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"NOT WHO BUT *WHAT*: WHAT IS SHE?" Disembodied Quests for Utopia and Retrotopia from Mkrtich Armen's *Yerevan* (1931) to Thomas Pynchon's *V.* (1963)

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The paper engages two works of the 20th century in a cross-temporal dialogue: the novel *Yerevan* (1931), written 14 years after the October Revolution by the Soviet-Armenian writer Mkrtich Armen, and the novel *V.* (1963), written three decade and one world war later by the US-American writer Thomas Pynchon. At first glance, the two works do not make for a likely pair – on the one hand, a milestone in modern North American literary history, and on the other hand a work from the former Soviet South, written in Armenian, banned upon publication and almost forgotten until its post-Soviet republication in 2016.

The paper connects these two works of 20th literature in a cross-temporal dialogue along the themes of utopia, retrotopia, and modernities in contest. In spite of their apparent difference in context and history of origin, it demonstrates that the plots of both Armen's and Pynchon's novels are structured around bafflingly similar disembodied quests that haunt their respective main protagonists. Set at the height of the Cold War and the anti-colonial struggle, Pynchon's V. stands as a placeholder for a form of Western modernity that brought humanity to the brink of self-extinction. Armen's Yerevan, on the other hand, refers to a distinctly different and more optimistic revolutionary horizon of expectation characteristic of the 1920s and early 1930s, when hopes for an emancipating, socialist form of modernity have not yet been obscured by the dread of Stalinism.

Read together (and against each other), the paper argues that the tragic-utopian quest for Asmar in the Soviet-Armenian 1930s and the ironic anti-anti-utopian quest for V. in the US-American 1960s construe a complex dialectical image of human progress and its inherent possibilities and pitfalls.

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Introduction: Famous or Forgotten

In 1906, Mkrtich Grigor Harutyunyan was born into the family of an Armenian craftsman in Alexandropol (nowadays Gyumri, Armenia) – an ethnically diverse and rapidly industrializing town situated in the Caucasus Viceroyalty at the southern fringes of the waning Romanov Empire (Melkonyan 1981).[1] A fervent supporter of the October Revolution, upon graduating from the Moscow State Institute of Cinematography, he worked as a teacher in the newly formed reading huts (*izba-chital'nia*) before moving to Yerevan, the nascent capital of the Soviet Armenian SSR. While initially working in the editorial offices of the journals *Literary Positions* (*Grakan dirk'erum*) and *Young Bolshevik* (*Yeritasard Bolshevik*), he shortly after adopted the pen name *Mkrtich Armen* and started to pursue his own career as a writer (Melkonyan 1981).

After the publication of several poems and a collection of short stories in 1928, he gained wider prominence with his short story "Zubeida" – geographically set in the environs of Yerevan's Blue Mosque. The work is followed two years later by his novella *On the Hilltop of the City* (*K'aghak'y bluri vra*). One year later in Moscow, at the age of 25, he hoped for a breakthrough with the publication of a first full-fledged novel: *Yerevan. A Saga* (Melkonyan 1981).[2] In the novel, Armen sought not only to make sense of the rapid and irrevocable urban transformations that had rocked the city since the advent of state socialism in Armenia; with his book, he also set out to engage his readers in an intensive debate on the Soviet experiment with urbanity and what it means to make yourself at home in modernity.

However, arousing the suspicion of Stalinist censors, who held that it "promotes local nationalism and encourages a turn towards the feudal East",[3] the work was banned after publication. Arrested on charges of anti-state activities, in 1937 Armen was exiled to Siberia together with several other Armenian intellectuals at the peak of the Great Purge.

Three decades and a world war later, a Cornell graduate and ex-Navy seaman embarked on his own literary quest to make sense of the societal realities of his time. Like Armen before him, the young writer was likewise drawn to understand and contest encounters with modernity from the urban metropolises of postwar America and Europe to the postcolonial geographies of the East Mediterranean and Africa. Making

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1 I extend my gratitude to Shushan Abrahamyan who greatly assisted me in making accessible Mkrtich Armen's Armenian language novel "Yerevan" to me as an Armenian non-native speaker as well as Alexander Popov, Sascha Pöhlmann and the two anonymous reviewers for providing valuable feedback towards completion of this manuscript. This article was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation—DFG), Grant number 462569707.

2 M.G. Melk'onyan, *Mkrtich' Armen : Kyank'n u steghtsagortsut'yuny* (Yerevan: Sovetakan Grogh, 1981).

3 *Khorhrdayin Hayastan*, 267 (1933), 1.

his living as a technical writer at Boeing in Seattle, he was writing his debut novel in the early 1960s. In 1963, at the age of 26, he published said novel, which bore as its name only the cryptic initial *V.*

The book was surprisingly well received and catapulted him into the literary public virtually overnight. George Plimpton, literary critic of the prominent *New York Times*, attested the aspiring writer "remarkable ability ... which includes a vigorous and imaginative style, a robust humor, a tremendous reservoir of information ... and, above all, a sense of how to use and balance these talents".[4] The author, about whom little was known save his name – Thomas Pynchon – was to become within a decade one of the towering greats of the nascent American postmodern novel. Celebrated as "one of the most influential novelists of our time,"[5] Pynchon's novel *V.* alongside other works such *as The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) have exerted an immeasurable influence on subsequent generations of authors within the US and abroad.

Rehabilitated after World War 2, upon his return to Soviet Yerevan, Armen would likewise resume his activities and gain wider prominence as the author of several novels and translator of works by writers such as Anton Chekhov, Aleksandr Fadeev, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Mikhail Sholokhov. In 1971, one year prior to his death, the 1935 novel *The Spring Heghnar* (*Heghnar aghbyur*), widely regarded by Soviet-Armenian literary critics as his magnum opus, was adapted as a film by Armen Manaryan. Yet, his debut novel *Yerevan* was never republished during his entire life-time. It is only in the year 2016 – over eight decades after its release in Moscow and subsequent ban by Soviet authorities – that the Yerevan-based publishing house Antares decided to republish his debut novel, thus making it for the first time effectively accessible to Armenian readers. But for lack of translations, the novel is as yet barely accessible to a global readership.

At first glance, the two works do not make for a likely pair – on the one hand, a milestone in modern North American literary history and, on the other hand, a work from the former Soviet South, banned upon publication and almost forgotten. Yet this essay will argue for the benefit of making up for this missed encounter by engaging Pynchon's fictitious worlds of meaning into a translocal and transtemporal dialogue with a writer from pre-WWII Soviet Armenia. I seek to show how both authors attempted to make sense of their experience with modernity – but from opposing epistemo-temporal positions—divided by an unbridgeable chasm created by the dread and devastation of Stalinism and World War II. While Stalinism marked the death of the communist dream, World War II signified the collapse of the liberal-cosmopolitan

[4] 'Pynchon At 80: A Postmodernist's Influence', *Long Island Weekly* (blog), 12 August 2017, https://longislandweekly.com/pynchon-80-postmodernists-influence/.

[5] 'Pynchon At 80'.

ideal. This fundamental divergence in their perspectives, I argue, reveals the complex dialectics of liberation and annihilation that not only informs the multilayered plots of both novels but lies at the foundation of our experience with modernity itself.

