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The End(s) of the Dystopian City: From *Metropolis* to *Gravity's Rainbow...* and back

ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to analyze the dystopian elements in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and to prove that his dystopian vision imbues not only references close to famous dystopias of Twentieth Century such as *Nineteenth-Eighty Four*, but also to films (the Expressionist movement), and especially *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang. Although there is a rich amount of critical work on *Gravity's Rainbow*, the intertextual relationships between these texts and films have rarely been explored in order to understand and clarify Pynchon's post-modern dystopian vision. The influence of film on literature is also a less discussed topic, especially in the case of classic, canonic writers such as Orwell and Pynchon.

KEYWORDS

Dystopia; Fritz Lang; Thomas Pynchon; Modern City; City Film; Heterotopia.

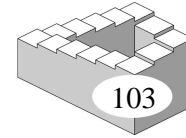
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Throughout *Gravity's Rainbow*, the allusions to film, the process of filmmaking and film-viewing, analogies between the discourse of the novel and the process of filming are constantly present. They become not only a constant metaphorical reference, but also a materialized metaphor, a second reflexive voice that points to the disintegration of the real: the end of the real becomes the thematic concern for the novel.

Modernist fears, postmodern technophobia

But why start with *Metropolis*? Firstly because it was highly influential for both Orwell and Pynchon, and for countless other directors and novelists. What is particularly important is that *Metropolis* ends with the catastrophe, with the images of the deluge as if the only alternative for the dystopian city-state resides in its destruction which makes room for a new beginning. The most important Western dystopias of the Twentieth Century, from Zamyatin's *We* to Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* tend to reiterate this scenario, opposing the apocalyptic hope and anarchy to the dystopian force of technology and corporate state. In this sense *Metropolis* is the starting point for a long series of sci-fi films, and *Gravity's Rainbow*



is an all-encompassing novelistic synthesis in mainstream, canonic fiction.

Secondly, *Metropolis* is very representative for a dystopian trend on the European imaginary which starts in the 1920s, particularly visible in some films of the Weimar Republic, produced by UFA, the company whose historical development is intertwined with the tragic destiny of the modernist, post-monarchical Germany. Both the company and the city where it was based, Berlin, the modern city *par excellence*, are a constant concern and inspiration for Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is widely known the genesis of *Metropolis*: Fritz Lang traveled to America in October 1924, and, before being allowed to disembark from the ship, Lang contemplated New York and had the idea of a "town of the future"¹. Thus, *Metropolis* was born out of a cultural shock of a European faced with the utopian, "fairy-tale like" cityscape in its pure manifestation. *Gravity's Rainbow* seems to have been the response to a similar cultural shock, the encounter with the unleashed demons of a decadent Europe who has brought hell on Earth with its world wars. In each case the perfect embodiment of the dystopian vision is the City, Lang being inspired by an American city, and Pynchon by its European counterparts, from London to Berlin.

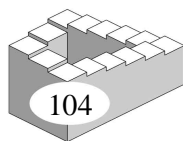
The modern city of Berlin is also an obsession for the "city films" of the twenties, from Karl Grune's *The Street* (1923) to Murnau's *Last Laugh* and culminating with Walter Rutmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927), but also Joe May's *Asphalt*, Lang's *M* and, the most dystopian of all, *Metropolis*. These films embody the very core of modernity, in David Frisby's terms: abstraction, circulation, movement, monumentality, and also the fascination with the artificiality of the set.²

The film industry in the Germany of the 1920s has been a constant source of

inspiration for Pynchon, especially in the case of Neubabelsberg, the famous entirely artificial city, located between Berlin and Potsdam. Neubabelsberg could be the equivalent of the Zone and Slothrop's whereabouts in the third part of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Tempelhof and Neubabelsberg are Europe's largest studios of the 1920s, are UFA's dream factories, where entirely fictitious cities are built (this chaotic proliferation of abandoned sets "In the Zone" spreads ontological confusion both for Pynchon's characters and readers). The history of UFA company mirrors in a paradigmatic way the German tragedy in the first half of the last century, while in terms of its production, Lang's film is the embodiment of the company's strategies, tendencies and shortcomings³. The Film City consisted of towers and tunnels created by unemployed architects in the post-war period⁴, a symbol for the connection between Cinema and the City, and between utopian city, cinema and modernism.

