

**The Hitchcock Connection:
Pynchon's Play with MacGuffins in *Gravity's Rainbow***

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines Thomas Pynchon's unrecognized debt to Alfred Hitchcock by considering the extensive and innovative use of Hitchcock's motif, the famous MacGuffin, in *Gravity's Rainbow*. It reads *Gravity's Rainbow* through Hitchcock's MacGuffin, interrogating its various functions in the novel as a plot device, as an object-cause of desire, as the Lacanian *objet petit a*, and as a Derridean mode of critique of presence and causality. In doing so, the essay focuses on three aspects of Pynchon's novel: its narrative strategy, its critique of western epistemology, and the games Pynchon plays. I interrogate Pynchon's use of the Hitchcockian MacGuffin as the novel's central narrative strategy *and* as a mode of epistemological critique. Further, I investigate the use of games and play to facilitate the use of the MacGuffin device and to expose power and control. I argue that Pynchon plays with Hitchcock's MacGuffin in a variety of ways and re-signifies the plot device as the Derridean play of *différance* to critique the desire for presence and fixed meaning in Western epistemology. I maintain that the MacGuffin, when operating as a critical mode of critique of the metaphysics of presence, is the major source of the text's indeterminacy. I conclude that in playing the game of the MacGuffin as a narrative device and mode of critique, Pynchon plays on and critiques the reader's desire for presence and fixed meaning.

Keywords: MacGuffin, *objet petit a*, *différance*, play, games, *Gravity's Rainbow*



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“... ever heard of the IG Farben Industries ...” (Hitchcock, *Notorious*)

“The Jamf business was only a front for ...” (*Gravity's Rainbow*)

Critics in Pynchon studies have not fully recognized the importance of the British director Alfred Hitchcock in Thomas Pynchon's oeuvre. This omission is especially true with regard to the American novelist's appropriation of the filmmaker's famous MacGuffin, a narrative device that motivates Hitchcock's characters' pursuit of an unobtainable object and drives the plot. Through a close reading of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), I explore the rarely acknowledged but important debt Pynchon owes to Hitchcock by showing how Pynchon plays with the Hitchcockian plot device and re-signifies it as both the Lacanian *objet petit a* (object-cause of desire) and the Derridean play of *différance*. This double re-signification marks Pynchon's 1973 book as one of the most important postmodern novels. Yet, no scholars have traced Pynchon's postmodernism to his experiment with Hitchcock's MacGuffin and his re-articulation of it as both the production of desire and difference/deferral. Through his multiple plays on the MacGuffin motif, Pynchon launches a relentless critique of the desire for presence and causality, making Pynchonesque MacGuffins the major source of *Gravity's Rainbow's* persistent refusal to settle on fixed meanings.

Pynchon's signature quest narratives anchor most of his novels and are easily recognized and frequently commented on by critics. These Pynchonesque quests, in effect, are a play on Hitchcock's MacGuffin, but they have not been recognized as having genealogical ties to Hitchcock. Pynchon's appropriation of Hitchcock is not limited to his multiple plays with the Hitchcockian motif. In fact, Pynchon pays tribute to Hitchcock in *Gravity's Rainbow* through anachronistic or implicit references to *North by Northwest* (1959), *Vertigo* (1958), *Notorious* (1946), and other Hitchcock films. If, like Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) of *Notorious*, the reader of *Gravity's Rainbow* has not heard of IG Farben, Germany's largest chemical cartel that supported Hitler's Nazi regime during World War II, Pynchon ensures that the reader will come away from the novel with this historical knowledge.

This essay highlights Pynchon's affiliation with Hitchcock's signature motif and his films and foregrounds how Pynchon advanced this Hitchcockian notion and turned it into a play of the signifier detached from the transcendental signified. I argue that Pynchon's play with the chain of the signifier, embodied in the various interconnected MacGuffins of the novel, intersects with his critical engagement with history. That is, through his characters' chasing of elusive and interrelated MacGuffins in Europe during and after World War II, Pynchon examines and critiques Germany's Nazi history, including the use and production of the V-2 rockets,

the weapons of terror of World War II, and the extermination of Jews, political enemies, and other discriminated-against minorities during the war. In doing so, Pynchon also recalls and indicts Germany's violent colonial history in southwest Africa, which culminated in the massacre of the colonized African Hereros in the early twentieth century—a violent history that, in Pynchon's view, was repeated in the Nazi regime's persecution of racial and ethnic others.

Since its publication in 1973, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*—whose narrative concerns the German V-2 rockets that explode without warning signs or sounds that would allow the target victims to escape—has generated numerous critical studies. Among these, film analyses figure prominently, particularly during the decade after the novel's publication. Consider some of the exemplary film-oriented studies of the novel from early critics. "Film is everywhere in *Gravity's Rainbow*" (173), writes Richard Poirier, who also notes the special design of the book, which uses seven small squares to divide the chapters. These squares, Poirier suggests, "simulate the sprocket holes in a film," making each chapter into "a scene" from a film (169). Rather than reading film into the novel, Scott Simmon reads the entire novel "as a film" (348, 361) and proceeds to analyze the influence of Hollywood genre films from the 1930s and 1940s on character development and other textual elements. Similarly, David Cowart notes that film is the novel's "ostensible medium" and that *Gravity's Rainbow* "purports to be a movie itself" and is actually structured as one (33). Charles Clerc celebrates the novel as the first example of "the workings of an 'auteur' theory of fiction" and as recognizable as a film by Hitchcock and other auteurs (150). Sherrill Grace focuses on Pynchon's use of German expressionist director Fritz Lang's silent films of the 1920s (657). Film analysis of the novel continued to interest critics in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the work of Thomas Moore and Hanjo Berressem demonstrates.¹ However, these film-oriented studies of this instant classic fail to address the Hitchcock connection in Pynchon, which is manifested in the Pynchonesque MacGuffins. I address this significant failure in this essay.

In contrast, Lang is widely recognized as having a strong influence on the cinematic elements of *Gravity's Rainbow*, whose German characters are portrayed as his fans. As Grace convincingly demonstrates, Franz Pökler is a fan of Lang's German silent films, particularly identifying with *Metropolis's* Rothwang, a mad scientist who rules a city built by workers laboring underground (578). The fictional German director Gerhardt von Göll, who creates the propaganda footage of the Schwarzkommando, is compared to Lang and other noted German expressionist directors and regarded as their "equal" (112). At the novel's close, Pynchon mentions

¹ See Moore's *The Style of Connectedness* (30-62) and Berressem's *Pynchon's Poetics* (151-90).

Lang again, paying tribute to the director who invented the countdown technique in his 1929 Ufa film *Frau im Mond* to create a sense of “suspense” during a rocket launch (753).

Critics have duly noted that Lang and his films receive prominent treatment in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In contrast, the important influence of Alfred Hitchcock, the “English Franz Lang” (Bogdanovich 170), on Pynchon’s novel has not been fully explored in Pynchon scholarship. This lack of attention to how Pynchon appropriates the narrative strategy Hitchcock finessed in his spy thrillers from the 1930s to the 1960s—the famous MacGuffin—is the focus of this essay. Pynchon’s play with the Hitchcockian MacGuffin coexists with a Derridean play of the signifier, which “extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (Derrida, *Writing* 280). Pynchon’s rise in American literature coincided with the rise of postmodernism and the introduction of French poststructuralist theories to America. The year 1966 saw the publication of Pynchon’s novella *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is considered his inaugural postmodernist work, and Jacques Derrida’s presentation of “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” at Johns Hopkins University (Coward, *Dark Passages* 202). Derrida’s influential essay ushered in a relatively new reading and writing practice that disrupted the structure of the “transcendental signified” (*Writing* 280) through play, understood as the “disruption of presence” (*Writing* 292). Interpreting Pynchon’s play with the Hitchcockian MacGuffin as the play of *différance* throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* elucidates the device’s critical function, of which Hitchcock had not been able to convince his frustrated critics. These critics, seeking to unlock the meanings of his MacGuffins, had accused Hitchcock of having “nothing to say” with his pointless plot device (Truffaut 139).

