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Cinematic Auguries of the Third Reich in *Gravity's Rainbow*

The countdown as we know it, 10-9-8-u.s.w., was invented by Fritz Lang in 1929 for the Ufa film Die Frau im Mond. He put it into the launch scene to heighten suspense. "It is another of my damned 'touches,' " Fritz Lang said.

Gravity's Rainbow (p. 753)¹

Fritz Lang's movie about a rocket trip to the moon was remembered with fondness and even reverence by the German rocketeers at Peenemünde during World War II. There being no funds available for the development of rockets for space travel such as they dreamed of, many of these scientists felt themselves to be working on military rockets *faute de mieux*. Some of them had advised Lang on technical matters during the filming of *Die Frau im Mond*, and they regarded that movie not as mere childish fantasy, but as pure prophecy. It is not surprising, then, to discover in Ernst Klee and Otto Merk's *The Birth of the Missile* that the first successfully flown V-2 rocket, launched October 3rd, 1942, bore the emblem "*Die Frau im Mond*."²

Franz Pökler, a fictitious member of the staff at Peenemünde in Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*, greets the movie on its first appearance with something less than total reverence. Seeing it with his wife, "Franz was amused, condescending. He picked at technical points. He knew some of the people who'd worked on the special effects" (p. 159). Yet for all his superiority on this occasion, Pökler is fascinated by movies; in fact he particularly dotes on Fritz Lang movies as long as his favorite actor, Rudolf Klein-Rogge, is in them.

While Klein-Rogge was not in *Die Frau im Mond*, he did appear in a number of Lang's other films during the 1920's, including *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* (1922), *Die Nibelungen* (1923-24), and *Metropolis* (1926). These movies, along with Lang's *Der Müde Tod*, are all cited in Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* as examples of films that expose "deep psychological dispositions predominant in Germany from 1918 to 1933. . . dispositions which influenced the course of events during that time."³

Kracauer argues that characters like the master criminal Dr. Mabuse, or the mad scientist Rotwang (in *Metropolis*), illustrate a growing fascination with or acceptance of the evil genius or tyrant. The fatalistic plot of *Der Müde Tod*, on the other hand, manifests a spirit of passivity before "fate" or "destiny." *Die Nibelungen* also reveals the inexorability of fate, in addition to eliciting horror at the anarchic indulgence of instinct and passion (Kracauer, pp. 81-95 and *passim*). The sociological and political relevance of these "dispositions" will be evident. When Pynchon makes these particular movies the favorites of the politically apathetic cineaste Franz Pökler, he seems to have Kracauer's theories in the back of his mind.

Like many of his fellow rocket technicians, Pökler pays little attention to politics—even when his leftist wife is sent to a concentration camp. Yet *Metropolis* is described as

exactly the world Pökler and evidently quite a few others were dreaming about those days, a Corporate City-state where technology was the source of power, the engineer worked closely with the administrator, the masses labored unseen far underground, and ultimate power lay with a single leader at the top, fatherly and benevolent and just . . . (p. 578)

The picture fits Nazi Germany, with non-Aryan slave labor at the bottom and a paternal *Führer* at the top. Smaller versions of *Metropolis* will flourish under Nazism. Pökler will be one of the engineer-elite in the *Raketen Stadt* at Peenemünde, whose slave labor comes from Trassenheide; and subsequently in the even more *Metropolis*-like complex at Nordhausen, whose literally underground factory is worked by slave labor from the Dora camp.

Pynchon's most important references to *Metropolis* and the other Lang movies come when Tyrone Slothrop, the book's protagonist, encounters the derelict Pökler after V-E Day. Slothrop hopes to find out something about the mad scientist who experimented on him in infancy, one Laszlo Jamf, with whom Pökler had studied at the *Technische Hochschule* in Munich before the war. But the half-mad engineer "keeps getting sidetracked off into talking about the movies, German movies Slothrop has never heard of, much less seen . . . yes here's some kind of fanatical movie hound all right" (p. 577, Pynchon's ellipsis). Pökler even thinks General Eisenhower on the radio sounds like Clark Gable.