Quests for Retrotopia: "Temporal Homesickness" as a Leitmotif

Given their specific historical contexts and positionality in prevailing global power hierarchies, it comes as no surprise that a strong knowledge asymmetry persists with regard to scholarship produced on both works of art. Before the reissue of Mkrtich Armen's *Yerevan* in 2016, the novel was hardly read, let alone academically investigated. Sona Mnatsakanyan, a doctoral candidate at the Department of Slavonic Languages and Literatures of Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, appears to be the only researcher that currently engages explicitly with the work within the context of her ongoing research of Yerevan and its representation, albeit within the confines of modern Armenian literature.[6]

In contrast, few postmodernist works have elicited as much scholarly interest than the works of Pynchon, given their original narrative structure and rich texture of historical and intertextual references. At the height of scholarly reception of Pynchon's oeuvre in the 1980s and 1990s, *V.* was explored in the context of "European imperialism" (Cooley 1993), as a literary site that marks the "shift from modernism to postmodernism" (van Delden 1990, 117), or as an "impossible cognitive quest" (Rodríguez 1993) at the intersection of historical metafiction (Cassola 1985) and unfettered paranoia (Bersani 1989[7]).[8] Yet other researchers have turned to more specific aspects of the novel, such as the role of the second main protagonist Benny Profane in the overall plot (Begnal 1979) or the novel's portrayal of "decadent erotic relationships", which, as Lila V. Graves suggests, "mirror the decline of twentieth-century culture" (Graves 1982, 62).[9]

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[6] 'Mnatsakanyan, Sona', 13 August 2020, https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/friedrichschlegel/personen/Doktorand-innen/Mnatsakanyan/index.html.

[7] Leo Bersani, 'Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature', *Representations* 25 (1 January 1989): 99–118, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928469.

[8] A. Cassola (1985), 'Pynchon, V., and the Malta connection.', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 12(2), 311–331.
See e.g. Leo Bersani, 'Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature', *Representations* 25 (1 January 1989): 99–118, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928469; Rodríguez, Francisco Collado. 'History and Metafiction: V.'S Impossible Cognitive Quest', *Atlantis* 15, no. 1/2 (1993): 61–77. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41054707; Ronald W. Cooley, 'The Hothouse or the Street: Imperialism and Narrative in Pynchon's *V.*', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 39, no. 2 (1993): 307–25, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0354; Maarten Van Delden, 'Modernism, the New Criticism and Thomas Pynchon's "V"', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 23, no. 2 (1990): 117, https://doi.org/10.2307/1345734.

[9] See Michael H. Begnal, 'Thomas Pynchon's V.: In Defense of Benny Profane' *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 9, no. 2 (1979): 61–69. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30225661 and Lila V. Graves, 'Love and the Western World of Pynchon's "V."', *South Atlantic Review* 47, no. 1 (January 1982): 62, https://doi.org/10.2307/3199611.

More recent scholarship questioned the author's own identity in light of the "sensibility of postmodern whiteness" (Witzling 2006) and read the book as a case of "obsessional modernism" (Judy 2020) or as "an alternative to binary thinking" (Servain 2013, 41).[10] In addition to this, a few existing comparative studies have shed light on the "parallel themes of Franz Kafka and Thomas Pynchon" (Lattimer 1982) or the novel's resemblance with Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's *Don Quijote de la Mancha* (Holdsworth 1999) and Roberto Bolaño's 2666 (Vasilenko 2011).[11]

The point of departure for this paper is the tentative observation that, in spite of their obvious differences in context and history of origin, the plots of both Armen's and Pynchon's are structured around a bafflingly similar quest that haunts the respective main protagonists. In the case of Pynchon, it tells the story of Herbert Stencil, a troubled Englishman "obsessed with his historical passion" to "decipher his father's diary" (Zapf 2004[12], 355) in pursuit of what appears first like a mysterious woman that goes by the initial of *V.* In the case of Armen, the storyline unfolds around Arshak Budaghyan, a Soviet-Armenian architect obsessed with a self-imposed architectural mission to decipher the "Eastern" legacy of his native city, Yerevan, in pursuit of clues to a vanished woman by the name of Asmar.

Kenneth Kupsch, in his analytical essay "Finding V.", rightly observes that "[m]ost fictions organized around the idea of a quest-detective stories being among them-tend to resolve in one of three ways: the thing sought turns out to be (1) an object of some kind ... (2) a person ... or (3) a cabal of shadowy and manipulative people or institutions." (1998, 430).[13] At first glance, both novels appear to conform to the second category – given the fact that efforts to relocate a lost, mysterious female character – form the initial points of departure for both quests.

[10] See Ron S. Judy, 'Entropic Anxieties: Thomas Pynchon's *V* . And Obsessional Modernism', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 61, no. 5 (19 October 2020): 503–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1767027; David Witzling. 'The Sensibility of Postmodern Whiteness in V., or Thomas Pynchon's Identity Problem', *Contemporary Literature* 47, no. 3 (2006): 381–414. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4489167; Cyril Servain, 'Noise and Parasitism in Thomas Pynchon's V', in *Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd and Gilles Chamerois (Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2013), 147–71, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pulm.13993.

[11] Carole A. Holdsworth, 'Dulcinea and Pynchon's V', 1999, https://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/dulcinea-and-pynchons-v/; Lattimer, Lois J. "Parallel themes of Franz Kafka and Thomas Pynchon", Master thesis submitted submitted to the Faculty of the College of Humanities, Florida Atlantic University (1982); Andrei Vasilenko, 'Apocalyptic Quest in Thomas Pynchon's *V*. and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*', *Pynchon Notes* 0, no. 0 (22 September 2011), https://doi.org/10.16995/pn.2.

[12] Hubert Zapf: Postmodernismus (60er und 70er Jahre) – Thomas Pynchon. In: Hubert Zapf u. a.: Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte. Metzler Verlag, 2. akt. Auflage, Stuttgart und Weimar 2004, ISBN 3-476-02036-3, S. 354–358, hier S. 355.

[13] Kenneth Kupsch, 'Finding V.', *Twentieth Century Literature* 44, no. 4 (1998): 428, https://doi.org/10.2307/441592.

While initially appearing like the stereotypical narrative of a lover in pursuit of his lost love, both quests soon transcend these simplistic plot structures. Instead, they come to serve as a multi-layered web of allegories and (dis-)embodiments – which the readers are expected to decipher as the endpoints of their own crisis-ridden present marked by an onslaught of forces – broadly understood as Western modernization – that are to irrevocably alter the material and immaterial landscape of the world.

In light of this, I approach the works primarily as historical-sociological testimonies that bear witness to profound social upheavals and transformations that have shaped the authors' perception of their contemporary realities during the time of creation. In particular, the focus here lies on examining how both authors experience, contest and, ultimately, make themselves at home in modernity, together constructing a shared, complex retrotopian horizon that spans stark historico-temporal and geo-political divides—from the post-revolutionary Armenia of the 1930s to postwar America of the 1960s.

While initially the quests in both *V.* and *Yerevan* appear to be animated by a similar nostalgia for an enchanted, pre-modern past, as the plots unfold, V. and Asmar come to occupy substantially different positionalities within the authors' webs of meaning. In the latter case, Asmar is portrayed as the unequivocal antagonist to Western-style modernity. As an effaceable residue of the Old World, she resists any alterations brought about by modernity. In contrast to this, as the story progresses, V. herself becomes appropriated, corrupted and consumed by the New World, serving as corporeal canvas where modernity's eerie theater of destruction is played out.

