Expanding the Kingdom of Death: Paradigms of Perception and Space in Works of Thomas Pynchon

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Abstract

Thomas Pynchon's works have been identified as prime examples of postmodern American prose fiction. As such, their language, narrative techniques and content, often dissonant with employed genres, have been labeled as postmodern in their dismissal of any reliable authorial message. This article[1] argues that while Pynchon's novels mirror paradigms of thought and of a perception of reality, they also show a consistency in re-presenting literary and geographic space, as well as history as narrative. Using three of Pynchon's novels, the article concludes that an authorial message can be discerned both in the change and in the consistency: a message of the need for humane interaction quite different from stereotypes of the cynicism of postmodernism.

Introduction

Postmodern fiction employs what has been termed a "cannibalization of the past" genres, disciplines, and topics.[2] Among the authors who stand as prominent examples of such technique is Thomas Pynchon. His novels teem with references across fields, disciplines, and registers, and receive equally diversified treatment from critical analyses, for example an enchantment with the Joycean scope of its language or the Cabbalistic system of text organization to inter-textual references to popular culture and inspiration by Deleuzian ideas on the schizophrenia of capitalism.

This article addresses the paradigms of perception and structure of thought that Pynchon uses to inform the characters, narrative structure and plot development in his novels. To a certain degree, the paradigms of perception of social and political reality in Pynchon's novels can be said to mirror the atmosphere and paradigms of thought at

the time of their publication. At the same time, however, there is a consistency in his works that spans across the time period of their publication, especially pertaining to the author's idea of space and history as a narrative.

The novelist remains largely silent regarding his own work. However, a proliferation of critical literature on the novels exists, usually focusing on a single text and invoking other critical analyses. There seems to be a lack of inter-textual analysis of Pynchon's works themselves. That is why this article limits its scope to three of his works but emphasizes their mutual comparison, while employing but a few secondary literature sources. Three novels that wonderfully exemplify Pynchon's work are the following: *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), *Mason&Dixon* (1997), and *Against the Day* (2006). These works reflect both the development of the paradigms at the time of publication, and at the same time can be searched for the examples of a consistent treatise of political space and history as a narrative.

Gravity's Rainbow

Paranoia as a paradigm of perception represents a recurring drive for Pynchon's character and plot development (Levine, 1976; Mendelson, 1978; Tanner, 1982). Pynchon's approach to this kind of perception of reality elevates paranoia from a process of a non-functioning mind to the only paradigm that can withstand the environment the author creates in his novels. Yet, its role shifts as we progress from one novel to another. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, paranoia is indeed a cognitive method that provides characters with information driving them to follow their respective goals, open or clandestine. We have Tyrone Slothrop — the famous anti-hero running for his life — pursued by invisible, yet ever-present industrial agencies while trying to reveal his personal connection to the ultimate weapon, the V2-Rocket. The technology for the Rocket is prey to other secret-hunters as well: Tchitcherine, the Soviet officer, haunted by his African step-brother Enzian; Blicero, the Nazi officer wanting to transcend death by embracing it with technology; and even the Counterforce, a frantic, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt of the Allied early post-war assemblage of individuals to rescue Slothrop. All these actors are connected with the secret of rocket-propelled weapon systems,

all of them keep peeping over their shoulders, knowing that their past, and their future, is out there to get them.

Pynchon unleashed this Cold-War-scare dynamic onto his characters to portray the alienation between humanity and the technology that it created in order to fight its biological limits. At the same time, he showed how destructive this breach between creators and their creation can become, on the premise of a Faustian hunger for knowledge, or Frankensteinian obsession to conquer death. This resonates with the contemporary concept of the Mutually Assured Destruction that defined the bi-polar world order in 1973.

This order grew from the industrial build-up that marked the war effort of the superpowers, but overflowed into an incessant advent of new technologies during the Cold War. The constant build-up of fear in both Western and Communist camps, resulting in armament stockpiling as a means of deterrence, Doomsday scenarios and prospects of a grim future for the ever-shrinking available space on the planet, is destabilized even further by the possibility of a technologically induced apocalypse. Pynchon elevates paranoia to a paradigm at the time when paranoia permeates analyses of international relations, when fear and unknown, unseen enemies are causing panic and domestic witch-hunts and international belligerence.

