

The Hyperobject's Atomization of "Self" in *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Abstract

This article further inspects the Rocket and Schwarzgerät at the center of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1974). Though scholars commonly employ the Rocket as a metaphor and symbol by which they analyze plot and characters, I inverse this approach to see what the plot and characters can reveal about the Rocket qua Rocket. Drawing from Object-Oriented Ontology—specifically Timothy Morton's concept of the "hyperobject," or an entity that is dispersed through time and space—I claim that the Rocket functions as a hyperobject. The tendency of scholars to avoid a claim of reality towards the Rocket, I argue, is an echo of Western philosophy's long valorization of the epistemological over the ontological that parallels unavailability with unreality. A reading the Rocket as hyperobject reveals a plot of ontological uncertainty unfolding in the characters' search for inherently recessive entities.

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“The awful shadow of some unseen Power

Floats though unseen among us; visiting

This various world...”

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”

When the 1974 Pulitzer Prize committee rejected the jury’s unanimous recommendation of Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* for the fiction prize, they did so under the impression that the novel was “turgid,” “overwritten,” and ultimately, “unreadable” (“Pulitzer”). From the perspective of literary scholar Harold Bloom, however, Pynchon’s novels are not at all “unreadable.” Instead, in an interview with *The Paris Review*, he deems them “very difficult pleasures” (Weiss). Bloom—like any avid reader of Pynchon—would likely cite *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the paragon of Pynchon’s “difficult pleasures.” The novel’s timeline ranges from the latter stages of World War Two through the immediate post-war period. Its scope stretches geographically through England, France, Germany, and southwest Africa. Characters seek after a mysterious Rocket¹ in all of these places, following hints, clues, and each other. Their reasons for seeking the Rocket are multi-faceted, but the common denominator is a compulsion to seek and to find the elusive entity. In tandem with the novel’s controversial reception among the general populace and the Pulitzer committee, scholars immediately took to delineating the complex and interlaced narrative from various theoretical vantage points.

While most scholars would likely center the plot of the novel on the mysterious Rocket (coupled with its equally mysterious component, the Schwarzgerät), scholarship is divided on matters concerning the Rocket’s significance. Richard Poirier proclaims, “the central character is the Rocket itself, and all other characters, for one reason or another, are involved in a quest for it, especially for a secret component, the so-called Schwarzgerät” (173). However, Poirier ultimately settles on the disappointingly vague conclusion that the Rocket, in spite of its central role in the novel, is simply a representational assembly of “sex, love, life, death” (173). Similarly, scholars such as Edward Mendelson, Molly Hite, Dwight Eddins, and David Seed have written extensively on *Gravity’s*

Rainbow's sprawling cast of characters, societal and cultural themes, and psychoanalytical yearnings. These readings, if they look to the Rocket at all, offer many interpretations of what it might symbolize. Yet the Rocket itself, devoid of metaphorical meaning, has remained mostly ambiguous. Poirier's declaration of its symbolism, though quite broad in nature, is representative of scholarship concerning the Rocket. While previous scholars' metaphorical and symbolical interpretations have proven interesting in recognizing its multi-faceted role in the novel, I believe there is also a need for a reading of the Rocket as an object instead of a metaphor or symbol in order to sustain a discussion on the novel's grappling—on an ontological level—with notions of connectivity and autonomy.

The Rocket is purposefully kept ever so slightly out of arm's reach from both the characters who seek it and the reader. Molly Hite has deemed this maneuver Pynchon's "trope of unavailable insight" (*Ideas of Order* 25), which populates each of his novels. For example, the lady V. of V. (1963), the Trystero of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), corporatism in *Against the Day* (2006), the Golden Fang Enterprise of *Inherent Vice* (2009), and the Montauk Project of *Bleeding Edge* (2013) are all shadowy entities that loom constantly in the characters' paranoid minds, forever out of definitive reach. The Schwarzgerät is a particularly interesting manifestation of the trope, due to its range of significance for each character who seeks it, as well as its ability to hold together a fragmented plot that boasts over 400 characters. In spite of its important role in the novel, Pynchon reveals very little about the mysterious device. The Schwarzgerät is a component of a V-2 rocket, indeed of *the Rocket*, as an insulation device, capable of containing a human being through launch, and constructed of the fictional plastic Imipolex G. The Rocket and its Schwarzgerät are sought after by nearly every principal character for a wide array of motives. It is likely owing to the scarcity of information that the aforementioned scholars have devoted their attention to using what little is told about the Rocket to break down and analyze the motivations of the characters that seek after it, rather than analyzing the object itself. In some ways, the Rocket and Schwarzgerät become, for these critics, a multi-purpose symbol for American society in general—a de-coder ring to unlock the postwar period's psychological, spiritual, and physiological paradigms. While their approaches have proved fruitful since the novel's release, resulting in some fascinating analyses, there remains much to be said concerning the Rocket qua Rocket.

In an assessment of Pynchon's first three novels—*V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity's Rainbow*—Molly Hite insightfully notes that the “novels all capitalize on a sense of insufficiency, and in creating this sense of insufficiency Pynchon has effectively created a gap that most criticism of his work has tried to fill” (122). She elucidates three approaches of Pynchon scholarship, the first of which “assumes that each novel does contain a central, controlling insight, but that this insight is so cunningly encoded in the text that it must be brought to light by an elaborate process of translation,” an approach she deems problematic because it results in plural interpretations, all claiming legitimacy as the “Center” (122).² The second approach “claims that the novels do not express central insight because this insight is simply too horrible to face” (122), which results in the objection of why Pynchon would bother writing the novel at all. The third approach “maintains that the novels do not express the unavailable insight because this insight is inexpressible. Language is inadequate to convey the full truth about present day reality” (122). Hite's final suggestion for how to read Pynchon's novels is perhaps the most compelling one, but one that I will nevertheless reject: “Because the Holy Center, the ultimate guarantor of meaning, is unavailable in all the novels, all the novels occupy context in which any number of local systems of meaning can coexist” (128). This interpretation is quite sensible in that the Holy Center, or the point of epiphany and full realization, is unavailable to the novels' characters. Yet my article challenges Hite's epistemological suggestion, which, along with much of Pynchon scholarship, parallels unavailability with unreality.

