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"Sound and Vision": Thomas Pynchon, Perception, and Transcendence

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Abstract

Previous studies of Thomas Pynchon's works have made progress in defining numerous aspects of what could be construed as the Pynchonian worldview. However, they have mainly identified them in general, visual terms, separated from the level of the direct experience of his characters. The process of perception is important in philosophical inquiry, but its role in the worldview of Pynchon's works has thus far not been examined in depth. Perceptions of all kinds, especially of the auditory kind, feature prominently in Pynchon's works, but previous studies of Pynchon's representations of perceptions have mainly focused on music and sound technologies. Using a theoretical framework from the field of literary sound studies, and Ihde's phenomenology of sound, which distinguishes between the perceptual and imaginative modes of experience, I analyze Pynchon's unique perceptual representations in his novels *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, identify Pynchon's tendency for suspicion towards the perceptual mode, and outline a distinctly Pynchonian mode of perception visible throughout these works: one that erases the distance between the modes of experience. This mode of perception has multiple purposes: functioning as a method for shaping his characters' direct experience into a more meaningful one in the midst of the postmodern erosion of their worldviews; as a method for making their spiritual notions more subjectively "real"; and as a form of resistance against insurmountable power structures.

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Introduction

In the beginning was a screaming — at least if what you are reading is Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973; hereafter *GR*). Pynchon's postmodern epic, chronicling the emergence of the military industrial complex in Germany at the end of the Second World War, begins with the "screaming" of a V-2 rocket and ends with a song cut short by a rocket strike. These sounds bracket the text, whose structure is simultaneously circular and parabolic (or rainbow-shaped, if you will). Representations of sounds, and indeed all kinds of sensory perceptions, abound in Pynchon's works.

Textual representations of sensory perceptions are not the only example of perception's prevalence in Pynchon's fiction; perception as a process is a foundational issue for inquiries metaphysical and epistemological. The worldview conveyed in Pynchon's works has been the subject of much research, but thus far, scholars have not quite satisfactorily answered the question of what role perception plays in this Pynchonian worldview. At best, this issue has only been mentioned tangentially in studies of his works and so the time is ripe for us to ask the question: what is Pynchon's philosophy of perception?

Words frequently used to describe some of Pynchon's central concerns: "Framing" (Moore 31), "perspective" (Cooper 133), "mapping" (Best 1), while accurate for this central concern of Pynchon's, also have their shortcomings. Firstly, they are abstract generalizations and do not adequately describe *how* these techniques function at the level of experience. Secondly, they are all visual terms. If, as Steven Connor has argued, the modern self is better understood in terms of sound rather than vision (208), then perhaps these Pynchonian modes of perception can better be understood aurally? And if these notions are separated from the direct experience of Pynchon's characters, perhaps what is required is a more phenomenological approach?

Justin St. Clair has examined Pynchon's affinity for the aural; however, St. Clair mainly focuses mainly on the "sonic backdrop", or background sound of the postmodern era (5). While this approach has turned out to be fruitful, it ignores a central aspect of Pynchon's fiction: the importance of the imaginative mode of experience. Don Ihde, in his phenomenology, differentiates between the perceptual and imaginative modalities of experience, the former consisting of outer experience and the latter consisting of inner experience, together constituting the "polyphony of experience" (119). This polyphony turns out to be integral to the way Pynchon's characters perceive the world. In this essay, I will

examine this Pynchonian mode of perception as depicted in *GR* and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966; hereafter *CL49*), using a theoretical framework drawing from the field of sound studies, in combination with Ihde's phenomenology of sound. The idea that emerges throughout these two novels, I argue, is a sense of suspicion directed towards a "naïve" reliance on the perceptual mode of experience, and an advocacy for an integration of the imaginative mode of experience into the perceptual; an erasure of the distance between the modalities.

The first part of this essay consists of two background sections: the first providing an outline of what could be understood as the Pynchonian worldview and the second containing a description of the theories relating to sound, perception and experience. The second part consists of three sections: the first shows how Pynchon portrays the perceptual mode of experience as no longer sufficient for practically orienting ourselves in the world, having been rendered obsolete by techno-scientific progress serving the power structures that dominate it. The subsequent section shows how he portrays our link to perceptual sources for mystical insight as having been severed due to the insufficiency of relying, at a philosophical level, merely on the perceptual mode of experience. The final section identifies the specifics of Pynchon's alternative mode of perception, namely how his characters integrate the imaginative mode into the perceptual to better make sense of their place in the world.

“Doctrine of Elements”: A Background

Before delving into an analysis of how perception is represented in the two novels, we will need a foundation: namely an outline of the view of the world conveyed in his works and a theoretical framework for his textual representations of perceptions. The two following sections will define this worldview first and then provide the theoretical frameworks concerning perception, in order to make sure that the theories can be applicable to Pynchon’s works in a way that is congruent with his philosophical stances.