Jamf, Pökler eventually discloses, was an exponent of what Pynchon dryly calls "National Socialist chemistry" (p. 578). Recalling Jamf's injunctions to his students to be not tame technologists but scientific "lions," Pökler is reminded of his personal idol, the actor Rudolf Klein-Rogge, who played Rotwang, the unhinged but leonine scientist of *Metropolis*. Pökler is

taken with Klein-Rogge playing the mad inventor that Pökler and his codisciples under Jamf longed to be—indispensable to those who ran the *Metropolis*, yet, at the end, the untamable lion who could let

it all crash, girl, State, masses, himself, asserting his reality against them all, in one last roaring plunge from rooftop to street. (p. 578)

Calmly rational, Pynchon calls this "a curious potency." It is, of course, no "potency" at all, but the wholly negative final gesture of a lunatic. Yet Pökler finds it attractive. The idea that seems to appeal most strongly to Pökler here is that Rotwang "asserts his reality." Not his individuality or his importance, but his *reality*, and not *to*, but *against* his fellow characters. Since they have no reason to doubt his reality, the phrase must mean that Rotwang asserts his refusal to be dismissed as a two-dimensional illusion to the audience of which Pökler is a part. It is a curious locution, and Pökler probably would not be able to explain it very well, because he has long since ceased making distinctions between movies and life. Movies, dreams, and waking life all flow together for him to make a single phantasmagorical reality.

Thus it does not matter that, watching the nearly 7000 meters of Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, Pökler periodically dozes:

He kept falling asleep, waking to images that for half a minute he could make no sense of at all—a close-up of a face? a forest? the scales of the Dragon? a battlescene? Often enough, it would resolve into Rudolf Klein-Rogge, ancient Oriental thanatomanic Attila, head shaved except for a topknot, bead-strung, raving with grandiloquent gestures and those enormous bleak eyes. . . . Pökler would nod back into sleep with bursts of destroying beauty there for his dreams to work on, speaking barbaric gutturals for the silent mouths, smoothing the Burgundians into something of the meekness, the grayness of certain crowds in the beerhalls back at the T. H. . . . and wake again—it went on for hours—into some further progression of carnage, of fire and smashing. . . .

On the way home, by tram and foot, his wife bitched at Pökler for dozing off, ridiculed his engineer's devotion to cause-and-effect. How could he tell her that the dramatic connections were really all there, in his dreams? (pp. 578-79, Pynchon's ellipses)

One wonders to what extent Pökler's countrymen found their dreams invaded by such images. Pökler himself will probably not even notice the gradual shift of scenes such as these off the screens of movie theatres and sleeping minds and onto the stage of the real world. After 1933 movies like this one will seem to be interacting not only with Pökler's dreams, but with the very life of his country. And by 1939 the "carnage, fire and smashing" and the cowed "Burgundians" will have completed the transition into real life.

Pökler's admiration of Attila the Hun and the other Klein-Rogge characters shows us why he is so dominated by the sadistic and demented Major Weissmann, his superior in the rocket program. Desiring to launch his catamite Gottfried in a V-2, Weissmann assembles a secret team, which includes Pökler, to make the necessary modifications in the rocket. Horst Achtfaden, another of Weissmann's subordinates, reveals under interrogation that all the members of the team "were given code-names. Characters from a movie, somebody said. The other aerodynamics people were 'Spörri' and 'Hawasch.' I was called 'Wenk' " (p. 455). These

are characters from Lang's *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*; as the mad scheme's mastermind, Weissmann would have designated himself Dr. Mabuse. In the movie, Dr. Mabuse was played by Pökler's "lion," Klein-Rogge.