However, the environment Pynchon uses as a setting, is no passive element. It is no mere background on which the characters slide in an out of view. It is an active representation of space that co-creates the plot, and it exercises power over the characters in the novel. Moreover, it may be itself a carrier of meaning, supporting paranoia as a paradigm and structurally delineating the plot's development. The space in question is the Zone, the area that embodies the paradox in terms of an "uncharted territory." It is because time is frozen by negotiations between present military powers, and space convolutes upon itself with self-identifying meanings (Weisenburger 2006, 177–9). The paranoiac drive of characters is fully employed in yet another case in the novel: n the chapter on Mittelwerke, or final assembly plant of the V2-Rocket, where Pynchon opens a play of illusions of the failed past and dreams of a feared future at the same time. This makes it possible for him to hint at ontological and epistemological issues of the relationship between humanity and technology in the postwar world. While the Zone provides a representation of space that is in an anticipatory mode, as a nodal point

of intensity that can diffuse into countless possible outcomes, the Mittelwerke stands as a representation of the paranoiac dynamic of the Cold War world system driven by dehumanizing technology that communicates through fear. Human individuals is rendered obsolete, becoming mere carriers of technology that overwhelms them and turns them into numbers in ranks and files. Humanity is exposed to the entropy of mechanistic proportion, and the only escape from it is dissolution.

Mason & Dixon:

If one searched for a "geographic novel" among Pynchon's works, it would be *Mason & Dixon*. The plot unfolds around the characters' travels in their capacity of astronomers, surveyors, and near explorers. The novel could be considered a travelogue, both in time (delving into the past) and in space (exploring new realms). Despite their vocation, neither of the two main characters actually wishes to travel as much as they must. And, moreover, they are assigned destinations by Royal Society -- they do not choose them based on their scientific or personal preferences. Their travels are missions, sometimes in fulfillment of questionable goals. Contrary to other characters on the pilgrimage-like journey, thrusting at possible meanings (Mendelson 1978, 119)[3] and truth about themselves (as is the case of Tyrone Slothrop), Mason and Dixon are always sent to places, more often than not against their will.

The journeys set events in motion and at the same time convey an additional message to the reader. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop arrives at the realization that there may be no free will of his own and, while struggling to reveal his life interwoven with the syndicate war-effort, his search suggests that his paranoiac flight from social networks provides him the only sort of freedom he can attain as well as necessarily results in his dissolution. In *Mason & Dixon*, the characters discover the connection between all their travels, underlying the main plot involving the work of an astronomer and a surveyor — slavery (García-Caro 2005, 103; Patell 2001, 32). They realize that they themselves are bereft of choice of their mission, and have become tools fot the propagation of an empire that "started at home."

Slavery, the most extreme form of social inequality, exists everywhere they have been sent to do their work. And what is their work? It is to measure the transit of Venus, one of the crucial steps made to solve the mystery of longitude and controlling time, and, of course, the surveying job of delineating a property line between the two colonies. Both missions, though different in the nature of the work required, have the same result. They provide a division of space into segmented territories to be controlled by military and political power (Lensing 2005, 141).

If Pynchon early in his works departs from the modernist notion of action initiated by characters inner choice or consciousness, externalizing this source of action (Mendelson 1978, 5) by putting someone else in charge of the characters' actions (in *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is "They"; in *Mason & Dixon*, it is the British empire[4]), he does so gradually. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the "They" are inhabitants of a paranoiac realm, in *Mason & Dixon*, the empire with its state power takes over. Pynchon identifies colonization and the process of creating divisions with disastrous consequences created by states, echoing the end of the bi-polar world order.

If the enemy is revealed, it can be crushed. And once done with, expansion and proliferation of merciless wealth can ensue. Liberty is defined negatively, freedom is commodified as property, so everything can be calculated and, ultimately, acquired (Patell 2001, 92–7). The second paradigm that Pynchon pins down is a uni-polar moment in a military sense. One central power can spread endlessly not because there are no opponents, but because nobody seems to be interested in opposing it.

At the very same moment, however, Pynchon spells out the dark side of the nascent civil globalization. While the uni-polar moment results in apparent lack of violent conflict (since it is inhibited by the overwhelming power of the center, in other words, it is *structurally determined*[5]), the marginalized past starts to corrode the center in a subversive manner. It reads as a commentary on the negligent self-assuredness of the righteous feeling of self-indulging, self-congratulating certainty, unaware of the entropy within the closed system of one world.

And yet *Mason & Dixon* cannot be labeled a mere political pamphlet of too many pages. Pynchon tells the story of the two Englishmen in the New World not only to trace back the possible origins

of the world order and inequality based on physical and social divisions. He also shows how the two heroes, initially suspecting each other of being secret agents of some higher power, grow from financially desperate and politically disgruntled star-gazers to a simple pair of friends. And it is this development, from the original distrust based on previous negative experience and official career calculations to a simple caring friendship of understanding and mutual respect, that reveals the naked truth: the overpowering center deprives individuals not only of choice, but of an ethical and personal dimension to understanding reality.

