The Shadow of the Hyperobject in Thomas Pynchon's V. and Gravity's Rainbow

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The Shadow of the Hyperobject in Thomas Pynchon's V. and Gravity's Rainbow

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BY

Trevor Martinson

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Introduction: Unambiguous

“Thomas Pynchon is an enigma shrouded in a mystery veiled in anonymity.”
- CNN, “Where’s Thomas Pynchon?”

It could make for a nice flourish to introduce early into my thesis a quote by Thomas Pynchon, the author himself discussing his work, perhaps through an interview with *The Paris Review* or Charlie Rose. Even better would be a quote from the author that, in some way, summarizes what is surely an idiosyncratic philosophy of writing. Such insight would provide for an initial understanding from which my thesis could then operate. However, such a quote would be difficult to come by as Pynchon has never given an interview and only three known photographs are in circulation, all of which predate the publication of his first novel. Thomas Pynchon has mostly distanced himself from the public, yet he has simultaneously penetrated the literary imagination of the 20th and 21st centuries. His entire oeuvre stands as a cornerstone to postmodern literature as we now know it, having inspired authors such David Foster Wallace, David Mitchell, and Dave Eggers.

However, Thomas Pynchon is not entirely removed from the world. When Salman Rushdie, following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, was threatened with a fatwa declared by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Pynchon joined a fray of writers who wrote to Rushdie, supporting him and his work (“Words”). Also a fan of popular culture, Pynchon has lent his voice to two episodes of *The Simpsons*. In one of the more mythic stories, CNN tracked Pynchon down and caught him on video camera walking the streets of Manhattan. Before airing, however, Pynchon called the studio and asked that the film not be shown, stating, “Let me be unambiguous” (“Where’s Thomas Pynchon?”). In
refusing the opportunity for someone the opportunity to speculate, Pynchon is not
entirely absent, but neither is he at all accessible.

Yet the absence of the author is, in some sense, entirely appropriate. His absence
perfectly puts into practice an assumed literary aesthetic that each of his novels dutifully
inherit. In his first novel *V.* (1963), written while he worked for Boeing as an engineer
after serving in the Navy and graduating from Cornell with a degree in English, the
characters seek a mysterious woman who goes only by the eponymous name of “V.” That
same year began Pynchon’s reputation as a hermit and recluse after *TIME* magazine sent
a photographer to get a photo of Pynchon, who subsequently, as the story goes, hopped
on a bus to Mexico, where he would remain for some years. The photographer, like any
one of Pynchon’s characters, was sent on a wild chase after something he would not find.
The uncanny parallel of Pynchon’s reclusive tendencies and his plotlines is in no way
negligible.

Molly Hite, one of the most prolific Pynchon scholars, aptly calls the persistent
absence of central identities within Pynchon’s novels the “trope of unavailable insight”
(121). The trope is highly idiosyncratic and, in some ways, it has come to define his
writing. Following *V.*, Pynchon wrote *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), which gained more
popularity for the enigmatic author. In the novel, the main character, Oedipa Maas, seeks
after a shadowy rogue postal firm, the Trystero. As may be expected, the Trystero never
emerges from the shadows; characters and readers alike are denied revelation of the
growing conspiracy. Pynchon’s third (and arguably most popular) novel was *Gravity’s
Rainbow* (1974). At the center of the novel is a Rocket, which, like the Trystero, is
doggedly sought after, generating numerous side-narratives and burlesque episodes, but
the Rocket is never found in its entirety. I could continue offering examples of this trope playing out in Pynchon’s work, but it is not necessary as each novel follows a similar pattern. An avid reader of Pynchon reads his work knowing they will be denied full access to the mysteries at the center, but it is part of the fascination. There is something irresistible in the absolute denial of epiphany.

Hite also notes how scholars and readers alike are drawn to Pynchon’s inconclusive texts. “The novels all capitalize on a sense of insufficiency,” she writes, “and in doing so Pynchon has effectively created a gap that most of his scholarship has sought to address” (121). Hite outlines three approaches to Pynchon that scholars typically take in analyzing the novels. “The first approach,” she writes, “assumes that each novel does contain a central, controlling insight, but that the insight is so cunningly encoded in the text that it must be brought to light by an elaborate process of translation,” which she believes to be problematic because it results in plural interpretations, all claiming legitimacy as the one true “Center.”1 The second “claims that the novels do not express central insight because the insight is simply too horrible to face,” which, according to Hite, “represent[s] retreats from an unpalatable truth and serve[s] to counsel blissful ignorance as a fitting response to a world that is ‘really’ either intolerably orderly or intolerably chaotic.” The third “maintains that the novels do not express the unavailable insight because the insight is inexpressible. Language is inadequate to convey the full truth about present-day reality” (122). Hite’s final suggestion for how to read

1 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. The term “Holy Center” derives from Gravity’s Rainbow (517). Needless to say, Hite notes that no characters ever reach the “Holy Center.”
Pynchon's novels is an interesting one, but one that I will ultimately break from:

"Because of 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). It is a promising interpretation at first sight. It fits neatly into the postmodern theoretical context in which the novels are written—an opening up of plural meanings that are capable of coexisting. Further, it is well-grounded in that the Holy Center, or the point of epiphany and full realization (stumbling across the Rocket would be such a realization), is unavailable to the characters of the novels. Yet this thesis aims to challenge Hite's notion of unavailability. Her epistemological suggestion, which echoes a majority of Pynchon scholarship, proposes unavailability as parallel to unreality. I argue instead that the abstractions at the center of each Pynchon novel, which are inseparable from epiphany, are real. Just because it is not depicted or represented in its entirety does not mean there is not a real presence emanating from a real thing.

Western philosophy has long valorized epistemological thought over the ontological. The Cartesian self ("I think therefore I am") has enjoyed a dominant position and is reflected in postmodern philosophy, which is well-known for questioning a reality that extends beyond oneself, a derivative, perhaps, of a largely human-centered philosophy. Whatever one does not encounter directly, its reality, through epistemology, can be questioned or challenged. Graham Harman notes the seemingly inveterate anthropocentric approach to conceptualizing the world in discussing Kant's legacy in current philosophy: "[W]hat is truly characteristic of Kant’s position is that the human-world relation takes priority over all others" (The Quadruple Object 45). Though postmodern philosophy is nuanced, a major component of it is nicely encapsulated in
Lyotard’s famous “incredulity towards metanarratives,” or the incredulity towards truths and realities shared by all. Postmodernism, baring its epistemological foundations, asks how can someone know there are real things out in the world? Or, a more germane question in regards to the Cartesian self, “How can I know there are things that are outside of me?” The focus on epistemology dominates Pynchon scholarship, though it rarely announces itself as such.

Oftentimes, Pynchon scholarship, if it looks to the entities at the center of each novel, reduces them to metaphors or symbols. The epistemological readings dismiss their reality, nullify their presence, and the entities in turn become a representation of post-war anxieties, American imperialism, etc. In one case, Richard Poirier, in a discussion on *Gravity’s Rainbow*, suggests that the Rocket at the heart of the novel is simply a representational assembly of “life, love, sex, death.” Poirier’s declaration, while frustratingly broad, is representative of current scholarship. I do not mean to suggest that such readings are without value or even that they are inherently wrong. What I do mean to suggest is that there is an enormous terrain of Pynchon’s works left unexplored by scholars, one which recognizes the legitimacy of the central entities as something real, and in doing so sustains an analysis of ontological uncertainty unfolding throughout each novel. To recognize the “legitimacy” of the central entities, which are most often inanimate objects, requires a system of analysis that requires less an understanding of objects qua humanity and more an understanding of objects qua objects.

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 topic is the title characters, the nature of objects, or “things” as he
sometimes refers to them, proliferates 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, “Heidegger’s account of equipment gives birth to an ontology of objects themselves” (1). Harman fleshes out an “ontology of objects” in Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects, (2002). 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 anthropocentrism² and avers that all entities share the similar characteristic of a sublime unknowability, an indefinable essence (here, and elsewhere, OOO breaks from epistemology). 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

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² Anthropocentrism, as the name suggests, is the time-honored tradition of considering human beings as more significant in the scheme of existence than other types of being.
calls for constant critique of conclusions derived from prioritizing human consciousness and puts in their place conclusions that recognize the legitimacy and importance of thinking beyond the privileged relation of human-world.

One prominent figure of the OOO movement, Timothy Morton, engages the pressing issue of global warming, coining the term “hyperobject” to describe an entity such as global warming that is spread thoroughly throughout space and time in relation to human experience. The hyperobjects most notable trait is their inaccessibility. Due to their massive dispersal through time and space, Morton writes, “hyperobjects are contradictory beasts. [...] Hyperobjects cannot be thought of as occupying a series of now-points ‘in’ time or space. They confound the social and psychic instruments we use to measure them” (47). Like Pynchon’s central entities, hyperobjects refuse total comprehension and total capture. They move like a shadow along the periphery of human awareness.

The hyperobject, massive in relation to human existence, is unsurprisingly difficult to summarize satisfactorily in one or two paragraphs. Thus, the next chapter will work to provide a better understanding of the hyperobject while simultaneously applying it to Pynchon’s work in order to gain an understanding of the novels’ discussions on objects, inanimate beings, and how humans understand and encounter the ontological statuses of not only themselves, but the world around them.

Object-Oriented Ontology has yet to be applied to Pynchon in scholarly work. However, OOO lends itself incredibly well to the study of Pynchon, whose novels seem deeply concerned with the mystery and essence of objects. Instead of settling on symbol or metaphor, OOO calls for recognizing objects, whether real or fictitious, as objects unto
themselves. OOO refuses to, in the words of Graham Harman, reduce objects to “despicable nullities” (*The Quadruple Object*) Symptomatic of current “correlanist” practice within Pynchon scholarship, Richard Poirier reduces the Rocket of *Gravity’s Rainbow* to a symbol of “life, love, sex, death,” an abstraction imprinted on human consciousness.

Much of this thesis will further elucidate the concept of the hyperobject as it relates to two of Pynchon’s novels, but first I will redirect the discussion to Hite’s previously discussed trope of “unavailable insight.” The term itself notes the human-centered thinking in relation to Pynchon’s texts: what is unavailable is unusable without being transformed into metaphor. But for Pynchon to sustain the dichotomy of unavailability and insight at the center of each novel, he offers plenty of clues, hints, and even direct mentions of those unavailable entities. Much of *The Crying of Lot 49* consists of Oedipa’s sifting through such signs, hoping (futilely) that they will somehow lead her directly to the source—the Trystero. What is especially poignant about the search is Oedipa’s constant dilemma, as noted by Edward Mendelson. She is constantly left to affirm or deny the sacredness of what she sees. In using the term “sacred,” Mendelson refers to the deity-like status of the Trystero in the context of Oedipa’s quasi-religious quest. Either the signs Oedipa comes across are true signs of the Trystero or they are random signs with no inherent meaning unto themselves, an option that comes with the implication that all meaning is somehow derivative of her paranoid psyche. The dilemma is the same dilemma that this thesis addresses. Scholars suggest that *The Crying of Lot 49* is an experiential novel in that it forces the reader into the position of Oedipa, affirming or denying the existence of the Trystero based upon the sparse evidence available.
However, I would like to amend such an observation to suggest that scholars are put in a similar position. They, too, are left to either affirm or deny the existence of the Trystero based on their philosophy of accessibility, which is founded on a human-centered view of the world. To the epistemologically informed scholar (which, I argue, is almost each and every Pynchon scholar) it is impossible to say for sure whether or not the signs truly point to the Trystero or that the Trystero exists at all. There is no way to know for sure that there exists a reality beyond Oedipa’s own. The world outside of individual perception thus narrows indefinitely until all that remains are hypothetical questions concerning reality. But to the ontologically focused scholar, there can exist real things, regardless of humankind’s access to them.