Hite's discussion offers a crucial insight: none of the approaches to Pynchon's novels that she lists treat the Center as something real, beyond the characters' perception of it. Indeed, to make a claim of “reality” beyond individual perception about a postmodernist text seems a special branch of heresy in that they often relish indeterminate reality—such heresy seems even more scandalous in the context of a Pynchon novel. However, there have been several undertakings of Pynchon that move away from the epistemological paradigm, many of which employ a scientific or technological focus. Joseph Tabbi's *Postmodern Sublime* (1996) looks to the “real” elements of technology within *Gravity's Rainbow* and suggests the novel “subverts the status quo of *all systems*, be they scientific, linguistic, or ideologically inscribed as ‘human’” (78, emphasis in original). Ali Chetwynd questions the widely held symbolism of the Rocket's flight path, noting that this symbolism is quite often a

result of the characters' projecting onto it in what he deems "subjective idealization" (115). Similarly, Nina Engelhardt's recent reading of the novel looks to the scientific, mathematical, and historical conditions reflected in the novel to "focus on the physical concept of gravity that [...] has part in determining the Rocket's path" (2). I believe, however, that there remains much to be discerned in the nature of the Rocket itself. To directly confront the Rocket and Schwarzgerät non-symbolically could be viewed as a fruitless endeavor, or perhaps even sheer conjecture. The line of thought may conclude that, since Pynchon has not given us a concrete presence at the center of the novel, we are free—perhaps even obligated—to regard the Rocket as a metaphor in understanding the inter- and intra-personal labyrinths at play in the novel. My analysis, however, inverts this tendency. Instead of looking at what the supposedly symbolic Rocket can tell us about the novel as a whole, the characters that populate the pages, and the depicted societies, I focus on what all of these elements can reveal about the Rocket's qualities and characteristics. By then observing the qualities and characteristics of the Rocket itself, I advocate an approach to Pynchon that affords legitimacy to the central abstractions (e.g., the Rocket) and, as a result, questions the long-held postmodern practice of disavowing the existence of a discernible reality, which Pynchon's main character of *Bleeding Edge* deems "the epistemological bug" (BE 433). Avoiding claims of reality due to a lack of presence (in the vein of Hite's suggested approach to Pynchon) is largely a product of Western philosophy's long-standing valorization of the epistemological over the ontological (cf. Harman, *The Quadruple Object* 45). As this essay will ultimately discuss, epistemological wavering on matters of reality serves only as preservation for a fictitious sense of subjective autonomy.

My approach to analyzing the Rocket may at first resemble Hite's approach in that it claims a central, controlling insight—the very real existence of the Rocket and Schwarzgerät—, yet it is subtly different. An object-oriented approach will not conclude that the Rocket is a symbol of life, love, sex, and/or death. Instead, my approach operates under the simple ontological perspective that the Rocket is a Rocket and the Schwarzgerät is a Schwarzgerät. The focus falls upon the properties, characteristics, and perceptions that will help illuminate the Rocket's central role within the novel's Byzantine plot. To analyze the Rocket effectively requires a system of analysis that relies less on the traditional scope of the understanding of objects qua humanity and more on an

understanding of objects qua objects; that is, it requires Object-Oriented Ontology.

Martin Heidegger led perhaps one of the most pivotal advances in twentieth-century philosophy with his landmark work, *Being and Time* (1927). Although Heidegger asseverates that his topics are “Being” and “Time,” the nature of objects, or “things” as he sometimes refers to them, profligates throughout. Long after Heidegger, as the twentieth century drew to a close, a rejuvenation of Heidegger’s subtle workings of objects was reinvigorated by Graham Harman, who claims that “Heidegger’s account of equipment gives birth to an ontology of objects themselves” (1). Harman fleshes out an “ontology of objects” in his 1999 doctoral dissertation, *Tool-Being: Elements in a Theory of Objects* (later revised into a book, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, 2002, from which I quote in this essay). Harman radicalizes Heidegger’s tool analysis into an exhaustive philosophical study of the inherently unknowable essence of objects. As a result of his work, Object-Oriented Philosophy, or Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO from this point onward) was born. Scholars of philosophy, the humanities, political science, video game design, and a colorful array of other disciplines began actively participating in, and contributing to, the field.

OOO is a form of speculative realism that rejects the long-standing philosophical tradition of anthropocentrism and avers that all entities share the similar characteristic of a sublime unknowability, an indefinable essence. Here and elsewhere, OOO breaks from epistemology. However, these are only the core tenets. The philosophy itself has seen a variety of applications, ranging from fresh understandings of food, waste, nuclear materials, and even aliens. OOO is not easily compartmentalized. An especially poignant cornerstone to the philosophy, in regards to the current undertaking, is the notion of anti-correlationism, which rejects “the belief that human access sits at the center of being, organizing and regulating it like an ontological watchmaker” (Bogost 5). In OOO, human cognition and human existence (Heidegger’s *Dasein*) lose their self-privileged status. In other words, anti-correlationism calls for constant omission of conclusions that prioritize human consciousness and puts in its place conclusions that recognize the legitimacy and importance of thinking outside the dominant human-world position.

Zeug and Gerät: Heidegger's Objects

In his tool analysis of *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers the following statement: “In the domain of the present analysis, the entities we shall take as our preliminary theme are those which show themselves in our concern with the environment” (95). One of the core tenets of Heidegger’s philosophy is in the strange, metaphysical friction that exists between an object as present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) and ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*). Or, put more simply, there is friction between an object contextualized in its designated purpose and an object removed from its designated use. Heidegger states that, while ontologically explicating a thing, one must realize that those things that we encounter are “proximally hidden” (96) because it is impossible to anticipate a thing’s ontological character. He clarifies by saying that the things of his analysis “never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves, so as to add up to a sum of realia and fill up a room” (98). Instead, what one would encounter is the *room*, and only through acknowledging the relations within can individual things then emerge. While many of these ideas were later transmuted and radicalized by several scholars in a variety of academic disciplines into the much more object-rigorous theory of OOO, the core ideas largely remain. What should be taken from a very brief synopsis of an exhaustive and seminal philosophical work is as follows: objects withdraw into an *essential* nature that is entirely unavailable to human perception and cognition.

In a 2001 article, Patrick McHugh suggests that Pynchon uses Heideggerian ontology as a meta-representation of the radicalism and cultural revolution represented in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. This particular claim is far outside the scope of the current essay, but it holds true that there are uncanny parallels between Heidegger’s ontological work and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Specifically, there are similarities between Heidegger’s notion of “equipment” and Pynchon’s Schwarzgerät, a component of the Rocket itself. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger refines his use of the word “things” and opts that instead, “We shall call those entities which we encounter in concern ‘equipment’” (97). Writing in German, Heidegger used the word *Zeug*, which, as the translators John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson mention in a footnote, “has no precise

English equivalent. While it may mean any implement, instrument, or tool, Heidegger uses it for the most part as a collective noun which is analogous to our relatively specific ‘gear’ [...] or the still more general ‘equipment’” (97). Similarly, *Gerät* (of *Schwarzgerät*) is without a precise English equivalent; it can be translated as “device”—or, like *Zeug*, as —“equipment,” “instrument,” or even “tool.” *Schwarzgerät* (which has mostly been referred to as “black device” within Pynchon studies) already bears resemblance to Heidegger’s “equipment.” In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Enzian (a native speaker of German) translates *Schwarzgerät* for the English-speaking Slothrop as “Blackinstrument” (*GR* 369).