I: Hitchcockian MacGuffin

In *Hitchcock*, a collection of French director François Truffaut’s interviews with Hitchcock, the British director illuminates his conception of the MacGuffin. The MacGuffin is simply the pretext that drives the plot, the thing that the spies and the hero and/or heroine of the film are pursuing. For Hitchcock, it does not matter what the MacGuffin is; it could be plans, secrets, documents, or something “trivial and absurd.” What matters, he emphasizes, is that the MacGuffin “must seem to be of vital importance to the characters” (138). Despite the importance of the MacGuffin to the characters, Hitchcock claims that “it’s beside the point” to “figure out the truth of a MacGuffin” and that the MacGuffin is “of no importance” to him as narrator/director (138). To emphasize the irrelevance of the MacGuffin, Hitchcock

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tells Truffaut a story that explains the origin of the term through a dialogue between two strangers on a train.² As Hitchcock tells it,

Stranger 1: “What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?”

Stranger 2: “Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.”

Stranger 1: “What’s a MacGuffin?”

Stranger 2: “Well, it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

Stranger 1: “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

Stranger 2: “Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!”

Hitchcock: “So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.” (138)

Slavoj Žižek tells a slightly different version of this famous story that concludes, “Well, you see how efficient it is!” (*Sublime* 163). Žižek here brilliantly expounds on the nature of the Hitchcockian motif, which, despite being “pure nothing,” is nonetheless “efficient” (*Sublime* 163) or, in the words of Mladen Dolar, “it works” (44).

Žižek, one of the most astute readers of Hitchcock’s films, theorizes the Hitchcockian MacGuffin from a Lacanian perspective. For Žižek, the recurring motif in Hitchcock’s spy and romance thrillers can be productively read as a Lacanian *objet petit a*, an object that is more and less than itself, a sublime object that resists symbolization.³ As Žižek argues, “MacGuffin is clearly the *objet petit a*, the lack, the leftover of the Real setting in motion the symbolic movement of interpretation, a void in the centre of the symbolic order, a pure semblance of the ‘mystery’ to be explained, interpreted” (*Sublime* 185). In this Žižekian reading, the MacGuffin is the “object-cause of desire” for the characters and the reader (*Sublime* 163; *Looking* 101).

To historicize the Lacanian concept, the *objet petit a* is initially employed to designate the little other (*autre*) in opposition to the big Other (*Autre*).⁴ As Lacan further develops this concept, the *objet petit a* comes to represent the m(O)ther’s desire, the cause of desire for the child (Fink 59). When the child is separated from the m(O)ther to become a divided subject, a rift occurs, leading to the advent of the *objet petit a* (Fink 59; Homer 87). In this context, the *objet petit a* can be understood

² Hitchcock’s collaborator Angus MacPhail was credited with establishing the term MacGuffin and told the original MacGuffin story (Spoto 145).

³ Topologically speaking, the *objet petit a* is implicated in all three of Lacan’s orders (the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real) (Homer 87) and is placed at the center of the Borromean knot where the three orders intersect (Evans 125-26).

⁴ Lacan develops this concept from the Freudian object and his exploration of otherness. Lacan insists that the *objet petit a* “should remain untranslated” to acquire “the status of an algebraic sign” (Sheridan, “Translator’s Note” 282).

as the remainder and reminder of the m(O)ther/child dyad for the divided subject, who nevertheless clings to the illusion of w(h)oleness through fantasy. Lacan makes an important distinction between the object of desire and the object that *causes* desire (Fink 97).⁵ For Lacan, there is no empirical object that can fully embody the *objet petit a* (McGowan 77). Lacan insists that the *objet petit a* is “this object that is never there, that is always situated elsewhere, that is always something else” (qtd. in McGowan 77). Todd McGowan captures the slipperiness of the *objet petit a*, noting, “Insofar as this object promises the ultimate enjoyment, it is imaginary, but insofar as it constantly eludes us and haunts us with its absence, it is Real” (77-78). In its most radical phase, the Lacanian *objet petit a* can be said to operate in the same vein as Derrida’s *différance*.

Before Žižek’s Lacanian rearticulation, Pynchon also plays with the Hitchcockian MacGuffin. Pynchon’s play is most obvious in the quest motif in his work, but critics have overlooked this important interplay of the quest as MacGuffin or the MacGuffin as quest. In *Pynchon and the Political*, Samuel Thomas remarks that the motif of questing is part of Pynchon’s stock-in-trade. He notes that questing and war form the “definitive characteristics of Pynchon’s fiction, touchstones of his prose,” as exemplified by *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (69). He adds that questing is at the heart of Pynchon’s exploration of war, both the Great War and the Second World War (70). However, Thomas does not interrogate the workings of the MacGuffins in Pynchon’s quest novels.

In his experiment or play with the Hitchcockian MacGuffin, Pynchon goes beyond simply deploying it as a plot device to set his texts in motion. Importantly, Pynchon transforms the plot device as a mode of desiring production (desires that cannot be met) and a mode of critique of the Western metaphysics of presence. Like the critical Žižekian MacGuffin, the Pynchonesque MacGuffin functions as a mode of critique that undermines the reader’s desire for certainty and fixed meanings. Play in Pynchon therefore encompasses both the traditional sense of the word and the Derridean play of the signifying chain of signification that resists settling on a transcendental signified and a closure. Moreover, plot (in the sense of storytelling) in Pynchon functions critically to undo itself in refusing to provide a sense of certainty. Brian McHale notes that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is ontologically “unstable, flickering, indeterminable” (95). I argue that the MacGuffin, when operating as the Lacanian

⁵ Functioning as the object-cause of desire, the *objet petit a* is conceptualized as a lost or phantasmatic object and is “at once the void, the gap, the lack around which the symbolic order is structured and that which comes to mask or cover over the lack” (Homer 88). Paul Verhaeghe expresses this radical nature of the *objet petit a* in this way: “Object *a* lies beyond the signifier, it is the last term of desire which can never be expressed in signifiers” (145).

objet petit a or the Derridean mode of critique of presence, is the primary source of the text's indeterminacy.

Nevertheless, the quest as MacGuffin or the MacGuffin as quest drives the Pynchonesque plot, providing the motivations of the main characters. In *V.* (1963), Herbert Stencil is seeking the meanings of an enigmatic woman named V.—“a remarkably scattered concept” (431) and the MacGuffin of the novel—but without success. In *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Oedipa Maas seeks to unravel the mystery surrounding the underground delivery organization Trystero, the novella's MacGuffin, while roaming California; she also fails. By 1973, none of Pynchon's novels had made such extensive use of the MacGuffin as *Gravity's Rainbow*. An assemblage of MacGuffins drives the 760-page novel. These MacGuffins can be grouped into object MacGuffins (stimulus x, Slothrop's map, Schwarzgerät, and Imipolex G) and human MacGuffins (the Schwarzkommando, Ilse Pökler, and Jamf). This overarching narrative strategy produces MacGuffin narratives that are not totalizing master narratives and that intersect with other rhizomatic narratives.

II: Stimulus X as *Objet Petit a* and *Différance*

The “Mystery Stimulus” (84), with which the German scientist Laszlo Jamf sexually stimulates and conditions the American Tyrone Slothrop as an infant in 1920, is the MacGuffin that propels the narrative in Part I of the novel. Jamf's mysterious “stimulus x” (85) is believed by the Pavlovian Edward Pointsman of the White Visitation to hold the key to Slothrop's uncanny ability to survive in London after September 1944, when the city was terrorized by Germany's new vengeance weapons, the V-2 rockets. These rockets explode before the sound of their approach can be heard, a reversal of the V-1 or buzzbomb. Slothrop appears to be a victim of the V-2 terror bombings; his experience of the V-2s is one of terror, as opposed to his experience of the V-1s, which generate suspense.⁶

Pynchon presents Slothrop's sexual conditioning using black humor. After being sexually conditioned by Dr. Jamf, baby Tyrone reportedly experiences an erection of “1.05 column inches,” which is the “exact mean length” of the “average campus humor magazine” (84). According to the dossier kept by the IG Farben

⁶ To explain the difference between terror and suspense in his productions, Hitchcock uses the example of the V-1 and V-2 bombs. He notes, “The buzz bomb made a noise like an outboard motor, and its chugging in the air above served as notice of its impending arrival. When the motor stopped, the bomb was beginning its descent and would shortly explode. The moments between the time the motor was first heard and the final explosion were moments of *suspense*. The V-2, on the other hand, was noiseless until the moment of its explosion. Anyone who heard a V-2 explode, and lived, had experienced *terror*” (Gottlieb 118).

surveillance program, Slothrop has had “a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky” (26) since his sexual conditioning. At the precise moment when the first V-2 strikes London, the narrator notes, “Slothrop’s cock” inside his GI undershorts appears to experience “a sneaky *hardon*, stirring, ready to jump” (26). Pynchon’s juxtaposition of the first historical V-2 strike, which occurred on September 8, 1944, and the fictional Slothrop’s sexual arousal invites speculation.⁷ Are they a historical coincidence? Do they have a causal connection? The text remains ambiguous.