Choosing *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the basis for my thesis may seem based on unabashed masochism. The two novels are known for being particularly dense and sprawling, each boasting an enormous cast of characters, an enormous reach of several plotlines, and Pynchon’s idiosyncratic discursive/regressive narrative arc. Yet this is precisely the reason the two novels were chosen. At the heart of each is a central entity that, amazingly, holds together an incredibly tortuous narrative: the mysterious lady V. and the Rocket. Moreover, each of these central entities is vastly different yet uncannily similar to the other, allowing for an analysis that recognizes, true to the approach of OOO, the inherent unknowability of all objects, which, in itself, expands one’s understanding concerning Pynchon’s work.

In Chapter One, I discuss *Gravity’s Rainbow.* The novel’s mysterious Rocket and Schwarzgerät offer an excellent platform to discuss the hyperobject, its various traits, and
its malignant magnetism. Doing so offers a fresh perspective on some of Pynchon’s favored motifs such as paranoia, predestination, and most importantly, connectivity.

Chapter Two looks to *V.*, a lesser-studied text in comparison to *Gravity’s Rainbow*. In *V.*, Pynchon most clearly deals with the dichotomy of the animate and inanimate world, which he further juxtaposes atop the mysterious presence of the lady V. Analyzing lady V. allows for an expanded commentary on how the hyperobject relates to the agency of both the animate and inanimate, as well as how the hyperobject contributes to conceptualizations of “world” as we understand it.

While analyzing Pynchon’s central entities as metaphors and symbols has proven fruitful in the past, the approach has removed the entities further and further away from any claim to reality; to quote Latour, “The question [of critical theory] was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism” (231). There still exists a vast expanse of unexplored terrain through analyzing the texts from an ontological viewpoint, one which looks specifically to the objects for their contribution to the understanding of a story. In doing so, a new reading of Pynchon is offered, one which explores a vast world of ontological connection, disruption, and dissolution.
Chapter 1:
Autonomy and Dissolution of “Self” in Gravity’s Rainbow

“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 Rocket (serial number 00000) 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 their interpretations of the novel on the mysterious Rocket (coupled with the equally mysterious Schwarzgerät), scholarship is divided on matters concerning the Rocket’s significance. Richard Poirier offers a somewhat typified proclamation, “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.” However, Poirier ultimately settles on the disappointingly vague conclusion that the Rocket is simply a representational assembly of “sex, love, life, death” (173). Similarly, exemplary 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 a wide array of possible symbols for the Rocket and its Schwarzgerät. Yet the Rocket itself, devoid of metaphorical meaning, has remained ambiguous. Poirier’s declaration of the Rocket, though quite broad, is representative of current scholarship. While previous scholars’ metaphorical and symbolical interpretations of the Rocket have proven interesting, I believe there is also a need to recognize the Rocket free of metaphor or symbolism in order to sustain a discussion on the novel’s grappling with notions of connectivity and autonomy. However, the lack of scholarship on the Rocket itself is understandable.

The Rocket is purposefully kept ever so slightly out of arm’s reach from both the characters who seek it and the reader. As noted in the last chapter, Molly Hite has deemed the maneuver Pynchon’s “trope of unavailable insight,” 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* (2004), and the Golden Fang Enterprise of *Inherent Vice* (2009) 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 fractal plot that boasts over 400 characters. Pynchon reveals very little about the mysterious device. The Schwarzgerät is a component of a V-2 rocket (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 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 Schwarzgerät to break down and analyze the motivations of the characters that seek after it, rather than analyzing the rocket itself. In some ways, the Rocket and Schwarzgerät become, for these critics, a very oblique symbol for American society in general—a de-coder ring to unlock the complexities of postwar psychological, spiritual, and physiological states. While their approach has proved interesting since the novel’s release, resulting in some fascinating analyses, there remains much to be said concerning the Rocket qua Rocket.

In my previous chapter, I discussed Hite’s generalized analysis of the various approaches to Pynchon’s texts. Her discussion offers a crucial insight: none of these approaches treat the Center as something real, beyond the characters’ perception of it. Indeed, to make a claim of “reality” beyond individual perception about a postmodern text seems a special branch of heresy in that postmodern texts often relish indeterminate reality—such heresy seems even more scandalous in the context of a Pynchon novel. Moreover, to confront the Rocket and Schwarzgerät fully may be avoided simply because it could be seen as a fruitless endeavor, or 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 the long-standing approach to analyzing *Gravity’s Rainbow*. 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 can reveal about the Rocket’s qualities and characteristics. By then observing the qualities and characteristics of the Rocket itself, I advocate a new approach to Pynchon, one which involves recognizing the legitimacy and reality of the central abstractions (e.g., the Rocket) and questioning the long-held postmodern practice of disavowing the existence of a discernible reality. Avoiding claims of reality due to a lack of presence is a product of Western philosophy’s long-standing valorization of the epistemological over the ontological (Harman 45). As this chapter 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 Molly Hite’s first listed approach in the above discussion 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 according to the ontological perspective that the Rocket is a Rocket and the Schwarzgerät is a Schwarzgerät. Unlike previous scholars, I suggest that Rocket does not serve a purpose outside itself; rather, it exists and has importance in its own right, free of metaphor or symbol. My focus is on the properties, characteristics, and perceptions that will help illuminate the Rocket’s pith-function 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.

Zeug and Gerät: Heidegger’s Objects

In his tool analysis of *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers the 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). While a full summary of the tool analysis isn’t necessary for current purposes, 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, respectively. Heidegger states that, while ontologically explicating a thing, one must realize that those things that we encounter are “proximally hidden” 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.

As Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was published in 1927, it is likely that Thomas Pynchon would have encountered it, either through his university years at Cornell (1953-1957) or through his own, personal studies. The latter possibility could be just as likely, considering that many have quipped that to read Pynchon, one must have an encyclopedia at hand. Regardless, Pynchon’s encyclopedic knowledge extends into philosophy. He mentions several philosophers throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*, including multiple mentions of Leibniz, Heidegger’s intellectual predecessor in metaphysics and ontology. In a recent article, Patrick McHugh suggests that Pynchon used 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 chapter, but it holds true that there are uncanny parallels between Heidegger’s ontological work and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Specifically, there are uncanny 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

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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”—both Zeug and Gerät can refer to equipment, tool, or instrument. In Gravity’s Rainbow one main character, Enzian (a native speaker of German), translates Schwarzgerät for the English-speaking Slothrop as “Blackinstrument” (369).

Lauded for his both overt and subtle wordplay, Pynchon seems to point to the ontological character of the Rocket and Schwarzgerät by means of a very subtle nod to Heidegger. Pynchon possesses an intimate understanding of the German language, which would allow for such subtle wordplay between Zeug and Gerät. His linguistic enterprise 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). To point to every example of Pynchon’s play on the German language would prove unnecessarily exhaustive when one single passage illustrates it best. 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. (397)

Pynchon’s word-play with the German language offers some needed, 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 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 manifestation 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” (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: “hyperobject.” At once strikingly familiar to Heidegger’s object, yet hauntingly different, the hyperobject offers the most chillingly accurate analogue of the elusive Rocket and its Schwarzgerät.
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 allow 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” (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.”

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, an object must be treated as an object to avoid the danger present in qualifying ontological existence. 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. To treat something as elusive as the Rocket as *something* 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 Schwarzgerät 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 not only does injustice to individual things, but is also misleading: “[T]here are real things for sure, just not as we know them or knew them” (4). The equivocation of what is real is a byproduct of postmodern epistemology, encased in the simple question, “How can I know there are (or are not) real things?” (Morton 9). OOO boldly asserts that we *do* know. Harman, writing on Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* (the being of humankind), states, “The 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!” (Pynchon 690). There are real things, and often, a “trace of unreality” is a paradoxical indication of them. In looking to the ontological character of the Rocket and forfeiting the hedged security of epistemology, a new Rocket emerges as part of a new text, one which severely threatens the notion of the autonomous self in a highly connected world.

The manner by which one can begin to note the essential identity of the Schwarzgerät 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” (244). The hyperobject can be noted by its various effects, yet never seen 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). While partaking of the essential withdrawn nature found in everyday objects (a hallmark of Heidegger-inspired OOO), the hyperobject distinguishes itself through its massive distribution and massive effects. 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 all of these examples, the 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. To map the existence of such a hyperobject, one need only look at its effects. To look at the hyperobject’s effects, however, first requires an understanding of its characteristics according to Morton’s taxonomy: viscosity, nonlocality, phasing, interobjectivity, and temporal undulation.
The characters’ induction into the Rocket conspiracy marks perhaps the most illuminating quality of the 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 then refers to its uncanny characteristic of mass entanglement. 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. The viscosity of the hyperobject results in an increasing awareness of its looming presence, as well as awareness of how the individual is enveloped and active within its viscous presence. 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). The common denominator in the connectedness or the unifying presence that is able to achieve such an interlacing of plot is the Rocket. The person tracing 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 as an infant to IG Farben, the manufacturer of Imipolex G—the material used to construct the
Slothrop reads through the papers, 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 Imiplex G” (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 ubiquity 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” (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) leads him to a self-defeating conclusion: “The Schwarzgerät is no Grail, Ace, that’s not what the G in Imiplex G stands for. And you are no knightly hero . . . you know that in some irreducible way it’s an evil game” (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, “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, but I would complement his interpretation
by suggesting that Slothrop has an inveterate need to seek the Schwarzgerät, a need which began the moment, while looking through Jamf’s dossier, he was made privy to its existence. The foreboding knowledge that Slothrop won’t ever find the Rocket is not enough to discourage him from the search. 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, he continues seeking precisely because he knows it exists, thereby revealing an initial property of the Rocket—though absent throughout the novel, its existence is made manifest in its similar effect upon all seeking characters. All the characters are caught in the viscous fabric of the hyperobject, irrevocably drawn further into its ephemeral mystery.