Lauded for his both overt and subtle word-play, Pynchon seems to point to the ontological character of the Rocket and *Schwarzgerät* by the malleability of its very name. Throughout the novel, Pynchon toys with the German language, which is noted by David Seed: “In [*Gravity’s Rainbow*] a chain of analogies is set up which includes [...] German state divisions, German word-formation, and even the step-gables of German houses” (190). In concern to the Rocket and *Schwarzgerät*, one single passage illustrates Pynchon’s subtle manipulations quite well. Tchitcherine, another character questing for the Rocket, recalls a conversation he had with Slothrop, which occurred after Slothrop’s aforementioned conversation with Enzian:

Slothrop never mentioned Enzian by name, nor the *Schwarzkommando*. But he did talk about the *Schwarzgerät*. And he also coupled “Schwarz-” with some strange nouns, in the German fragments that came through. Blackwoman, Blackrocket, Blackdream. . . . The new coinages seem to be made unconsciously. Is there a single root, deeper than anyone has probed, from which Slothrop’s Blackwords only appear to flower separately? Or has he by way of the language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named. (*GR* 397)

Pynchon’s word-play with the German language offers some necessary preliminary insight about the *Schwarzgerät*: the name itself should not be understood as fixed. What is occasionally referred to as the “black device” throughout the novel could just as well be called the “black instrument” or, taking Heidegger’s possible influence into consideration, “black equipment.” What such a reading would imply for

the Rocket and the Schwarzgerät is quite simple in the context of a previous quote from Heidegger. A thing is inherently, proximally hidden: “[Objects] never show themselves proximally as they are for themselves, so as to add up to a sum of realia and fill up a room” (Heidegger 98). The Rocket and Schwarzgerät are perfect manifestations of “proximally hidden” objects. Though their existence is documented in dossiers and reports, they remain in a constant state of *elsewhere*. As the narrator says about the workers in the factory that produced the Schwarzgerät: “Whatever the new device [the Schwarzgerät] was, nobody saw it” (GR 439). While the analogue alone would provide for an interesting analysis of the Schwarzgerät, I am interested in pushing the Heideggerian analogue toward a recent concept born of OOO: the hyperobject. At once strikingly familiar to Heidegger’s object, yet hauntingly different, the hyperobject, which will be discussed at length later on, offers the most chillingly accurate analogue of the elusive Rocket and its Schwarzgerät.

Pynchon’s Hyperobject

There remains the question of how to conceptualize the Rocket’s “reality,” which has likely been weighing on the mind of any postmodernism-oriented reader ever since my proclamation that within the novel’s reality, the Rocket *does* exist as something real. The theory of the hyperobject will provide further clarification, but it will prove most beneficial to begin with Pynchon’s given definition of *unreality* as understood by Tchitcherine, the Russian half-brother of Enzian: “The only tipoff to its unreality is— The radical-though-plausible-violation-of-reality” (GR 718). Such a definition plays an odd role in the novel, in part because the characters seem to have diverse and vacillating opinions on whether or not the Rocket is real. Instead, what should be taken away is the operative term “violation-of-reality.”

Brian McHale, in his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), discusses the problematic that arises when discussing reality within a fictional context that is constructed by language. Drawing from theories of poetics, McHale observes the distinction between the fictional and real, but also states: “This does not mean, however, that *no* relationship exists between the fictional heterocosm and the real world. [...] [A] modified heterocosm theory is required, one that admits of a certain kind of

overlap or interpenetration between the heterocosm and the real” (28, emphasis in original). Discussing *Gravity’s Rainbow* in particular, McHale emphasizes the way in which the novel proposes its real-world corollary: “As the novel unfolds, our world and the ‘other world’ mingle with increasing intimacy, hallucinations and fantasies become real” (45). The Rocket at the center of the novel cannot thus be mistaken as an impotent or passive construct of language; instead, its textual existence in the novel presupposes some measure of overlap with our world.

Moreover, withholding ontological exploration from fictional objects could well be regarded as flagrant correlationism. In the opening pages to *The Quadruple Object* (2011), Graham Harman addresses the need to treat objects as objects, whether real or fictitious: “All such objects must be accounted for by ontology, not merely denounced or reduced to despicable nullities. [...] My point is not that all objects are equally real, but that they are equally objects. It is only in a wider theory that accounts for the real and unreal alike that pixies, nymphs, and utopias must be treated in the same terms as sailboats and atoms” (5). Fiction or fact, OOO asserts that an object must be treated as an object to avoid the danger present in qualifying ontological existence as viewed through the limited boundaries of human perception. In *Tool-Being*, Harman discusses the inherent danger of ontic prejudice implicit in a theory of substance: “The notion of a natural substance makes illicit use of our ontic biases to draw a supposed ontological distinction between substance and non-substance. [...] [T]he mistake lies in holding that the substance has to be a natural ultimate point” (277). To read *Gravity’s Rainbow* via the lens of OOO means to treat the Rocket—which some critics may refer to as a violation-of-reality, a variegated illusion in the characters’ consciousness—as an object in its own right that factors greatly into the events of the novel. To treat something as elusive as the Rocket as *something* beyond a metaphor goes firmly against what Dwight Eddins calls the “postmodern privileging of indeterminacy” (119). It is precisely such indeterminacy that has led scholars instead to look to what the Rocket symbolizes, as opposed to what it is or even accepting the concept that it is something at all. Morton suggests that postmodern theory’s tendency to treat everything as a metaphor—a statement that can perhaps be refined slightly to say that postmodern theory often views representation as inherently obfuscated—not only does injustice to individual things, but it can also be misleading: “[T]here are real things for sure, just not as we know them or knew them” (4). Harman, writing on

Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* (the being of humankind), states that "[t]he fact that *Dasein* never *arrives* at an 'essential identity' does not mean that there is none" (185), a distinction echoed by Slothrop's thought that "just cause you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there!" (*GR* 690). While it would be errant to argue by this logic that absence necessitates presence, we must, for the time being, dismiss the epistemological impulse to reject the possibility of a reality that extends beyond oneself. Thus, if we grant OOO's assertion that there are real things, which are at times entirely unavailable to human perception, then a "trace of unreality" can serve as a paradoxical indication of them. In looking to the ontological character of the Rocket and forfeiting the hedged security of epistemology, we observe to a new Rocket, one that severely threatens the questing characters' most integral notions of self.

The manner by which one can begin to note the essential identity of the Rocket is by recognizing its function as a hyperobject. Morton notes the uncanny way in which hyperobjects emerge as realities: "Immediate, intimate symptoms of hyperobjects are vivid and often painful, yet they carry with them a trace of unreality. [...] The threat of unreality is the very sign of reality itself" (Morton 28, 32). For the characters who seek the Rocket, it's the threat of unreality that draws them closer. In its refusal to be found, it suggests an actively evasive presence, perhaps summed up by Slothrop in his fear of a "Presence so large that nobody else can see it" (*GR* 244). The characters that experience the Rocket experience its various effects, never the object in its entirety. In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), Morton begins by broadly defining the term hyperobject as "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. [...] Hyperobjects are not just collections, systems, or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right" (1-2). True to the OOO framework, the hyperobject is not simply a sum of its relations. While partaking of the essential withdrawn nature inherent in everyday objects (a hallmark of Heidegger-inspired OOO), the hyperobject distinguishes itself through its massive distribution and massive effects. Though they display similar characteristics, hyperobjects defy physical uniformity; Morton offers some examples of hyperobjects in order to show how diverse they can be: nuclear materials on Earth, global warming, capitalism, and the solar system. In a traditional taxonomy of objects, the Rocket and global warming (or capitalism and the solar system, for that matter) would not be considered similar in any regard; it is within the theory of the