This ambiguity signals that Pynchon frames Slothrop as occupying the place of the *objet petit a*, as an object-cause of desire for those who are eager to determine his suspicious connection to the explosions of V-2s. Within this frame, Jamf’s unknown stimulus becomes the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the phantasmatic object that causes and produces desire in those who seek its presence. At the same time, Pynchon presents Jamf’s stimulus x as a play of difference and deferral.

Jamf, the reader is told, does not reveal the stimulus used, an enigma that has “fascinated generations of behavioral-psychology students” (84). Its absence throughout the novel constitutes it as the elusive Lacanian *objet petit a*, one of the major MacGuffins of the novel. Yet Pointsman, who sees himself as the heir apparent of Ivan Petrovich Pavlov, the Russian physiologist known for his “conditioned reflex” concept, is searching for the “stimulus x” and aspires to the glory of a Nobel Prize by unlocking the mystery. For Pointsman, the stimulus x functions as the MacGuffin or the *objet petit a*, an impossible object that nevertheless causes the desire to identify and find the (missing) object. Pynchon thus initiates a critique of Pointsman’s desire for the presence of the stimulus x, a desire presumably shared by readers.

Pynchon also plays on the question of the remainder with Slothrop’s de-conditioning. Despite Jamf’s de-conditioning, which is intended to reduce the infant’s sexual reflex to zero, the possibility of “*a silent extinction beyond the zero*” remains, a residual that could remain dormant for another 20 or 30 years (85). For Pointsman, this “residual,” a haunting presence of the stimulus x, efficiently establishes Slothrop’s ability to survive the V-2 attacks and his presumed responsibility and guilt in the V-2 deaths. Jamf’s “Mystery Stimulus” and Slothrop’s “silent extinction beyond the zero” thus provide the narrative’s motivation and the pretext for Pointsman’s plot against Slothrop.

As “a semblance of being” (Lacan, *Seminar XX* 99) that haunts and eludes being captured and symbolized in the Real, the stimulus x nevertheless provokes multiple and inconclusive interpretations in the imaginary, producing *jouissance* or

⁷ Pynchon’s source for the first historical V-2 strike on London is David Irving’s *The Mare’s Nest* (1964) (Weisenburger, *Companion* 33).

surplus enjoyment.⁸ The haunting of the stimulus x can be seen in the desire of Pointsman and his colleagues at the White Visitation to seek a causal connection between Slothrop's sexual arousal and the explosions of V-2s.

The fact that Slothrop becomes sexually aroused when exposed to the V-2 explosions is speculated upon and assigned multiple interpretations by Pointsman and his colleagues. To varying degrees, all except Roger Mexico posit a causal relation between the V-2s and Slothrop's sexual arousal. Pointsman asserts that Slothrop can “*feel them [V-2 rockets] coming, days in advance. But it's a reflex. A reflex to something that's in the air right now*” (49). Rollo Groast believes it is “precognition” (85). Edwin Treacle, “the most Freudian of psychical researchers,” believes that Slothrop's psychokinesis, “*causing the rockets to drop where they do,*” manifests his unconscious desire to “abolish all trace of the sexual Other” (85). To Mexico, a young statistician analyzing the rate of the V-2 strikes in London using the Poisson distribution, Slothrop's case is a “statistical oddity” because the American's sexual conquests, which he marks on his map as “girl-stars,” correspond to the “rocket-strike circles” on his own map of the “Robot Blitz” (85, 86). With the exception of Mexico's, these speculations all attempt to fix the meaning of Slothrop's sexual arousal and impose a reading on it that connects it to the V-2. Mexico, in fact, insists on thinking beyond the logic of cause and effect (89). Their failure to reach a consensus indicates the nature of “stimulus x” as “*a letter in sufferance,*” or a letter being held up in the course of delivery (Lacan, “Seminar” 59).⁹ These multiple and conflicting interpretations produce *jouissance* or surplus enjoyment for the reader.

The text, in contrast, invites a Derridean reading of the deferral of the stimulus as the signifier. Using black humor again to discourage the characters and the reader from attempting to decipher Jamf's stimulus x, Pynchon includes a hint at the beginning of Chapter 13: “When Jamf conditioned *him*, he threw away the stimulus” (83). This clue and two additional clues are presented as jokes/insults and are said to be taken from *Neil Nosepicker's Book of 50,000 Insults*, published in 1933 by The Nayland Smith Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Later, the reader learns that

⁸ In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek aptly illuminates the paradoxical nature of Lacan's *objet petit a*: it is a “surplus object, the leftover of the Real eluding symbolization” that gives rise to “surplus enjoyment” and an “object-cause of desire,” “the desire of the Other” that signals “the lack in the Other” (50, 53, 118). Žižek also points out that Lacan develops his notion of *jouissance* from Marx's theory of surplus value (*Sublime* 50).

⁹ In his analysis of Poe's “The Purloined Letter,” Lacan reads the letter stolen from the Queen as the signifier circulating within the symbolic circuit. Lacan concludes that “a letter should always arrive at its destination” (“Seminar” 72). Derrida, however, contests this Lacanian reading, arguing that “a letter can always not arrive at its destination,” caught in the structure that makes it “capable, always, of not arriving” (*Post Card* 444). Pynchon would have agreed with the Lacanian reading of stimulus x as “the letter in sufferance,” but not with its “arrival at its destination.” As he revised his conception of the *objet petit a*, Lacan eventually arrived at Derrida's position.

Pointsman is an avid reader of British novelist Sax Rohmer's detective novels, which feature the adventures of Scotland Yard detective Sir Denis Nayland Smith and his rival, the evil Dr. Fu Manchu (277-78, 631). Pointsman is obviously the "intended victim" of the joke and satire but pursues the cause-effect cue/clue in Slothrop's case, using the urgency of the war to "act in a fascist fashion" against Slothrop (Paz 195). In doing so, he invokes what Giorgio Agamben calls the "state of exception" to justify his means (7, 57).¹⁰

Like Jamf's stimulus x, Slothrop's sex map serves to facilitate Pynchon's MacGuffin plot as the play of the object-cause of desire and of *différance*. Through this map, we can see how fantasy in the Lacanian framework mediates the *objet petit a* and the Lacanian Real. This map also provides another example of *jouissance* or surplus enjoyment for those seeking the missing stimulus x and for the reader. Introduced early in the novel, Slothrop's map of sexual conquests in London during the V-2 bombing raids establishes his connection to the Rocket, the central image of the novel.¹¹ The map renders Slothrop a Don Juan figure who marks each of his sexual encounters with a colored star representing a girl and selects the color according to his mood. With this map, Pynchon is playing a game of sexual fantasy and of *différance* with the reader, framing Slothrop as "the man who knew too much" and also "the wrong man" mistakenly believed to hold the key to the V-2 strike patterns.¹²

Slothrop's map appears at first glance to lend strong "support" to speculations about the "Mystery Stimulus." I quote at length from a description of this map because of its significance in Pynchon's MacGuffin-oriented narrative strategy. It is the target of Teddy Bloat's covert mission to photograph it and deliver the images to Mexico for analysis. As Bloat observes his target, the narrator notes,

The stars pasted up on Slothrop's map cover the available spectrum, beginning with silver (labeled 'Darlene') sharing a constellation with Gladys, green, and Katharine, gold, and as the eye strays Alice, Delores, Shirley, a couple of Sallys—mostly red and blue through here—a cluster near Tower Hill, a violet density about Covent Garden, a nebular streaming on into Mayfair, Soho, and

¹⁰ Agamben's interrogation of the "state of exception" as a paradigm of government that still exists grows in part out of his reading of Walter Benjamin's thoughts on fascism in *Illuminations*. There, Benjamin writes, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (257).

¹¹ Scott Drake maintains that the movement of *Gravity's Rainbow* is structured and contained by the image of the rocket, which is simultaneously undermined by the "rhizomatic growth" of other digressive narratives. (238). This essay supplements Drake's reading.