Without doubt, a guiding leitmotif in both novels is that of *retrotopia*, a concept proposed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in his eponymous work (2017).[14] Bauman understands retrotopia in the sense of a yearning for a romanticized past in the face of the uncertainties and discontents of modernity. In an interview given to the media platform *spiked online* in 2016, one year prior to his death, Bauman underscored the structural similarity between the phenomena of utopia and retrotopia:

> In both cases, the floodlights of attention are focused on some aspects of, to quote Leopold von Ranke, *wie es ist eigentlich gewesen* [how it actually was] but in a dense shadow. This allows both to be ideal (imagined) territories on which to locate the (imagined) ideal state of affairs, or at least a corrected version of the present state of affairs. (Bauman 2016)[15]

[14] Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia*, trans. Frank Jakubzik, Erste Auflage, Sonderdruck, Deutsche Erstausgabe, edition suhrkamp Sonderdruck (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017).

[15] Zygmunt Bauman, "Living Towards the Past", *spiked online*, 2016-12-30, https://www.spiked-online.com/2016/12/30/living-towards-the-past/.

However, what distinguishes retrotopia from utopia is, according to Bauman, that trust in the future gives way to fundamental mistrust, casting a shadow in retrospective direction from a dystopian vision of the future towards a present-in-crisis. Bauman, himself a Jewish Holocaust survivor from Poland, asserted that "retrotopia", first and foremost, "derives its attraction … from the 'never again' sense", arguing that the "centrality of the Holocaust to contemporary political and historical discourse … testifies to the collapse of confidence in the future's ability to raise moral standards" (Bauman 2016). Thus, the retrotopian subject is characterized by a tendency to discard visions of a better future in favor of "living towards the past" (Bauman 2016).

While Bauman ties this "imagination fatigue" to the traumatic events of "Auschwitz, Kolyma and Hiroshima", his fellow sociologist Hartmut Rosa reveals inexorable social acceleration as the persistent symptom of life under neoliberal capitalism (Rosa 2015) as being at the core of this affective turn away from what has become an overwhelming and overburdening present.[16] Rosa's idea of alienation through acceleration is maybe expressed most eloquently and succinctly by Pynchon himself, who in his novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) composes the lyrical image of a "lateness and absence that fill a great railway shed after the capital has been evacuated" with "no time-traveling capsule to find your way back to" (Pynchon 1973, 303).[17]

The disposition of Benny Profane, the second main protagonist of Pynchon's *V.*, appears not only to reflect but literally embody this retrotopian sense of lateness. He is introduced to the reader as a character who does not find his place in his age, suffering from a chronic "temporal homesickness for the decade [he was] born in", who witnesses with dismay how he fails to catch up with a "city that would not exist after two weeks more at the most" (Pynchon 1995, 148). Within weeks he would see himself being superseded and dislocated by "people in new suits, millions of inanimate objects being produced brand-new every week, new cars in the streets, houses going up by the thousands all over the suburbs he had left months ago" (Pynchon 1995, 148) – effectively nullifying the value of his own individuality. At another point, the musings of the dentist Dr. Eigenvalue suggests furthermore a direct correlation between the acceleration of social life, a retrotopian sense of nostalgia and the state of "being lost to any sense of a continuous tradition" (Pynchon 1995, 155) – such a view is characteristic for what the urban geographer David Harvey diagnosed as the condition of postmodernity (Harvey 1989):

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[16] Hartmut Rosa and Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Paperback ed, New Directions for Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[17] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking Press, 1973).

> Perhaps history this century ... [is] ... compartmented off into sinuous cycles each of which come to assume greater importance than the weave itself and destroy any continuity. Thus it is that we are charmed by the funny-looking automobiles of the '30's, the curious fashions of the '20's, the peculiar moral habits of our grandparents. We produce and attend musical comedies about them and are conned into a false memory, a phony nostalgia about what they were. (Pynchon 1995, 155)

However, rather unexpectedly for a novel written in the wake of the revolution, the leitmotif of retrotopia also informs the affective tuning of Armen's *Yerevan*. Even amidst the fervor for progress as an essential part of socialist world-making, we can detect in Armen's writing an unexpected yearning for past-time temporalities and their socio-cultural lore. This yearning manifests itself in different ways, from a fascination with bygone empires – in particular the Qajar Persian Empire – to a desire to preserve the vernacular architecture of his own childhood environment. Witnessing the rapid and profound changes have been altering the cityscape of Yerevan at the time of writing, Armen conjures up the retrotopian counter-image of an immutable, romanticized "Old Yerevan" (*Hin Yerevan*) that shimmers to life before the imaginary eye of the reader (Armen 2021).[18]

Armen's novel opens with its protagonist, a young and passionate architect by the name of Arshak Budahgyan, who is dispatched to the city to build new Soviet Yerevan. However, shortly after his arrival, he becomes afflicted by a yearning for the old, Persian-era city, which gradually vanishes before his very eyes. The pre-revolutionary urban space is introduced to the reader as a gradually vanishing cityscape replete with the socio-architectural remains of the Islamo-Persianate world – *chaikhanas*, *hamams*, open-air bazaars feature prominently in his illustrative descriptions that paint a vivid picture of a largely medieval city – its cohesion yet unbroken by the onslaught of Tsarist imperialism and the advent of Western modernity.

In harmony with the surrounding vineyards, the city of the old world is framed as an ontological wholeness, "a complete image [*amboghjakan mi patker*] bathed in bright sunlight, framed by a thick green ring" and animated by an "age-old mystery" (*daravor mi khorhrdavorut'yun*) that engulfs the urban space (4):

> Beneath, sprawling wide and open, Yerevan stretched out before them. From the hill's vantage point, the city lay bathed in the golden sun and surrounded by verdant trees ... A gentle breeze rustled along the riverbanks, causing trees to whisper softly

[18] Mkrtich Armen, *Yerevan* (Yerevan: Antares, 2021).

> all around. In various gardens, the sounds of flowing water could be heard, creating a soothing ambiance. Mounds covered in lush greenery, shaded by fruit trees, presented an inviting sight. From one of the gardens wafted the melodic strumming of a tar, while from another park, hidden from view, came the laughter of women … Sarah walked along in her white dress, immersed in that translucent greenery, resembling an innocent and joyful bride. (Armen 2021, 227)

Genealogically, the idea of the vanishing old world is a recurrent theme in Armen's works and can be traced back to his earliest writings. Published in 1926, his short story "The Red Square" (*garmir karrakusin*) revolves around the life in a vernacular district of *Getar-Chai* along the shores of Getar River. Its predominantly Muslim-Turkic inhabitants chance upon cryptic "cross-shaped signs" (*khach'adzev nshanner*) left at the walls of their homes by "[s]omeone in a hurry" who had "drawn these marks with a rough brush" (Armen 1926, 59).[19]