Many other characters besides Slothrop are engaged in a similar quest for the Schwarzgerät with a similar persistence. While some are questing after the Schwarzgerät for martial or political reasons, others seek simply to find. Slothrop’s need to find the Schwarzgerät is also found in many of these characters who are seeking the Schwarzgerät for reasons that they themselves may not be fully aware of. In other words, Slothrop is not the only character caught in the viscosity of the hyperobject. Joshua Pederson, writing on Pynchon's common theme of the preterite and the elect (or, those who are passed over by God and those who are “chosen”), states, “[T]he gravitational pull of the preterite attracts all who seek to escape it, and all, it seems, eventually become members of the ‘passed over’” (147). What demarcates the preterite and elect in the novel is proximity to the Rocket. Dwight Eddins notes, “The blurring of the distinction between the preterite and the elect in a natural communion . . . traps both groups in a sterile alternative of
victimhood and oppression” (115). Both Eddins’ and Pederson’s classification of who, in the novel, are elect or preterite is centered on who is closest to the rocket conspiracy—those who are closest to the conspiracy are considered the elect, and those, like Slothrop, who are seeking the root of the conspiracy, are the preterite. But these divides are constantly in flux. As Pederson notes, the “elect” characters often fall from their privileged status, and find themselves questing alongside the preterite. One key example of the leveling from elect to preterite is seen in the case of Pirate Prentice. During wartime, he was employed through PISCES to manage the fantasies of higher-ups in the military, so that these high-ranking officials could better focus their attention to the war effort. However, after the war, PISCES loses funding and Prentice is released from his duties. No longer an “elect,” no longer a part of the possible conspiracy, Prentice and others begin searching for the truth, thus becoming preterite. Thus, the viscosity of the hyperobject encompasses all who become aware of it, echoing Morton’s statement, “We find ourselves caught in [hyperobjects]” (32). The only difference between the two camps is that the preterite seek rather blindly while the elect are closer to the truth, not through having some inexplicable access to the hyperobject itself, but through knowing more about it and having a better understanding of how deep the conspiracy runs. Just like the preterites, however, the elect come no closer to finding the actual Rocket and Schwarzgerät. The impotence of both the preterite and the elect’s quest does not give credence to the Rocket’s “unreality.” Instead, it signals the Rocket’s nonlocality.

In a position analogous to Slothrop’s, the main character of The Crying of Lot 49 (the novel preceding Gravity’s Rainbow), Oedipa Mass, must seek out a recondite presence—the Tristero, a shadowy system of postal carriers. Though their operation
seems to branch everywhere, the actual centralized operation is nowhere to be found, regardless of the many signs that she follows. Oedipa’s predicament is described in this way: “Suppose, God, there really was a Tristero then and that she had come on it by accident. . . . [S]he might have found the Tristero anywhere in her Republic, through any of a hundred lightly-concealed entranceways, a hundred alienations, if only she’d looked” (179). Her fear, rational or irrational, is that if she gives up looking, she will never know, while simultaneously, she may be working her way further and further into a fantasy. Writing on the same passage, Edward Mendelson, suggests that, in the recondite presence of a central agent around which the plot revolves, “the simple becomes complex, responsibility becomes not isolated but universal, the guilty locus turns out to be everywhere, and individual clues are unimportant because neither clues nor deduction can lead to the solution” (“Sacred” 123). The impossibility of coming to a solution arises because the Trystero, as with the Schwarzgerät, is paradoxically everywhere while also nowhere at all, exhibiting its effects from whatever remote, or intimately close, distance. The Trystero clearly operates around Oedipa—she can see its signs all around her. However, she cannot find them anywhere. The apparent paradox is explained 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 (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” (44). The hyperobject is able to affect natural discourse greatly without being “present” in the
normal sense of the word. Morton clarifies his distinction 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” (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 . . . there is no such thing, at a deep level, as the local” (47). Global warming, much like the Rocket, is hauntingly real, 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 discursive 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 impossible. Luc Herman and Petrus van Ewijk write, “[E]ven 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—the conspiracy is never presented as
if it exists 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?” (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 . . . 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 view of technology as expanding outward into shadowy, corporate connections has been connected by scholars to the crux of the Rocket-conspiracy. The Rocket’s geopolitical origins, some would argue, contribute to its mystique. 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, multinational 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). While his interpretation is fairly straight-forward, I would advocate a slightly different reading for the task at hand. Enzian demonstrates a paranoia that concerns the Rocket’s capacity to influence. More than the political quagmire the Rocket introduces, it also denotes an impossible return to a single point of origin. 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. He is aware of losing something, though he can’t 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.

Slothrop reaches a similar revelation of the Rocket’s ambiguous origin and realizes that the production of the Rocket involved German, Swiss, English, and American factions before and during the war. In the words of Menahem Paz, “There are,
[Slothrop] believes, ‘Elect’ people who clandestinely combine to run the multinational megacorporations, effectively dominating the entire world. . . . [They] make crucial decisions about war, about the course of scientific development, and the direction of the world economy” (207). The binary of the preterite-Elect is distinguished by locality and the agency that locality affords. Those who are able to control across a distance of time or space are considered Elect, whereas those immediately involved in the consequences of such decisions, however unknowingly, comprise the preterite. With a slightly altered understanding of the preterite and Elect in mind, the Rocket itself acts as the ultimate Elect, a hyper-Elect perhaps. It is a shadowy presence that greatly affects the discourse of the novel, yet it is entirely unseen. It is the prime-mover of each character, each digression. Moreover, it takes on an air of frightening mobility, unseen influence, and a far-reaching origin, both geographically and chronologically. How then can it 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 epiphanean 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 (207-209).

As discussed previously, the manner in which the characters are connected is primarily through the Rocket (again, I use “Rocket” to signify the 00000 and the S-Gerät). 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:

“[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 much larger whole, a much larger hyperobject that supersedes its three-dimensional caricature.

With an understanding of the hyperobject’s phasing in mind, paranoia serves a beneficial purpose; it is particularly attuned to phased representations of a larger, unseen whole. The paranoiac 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” (The Voice of Ambiguity 105). A liminal understanding of the plot-at-large is common to all Pynchon’s characters undertaking paranoiac quests while “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” (651). The binary of data consistency/falling apart implies something larger from which the data derives. Prentice justly notes that it is the system that matters, a catch-all for a much larger-something that is at work. There is something that the data, the representations, and the events are coming from.

Yet the true paranoiac 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 (208). A similar sentiment is echoed by the narrator, who graciously offers a lucid, 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…” (717). Keeping in mind Chaos Theory, paranoia in the novel is 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 echo the tenets of 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 does; it is the way in which the hyperobject is conceivable. Its pieces, fragments, and representations constantly surround us. However, to put them all together into a single mosaic of clarity and absolute presence is impossible because we simply do not exist alongside the hyperobject. The hyperobject occupies a dimension beyond ours. We receive only translations of the hyperobject; the result of connecting these translations is a highly speculative, likely inaccurate, portraiture. Or to use yet another characteristic of the hyperobject, connecting all the spiraling pieces is impossible due to the interobjectivity of the hyperobject.

The hyperobject’s effects, as noted, are nonlocal. They occur both everywhere and nowhere. But the way in which the hyperobject is experienced is best explained through the trait of interobjectivity: “Hyperobjects provide great examples of interobjectivity—namely, 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” (90). In the same way that Slothrop’s Puritan
ancestors sought “Data behind which always, nearer or further, was the numinous certainty of God” (245), so do the questing characters try (and fail) to trace the Rocket’s “footprints” to a definite presence. 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 . . . growing toward a shape predestined and perhaps a little otherworldly” (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” (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.

Not only are the Rocket’s effects nonlocal, but the object itself is nonlocal. It occupies a dimension beyond the strictly human, encompassing a time and a space that warps perceptions of 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” (109-110). 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, shrouded beneath an index of signs, dead ends, and spiraling connections, is surely real. Its phased effects 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. The Rocket forces the 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’” (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 Erdschweinhöle 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)

Enzian’s reflections on the Rocket led to Dwight Eddins’ reading that the Rocket “symbolizes a constant metaphysical rebellion” against the law of gravity, or more simply, that the Rocket symbolizes a potential stasis of the divine, free from the effects of entropy or chaos. He goes on to say that Enzian’s projection of his desire onto the Rocket is an analogue desire to attain the Holy Center, as discussed earlier on. While I would agree with Eddins that it is, indeed, Enzian’s desire, his reading tells us very little about the Rocket itself, free of projection; however, it does introduces a theme that runs rampant throughout the novel—time, more specifically, space-time. When Eddins notes that the Rocket symbolizes a stasis, a potential infinite existence at the peak of the Rocket’s parabola, he is noting Pynchon’s idea of time as something capable of malleability. In one instance that demonstrates the novel’s play with space-time relativity, a briefly featured character connected to the S-Gerät discusses “a common aerodynamic effect” which involves “our own boundary layer and the shape of the orifice as we pass it,” which leads a gainsayer to heckle her: “Oh you mean that before we get to it...it’s a different shape?” (750).

Pynchon seems to suggest here that his central abstractions, 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 hyperobject’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 hyperobects, 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” (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 in saying the Rocket’s effects are in some way due to Blicero. However, even in her correlationist observation, she notes an important aspect of the Rocket. In and of itself, it greatly affects 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. Throughout Hyperobjects, Morton does what I have done with Gravity’s Rainbow: he shows how global warming fits his criteria for what a hyperobject is and does. 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 in the novel, attracting the characters much
like moths to a flame—all names and places are somehow linked to its looming shadow.
But as the metaphor of a flame suggests, its deterministic agency, its viscous presence
that brings both the Elect and the preterite near, is fatal. At the end of his quest, Slothrop
stands as the prime example of the fatal agency of the hyperobject; he begins to disappear
and disintegrate, quite literally. As the disintegration occurs, the narrator addresses
Slothrop directly:

“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. (517)

Slothrop is presented with a paradoxical situation: to maintain his persona, he must situate himself in the past and/or the future; however, losing a sense of the present results in a rarefaction 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. The influence of the hyperobject crosses demarcations of time, and more importantly, crosses artificial demarcations that separate the self from the outside world. Ultimately, Slothrop loses personhood and 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. (emphasis in original, 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” (757). The fragmented Slothrop bears specific resemblance to the Rocket, which itself was fragmented in order to keep it hidden. It is here that we encounter a strange pass in the novel: Slothrop takes on characteristics of the hyperobject he seeks. 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. He has been subsumed into the Rocket’s viscous fabric entirely.

The strange ending for the novel’s main character 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” (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’” (726). The operative term “conventional” would suggest a more unconventional sense of “found,” which indeed is the approach that this chapter 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. Object-Oriented Ontology demonstrates that, as seen with the hyperobject, the inability for one to identify and detain is an identifying feature of reality itself.