¹² I am referring here to Hitchcock's two films, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934, 1956) and *The Wrong Man* (1956).

out to Wembley and up to Hampstead Heath—in every direction goes this glossy, multicolored, here and there peeling firmament, Carolines, Marias, Annes, Susans, Elizabeths. (19)

Bloat casts doubt on the narrative the map seems to tell, speculating that “[p]erhaps the girls are not even true.” Nevertheless, the map is taken by Pointsman to be “evidence” of Slothrop’s incriminating connection to the Rocket. The correspondence of his sexual conquests with the actual V-2 strikes on Mexico’s Poisson distribution map reinforces this view, making Slothrop highly suspect in the deaths of these “girls” to Pointsman and company.

Slothrop’s sexual encounter with Darlene at Mrs. Quoad’s house in the East End further reinforces Slothrop’s mysterious connection to the V-2. In this episode, Slothrop is subjected to Mrs. Quoad’s “Disgusting English Candy Drill” (118), in which he is forced to eat what he believes are horrible exploding English candies before being given the opportunity to have sex with Darlene. At the end of their sexual encounter, which is clearly under surveillance by Pointsman’s man, Mrs. Quoad’s house is unexpectedly hit by a rocket. As the narrator relates, “When, with no warning, the room is full of noon, blinding white [...] Slothrop’s penis has sprung erect, aching. To Darlene [...] this hardon has seemed reasonably part of the white light, the loud blast” (119-20). This episode is important in validating the “truthfulness” of Slothrop’s map, showing that Darlene, a nurse working at St. Veronica’s Hospital, actually exists and believes there is a causal connection between the rocket explosion and Slothrop’s erection.

However, at the close of Part II, Pynchon undermines Slothrop’s map and his stories about his girls by revealing that they may have been Slothrop’s “sexual fantasies” and not “real events” (272). In other words, Slothrop’s map is likely a MacGuffin that is actually “nothing,” though it is sufficient to establish his connection, however tenuous, to the Rocket. The deconstruction of this fantasy map in a scene of slapstick comedy is performed by Pointsman’s underlings, two gumshoes named Harvey Speed and Floyd Perdoo. In their investigation of the “random sample of Slothropian sex adventures” (270), the two “soft-boiled shamuses” find no “Darlene,” nor any other girls who appeared on Slothrop’s map of London (271). The deterritorialization, or coming undone (in Deleuzian terms; *Anti-Oedipus* 322), of Slothrop’s map becomes involved in another uncertainty, however. Before performing their investigation, Speed and Perdoo, the narrator reports, are “infected with the prevailing fondness out here for mindless pleasures” (270). Under the influence of drugs, they exaggerate and caricature Slothrop’s map of London as “Don Giovanni’s map of Europe—640 in Italy, 231 in Germany, 100 in France, 91 in Turkey *but, but,*

but –in Spain! in Spain, 1003!” (270). In this hallucinatory state, they conduct their investigation. Their findings, however, cannot dissuade Pointsman from his cause-effect mindset, and he continues to believe that Slothrop is the man who can unlock the timing of the V-2 explosions.

The text further problematizes Slothrop’s map, suggesting that it functions as a projection of his own sexual fantasies. Later, in the Zone (post-war Germany), Slothrop himself admits that some of the “yarns” he told to his British colleague Tantivy Mucker-Maffick about his girls were sexual fantasies. He blames his “primitive fear” for leading him to “edit, switch names, insert fantasies into the yarns” for Tantivy back in the ACHTUNG office (302). Disorienting as it is, Slothrop’s own admission to having projected his sexual fantasies onto his map of London, which comes more than 280 pages after the map makes its first appearance, confirms the status of his girl-stars map as a MacGuffin that operates as the Lacanian *objet petit a* to expose Slothrop’s fantasies as “an objectification of a void” (Žižek, *Sublime* 95).

Slothrop’s projection of his sexual fantasies onto his London map foregrounds the significant role that fantasy plays in negotiating and coming to terms with the Lacanian Real, the Real that resists or eludes symbolization. Encoded in his sexual fantasies is also the famous Lacanian question “*Che vuoi?*,” which characterizes one’s desire as “the desire of the Other.” For Lacan, “*Che vuoi?*” does not simply ask “what do you want?” but rather “what does he [the analyst, the symbolic Other] want of me [the subject/the analysand]?” (*Écrits* 312). Žižek glosses the question as “What’s bugging you? What is it in you that makes you so unbearable not only for us, but also for yourself, that you yourself obviously do not control?” (*Read Lacan* 43). Therefore, “*Che vuoi?*” not only foregrounds the subject’s desire as the Other’s desire but also pushes the subject to fantasize about what the Other wants of him or her. Fantasy, as Žižek notes, is an important defense mechanism against “*Che vuoi?*”; it is “a screen” used to conceal “the gap, the abyss of the desire of the Other” (*Sublime* 118). Thus, the urgent and titillating question behind Slothrop’s map is not “what does he want or desire?” but rather “what do They want/desire of him?” or even “what does the Rocket want/desire?” Slothrop’s sexual fantasies are his attempt to escape the terror of the V-2 rockets; they are his answer to the unbearable reality—what does the Rocket want? Unable to translate the desire of the Other/the Rocket, Slothrop compromises by indulging in his fantasies of sexual conquest that prove to be imaginary, exposing him as a “failed interpellation” (*Sublime* 113). Interpreting Slothrop’s map of sexual fantasies as his “real” desire, as Pointsman does, is a misreading of Slothrop’s case.

III: S-Gerät/Imipolex G as Games and Play

Near the conclusion of Part II, which is set in the French Riviera, the text introduces a new MacGuffin: “Document SG-1,” a “state secret” that concerns the mysterious Schwarzgerät and Imipolex G (242, 252). The emergence of this plot device initiates Pointsman’s “Pavlovian plot,” which sends Slothrop to Nice, Zürich, and the Zone to seek knowledge and truth about these objects. The S-Gerät, later revealed to be a rocket with quintuple zeroes coated with Imipolex G, operates as an “object-cause of desire” for Slothrop and other seekers. Imipolex G, a new plastic invented by Jamf for the IG Farben in 1939, which is expected to “flower into a full *Imipolectique* with its own potency in the Zone” (490), operates in the same way. The “temporal problem” (Berressem 125) raised by Imipolex G has become a source of contention for critics.¹³ However, I suggest that it is part of Pynchon’s strategy of using play and game to destabilize Imipolex G as the signifier, as evidenced in Slothrop’s strong response and non-response to the smell of the white plastic. In this section, I explore how Pynchon plays with the MacGuffin motif through the angle of play and games, which is entangled with his invocation and criticism of Nazi history and his appropriation of Hitchcock’s films.

Molly Hite, analyzing *Gravity’s Rainbow* through Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955), notes that play is given priority in the epic (680). Brian Edwards considers *Gravity’s Rainbow* “a source book of play as concept” because of its “overt reference to the rhetoric and strategies of game and play” (106). Indeed, play and games abound in the novel: the game They play with Slothrop on the S-Gerät/Imipolex G; the sadomasochistic oven game played by Weissmann/Blicero, Katje, and Gottfried; the surveillance games played on Slothrop; the various (psychological) chess games; the game of zero and death played by the radical Zone-Hereros; and the MacGuffin games and the vertigo game played by Pynchon.

