

Thomas Pynchon's Trash Heap: The Pile of Comic Books in Gravity's Rainbow

Since Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow* was published in 1973, numerous literary critics have written essays attempting to unlock the novel's meaning. Many of these essays focus on Pynchon's art of allusion and intertextuality. These essays tend to focus more on his allusions to music, painting, cinema—German expressionism in *Gravity's Rainbow*—and literature; very little attention has been paid to comic books (Stevens, 37). Perhaps this is because unlike music, painting, cinema, or literature; the entirety of the comic book genre had been labeled at this time as inane children's literature or wartime propaganda at best or—according to the famous psychiatrist Frederick Wertham—the source of every social ill that afflicted American children at worst (Morrison, 54). During this period, they were never considered an artistic form in their own right (Beatty, 250). The alienating nature of comic books and their prevalence in the novel is perhaps one of the reasons the novel was denied the Pulitzer Prize for being “unreadable, turgid, overwritten, and obscene (Simonetti 381).”

But the fact that comic books are often associated with “low” culture and shunned from the artistic community is no reason to ignore their appearances in art (Beatty, 250). Comic books are a legitimate “pop phenomenon” and played an important role in American pop culture during their Golden and Silver Age (250). Roy Lichtenstein, a pop artist and contemporary of Pynchon's, became famous by appropriating comic book panels in his paintings during the 1960's in spite of the stigma comic books had within the artistic community (250). Lichtenstein's artistic output during this time—particularly his painting, *Whaam!*, an appropriation from a panel drawn by Irv Novick in a 1962 issue of *All-American Men of War*—eventually caused critics to indirectly look at the comic book form through his work and critically reflect on the form and its

tumultuous purpose in history. The fact that Pynchon's art-form of choice is the novel also allows him to diversify his interactions with the comic book genre. Pynchon dialogues with comic books through the artistic uses of allusion, Lichtenstein-esque appropriated intertextual plot lines, and parodic takes on tropes of the genre—particularly those found in the Golden Age—opening up the form to a new wave of indirect criticism.

A Historical Context: The Gold and Silver Ages of Comic Books (1935-1970)

As *Gravity's Rainbow* is a work of WWII historical fiction written during the turbulent Cold War era; a working knowledge of The Golden and Silver Ages of comic books, is crucial to understanding Pynchon's conversation with the medium within the novel. During the War, servicemen became a new, fast growing audience; and the content of newly produced wartime comic books began to reflect the themes of the War and the Wartime home-front (Levitz, 41). Indeed, comic books became not just a form of escapism, but an important kind of propaganda for Americans: "morally validating the rightness of the American intervention in Europe, while lifting up the soldiers' spirits (Simonetti 380)." Unlike past iterations of domestic vigilante superheroes such as Batman, Wartime superheroes, such as Captain America, had not just the legal right to exist, but congressionally approved permission to *kill* the enemies of the American way: the "Japanazis" as they were sometimes called (Morrison, 39). The shifting definition of what a superhero—or perhaps, just a regular, everyday Wartime hero—was made them wholly relatable to the American soldier. Thus, the superhero concept was hijacked, and superheroes were by and large exploited for the American War cause; and, "during the years of the Second World War, the [new] superhero concept spread like wildfire (52)."

The year 1941 in particular—the months leading up to Pearl Harbor—marked the dawn of the “patriotic superhero” and is the year that several of the now-famous superheroes named in *Gravity’s Rainbow* first appeared in print (Morrison 37). This was the dawn of such superheroes as Captain America and Wonder Woman. It was during this year that Superman’s character retooled from that of an outlaw vigilante in the vein of Batman, to a staunch defender of the American version of status quo (38). Jack Cole’s Plastic Man—a sort of proto-Silver Age hero, whose stories often emphasized transformations or disguises—was a more comedic take on the superhero concept and debuted this year in the first issue of *Police Comics* (Cole, 18). Plastic Man’s interaction with the warfront however was, interestingly enough, limited as he was told, in a fictional letter from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in *Police Comics* #18, that he would better serve his country by performing counterespionage work for the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and, occasionally taking time off to sell war bonds to the American public (Levitz, 273, 275).