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 he (Slothrop) was with the Rocket. The uncanny realization that he was very much involved 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, “[W]e are always inside an object. . . . [E]very decision we make is in some sense related to hyperobjects” (17-
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 it 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. The hyperobject ceaselessly confronts the individual with an ontological web of interconnectedness. Its 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” (20). The individual is then subsumed into a global network and the epistemological concept of “self” slips further and further away until, as in the case of Slothrop, it disappears entirely.
Chapter 2:
Ontological Uncertainty and the Agency of the Inanimate in *V.*

“What an amusing world it still is, where things and people can be found in places where they do not belong.”

-Thomas Pynchon, *V.*

Although one could potentially criticize Thomas Pynchon’s debut novel *V.* (1963) for its jagged plot-lines, manic-to-introspective tone, and one-dimensional characters, the *New York Times* heralded it as “a brilliant and turbulent novel” (Plimpton). Serving as the foundation of a long and successful literary career, *V.* allows readers an interesting glimpse into the development of a style that would later become Pynchon’s stamp on American literature. The novel contains the same devices that his entire oeuvre would later build on—a tortuous narrative, a conspiracy, an inaccessible entity at the center of everything, and thwarted epiphany for characters and readers alike. The main character, Benny Profane, finds himself in the middle of a conspiracy that centers on the elusive “lady V.” The conspiracy involves long and winding flashbacks to Malta during World War II, journal entries, international spies, a transgender priest, and alligators in the sewer of New York City. While Profane is unknowingly pulled into the conspiracy, Stencil, an amateur sleuth who inherited the search for V. from his father, directly engages in the quest. Like the Trystero of *The Crying of Lot 49* (1969) or the Rocket of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it is V. that holds the novel’s spiraling plots together. However, V.’s hold on the narrative is much more tenuous than the central entities of Pynchon’s future novels, in part because V. is not easily conceptualized as something. While the evidence supposedly points to V. as a woman, Pynchon allows her to remain ambiguous: some characters suggest that V. is actually a boat off the coast of Malta, others suggest she is a sewer rat, and those who claim she is a woman are further divided between two women:
Victoria Wren and Vera Mondaugen. The effect is an extremely chaotic narrative with more questions than answers. Such an effect would likely be considered experiential: while the reader is left in a constant flux of conflicting evidence, the characters also follow a trail of questions. But the motivation behind their search is equally mysterious, even to them.

While V.’s identity is an interesting quandary I will discuss at length later on, I will, for the time being, refer to V. often as a woman, in part because the characters largely do the same. I would like to note early on that I am not going to implicitly or explicitly suggest an objectification of women, as perhaps could be anticipated in light of an object-oriented focus. Object-oriented ontologists are quick to note that the use of the term “object” is not used in tandem of an implied “subject.” Instead, the object-oriented ontology (OOO) theorist is concerned with the inherent “unknowability” and relations of all things—objects, humans, nonhumans, etc.—and rejects “the claims that human experience rests at the center of philosophy, and that things can be understood by how they appear to us. In place of science alone, OOO uses speculation to characterize how objects exist and interact” (“What is Object Oriented Ontology?” Bogost). However, V. does seem to invite a discussion on objectification. Benny Profane, the bumbling, misogynistic main character, sees women largely as inanimate objects, which has led to insightful feminist criticism on the novel. Mary Allen, for example, focuses on the “blankness” of the women in the novel, including V.: “V. herself is nothing more than a

4 Ian Bogost writes in his book *Alien Phenomenology* that he prefers the term “unit” in place of “object” when writing on OOO because, “*object* implies a *subject*, and the marriage of of subject and object sits at the heart of correlationism. . . . [T]he problem lies in the assumption that one subject—the human subject—is of interest or import” (23).
‘fetish-construction’ . . . [that] Man will always search for, without ever knowing why” (43). I will delve more fully into the problem of V. as strictly object, but first I would like to explore Allen’s idea of characters seeking V. “without ever knowing why,” as her observation does, I believe, reveal something essential about V.

The question of motivation, as Mary Allen notes, is perhaps the biggest question a reader of V. faces: why do these characters seek after V.? This article will suggest that characters seek after V. due to their assumptions that V. is passive, a trait assumed to be inherent to femininity and inanimateness. In trying to locate her, the questing characters seek affirmation that they, as men, hold a superior position in an ontological taxonomy of “being.” However, they do not realize that they are engaged in a quest for a hyperobject—one whose presence poses a serious threat to their ontological convictions.

Previous scholars have also been concerned about the question of the characters’ motivation. Richard Patteson offers an insightful primer for studying “structure and certitude” in the novel. He notes that Stencil faces a decision similar to many other Pynchon characters: there is either something or there is nothing, the latter signifying a chaotic, entropic universe, perhaps more terrifying than a malevolent “something” (31). Patteson describes a constant “block of information pertaining to V.” He notes that the characters’ inability to gain full access to V. “is of some significance, because Pynchon expresses the epistemological aspects of his theme chiefly through the narrative technique and the manipulation of plot” (31). I believe that Patteson is correct to say that Pynchon incorporates “epistemological aspects” in the text, and I would further agree that it is largely accomplished by a chaotic narrative that incorporates and juxtaposes conflicting accounts of who or what V. really is, but I will deviate from his reading in
order to shed light on the matter of V.’s reality. In discussing Stencil’s father’s search for V., Patteson notes, “Herbert Stencil’s search for V. is a quest for both knowledge and a kind of pattern or connection. The two are closely related, if not identical, because knowledge itself cannot exist without form. Formlessness implies meaningless, as Pynchon knows” (30). Aside from his somewhat hedged implication, Patteson echoes an epistemological outlook on the correlation between knowledge and patterns, or knowledge and visible evidence. Without the presence of objective evidence, knowledge cannot be said to exist, resulting in what Pynchon’s main character of *Bleeding Edge* (2013) refers to as “the epistemological bug” (433). A Cartesian scholar, without sure pattern or connection, then dismisses the question of V.’s reality.

Kenneth Kupsch, in a rather daring article, demonstrates a refreshing attitude towards the novel and, more broadly, the epistemological tendency of postmodern scholars to waver on matters of reality. Engaged in a discussion on V.’s identity, he states, “It is my contention that there is a knowable, unequivocal, and essentially irrefutable answer to the question, and that far from releasing the reader from any further obligation to the work, knowing that answer heightens one’s obligation to it” (428). While his statement encapsulates a bold ontological position, he claims that he knows who or what V. actually is: “many of the crucial references merely point the way; like Stencil, readers must be willing to do their own legwork” (429). Though I would agree that the novel is, in some ways, an experiential detective novel for a reader, his reading confines V. to the status of an identifiable thing/symbol/reference, and his methodology includes breaking the narrative apart chronologically. He ultimately suggests that V.’s identity differs in each important section. For Kupsch, V. is, respectively, “Astarte,
Aphrodite, Venus, Christ,” and “Victoria Wren.” Kupsch, much like the characters who seek after her, approached V. as though she were easily contained in a specific word, a name, a place in time.

Conversely, some scholars approach the novel from a position of reduction. According to Edward Mendelson, the novel centers on a single idea, and the entire discursive structure is simply an elaboration of said idea. Mendelson writes that the novel centers on “the decline of the animate into the inanimate” (6). Indeed, the dichotomy of animate/inanimate runs throughout the novel. Benny Profane has a keen awareness for the inanimate world, in part because he believes that he is victimized by inanimate objects, a belief that he affirms each time he trips over an object or is hit by debris. After he is almost hit by a car, “[Benny] reflected that here was another inanimate object that had nearly killed him,” and the narrator describes him as “somebody who lies back and takes it from objects” (17, 314). The tension of the animate and the inanimate runs throughout the novel, inviting an inquiry into the novel’s representation of object relations, as well as how these object relations inform an understanding of the identity of V., free of a projection of metaphor or symbol. Throughout this article, I reverse the traditional approach to Pynchon’s novels: instead of discussing what the mysterious entities can tell us about the characters who seek after them, I will discuss what the characters can tell us of the entities. Before looking into the identity of V., however, it is important to look to the overarching structure into which V. falls. Throughout the novel, the animate world and the inanimate world interpolate, allowing for an alternative reading of the central tension and, ultimately, for V. herself.
Mendelson’s summary of the novel in terms of the animate declining into inanimateness is likely not intended to suggest Pynchon’s interest in the ontological qualities or traits of objects. Instead, it would seem that Mendelson suggests an alternative motif of entropy, or, the process by which a system degrades into chaos. In the context of the animate and inanimate worlds, entropy becomes a visible process, or at least more easily conceptualized as the inanimate world overrunning the animate. In *V*, the inanimate is even given a voice to narrate this process of entropy. When Benny Profane gets a job working security for the aptly named Anthroresearch Associates, he has the opportunity to converse, literally, face-to-face with the inanimate. One of their projects is SHOCK and SHROUD, which stand for, respectively, “synthetic human object, casualty kinematics” and “synthetic human, radiation output determined” (309). Both are a sort of test-track dummy, each designed to measure effects of different bodily traumas. Profane, noting the uncanny anthropomorphic qualities of SHROUD, designed to absorb radiation, starts a conversation with it/him:

“What’s it like,” he [Profane] said.
Better than you have it.

“What.”

Wha yourself. Me and SHOCK are what you and everybody will be someday [. . .]

“You don’t even have a soul. How can you talk?”

Since when did you ever have one? […]

“What do you mean, we’ll be like you and SHOCK someday? You mean dead?”

Am I dead? If I am then that’s what I mean.
“If you aren’t then what are you?”

Nearly what you are. (311-312).

SHROUD notes immediately, without much provocation, the impending entropy of the entire human race. Moreover, he suggests that the process is self-induced. Benny’s reaction exemplifies an attitude of ontic prejudice, or an implicit assumption of ontological superiority over the inanimate. He mentions the lack of a soul in the object, which could be referred to as a clear divide between the animate and the inanimate. However, SHROUD’s responses to Profane highlight the inevitability of a communion between the animate and inanimate worlds, a coming together. The barrier of ontic prejudice is severely trivialized by SHROUD. To him, there may be differences, but they share in a common direction—a leveling of sorts that would make the animate equal to the inanimate.

Jane Bennett, in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), lays the claim that the animate and the inanimate share a common “vibrancy.” In a discourse ranging from the scientific to the philosophical, Bennett disperses vibrancy (i.e., Dasein) across ontic boundaries, closing the divide between human and nonhuman actors in order to demonstrate “the degree to which people, animals, artifacts, technologies, and elemental forces share powers and operate in dissonant conjunction with each other” (Bennett 34). Both humans and nonhumans, she says, possess agency. Moreover, she says, “The association of matter with passivity still haunts us today” (65). Bennett uses the illuminating term “thing-power” to think “beyond the life-matter binary,” which otherwise suggests that inanimate objects possess no agency whatsoever (20). Essentially, Bennett argues that the life-matter binary has caused us to overlook the agency of nonhuman actors and the way
in which nonhuman agents assemble and function whether or not there is intentionality behind the outcome. To explain the different ways of conceptualizing thing-power, Bennett writes, “The desire of the craftsperson to see what a metal can do, rather than the desire of the scientist to know what a metal is, enabled the former to discern a life in metal and thus, eventually, to collaborate more productively with it” (60). Thus, the breaking down of the life-matter binary is a breaking down of the animate-inanimate binary, as well. In the context of OOO, the life-matter binary is inherently anthropocentric, suggesting a sharp ontological divide between life and everything else. However, the same life-matter ontic prejudice is seen in Pynchon scholarship in a statement such as “decline of animate into inanimate,” which implicitly suggests an ontological de-valuing in moving from animate to inanimate.