Mason and Dixon must plunge themselves into the space of their work to unveil the truth of inter-relationship, and learn to cherish that which they are given by one another's company, on the level of individual actualization, fighting the entropy of humanity as a carrier of its mechanistic determination. It is a level of personal investment, immersion into the space of representation (or, in other words, meaning), on which they can clear the path for their mutual reciprocity (Lefebvre, 1992).[6] Space is a level of reality that needs not to be tamed and territorialized for profit but lived in and experienced, which leads to a humanistic approach and an ethical argument. The surveyors actively *create* the environment by carving out the future historical division of America from a previously untamed, subjunctive space by running the Line, effectively delineating social structure on geographic level. It is in the realization of the fact that they are playing an active part in the destructive project of turning the Continent from the subjunctive entity into a calculated and measured commodity, thus closing the promise of the possible into the appropriated, finite, striated space of the actual, violently appropriated space: a territory. As Deleuze and Guattari establish:

> The model is a vertical one; it operates in an open space throughout which thing-flows are distributed, rather than plotting out a closed space for linear and solid things. It is the difference between a *smooth* (vectorial, projective or topological) space and a *striated* (metric) space: in the first case "space is occupied without being counted," while in the second case "space is counted in order to be occupied." (Deleuze & Guattari 1986, 18)

When Mason and Dixon refuse to continue with the Line, they liberate themselves. That is the opportunity Pynchon outlines for his characters, and for the reader.

The surveyors decide to discontinue the Line, to somehow prevent its movement westward, and Dixon, in a heroic though historically accurate act, threatens to thrash a slave conductor who is being violent towards the slaves. As their actions become oppositional to the world they have helped advance, and they reassert their "thoughts," they also conclude that America *could* have been different, exceptional, but it was not […] At this point, instead of the utopian space that was being imagined by the eager founders of the nation, America has become for Pynchon's Dixon a thing of the past, subjunctive. (García-Caro 2005, 121: emphasis original)

Against the Day

It is this sense of chance, or hope, that Pynchon elaborates on in *Against the Day*. If *Gravity's Rainbow* is about the end of a war and the possibilities that are open in the Zone (and thwarted by immediate coming of the Cold War), and *Mason & Dixon* is about the ruthless expansion of the colonial life and divisions with disastrous ramifications (yet opening vistas of possible ethical involvement on personal level), *Against the Day* focuses on the points of intensity where *things went wrong*. The novel explores the tumultuous time before the first and foremost apocalypse of the ever-growing Western world of profitable business, limitless technology, and scientific discovery in various places. The point is not only to explore the moments but also places. Time and space converge in nodal points of intensity from which a bifurcation in events and decisions leads to drastically different ends.

The characters in *Against the Day* start with an uncertain notion of plots against them, similar to what characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* uncover through constant application of paranoia, but they do not stop there. If Mason and Dixon discover the ethical dimension of their work and refuse to partake in the colonizing violence (embodied most vividly in the presence of slavery), characters in *Against the Day* realize that it is possible to begin living within the systemic violence while pursuing their goals and maintaining the ethical standard that the ruthless capitalism

wants them to shed. Kit Traverse, a son of a free-thinking anarchist who protected the rights of miners against the mining companies in the struggle for unions (His father was a dynamite-carrying nitro-fan.) accepts his father's murderers' offer of money and education, but later uses both to escape and continue his father's work in Europe. In a very similar way, Yashmeen, a daughter of a Russian secret service officer, herself a medium and a self-made secret agent, develops from a merciless manipulator of men into a supporter of lovers.

Pynchon has his characters operate openly on the double premise. They are being used, but perhaps, as a "plan within plan" they may have a fool's chance to turn against their puppeteers. In that manner, they can still overtly support the great powers in their war-mongering (which ultimately leads to the catastrophe of WWI) but secretly struggle to save other people for very humanistic reasons: love, friendship, or the return of a favor. The characters acquire more freedom when they give up the notion that freedom is something to be "had," the principle that sells an individual into the perception of commodified reality.

Pynchon seems to portray the micro and macro levels of the post-9/11 civil society. While knowing that catastrophes are not only possible but perhaps inevitable, that enemies are not only numerous but completely unknown because their motives are unknown, it is possible to strive for a gentler approach to international and inter-class differences. Ethical values of simple interpersonal decency may arise from the ashes of the fire that the self-assured consensus of the 1990s has burned into the many societies and economies in their hurried transformation under the external pressure for Western-style liberal civil society (Keane 2003, 185).