hyperobject that their characteristics and effects can be seen as uncannily similar. One common denominator that serves as the foundation for hyperobjects is that we are always, in some irreducible way, inside of them, never escaping their influence. Both Harman and Morton would agree that just because a hyperobject is never touched or seen in its entirety does not mean that it is not real. In fact, such a situation would only be further evidence that what is in question is, indeed, a hyperobject. However, one could argue that there is indeed a character who experiences the Rocket in its entirety—Gottfried, Commander Blicero’s sacrificial sex slave, who is contained within the Schwarzgerät as the Rocket launches at the close of the novel. Though Gottfried certainly is given intimate access to the Rocket’s essence relative to other characters—it is described as “the womb into which Gottfried returns” (GR 765)—, I would argue against any interpretation that suggests Gottfried experiences the Rocket in its entirety. His relationship to the Rocket, as suggested by its womb-like function, is akin to his relationship with Blicero in that he is subordinated in its presence. He functions *within* the Rocket, never occupying an outside stance by which he could comprehend it fully. A perspective that would allow for full access to a hyperobject is quite impossible for a human being in that the hyperobject, by definition, is “massively distributed in time and space” (Morton 1). Therefore, to map the existence of a hyperobject is best accomplished through looking to its observable effects. To affirm the real presence of the Rocket within the novel, I will discuss its various effects in tandem with Morton’s taxonomy of the hyperobject’s characteristics: viscosity, nonlocality, phasing, interobjectivity, and temporal undulation.

Franz Pökler, a questing character in pursuit of the Rocket, feels it “beckoning him in” (GR 412), which marks an important characteristic of the Rocket as hyperobject: *viscosity*—becoming aware of the existence of the hyperobject entails an increased awareness of one’s presence within its structure. Morton states: “The more I know about global warming, the more I realize how pervasive it is. The more I discover about evolution, the more I realize how my entire physical being is caught in its meshwork. [...] The more I struggle to understand hyperobjects, the more I discover that I am stuck to them” (28). The hyperobject’s viscosity refers to its uncanny characteristic of mass entanglement on a physical scale. There is no way to ever be “free” of global warming, to exist in a space or time outside of it, because one is constantly inside of it. Tchitcherine observes

the Rocket's viscosity when he is struck with the epiphany: "Oh, a State begins to take form in the stateless German night, a State that spans oceans and surface politics, sovereign as the International or Church of Rome, and the Rocket is its soul" (GR 576). Though Tchitcherine projects a symbolical dimension unto the Rocket, he nonetheless comes to an important realization of its character: the common denominator in this "state" (which will be discussed at length later on) is the Rocket. Thus, the viscosity of the hyperobject results in Tchitcherine's increasing awareness of its looming presence, as well as awareness of how he, as an individual, is enveloped and active within its viscous presence.

However, perhaps the most salient example of the hyperobject's viscosity in regards to the Rocket is its function within the novel as a whole. Joseph Slade writes that to discuss *Gravity's Rainbow* is complicated by the mere fact that "everything [in the novel] is about *connectedness*: Pynchon has created a universe in which everything is related to everything else" (159). As discussed above, the unifying presence that is able to achieve such an interlacing of plot is the Rocket. While Slade's observation of course includes symbolic connections within the novel, it remains that the novel is populated with a myriad of physical connections that come about as a result of the Rocket's central presence, and these connections spiral outward from principle characters, minor characters, and national borders. The prime tracer of these connections is largely the main character, Slothrop. It could be argued that the novel is in some ways a gradual progression of Slothrop's ever-heightening awareness of how enmeshed he (and everyone else) truly is with the Rocket. When he finds the dossier to Laszlo Jamf, a scientist, Slothrop uncovers his own connection to the Rocket and the Schwarzgerät. As it turns out, Slothrop was sold at an early age to IG Farben, the manufacturer of Imipolex G—the material used to construct the Schwarzgerät. As an infant, he was experimented on with this material, thus establishing an early, physical connection with the eventual Rocket. As Slothrop reads through the documents, he begins to see just how enmeshed he truly is with the Schwarzgerät: "[Slothrop] knows that what's haunting him will prove to be the smell of Imipolex G" (GR 291). From that moment on, Slothrop's primary purpose is to locate the mysterious device. As his quest becomes increasingly complicated by other Rocket-seekers and by side-tracked Quixotic adventures, he begins seeing the malevolent omnipresence of the Rocket's Schwarzgerät: "[H]e knows as well as he has to that it's the S-Gerät after all that's following

him, it and the pale plastic ubiquity of Laszlo Jamf. That if he's been seeker and sought, well, he's also baited and bait" (GR 498).

After Slothrop is made aware of the mysterious Rocket, he begins to see how it affects not just the world around him, but also himself as an individual. Moreover, Slothrop's increasing paranoia (as he realizes how enmeshed he is with the Schwarzgerät) seems to disregard the possibility that his situation is founded on coincidence, illusion, or orchestration. Indeed, this is the question that Pynchon's characters must face and that the novel itself refuses to resolve; however, to treat the Rocket with respect to its reality is to implicitly vindicate Slothrop's paranoia, calling to mind Leo Bersani's suggestion that "the 'paranoids' of Thomas Pynchon's fiction are probably justified, and therefore—at least in the traditional sense of the word—really not paranoid at all" (101). Slothrop's conviction of the Rocket's reality, however, leads him to a self-defeating conclusion: "The Schwarzgerät is no Grail, Ace, that's not what the G in Imipolex G stands for. And you are no knightly hero. [...] [Y]ou know that in some irreducible way it's an evil game" (GR 370). In a moment of self-defeat or self-awareness, Slothrop comes to the realization that the Schwarzgerät is "no Grail." While he possesses some understanding that he will not find the Rocket and the Schwarzgerät in their entirety, he continues in his quest regardless. Moreover, he understands that, in searching for it, he puts himself in some position of unnamable danger, an *evil* game. Menahem Paz suggests that "Slothrop follows the trail of the rocket mainly because it is the only lead he has, and perhaps because subconsciously he feels that this might prove personally rewarding" (200). The question remains as to why his search would be personally rewarding. Paz suggests that the answer has something to do with working through Slothrop's past with the Schwarzgerät; indeed, one might argue that Slothrop's search, though physical in nature, is borne out of a primarily symbolic interest in the Rocket and Schwarzgerät, such as viewing the search as a means to reconcile a repressed past. However, I would complement this interpretation by suggesting that Slothrop is motivated to seek the Schwarzgerät after realizing his own physical connection to it and, true to the hyperobject, *within* it; his search can then be understood an attempt to locate the Rocket in order to better understand how to free himself of its ominous, seemingly ubiquitous, influence. The foreboding knowledge that Slothrop will not ever find the Rocket is not enough to discourage him from his search. After all, would someone ask a climatologist who encounters the hyperobject of global

warming why they pursue global warming when they can never see it in its entirety? In the face of imminent failure and even danger, Slothrop continues seeking precisely because he knows it exists, thereby revealing an initial property of the Rocket—though largely absent throughout the novel, its existence is seen through its homogenous effect upon all seeking characters: the characters caught in the viscous fabric of the Rocket are irrevocably drawn further into its ephemeral mystery, echoing Morton’s ominous statement: “We find ourselves caught in [hyperobjects]” (32). Thus, Slothrop, finding himself enmeshed, seeks after the hyperobject in a vain attempt to free himself from the threat of an unseen force.