The main character of that story, a Muslim girl by the name of Zaira, comes to understand that the signs mark the buildings that are to be demolished as part of a wide-ranging programme of urban transformation. While her strict father, a Turkish bricklayer, enjoys playing backgammon in a neighbouring *chaikhana*, she rids herself of her hijab and sneaks away with another girl, Fatma, to the city centre. Changing the "sad and unbearable stream" (*tkhur u antaneli arrvak*) of her suburban home by the river for the "glimmers of electric lights" (*elektrakan luyseri shoghk'ery*) in downtown Yerevan, she catches a glimpse of the new urban development plan (61):

> Do you see the picture on the wall? That is *New Yerevan*. And that *red square*, that is a large building to be constructed in your Neighborhood, in the place of your home (*dzer T'aghum, dzer tan teghum*). (my emphasis; Armen 1926, 62)

To the reader's astonishment, Zaira is hardly moved by this. Being regularly exposed to men stalking her in the narrow and dark alleyways of *Getar-Chai* where "nothing can be seen on cloudy nights" (*amp gishernern ayntegh ch'i yerevum voch'inch'*), she longs for the freedom that the new world of a "wide, bright and stone-built Yerevan" promises to her (61). The story ends with Zaira smiling at the thought of the new city as she overlooks the shores of Getar River at night: "[T]he frogs sang their swamp song again, but Zaira felt that they were singing for the last time, with a deathly shudder (*mahamot mi sarsurrov*)" (Armen 1926, 63). While in the short story, the "deathly shudder" is reserved to modernity's other – the frogs of a premodern, animalistic world – in the

[19] Mrktich Armen, *Karmir K'arrakusin* (1926).

novel *Yerevan* it is the main protagonist, Arshak Budaghyan, himself who is engulfed with retrotopian melancholia.

His acute sense of "temporal homesickness" reaches a climax when he takes on the task of demolishing his own neighborhood in Yerevan-Nork. Torn between his utopian ambition to build the socialist city and nostalgic longing for the old, he decides to hold a party at his neighbor Gabo the night prior to the demolition, gathering all "enthusiasts of old Yerevan" for a symbolic city funeral. Soon after "[t]he resonant and rhythmic beats of the *daul*, the gentle ticking of the *daf*, the melodic tones of the *zurnas*, the gentle rustling of bells and tambourines, the deep chiming of cymbals and the long notes of the *kyamancha* intertwined seamlessly" in a mournful death march which "captivated everyone present" (Armen 2021, 141–42).

The four instruments mentioned – *tar*, a long-necked, waisted lute, *kamancheh*, a bowed string instrument*, zurna,* a woodwind instrument, and, *daul,* a percussion instrument – have all been in widespread usage across a vast Persianate geography from the Caucasus to Iran and Central Asia. This linkage to the city's Persian and Islamic legacy is further underscored by Armen's description of Old Yerevan as the "city of the sun" (*arevi k'aghak'*), which is a clear reference to the imperial emblems of both the Safavid and the Qajar Empire that exhibit the classical pre-Islamic Persian symbolism of lion and sun (*shir-o xorshid*). While the object of retrotopian longing is always already gone in Pynchon's post-war novel, the funeral scene in Armen's novel can be read, in contrast, as a performative genealogy of *becoming-bygone*, in which the all-encompassing process of devastation is reified in a narrative structure and thus made utterable.

But even after this symbolic funeral, at which the post-Persianate city is ultimately laid to rest, the main protagonist continues to be haunted by the retrotopian ambition to recreate what had been destroyed. Seeing in "every small house" the "fragment of a shattered dream" (*p'shrvats yerazi mi bekor*), he is driven by the idea to find and piece together those fragments in quest of reviving the old post-Persianate in the new post-revolutionary city – and thus reviving the spirit of Asmar (Armen 1921, 238).

Asmar and the Quest for Arevelk' ("the East")

In the opening chapter of Armen's book, *Asmar* (from Arabic *ismarra*, literally "tanned, dark-skinned") is introduced as the daughter of an affluent Turkish tradesman who turned into a widow after the untimely death of her husband. Residing alone in a luxurious and richly decorated Oriental house in the multi-ethnic district of Nork at the outskirts of Yerevan, frequent nightly visits by an amorphous group of people –

from Persian traders to old mollahs – suggest to the reader that she earns her living as a sex worker after the demise of her husband. Conforming to the mythical image of Pynchon's V. as Venus (Kupsch 1998), Asmar is likewise described as a strong and sexually potent woman who takes the protagonist's virginity and leaves him craving love and affection. Heartbroken, he ultimately leaves Yerevan to pursue his studies in Soviet Russia.

Plotted as a wealthy widow older than the protagonist, Asmar's life trajectory inevitably evokes another resemblance with the historical person of Khadijah bint Khuwaylid, a successful businesswoman, widow to two, and first wife to the prophet Muhammad. In view of this, the constellation of the main protagonist's relationship with Asmar already hints at the role he is to assume as the story unfolds – namely, that of a savior, albeit a secular one.

After championing his academic and occupational tribulations in Moscow and Leningrad, the aspiring young architect is called back to his original point of departure – Yerevan – and tasked with co-planning the new socialist city. Shortly after his arrival he is overcome by pangs of nostalgia, and "the subconscious hidden in his legs" (*yent'agitakts'ut'yuny t'ak'nvats ir vot'neri*) prompts him to seek out Asmar again in the suburban maze of the suburban district of Nork (Armen 2021, 23). However, to his dismay, in lieu of Asmar's former house he encounters a dilapidated ruinscape without any trace of her – prompting him to conclude that she could have perished in his absence.

The realization of her likely death forms the crucial turning point here. Instead of giving in to his sorrow about the loss of Asmar, the main protagonist instead sublimates his grief. By doing this, he unleashes a force within himself that will, from then on, drive his entire architectural endeavor and inscribe itself into his vision for a future city:

> But who is that Asmar of which he is dreaming of, Budaghyan thought, is she that woman, the first woman of his life? No, this Asmar is an idea that he is trying to implement. The idea of the New East [*Nor arevelk'i gaghap'ary*] (Armen 2021, 183)

It is only through this act of sublimation that Asmar is *disembodied*, stripped of her material existence, and thus able to serve as a free, variable reference point both for the legacy of the "old city" (*hin k'aghak'y*) and the utopia of a "New East" (*nor arevelk'*) alike. From this point onwards, the quest for Asmar metamorphoses for Arshak Budaghyan from the search for a physical person to a mission to revive her disembodied and immaterial legacy.

There are several indications that Arshak Budaghyan's quest for Asmar is here modeled on a secularized version of the *suluk* – a form of spiritual wayfaring or traveling in Sufi Islam by which the traveler (*salik*) returns to the source of his existence. A dream sequence in the second half of the book illustrates this best, when the main protagonist proclaims: "I am your new poet [*shahiry*], ashugh, dervish" (Armen 2021, 114). Read in this vein, his journeying through Soviet Russia can be understood in retrospect as an inner, intellectual travel by which he obtained knowledge in the field of architecture and urban planning that would allow him not only to hold on to Asmar in the form of his abstract vision of a "New East", but to bring her back "materially" as a memory reified through the creation of his future architectural works.