Systems of Reality: Defining the Pynchonian Worldview

By now, it has become cliché to begin a discussion of *GR* by stating that the novel is notoriously difficult to read, or that it resists analysis, its narrative being, in the words of countless scholars, “labyrinthine,” “psychedelic,” and “fragmented.” The complexities and uncertainties do not end at the stylistic level; rather, they can also be found in the world that Pynchon portrays, as well as in his ideas. This section will provide an outline of Pynchon’s world, and the philosophical stances scholars have attributed to him.

The world as presented by Pynchon is a cruel and disorienting one, portrayed as a postmodern hellscape, about as difficult to navigate as *GR*’s text itself. His characters must navigate complex webs of plots, secret government agencies and bureaucracies, and throughout *GR* there are numerous references to The System, an all-encompassing aggregate of structures that has come to dominate the world—it comes as no surprise that some of Pynchon’s main themes are paranoia and the mounting insecurity of whether the patterns observed are real. While the setting of *GR*—the mid-1940s—is not always considered as part of the postmodern era, the issues presented in the novel marks its setting as a characteristically postmodern one, a “technocratic/bureaucratic/cybernetic/media world” (Best 61). According to Steven Best, political bureaucracies, media and economies function here as interlocking and interconnected power structures, resulting in an existence characterized by further difficulties for individuals to perceptually and cognitively orient themselves, and to find a place in its “collective system of meanings” (63)—this, in turn, results in the collapse of previously stable worldviews, and a decreased sense of our having any influence over the direction the world is moving in.

The bleakness does not end here; Pynchon's narration frequently calls into question the notion of free will. Throughout *GR*, there is the implication that the characters lack control over their lives and the narrator makes this case from multiple standpoints. The subject is discussed on numerous occasions: for instance, during a séance in one of *GR*'s earlier episodes[1], a spirit speaks of "the illusion of control. That A could do B. But that was false. Completely. No one can *do.* Things only happen. A and B are unreal, are names for parts that ought to be inseparable" (36). During a later séance, another spirit speaks on the same subject: giving an elaborate description of the relation between technological development, political economy and systems of control, he tells the audience that "all talk of cause and effect is secular history, and secular history is a diversionary tactic. Useful to you, gentlemen, but no longer so to us here" (198). Peter L. Cooper has described this as Pynchon's "central paradox": his world works through randomness, but still his characters are "controlled" by outside forces (125). It is not quite a causal determinism, but rather a lack of free will due to the world functioning through a chaotic web of randomness, where everything is contingent on everything else. The idea seems to be that we might *think* that our actions are free, and that our actions will cause other things to happen out of our own volition, but looking at the matter from an external, wider perspective will reveal these concepts as illusory.

This lack of agency is nothing new in Pynchon's world; after all, the spirits state clearly that control is an illusion because the world does not work according to laws of cause and effect. However, while it is a fundamental aspect of reality that calls free will into question, there are political aspects at play here as well—it might be the case that no one can *do* because the very notion of *doing* presupposes that our actions are separated from everything else that happens, but the narrator also implies that the societal structures at work in the (post)modern world do not facilitate any freedom of action, describing earlier generations during the First World War as "run day in and day out, on and on, by no visible hands, certainly not those of the people …" (*GR*, 730). Pynchon thus calls freedom of will into question on both a philosophical and a political basis: if the world functions through randomness rather than laws of causality, there is already reason to question whether our actions are truly our own, but it is clear that our actions are even less free if our lives are run by self-perpetuating power structures.

Another concern of Pynchon's is the nature of knowledge. A precise definition of his epistemological stance has proven to be difficult, but nevertheless scholars have identified some tendencies. In *Signs and Symptoms*, Peter L. Cooper notes that Pynchon shows "a

[1] It is convention among Pynchon scholars to refer to *GR*'s chapters as episodes.

fascination (sometimes horrified) with epistemological dilemmas" (3). Thomas Moore has referred to this as a concern with "framing," the frame being Pynchon's "central epistemological symbol, which is everywhere in [*GR*]" (31). Moore's reading agrees with Cooper's description of the ever-present theme of perspective. According to Cooper: "homogeneity, continuity, and integrating patterns may all be illusions of perspective, but then so may be heterogeneity, discontinuity, and disintegrating wastescapes"—a notion that he then compares to the example of mixing white and black powders to get a homogeneous gray powder, which for a microscopic insect would appear as a heterogeneous gathering of white and black boulders (133).

Indeed, Pynchon is, as Martin Paul Eve writes, often concerned with "the limits of the human perspective on the world" (16). However, the awareness of these limitations is used to combine different systems of truth, in a way that Cooper has identified as epitomizing the Pynchonian imperative that we must view these systems as "parallel, not series," resulting in a more open-ended epistemology (171). This leads Thomas Moore to argue that Pynchon's ideas of knowledge, truth and justified belief are predicated on a "both/and" principle rather than "either/or" disjunctions. With this epistemological open-endedness in mind, Pynchon's disdain for positivism comes as no surprise. As stated by Eve, "the physical and chemical sciences are subjected to extreme scrutiny as emblems of a positivist materialism that leads to the culture of the V-2 rocket; the belief that scientific knowledge of physical processes can only ever lead in the direction of human advancement is thoroughly undone" (2). Perhaps the clearest example of this is the narrator's remark about Thanatz, who in a later episode has been thrust into the same confusing circumstances as most other characters: "there's no counting for any positivism to save him … that only got in the way" (*GR*, 791). At the very least, it is clear that Pynchon's epistemology privileges open-endedness over systemic closure. While it would be safe to assume that the postmodern disintegration of totalizing metanarratives plays some part in this, it is clear that this epistemological open-endedness also stems from Pynchon's metaphysics.