"Germany in the year zero", also a title for a well-known film by Rossellini, is also the setting, the generating nucleus of Pynchon's postmodern hallucinatory vision in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and especially in the third part, *In the Zone* and the fourth, *The Counterforce*, the most intricate, intertextual and provocative parts of the novel, both for the reader and for the critical theory.

In spite of the fact that it is not a science fiction novel, *Gravity's Rainbow* shares with *Metropolis* and with this genre a sharp technophobic vision, placing technology as the source for wars, destruction, death and oppression, starting a long process of which Pynchon gives a thorough account, a process ending with the demise of humanity.



Technophobia: initiating the dialogue

One of the first images in *Metropolis*, probably one of the most discussed images in film history, represents the machines in their purest manifestation. What strikes the film viewer is the absence of any human trace or agency, the machines dominating the entire frame, in sharp contrast with the next shot, where the amorphous mass of workers are marching in a dream-like state, an image that would become the epitome of modernism itself.

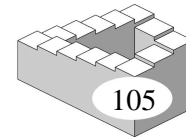
The first and most important Pynchonian allusion to *Metropolis* is conveyed with a secondary character, Pöckler, a frantic moviegoer, who envisions a city-state:

Metropolis. Great movie. Exactly the world Pöckler and evidently quite a few others were dreaming about those days, a Corporate City State where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top, fatherly and benevolent and just, who wore magnificent suits (...) the mad inventor that Pöckler and his co-disciples under Jamf longed to be (Pynchon, 1973, 673)

In both *Metropolis* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, the mad inventor/ scientist is, of course, the source of destructive technology. Consequently, the source of all the destruction and death that follows after their inventions are put into practice and receiving a grand industrial scale. In fact, Pynchon's novel alludes to a series of films and books belonging to the modernist tradition (especially the interwar period, generally labeled the "machine age"), where the

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central, key character/antagonist is the "mad scientist", starting with Wells' early dystopian writings, and continuing on screen with the "haunted" films of the Weimar years, *The Golem*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Homunculus* (Otto Ripert, 1916), and Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* (1922; 1932). *Things to Come*, the 1936 adaptation of Wells' novel (with author's script) must also be noted here for its extended speculation on the future of the City ("Everytown") which is both utopian (the perfect organization and structure) and dystopian, and its foundation lays in the most destructive war in the history of humanity (Wells' prophecy was accurate). The idea that technological progress and its oppressive consequences were triggered by the great forces of annihilation unleashed during the Second World War manifests its subliminal presence in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In both Lang and Pynchon's terms, it is the "weary death" longed for in the Western world during the first decades of the Twentieth Century. *Metropolis* foretells the real unfolding of the events through its ambivalence of utopian expectation (real Maria raising the hopes of the oppressed workers, the hopes for a liberating revolution) and dystopian consequences (the actual revolution leading to a totalitarian world where their enslavement will worsen – the robotic double of Maria taking control over the workers in her hypnotic speech, anticipating others famous crowd-hypnotists of the Thirties in Germany). *Gravity's Rainbow* offers a more distant and elusive perspective of the well-known, real events of the first half of the century, a synthesis and minute description of the end of utopia: a corporatist dystopian world, ruled by technology, originating in the utopian-scientific minds of the 1930s. My reading of Pynchon's novel will not insist on its undeniable deconstructionist impulse towards every aspect of its all-encompassing outline of the Twentieth Century.



The opening shots of *Metropolis* also dominate the last part of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "The Counterforce", where the overarching suggestion is that, in spite of the destruction and the zero point reached by Western history, the Dystopian city/ world has survived, a world of surveillance, omnipotent corporations and increased control:

It's a giant factory-state here, a City of the Future full of extrapolated 1930s swoop-façaded and balconied skyscrapers, lean chrome caryatids with bobbed hairdos, classy airships of all descriptions drifting in the boom and hush of the city abysses, golden love-lies sunning in roof gardens and turning to wave to you at your pass. It is the Racketen-Stadt (Pynchon, 785)