According to the architect, through the construction of an internationalist commune house named "East", the post-Persianate remains of multi-ethnic Yerevan as personified by Asmar are to shine again – albeit this time in the splendor of socialist internationalist solidarity. Remembering his colleagues from Uzbekistan and Georgia, whom he had befriended during his time in Moscow, Arshak Budaghyan is determined to gather all "under the banner of Asmar, around the idea of the Soviet East" (Armen 2021, 183). Asmar at this point clearly assumes the role of the savior that is expected to reunite a divided and embattled geography around the shared idea of communism: "Oh, if Asmar comes, she will bring [along with her] all the architects of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan" (Armen 2021, 183).

Disembodied from the physical person, this imaginary form of Asmar as an internationalist-socialist redemptive figure bears further resemblance with Walter Benjamin's conceptualization of the *Urbild* or ur-image. Benjamin's utilization of this notion is hardly surprising given the fact that it constitutes a key term of the Baroque – which he had studied in depth in his early work on *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin 1928).[20] A century before Herder and Kant made the term the subject of their philosophical debate, it was the German polymath and writer of Christian hymns, Erasmus Francisci (1627 – 1694), who had elaborated on the notion of the *Urbild* in his *Lusthaus of the Upper and Under World* (1676).[21] One of the most widely read authors of his time – works like his *Infernal Proteus* served Goethe as a source for his *Faust* – he can be credited for coining or at least popularizing the term.

Drawing from Plato's theory of forms, Francisci argues: "God created before the visible world and formed it afterwards: which is why they also call it mundum

[20] Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, 13. Auflage, Suhrkamp-Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 225 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2018).

[21] Erasmus Francisci, *Das Eröffnete Lust-Haus Der Ober- Und Nieder-Welt*, 1. Auflage (Nürnberg: Endter, 1676).

archetypum, the ur-image of the world [*das Ur-Bild der Welt*].” (Francisci 1676, 45) In the following he further distinguishes this *mundum archetypum* from the physically existing world:

> Among the four major worlds, the ur-world [*die Ur-Welt*] or primeval world-pattern [*das urſtåndige Welt-Muſter*] precedes all. It is likewise called the world of the intellect [*Intellectual-Welt*] or the world of the spirit and the mind [*die Welt im Geiſt und im Verſtande*]; likewise called the world of the causes of all causes [*imgleichen die Welt der Urſachen aller Urſachen genennt*]: once it is the fullness all shapes or patterns ... The followers of Platon call it ideam, which is an eternal specimen or pattern of all things ... the ideal or archetypal world is referred to as a pattern in so far as it is opposed to the sensory or visible world [*der ſinn- oder ſichtbarlichen Welt*]. (Francisci 1676, 84)

Yet whereas Francisci’s ur-image is permeated by a divine “primeval world-pattern” (*das urſtåndige Welt-Muſter*) which “precedes all”, Benjamin’s ur-image is informed by a distinctly secular utopia. It is the image of a pre-agricultural hunter-gatherer society based on egalitarian social relations and common ownership – that is, it mirrors the ur-image of primitive communism that served Marx and Engels as the fundamental axiom for their theory on the historical genesis of capitalism. In a fragmented note of his *Passagenwerk* that opens with a quote by Jules Michelet - »Chaque époque rêve La suivante« (“Every epoch dreams of the one that follows”) – Benjamin argues that the “dreaming collective” (*das träumende Kollektiv*) of modern society, in the act of anticipating its own possible futures, encounters suddenly flashing images of its own repressed, pre-capitalist ur-history:

> In the dream, in which each epoch is represented by images of the one that follows it, the last one appears fused with elements of ur-history [*vermählt mit Elementen der Urgeschichte*], that is, of a classless society. Their experiences, which have their depository in the unconscious of the collective, generate, in interpenetration with the new, the utopia that has left its trace in a thousand configurations of life, from the permanent buildings to the fleeting fashions [*von den dauernden Bauten bis zu den flüchtigen Moden*]. (Benjamin 1982,1226)[22]

[22] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 5 Teil 2: Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 9. Auflage, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft, 935,1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2020).

Yet, Susan Buck-Morss's elaborate study of Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* (1927–1940) cautions that this does not mean that past myths themselves may serve as blueprints for an anticipated future. Instead, ur-images in Benjamin's writings rather occupy the position of dream symbols, and as such "[they provide the *motivation for future emancipation, which will not be literally a restoration of the past*, but will be based on new forms" (Buck-Morrs 1989, 117; emphasis by the author). It is in precisely the same way that Armen plots Asmar as the ur-image of Eastern Yerevan.[23]

As a mobilizing force for future emancipation she drives the protagonist not simply to restore a retrotopian image of the pre-Soviet past. Rather, she encourages him to transcend the arresting image of what he perceives to be a Western-centric present in favor of another future urbanity that sublates the city's past. And in a distinctly Hegelian sense of the word *Aufhebung* – which translates as both "abolition" and "lifting-up" – this sublation entails inevitably both an abolition, a fundamental break with the old city and likewise, a preservation and lifting up of this city to what the post-revolutionary novel cherishes as a higher level of development.[24]

Finally, Asmar is the light that guides the main protagonist of Armen's novel out of the obscurity of Western-style modernization towards the horizon of an alternative modernity – that of the Soviet East, where the trauma of loss promises to be dissolved in the newfound future.

V. and the Quest for the Void of Venus

Akin to Arshak's quest for Asmar, the quest for V. likewise starts with a traumatic loss. We learn about Herbert Stencil, one of the two main protagonists, that he was born in 1901 and that he was – just like the protagonist of Armen's novel – raised without a mother. No further information on his mother's departure from life is provided throughout the novel:

> No facts on the mother's disappearance. Died in childbirth, ran off with someone, committed suicide: some way of vanishing painful enough to keep Sidney [Herbert's father] from ever referring to it in all the correspondence his son which is available. (Pynchon 1995, 52)

[23] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, 8. print (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

[24] Just like in Jung's conceptualization of the term, the ur-image is put to work by the main protagonist in face of his "dis-satisfaction with the present [der Unbefriedigung der Gegenwart] … to compensate … for the monotony of the zeitgeist [*Einseitigkeit des Zeitgeistes*]", see C. G. Jung and C. G. Jung, *Seelenprobleme der Gegenwart*, 9. Aufl., 3. Aufl. innerhalb der Studienausg, Studienausgabe bei Walter / C. G. Jung (Olten: Walter, 1974), 71.

Just as in the case of Armen's Asmar, the reader is first tempted to believe that the story would unfold as a traumatic quest for the vanished woman, wife to Sidney and mother to Herbert. However, Sidney's diary entry from Florence, dated April 1899, two years before Victoria's death, contradicts this reading: "There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. *Not who, but what: what is she*" (emphasis by the author, Pynchon 1995, 53).

The entry shows not only that the search for V. precedes Victoria's death, but also that the quest for V. transcends the simple plot structure of one person's search for another. The latter is also further reinforced by the fact that Pynchon refers to both Sidney and Herbert interchangeably by their family name "Stencil" – which further reinforces the idea that both are merely generic templates, identical stencils without any significant characteristics. This is strikingly similar to Armen's protagonist, who shares his first name "Arshak" likewise with both his brother, a heavy drinker and occupational failure, and his paternal grandfather.