Pynchon's treatment of the issue of the nature of reality will catch anyone's attention when encountering the strange, surreal and hallucinatory aspects of *GR*'s narrative—the irony of a ghost telling scientists at a séance what is "real" and "unreal," for instance, will certainly escape no one, and throughout Pynchon's narration, dreams, hallucinations and "reality" blend into one another, leaving the reader unsure of what is "real" or "unreal." Referring to the philosophical debate between materialism and idealism, Eve remarks that Pynchon's works "sit uncomfortably between these two strains of philosophical thought," one example

of this being that “Pynchon's supernatural spaces—‘the beyond,’ ghost-worlds, and dreams—are not wholly materially inaccessible” (2-3). Instead of taking part in what, in Pynchon’s case, might be an irresolvable, dualistic debate, Eve argues that Pynchon’s metaphysics might better be understood as situated within the new materialist tradition: a nonhomogeneous stream of metaphysical thought that seeks to dispense with binaries such as mind-body, living-dead, subject-object, or indeed even the binary of real-unreal (4-5).

Listening to the Voices of Pynchon’s World

This section outlines the concepts from the field of sound studies and Ihde’s phenomenology of sound that are of relevance for the analysis in the further sections. For theory concerning textual representations of sounds, Mieszkowski’s book *Resonant Alterities* is appropriate considering her ambition to further bridge the gap between sound studies and literary analysis. Additionally, since Ihde’s phenomenology is rarely—if ever—used in studies of Pynchon’s works, it might provide some novel perspectives.

Given that text consists of written words, and words were originally phonetic, it comes as no surprise that sound studies, originating in R. Murray Schafer’s study of soundscapes, entered into the field of literary studies. Sound studies is a “recognition of a lack of attention to the sonic/the aural”; a new focus on examining our auditory experience that has been referred to as “the acoustic turn” (Mieszkowski 33).

This acoustic turn reflects the emergence of what Steven Connor refers to as “the modern auditory I”. In his essay of the same name, Connor argues that the advent of modernity caused a perceptual shift; with noisier environments and sound technologies having become an integral part of modern life, in tandem with the “epistemized self” that seeks to understand itself, hearing has become “of defining importance in modernity” (203-4). The self, Connor suggests, has been reimagined,

> not as a point, but as a membrane; not as a picture, but as a channel through which voices, noises and musics travel … a new kind of human subjectivity, which is continuously being traversed, dissolved and remade … its understanding of itself in terms of its interception of, and by, experiences, events and phenomena, rather than its reception or perception of them, is frequently embodied in terms of sound. (207-208)

Thus, the modern self can be understood as an auditory self—a membrane that can resonate with its surroundings or be damaged by them.

Textual representations of sounds can be approached from two sides: the “auditive” and the “sonic.” An auditive analysis approaches the sound as perceived, whereas a sonic analysis is concerned with the sound’s source, approaching the sound as produced (Mieszkowski 59). More specifically on the sonic side, “schizophonia” is a useful concept for my analysis in the subsequent sections. Schizophonic sound is a term introduced by R. Murray Schafer, referring to the separation between the “original” sound and its reproduction. After the invention of sound technologies such as recording devices, the telephone, and the radio, sound no longer needed to come from its “original” source (Mieszkowski 63).

The auditive side of analysis will mainly use Ihde’s phenomenology, an appropriate resource due to Ihde’s phenomenological method of *epoché*, or the casting aside of beliefs and preconceived judgments on the nature of reality: “Ultimately sense data and primary qualities and a whole family of related unexperienced causes are ghosts that lie behind experience rather than lie in primordial experience. As an alternative view, phenomenology places in brackets precisely these ‘beliefs’” (43). Instead, there is a focus on experience itself, *as experienced*. This approach will prove fruitful for studies of Pynchon’s fiction considering his concern with subjective perspective, and his (at least partial) rejection of the real-unreal binary.

According to Ihde, sounds are “given” to the perceiver: “I cannot force them into presence … I must *await* their coming” (108). Time is considered as the horizon of auditory phenomena; that is, the “limit” between the phenomenon being experienced and not experienced. Within the horizon the perceiver hears the sound, and beyond the horizon there is an “absence” from which the sound emerges (105).

Ihde defines experience as consisting of two modalities: the perceptual mode of experience and the imaginative mode, the interplay between these modalities referred to as the “polyphony of experience.” The perceptual mode consists of that which is experienced through our sensory organs, or “outer experience,” while the latter consists of “inner experience,” comprising the range from imagined representations and memory, to inner speech (119). One example of this polyphony: reading this essay, what you are experiencing in the perceptual mode is the sight of black text on a white background, perceived by your eyes that move across the page; the ideas and images conjured in your mind, however, are experienced in the imaginative mode. The full experience of reading consists of the interplay between these modalities: naturally, moving your eyes across the page without involving the imaginative mode does not count as “reading.”

