such a section; but the chapter seems strung together and tacked on, and the structural integrity of the study as a whole suffers from its inclusion. Whereas the previous chapters are reasonably coherent, though apt to sprawl, this last one consists of much mere cataloging of literary allusions and influences, and of a rather arbitrary, if not haphazard sequence of brief discussions of Pynchon's allusions and probable debts to several Jacobean and Caroline playwrights and to Poe, Forster, Dodgson, Fariña, Rilke and Jung, as well as discussions of Pynchon's theory and use of metaphor, his "devotion to the quest plot," and his use of a variety of other literary devices. The chapter hardly does justice to the vast and complex subject of Pynchon's specifically literary practices and allusions. Yet Cowart's discussions in this chapter are, as far as they go (some are actually quite detailed), competent and informative. For the sake of its overall unity, however, The Art of Allusion might better have been devoted entirely to Pynchon's allusions to the non-literary arts. That subject is surely broad and fertile enough to justify an independent study, and Cowart is surely master enough of

that more restricted subject to have given us a perhaps even more expansive study of it. One misses, for example, in the present book, the work he has published on "Cinematic Auguries of the Third Reich in Gravity's Rainbow," which would not have seemed out of place. And Pynchon's copious allusions to Wagner, which Cowart has also attended to briefly elsewhere, probably deserve more than passing mention here. But notwithstanding its flaws--its dubious thesis, its anti-climactic structure and, possibly, its omissions--there is much to appreciate and enjoy in The Art of Allusion. Besides being a master of many arts, Cowart is an uncommonly diligent student of Pynchon's works, capable of comprehending and elucidating many far-flung and complex elements of Pynchon's texts.

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Generally more science-oriented, but also containing chapters on film and literature, Pynchon's Fictions: Thomas Pynchon and the Literature of Information by John O. Stark might complement Cowart's study neatly, were Stark's book not so relentlessly inconsequential. Stark assembles a wide array of information on various subjects, most of it obvious to readers of Pynchon or already familiar to readers of Pynchon criticism, but fails to elucidate Pynchon's work in terms of it. (For all his concern about information, he is often careless about names, dates, incidents, and characters.) He rarely analyzes Pynchon's texts at length or in depth. His prose is flaccid. According to Stark's grand schema--probably an afterthought, since Stark never recurs to it explicitly after his introduction--Pynchon's work can be understood if visualized as three concentric circles: "The inner circle, the texture, represents Pynchon's description of unmediated everyday reality. That is, in the elements of his fiction he presents the confusion that vexes people who have no ordering principle to make details fit together, to help them discover meanings." The second circle represents the information Pynchon borrows from science and technology, psychology, history, religion and film, as well as Pynchon's references to the methods of organizing information employed by each of these disciplines. "Explaining both information from and theories about each of these disciplines," Stark

claims, "goes a long way toward illuminating Pynchon's work," though one couldn't prove that by Stark. "However, all of these disciplines fail to organize satisfactorily the enormous amount of information available to contemporary people. Although this task is probably hopeless, Pynchon's literature can be understood as an effort to work towards its accomplishment." Thus, the third circle represents Pynchon's own "literary uses of information," "his literary allusions and his analysis of the nature of literature." Stark's ultimate revelation is that literary fictions provide a more comprehensive means of organizing experience, events and information than do such other fictions as science and technology, psychology, history, religion and film. That does not come as much of a surprise.

Stark's first chapter actually has little to do with "Pynchon's description of unmediated, everyday reality," or with "the confusion that vexes people who have no ordering principle to make details fit together, to help them discover meanings." Instead, it exhibits the confusion that vexes people who have a naively realistic bias. It "shows how the elements of Pynchon's fictions, by disputing common sense and flouting the conventions of realistic fiction, produce chaos" in the mind of at least one reader. For page after page after page, Stark engages in awe-struck chit-chat about non-realistic plots, characters and settings, about multi-layered texts and unconventional structures, about thematic emphasis on literary, epistemological and metaphysical problems, about authorial erudition, mixed genres, ambiguous tone and sophisticated handling of points of view, about imagery and symbols, and about style. It takes Stark nearly forty pages to realize or to admit that literary fictions are fictive and that other ways of understanding reality are also fictive. He asserts that "Pynchon concentrates on the process of organizing data, not on unorganized data or the result of such organizing;" but such a useful observation is all but lost in the welter of all Stark's astonishment at discovering, and all his unnecessary labor to explain that literary fictions are constructed by authors, and often have narrators with points of view. Stark appropriately stresses the need many of Pynchon's characters feel for ways to organize experience and information, and

thereby to discover and/or create meaning. He understands that one can choose among numerous possible literary and non-literary ways to organize data. "Pynchon dramatizes these choices, partly by shaping his narratives so as to incorporate them, and partly by having his characters choose." The five middle chapters of Stark's study are devoted to a survey of non-literary data and non-literary fictions or non-literary methods of organizing data in Pynchon's works.