Yet while Armen's protagonist feels chosen to pursue his quest, Herbert Stencil appears to be painfully aware of his own replaceability in his, describing himself as "quite purely He Who Looks for V." while recognizing that "she was no more his own identity than Eigenvalue the soul-dentist or any other member of the Crew" (Pynchon 1995, 226). Accordingly, neither Herbert nor Sidney appear to be specifically eligible or chosen to search for V. Instead, it is the search itself – in its disembodied pure form of a harrowing lack – which imposes itself on them not as a "scholarly quest … and adventure of the mind, in the tradition of the Golden Bough or the White Goddess" but as a haunting obsession reminiscent of a pursuit for a "beast of venery … chased like an obsolete, or bizarre, or forbidden form of sexual delight" (Pynchon 1995, 61).

While in the case of Asmar an actually existing physical person expires and transforms into a mobilizing idea – that of the "New East" – V. appears first as the symptom of an obsession without any clear-cut object that reifies itself in the world of those who seek to hunt her down. Appearing in various impersonations (Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, the Bad Priest) and reifications (Vheissu, the *Birth Of Venus*, Victory) throughout the novel, V. remains forever broken and fragmented along diverging spatio-temporal lines. As the elusive trace of what appears initially like an unknown agent, V. flares up at historical moments of crisis only to vanish again into the fabric of time.

Given this inherently amorphous character, V. appears to be irreducible to any common denominator save a certain vague sense of femininity. This has prompted some critics of the novel to question or even reject the significance of the quest for

V., suggesting that Pynchon merely sought to mock and mislead readers in a carefully constructed hall of mirrors that is devoid of inherent meaning. In this context, some critics see the quest as a pathological behavior, a form of "obsessional modernism" that afflicts the main protagonist (Judy 2020), while others tend to reduce it to that of an "impossible cognitive quest" (Rodriguez 1993, 61). Instead, siding with Kenneth Kupsch's reading of the novel, I hold that the quest for V. – while evading conventional plot structures – is inherently meaningful:

> Stencil continues his quest at the novel's end, not because he is some quaintly obsessed madman who simply refuses to accept the idea of the unanswerable, but rather because knowing that answer has given his quest all the more meaning and importance, and has given all future evidence its proper place in the overall architectural scheme. (Kupsch 1998, 429)

Kupsch further suggests that the quest for V. corresponds to a quest for Venus – and its cognates Aphrodite and Ishtar – as the mythical ur-image of power. Accordingly, he proposes to define V. overtly in terms of her *positive* content. While I agree that the mythical character of Venus might be indeed key to making sense of V. – further underscored by the prominent place which the theft of Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* occupies in the overall plot structure – I contend that V. cannot be exhausted by her positive content. Tying in with a contemporary of Pynchon, Jacques Lacan, and his *manque à être* as the lack of being around which desire is structured, I hold that V. must be understood first and foremost with regard to her defining *negative* content, that is, her lack. Accordingly, V. is less a contemporary and corrupted incarnation of Venus but a placeholder for the void left behind by Venus – the mythical symbol of natural power and fertility – in the age of unprecedented technological advancement. As the result of a retroactive causation, this disembodied lack makes the primordial image of animated life itself appear as always already incomplete:

> Mothers ... perpetrate a fictional mystery about motherhood. It's only a way of compensating for an inability to live with the truth. Truth being that they do not understand what is going on inside them; that it is a mechanical and alien growth which at some point acquires a soul. They are possessed. Or: the same forces which dictate the bomb's trajectory, the deaths of stars, the wind and the waterspout have focused somewhere inside the pelvic frontiers without their consent, to generate one more mighty accident. It frightens them to death. It would frighten anyone. (Pynchon 1995, 321–22)

As a variable in an equation, V. no longer represents the ascent to the animate – Venus as the symbol of creation – but the descent from the animate into the inanimate. As the inverse of Venus, V. comes to embody the mechanical forces of annihilation, a theme more aptly explored at the example of military rocket technology in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Understood as a function of decadence, V. resembles a parable whose end point is total non-humanity: humankind's self-extinction. As an empty signifier, V. occupies the nexus of the story-plot in the form of an irreducible void that mirrors the disembodied wound torn open in the socio-cultural fabric by the horrors of the twentieth century. And it is precisely the force unleashed by this ineffaceable void that pulls in the novel's characters, informing their motives for action and animating Stencil's hunt for V.

Even though Pynchon never exposes the nature of V. definitively and explicitly in terms of a classic resolution of the conflict at the end of the novel, he nevertheless plants numerous clues and hints which readers will want to piece together in an effort to construe a strikingly complex, yet likewise, fairly coherent picture of V. In light of the fluidity characteristic of postmodernist literature, which also includes the dissolution of the traditional boundary between main plot and subplots, it comes as no surprise that it is an otherwise fairly insignificant character by the name of M. Itague, introduced as one of the owners of a cabaret on the rue Germaine Pilon, who offers perhaps the most succinct expression of the novel's central idea:

> A decadence … is a falling-away from what is human, and the further we fall the less human we become. Because we are less human, we foist off the humanity we have lost on inanimate objects and abstract theories. (Pynchon 1995, 405)

Constituting the central theme of the novel, this leitmotif is reiterated almost verbatim in Fausto's confessions: "Decadence, decadence. What is it? Only a clear movement toward death, or, preferably, non-humanity" (Pynchon 1995, 321). In this world of non-humanity governed no longer by the purported agency of a transcendental force but, instead, by inanimate probabilities and accidents man is reduced to being no more than an "inconsequential shadow" (Pynchon 1995, 324): "[t]here is more accident to [life] than a man can ever admit to in a lifetime and stay sane" (Pynchon 1995, 320–21).

In an effort to grapple with this unbearable truth, humans make themselves believe "that machines, dwellings, streets and weather share the same human motives, personal traits and fits of contrariness as they" (326). Yet, by doing so, they effectively deny the radical alterity and non-humanity of V.'s world. And it is precisely this denial that lies at the heart of a Western-culture-gone-global as an irreducible void which the quest plot wants to uncover. Accordingly, what initially appeared as a pathological-obsessive

quest fueled by the paranoid belief in a clandestine world conspiracy suddenly appears in an entirely different light. At the end point of the quest stands the radical momentum of an existential self-recognition: While the main protagonist of Armen's novel can cling to the post-revolutionary blueprint of a society on its way to socialism, the protagonists in Pynchon's novel are left "alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are" (Pynchon 1995, 326), and their only hope for humanity lies in convincing themselves again, first and foremost, of their own humanity.

Understanding this to be the fundamental meaning of V., the entire plot of the novel reads, in retrospect, as a masterfully wrought reification of this quasi-anarchist idea. Throughout the novel, the second protagonist, Benny Profane, a discharged U.S. Navy sailor and self-proclaimed *schlemihl* (Yiddish for an awkward or unlucky person) devoid of any ambition, is haunted by a paranoid fear of being killed or replaced by inanimate objects (24). He feels confirmed in his fear when he catches his on-again, off-again girlfriend, Rachel Owlglass, getting intimate with her car during a nightly car wash and fondling the gearshift. In a world of "machines more complex than men" (Pynchon 1995, 322) inanimate items do not only constitute fetishized objects of desire – instead, they may also fuse with the animate.[25]

And indeed, by the story's end, V. herself becomes a ghastly cybernetic organism. During World War II, children on Malta discover her half-human, half-automaton body, dismantling it until they notice her artificial glass eye, whose intricate clock mechanism eerily resembles the core of the Nazi *Vergeltungswaffe 1* rocket (Kupsch 1998, 438). The descent into the inanimate constitutes the leitmotif of the novel and manifests itself here in different societal phenomena and realities that characterize modernity – from capitalism and its commodity fetish to the objectification of female bodies and colonialism (Pynchon 1995, 214–221).