As Slothrop seeks the Rocket, he stumbles upon documents, places, and people that were in some way directly involved in with it, all of which greatly affect his quest and the novel as a whole; by the end of the novel, he has not found the Rocket, but he has experienced it. For example, one of the workers on the Rocket considers himself an “extension of the Rocket” (408), which then invites the observation that the Rocket, though not immediately present in the traditional sense, is able to exhibit effects from a remote location. The apparent paradox is exemplified in the hyperobject’s *nonlocality*, a term that Morton borrows from quantum theory, which proved that separate particles were able to signal information (a directional spin) faster than the speed of light at any given distance (cf. Morton 42). One particle could exhibit a physical effect through a remote distance. Morton notes that the quantum example of nonlocality does not apply to all hyperobjects. Instead, he writes, “The action at a distance that hyperobjects manifest is nonlocal, but not in the quantum sense” (45). The hyperobject is able to affect the course of the novel greatly without being “present” in the normal sense of the word. In many ways, this sums up the Rocket’s role in the novel as a whole, but a specific example is found in the character of Franz Pökler, one of the Schwarzgerät technicians. Though he never encounters the device in its entirety, he suspects that he “was an extension of the Rocket, long before it was ever built” (GR 408). He experiences a physical and emotional connection with the Rocket without any full access to its presence. Morton clarifies nonlocality with an analogy: if you are feeling raindrops, what you are experiencing is climate, and one could equally say that you are experiencing some discursive effect of climate change, “but you are never directly experiencing global warming as such” (cf. 48). You can experience global warming’s effect on rain, on temperature, etc., but

global warming itself, an entity unto itself, is impossible to experience in full. In effect, nonlocality as applied to a theory of hyperobjects means that a hyperobject “cannot be thought as occupying a series of now-points ‘in’ time or space. [...] [T]here is no such thing, at a deep level, as the local” (Morton 47). The Rocket, much like Global Warming, haunts those who seek it as an almost omnipresent force, yet it is impossible to experience as any local presence. It is far too distributed across continuums of experience.

Scott Drake notes the Schwarzgerät’s strange ability to unify a narrative from a remote location: “The rocket functions as an overarching structure that attempts to supersede the inherent value of the digressive narrative lines to which it is attached in order to direct [the characters] back toward its own image and thereby establish its centrality in the novel” (237). Drake approaches a theory of the Rocket itself as something whose effects are nonlocal, but he ultimately concludes that the Rocket’s ontological status, in the novel, remains uncertain. But there remains something to be said for Drake’s acknowledgment that the Rocket seems to possess a strange ability to order and direct all discursive plot-lines back to itself; however, I would argue the process of connection is inherently impossible. Luc Herman and Petrus van Ewijk write that “even though reading *Gravity’s Rainbow* might induce the feeling of completeness, its seemingly unending connections also deconstruct that idea. The intimation of infinity hurts the shallow belief in neat totality. [...] The result does not necessarily have to be chaos, but Pynchon certainly presents the reader with a hopeless task and thus undoes any dreams of wholeness” (173). The “hopeless task” is, of course, purposefully analogous to the characters’ very own task—to connect the moving pieces of a moving conspiracy. Or, to put it another way, they must trace the connections between themselves and the conspiracy. The novel’s quest is a self-reflexive act, and the conspiracy is never presented as if it existed in a vacuum. The conspiracy deeply threatens the individual who seeks to get to the bottom of it, creating the central conflict at play in the novel, the impossibility of resolving the Rocket-conflict posed against each individual; in other words, if the individual does not find the Rocket, the conspiracy continues indefinitely, ultimately threatening her most basic assumptions concerning her existence.

At one point in the novel, Närrisch, a bumbling rocket technician

involved with the creation of the Schwarzgerät and the 00000, thinks back on all that has occurred since those days as he is hounded by Russians in search for the Rocket: “Did the S-Gerät program at Nordhausen in its time ever hint that so many individuals, nations, firms, communities of interest would come after the fact?” (GR 525) Just as nonlocality refers both to time and space, so does the Schwarzgerät exhibit its effects through both. Enzian, leader of the Schwarzkommando, troubles himself with the question of how far back the origin to the Rocket plot goes:

We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught [...] Up here, on the surface, coaltars, hydrogenation, syntheses were always phony, dummy functions to hide the real, *the planetary mission* yes perhaps centuries in the unrolling [...] And if it isn't exactly Jamf Ölfabriken Werke? what if it's the Krupp works in Essen, what if it's Blohm & Voss right here in Hamburg or another make-believe 'ruin,' in another city? Another *country?* (530)

The Rocket's plural geopolitical origins, some would argue, create the conspiracy. Joseph Slade writes that the conspiracy of *Gravity's Rainbow*, analogous with the “They” who are constantly at blame by the paranoid characters, “is cosmic, its reach virtually unlimited, its most discernible components the huge corporations and cartels. [...] These organizations, multi-national and therefore supra-national, ignore geographical and political boundaries; accountable to no one government, they circumvent the laws of all nations, and operate as states themselves” (161). Slade's sentiment views the Rocket conspiracy as having its analogue in vast political state networks, similarly noted by Doug Haynes: “[W]e can see the Rocket of *Gravity's Rainbow* through this lens: the repository and expression of supernatural forces as well as a cutting-edge state apparatus” (316). Indeed, this reading is supported by Enzian's view of the Rocket, which he claims “has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it” (GR 741). While the state interpretation is important to the novel, I believe there is another way to view the Rocket's vast influence. In addition to the transnational and political quagmire the Rocket catalyzes, its refusal to be categorized geographically denotes an impossible return to a single point of origin, thus engendering Enzian's suspicion that the Rocket, without a discernible or localized presence,

must “be many things.” Enzian’s quest to trace the Rocket, to trace how it affects him and the people he leads, is then problematized dramatically. Thus, the air of existential melancholy in Enzian’s passage is not negligible in the Freudian sense: He is aware of losing something, though he cannot be entirely sure what it is. He steadily becomes aware of the fact that it exists far beyond any reach that he is capable of, but still he continues searching. How then can the Rocket continue to draw characters in its wake in lieu of a unified, local presence in the narrative? This is, in some ways, the pivotal question concerning the hyperobject. How can it be known if it is inherently unknowable? Such a phenomenon can be explained by the hyperobject’s property of *phasing*.