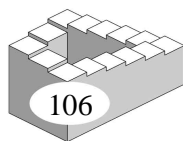
The Rocket is one of the most important symbols, secrets and objects of Slothrop's quest (the Holy Grail of the paranoid plot). It is also the magnetic pole that gathers all the scattered episodes and subplots of the novel, resisting its entropy, manifesting its presence both in the beginning and in the very last pages of the novel. The V-rockets are, in the first chapter, "Beyond the Zero" the very first factor to disrupt linear, chronological time, spreading chaos in a Blitz-London setting. The rocket is also the very secret Slothrop is looking for throughout the Zone. Its image alludes to the verticality of *Metropolis*, present everywhere: the giant structures, the close-ups with the pistons moving up and down, the panoramic shots of the cityscape. The very core of *Metropolis* is vertical, it can be envisioned as a pyramid-the hierarchical class system, similar to Orwell's *1984* and other Western dystopias. Each social class in this dystopian vertical city corresponds to a specific layer and these layers are vertically disposed, from the upper point of total authority (Joh Fredersen) to the anonymous

workers. One of the intertitles in the film illustrates graphically (the triangle) how the figure of the pyramid can be confused with the top of the rocket: absolute power and technology are perfectly intertwined.

Dystopian vision, heterotopian confusion

From the first pages of Pynchon's novel we plunge in an Orwellian world, one resembling the dystopian city of *Nineteen-Eighty Four*: Pynchon seems to draw especially on the atmosphere of Orwell's war diaries, threading upon the idea of the perpetual war and rendering it in an almost surreal fashion. This idea of an impending and imminent world war that would not end until humanity returns to a Dark Age condition was surprisingly foretold by Wells four years before the events would fulfill his prophecy and adapted to screen by the writer himself in *Things to Come* (1936). The film represents the actual London of the 1930s destroyed in an unexplained outburst of violent attacks, a thirty-year war that leaves it in ruins, then paving the way for a futuristic metropolis.

Unlike Wells, Pynchon maintains the historical elements of a London during the Blitz in the first part of *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Beyond the Zero", although we progressively experience, along with the characters, the dream-like sensation of being forever trapped in a dystopian city. Pynchon manages to convey this sensation through very precise historical details in order to render the uncanny of the dystopian world, from which there is no escape other than death or apocalypse (namely the anarchy and the chaos). The historical facts and records have the function to de-locate the dystopian city out of any recorded history: the total war becomes an impossible event transcending history in an apocalyptic manner. The

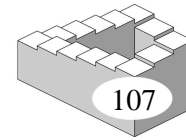


character's visions are augmented progressively and eventually engulf the whole discourse of the first part. Roger Mexico, Tyrone Slothrop and Pirate Prentice are literally absorbed in their visions of an idyllic past, whether is the 1920s Weimar Republic or 18th Century. The nostalgia for the lost world of yesteryear materializes itself ironically in the spirit invoked by Ronald Cherrycoke, Peter Sachsa, who comes along with a fascination with the decadence of the Weimar Republic. The war is also a force of oblivion, propagating its blank spaces and wiping off their personal histories, which is also typical for the dystopian hero: Winston Smith (*Nineteen-Eighty Four*), Montag (*Fahrenheit 451*) and Alex (*A Clockwork Orange*). Slothrop and Roger Mexico have both forgotten their lives before the Blitz, a real event that becomes a metaphor for oblivion.

As far as the concepts of utopia/ dystopia are concerned, *Metropolis* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are completely opposed in their intention of representing the transformation of dystopia into a possible utopia after the totalitarian city is destroyed in *Metropolis*, and, respectively, a dystopia which turns into a hybrid form, which does not fit in either of these categories, namely *The Zone* in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Another feature of reality and its specific mutations which in the *Zone* regards the objects which become progressively non-opaque, and the categories of space are re-defined and reversed. The well-known denomination of these postmodern "impossible" worlds is *heterotopia*, and the *Zone* is considered a paradigmatic example for the postmodernist fiction⁵. This territory has at first a very clear historically-generated point, the apocalyptic year 1945 and the temporary suspension of all the boundaries, nations, authorities, a temporary lapse of previous and present history.

The *Zone* becomes gradually the centre of the world, where all the peoples gather, whether real or imagined, all the political leaders arrive to decide the very course of future, and all the signs indicating both an end and a beginning of an era are summarized. The case of the imagined *Herero* population, allegedly transformed by Hitler into the *Schwartzkommando*, are scattered throughout the *Zone* as the ghost of the former Nazi madness, a link with the fictional world of *V*, and a symbol for the dystopian Experiment of death and repression: their presence is disturbing as they suggest both the European Colonialism and the racial purification, the beginning and end of modernism. The *Herero* population is also the "monstrous race" that populates this inverted utopia (*The Zone*) which is a typical anti-utopian feature. The members of the *Schwartzkommando* perpetrate the idea that they are nothing but a fictional speculation, and thus, the *Zone* achieves its conscience of its non-existence ("There are even now powerful factions in Paris who don't believe we exist. And most of the time I'm not so sure myself"⁶). This is just one of the instances of a self-reflexive suggesting the ontological paradox of the *Zone*: its existence/nonexistence is achieved through its precise and minute description (the most extended chapter in the novel) and through its simultaneous deconstruction⁷.