Play and games constitute two important elements in Pynchon’s postmodern approach to fiction. Pynchon’s use of play and games in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is rather complex. However, some observations can be made regarding the ways in which Pynchon plays with these two categories. First, it is not always easy to distinguish the two concepts. Both can be seen in Pynchon’s play of the signifier, or what Derrida calls “play” that disrupts presence (*Writing* 292). Both categories contain the

¹³ Douglas Fowler comments on the contradictory representations of Imipolex G (273). Berressem notes that even the psychological concept of belatedness cannot logically explain the haunting of Slothrop by Imipolex G (125). However, José Liste Noya argues that belatedness, which “implies a temporal skewing,” is used to “fantastic effect” in Pynchon’s novel (524). Noya maintains that interpenetration of the past, even a fictional past, and the present allows Imipolex G to “extend its simulacry control over ‘real’ scenarios that ostensibly have no ontological connection with each other” in Slothrop’s case (524-25).

traditional usage of play and games, as in playing a chess game. However, Pynchon's staging of an elaborate psychological chess game or a byzantine MacGuffin game can gesture toward or morph into a play of *différance*. Furthermore, play in Pynchon is not limited to the play of significance and is employed in conjunction with his excavation of historical events (as in Slothrop's pursuit of S-Gerät/Imipolex G, leading him to the site of V-2 production and allowing the novel to raise the issue of the Nazis' use of slave labor in the production of terror weapons), thus foregrounding its seriousness. Theorizing play as a concept, the Dutch thinker Johan Huizinga writes, "Seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness" (45). In Pynchon, play and games work in tandem with political and ethical seriousness. Finally, playing with readers by undercutting or deconstructing what they believe to be true is one of the signature postmodern Pynchonesque plays and games. We have seen Pynchon's undoing of the stimulus x and Slothrop's map of sexual fantasy. Pynchon's deconstruction practice climaxes in revealing Dr. Jamf as a fiction and the ultimate MacGuffin of the novel.

Pynchon injects the postmodern use of play and game into Slothrop's quest for the S-Gerät and Imipolex G. For example, "a business card, embossed with a chess knight" (248) given to Slothrop by Blodgett Waxwing and a white plastic chess knight by which Slothrop shall know its mysterious owner drive the MacGuffin plot. In addition, Slothrop is placed in a "fancy cell" at the Casino Hermann Goering, where "[e]very piece of Allied intelligence on the A4 [V-2]" finds its way to him (242). The motif of game and play is embodied in the casino itself, where, in the Himmler-Spielsaal room, Slothrop is so overwhelmed by the numerous games being played around him that he becomes paranoid and flees. As the narrator comments, "it's here that saturation hits him, it's all this playing games, too much of it, too many games" (205). Being forced to play Their game, Slothrop involuntarily becomes a "hardboiled private eye" (561) investigating the Imipolex G and S-Gerät case, first at Nordhausen and then at other sites à la Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Slothrop's investigation is, of course, under Their surveillance, adding another layer of play and game, because "[h]e's more useful running around the Zone thinking he's free" (390).

The games Pynchon plays with Slothrop through Pointsman, the German film-director turned black marketeer Der Springer/von Göll, and Tchitcherine correspond to the Hitchcockian MacGuffin, chess game, and game of vertigo triggered by Imipolex G. Pointsman and Springer figuratively position the American on the chessboard that is the Zone so that he can search for Rocket 00000. Pointsman's SG-1 document leads Slothrop to Nordhausen, where the V-2 rockets are manufactured by

slave labor under the direction of SS Major-General Kammler.¹⁴ Springer's "S-Gerät strategy" (516) directs the American to Peenemünde, the rocket testing site and cradle of the space program. Woven into this chess game is Pynchon's engagement with the Nazi history of developing and testing the V-2s and the Nazi concentration camps. This engagement constitutes the political and historical dimensions of the novel that showcase Pynchon's historical sense and imagination. The chess game also functions as a metaphor for the game They, or the elect, play with the preterite. Huizinga's theorization of play as encompassing seriousness aptly illuminates Pynchon's strategic use of play and games to engage with history and raise the issue of ethics in war time practices.

Following Slothrop's visit to the Mittelwerke, the underground factory in Nordhausen in which he is presented as an Orphic figure, his movements within the Zone are orchestrated by Springer. In the chess game Springer plays with Slothrop, the MacGuffin pattern or plot that propels the quest narrative is revealed, taking Slothrop from Nordhausen to Swinemünde and Peenemünde as he chases the S-Gerät/Imipolex/Jamf lead. The function of Springer in Slothrop's quest, then, is to play the MacGuffin game with Slothrop. Springer, as his underworld name suggests, is the embodiment of the white knight who "leaps perpetually ... across the chessboard of the Zone" (376). As the "white knight of the black market" (492), he seeks to appropriate "every last negotiable item in the Zone" (611). To this end, he pursues the V-2 rockets and uses Slothrop to make him rich, spreading a rumor that a man wearing a white suit in Swinemünde can obtain the S-Gerät (294). In this chess game, Springer enlists the help of a Berlin drug addict, Säure Bummer, who gives Slothrop a plastic white knight that will lead him to its mysterious owner. Through this constellation of names, the text produces an "alphabetical coincidence" through the Slothrop/Springer/Säure link that echoes the Schwarzgerät/Schwarzkommando/Scuffling (Slothrop's alias while in Nordhausen) trio (363). Springer's S-Gerät strategy, which is, of course, a MacGuffin, does not lead Slothrop to find his "grail," though he does obtain information about the S-Gerät and Imipolex G and even has a Lacanian "missed encounter" with the items he seeks.

Involved in the S-Gerät strategy are the Russian intelligence officer Vaslav Tchitcherine and his young lover Geli Tripping, who helps spread the S-Gerät rumor. A German apprentice witch living on Harz Mountain, Geli acts as a spy for Tchitcherine and sleeps with Slothrop to obtain information from him, turning herself

¹⁴ Pynchon describes in detail Slothrop's experience of the Mittelwerke, where the industrial labor of the Dora concentration-camp workers "did happen" (303). Examining the Mittelwerke passage, Weisenburger notes that Pynchon's "historiographical speculation" summons the ghosts of the Dora workers haunting the underground factory ("Haunted" 19-20).

into a Mata Hari, a femme fatale.¹⁵ As Slothrop moves from Nordhausen to Swinemünde and Peenemünde, the text gives the nod to Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) through the MacGuffin motif, Cary Grant reference, Mata Hari figure, and even direction of travel.¹⁶ The allusion to the film is, however, anachronistic.¹⁷ In his dalliance with Geli, Slothrop claims that his name is "Cary Grant" (294), the male lead in *North by Northwest*. Before his departure for Berlin, where he plays the role of Rocketman to retrieve a bag of hashish for the American seaman Bodine at Potsdam, where the Allied victors are negotiating their respective geopolitical influences in post-war Germany, Slothrop stands "up on top of the Brocken, the very plexus of German evil, twenty miles of *north by northwest* of the Mittelwerke," with Geli at his side (329; emphasis added).¹⁸ For Hitchcock fans, this scene recalls Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint's flight to the top of Mount Rushmore. The famous landmark is located northwest of Chicago, the city to which Grant's character (Roger Thornhill) travels from New York in his search for the truth about "George Kaplan," a MacGuffin who does not exist.

Caught in the S-Gerät/Imipolex G plot is Greta Erdmann, a German film actress and the female lead in von Göll's *Alpdrücken*, a sadomasochistic pornographic film whose fans include Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda (461). Given her ties to von Göll, it is highly suspicious that Erdmann, who becomes Slothrop's sex partner, is playing the role of Mata Hari with Slothrop, leading him to Swinemünde, where her former director is located. Erdmann, searching for her daughter Bianca and husband Miklos Thanatz, meets Slothrop by design/accident at the Neubabelsberg film studio outside Berlin, where she and her co-star Max Schlepzig (Slothrop's alias, provided by Säure to help him penetrate the security at the Potsdam conference) had filmed von Göll's *Alpdrücken*. After having sex, Slothrop and Erdmann board the white deathship *Anubis* to sail north, the direction of death in *Gravity's Rainbow*, to Swinemünde, where Slothrop meets Von Göll/Springer. The fact that Slothrop and Erdmann's meeting and subsequent sadomasochistic sex occur on the *Alpdrücken* film set suggests that Von Göll/Springer

¹⁵ Mata Hari was a Dutch dancer-turned-female spy executed on dubious grounds by the French during the First World War. Constructed as the "classic *femme fatale*," she "haunts all subsequent accounts of women and espionage" (White 72).

¹⁶ Alicia Huberman (Ingrid Bergman) of *Notorious* (1946) and Eve Kendall (Eva Marie Saint) of *North by Northwest* (1959) assume the Mata Hari role while working for the U.S. government during the Cold War. Nora Gilbert argues that Alicia and Eve use their female bodies as corporate and political commodities to act on their "patriotism" (10), a practice both films critique (6).

¹⁷ Reading *Gravity's Rainbow* as "a chase, a complicated pattern of Hitchcock-like pursued pursuers," Scott Simmon identifies an essential allusion to "Cary Grant" and the "north by northwest" direction of travel (356). My reading of Pynchon's nod to *North by Northwest* is indebted to his essay.