There is typically a sense of "distance" between the perceptual and imaginative modes, but this distance can also be "erased." The representations within the imaginative mode are characterized by being *presented* as "irreal"; however, during a hallucination for instance, a representation originating from the imaginative mode, due to the "loss of distance" between the modalities, no longer presents itself as irreal. Instead, being experienced in the perceptual mode, it is *presented* to the experiencer as "real" (126-7).

Lastly, although Ihde's phenomenology is mainly a phenomenology of sound, it can be applied to other perceptions too; after all, he does state that his aim is "a radically different understanding of experience, one which has its roots in a phenomenology of auditory experience" (15). This does not necessarily signify that it is an understanding of experience *limited* to the auditory dimension; rather, it can be understood as the groundwork for an understanding of experience adapted to the modern auditory self.

As Mieszkowski notes, literary texts do not necessarily aim at "reconstructing what a given place sounded like at a given time" (59). Textual representations of sounds, and indeed, all perceptions, can be approached as "vehicles for meaning making," an approach that considers them "as the presumed site of identity, as a privileged locus of power, as the object of a drive … as a presence in absence which can hail, hallow, haunt and heal" (336, 36). In the subsequent sections, the voices of Pynchon's world will be considered in this light.

"Doctrine of Transcendent Method": The Perceptual and Imaginative Modalities of Experience, and Pynchon's Polyphonic Perceptions

The following sections examine the perceptual and imaginative modes and the different ways in which Pynchon's characters use them; their merits and their shortcomings. The modern self is an auditory self, but the postmodern soundscape functions differently from its previous, modern stage. Here, the structures targeted by Pynchon's anxious fictions have rendered the perceptual mode of experience obsolete for practical survival, the sonic backdrop that makes up the postmodern soundscape having transcended sound itself.

The second section shows how for Pynchon, a "naïve" reliance on the perceptual mode is also insufficient for gaining mystical insight, a notion that also has clear moral dimensions. In *GR*, Pynchon seems to trace the beginnings of the postmodern stage to a group of "corporate elites from the Nazi sphere" not listening to a spirit at a séance, due to their

attitudes toward the perceptual mode.

The third section identifies the distinct manner in which many of Pynchon's characters perceive the world, which involves an erasure of the distance between the modalities of experience. This is intimately connected with Pynchon's spiritual side. Ultimately, the way in which his characters open "the doors of perception" suggests a Pynchonian form of transcendence, framed as both a way of giving their subjective systems of meaning a sense of "reality," but also as a potentially reality-shaping force.

The Screaming: Postmodernity Is Supersonic

Our perceptual apparatus emerged at a time when threats to our survival at the very least had the *possibility* of being perceived beforehand—even the most sudden and unpredictable of threats, that of a lightning strike, would provide a perceivable warning beforehand by the presence of stormy clouds above. However, throughout history there has been a steady invention of new instruments of murder that incrementally eliminate this possibility of being perceived in time to survive them. *GR* is concerned with one that emerged in the mid-1940s: the V-2 rocket. Capable of supersonic speed, it could not be heard before striking its civilian targets. Providing no perceivable warning beforehand, and its impact sites being seemingly random, it is portrayed as a weapon we were not perceptually equipped to deal with. The Pynchonian self is an auditory self, albeit one that is coming to terms with the notion that the perceptual mode of experience has been turned against it, in a sense weaponized, by the dominant world order.

In one of *GR*'s earlier episodes, protagonist Tyrone Slothrop is seized mid-conversation by a sudden spell of panic at the prospect of supersonic death:

> ... Slothrop, instead of going on with his story, has given himself up to shivering …
> 'I don't know. Jesus.' …
> Presently, after a pause, cigarette in motion, 'You can't hear them when they come in.' …
> 'Of course you can't, they go faster than sound.' …
> 'But these things explode first, a-and *then* you hear them coming in. Except that, if you're dead you *don't* hear them.' (27)

Supersonic speeds were, at this point in time, not an alien notion: it is self-evident that if sound waves have a speed, then the sound of a supersonic object will have a "delayed" arrival. Given the broad familiarity of this concept, how can something so intuitive cause such a crisis? The delayed sound of the rocket *does* disturb Slothrop immensely. It is, in fact,

precisely this discrepancy between the familiarity of the nature of supersonic objects and the anxiety the rocket causes that reveals it as immensely disruptive of his being.

However, it is not strange that Slothrop finds the rocket incomprehensible, and this can be understood through Ihde's phenomenology: specifically, the definition of time as the horizon of sound. If the sound of the rocket is heard after it has already struck its target, the sound emerges through the horizon after that which emitted it has already ceased to exist—at least in the form that emitted the sound. By being supersonic, the rocket has disconnected the perception of its sound through the perceiver's temporal horizon, from the "horizon," or border, of its own existence. Sound, as Ihde writes, "comes into being and passes from being in a temporal dance which does not submit to my will" (85). Slothrop's anxieties lie partly in his recognition that his eventual death is unavoidable if a rocket happens to fly in his direction: there is no perceivable warning that could provide him with the possibility of avoiding it, and no matter how much he wills it, he cannot change this fact, since the temporal dynamics of sound do not submit to his will.