Bennett’s challenge of the life-matter binary is echoed in the exchange between Benny and SHROUD. SHROUD points to the similarities between him and Benny, as well as the movement of humankind towards inanimateness (note: not a decline). With Bennett’s challenge in mind, Mendelson’s judgment summary of V. is problematized. His anthropocentric interpretation of “decline” suggests a taxonomical fall from grace. But he is not alone in his ontological assumption. Dwight Eddins notes a similar movement from the animate and inanimate in V. by calling it a novel that is “clearly dedicated to the depiction of degeneration, entropic and otherwise” (52). The ontic prejudice wrought by modes of epistemology has clearly held influence on the way scholars interpret fundamental themes of the novel, as seen in the language used to describe a shift from animate to inanimate. I would like to postulate a different approach to analyzing Pynchon’s V. The entire novel seems to advocate for realignment of ontological
assumptions, leveling the animate and inanimate in matters of both taxonomy and agency, ultimately resulting in a flat ontology.

In his book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (2002), Manuel Delanda coins the term “flat ontology,” which, as Levi Bryant notes, “rejects any ontology of transcendence or presence that privileges one sort of entity as the origin of all others and as fully present to itself” (“The Four Theses”). Importantly, “flat ontology refuses to privilege the subject-object” and it “argues that all entities are on equal ontological footing and that no entity, whether artificial or natural, symbolic or physical, possesses greater ontological dignity than other objects” (“The Four Theses”). Echoing Bennett’s material approach to the life-matter binary, Bryant, in his interpretation of Delanda, lays out what is at the heart of OOO: a flat ontology where nothing is granted more ontological importance than something else. The principles of a flat ontology reveal what I argue is truly at work in *V.*: a steady confrontation with ontological uncertainty in the face of the recognizably inanimate. I discern two levels on which the conflict plays out: Benny Profane and his constant struggle with the inanimate world and V., the mysterious hyperobject at the heart of the novel.

**Profane and Passivity**

For Benny Profane, “inanimate objects and he could not live in peace” (32). Profane’s fascination with and fear of the inanimate is in some ways directly correlated to misogyny. Indeed, in his mind, the inanimate is equated, if not synonymous, with the feminine. For Profane, a man is “Master of the inanimate. But a schlemihl, that was hardly a man: somebody who lies back and takes it from objects, like any passive
woman” (314). Benny considers himself a schlemihl, thereby explaining his aversion to the inanimate. His logic runs as follows: to come face to face with the inanimate, to fall below the level of “master of the inanimate,” results in a fall from masculinity and into femininity; a fall from masculinity, as he sees it, is a movement of ontological decline.

It is unsurprising then that the novel has received insightful feminist readings that praise the novel’s depiction of “the way(s) in which Man, masculinity, and maleness are also social constructions that shape, and are shaped by, the feminine” (Hawthorne 74). Even a lauding scholar, however, calls the means by which the effect is achieved, “at times naïve, uninformed, or even crude” (75). Mary Allen discerns the constant evolution of male identity in the novel, shifting around various female presences, lady V. notwithstanding. Understanding the way in which Pynchon works to define certain roles is helpful in application to the binary between animate-inanimate. Taking into consideration Profane’s syllogism between the inanimate and the feminine, one could conclude that in the same way maleness is shaped by the feminine, so is the animate—from Profane’s perspective—shaped by the inanimate. As we work towards an understanding of the two in a flat ontology, we arrive, momentarily, at a pass in which the two are at the very least mutually constitutive: the inanimate/animate binary intersects with the feminine/masculine binary.

The animate and the inanimate world of V. work to shape each other greatly. Constantly, the narrative employs incredibly pointed metaphors, illustrating the dissolution between the animate-inanimate binary by drawing a comparison of the two—for instance, “The party, as if it were inanimate after all, unwound like a clock’s mainspring” (47). But one metaphor is particularly germane. Benny remembers a story he
heard once about a boy “born with a gold screw where his navel should have been” (34). He wants to get rid of it and finally he is able to. After taking it out, he falls apart. The narrator writes, “To Profane, alone in the street, it would always seem maybe he was looking for something too to make the fact of his own disassembly plausible as that of any machine” (35). In a passage that eerily foreshadows the dissipation of Slothrop’s personhood in Gravity’s Rainbow, Profane’s ontological anxiety is given new dimension. Not only does he disdain passivity to objects, but he also fears the precariousness of human/animate existence. He would rather fall apart due to discernible decay than through death itself.

In light of Profane’s existential despair, his interaction with SHOCK and SHROUD makes a good deal more sense. He comes face to face with an inanimate object that embodies all that he fears. Not only could Profane become passive to the object, but the object delivers a reminder of Profane’s species’ impending extinction. However, I would like to suggest an alternative and complementary reading for the interaction between SHROUD and Profane. Instead of seeing the discussion simply as an ominous moment of a robot warning Profane of humankind’s follies with dangerous technology, I think something of equal importance is also occurring. Profane experiences an ontological crisis where questions of being, which had steadily become more and more precarious, are suddenly thrown into complete flux. It suddenly becomes very clear what Profane’s fears re-direct to: flat ontology, a sudden equalization of the animate and inanimate, a stripping away of humankind’s exceptionalism and a realization of the agency of the inanimate.
The movement of the animate to inanimateness in the novel has been noted by scholars, but it has been identified as entropy, or gradual movement towards chaos. As I argued earlier, the conflation of a rising inanimate with “decline” is a display of ontic prejudice and assumptions of animate superiority. However, the parallel of chaos with the inanimate reflects Profane’s anxiety in regards to a leveling of ontological agency in the novel. According to David Seed, one of the novel’s conspiracies is that Profane believes (rationally or irrationally) that inanimate objects are out to get him, which he then calls “a comic version of the paranoia we meet repeatedly in the historical sections [of V.]” (73). Seed describes the paranoia as “comic” because, in his view, Profane’s identification as a schlemihl and his interactions with inanimate objects demonstrates his attempts “to minimize his own humanity and reduce himself to an amoeba-like passivity” (73). Seed demonstrates the assumption that inanimateness equals passivity, perhaps because Profane himself makes such an assumption. Ultimately, Seed suggests that, because of his anxiety about becoming inanimate and passive, Profane represents “atrophied humanity” (75). Seed’s quote of course harkens back to Mendelson’s suggestion of a “decline of the animate” and demonstrates an equal attitude of anthropocentricism; the anthropocentrism hinges on the notion of “decline” or any other connotation affixed to a more general concept of ontological movement.

The movement in the novel is not one of decline; rather, it is a movement towards ontological equivalence and recognition of inanimate vibrancy. Bennett writes of “vibrancy” in matter: “Humans encounter a world in which nonhuman materialities have power, a power that the ‘bourgeois I,’ with its pretensions to autonomy, denies” (16). In V., however, the characters are no longer able to deny the agency of the inanimate.
Instead of objects falling far into the background of \( V \), they are foregrounded. The human characters that encounter them see themselves poised against these inanimate objects, inexplicably threatened by them. They take on an agency that, in effect, forces the animate humans to evaluate their ontological existence, their sense of “being” in the world. It is not only Benny Profane who encounters the inanimate world. One character, Fausto, writes sweeping journal entries that detail the ruins of Malta following World War I. In them, he notes to a reader, “Observe the predominance of human attributes applied to the animate” (375). Later in the novel, a man discussing the \( V \) conspiracy similarly observes an instance of anthropomorphism: “The inert universe may have a quality we can call logic. But logic is a human attribute after all; so even at that it’s a misnomer” (538). His statement highlights the correlationist attitude of Profane’s fear of the inanimate world: if the binary between animate and inanimate does not mark a taxonomy of importance, what are the implications for a schlemihl like Profane, who already sees himself as worth little in the grand scheme of humanity? The question can be more fully explored in an analysis of the mysterious \( V \), the hyperobject at the center of the novel.

\[ \textbf{V., the Objectified Hyperobject} \]

Along with forcing humankind into a state of ontological uncertainty, the inanimate oftentimes enters into a framework of relations as actors in and of themselves. Jane Bennett notes an example in the case of a citywide blackout: the inanimate (in its sudden refusal to operate and bringing a city to a halt) is at once apparent as an actor in human affairs (21). In the case of the novel, the inanimate accounts for the central
conflict and tension: an equalizing movement of the animate and inanimate. Writing on
the geographical or spatial implications of a flat ontology, Marston et al. suggest systems
of the animate-inanimate “where the dynamic properties of matter produce a multiplicity
of complex relations and singularities that sometimes lead to the creation of new, unique
events and entities” (422). When ontological value or weight is correctly perceived as
evenly distributed, the inanimate emerges as much a prime mover as the animate. Bennett
poses an important philosophical hypothesis regarding agency:

[B]odies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage. What
this suggests for the concept of agency is that the efficacy or effectivity to
which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an
ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in
a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts. (23)

An example of the inanimate’s agency can be found in the hyperobject. Its massive
power physically, spatially, and temporally is derivative of its network of inanimate
actors that possess agency unto themselves. Yet the sum of these inanimate actors does
not account for the hyperobject in full. According to Morton, “Hyperobjects are not just
collections, systems, or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right”
(2). Morton is not suggesting that hyperobjects do not consist of various systems and
networks; instead, he warns against the reductive viewpoint that sees them as only a sum
of networks or systems. It is an important distinction to make as V. herself embodies both
terms. I argue that she does incorporate a network of entities, but that she is also, above
all else, a hyperobject.
Morton writes, “Hyperobjects are agents. They are indeed more than a little demonic, in the sense that they appear to straddle worlds and times” (29). His statement serves as an uncanny description of V. as well. David Cowart writes that V. is “a mysterious woman whose dark and bloody career parallels the dark and bloody unfolding of the twentieth century. V. seems intimately involved with the century’s violence and bloodshed, gravitating naturally to its wars and sieges” (13). The parallel between the hyperobject and V., already quite uncanny, only becomes further solidified in looking at how the scholars treat V. While some, like Kupsch, become too confident in their delineations of exactly what and where the object is, others dismiss the object’s existence entirely based upon its unavailability. For example, David Cowart writes of V.’s role in the novel:

The ‘conspiracy,’ along with the illusion of V.’s agency as shaper and influencer of history, no doubt begins and ends in Stencil’s paranoia, but the woman herself, the compelling symbol of a culture that has destroyed itself with violence and drifted into dissolution and triviality, cannot be dismissed so easily. V. personifies the forces that have sapped the vitality of modern man and made of them a ‘Sick Crew.’ She is figuratively the mother of this generation. (15)

Cowart then suggests that V. is literally the mother of Stencil, though very little in the novel supports this claim. What is odd in Cowart’s passage is how he reduces V.’s agency. He replaces agency with concessions of symbolism and personification. V. cannot be a real “shaper and influencer of history,” because she does not make herself available to the human actors in the novel.
Stencil, as he seeks V. desperately, cannot find her. In his idiosyncratic third-person speech, Stencil worries over the possibility of finding her multiple times:

She’s yielded him only the poor skeleton of a dossier. Most of what he has is inference. He doesn’t know who she is, nor what she is. He’s trying to find out. (164)

What this mission was, however, came no clearer to him than the ultimate shape of his V-structure—no clearer, indeed, than why he should have begun pursuit of V. in the first place. (244)

Stencil wrestles as well with V.’s agency, while ironically displaying it quite well. He does not understand why he seeks V., but he does so anyway. It consumes him. V.’s agency, like the agency of the hyperobject, establishes itself deep on the consciousness of those who become aware of it. One of these characters—Stencil’s father—writes in his journal, “There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected” (49). Stencil’s father’s observation of V. aptly summarizes Pynchon’s narrative maneuvers throughout the novel. There is no narrowing of information; in fact, it is quite the opposite. The narrative is flooded with information pertaining to V., some of which is contradictory to other information. Again, the flux of information has led some scholars to read V. as a metaphor, a signifier of chaos; however, I argue that the oft contradictory evidence is a very important detail pertaining to V.’s reality as will later be discussed.

It would prove exhausting and tedious to point to every hint, clue, or passing description of who V. is, what V. is, or if V. is at all. Instead, I would like to zero in on some overarching themes concerning V. In a general sense, there are two unchanging characteristics of the mysterious V.: V. brings about a sense of death while also exerting
sensuality. The narrator notes, “[Stencil] tried to tell himself meeting V. and dying were separate and unconnected for Sidney [Stencil’s father]” (428). One reason why Stencil continues in his quest, as well as those who preceded him, is owing to V.’s sexuality. In one narrative, V. is thought to be a young girl, a dancer turned prostitute. One man discusses her sexuality by saying, “The girl functions as a mirror. You, that waiter, the chiffonier in the next empty street she turns into. . . . You will see the reflection of a ghost” (443), while later she is referred to as “not real but an object of pleasure” (449). Underneath the sexist notion of woman as unmediated object of pleasure, there is an underlying movement through her sexuality towards a literal inanimate state.

Later in the same section, the narrator states that V. is “aware of her own progression towards inanimateness” (455). While her depicted awareness could, of course, refer to the pressure placed on her to become passive, such a reading is complicated by her physical transformation to inanimateness. For instance, Stencil fears, in an episode of doubt, that the entire V. conspiracy will “add up only to the recurrence of an initial and a few dead objects” (494). Later, a character says that V. has “an obsession with bodily incorporating bits of inert matter” such as a clock-iris eye and a “star sapphire sewn into her navel” (542). The latter detail eerily echoes Profane’s story about the man with the screw through his navel, calling for a similar insight: through incorporating the inanimate, V. transforms herself into a system of animate and inanimate agents—an assemblage of materials of equal ontological weight that exert a powerful, yet deadly pull on the characters.

V. joins the seemingly disparate parts of death and sensuality. She herself subscribes to the thought that “the act of love and the act of death are one” (456). The
bridging between the two seems also to serve as the pull on the characters to quest after her, bringing to mind a passage in which a character states, "a latent sense of death always heightens the pleasure of such an involvement" (100). But, more than incorporating both a "latent sense of death" as well as inanimate sexuality, these two components—death and sexuality—are mutually constitutive in their effect on the questing characters: they prove tantalizing. Jane Bennett notes Mario Perniola's "sex appeal of the inorganic" during a discussion on the vibrancy of materiality: "This neutral sexuality draws human bodies to apparently dead things—to objects, stones, bits of matter. . . . The 'sex appeal' of the inorganic, like a life, is another way to give voice to what I think of as a shimmering, potentially violent vitality intrinsic to matter" (61). The ability of the inorganic to adopt sexual characteristic results from a human's attitude of the inanimate blankness or "neutrality." The "sex appeal of the inorganic" could provide an interesting parallel to the aforementioned fetish constructions of feminist criticism; however, more germane to the task-at-hand, another possibility opens up in the hyperobject that complements past feminist criticism. Timothy Morton suggests the hyperobject provides an "intimacy with death," due to its massive span in relation to humankind; the hyperobject's effects and its existence greatly outlasting that of an individual human or even humanity as a species. In a sense, the hyperobject forces individuals into the position of realizing their ephemeral existence. The aura of sensuality, however, is new to the hyperobject under consideration in the current article. Though scholars have noted that the Rocket of Gravity's Rainbow (which acts as much as a hyperobject as does V.) in some way embodies sexuality due to its phallic nature, the sexual property is retrospective and, at its core, correlationist. It is one thing for the
hyperobject itself to embody sexuality; it is quite another for an observer or character to project the same sexuality onto the hyperobject much in the same way metaphors and symbols are projected onto the hyperobject. More than a projection, I argue that the aura of sexuality that surrounds V. is very much an irreducible product of V.’s status as hyperobject.

Feminist approaches to V. have been particularly interested in the role of men in pursuing V., Profane included. Mary Allen notes that the novel epitomizes the idea that, “Men now project a kind of horrible blankness of the age onto the image of women” (79), which again highlights the artificiality of Profane’s parallel between masculinity and animateness or femininity and inanimateness. His association in either case is an example of synthetic correlationism, drawing a relation where there is none, which is inevitably a byproduct of what you could consider to be a sort of “ontological solipsism.” But because he cannot step outside his correlationist mindset, his fear of becoming an object is inextricably linked to a loss of masculinity. His correlationist attitude, while particularly neurotic, is shared by other questing characters. The narrator says, as Stencil worries himself over the V. conspiracy:

It did bring up, however, an interesting note of sexual ambiguity. What a joke if at the end of this hunt he came face to face with himself afflicted by a kind of soul-transvestism. How the Crew would laugh and laugh. Truthfully he didn’t know what sex V. might be, nor even what genus and species. [. . .] V. might be no more a she than a sailing vessel or a nation” (244).
What is of most interest in the passage is the immediate acceptance of the inaccessibility of V. While Stencil is willing to concede that he can’t be sure what V. is, he quickly acknowledges that V. could very well be an inanimate object. The possibility embodies the same attitude of Profane: In the taxonomies of genders and species and objects—men are animate and everything else is inanimate and feminized (e.g., the ship, which some characters suggest is in fact V., referred to as a “she”)—a clear binary is observed. Thus, in seeking V., both Profane and Stencil believe they are seeking a sexualized, passive, feminized, and inanimate being. Stencil himself notes to Benny Profane, “Not even as if [V.] were any cause, any agent. She was only there” (428-9). Moreover, actively searching for an inanimate being, passive in nature, will affirm for them their masculinity, which is inseparable from receiving affirmation that they are, indeed, animate. They are, indeed, special in the ontological scheme. V., to them, serves as a missing link in an ontological framework. To prove their superiority in an ontological taxonomy, they must find V.

The characters are mistaken, of course. Their correlationist viewpoint (which, here, is closely tied to misogyny) relies upon the parallel between inanimateness and passivity. Jane Bennett notes, “The association of matter with passivity still haunts us today . . . weakening our discernment of the force of things” (65). Pynchon scholars such as David Cowart exemplify this association between objects and passivity in his discussion of Profane’s fears: “It sums up Profane’s belief that objects are in conspiracy against him, a comic version of the paranoia we meet repeatedly in the historical sections. . . . His drift into and out of such episodes resembles a cartoon or stylized comedy where the audience is freed to laugh by the distancing absurdity of events” (73). Cowart is
hesitant to assign any agency to the objects, opting instead to suggest that Profane’s paranoia is entirely unfounded, even comic in its absurdity. Yet an unfounded paranoia does not account for Profane’s interaction with SHROUD or indeed with Stencil’s interactions with V. After all, V. is anything but passive or absurd throughout the novel. Though inaccessible to the characters, V. is in many ways the author of the quest. All of the novel’s spiraling narratives are related, however obliquely, to V. And as the author of the quest, V. recedes and withdraws from perception, enticing characters to continue searching in hopes that they will affirm her existence, thereby supporting their self-perceived ontological superiority. However, due to the impossibility of ever locating the hyperobject in its entirety, one could assume that they are faced by not only failure, but a challenge to their most basic ontological assumptions.

The Quest for the Hyperobject and Ontological Affirmation

Stencil’s quest for V. is riddled with contradiction and uncertainty as to whether or not V. exists at all. In a moment of dejection, Stencil thinks that V. may be nothing at all, “Its particular shape governed only by the surface accidents of history at the time” (164). Stencil’s sentiment is one often raised when thinking about hyperobjects. Stencil’s statement—removed from the context of the novel—could double as an attempted argument against the existence of global warming: global warming can’t be pointed to, so perhaps the “proof” of its existence is merely circumstantial; or, if I can hold a snowball in my hand on the Senate floor, then global warming is a liberal fantasy. Like any

5 This, as evidenced, when Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.) “disproved” climate change by holding a snowball on the senate floor.
hyperobject, V. straddles the fine line between perceptibly real and unreal. Morton writes, “Hyperobjects are so huge and so long-lasting, compared with humans, that they obviously seem both vivid and slightly unreal, for exactly the same reasons” (emphasis in original, 128). Hyperobjects are so foreign in relation to the human experience that they are not easy to conceptualize in terms of reality. Thus, the result of an awareness towards the hyperobject’s existence—among them, re-thinking assumed ontological taxonomies—causes suspicion of both the hyperobject’s reality and unreality. V.’s existence is questioned for the same reason; she is unable to be seen in her entirety.

In a more general sense, the ability of V. to raise ontological anxieties within the characters is in itself a sign of the hyperobject. Morton describes becoming aware of the hyperobject as a surreal experience, akin to “finding yourself in a David Lynch movie in which it becomes increasingly uncertain whether you are dreaming or awake” (153). One way in which such defamiliarization occurs is in a heightened awareness to ontology itself, or the “being” found in unfamiliar places. Morton writes that becoming aware of global warming entails ontological awareness: “We coexist with human lifeforms, nonhuman lifeforms, and non-lifeforms, on the insides of a series of gigantic entities with whom we also coexist: the ecosystem, biosphere, climate, planet, Solar System” (128). In other words, assumptions of ontological superiority are thrown into uncertainty in the wake of the hyperobject. An awareness of the hyperobject’s interobjectivity will itself cause one to see the endless chain of how human and nonhuman agents constantly collide and affect each other. Each part of the hyperobject demands seeing outside of one’s delusional ontological superiority, as is the case with Stencil and with Profane. In an ominous journal entry from Stencil’s father, he writes, “There is more behind and inside
than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report” (49). The answer to his question would likely correlate to answering assumptions concerning his ontic assumptions, revealing a world in which the animate and inanimate share ontological footing and agency; thus, Herbert Stencil comes to an indirect conclusion on the existence of a flat ontology.