After WWII, adults began to stop reading comic books— their usefulness as a means for wartime Propaganda and escapism for soldiers having outlasted them. In order to retain adult leadership, many comic book writers began adding gratuitous scenes of sex and violence in their work; this unfortunately did little to recapture the original adult audience (Stephens, 40). By 1954 a terrible stigma began to attach itself to the word “comic book” and anyone that was remotely associated with it; and social crusaders—led by Frederick Wertham—began to attempt an annihilate the art-form (54). Paul Levitz states that “social crusaders blamed comics as the cause of juvenile delinquency and other social ills (Levitz, 51).” Grant Morrison says that “comic books and their creators were painted as cunning corrupters of children, as monstrous artifacts

crafted by experts to twist young and impressionable minds in the direction of crime, drug addiction, and debauch (Morrison, 54).” Wertham’s, 1954 best-seller *Seduction of the Innocent* perpetuated all of these arguments and ultimately, due to Wertham’s activism and the growing social crusade, a Comics Code was enacted that mirrored the Hays Motion Production Code of 1930 (54). From henceforth, any comic book that did not live up to “the code” would be thrown in the trash bin.

During this time, many of the newly popular genres of comic books, such as Horror, began to be heavily censored—scenes dealing with the walking dead, torture, vampires, ghouls, werewolves, and cannibalism were prohibited (56). But, the War genre notably still thrived, and lines such as *All-American Men of War* and the Iron Man and Captain America issues found in *Tales of Suspense* depicted pro-American war stories that painted a respectful picture of established authority and reflected the established moral code (56-57). It appears that during the 1950’s and 1960’s, the comic book form retained its usefulness as Golden Age style propaganda; however, the audience for it shifted from American soldiers to American children.

Due to Superman’s enduring popularity, kid-friendly and patriotic nature, he was able to thrive in this new environment and several characters from his universe got books of their own; and eventually, roughly twenty-five percent of the entire DC line would star him in some shape or form (Levitz, 22). Perhaps the most notable of these comic spin-offs—when discussing *Gravity’s Rainbow*—was Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olson, a line that debuted in 1954 and starred “Ace Reporter” Jimmy Olson, a super-powerless man with a natural penchant for disguises—most based on his own ingenuity (Morrison, 64). In almost every issue, Jimmy Olson would dawn a disguise—or be transformed by forces outside of his control—and hunt for the lead in

whatever story he was reporting (65). Indeed, the character of Jimmy Olson seems to revel in the Plastic Man-esque themes of transformation and disguise, and his exploits seem almost proto-Slothropian.

The theme of transformation—whether it was based in reality or the fantastic—was by and large a product of the Silver Age. Plastic Man, the proto-Silver Age hero, had a notable resurgence in 1966, albeit Jack Cole-less—the creator having tragically shot himself in 1958—and Comics Code Approved (Levitz, 21; Cole 224). This new Plastic Man line however, simply lacked the edgy spark of the original, and thus had a brief, ten issue run (Levitz 185). Perhaps the reason why the revamped Plastic Man failed to enamor itself to the comic reading public was due to the highly successful Fantastic Four—in particular, their leader, the elastic Mr. Fantastic: rocket scientist transformed into superhero after an encounter with a burst of radiation—with powers identical to those of the old Golden Age icon (90). Indeed, it would not be a stretch to conjecture that Mr. Fantastic was the bridge that brought the Gold and Silver Ages of comic books together, giving the super-powered heroes a new purpose in the Rocket Age.

But in spite of the increasing popularity of comic books in the 1960's, they never had the opportunity to be taken seriously as art, and were still denoted as either child's-fare or trash; and their placement in high-art was relatively unthinkable (Beaty, 250).