Written in the wake of anti-colonial struggles, the novel in particular links colonial rule to the rise of the inanimate. The fifth chapter, set in colonial Egypt post-Fashoda Crisis (1898), exemplifies this theme. Egypt—ironically dubbed "Baedeker land" after the famed travel guide—appears both as an exoticized fantasy and a site of political unrest. In this tourism-ridden colony, mutual dehumanization prevails:

[25] For example, Fergus Mixolydian, an "Irish Armenian Jew and universal man" who "laid claim to being the laziest living being in Nueva York … devised an ingenious sleep-switch, receiving its signal from two electrodes placed on the inner skin of his forearm" effectively becoming an extension of his own TV set (Pynchon 1995, 56). In a similar vein, Eric Bongo-Shaftsbury, a fellow traveler and Victoria's lover in Cairo during the Fashoda incident, reveals himself as an "electro-mechanical doll" by exposing a miniature electric switch beneath his arm, with silver wires sewn into his flesh running to his brain (Pynchon 1995, 80).

to Western travelers, local workers—“waiters, porters, cabmen, clerks”—blend into the landscape as mere automata (Pynchon 1995, 70), echoing Marxist critiques of capitalism. Permeating all spheres of human interaction, colonialism and capitalism reveal themselves here as the principal forces of Western modernity that underpin the hegemony of the inanimate – that is the reign of V.

Retrotopia Reified? From Asmar to the Commune House *Arevelk* / From V. to the Antarctic Expedition to *Vheissu*

As evidenced by his characterization of V., Pynchon appears to read humanity’s experience with modernity as singular, all-encompassing, and inescapable. In contrast to this idea – which is grounded in the experience with capitalist consumption culture of post-war America – Armen’s novel suggests a profound schism in this prism, the existence of two antagonistic and irreconcilable forms of modernity – the Capitalist *Arevmudk’* (“West”) on the one hand and the Soviet *Arevelk’* (“East”) on the other hand, which appear to be caught in the period leading up to World War 2 in a relentless struggle for hegemony.

Furthermore, for Pynchon the animacy of the pre-modern is condemned to irrevocable effacement by the “inanimating” forces of modernity. In Armen’s work, in contrast, it is the forces of modernity themselves that may be put to work to revive the legacy of the pre-modern – in its emancipated form – in the form of a nascent, socialist “New East” (*nor arevelk’*). In the second part of Armen’s novel this retrotopia comes to materially reify itself when Arshak Budaghyan is commissioned to construct his own commune house “East” (*arevelk*’) – in fierce competition with another, Western-style commune house project by his adversary Gurgen Parsadanyan. Resonating Western hubris, Parsadanyan’s counter project bears the name of “Victory” (*haght’anak*), which, in an interesting twist of intertextual irony, is offered also one of the possible meanings of V. in Pynchon’s novel by Margravine di Chiave Lowenstein, a friend of Stencil, in one of the opening scenes on the west coast of Majorca (Armen 2021, 238).

Informed by antagonistic imaginations of the city’s future, the competition between the two architects reveals the deep fault lines that characterized the early Soviet modernity project. In a shattered zone of past-ridden retrotopias and future-anticipating utopias, both architects seek to reify their respective visions of the city in the material landscape of the nascent Soviet-Armenian capital. Accounts of numerous heated arguments between the two mutually antagonistic architects manifest how irreconcilable their urban utopias are. Parsadyan expresses open disdain for Budaghyan and his attempt to architecturally rehabilitate what he perceives as the “East”:

> But isn’t it as clear as the sun that I am excited by the last word in architecture, the civilized West [*k’aghak’akrt’vats arevmutk’its’*], and you by the backward East [*heta-mnats’ arevelk’its’*] ... (Armen 2021, 124)

To this, Budaghyan counters that it was the West that has appropriated the traditions of the east for centuries. Left without any prospect of settling their argument, both architects come to realize that the only thing they agree on is their commitment to demolish the “provincial dwarf-like city streets and buildings” – the lingering legacy of imperialism which persists as a “paw of Tsarism” (*Ts’arizmi t’at’y,* Armen 2021, 131) at the very heart of Yerevan.

Ultimately, Budaghyan’s retrotopian quest for the “New East” (*Nor Arevelk’*) is not solely the struggle for a particular architectural style or a way of coming to terms with the loss of Asmar. In a cryptic dream sequence, his opponent Parsadyan appears in front of him and – upon declaring his own defeat – sides with Budaghyan’s emancipatory project of rehabilitating an “oppressed” colonial-ridden geography:

> And why, finally, now we don’t improve our tar and kamancheh, our daul-zurna, which were oppressed by the European rulers and their instruments for centuries and didn’t have a chance to grow and progress... why should we imitate the piano and the violin, when we can give mankind other instruments as loud as the piano, equal to the violin... Arshak Budaghyan, you were right, we have to break our Columbus egg... (Armen 2021, 205)

In stark contrast to a dominant trend to model the Soviet pathway to modernity on the Western-capitalist and European experience, Budaghyan hints with his vision of a *New East* at the possibility of an alternative pathway to modernity, which does not abandon its inherited cultural lore (of which Asmar is its embodiment) but instead uses it as a point of departure towards a new and unprecedented socialist horizon.

However, the ensuing construction process turned out to be sobering. Limited production possibilities severely hampered the realization of his architectural vision. Visiting the construction site, he finds it increasingly hard to believe that the unremarkable building being constructed is the “East” he has been dreaming of. Worse still, apart from the two architects themselves, no outsider seems to be able to distinguish between his construction project.

The fundamental conceptual differences of the two antagonistic architects boil down to “cabinets resembling cigarette boxes with a matchbox on top” for Parsadanyan and “cabinets resembling mosque entrances with an arched door and a painted brick color” (Armen 2021, 260) for Budaghyan. In the closing section of the book, the failed

architect notes with resignation: "The idea was defeated. Shems [is] lost, the East [is] lost" (Armen 2021, 265).[26]

Akin to the commune house "East" as the material reification of Asmar and the ideal of the Eastern city she embodies, Pynchon also hints at the existence of a physical site that may serve as the endpoint for his main protagonist's retrotopian quest: Vheissu, whose the initial likewise suggests a possible link to V. In an ironically-stylized dialogue rife with Orientalist exoticism, a Western explorer by the name of Hugh Godolphin confides to Victoria (a possible impersonation of V.) the existence of a hidden land in the Antarctic:

> He started telling her about Vheissu. How it was reached, on camel-back over a vast tundra, past the dolmens and temples of dead cities; finally to the banks of a broad river which never sees the sun, so thickly roofed is it with foliage. The river is traveled in long teak boats which are carved like dragons and paddled by brown men whose language is unknown to all but themselves. In eight days' time there is a portage over a neck of treacherous swampland to a green lake, and across the lake rise the first foothills of the mountains which ring Vheissu. Native guides will only go a short distance into these mountains … Even in the Antarctic, huddling in hasty shelter from a winter storm, striking camp high on the shoulder of some as yet unnamed glacier, there would come to him hints of the perfume those people distill from the wings of black moths. Sometimes sentimental scraps of their music would seem to lace the wind; memories of their faded murals, depicting old battles and older love affairs among the gods, would appear without warning in the aurora. (Pynchon 1995, 168)

As the plot progresses, the promising utopia of Vheissu is debunked as an obsessive fantasy of the Western mind, as "private colonies of the imagination" that match conquests in the real geographies of "China, the Sudan, the East Indies" (Pynchon 1995, 158). This resonates with Alexander Popov's idea on the structural resemblance of the imperial project and the utopian operation, which both "[i]n their quest after totality … repeatedly come against … everything thrown off by the real, which prompt them to regroup our dream of their own destruction and/or impossibility" (Popov 2023, 17).[27] Read in this vein, the journey to Vheissu resembles a movement toward utopia and

[26] *Shems* can be read here in many ways as a cipher for the East. On the one hand it is, quite literally, the Arabic sun and thus a variation on the motif of the Persian city of the sun, or on the other hand it is an allusion to Shems-i Tabrizi, the mythical vagabond who served as an inspirational figure for the Persophone Islamic mystic Jalaladin Rumi. In any case, it must be noted that the quest for reaching the ultimate telos behind Asmar fails in its realization.

[27] Alexander Popov, *Zone Theory: Science Fiction and Utopia in the Space of Possible Worlds* (Lausanne and Oxford, UK: Peter Lang, 2023).

simultaneously away from it, a trip "from the utopian island, surrounded by walls and trenches, to the unassimilable Zone" (Popov 2023, 27). For when the explorer Hugh Godolphin ultimately reaches the site of Vheissu, it manifests itself not as an earthly paradise but as a "a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation" (Pynchon 1995, 206). It is not by failing to reach but precisely *by reaching* Vheissu that the sought-after utopia is debunked as an obsessive fantasy, an impossibility. Read together with a remark by the Gaucho that humans "are apes in a circus, mocking the ways of men" (Pynchon 1995, 210), this scene provokes the striking idea that what Godolphin encounters here are not, as one might assume, the idealized remnants of an exotic and untouched nature but, in fact, the frozen corpse of a decadent humanity itself. Writing his novel 32 years and "one world war" after Armen – when the world had already witnessed the rise of fascism and descent of communism into Stalinism – Pynchon evokes with *Vheissu* the ultimate allegory of a utopia-gone-bad, or *anti-utopia*.

A key dialogue scene between Godolphin and Vera Meroving – another of V.s impersonations – is exemplary of this. When Vera exclaims "This siege. It's Vheissu. It's finally happened", Godolphin rebukes her: "There's been a war, Fraulein. Vheissu was a luxury, an indulgence. We can no longer afford the likes of Vheissu." And when she protests – asking "[b]ut the need ... its void. What can fill that?" –Godolphin gives a sobering reply: "What is already filling it. The real thing ... Whether we like it or not that war destroyed a kind of privacy, perhaps the privacy of dream. Committed us ... to work out three-o'clock anxieties, excesses of character, political hallucinations on a live mass, a real human population ... our Vheissus are no longer our own, or even confined to a circle of friends; they're public property." (Pynchon 1995, 248)

However, this moment of recognition, as sobering as it must come to the reader, should not be thought of as a final triumph of anti-utopianism. Instead, it harbors within its own appearance a distinctly emancipatory and, maybe even, redemptive momentum. In a more optimistic reading of Pynchon's Vheissu plot, one may argue that the ironic deconstruction of utopia must not be understood as the endpoint of the utopian operation but, on the contrary, as the precondition for its resuscitation in the future. For the envisioned utopia gives way not to its negation – that would be dystopia – but to its own inherent negativity, the realm of the not-even-yet-imagined at its very core, the space that Popov, drawing on Frederic Jameson, describes in his book *Zone Theory. Science Fiction and Utopia in the Space of Possible Worlds* (2023) as *anti-anti-utopia*.[28]

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[28] I am indebted to Alexander Popov for this idea.

Popov argues that it is only once the imagining subject is freed from the narrow confines of past utopias and the catastrophes they brought about that a genuinely utopian form of thinking can emerge, "a form of forms capacious enough to house a permanently open multiplicity of beings" (Popov 2023, cover text). This of course ties in with Jameson's conceptualization of the utopian operation as a form of cognitive mapping, a mental quest whose very impossibility of fulfillment becomes the driving force behind its perpetual continuation. Jameson's attempt at approximating the conceptual horizon of the yet-unimaginable (Jameson 1990) further connects to a longer tradition of Marxist utopian thinking enunciated maybe most eloquently in Ernst Bloch's idea of a "forward-dawning futurity" (*Dämmerung nach vorn*), which sheds light on the present from a multitude of possible futures that dwell in the twilight of pre-imagination (Bloch 1961).

In line with this, the supposed tragedy of Vheissu, the failure to find a distorted utopia, reveals itself not as bleak dystopia but, on the contrary, as the necessary precondition for any true utopian operation, whose iconoclastic starting point always rests in the destruction of the imaginative images already at hand.

In a similar vein, the quest for Vheissu did not fail by accident. Instead, it was from its very outset doomed to failure since the dreams that fueled the quest belonged to the imperial mindset of the old world it sought to unmake. Pynchon's ridicule, in this light, can be understood not only as a way of debunking false utopias but, more so, as the utopian operation per excellence, which lies in the "un-worlding so that new no-places can be made possible" (Popov 2023, 26). This, again, ties in with Thomas Moylan's conceptualization of critical utopia, which he delineates in *Scraps Of The Untainted Sky* (2000, 82) as a call to "reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream." While the quest for Asmar *fails* in its realization, it might be more adequate to argue that it is precisely *in its failure* to live up to its utopian promise that the quest for V. *succeeds*.

Conclusion: Mirrors of their Presents

Kupsch rightly observes that "it is by knowing who V. is, and more specifically still, *who V. has become by the "present" of the book*, that the reader will be able to make sense of why things are the way they are at that time" (Kupsch 1998, 429). Set in the aftermath of a devastating second World War, Pynchon's *V.* stands as a placeholder for a historical experience in which ideological dreams had brought humanity to the brink of self-extinction. The "V." in Armen's *Yerevan*, on the other hand, refers to a distinctly different, revolutionary horizon of expectation characteristic for the 1920s and early 1930s, when hopes for redemption tied to an alternative, socialist modernity were not yet obscured by the terrors of starvation and the gulag.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, published four years after the first moon landing and 28 years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Pynchon himself gets to the heart of this dialectic and introduces the rocket as maybe modernity's most compelling metaphor of it: "(For) the Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it ... of a good Rocket to take us to the stars, an evil Rocket for the World's suicide, the two perpetually in struggle" (Pynchon 1973, 124). Read together (and against each other), the utopian quest for *Asmar* in the Soviet-Armenian 1930s and the anti-anti-utopian quest for *V.* in the US-American 1960s construe a complex dialectical image of human progress, its inherent possibilities and pitfalls.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.