The shaking of ontological assumptions directly correlates to V.’s temporal undulation, or the ability of the hyperobject to highlight the endless chain of effects moving to and from observer and hyperobject. Or, as Levi Bryant puts it, “We produce effects in the water (i.e., the hyperobject) like diffraction patterns, causing it to ripple in particular ways, and it produces effects in us, causing our skin to get goosebumps” (“Hyperobjects and OOO”). Our perception of a hyperobject is invariably bound to those “ripples” of experience caused by our awareness of its presence. Bryant poses a relational view of the hyperobject, at least in that temporal undulation acknowledges the role that human actors (along with any other actor) play in the hyperobject. Of course, the opposite is equally true. Just as global warming is shaped by humans, it also shapes human lives. In the same way, V. is also shaped or affected by those who seek her.

The manner by which the characters ultimately shape V. is primarily one of reduction. The characters atomize her massive, looming presence into constituent parts, and in turn suspecting these individual parts of containing the whole. Joseph Fahy summarizes the characters’ options when determining the identity of V.: “[V.] may be a nation, a sewer rat, Victoria Wren, Vera Meroving, Veronica Manganese, or a sailing vessel” (5). Interestingly, he concludes, “such matters are open to various levels of
interpretation, as critics have suggested.” While it seems like a fairly obvious statement, I believe it does some injustice to Pynchon’s depiction of V. while also reflecting a somewhat limited viewpoint offered through an epistemological stance. Oftentimes, Pynchon scholarship suggests that V. is either unreal or one of the possible identities Pynchon lays out. However, I argue that V. is all of these “identities” in a way that supersedes the somewhat tidy conclusion that she is unified as nothing more than a general V. “concept.” Ontologically speaking, V., as a hyperobject, is not confined to a single sewer rat or a girl in the ruins of Malta; V. can be all of these manifestations. My explanation of V.’s identity has not previously been afforded, most likely because of the seeming absurdity/impossibility of the statement that V. is all of these identities in a way that supersedes metaphor and symbol. Yet the possible connotation of absurdity is bound to the long-running Western epistemological tradition that associates “being” as centralized largely to the perceiving self. In the theory of the hyperobject, V. can very much be de-centralized into various identities.

Dwight Eddins makes a decidedly similar claim, though for much different reasons and in the direction of a far different conclusion. To Eddins, V.’s dispersion into splintering identities marks an “existential interpretation” (51). V. is unified, he states, as “a goddess-shaped emptiness, an oddly negative divinity that serves as the genius of a historical process driven by randomly, antiseptically neutral forces” (51). Eddins notes perhaps the most identifiable feature of V. as a hyperobject—the strange presence of her absence, the shape of her negative impression throughout the novel. However, Eddins notes that her “emptiness” in its final form amounts to nothing more than symbolism. I advocate for a similar reading, though with the amendment that V. does not amount to
mere symbolism. Eddins’ observation that V. is not one of the identities, but all of them is tied to his interpretation of V. as a “goddess.” To Eddins, V.’s ability to be all of these identities is similar in effect to the trinity—a divine agency, embodying all identities singularly and at once. While his interpretation is helpful in conceptualizing the hyperobject’s agency, the trinity concept should by no means be mistaken as synonymous with the hyperobject.

Though the hyperobject may consist of multiple “bodies” (e.g., global warming consisting of acid rain, chemicals in the atmosphere, methane gas, etc.), it does not embody itself into each of these bodies fully (in the manner of the trinity). For example, the entire essence of global warming is not to be found in a rainstorm. Instead, OOO sides with quantum theory in suggesting that objects possess no properties intrinsic to them: “Instead, each object should be regarded as something containing only incompletely defined potentialities that are developed when an object interacts with an appropriate system” (Bohm 139). Morton argues that hyperobjects are fully capable of uniting objects into such a system: “they [hyperobjects] can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects” (Morton 1). However, Morton is also careful to clarify that the hyperobject is not just an assemblage of other objects; it is also an object unto itself that continues to exist beyond the physical capacities of humans in a higher dimension. However, its affects on other objects are oftentimes visible, which is precisely what V. accomplishes. Although V. exists beyond the characters’ perceptions, the identities of V. throughout the novel are physical manifestations of the hyperobject whose entirety is inherently inaccessible.
As Stencil combs through old records and testimonies, he fluctuates from certainty to uncertainty as to whom V. really is, stuck on the notion that V. must be *one* of these identities. For a moment, he suspects Victoria Wren—a dancer turned prostitute. As he looks at his dossier on her, “Victoria was gradually replaced by V.” (456). It's a common scenario for a Pynchon character—siphoning a massive amount of information (some of which is undoubtedly a red herring), tracing the clues to a single *something*. The characters’ paranoia, it seems, is only ameliorated by having something to point to. In doing so, however, Stencil ignores the ominous journal entry from his father that reads, “There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected” (49), which is precisely the nature of the hyperobject. It is able to hold together multiple objects, all the while remaining more expansive than can be anticipated. Morton offers an analogy in understanding the odd, indeed paradoxical, characteristic. He compares the hyperobject to the Tardis of BBC’s *Dr. Who*, which is essentially “a time traveling spaceship that is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside” (Morton 79). He elucidates his comparison: “If it is the case that an entity has more parts than it can encompass in a whole, then objects are transfinite in some sense, fractals that contain more of themselves than they let on on the outside” (79). Thus, V. as the novel’s hyperobject is not contained to one identity over the other, much as the reading performed by Kupsch and other scholars suggests. Instead, V., much like Walt Whitman’s grandiose self-characterization, is large and contains multitudes.

As a whole, the novel grapples with assumptions concerning the nature of objects by introducing a hyperobject that threatens a false sense of ontological superiority through exemplifying tenets of a flat ontology. V. is an assemblage of the animate and
the inanimate; the animate in no way assumes more agency than the inanimate: Vera Mondaugen is no more V. than is the sewer rat. These very real identities operating beneath the agency of V., embodying the notion of flat ontology, are skeptically noted in Stencil’s musings:

To go along assuming that Victoria the girl tourist and Veronica the sewer rat were one and the same V. was not at all to bring up any metempsychosis; only to affirm that his quarry fitted in with The Big One, the century’s master cabal [. . .] If she was a historical fact then she continued active today and at the moment, because the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name was as yet unrealized, though V. might be no more a she than a sailing vessel or a nation. (244)

On some level, Stencil is aware of the possibility that V. is an assemblage of various identities, yet at the same time, he seems incredibly hesitant in his conclusion, as demonstrated by the final line of the passage in which he decisively offsets his conclusion. His frustration is likely due to an assumed ontological significance inherent in a human being that is absent in an inanimate object. His ontic prejudice that does not allow him to see that the hyperobject truly does extend beyond the human and into the inanimate world; moreover, it does so in an ontologically egalitarian manner in tandem with a flat ontology, no single component containing more ontological “weight” than another. In other words, Stencil can’t accept the inherent withdrawnness of the hyperobject made up of these identities because he feels that he must find all of V. in a single one of these identities. The impossibility of such a task, in essence, is his true
“quarry”—the impossible task of distilling the entire hyperobject into one component of itself.

V. forces the characters into a position where they either seek without ever coming near or confront the agency of the inanimate as well as the feminine. Were the characters to acknowledge that V.’s identities—animate and inanimate both—were interobjective components of a larger hyperobject, the search could perhaps come closer (though, of course, never leading to the hyperobject in its entirety) because in doing so they would at least realize the futility of their myopic approach. Yet, as seen in the previous quote about Stencil and his wariness to assume that they are all related to V., the characters are mostly unable to surmount their ontic prejudice. When a character asks Oedipa Mass of *The Crying of Lot 49* if she has considered whether or not her situation is simply an elaborate hoax, the narrator writes, “It had occurred to her. But like the thought that someday she would have to die, Oedipa had been steadfastly refusing to look at that possibility directly” (138). The same logic applies to Stencil and to Profane: They both refuse to look directly at the possibility of a universe in which the inanimate is not passive and the animate loses ontological superiority. Were they to look at the distinct possibility of a de-centered animate, they would need to question, in the words of Jane Bennett, their “larger faith in the uniqueness of humans” (108), which to both is also related, as discussed, to their concepts of masculinity. Thus, in some ways, their central dilemma is one of retaining basic understandings of “self.” Confronting V. fully would mean confronting basic assumptions of “being” that V. would inevitably shatter. Thus, Stencil understands that what awaits him at the end of his quest is death. As his father mysteriously died after seeking V., Stencil equates V. with “foretastes of Armageddon”
a characterization which, though hyperbolic in nature, underlines the unnamed and unspecified apprehension he has towards V. And, paradoxically, a latent sense of death proves tantalizing enough to continue searching, as discussed before. It is clear that hyperobjects are, indeed, “contradictory beasts” (Morton 47).

The only way to really think of V. is to think of the various identities throughout the novel, giving each an equal ontological weight as agents unified through the hyperobject. Because of hyperobjects’ ability to unify elements, animate and inanimate alike, they “humiliate the human, decisively decentering us from a place of pampered privilege in the scheme of things” (Morton 47). No longer is the human the ontological capstone in an expansive taxonomy of things; instead, hyperobjects level these taxonomies through revealing the agency and withdrawnness of nonhuman life. When the characters seek V., they only find themselves farther and farther away from her, upholding evidence of a flat ontology: “The more we know about an object, the stranger it becomes” (Morton 175). In their ability to demonstrate the withdrawnness/strangeness of all things, hyperobjects reveal an ontological semblance in all things: everything—animate and inanimate—withdraws and becomes stranger the more it becomes “known.”

As a harbinger of a flat ontology, V.’s “decentering” of the characters from their ontological statuses confronts the characters’ assumptions that femininity is inherently tied to passivity and inanimateness while masculinity is tied to agency and the animate. In sum, V.’s presence at the heart of the novel throws ontological assumptions into utter disarray.