Allusion, Appropriation, and Parody: Comics in Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow

During the Pop Art movement of the 1950's and 1960's, artists—Lichtenstein in particular—began to do the unthinkable and turn towards comic books as a source for artistic inspiration and as a means to conduct cultural commentary. These artists painted a highly critical picture of the inert melodramatic seriousness of the form and played off of the idea that comic

book images are strange and unfamiliar (Beaty 265). They mocked the idea that comic books could be viewed as an elevated art-form—by ironically elevating them as an art-form by virtue of painting them—and basically equated them to War advertisements and relegated them to trash heaps; and ultimately paved the way for them to be utilized later by Thomas Pynchon.

Thomas Pynchon pulled comic books out of the garbage and gave them a new life, and a new context, in *Gravity's Rainbow*. The amount of references to fictional comic book characters—both obvious and obscure—found in *Gravity's Rainbow* is staggering and potentially off-putting. Pynchon makes an incredible use of allusion within the novel. The first notable allusion to comics is found in a Batman pun (Pynchon, 11). There are numerous allusions to Plastic Man—stylized as Plasticman in the novel, perhaps to make him more analogous to Superman and Pynchon's own creation: Rocketman—and Plastic Man comics (206, 314, 331, 752). Later in the novel, there are several superhero name drops which include the likes of Wonder Woman, Superman, and Jimmy Olson (676, 751, and 752). More obscure references include Hop Harrigan, the Green Hornet, and the Submariner (117, 376, 752). These constant allusions display Pynchon's familiarity with the superhero genre and enables readers to view him as an authority on the topic—a status Pop artists like Lichtenstein never really had.

Pynchon appropriates the plot lines of comic books in a manner similar to that of Lichtenstein's appropriation of panels in his paintings, in that the content of the comics were used as holistically as their respective mediums allowed. Critics have noted that Pynchon possibly used the plot lines found in comics as both subplots and, in one particular case, fodder for the main plot in *Gravity's Rainbow*—this appropriations could be related to the literary art of intertextuality (Winston, 74; Stephens, 39). Stephen Weisenburger suggests that it is possible that

Pynchon occasionally appropriated the diction and rhythm of Jack Cole's dialogue in Plastic Man for the narrative in *Gravity's Rainbow*; however, while this may be the case, it is difficult to make that argument based on anything other than conjecture (Weisenburger, 133). It is also important to note that while the relationship between the content various comic books and *Gravity's Rainbow* is uncanny, there is little to no explicit evidence that Pynchon appropriated anything for the novel—he certainly has not told anyone if he did—and he could have unquestionably invented all of the following events on his own (Winston, 75).

That being said, it appears probable that the prospect of inserting human cargo into a V2 rocket—a significant plot element in *Gravity's Rainbow*—was not an idea of solely Pynchon's invention but rather, an appropriated plot line from a story titled *If This be Treason* found in issue 70 of Marvel's line *Tales of Suspense* (73). The story in this issue concludes with Captain America, his sidekick, Bucky Barnes, and the sister of an American scientist named Dr. Cedric Rawlings being led into a specialized V2 rocket (74). In the story, Dr. Rawlings assisted a Nazi Major named Uberhart develop the special V2; it is implied that Major Uberhart coerced his assistance by imprisoning his sister earlier in the story (74). Winston connects the story's "V2 with a compartment" found in *If This be Treason* to the Schwarzgerät—V2 rocket 00000—sought throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* and launched, with Gottfried inside it, at the end of the novel (Winston, 74, Pynchon, 750). He also notes that unlike in *If This be Treason*, in *Gravity's Rainbow* the rocket launch is not thwarted by the end of the story; the rocket in fact reaches its destination. This significant difference in the story highlights Pynchon's involvement with the criticism of the comic book hero narrative that has also been noted in the works of Lichtenstein. And indeed, in the universe of *Gravity's Rainbow*, there are no heroes.