¹⁸ Hitchcock took the 1959 film's title from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2, in which Hamlet says, "I am but mad north-north-west" (McGilligan 574).

is orchestrating Slothrop's travel through the Zone, playing Slothrop like a pawn. For Springer, "Queen, Bishop, and King are only splendid cripples, and pawns, even those that reach the final row, are condemned to creep in two dimensions, and no Tower will ever rise or descend—no: *flight has been given only to the Springer!*" (494).

By design, Slothrop's voyage on the *Anubis* and his journey from Swinemünde to Peenemünde—northern and northwestern movements, respectively—imitate the directions traveled by Grant's character in *North by Northwest*. Furthermore, Pynchon maps north and northwest onto *Gravity's Rainbow* and re-signifies them as directions of death to underscore the "culture of death" and the "ideology of zero" produced by the corporate Rocket State. This mapping and re-signification dovetail with historical facts about Nordhausen. "North is death's region," says the narrator, adding "Nordhausen means dwellings in the north. The Rocket had to be produced out of a place called Nordhausen. The town adjoining was named Bleicheröde as a validation, a bit of redundancy so that the message would not be lost" (322). On his way to Peenemünde with Springer and Klaus Närrisch, a former V-2 missile guidance researcher who now works for Springer, Captain Frau Gnab redirects her pirate boat "around to the northwest" (498), symbolically emphasizing the boat's direction. The journey ends badly when the passengers are ambushed by Tchitcherine, who is waiting for them at Peenemünde. He is also searching for the Rocket 00000 as an indirect way of tracking and killing his black half-brother Oberst Enzian. The text later reinforces this Hitchcockian borrowing and re-signification through Weissmann's firing orders for the Rocket 00000 and the Schwarzkommando's salute. As the narrator comments, "Evidence and intuition—and maybe a residue of uncivilizable terror that lies inside us, every one—point to 000°: true North. What better direction to fire the 00000?" (707). After learning the direction that the Rocket 00000 will be fired from Thanatz, Christian, a member of the Schwarzkommando, "cocks out [his hand] half in salute, half in celebration, aimed toward the Heath, northwesterly, Kingdom-of-Deathward, and Enzian's goes out the same way" (673).

Springer not only plays chess with Slothrop, moving him like a pawn in the Zone, but also plays a vertigo game with the chess knight made of Imipolex G, another anachronistic tribute to Hitchcock.¹⁹ Knowing Slothrop's fear of the smell of Imipolex G, which represents the haunting of Dr. Jamf, Springer maliciously uses a plastic chess knight made of Imipolex G as the symbol by which Slothrop will recognize him. In *Man, Play and Games*, French thinker Roger Caillois uses the term

¹⁹ This game of vertigo recalls Hitchcock's 1958 film *Vertigo*, whose hero, John "Scottie" Ferguson (James Stewart), suffers from acrophobia, preventing him from saving his police colleague and later his love interests "Madeleine" and Judy (both played by Kim Novak).

Ilinx to describe games “based on the pursuit of vertigo” that “attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind” (23). Springer’s intent is to cause Slothrop to experience vertigo. The game Springer plays with the plastic chess knight is to *wait* for Slothrop to discover that it is made of Imipolex G. The narrator hints at Springer’s game by drawing attention to a “white object,” a white knight chess piece on the table in Säure’s Berlin cellar, that is “watching him [Slothrop] out of its staring shadows” (436). Slothrop “feels its stare” but, the narrator says, “wait’ll Slothrop finds out what *kind* of plastic, boy!” (436). Knowing Slothrop’s terror of Imipolex G, the reader expects its potency to overcome Slothrop. However, this expectation is frustrated because, as Susan Strehle has noted, Slothrop carries the chess piece for several weeks without any reaction, not even an erection (41). Springer’s chess piece turns out to be “nothing” to Slothrop in the MacGuffin sense. This play has a dimension of seriousness, however; it exemplifies the Pavlovian “ultraparadoxical phase,” in which the subject does not respond to the supposed stimulus.

The text continues playing the game of vertigo with Slothrop, preying on his fear of Imipolex G. Slothrop actually experiences an episode of vertigo when, following the Peenemünde visit, he returns to the *Anubis* to retrieve a brown package for Springer. Springer does not tell him what is in the package, only that it has been placed in the ship’s “engine room. Starboard side, down behind the generator” (530). Slothrop’s visit to the engine room during a blackout repeats his previous underworld journeys: the drug-induced toilet trip in the Roseland Ballroom and his visit to the Nordhausen V-2 factory. As he gropes for the package in the dark engine room, he smells the body of Bianca, her perfume, her feces, and “the smell of brine ... and the smell of ... *of* ...” before passing out (531). The Pynchonesque ellipses indicate the smell of Imipolex G, hinting that in the brown package “wedged behind the generator” is the mysterious plastic device Slothrop is claiming for Springer (532). Slothrop, in other words, has come into contact with the object of his quest—the S-Gerät, a plastic fairing for the modified Rocket 00000—in the brown package *without* realizing it.²⁰

²⁰ Lawrence Kappel has argued that the text confirms this reading in the penultimate chapter of the novel in a game of wordplay formulated as “GE_ _RAT_ _” (734). Kappel notes that “the package contains the plastic (Imipolex G) fairing made by Pökler to protect the S-Gerät itself (the passenger) during the rocket’s ascent” (236). He also argues that Bianca’s corpse in the engine room represents those of Gottfried and Enzian, the passengers on the 00000 and the 00001, respectively, because they are all children who have been murdered or betrayed by a mother (Erdmann) or a father figure (Weissmann/Blicero) (236). However, Bernard Duyfhuizen cautions against Kappel’s reading, which he criticizes for showing a “readerly desire for enigmas to be resolved” (“Suspension” note 8).

Due to his vertigo, Slothrop's encounter with the S-Gerät/Imipolex G constitutes an encounter that is "forever missed" in the Lacanian sense (*Seminar XI* 59).²¹

IV: Paracinematic Existence and/or MacGuffin

Gravity's Rainbow also plays with and dwells on Hitchcockian "people MacGuffins."²² In doing so, it destabilizes the boundary between reality/fiction and the real/the reel and rearticulates the convergence of opposites in the postmodern space of the fantastic.²³ The Schwarzkommando originates in a MacGuffin, a fiction: a forged documentary about a group of black rocketeers in wartime Germany. Von Göll shoots the footage for Pointsman's PISCES agency, which uses it as propaganda to demoralize the Germans by showing the mixing of races in the German armed forces. The idea, code-named "Operation Black Wing," is spawned by Pointsman's underlings and is loosely based on the existence of real southwest African Hereros in Germany (74).²⁴ The plotters also participate in shooting the fake documentary, giving "plausible blackface" performances (113). Later, when the British discover the actual existence of the Schwarzkommando in the Zone before V-E day, they become spooked by the "real black rocket troops," a "story made up to scare last year's enemy" (276). Freudian Edwin Treacle attributes his colleagues' fear of the Schwarzkommando and their blackness to "feelings about shit, and feelings about shit to feelings about putrefaction and death [...] their repressions *had* [...] *had* incarnated real and living men" (276-77).²⁵ Treacle's reading of his colleagues' reaction to the real existence of the Schwarzkommando highlights the whites' racist and colonial ideology toward the dark race. Critic Lawrence Wolfley reads the appearance of the Schwarzkommando in the Zone as a manifestation of the Freudian notion of the return of the repressed and an allusion to Norman O. Brown, whose *Life against Death*

²¹ In *Seminar XI*, Lacan uses the term *tuché*, a term he borrows from Aristotle, to describe the encounter with the real and insists that such an encounter, as in trauma, is forever missed (53, 55).

²² Notable examples include "Carlotta Valdez," the phantasmagorical great-grandmother of Madeleine who haunts the "fictional" Madeleine played by Judy in *Vertigo* and "George Kaplan" in *North by Northwest*.

²³ I adopt the notion of the fantastic from Noya's reading of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Noya conceptualizes the fantastic from a post-Todorovian and poststructuralist perspective, noting, "the fantastic arise[s] from the unexpected conjunction of reality and fantasy." As such, it appears to be "one privileged mode of postmodern 'mapping'" (514-15).