The understanding of V. as a hyperobject demands a new reading for the novel. As mentioned earlier, scholars have widely declared that the novel’s theme is “of the
running-down of all animate things” (Lense 60). or “the decline of the animate into the inanimate” (Mendeslon 6). However, I suggest that the movement of the novel is not from animate to inanimate; instead, the entire novel consists of the characters gradually becoming aware of the agency of the inanimate—a steady realization of a flat ontology. What they had previously mistaken as passivity is actually a withdrawn agency inherent in all objects. Scholars who suggest the novel embodies “decline” reach their conclusion from a correlationist standpoint, ironically paralleling Profane’s association of inanimateness with passivity. Such an understanding is directly contradicted in light of V.’s agency. Though never found, V. is dispersed through (though is not limited to) the various identities because these identities are interpolated through the hyperobject’s effect of interobjectivity. Though unified through V., the individual identities do not contain the whole essence of the hyperobject, as the hyperobject’s essence is distributed beyond human perception. What is fully available to the character’s perception is a lingering, morbid awareness—a morbidity that is inseparable from V.’s invasive presence in an anthropocentric (and largely misogynistic) world. In this way, V. demonstrates that not only does the hyperobject promise to far outlast human life, but it also shows that human life is perhaps no more “special” than any other unknowable, forever withdrawn life.
Conclusion: Pynchon’s Postmodern Hope

I would of course argue against the claim that Pynchon’s work is in any way formulaic; however, there is undoubtedly a foundation on which each of his novels builds: someone seeks after something that may or may not be there. The common strain in all the novels, I feel, must in some way be responsible for the literary impact of Thomas Pynchon on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Perhaps the reason why his work resonates so deeply with our postmodern sensibilities is because it provides a mirror to these very same sensibilities. His novels offer reflections of characters dealing with exaggerated situations of our own, many of which reduce to the question, “Is there a reality that extends beyond ourselves?”

Pynchon scholars have been quick to deal with the characters’ epistemological inquiries, which has proven interesting, but evident in the scholarship on Pynchon is a lack of explicit ontological perspective, which could be argued as a powerful ontological sentiment in and of itself; Timothy Morton writes, “the refusal to get ontological is already ontological” (46) because the refusal demonstrates a dismissive attitude towards questions of “being” under the assumption, perhaps, that such questions are of lesser importance. The trivializing sentiment towards ontological inquiry (particularly any ontological inquiry dealing with our capacity to “know” the reality outside ourselves) can be applied to Pynchon scholarship and postmodernity in general. In its valorization of epistemology and epistemology’s “promise” of a possibly illusory reality, postmodern thought has revealed an ontological state of uncertainty, which I believe has been reflected quite perfectly in Pynchon’s work. Pynchon’s novels demonstrate a world that finds ephemeral comfort in the possibility of unreality, but which later causes the
characters deep concern when they relate the question to their state of “being,” as perhaps demonstrated best in *Gravity’s Rainbow* when Blicero, the commander of the original Rocket battery discusses a possible chance to live on the Moon: “[P]resence back on Earth is only temporary, and never ‘real’ . . . passages out there are dangerous, chances of falling so shining and deep. . . . Gravity rules all the way out to the cold sphere, *there is always the danger of falling*” (emphasis in original, 624). In a single sentence, Blicero hints at an illusory reality, while simultaneously acknowledging a very real outside world that holds massive sway over the individual.

The epistemological anxiety faced by Pynchon’s characters (caused by confusion about reality vs. illusions of reality) is also, in the vein of Morton’s statement, an ontological anxiety. The anxiety that all reality is an illusion doubles as an anxiety that one’s sense of being is also illusory. Conversely, one can associate the anxiety that there are real things that extend beyond oneself with the anxiety that the individual is inextricably linked to outside factors (as is the case of Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*).

Regardless of their apprehension, the characters are inexplicably motivated to engage in the quest for the central entities—the Rocket and V. As I have noted throughout the previous chapters, the characters’ motivation to search has been a central talking point in Pynchon scholarship. David Cowart discusses the parallel between Pynchon’s motif of entropy and the characters’ motivation to quest after something in an increasingly unfamiliar world:

[Pynchon] uses entropy as a paradigm of the snowballing deterioration of the West. . . . [O]ne might be able to arrest or reverse the decline of a seemingly
moribund culture. Some such meliorism does in fact seem to motivate a few of Pynchon’s characters—and, I would argue, Pynchon himself. (2-3)

The characters seek desperately to retain some concept of “world” as they know it; moreover, the retention of “world” relates also to halting the movement of the broad culture into entropy. Cowart may be inclined to suggest that the characters wish to do so in order to preserve some familiar concept that is steadily falling away. Elaine Safer states as much in regards to Oedipa Maas of *The Crying of Lot 49*: “Characters search vainly for some form of order as a means of self-preservation. . . . In [Lot 49], the quest of Oedipa Maas is . . . a means of defining the self” (283,287). Oedipa’s situation is also the case for Slothrop, Stencil, and Benny Profane. They are all put into a situation in which the result of their quest will have a deep impact on how exactly they go about defining “self.” Ironically, what they seek are hyperobjects, incapable of ever being found, thus damning their efforts. In their effort to retain their sense of “world,” their reality is drastically changed through the hyperobjects.

For Slothrop, finding the Rocket means that his “self” is capable of acting beneath the promise of autonomy, unaffected by unseen forces and connections that tie him to various factions and martial movements. For Benny Profane and Stencil, finding V. entails a reification of the animate’s ability to conquer the inanimate, thus reaffirming their ontic prejudice and agency. In their inability to locate the hyperobject, their entire concept of “world” is shaken. In their failure to find that after which they quest, the characters must come to terms with a changing world, one in which their most basic assumptions about existence are thrown into flux. The hyperobjects demand that the characters re-think the very fabric of the world that they move through, a world
containing massively dispersed entities whose influence one can see everywhere, yet the
entity itself is forever unavailable in its entirety to human perception. It is here that the
novels intersect with our own world. Within a postmodern society that often approaches
frameworks of reality skeptically, to confront the possibility of an entity that, in some
way, connects individuals through its presence and displays enormous nonhuman
influence, dramatically complicates such skepticism. What are the implications of its
slightly “malevolent” reality—to use Morton’s word—to our own assumptions of what it
means to “be” in the world?

When I suggest that parallel of Pynchon’s novels and our postmodern
sensibilities, I’m following the conclusion of many other scholars, such as Dwight Eddins
and Molly Hite. However, what I would like to add onto the previous understanding is
that Pynchon offers hope. Most scholars would suggest that Pynchon’s novels act merely
as representations—mirrors of postmodern society. But I think that Pynchon goes one
step further and offers some sense of amelioration.

Before delving fully into Pynchon’s “postmodern hope,” it will be necessary to
break down the parallel at work. To suggest that Pynchon’s novels, in some way, reflect
the post-war/postmodern world would implicitly suggest that the characters confront a set
of circumstances that mirror our own. At its core, I believe the set of circumstances is
quite simple: there are many elaborate illusions, byproducts of an entropic universe, or
there really are mysterious, unseen entities which precipitate events. Of course, I claim
Pynchon suggests that there are real things in the world as opposed to all things being
illusory; there are real things that supersede human perception; there are real things that
carry an enormous influence on our lives and over the future. I do believe, however, that
Pynchon does not stop by mirroring the ontological anxieties of his post-war generation—the fear of connections (Chapter 1), the fear of humans declining into inanimateness (Chapter 2), and the fear of something not readily observed or comprehended (Chapters 1 and 2). Instead, he offers a single, unifying entity able to embody all of these anxieties while simultaneously mirroring questions of real or unreal: the hyperobject.

The theoretical concept of hyperobjects, when applied to Pynchon’s novels, demonstrates that the search for absolute truth and reality is doomed from the beginning. Locating the central entities in massively dispersed affairs is impossible. Yet the impossibility of locating the central entity is not affirmation of the insolvable dichotomy between reality and illusion, nor does it nullify an ontological reading. In fact, it is just the opposite. Hyperobjects alone presents an ontology in which “being” is radically re-conceptualized—a “being” that is recognized in its past and its effects, never the whole presence, which is beyond human perception. The novels of Pynchon reveal that the hyperobject is a major component of the plot; however, more than a fixed device of “plot,” the hyperobject is also an active force within the novels.

Consider the famous opening passage of Gravity’s Rainbow: “A screaming comes across the sky” in reference, of course, to the movement of a Rocket. The conclusion is set in a movie theatre as a V-2 Rocket drops onto the crowd, ostensibly while the same screaming comes across the very same sky. Thus, the novel begins and ends with the Rocket. There is no better representation of the hyperobject: the actions and plots born from the hyperobject will also end with the hyperobject. Timothy Morton ominously declares that hyperobjects, due to their sheer longevity, are what have brought about the
end of the world as we know it. Though their existence is often mistaken as having an
exact beginning, their introduction into our world—not only physically (e.g., the creation
of global warming), but also through general awareness—places them at the center of
their very own narrative. While humans may be engaged with the hyperobject, their
participation in the narrative will not change the outcome: the hyperobject will outlast the
human. Morton would suggest that it does more than simply exist at the heart of a
narrative; the hyperobject will become increasingly primary in human discourse:

Nonhuman beings are responsible for the next moment of human history and
thinking. . . . The reality is that hyperobjects were already here, and slowly but
surely we understood what they were already saying. They contacted us.
Hyperobjects profoundly change how we think about any object. . . . Heidegger
said that only a god can save us now. As we find ourselves waking up within a
series of gigantic objects, we realize that he forgot to add: We just don’t know
what sort of god. (emphasis in original, Morton 201)

The hyperobjects, viscous and powerful, impose themselves in a manner contingent upon
the degree to which we seek after them—one of the prominent features discussed
throughout the previous chapters. But this characteristic is really only one aspect of their
being. In the previous passage, Morton implies a saving-power behind hyperobjects,
aligned with an agency of the divine, suggestive of some kind of redemptive power. But
the question remains: Who will be saved?

Perhaps Pynchon’s hyperobjects serve not just to mirror a generation of people
who would rather not be connected to each other and would rather remain at the top of an
ontological taxonomy. Perhaps hyperobjects act, in some capacity, as a “god” that can
save the characters. However, the way in which they save is clearly not through the
typical understanding that implies preservation or keeping someone out of harm’s way.
Instead, the hyperobjects of Pynchon’s novels seem to do something quite different. In
the case of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *V.*, the central entities perform eerily similar functions.
The fears of the characters who seek after the central entities are wholly affirmed by their
respective entities. Stencil fears death, but also—as I argue—he and Profane both
fear finding that humans (specifically men) are anything but ontologically superior—a
fear that *V.* confirms. Slothrop fears a web of connections, creating a chaotic tangle of
motives and conspiracies that directly involves him, and his sense of being connected to
it all is revealed as he draws further and further into the hyperobject. The saving power of
the hyperobject is not a comforting power; it is a much more troubling one. The
hyperobject comes forward with reaffirmations of our deep-seated ontological anxieties.
It forces us to recognize the problematic nature of philosophical modes of thought forged
by centuries of focusing on epistemological thought. The narrative of the hyperobject is a
narrative of confronting ontological questions that lead to unnerving answers. Perhaps we
are not nearly as autonomous as we thought. Perhaps we are no more ontologically
valuable than any single object surrounding us. Perhaps—in some oblique, yet
irrevocable way—we knew it all along.
Works Cited