Paranoia, a deeply rooted theme in Pynchon’s oeuvre and particularly exemplified in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, shares with the concept of phasing what could well be considered a cause-and-effect relationship. David Seed, writes on peculiar paranoia that is emboldened through *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s sheer repetition and recurrence:

These recurrences generate an anxiety in the reader by hinting at more connection than can actually be formed. [...] Moments of discovery are crucial in *Gravity’s Rainbow* because they appear to be the epiphanous confirmation of these paranoid fears. [...] The reader gradually becomes aware of a lattice of intersections between these plots which does not grant an over-view but does at least remind him of the inadequacy of any one means of explanation (207-09).

As discussed previously, the manner in which the characters are connected is primarily through the Rocket. Just as they are connected through their quest for the Rocket, they are connected through the paranoia that results from their failing quest. Pynchon’s use of paranoia is certainly of interest to a discussion on the hyperobject’s phasing, which Morton defines thus: “[Hyperobjects] occupy a high-dimensional *phase space* that makes them impossible to see as a whole on a regular three-dimensional human-scale basis. [...] We only see snapshots of what is actually a very complex plot of a super complex set of algorithms executing themselves in a high-dimensional phase space” (70). In other words, human access allows us only very crude representations of a hyperobject that supersedes its three-dimensional caricature; this sentiment is echoed by the narrator of *Gravity’s Rainbow* when discussing the Rocket’s flight path: “[I]t’s only the peak that we are allowed to see”

(GR 740).

With the Rocket's phasing in mind, paranoia serves a beneficial purpose; it is particularly attuned to phased representations of a larger, unseen whole. The paranoid is hyper-observant of the phased effects—the signs of the hyperobject—and tries to assemble them into a larger, understandable totality. Thomas Schaub points out that Pynchon's employment of paranoia "becomes a metaphor for the difficulty of knowing from the *inside* whether or not a set of events constitutes a designed plot or is merely coincidental" (105). A liminal understanding of the plot-at-large is common to all Pynchon's characters undertaking paranoid quests while being "inside" the "set of events." At one point in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Roger Mexico and Pirate Prentice discuss their preterite status as pitted against the unknowable "They," from whom the entire Rocket conspiracy (even the war) supposedly originates. Likely echoing the thoughts of all characters involved in the widespread conspiracy, Prentice tells a paranoid Roger: "We don't have to worry about questions of real or unreal. They only talk out of expediency. It's the *system* that matters. How the data arrange themselves inside it. Some are consistent, others fall apart" (GR 651). The binary of data consistency/falling apart implies something larger from which the data derives and that relies upon mental assembly to make sense of it. Prentice justly notes that it is the *system* that matters, a catch-all for a much larger-something that is at work. Though Prentice uses *system* as a non-physical descriptor of the relationship between data, his logic is worth noting in relation to the Rocket's phasing in that he suggests there is something from which the collected data, representations, and events derive. He notes that all they have at their disposal are phased representations of a much larger presence, impossible to perceive in its undistorted entirety.

Yet the true paranoid of the novel is, of course, Slothrop. Menahem Paz notes that, for Slothrop, there are two possibilities concerning the plot in which he has found himself: There is a deterministic Elect who dictate the actions of the preterite without revealing themselves, or there is total randomness. Paz synthesizes Slothrop's dichotomous fears in the form of chaos theory, suggesting that there is a connection between events, but that the connection is highly unpredictable and uncontrollable (cf. 208). A similar conclusion is echoed by the narrator, who graciously offers an operative definition of paranoia: "[I]t is nothing

less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation [...]” (GR 717). Keeping in mind chaos theory, paranoia functions in the novel as an attempt to gain access to the connections between events in order to gain control. Yet the connections and signs that the characters are trying to make sense of are not perfect manifestations of the Rocket—they are phased representations. To revisit chaos theory, there is a connection, but the connection is unpredictable and intensely difficult to control. The very idea that everything is connected would imply that, after connecting the events, a larger picture emerges, which is precisely what a hyperobject allows; it is the way in which the hyperobject is conceivable. Its pieces, fragments, and representations constantly surround us. However, it is impossible to put them all together into a single mosaic of clarity and absolute presence because we simply do not exist *alongside* the hyperobject; or, to quote from *Gravity’s Rainbow* discussing the Rocket, it is concealed “behind an uncrossable wall” (GR 679). The Rocket occupies a dimension beyond ours that is inherently inaccessible to those who seek it. The characters receive only translations of the Rocket; the result of connecting the translations is a highly speculative, likely inaccurate, portraiture. Or to use yet another characteristic of the hyperobject, connecting all the spiraling pieces seamlessly is impossible due to the *interobjectivity* of the Rocket.

Many of the Rocket’s effects, as noted, are nonlocal. They occur both everywhere and nowhere. But the way in which the Rocket is experienced by the characters is best explained through the hyperobject’s trait of interobjectivity, or “the way in which nothing is ever experienced directly, but only as mediated through other entities in some shared sensual space” (Morton 86). Interobjectivity is closely related to causality—how objects affect other objects and other entities as a part of a given assemblage. Yet the causality is not seamless and does not lead to absolute clarity in regards to what is behind all of the branching causality. Morton writes, “[Interobjectivity] does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences” (83). The reason for these gaps and absences is owing to the nature of the hyperobject. One simply cannot use the causal marks of the hyperobject to find the hyperobject because “The appearance of things, the indexical signs [...] is the *past* of the hyperobject” (Morton 90). This statement could raise an objection to the theory of the hyperobject applied to the Rocket of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: If the hyperobject differs from

a regular object in its inability to be perceived as a local presence and its elusion to human perception, how can the Rocket (a real object with real physical dimensions) be regarded as a hyperobject? In the same way that Slothrop's Puritan ancestors sought "Data behind which always, nearer or further, was the numinous certainty of God" (GR 245), so do the questing characters try (and fail) to trace the Rocket's "footprints" to a definite presence; they cannot be certain that the Rocket exists with physical dimension at all. However, the impotence in the quest does not exclude an awareness of the Rocket's existence, even if its existence is difficult to conceptualize: "It was impossible not to think of the Rocket without thinking of *Schicksal*, of growing toward a shape predestined and perhaps a little otherworldly" (GR 422). They see signs of the Rocket conspiracy and scramble to order the signs into a coherent—perhaps otherworldly—shape, but they will forever be left with only these signs of the Rocket, a limitation hinted by the narrator as follows: "[I]f it all does grow toward some end shape, those who are here inside can't see it" (GR 546). The Rocket exists, yet its existence is seen only as fragmented throughout the winding narrative. Bits and pieces are scattered liberally throughout, yet the central Rocket, the sought after and quested for, is not found because it exists beyond the narrative in a dimension not recognized by those who seek it.