The recognition of the rocket's sonic dynamics forces a modern auditory self to confront a newfound inability to perceptually navigate the world. This, in turn, results in a spiritual crisis on Slothrop's part. Slothrop's Puritanical background is explained by the narrator: "there is in his history, and likely, God help him, in his dossier, a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky" (30). The narrator provides a historical background for Slothrop through a description of his Puritan ancestors, stating that the "American truth" of the Word "claimed the Slothrops" (32). In London, however, the inability to perceive a lethal threat such as the rocket in time to at least have the *possibility* of surviving it, threatens the stability of his faith:

> When he couldn't help he stayed clear, praying, at first, conventionally to God, first time since the other Blitz, for life to win out. But too many were dying, and presently, seeing no point, he stopped … He has become obsessed with the idea of a rocket with his name written on it …
> 'Who's pretending? … It could happen *any time*, the next second, right, just suddenly…shit…just zero, just nothing…and…'
> It's nothing he can see or lay hands on – sudden gases, a violence upon the air and no trace afterward…a Word, spoken with no warning into your ear, and then silence forever. (28-9)

Slothrop contemplates whether the Word will arrive to him with the rocket, followed by his immediate death and ultimately the "silence" of God. Gradually, his Puritanical obsession with hearing the Word is supplanted by his more paranoid side, the stability of his previous

worldview having been subject to a "great invisible crashing," akin to that of *GR*'s opening paragraphs (3).

The rocket's "tearing" of the sound from its source is reminiscent of schizophonia; indeed, Mieszkowski suggests that schizophonia is not necessarily limited to technologies of electro-acoustic *transmission* or *reproduction*, but is rather characterized by the separation itself (63). However, there is an example of more conventional schizophonia framed as oppressive later in the novel. Slothrop, attempting to infiltrate a restricted area in occupied Berlin, is caught by patrolling guards: "and the air between quickens with spoken Russian at the speed of light weaving a net to catch Slothrop" (448). The workings of schizophonic sound—in this case transmitted at supersonic speed—is a "net," an instrument of power used to "catch" him.

Many scholars have associated the proliferation of electro-acoustic technologies with the emergence of the postmodern stage. Ihde, while he does not use the term "schizophonia" himself, does suggest that postmodernity emerged with the proliferation of schizophonic sound, specifically due to its inherent ontological disconnect: sounds, insofar as they are heard, no longer require the material connection to their source that was previously necessary (261). Justin St. Clair, in turn, argues that there is in the postmodern world a weave of sonic communication and reproduction, of such a scale that it has been subsumed into the background, a "sonic backdrop" that is rarely even noticed; this lack of attention can then be used as an instrument of power (8).

There is no direct solution to these schizophonic dilemmas. Statistician Roger Mexico and behaviorist Ned Pointsman attempt to predict the rocket strikes but never arrive at any certain methods, and although Slothrop *does* have the ability to predict them, his predictions span a rather uncertain time frame between two and ten days (101). Moreover, Slothrop is unaware of this ability while still in London and therefore unable to actually use it while the rockets are still a clear and present danger. While Slothrop's ability is akin to extra-sensory perception, this mode of perception is not presented as a solution to the threat of the rocket. Slothrop is caught in the web of the postmodern soundscape, with no means of escape, neither in the case of the V-2 rocket nor in the case of the "web" of sounds transmitted at supersonic speed. For Pynchon, The System exercises its power over individuals by supersonic means; in all respects, the sonic workings of their instruments of power exceed our auditive capabilities. A world where dominant power structures function through the transmission of sounds at speeds faster than sound itself, is a world where the workings of the structures that shape our lives exceed our perceptual capabilities. Ultimately, in Pynchon's portrayal of this, it is as

though The System has won. This state requires some amount of creativity for an existence within it to be bearable, as the following sections will show.

A Word on The Word: Mystical Insight and the Perceptual Mode

There is another side to Pynchon's portrayal of the perceptual mode's insufficiency, more specifically his attitude towards its "level of greatest naïveté" (Ihde 60). Moreover, he seems to show a moral concern about this issue. This section examines the perceptual dynamics of the attempts at mystical insight during the Rathenau séance.

In multiple respects, the séance near the end of the first part of *GR* is primarily an auditory event. During a flashback, elite members of "the corporate Nazi crowd" are conducting a séance to contact the spirit of Walter Rathenau, Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic (194). The relevance of the auditory for this séance is made clear by the medium's first question: "Are you listening, Generaldirektor?" receiving the reply: "I am listening, Herr Rathenau" (196).

There is a schizophonic detachment of sound from source here, as the narrator describes the spirit's voice as "a voice moving Sachsa's lips and rigid white throat" (196). In other words: it is not Sachsa's speech apparatus that moves to produce his voice, but rather *a* voice moving Sachsa's speech apparatus. The words they are hearing originate from beyond what the narrator refers to as "the Wall" between matter and spirit (195). It is the voice of Rathenau's spirit speaking with Sachsa's mouth and vocal cords as a conduit; the medium's speech apparatus reproduces the sound transmitted from "the other side."