Pynchon spends an extended amount of time in Part three of *Gravity's Rainbow*—The Zone—parodying the superhero genre as it was in the Golden Age. Unlike the plot appropriations which are at the end of the day, simply interesting conjectures, Pynchon's penchant for parody is pervasive, and his comment on comic books and their place in American culture is relatively clear. Pynchon parodies tropes of the genre such as the "Superhero Team"—a slightly anachronistic-to-the-plot Silver Age phenomenon—through the entities of The White Visitation, a collection of "clarvoyants, mad magicians, telekinetics, and astral travelers;" and The Floundering Four, an obvious take on The Fantastic Four (40, 675). But perhaps Pynchon's most successful parody rests on the shoulders of Tyrone Slothrop, "superhuman" protagonist of the novel who like Superman, possesses abilities powered by forces in the sky—the former superhero's are powered by the sun; the latter "superhero's" are powered by the Rocket." Slothrop dons several disguises in order to protect his true identity—that of a "super-powered" human rocket detector. Slothrop's numerous personas throughout the novel include other poignant characters such as Ace Reporter Ian Scuffling and Plechazunga, the pig-hero; and his penchant for disguise makes him analogous to the—once again slightly anachronistic-to-the-plot—"Ace Reporter" Jimmy Olson (256, 568). But perhaps the most poignant of Slothrop's alter-egos is that of Rocketman: the Superman of The Zone.

Rocketman's "origin story" takes place during Slothrop's extended stay in occupied Berlin. One day, while walking around the city, Slothrop smells "REEFER" and traces the scent to an Emil "Säure" Bummer—a cat burglar and dooper—and the girls Trudie and Magda (365). Slothrop join the trio, and smokes some dope himself (365). In the midst of the smoking, Trudie and Magda give Slothrop a "pointed helmet with horns, a full cape of green velvet, [and] a pair

of buckskin trousers”—all looted from a stash of Wagnerian opera costumes (365). Slothrop looks at these items, and notes that “without those horns on it, why, this helmet would look just like the nose assembly of the Rocket;” and, that if he altered his boots a little bit, and sewed “a big, scarlet, capital R,” onto the cape, he could become Rocketman (366). He soon does just that. It is fitting that Rocketman’s “origin story” is the result of drug abuse. There are two reasons for this: Rocketman is a parody of the Golden Age superhero, and drugs were a prevalent “evil” that went untouched by superheroes throughout those pre-Comics Code stories; and, many superheroes began as the result of chemical exposure—Plasticman notably got his powers after being doused with chemicals at Crawford Chemical Works in *Police Comics* #1. It is fitting that Rocketman begins his life as the result of exposure to the chemical THC.

But, Rocketman’s relationship with Golden Age superheroes does not end with his parodic origin story; in the following “Rocketman” centered episodes, Rocketman goes on a Golden Age-esque “mission.” This episode reads like an issue of a comic book—albiet an overly high-brow one—from that era, and is almost certainly a parody of that type of narrative. Though it is doubtful that Pynchon explicitly appropriated the plot of a particular issue of a comic book; the episodes contain enough tropes and head nods to the genre to justify reading it as a parody of the form. For instance, if one looks at a random issue from that era—for the purposes of this analysis, say, the Plastic Man story in *Police Comics* #5—one will note that the archetypical elements of the superhero story are represented in both works.

At the beginning of Rocketman’s story he is sent on a mission by an American authority figure: Seaman Bodine of the U.S. destroyer John E. Badass (Pynchon, 370). During the Golden Age, it was not unusual for a superhero to work for American authority figures; in *Police Comics*