To further complicate their ill-fated pursuit, the questing characters are enmeshed with the Rockets' past signs, gaps, and absences. Yet the reader must perform a similar task along with the characters. Dwight Eddins, writing on the narrative form of *Gravity's Rainbow*, states that the novel "is a dauntingly intricate web of reciprocities, ironic correspondences, inversions and unexpected doublings, one effect of which is to disorient us from our linear, simplistic mappings of experience" (109-10). In a sense, the novel advocates for a reader-paranoia alongside the questing characters' paranoia. Reader-paranoia results from trying to get to the truth from an obstructed viewpoint that, in the words of Lance Olsen, "seeks to undermine the modernist paradigm of narrative and epistemological constructions [...] [the reader] must live in a state of paranoia" (83). Again, the narrative of Pynchon's central entities intersects neatly with the narrative of the hyperobjects. The hyperobject lurks beyond definitive reach, shrouded beneath an index of signs, dead ends, and spiraling connections. It is observable primarily in its phased effects that surround the narrative of the world. Its past permeates thought through causal relations. However, its strange

presence—its dichotomy of here and not-here—either results in an epistemological claim that it does not exist, or it tears us from our “simplistic mappings of experience.” Of course, I would declare it is the latter. The hyperobject demands that we think differently about our perceptions of all things, not just the hyperobject. Similarly, the Rocket forces the novel’s characters to confront the seeming unreality of their own existence in tandem with something as withdrawn as the Rocket with statements such as, “presence back on Earth is only temporary, and never ‘real’” (GR 737). All assumptions, epistemological and ontological, are thrown into limbo by the Rocket and its bizarre, inaccessible existence. The Rocket, just like the hyperobject, calls into question the media through which the characters perceive and experience their existence, even through something as fundamental as space and time.

The Rocket’s effects on space and time are best noted by Enzian, the marginalized leader of the Schwarzkommando (the black Rocket troops) and the Erdschweinhöle (a group of Herero’s from Southwest Africa). The Rocket becomes a religion for his people. His primary goal throughout the novel is to reassemble a replica of the 00000, Schwarzgerät included. As Enzian reflects on the Rocket’s apotheosis, the narrator writes of the inherent motivation,

What Enzian wants to create will have no history. It will never need a design change. Time, as time is known to the other nations, will wither away inside this new one. The Erdschweinhöhle will not be bound, like the Rocket, to time. The people will find the Center again, the Center without time, the journey without hysteresis. (323)

To Enzian, at least, the 00000 and S-Gerät are not at all fixed entities. Thus, their space-time cannot be seen as permanent and fixed. Morton refers to this concept as the *temporal undulation* of the hyperobject, hinted at in his broad definition of the hyperobject as something “massively distributed across space-time” (3). Related to the theory of relativity, temporal undulation keeps the Rocket’s appearance in constant flux. Morton writes:

Relativity is what guarantees that objects are never as they seem, and not because they are ideas in my head—but because they aren’t. [...] Spacetime isn’t an empty box, but rather an undulating force field that emanates from objects. Now the thing about undulating temporality is that it really is measurably obvious in hyperobjects,

objects that are massive from a human standpoint. (64)

He goes on to qualify his claim by offering examples torn from basic illuminations of the theory of relativity, namely flying a space shuttle and telling a different time from a slower moving plane below at the exact same “moment” (65). The implication of temporal undulation is that hyperobjects “allow us to see that there is something *futural* about objects as such” (67). A hyperobject such as nuclear materials on earth force us to confront the sheer longevity of their existence relative to our own. Their distribution across time is far greater than any human individual’s, thus warping preconceptions regarding their temporality. The Rocket creates a similar effect for those who are exposed, in some way, to its presence. Greta Erdmann, a German film actress in the novel and one of Slothrop’s many lovers, recounts the Rocket controlled by Weismann/Blicero, the man who commanded the original 00000 Rocket battery: “It was not Germany he moved through. It was his own space. [...] My cunt swelled with blood at the danger, the chances for annihilation, delicious never knowing when it would come down because the space and time were Blicero’s own” (GR 494). Erdmann makes the mistake of conflating Blicero with the Rocket in suggesting that “space and time” were his own. Her account typifies an anthropocentric outlook in stripping the Rocket of its agency by saying the Rocket’s physical effects belong entirely to Blicero. While the locus of moral responsibility does indeed fall upon Blicero for the Rocket’s launch and the subsequent destruction that it causes, the physical effects that the Rocket catalyzes are entirely its own. To suggest otherwise would be akin to arguing that humankind possesses and controls melting ice caps or crippling droughts, as opposed to observing that such things may come about as a direct result of our existence, but they are ultimately components and effects of global warming. However, even in Erdmann’s correlationist observation, she notes an important aspect of the Rocket. In and of itself, it greatly affects fundamental notions of space and time, complementing Enzian’s view that the Rocket is an extension of space and time in and of itself. Also, importantly, the Rocket’s “chances for annihilation” are in tandem with its existence outside of fixed space-time. It is here that one encounters perhaps the most important aspect of the hyperobject—a connotation of destruction. The destruction the hyperobject and the Rocket suggest goes beyond what one would associate with a Rocket. Besides the physical annihilation that the Rocket inevitably brings, it also causes annihilation on a deeply ontological level.

I have noted previously that Timothy Morton's paradigmatic example of the hyperobject is Global Warming. But Morton also offers broader insight into why hyperobjects need to be recognized as such:

Hyperobjects force us into intimacy with our own death (because they are toxic), with others (because everyone is affected by them), and with the future (because they are massively distributed in time). Attuning ourselves to the intimacy that hyperobjects demand is not easy. [...] Once we become aware of the long-term effects of hyperobjects, we cannot abolish this awareness, and so it corrodes our ability to make firm decisions in the present. (139-140)

While Morton emphasizes the dire need to re-think ecological problems in relation to Global Warming, the "intimacy" under discussion is inherent in all hyperobjects, not just Global Warming. As in the case of the Rocket, though never stated, its presence ostensibly stretches into the future. The quest in which the characters are engaged could likely continue without their frantic search bringing them any closer to the Rocket. The quest would continue much as it does through the novel—finding only past signs of the Rocket and those who are also seeking. Thus, the search for the hyperobject Rocket does not reveal the Rocket; instead, it reveals its massiveness and the mass of connections that the Rocket unifies. Understanding the Rocket as a hyperobject introduces an entirely new dimension to the notion of Slothrop's "quest" as well as the hyperobject's "intimacy with death"—the preservation of a dissolving "self" in a massive web of connections.

The Malignant Reality of the Rocket

The Rocket is a magnetic presence throughout the novel, attracting the characters into a web of connections—all names and places are somehow linked to its looming shadow. However, its magnetic presence is far from benign; its deterministic agency is fatal. At the end of his quest, Slothrop stands as the prime example of the malignant agency of the hyperobject, as he begins to literally disappear. As the disintegration occurs, the narrator describes the situation:

"Temporal bandwidth" is the width of your present, your *now*. [...]

The more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are. It may get to where you're having trouble remembering what you were doing five minutes ago, or even—as Slothrop now—what you're doing *here*. (GR 517)

The narrator presents a paradoxical situation: to maintain his persona, Slothrop must situate himself in the past and/or the future; however, losing a sense of the present results in an atomization of his presence. It is understandable then that by the end of the novel, Slothrop is gone entirely into what Dwight Eddins aptly calls a “dispiriting limbo” (119). Slothrop's persona, his “self,” dissipates and dissolves entirely.