The narrator is aware of the schizophonic detachment between these planes of existence. During Roland Feldspath's séance in one of the earlier episodes, as the spiritual network breaks, it is described in terms of electro-acoustic transmission: "somewhere, through exhaustion, redirection, gusts of white noise out in the aether, this arrangement has begun now to dissolve" (37). The medium at the séance thus functions as something akin to a radio transmitter, or telephone, between the different sides of "the Wall."

This can be understood through Connor's notion of "the switchboard experience" (211). Connor describes that when the telephone was first introduced, the idea of the immediacy in communicating through this network at first seemed promising; however, the distributional network was an impersonal one, mediated by an unknown switchboard operator. Achieving a sense of immediacy in this manner of communication happened "only after one had surrendered oneself to the impersonal distributional networks"; impersonal networks such

as these had to be "subjected to visualization," and getting used to this "did not happen quickly or easily." What was required was "learn[ing] to construct and inhabit an imaginary … switchboard space" (212). In a similar fashion, the sound coming from the medium's mouth is not the *actual* voice of the spirit being transmitted; it is a reconstruction. The physical sound source is the receiver, and not the speaker. In Pynchon's séances, the "control"—a spirit on the other side mediating the transmission between spirit and medium—is akin to a switchboard operator.

The séance's network would thus require the same imaginary construction. This is not to say, however, that the audience would show the same skepticism towards the apparent "immediacy" of telephonic communication as they do for the séance; however, the difference between these cases lies not in their dynamics, but in their materiality. Telephonic networks work through electrical signals transmitted through physical wires, and the switchboard operator is a material human being; the imaginary switchboard space of a telephone network is an imaginative representation of something material.

The séance, however, is a network across different planes of existence—the material and spiritual—and taking this network seriously requires being able to take the spiritual side of things seriously: "Smaragd cannot really believe in any of this … the technician and manager. He may only want signs, omens, confirmations of what's already in being" (196). Being of a positivistic mindset, the audience members base their ideas on "reality" merely on the dimension of the perceptual mode that Ihde has referred to as "the first naive existential level of experience where sounds are the sounds of things" (61), which in the case of the séance will only contain the physical medium. Therefore, they cannot trust the imaginary network which they must construct across "the Wall" between matter and spirit. The irony is that what they perceive—a physical human being speaking—is not what is *actually* happening: a spirit speaking through the mouth of a medium.

Therefore, when the spirit's message contradicts their firmly held worldviews, and warns them that their plans will eventually turn the world into a desolate wasteland, they ignore it. The spirit's final utterance: "You think you know, you cling to your beliefs, but sooner or later you will have to let them go," is followed by the audience members giggling and cracking an antisemitic joke (198). For Pynchon, positivism is the "epistemology proper to a will to power that seeks to vanquish everything that is Other to the norm" (Best 70), and so the members of the audience go on to consolidate power instead of heeding the spirit's warning.

In fact, Pynchon makes it clear that it is their positivistic attitude that ironically allows them to deny the reality of the spirit's message. The narrator remarks that for Thanatz, one of the audience members: "there's no counting for any positivism to save him, that didn't even work in Berlin … at Peter Sachsa's sittings" (791). Furthermore, in another passage, Pynchon specifically ridicules the naïveté of the positivistic attitude towards the perceptual mode. In a film reel watched by Katje in one of the novel's later episodes, Sakall, a parody of Pynchon's positivistic behaviorist Ned Pointsman, tells his friend Rathbone: "Vhen you been out on the trail … for as long as I have, you know the ah real midget sheriff from ah hallucinated vun," and Rathbone replies that he "hadn't known either class existed." Sakall then tells him: "Vell, ve're *both seeing* him. That means he's real" (633). It is clear that Pynchon associates positivism with an attitude that considers that which is found in the passive, "naïve" reception of impressions in the perceptual mode as "real," and any manifestation of the imaginative mode in the perceptual as categorically "unreal."

The audience's lack of trust in the imaginative mode of experience has thus severed any link to sources of insight beyond their own sphere, beyond the objective reality they can passively receive through the perceptual mode. Their worldview, due to its privileging of the "objectivity" of the perceptual mode, allows them to disregard the message from the spirits, which in turn further consolidates their views. There is thus a moral aspect for Pynchon in taking seriously the spiritual side of things and making it "real" by erasing some of the distance between the perceptual and imaginative modes, since at this point, "They" grow increasingly resistant to change the direction they are bringing the world in. In the words of Rathenau's spirit: "The path is clear" (196).

Mieswzkowski suggests in her analysis of sound in occult fiction that the difference between magic and psychology might primarily be a question of vocabulary (150), and as Rathbone tells Sakall: "Joint hallucination is not unknown in our world, podner" (633). The irony in the séance ultimately reveals that if the audience had made the attempt to collectively hallucinate the spiritual "switchboard"—not that hallucination necessarily counts as a valid category for Pynchon—they would have experienced the séance as it *really* is. All of the above suggests a moral dimension to Pynchon's concern with opening "the doors of perception," an ideology of transcendence in the Blakean sense.