²⁴ The southwest Hereros rebelled against German colonialism in 1904 and were met by the brutal extermination forces of General Lothar von Trotha, resulting in a reported 60,000 casualties. Pynchon first fictionalizes this history in Mondaugen's story in *V*. (247-304) and then revisits it in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

²⁵ Khachig Tololyan observes Pynchon's "preoccupation with shit" (47), which motivates Slothrop's reading of German military documents literally "stained with genuine SS shit and piss" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 211). Other examples include Slothrop's fantastic toilet trip (63-67) and the Toiletship chapter (448-56).

(1959) embraces this Freudian view (879). The resurfacing of the Schwarzkommando suggests the impossibility of erasing the racial other from history. Embedded in this return of the repressed is the operation of a *reverse* MacGuffin: a fiction, a “nothingness” that becomes real.

In a metafictional self-conscious gesture, Enzian, the leader of the Schwarzkommando, discusses his group’s mythical existence for the Allied forces. “We were a surprise. 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” (361), says Enzian. Von Göll, upon discovering that the “Schwarzkommando are really in the Zone leading real, paracinematic lives,” is convinced that “his film has somehow brought them into being” (388). The Schwarzkommando thus exist in the space of the fantastic, undermining the rigid line between reality and fantasy and between the real and the reel.

In this postmodern Pynchonesque space, some members of the Schwarzkommando, the preterite, commit themselves to a game of zero and death in their “political struggle” against their German colonial masters (316).²⁶ Their bewildered German masters, “conned by their own Baby Jesus Con Game,” see this struggle as “the lemmings rushing into the sea” (318). Calling themselves “The Empty Ones,” these Europeanized Zone-Hereros, says the narrator, “are in love with the glamour of a whole people’s suicide [...] their approach and their game is pleasure” (318). Led by Josef Ombindi of Hannover, they are working for the day when “the last Zone-Herero will die, a final zero to a collective history fully lived” (318). However, Enzian, as their leader, attempts to weaken this seductive ideology of racial suicide, first by directing his followers’ energy to locating the V-2 rockets, which they plan to use to build their own black rocket, the 00001. Later, Enzian begins playing the Rocket game as a play of *différance* with his followers as a countermeasure, leading them to believe that the Rocket is the “holy Text” and that their mission as Kabbalists lies in “coding, recoding, redecoding the holy Text ...” (520-21). While using this countergame to naturalize Ombindi’s death program, Enzian is fully aware that “the real Text persisted, somewhere else” (520). Enzian can therefore be construed to be playing a MacGuffin game with his followers.

In the famous Pökler story, Pynchon also experiments with the concept of “people MacGuffins” by playing with the absence of Pökler’s daughter Ilse. As part of the larger MacGuffin narrative strategy, Pökler’s story in Chapter 11 of Part III drives the quest narrative. Pökler is revealed to be the “plastics man” developing the

²⁶ Through the lens of Jean Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange, Tiina Käkälä-Puumala reads the death mission of the Zone-Hereros as “a symbolic gift of death,” a “symbolic offering” that uses life as “a symbolic wager” to challenge the power structures of the Zone (197).

S-Gerät/Imipolex G for Weissmann (431-32). The inspiration for Pökler's character, Steven Weisenburger notes, comes from Walter Dornberger's 1958 book *V-2* ("End" 56). Weisenburger remarks that Dornberger, the former German Army Chief of Staff at Peenemünde and Nordhausen, never had the "courage or honesty" to recall in his book that "it was the inmates of Dora who built the rocket he and his fellow technicians designed" ("End" 61). This chapter discloses Pökler's role in building the A4 (V-2) for the SS and suggests his complicity in the abuse of "foreign workers" (423) at Dora concentration camp outside Nordhausen, where he lived and worked. Pökler, blinded by his passion for the rockets, allows himself to "put as much labyrinth as required between himself and the inconveniences of caring" to hide the Dora reality from his conscience (428). However, he faces this reality at the end of the war and atones for his participation in the Nazi program. Weisenburger argues that Pynchon's presentation of Pökler's acknowledgment of his complicity in the Nazi atrocities is "political," a means of enacting "an ethical reversal" of Dornberger's historical failure to confront this traumatic history ("End" 61). Weisenburger's critical engagement with Pynchon's source material underscores another of Pynchon's signature approaches to fiction: interweaving history into his storytelling.

Simultaneously, the narrative subtly constructs Pökler's daughter Ilse through MacGuffin logic, figuratively turning her into a MacGuffin. At the beginning of Chapter 11, in the summer of 1945, Pökler is "waiting for Ilse, for his movie-child, to return to Zwölfkinder, as *she* has every summer at this time" (398; emphasis added). However, the daughter he waits for at Zwölfkinder after the war is a total *stranger* to him, always meeting him for the first time, if she comes at all. This "she," I argue, is a person MacGuffin that never materializes. Furthermore, I distinguish the "last" Ilse that Pökler waits for from the other fake Ilses he accepts as his daughter in the psychological chess game he plays with Major Weissmann.

Chapter 11 tells a moving story about Pökler; his daughter Ilse (an anagram for lies), who was conceived after Pökler watched von Göll's *Alpdrücken*; and her cinematic doubles.²⁷ To encourage and coerce Pökler's loyalty to the A4 project in the research and development stage, the SS, represented by Major Weissmann, play a cruel psychological chess game with Pökler in which his daughter is a pawn. Weissmann, in a calculated move, offers Pökler an annual 8-week summer vacation with Ilse at Zwölfkinder, a fairyland representing the innocence of childhood in the German corporate state (419). Each year, he sends a different Ilse selected from the young female inmates at Camp Dora to visit Pökler at work in Peenemünde and

²⁷ Jim Neighbors identifies this Ilse/Lies connection while reading the ontological status of Ilse through Nietzschean perspectivism (190, 186).

Nordhausen. This visiting arrangement continues for six years, and the narrator comments,

A daughter a year, each one about a year older, each time taking up nearly from scratch. The only continuity has been her name, and Zwölfkinder, and Pökler's love—love something like the persistence of vision, for They have used it to create for him the moving image of a daughter, flashing him only these summertime frames of her, leaving it to him to build the illusion of a single child (422)

As this quotation indicates, the inmate-daughter whom Pökler saw each year occupies “an empty place,” like the MacGuffin (Žižek, *Sublime* 182). In fact, there is a doubling of the MacGuffin in this case: They construct a false image of Ilse for Pökler to bond with each summer based on Their knowledge of the real, unavailable Ilse, creating a false identity from the missing one. Pökler, in turn, willingly embraces these false reconstructions of Ilse, accepting the fake daughters as replacements for the real missing one. The narrator comments on Pökler's perspective as he plays Their game: “board and pieces and patterns at least all did come clear for him, and Pökler knew that while he played, this would have to be Ilse—truly his child, truly as he could make her. It was the real moment of conception, in which years too late, he became her father” (421). This belatedness says much about his illusion and his compassion for his movie daughter.

This sadomasochistic game depends on withdrawing the real Ilse. The reader last sees the real Ilse when Pökler's wife Leni takes her to visit her lover Peter Sachsa's Berlin apartment in the 1920s. This event occurs after Leni has left Franz, determined that her daughter “is not going to be used” by the Nazis as her husband was (156). The daughter's whereabouts are unknown to Pökler. Nevertheless, digging into Pökler's dossier, Weissmann finds a way to use the image of Ilse, or Ilse as a construct, to manipulate Pökler's loneliness and human need to love and be loved. Furthermore, the text last locates Ilse in a dream without confirming or denying her ontological existence. After her disappearance from the text for approximately 450 pages, her mother Leni/Solange dreams of “her own child, Ilse, riding lost through the Zone on a long freight train that never seems to come to rest. She isn't unhappy, nor is she searching, exactly, for her father” (610). Is Ilse still alive as her mother dreams and wishes? The text does not offer an answer.