It should not be forgotten that at the point in the novel when Slothrop's persona begins to wane, he is still very much seeking after the Rocket as he has been throughout a majority of the novel. His decisions, it seems, have been informed entirely by his search. In a sense, the hyperobject corrodes one's ability to “make firm decisions in the present” in part because the awareness of the hyperobject is a sort of solipsism—Slothrop sees how *he* is affected and how *he* is involved. He was born into the Rocket conspiracy, at each “present” moment in the novel he was consumed in a search for the Rocket, and his future, as a result, is bleak. All that he manages to discover are an increasing number of connections to the Rocket. While it is of course true that Slothrop suffers from Timothy Melley's concept of “agency panic” or an “intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control” (12), Melley's epistemological model of the “construction” of reality can extend to the ontological, especially in light of what occurs to Slothrop as a result of his search for the Rocket. Ultimately, Slothrop's personhood is *deconstructed* by an external agent (i.e. the Rocket), and he becomes a figure of Zone folklore and an archetype of the fatal quest:

There is also the story about Tyrone Slothrop, who was sent into the Zone to be present at his own assembly—perhaps, heavily paranoid voices have whispered, *his time's assembly* [...] He is being broken down instead and scattered. (GR 752)

Slothrop's disintegrated presence at first bears striking resemblance to the hyperobject. Indeed, in the strictest sense, Slothrop has become “massively distributed” through space-time. All that is left of Slothrop are phased representations: “Some believe that fragments of Slothrop have

grown into consistent personae of their own” (GR 757). The fragmented Slothrop bears specific resemblance to the Rocket, which itself was fragmented in order to keep it hidden. However, I would argue that he has not become a hyperobject unto himself because he remains Slothrop, a being that, through reassembly, could still be seen in his entirety. Instead, he has only become another *component* of the Rocket. In his dogged search, he has been subsumed into the Rocket’s viscous fabric entirely to the extent that his physical presence mimetically transmutes.

The strikingly bizarre ending for the novel’s main character, which Luc Herman and Steve Weisenburger deem the “strangest of all plot moves” (210), has puzzled readers and divided scholars. Tony Tanner suggests that Slothrop’s disappearance is yet another affirmation of the fate that awaits the preterite of the novel—they are cast aside, or “thrown overboard,” at the caprice of the System (54). His interpretation, in its focus on the banishment of preterite characters, overlooks the significance of the uncanny resemblance between the disintegrated Slothrop and the Rocket. Slothrop was not cast aside, he was *brought* in. In Heideggerian terminology, Slothrop becomes as “proximally hidden” as the Schwarzgerät. His very reality comes into question, much as the reality of the Rocket, the Schwarzgerät, and the Elect are in question throughout the narrative. Seaman Bodine, a friend of Slothrop, is described as “one of the few who can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature any more. Most of the others gave up long ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept” (GR 755). Slothrop entered the same, shadowy plane of the Rocket—he has become an abstract concept, a chimera of the Zone, a possible hoax. Pynchon’s narrator anticipates the parallel by writing, “It’s doubtful if he [Slothrop] can ever be ‘found’ again, in the conventional sense of ‘positively identified and detained’” (GR 726). The operative term “conventional” would suggest a more unconventional sense of “found,” which indeed is the approach that this essay has advocated—existence cannot be dismissed simply because it is never “positively identified and detained.” The philosophical traditions that prioritize the sense of conventional “finding” reflect previously discussed Pynchon scholarship that treats the Rocket as an illusory figure, metaphor, and symbol. One example of such prioritization can be found in Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger’s *Gravity’s Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (2013) in which the authors, in a discussion on the cultural revolutions occurring at the time of the novel’s creation,

write: “Here then is a vigorous and compelling historical backdrop of social, political, and legal struggle—of resistances to and evasions of a massive and invasive sovereign power against which we must read Slothrop’s [...] disappearance” (205). Conversely, Object-Oriented Ontology hypothesizes through the theory of the hyperobject that the inability for one to identify and detain is an identifying feature of reality itself, as previously mentioned. While readings centered on epistemology such as Herman and Weisenburger’s make for valuable contributions to Pynchon studies, they similarly refuse the possibility of reading Slothrop’s disappearance as a real event, which is a direct causality and further evidence of the Rocket’s real influence.

In searching for the Rocket, Slothrop has, by the end of the novel, lost himself. Just as Morton states that awareness of the hyperobject hampers our abilities to make firm decisions, Slothrop could not help himself from chasing after the Schwarzgerät, although he knew it was “no Grail.” The search for the Schwarzgerät was, at its very core, a search to see how entangled Slothrop was with the past, present, and future of the Rocket. The impulse to search then becomes an ironic attempt to retain the “self”—the more Slothrop comes to understand about the Schwarzgerät, the more his sense of self wanes until he dissolves into an inchoate state.

In a way, dealing with the hyperobject forces one to recognize that there is no such thing as the unaffected individual. In the words of Morton, “we are always inside an object” (17), and “every decision we make is in some sense related to hyperobjects” (20). Decisions about whether or not to use a plastic or paper grocery bag relate directly to, and are made “inside,” Global Warming. The concept of the individual constantly functioning within the multi-faceted influence of unseen forces is the core of each Pynchon novel. *Gravity’s Rainbow* shares and intersects with the narrative of the hyperobject. Questioning (or otherwise ignoring) the existence of the Rocket then exposes subjective modes of self-preservation to be found in epistemological indeterminacy. The logic could run as follows: If the Rocket does not exist, the individual (the Cartesian self) remains unaffected and free to continue existing simply through thinking. But to read Pynchon through OOO, and to read his central abstractions as hyperobjects is to confront the true conflict at the core of each Pynchon novel—connections severely threaten the sense of the free, autonomous, and unaffected individual in a way that extends

beyond the epistemological model and well into the ontological. The hyperobject ceaselessly confronts the individual with an ontological web of interconnectedness in which one's most integral sense of "being" is shattered and re-constructed, just as Slothrop dissolves and becomes inseparably bound to the influence and enigma of the hyperobject. The hyperobject's viscosity promises only to draw the observer further and further into its meshwork, until one realizes that "every decision we make is in some sense related to the hyperobject" (Morton 20). The individual is then subsumed into a global, ontological network and the epistemological concept of "self" slips further and further away until, as in the case of Slothrop, it disappears entirely.

Notes

1 My use of the capital "R" in "Rocket" is used only to distinguish the rocket with serial number 00000 affixed with the Schwarzgerät from the other, much more peripheral V-2 rockets mentioned throughout the novel. Pynchon does similarly, though Charles Hohmann in *Angel and Rocket* (2009) notes that Pynchon's capitalization often happens to "push discourse toward a metaphorical pole" (125), which is an insight that I do not mean to reflect.

2 Hite uses "Center" to denote a central, absolute truth. As used, it is a form of her term "Holy Center," which is an absolute truth with the added property of revelation for a character, or, in the words of Hite, a "terminal revelation" (122). The term derives from *Gravity's Rainbow*, noting that no characters ever reach the "Holy Center" (GR 517).

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