#5, Plastic Man takes orders from the chief of police in his home town (Cole, 43). Seaman Bodine “orders” Slothrop to infiltrate the Berlin White House—where Truman is residing—and dig up six kilos of hashish (Pynchon, 370, Weisenburger, 218). Plastic Man’s orders are simpler in *Police Comics* #5; he is told to infiltrate a boat full of members of an all female gang led by Madam Brawn (42). Both character notably get captured in their respective stories: Rocketman is captured by the Russians and is shot up with sodium amyntal, and Plastic Man is captured by the all female gang and forced to smoke several joints (Pynchon, 383; Cole, 45). As a result of their respective captures and forced-druggings, both characters reveal their secret identities to select people: Rocketman is revealed to be Slothrop to Tchitcherine and Plastic Man is revealed to be the gangster Eel O’Brian to Madam Brawn (Pynchon, 390-392; Cole 47). It is interesting to note that Slothrop becomes Rocketman, the superhero when high on weed while Plastic Man, the superhero reverts to his criminal alter ego Eel O’Brian under the same conditions—that juxtaposition raises several questions about the role drugs have on superhero culture. The Rocketman saga ultimately comes to a close when he meets Greta Erdmann, causing him to revert back to Slothrop—or perhaps, change into a new identity: Max Schelepzig (395-397). Plastic Man however, defeats Madame Brawn and, in subsequent issues, loses his identity as Eel O’Brian and permanently identifies as Plastic Man as a member of the FBI. Later, in Part Four of *Gravity’s Rainbow*—The Counterforce—Slothrop will become the Golden Age-style hero Rocketman regalia one last time and join The Floundering Four, thus making the Mr. Fantastic-like bridge between the Gold and Silver Age of comics; and, giving Pynchon a window to parody the topos of the Silver Age-style Superhero Team.

While plot-aspects in Part Three of Pynchon's novel—The Zone—share much in common with Golden Age comics in general; there seems to be an uncanny relationship between *Gravity's Rainbow* and Jack Cole's Plastic Man. In his introduction for *The Plastic Man Archives: Volume 1*, Peter L. Meyer, a noted comic book historian said that Cole's favorite themes—the elements that intrigued him for years—were “the interplay between extreme violence and humor, the capacity to change shape or disguises, the criminal who turns from bad to good, and the continuing counterpoint of beautiful women (Cole, v).” Almost all of these themes are present in *Gravity's Rainbow*. There are notable scenes of slapstick; the novel begins with Teddy Bloat falling out of bed and landing on a mattress that Pirate Prentice barely manages to shove under him (Pynchon, 5). Slothrop's penchant for transformation and disguise is a central theme of the novel, and his lust after beautiful women is often a central plot point. The only notable theme Meyer mentions that is absent from *Gravity's Rainbow* is the “criminal who turns from bad to good.” Ultimately, it seems that in *Gravity's Rainbow*, there are no good guys—no one is turning from bad to good. Ultimately, the last thing one could call Rocketman is a hero; and how can there be heroes in a world where Bruce Wayne's just a batman and not The Batman (11). Rocketman is simply a dooper whose one claim to fame in The Zone is that he rescued six kilos of hashish from under President Truman's window.

Critic Megan Condis says that “although [*Gravity's Rainbow*] is set during the Golden Age, its mode of presentation more closely resembles that of the Bronze Age (post-1970) of comics (Condis, 1171).” Her reasoning behind this assessment rests in the novel's darker subject matter, a trope of the post-1970 comic. While a comment on the Bronze Age of comics may have been intentional on Pynchon's part, it seems unlikely as the novel was published towards the

beginning of that era. It is more likely that Pynchon was viscerally parodying the Golden Age superhero: a pawn of the government, an enemy of narcotics, a slayer of America's enemies, and a voracious, inhuman do-gooder. Rocketman possesses none of those listed qualities; he is in fact, the polar opposite of all of them. Pynchon's parody seems to be commenting on the same kind of Golden Age style propaganda comic books that Lichtenstein's paintings did. The result is a smiler message—one that states that books of that nature are nothing more than propaganda and do not reflect the innate tendencies of Americans in either that or any other era.

Conclusion

Comic books have had a tumultuous history in America. They are pop cultural icons but, they are not what many would consider a part of our artistic natural identity. At best, they are simply intellect-free entertainment and at worst, they are still trash. Pop artists such as Lichtenstein relied on the notion that the strangeness of comics and their use as propaganda would elevate his critical art while keeping comics in the trash. his paintings take the form, and ultimately parody it by placing it in the high art context. So while critics have by and large relegated comic books to the trash bin; Thomas Pynchon grabbed them and threw them into his acclaimed artistic novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, noting there troubled history and problematic tropes while simultaneously thrusting them into the realm of high-art with it. Because Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, is conglomeration of trash, he forces critics to view comics not ironically in a gallery, but among yet even more trash, eloquently described in Pynchon's perfect prose.

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