V: Dr. Jamf: the Ultimate MacGuffin

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Dr. Jamf, the originator of the “Mystery Stimulus,” plays an even more crucial role in Slothrop’s quest as he haunts him like a doppelgänger despite reports that he is dead when Slothrop begins his investigation. Importantly, Jamf is ultimately the most surprising MacGuffin in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when it is eventually revealed that he does not exist (738). Pynchon hints at the deconstruction of the “Jamf business” when Mexico learns that Slothrop is being watched by the IG Farben (631). This discovery turns Mexico against Them, and he quits Their game and joins the Counterforce to rescue Slothrop. The dismantling of Jamf, however, is a cruel joke on Slothrop, who believes that he and Jamf, as a “coupling,” are locked eternally in the “primal dream” (623). In addition, Slothrop has finally disintegrated and been scattered throughout the Zone (712). The function of Jamf as “a fiction,” says the “world-renowned analyst” Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry, is to help Slothrop “explain what he felt so terribly, so immediately in his genitals for those rockets each time exploding in the sky ... to help him deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race’s, death” (738). Wuxtry-Wuxtry’s declaration, a “frame-break” (Waugh 33), is unforeseen, shattering what readers think they know about Jamf. This surprise runs the risk of eclipsing the last MacGuffin to appear in the novel: Gottfried in the launched Rocket 00000.

It is not clear for whom Wuxtry-Wuxtry speaks or works, but it is possible that Pynchon makes the latter’s declaration a form of “*explicit* metacommentary” (Waugh 36) to expose the “frame” with which Slothrop has been framed. Wuxtry-Wuxtry’s dubious explanation for the ontological nonexistence of Jamf, however, references the paradox of the Pavlovian “ultraparadoxical phase,” in which the experimented subject responds strongly to a stimulus that is not present. Slothrop’s response to Imipolex G, which he associates with Jamf and his sexual conditioning, is therefore Pynchon’s postmodern critique of cause-effect reasoning, the form of reasoning practiced by Pointsman. In other words, for Pynchon, Pointsman, who masterminds the game he plays with Slothrop’s mind through the S-Gerät and Imipolex G plot, is actually a victim of this game: Slothrop does not need a real (even dead) Jamf to become haunted or paranoid, only the *idea* of Jamf. Nevertheless, Wuxtry-Wuxtry’s claim of Jamf’s nonexistence, however difficult to believe, makes Jamf an ingenious MacGuffin. As John Orr says of the logic-defying Hitchcockian MacGuffin, “the MacGuffin is better seen as a ‘MacMiracle,’” and its “disappointment-value” and “lack of credibility” enhance its power (46).

Jamf, an exemplary MacGuffin exposed as “a void in the Real,” “a lack in the Other,” appears in the novel embedded in a fascinating rhizomatic structure that connects his storyline with others in many directions. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of the rhizome to describe any anti-tree or root

structure that is “always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (25). Jamf’s tie to the IG Farben, the powerful German chemical cartel, supports the text’s critique of the brotherhood among the cartels that worked on both sides during the war (251, 520).²⁸ Jamf, who is never physically present in the novel, is likely its most underanalyzed character, despite his significance. Yet, his significance as the phallic father/signifier is such that it is not enough for him to be dead on arrival; he must be declared nonexistent, a “symbolic death” obliterating the “signifying network” in which he is enmeshed (Žižek, *Sublime* 132).

Jamf’s haunting presence can be detected in esoteric epigraphs, in the discourse of other characters, in the “fat file” Pointsman plants for Slothrop, and in Slothrop’s own traumatic and tormented psyche.²⁹ We first learn of Jamf’s death from Pointsman. At the 1944 Christmas party, Pointsman thinks of Slothrop as “his own miracle and human child, grown to manhood but carrying someplace on the Slothropian cortex a survival ... of a piece of the late Dr. Jamf himself” (168). By the end of Part I, the reader infers that Jamf, as Slothrop’s sexual conditioner and Pökler’s organic chemistry professor, is deceased, although Slothrop will learn this “fact” much later in Part II when, while pursuing the lead about S-Gerät/Imipolex G, Slothrop visits Jamf’s grave on a Swiss mountain to confirm Jamf’s death. Prior to this visit, they initiate Jamf’s haunting of Slothrop while he is staying at the casino with Katje Borgesius, a Mata Hari planted by the White Visitation to learn more about Slothrop’s sexual life. “Back in a room, early in Slothrop’s life, a room forbidden to him now, is something very bad. Something was done to him” (208-09), says the narrator. In this traumatic scene, the shadow of Jamf’s haunting is cast, but he is not named as the “cause.”

Before Wuxtry-Wuxtry delivers the punch line that “There never was a Dr. Jamf” (738), both Slothrop and the reader are steadily led to believe that Jamf, despite his reported death, exercises a haunting effect on Slothrop through his sexual conditioning and Imipolex G. Jamf’s haunting is most powerfully reinforced in the scene in which Slothrop reads the “fat file” (283) on Imipolex G and discovers the plot against him as a baby. As Slothrop reads the file, he is troubled by “[a] smell, a forbidden room, at the bottom edge of his memory” that “is allied with the Worst Thing” (286). While reading his dossier, which causes him to experience another episode of vertigo, Slothrop discovers that he was “sold to IG Farben like a slide of beef” by his father Broderick, whose code-name in the “Schwarzknabe enterprise”

²⁸ Critics have noted that Pynchon’s source for the IG Farben is Richard Sasuly’s *IG Farben* (1947). IG means “fellowship of interests” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 164). Sasuly writes: “Cartels accomplish many things ... but they do not add to the peace of the world” (134).

²⁹ The two esoteric epigraphs appear on pages 71 and 83.

was “Schwarzvater” (286). The transaction was negotiated by his uncle, Lyle Bland, and Jamf. More importantly, this discovery connects Jamf’s haunting of Slothrop to “the smell of Imipolex G” (286). Slothrop also relates one of his recent dreams, in which the entry for “JAMF” in a German technical dictionary is associated with “It,” warning him “never to speak Its name” (287). How does the reader reconcile Wuxtry-Wuxtry’s claim with Jamf’s powerfully haunting presence in the minds of Slothrop and the reader?

If Wuxtry-Wuxtry’s claim is true, then the narratives become a web of convoluted lies, lies that nevertheless effectively play with the minds of Slothrop and the reader. These lies expose the group fantasy constructed around Jamf’s haunting presence in the novel. However, are we willing to give up those haunting effects, those lies that have given us so much pleasure in following Slothrop’s eventful quest? If we are not willing to do so, then we fall into the trap of believing that Jamf is the “master” who holds the key to the mystery surrounding Slothrop’s sexual erections, despite knowing that this notion is a fallacy. Jamf knows no more about Slothrop’s sexual arousal than anyone knows about where the Rocket will fall after its launch. However, if readers are supposed to doubt Wuxtry-Wuxtry’s claim and continue to believe that Jamf exists and is Slothrop’s sexual conditioner and the inventor of Imipolex G, Oneirine, Kryptosam, and Emulsion J (the film used by von Göll to make *Alpdrücken*), they stand accused of reading Jamf as the signifier when they know he is “a void in the Real,” “the lack in the Other.” In sum, the reader is caught in the double bind, in the game Pynchon plays in the novel. Through the deterritorialization of Jamf, Pynchon takes the play of the MacGuffin as *différance* to new heights.

Conclusion

Gottfried, gagged and bound in the tail of Rocket 00000, finally “arrives” at the last page of *Gravity’s Rainbow* in a surrealistic fashion. The rocket is launched at Lüneburg Heath to fulfill Weissmann/Blicero’s delusional dream of transcendence based on a “reactionary modernism” constructed from Rilkean poems of “destiny” (Haynes 315). Gottfried, as the antithesis of Slothrop, is comfortable with the “soft smell of Imipolex,” the material of his white bridal shroud (754). His fleeting appearance in the darkened theater, a sight verging on disappearance, engulfs readers who are learning to treat the novel as a film, and early 1970s moviegoers at the Orpheus Theater in Los Angeles, in a wave of terror. Gottfried does not walk out of this launch alive, as heroes do in action films (102-03), but Weissmann/Blicero goes on to assume several high-ranking positions (749). The Gottfried MacGuffin, however, hints at the possibility of intercontinental ballistic missile terror attacks in the nuclear

age that would leave no one unscathed. As *Gravity's Rainbow* warns, "They need our terror for Their survival" (539).

Marshall McLuhan, whose influence on Pynchon has been noted, famously declared that "the medium is the message" (7-21). As the medium in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the MacGuffin conveys the message that it is more and less than itself. It is more than a pretext to set the novel in motion; it operates as a mode for critiquing the metaphysics of presence and causality. Pynchon's extensive and innovative use of the MacGuffin brings a critical dimension to the motif, a critical practice that Hitchcock intuited. With his multiple plays on the MacGuffin, Pynchon transforms the concept into a critical *objet petit a* and *différance*, an achievement Hitchcock would appreciate.



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