Pynchon's straining of this movie through Pökler's fevered mind makes clear the way in which the exotically mad criminal genius was made an object of fascination in the German cinema, while directors like Lang refused, as Kracauer points out, to confer obvious moral superiority on the forces representing the law (Kracauer, p. 83). Dr. Mabuse's opposite number is State Prosecutor von Wenk, portrayed by "matinee idol Bernhardt Goetzke. . . who played tender, wistful bureaucratic Death in *Der Müde Tod*" (p. 579, my ellipsis). And Pökler recognizes von Wenk for the tame cat he is. He is "too gentle for the jaded countess he coveted—but Klein-Rogge *jumped in*, with all claws out, drove her effeminate husband to suicide, seized her, threw her on his bed, the languid bitch—*took her!*" (p. 579). Pökler's sadistic vehemence here reveals feelings of impotence and insignificance that were common in Weimar Germany, feelings whose continual exacerbation in the years between the wars made Hitler's violent reassertion of the honor of the Fatherland inevitable. Presumably Pökler is not alone in the delight he experiences when Mabuse rapes the countess; he and his countrymen will feel a similar release at the rape of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France.

Nor is the rape in *Dr. Mabuse* the only cinematic sadism that thrills Pökler. He experiences the same kind of excitement watching the flagellation and ravishment of another noblewoman, a "captive baroness," in a movie entitled *Alpdrücken*: "yes, bitch—yes, little bitch—poor helpless *bitch* you're coming can't stop yourself now I'll whip you again whip till you *bleed*" (p. 397). This movie is imaginary, as is its director, Gerhardt von Göll, who is himself an important character in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Von Göll is of special interest to us, however, because he is apparently modeled on Fritz Lang—the two having more in common than the effect their work has on Franz Pökler. The work of each lends itself, in Pynchon's eyes, to anagogical interpretation. Because the countdown, "10-9-8-u.s.w.," is analogous to the mystic's ten-stage approach to the *Merkabah*, or Throne of God, Pynchon ascribes Cabalistic significance to Lang's *Die Frau im Mond*. Von Göll's use of double shadows in *Alpdrücken*, on the other hand, he describes as "clever Gnostic symbolism" (p. 429).

The two directors are closest in their difficulties with the Nazi bureaucracy over film titles. One of von Göll's seems to impugn the Third Reich: "*Das Wütend Reich [The Mad Kingdom]*, how could they sit still for that? Endless negotiating, natty little men in Nazi lapel pins trooping through, interrupting the shooting" (p. 394). Never mind that the Reich so described is not Hitler's, but Ludwig II's. This incident is evidently based on one of Fritz Lang's anecdotes. Denied the use of a studio, Lang got into a heated exchange with a crypto-Nazi:

... at that moment I grabbed his lapel and felt something; I turned it over and there was a swastika button—he was a member of the Nazi Party. And they thought—blindly—that the title, *Murderer Among Us*, meant a picture against the Nazis.⁴

Lang was more fortunate than von Göll. When it came out that the movie was to be about a child-murderer, he was allowed to proceed with the filming. Nevertheless, he changed the title to *M* (1931).

But the film after *M*, a sequel to *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler*, was suppressed altogether, and Lang—again like von Göll—found it politic to leave Nazi Germany. Siegfried Kracauer explains why:

In 1932, Lang in *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse*, resuscitated his supercriminal to mirror the obvious Mabuse traits of Hitler. Through this second Mabuse film the first one is revealed to be not so much a document as one of those deep-rooted premonitions which spread over the German postwar screen. (Kracauer, p. 84)

If we return now to that earlier Mabuse film and its votary, Franz Pökler, we will see Pynchon rendering Kracauer's broad sociology in individual terms. Pynchon's meditation on *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler* and its effect on Pökler concludes with a singular passage which sums up the engineer's tendency not to distinguish between life, dreams, and movies:

Mabuse was the savage throwback, the charismatic flash no Sunday-afternoon Agfa plate could ever bear, the print through the rippling solution each time flaring up to the same annihilating white (Piscean depths Pökler has cruised dream and waking, beneath him images of everyday Inflation dreariness, queues, stockbrokers, boiled potatoes in a dish, searching with only gills and gut—some nervous drive toward myth he doesn't even know if he believes in—for the white light, ruins of Atlantis, intimations of a truer kingdom). . . . (p. 579, Pynchon's ellipsis)

The passage confuses slightly by shifting from movie terms to still-photography terms. The "Sunday-afternoon Agfa plate" is the picture taken of a bourgeois family group by a photographer. But Mabuse cannot participate in this stupidly middle-class ritual. Like the Nazis, he is violently anti-bourgeois, and some powerful, atavistic aura about him defies parlor photography. The print always comes out *white*—the color, in the chromatic symbology of *Gravity's Rainbow*, of fantastic death.