If the film *Metropolis* initiates a long tradition of Sci-fi movies where the spectacle of destruction (the city submerged in a grand-scale deluge and explosions) is rarely absent, Pynchon's style can be situated at the other edge of the spectrum, in sharp contrast with this manner of representing apocalypse and initiated, in his turn, a very different representation of the end as a slow progression towards the void, as a process of the disintegration of the real, the "apocalypse of the mind". This immersion into the blank space of non-existence affects not



only the Zone, but also the characters, especially the protagonist, Slothrop, who experiences a gradual disappearance. How can this mysterious disappearance of the protagonist be explained? Various interpretations have been suggested. At first glance, it seems that Pynchon suggests a growing distance between the reader and the protagonist stylistically, un-focusing the perspective, bringing us out of Slothrop's conscience and individuality. The critics have interpreted it as an immersion of Slothrop into the Zone, in such a way that he becomes the Zone, interspersed with it.

This *heterotopia* is generated by the very ambivalence experienced by the spectator when watching a movie and being literally absorbed by the images on the screen, the ambivalence of presence and absence. In the first part of the novel, *Beyond the Zero*, we witness and are gradually immersed in the inner worlds of Pirate Prentice and Slothrop, we visualize their fantasies. The perspective becomes even more fluid and we as readers become the spectators of Slothrop's dreams, being subject to the confusion between reality and dream which initially belonged only to Pirate Prentice, the "fantasist surrogate", until we can no longer tell the difference ourselves. The analogies and differences between films/spectator and dreams/ dreamer have often been analyzed, especially with the work of Christian Metz: impression of reality versus illusion of reality, with the images and sounds of the film delivering a sort of "paradoxical hallucination"⁸.

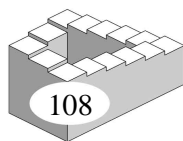
Pynchon artfully plays upon three dimensions in *Gravity's Rainbow*: the fictive, almost historical real, the characters' dreams, reveries and the all-encompassing process of film-making and film-viewing. *Gravity's Rainbow* begins as if in the middle of a dream ("A screaming comes across the sky"; "It is too late"; "it is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting

into") and ends in a movie theatre, with the acute awareness of a disruption, a sudden awakening from the "paradoxical hallucination" after watching a movie. There is an analogy between how Lang and Pynchon emphasize the unreal striking nature of the world described: the German director uses the striking artificiality of the sets and Pynchon doubles the discourse suggesting the rolling of a film stock. In *Metropolis*, the first image of the film draws attention to the abstract and unreal design of the sets, the vertical skyscrapers that block the horizon and embody "the modernist vision of functionalism"⁹.

Generating realities

The thematic role of the film and the moving pictures in *Gravity's Rainbow* are still ambiguous, tending obviously towards iconoclasm in the third part of the novel (*In The Zone*), and yet achieving a sort of a positive dimension at the very end of the novel in the sense that through the moving image we can visualize the end and at the same time postpone it (we will discuss it later). The suggestion in the third part of the novel regarding the moving images is that they contaminate the "real" until it becomes un-recognizable, blurring the borders between what seems to be a historical recognizable setting ("Germany in the year zero", 1945, shortly after its defeat) and a labyrinth of signs and images where both Slothrop and the reader are progressively lost.

Among many allusions to the films of the Weimar period, Pynchon introduces a fictive German director, Gerhardt von Göll, who uses the "Emulsion J" which has the peculiar property to "render the human skin transparent to a depth of a half a millimeter, revealing the face just beneath the surface" and who believes that his films are able to



produce changes in the “real”:

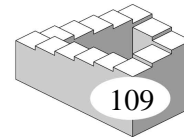
Since discovering that Schwarzkommando are really in the Zone, leading real, paracinematic lives that have nothing to do with him or the phony Schwarzkommando footage he shot last winter in England for Operation Black Wing, Springer has been zooming around in a controlled ecstasy of megalomania. He is convinced that his film has somehow brought them into being. “It is my mission”, he announces Squalidozzi, with the profound humility that only a German movie director can summon, “to sow in the zone the seeds of reality. The historical moment demands this, and I can only be its servant. My images, somehow, have been chosen for incarnation. What I can do for the Schwarzkommando I can do for your dream of pampas and sky...I can take down your fences and your labyrinth walls, I can lead you back to the Garden you hardly remember...” His madness clearly infected Squalidozzi, who then eventually returned to the U-boat and infected the others. (Pynchon, GR, p.451)

This madness contaminates the reader, who realizes that among the character’s dreams, thoughts and lucid fantasies, the novelistic discourse might also contain an ekphrastic account of an interminable film about war: the analogy with the film unfolding before our eyes is frequently inserted. The implications of this cinematic dimension of Pynchon’s text are important for our understanding of its abrupt end in a movie theatre with a rocket hovering above:

The rhythmic clapping resonates inside these walls, which are hard and glossy as coal: Come-on! Start the show!

Come-on! Start the show! The screen is a dim page spread before us, white and silent. The film has broken, or a projector bulb has burned out. It was difficult even for us, old fans who’ve always been at the movies (haven’t we?) to tell which before the darkness swept in. The last image was too immediate for any eye to register. [...] But it was not a star, it was falling, a bright angel of death. And in the darkening and awful expanse of screen something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see...it is now a closeup of the face, a face we all know. And it is just here, just at this dark and silent frame, that the pointed tip of the Rocket, falling nearly a mile per second, absolutely and forever without sound, reaches its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theatre, the last delta-t. (Pynchon, p.887)

The rocket provides therefore the connection between the dystopian city (very much resembling the Blitzed London of the 1940s), the technological factory of weapons of destruction (also central in *Metropolis*) and the end itself, since the perfect Rocket would eventually bring the long-awaited apocalypse (instead of being used to conquer other worlds). And it literally does bring an end, in this last page of the novel, interrupting the very projection of the unnamed silent film, which may be *Metropolis*, or *Woman in the Moon* (*Frau im Mond*, the 1929 feature by Fritz Lang). The latter could have also served as another inspirational source for Pynchon in the story of the V-rocket, since its plot relates to the stealing of the invention from a scientist by a group of businessmen. Pynchon alludes several times to this hypothesis: the advancement of technology and science, the absent-mindedness of the scientists involved, the corporate interests fulfilled (the military use of the



rocket), they are all a series of accidental causes leading to the destruction of humanity.

In the fragment quoted above, Pynchon attempts to represent the End in its very process of occurrence, which is quite unusual for a novel¹⁰ but very often done in a film. Suddenly, the narrated time becomes the present (a stylistic disruption of the present tense), and the discourse locates the End in the present through a visual image of the rocket falling, resorting to an ekphrastic description which comprise a double meaning: either the end is postponed indefinitely, confined in an apocalyptic silent film, or the boundaries between film and reality have imploded, and their images have erupted in the reality of the spectator. The process of film-viewing is used here as a metaphor that contains both options. Along with the final song, it restores the apocalyptic hope that the dystopian order will be overcome by the Preterites, Slothrop's ancestors: if the horrors of the last century were all just a movie, the time could be reversed as if it were a film-reel. As in *Metropolis*, in *Gravity's Rainbow* we almost witness the end of a dystopian order.

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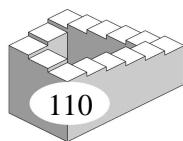
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Notes

¹ Thomas Elsaesser, *Metropolis*, BFI Film Classics, 2000, p. 9.

² Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 33.

³ Klaus Kreimeier, *The UFA Story. A History of Germany's Greatest Film Company (1918-1945)*, University of California Press, 1999, p. 151.



⁴ Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema*, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 24.

⁵ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1987, p. 45.

⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, New York, Bantam Books, 1973, p. 421.

⁷ Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992.

⁸ Christian Metz, "The Fiction Film and its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study", *New*

Literary History, vol. 8, no. 1, Autumn 1976, p. 77.

⁹ B. Mennel, p. 41.

¹⁰ Most of the apocalyptic novels tend to focus either on the imminent arrival of the End (pre-apocalyptic), or after it has already taken place (post-apocalyptic), and rarely on its actual description, on its dramatization as such, while the films are obsessed with its visual representation: endless sequences with the destruction of the cities, bombardments, disintegration etc.