“Indices as yet unfound”: The Origin of a Newfound Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bimodal Mind

Let us then turn our attention towards the novel mode of perception Pynchon’s characters use to make sense of their place in the world. If the characters lack control over their lives, the implication is that they can only *experience* their own actions and thus the perceptual takes on a more prominent role: perceiving is really all they can “do.” In *CL49*, protagonist Oedipa Maas asks the question: “shall I project a world?” (59), and while scholars have mainly related this question to her paranoid tracing of patterns, I argue that Pynchon’s idea of projecting a world is also a perceptual process, one that erases the distance between the perceptual and imaginative modes, integrating the latter into the former.

Slothrop, having long since resorted to paranoia to make sense of his life, walks underneath a row of arches on a Berlin street during one of the most disorienting periods of his Pynchonian quest, and one of the arches seem to him “more like an open mouth and gullet, joints of cartilage receding waiting.” He perceives the sound of his footsteps reverberating through the street as these mouths laughing: “it laughs as it has for years without stopping, a blubbery and percussive laugh.” Entering “the schizoid throat” seems a reasonable course of action to him, “because it is what the guardian and potent studio wants from him … Their unexplained need to keep some marginal population in these wan and preterite places.” (*GR*, 518-519).

There is, according to Ihde, “the possibility of a synthesis of imagined and perceived sound,” in which the perceptual and imaginative modes are “copresent,” and an example of this is to hear a “real” sound as something else than it actually is (132). In this passage, Slothrop is listening from himself—the imaginative mode is copresent with the perceptual, the latter being informed by the former—and thus Slothrop perceives the arches as mouths, and the sound of his footsteps as their sinister laughter. The idea of “Their plot” having supplanted his previous notion of God’s plan, this copresence of the modalities allows him to perceive his surroundings in a way that subjectively makes sense to his paranoid mind: he might be following Their laugh, and it might be part of Their plan, but at least it gives him a sense of direction—one made more “real” by appearing in the perceptual mode—than the sense of alienation he would otherwise feel, walking alone to unclear destinations over streets that he cannot even navigate.

In *CL49*, often viewed by scholars as a microcosm of all things Pynchonian, the text is in a way bracketed by two oft-quoted passages: the gallery scene and the Muzak scene. What

scholars have overlooked, however, is that these passages express a *wish* on the characters' part to perceive things in a certain way. In the gallery, Oedipa sees a painting which seems to explain to her her own existence as controlled by outside forces:

> Oedipa, perverse, had stood in front of the painting and cried … she wore dark green bubble shades. For a moment she'd wondered if the seal around her sockets were tight enough to allow the tears simply to go on and fill up the entire lens space and never dry. She could carry the sadness of the moment with her that way forever, see the world refracted through those tears, those specific tears, as if indices as yet unfound varied in important ways from cry to cry … Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works … she may fall back on superstition. (10-1)

Her journey throughout the novel can be understood as her gradual learning about these "indices as yet unfound," or the "formless magic," and the profound experience she had at the gallery. Later, she encounters an actor who tells her: "But the reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium." While the actor is mainly referring to his acting with this statement, she soon comes to ask herself the question: "Shall I project a world?" conceiving of this act of projection in more general terms (56, 59). Finally, when she meets the tragic Sailor who is dying of Delirium Tremens, she realizes what the "formless magic" is:

> what voices overheard, flinders of luminescent gods glimpsed among the wall-paper's stained foliage, candlestubs lit to rotate in the air over him, prefiguring the cigarette he or a friend must fall asleep someday smoking, thus to end among the flaming, secret salts held all those years by the insatiable stuffing of a mattress that could keep vestiges of every nightmare sweat … like the memory bank to a computer of the lost? … That stuffed memory … So when this mattress flared up around the sailor, in his Viking's funeral: the stored, coded years of uselessness, early death, self harrowing, the sure decay of hope, the set of all men who had slept on it … would truly cease to be, forever, when the mattress burned. She stared at it in wonder. It was as if she had just discovered the irreversible process. (93-5)

The "indices as yet unfound" consist in her subjective spiritual views on emotion, which she projects into her perceptions: in the case of the painting, she would have seen the world through those glasses as distorted not merely by the water, but—if not literally, then at least still within the perceptual mode—refracted through what she felt standing there in the gallery; in the case of the mattress, the sailor's entire life story, and the contents of his inner world, are projected into it.

Near the end of the novel, Oedipa's husband Mucho is listening to the Muzak in a bar, and remarks: "His E string … Do you think somebody could do the dinosaur bone bit with that one string, Oed? With just his set of notes on that cut. Figure out what his ear is like, and then the musculature of his hands and arms, and eventually the entire man. God, wouldn't that be wonderful?" (105). What is described here is a mode of perception that allows him to create a complete visual image merely through sound, through an active involvement of the imaginative mode with the perceptual, erasing even the boundaries between the senses: an opening of "the doors of perception."