In those five chapters, Stark compiles considerable information, much of it simply gleaned from Pynchon's texts (and from previous criticism) for the avowed purpose of showing how Pynchon uses individual bits of data. He also discusses the various methods his selected disciplines employ to organize and synthesize information, with the aim of showing how Pynchon adopts these disciplines' methodologies for his own purposes. "Science and Technology" touches on the topics of rocketry, plastics and drugs, of causal, statistical and less orthodox epistemologies, of synthesis and control, and of thermodynamics. It also discusses cybernetics and its definition, organization and use of information, and considers mathematics as a subject and a source of imagery. "Psychology" breezily covers paranoia, aggression, anality, sexuality, love and death, as well as Freudianism, gestalt psychology, Jungianism and behaviorism. "History" contains thumbnail histories of Malta, the Hereros, rocketry and Thurn and Taxis. Here Stark argues that, whereas the histories of science and communications are important in Pynchon's works and to an understanding of them, social, economic and political histories as such are less prominent and less important. He contends that Pynchon subordinates the latter kinds of history to, for example, an ahistorical analysis and representation of the suffering of individuals. Stark's claim that "historical events in [Pynchon's] novels rarely seem to have political causes," apparently derives from his having a quite restricted notion of politics. Stark rightly includes history or historiography among the data-ordering disciplines. He attempts to deal with questions of methodology, with premises about the existence and nature of time, with the historiographical implications of theories of memory, and with various theories of the movement and motive force of his-

tory. On these last points, his impulse is laudable, but his effort is erratic and his achievement scant. "Religion" touches lightly on intimations of revelation, eschews mythic interpretation as simplistic, contrasts the world views of the Puritans and the Hereros, discusses the occult tradition, vitalism, nineteenth-century German nature philosophy and the Tarot, and concludes with a breathless explication of William Slothrop's hymn. "The Film" discusses Pynchon's probable debt to From Caligari to Hitler, mentions some of the cinematic techniques Pynchon adapts for literary purposes, and considers some of the relations of cinematic techniques, technology, aesthetics, ontology and epistemology to Gravity's Rainbow. Regrettably, we gain very little from all this. Stark hardly ever discusses a subject thoroughly, either on its own terms or on Pynchon's. Rarely does he enlighten, instruct, demonstrate, argue, persuade or even entertain. He achieves only a few, isolated, modest insights. The five chapters are not redeemed by novelty or daring or grace or convenience. They do not enhance our understanding or appreciation of Pynchon's works.

Alas, things get worse in the inept final chapter, "Literature." Stark apparently has a peculiarly elementary sense of what literature is, or else has an odd notion of his readers' sense of what literature is. He lets us know, for instance, that "[Pynchon's] books, even the very long Gravity's Rainbow, are literary organizations of information." He seems to think of literature as a place to put things, mostly non-literary information, which retain their autonomous non-literary character. Of course, Pynchon's works also contain some literary information: German folk literature, Faust motifs, and even more allusions to Rilke than the reviewer said. Although raw literary information is less important to Pynchon than is raw non-literary information, literature as an information-organizing discipline is more significant and more comprehensive than are the non-literary disciplines. Stark boldly asserts that Pynchon "continually demonstrates that a sophisticated work of literature does not communicate a predetermined non-literary meaning from its beginning throughout its entire length." Rather, he suggests, "it creates and conveys meaning

gradually." All the "pieces" of Pynchon's works are united, not by any non-literary meaning, but by the literary quality of partial self-reflectiveness, by Pynchon's "putting his materials together in patterns [in the absence of an imposed non-literary meaning]," and by Pynchon's "perpetual concern with language." Stark's attitude toward this last concern reveals the depth of his penetration. Language itself, he feels, is unproblematic. If it were not, "Pynchon could not use it so effectively." The troubles that characters in V. and The Crying of Lot 49 experience with language, they create for themselves "by their slovenly use of language." In Gravity's Rainbow, language is wonderfully efficacious, and that's that. Stark also seems to believe that his definition of a literary fiction as one that demonstrates the necessity of fictions, reflects on itself, creates its order by making patterns, and assimilates non-literary fictions is highly original. Even if we needed to be persuaded of the truth and usefulness of such axioms, Stark's peculiar efforts would hardly answer.

It is difficult to conceive of the intended audience --non-academic, undergraduate or specialized--for Pynchon's Fictions. Stark does not try to be non-academic. His presentation is not just simplified for the general reader. He is neither merely innocent nor radically innocent--bent on refreshing our jaded senses or on compelling us to re-examine what we take for granted. He is not somewhere out in left field; he doesn't seem to know quite where the park is. Pynchon remains pretty much where Stark found him; criticism and Stark's readers, however, may experience a bit of a setback.

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