Pökler, in his sleepy movie-watching, has been figuratively swimming in a sea of film-developing solution (his name suggests that he is pickled by it). These depths are "Piscean" because, as his wife has revealed 400 pages previously (p. 154), Pökler's zodiacal sign is Pisces. From the bottom of this sea everyday reality comes through to him as photographic "images" among which he seeks the one developing into apocalyptic whiteness, nominally Dr. Mabuse, but ultimately Pökler's personal "white man," Major Weissmann. The latter, we hypothesized, may have taken 'Dr. Mabuse' as a code-name. His SS code-name, "Blicero," is complementary, for it is derived from 'Blicker,' the nickname the early Germans gave to Death. They saw him white: bleaching and blankness" (p. 322).

In a larger sense the image of bleached death maturing in the *Inflationzeit* is that definitive Klein-Rogge character Adolf Hitler, the historical madman that caps a long line of cinematic ones. Under whatever name, this personification of whiteness reigns in a "truer kingdom," which is both the Third Reich, and the Kingdom of Death. The phrase anticipates "that other Kingdom" (p. 722) to which Weissmann eventually succeeds in dispatching Gottfried. All of Pökler's favorite Klein-Rogge characters, along with his chemistry teacher, court or espouse some fantastic, non-bourgeois death, a death that is at once the ultimate reality and the ultimate suspension of reality. It was in "defiant death" that Rotwang asserted his reality. "Thanatomaniaic Attila," too, though Pynchon does not mention it, commits suicide by plunging into his flaming palace.

Metropolitan inventor Rothwang, King Attila, Mabuse der Spieler, Prof-Dr. Laszlo Jamf, all their yearnings aimed the same way, toward a form of death that could be demonstrated to hold joy and defiance, nothing of bourgeois Goetzian death. . . . (p. 579, my ellipsis)

Bernhardt Goetzke had played a *Weimarisch* fantasy of respectable mortality in *Der Müde Tod*: "tender, wistful bureaucratic Death." But the regime that succeeded the Weimar Republic, heralded as it was by the cinematic Corybants of death parading across Pökler's retinae, would bring with it a much less effete conception of mortality. Indeed, an effete attitude toward Thanatos would be the last thing one could ascribe to the Nazi ethos.

This fascination with "joyous, defiant death" is merely the last and most bizarre of the Pöklerian movie responses that seem to parallel, at every point, those "deep psychological dispositions" which Siegfried Kracauer found reflected in German films of the 20's and 30's. Yet in adducing Kracauer to illuminate Pynchon we risk doing Pynchon's art a disservice, because the relationship between German political destiny and the German cinema of the *Inflationzeit* cannot—let us admit—be as unequivocal as it is made out to be in *From Caligari to Hitler*. Kracauer has been criticized for the somewhat simplistic correlation he draws between what is, after all, merely a popular entertainment, and the psychological tenor—surely not homogeneous—of an entire nation. Pynchon, however, cannot be faulted on this score because he says nothing explicit about sociological and historical issues. Adhering to what Henry James calls the author's instinct for indirect presentation, he is content to show the effect of a few highly suggestive films on the mind of a single confused German engineer. By revealing Pökler's excited responses to sadism, tyranny, and violence on the one hand, and to bourgeois inertia, meekness, and fecklessness on the other, Pynchon speaks volumes about currents abroad in Weimar Germany—without ever descending to facile sociology or to generalizations about the German "collective soul." Pynchon demonstrates mental proclivities, then, much more persuasively than does Kracauer, the broadness of whose scope

detracts from his cogency. And while that author may have influenced him, it is to Fritz Lang alone, his fellow artist, that Pynchon turns for his working material—the images he allows to play before the eyes and in the mind of his character, Franz Pökler.

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NOTES

¹Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973). Page references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

²Trans. T. Schoeters (New York: Dutton, 1965), pp. 32-33.

³(Princeton: 1971), p. v. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁴Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* (New York: Praeger, 1969), p. 127.

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