Projecting a world is indeed an active process. Blicero, for instance, having taken on the identity of a Teutonic god of death, is capable of projecting his world to the extent that other characters experience it as he does as well. Later, the narrator remarks: "But there's no answer from Blicero. His eyes go casting runes with the windmill silhouettes" (*GR*, 796)—in other words, it is clearly stated as a perceptual process: his eyes are *casting* runes, and they are doing it actively. Furthermore, Blicero's abilities make Thanatz doubt his previous positivistic certainties—the reason that he realizes them as "pointless" being that "he knows Blicero exists" (791).

The mode of perception described above is an integral part of the activity of "framing." The Pynchonian self, being itself "perhaps created from nothing more than sequences of framed perceptions" (Moore 31), reasserts itself by projecting a world—this world-projecting turns perception into a more active process, which, in turn provides the process of self-creation with more raw material, more in tune with what one subjectively finds meaningful. What all characters are doing in the passages quoted above, then, is to erase the distance between the modalities of experience by projecting into the perceptual mode the content of their subjective minds. Ihde points out that the self "hides within itself and its imaginative acts (which hide themselves from others) a kind of autonomy" (118), and in the world as Pynchon portrays it, this might be the only autonomy left for the individual. The imaginative mode, then, is useful not only as a means for deeper spiritual meaning, but also for a more meaningful direct existence. In Blicero's case, it amounts to an ability to reshape external reality, but if nothing else, it is a mode of perception that allows at least one's *experience* to not be controlled by those in power.

This concern is evident in the story of Byron, the sentient lightbulb, in one of *GR*'s later episodes. In many ways, Byron's story is a parable for Pynchon's idea of human life underneath The System's power. Byron is also "run day in and day out, on and on, by no visible hands," and in his story, The Cartel functions as The System's stand-in. Byron, being

an immortal lightbulb, catches the attention of The Phoebus Cartel, which seeks to establish planned obsolescence for the lightbulbs they manufacture. As they move him between countries in order to disrupt his attempts to communicate messages of resistance to other lightbulbs in the electrical grid, constantly having him under supervision, Byron starts advocating for Bulb transcendence:

> He has come to see how Bulb must move beyond its role as conveyor of light energy alone. Phoebus has restricted Bulb to this one identity. 'But there are other frequencies, above and below the visible band. Bulb can give heat. Bulb can provide energy for plants to grow, illegal plants, inside closets, for example. Bulb can penetrate the sleeping eye, and operate among the dreams of men.' … Any talk of Bulb's transcendence, of course, was clear subversion. (774-775)

If the story of Byron the Bulb is to be viewed as a parable of life under The System, then it is also a parable of attempts at transcendence. Pynchon relates this concept to the perceptual mode in that Byron is advocating for the bulbs to find "other frequencies, above and below the visible band," implying a turn from the immediate perceptual mode to something closer to the realm of "the dreams of men." Moreover, this form of transcendence is "clear subversion," since it allows Bulbs—or individuals—to shape their experience of reality beyond what The Cartel—or The System—has restricted them to.

Eve suggests that there is throughout Pynchon's fiction a tendency towards the new materialist notion that "there is no reason why things should be as they are and that any other set of possible permutations are as likely" (9). If there is no reason why things should be as they are, the implication is the possibility of reshaping the dissonant noise and chaos of the world into something better. The chaotic Zone of postwar Germany, considered by Steven Best as an emblematic space of the wider postmodern state of the world (75), is a disorienting space, but its chaotic nature, the abundance of noise out of which subjectively meaningful signals can be constructed, might result in previously inconceivable possibilities for a better world, a better reality. After all, Slothrop contemplates that "maybe that anarchist he met in Zürich was right, maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another, the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed" (*GR*, 659).

Conclusion

Ultimately, the view Pynchon presents in these novels is a hopeful one, an ideology of transcendence. Even in a world where genuine action is impossible, meaning can be found, or at least created, through a more imaginative mode of perception. If everything is a matter of perspective, then everything is a matter of perception, and for Pynchon, there are modes of perception that allow individuals to transcend the experience they have been confined to by The System. Pynchon is not as much concerned with *what* lies beyond "the doors of perception" as with *how* to access it, and what lies beyond cannot always be adequately expressed in terms of regular modes of sensory perception. Attempting to explain such ideas in strictly figurative language that would also do them justice would be akin to asking a stick figure to explain a Rubik's cube.

This is by no means a complete account of Pynchon's view on the perceptual and imaginative modalities of experience, and further research ought to involve more of his works, and modes of perception beyond merely the auditory and the visual. In any case, this phenomenological approach seems to be a fruitful one, since the phenomenology itself is not based on previous ideas on the nature of reality. This is what allows this model to more adequately explain *how* his characters experience and perceive the world.

In Pynchon's world of control, cognitive freedom might be the only freedom left for the individual. In the face of a world that grows all the more difficult to make sense of, with its ever-increasing convolution of systems of meaning, what Pynchon portrays through his characters' experiences is a nondogmatic way to make direct experience more meaningful, through his novel way of using "the gift of sound and vision."

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