The concept of space in *Against the Day* has developed from the active element in the preceding novels that is outside characters and influences them into even something more. Space represents a driving force that determines the possible *and* the impossible, in fact provides a *structure of the possible* (Armand 2006, 56), not only in the physical or geographical sense, but in the epistemological sense of literacy, of the process of "making sense" (ibid.). Characters and plot development are always-already-conditioned by a representation of space that rules over their perception of reality.

In that sense, Pynchon pushes further what he delineated in *Gravity's Rainbow* with the Zone and in *Mason & Dixon* with the Line through the Continent. In *Against the Day*, the representation of space is no longer about creating environment but about discovering the structural possibility of doing so. This brings back the subjunctive that was seemingly lost. Characters (and the reader with them) can transcend into the realm of the fantastic immediately when aboard the skyship *Inconvenience*, a flying vessel partially invisible, partially magic. The destiny of its crew, the Chums of Chance, resonates with comic hero antics: it starts with the characters populating the crew and, through the encounters with their arch nemesis, it culminates with the trip into the center of the planet, and with an intervention in the war between underground gnomish armies. Their meta-narrative role is, however, rather about the indistinct boundary between the fun-toting, comic-hero fantasy and the pragmatic, troublesome, political, reality. Not even the Chums of Chance are spared the struggle between the possible and free on one hand, and the actual and commodified on the other. When offered eternal youth at an invisible university, they lose sight of their mission and their purpose, and they disintegrate. It is the renewed sense of ethical mission to find a legendary non-place, the mythical kingdom of Shambhala that gives them enough resolve to refuse the destructive comfort, and embark on another fantastic, yet less comic, voyage of self-exploration.

The mythical space is supported by the discussion of the possible double-refraction of light that may, in theory, lead to an actual spatial bifurcation, giving the characters a discernible hope of escaping the crushing reality of American class struggle or the European politics leading to the Great War. In other words, Pynchon employs the same idea as in *Gravity's Rainbow* with Mittelwerke, or in *Mason & Dixon* with the subjunctive Continent and the realm of the lost day, but this time it is not a projection into a fantastic future, or a reminiscence of a long-lost past, but it is an affirmation of an alternative that is ever-present with us. History has made a false attempt at signifying process, ascribing normality to a narrative that was privileged by circumstance. It does not have to be so.

Pynchon lets his text cry out that social, political, and even physical reality is not given, it may be altered by the decisions individuals make. Thus, he calls for those decisions to be responsible,

ethical, and humane. In Pynchon's own words from the cover blurb on *Against the Day*: "Maybe it's not the world, but with a minor adjustment or two it's what the world might be." (*Against the Day*, 2006: cover)

Pynchon has been viewed and interpreted as the quintessential postmodern American novelist. However his works show remarkable development that can serve as an analogy of what has been happening to the label of postmodern. In other words, Pynchon has grown from a whimsically destructive author into an author establishing problematized, yet humane values for his characters. His work has arguably changed the form, and the content, of postmodern prose fiction in America.

Notes

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[2] "To Jameson, developing his ideas from architectural notion of 'historicism,' postmodernism is thus characterized by 'the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past,' a situation which serves to preclude any real of effectual historical awareness on the part of the postmodern subject (*PM* 18)." qt. in Lensing 2005, 138.

[3] "This 'promise of hierophany,' of a manifestation of the sacred, is eventually fulfilled, and her 'sense of concealed meaning' yields to her recognition of patterns that had potentially been accessible to her all along, but which only now had revealed themselves. (Mendelson 1978, 119)

[4] Or, the Royal Society, or its Board of Longitude: however, it has been claimed that the paranoiac drive, a signature technique in Pynchon's previous works, diminished in *Mason & Dixon* (see Lensing 2005, 137; cf. Clerc 2000, 91; Hinds 2000, 205)

[5] ´´The analogy of a principle that is *structurally inherent* to a given reality is taken from Armand's concept of reality that is *structurally determined* by its physical maxims. What he argues on the level of individual's perception has been elevated to a principle of pragmatically defined environment of international relations as an arena populated with nation-states as rational actors. (Armand 2006, 67)

[6] Lefebvre states: "Space is social morphology: it is to lived experience what form itself is to the living organism, and just as intimately bound up with function and structure. To picture space as a 'frame' or container into which nothing can be put unless it is smaller than the recipient, and to imagine that this container has no other purpose than to preserve what has been put in it – this is probably the initial error. *But is it error, or is it ideology?*" (1992, 94; emphasis mine) Pynchon may be answering the question. If it is ideology, it may be resisted on the level of individuals.

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