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An Ecology of Representations: Zak Smith and Thomas Pynchon

Keita Hatooka

Laura: [...]Mother calls them a glass menagerie! Here's an example of one, if you'd like to see it! . . . Oh, be careful—if you breathe, it breaks! . . . You see how the light shines through him?

Jim: It sure does shine!

Laura: I shouldn't be partial, but he is my favorite one.

Jim: What kind of a thing is this one supposed to be?

Laura: Haven't you noticed the single horn on his forehead?

Jim: A unicorn, huh? —aren't they extinct in the modern world?

Laura: I know!

—Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*

From one of his earliest short pieces of fiction, “Entropy” (1960), through to his latest novel *Against the Day* (2006), Thomas Pynchon’s literary world has been set within the modern world, where not only unicorns, but also dodo birds are extinct.¹ Yet perhaps, upon reflection, it would be more accurate to see this literary creation as placed within the postmodern world where Pynchon’s characters cannot get over the idea that if they had stopped believing, on an epistemological level, in the chronological or theological or scientific order of their living world these creatures might have avoided extinction. As the epigraph of the first part of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon quotes the pregnant words of a historic rocket developer, Wernher von Braun:

Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death. (1)

In his 1981 book *Reading from the New Book on Nature*, Robert Nadeau claims that this quotation “is not to be taken without some sense of irony, but it also provides some useful insights into the design and meaning of *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (137). According to Nadeau, such a “new metaphysic” as von Braun-Pynchon’s is something too difficult for “Western man” to accept. This claim is put forth without pointing out any of the influences of Oriental thought; instead Nadeau emphasizes the resemblances to the work of Alfred North Whitehead, British mathematician, logician and philosopher:

If von Braun’s deity is like that of Whitehead, the never-finished becoming of nature’s process, there is continuity in our spiritual existence after death as well. Pynchon, whose sense of deity definitely resembles that of Whitehead, provides in the novel seemingly endless demonstrations of the fact that Western man has great difficulty accepting this new metaphysic because his tendency to impose either or categorical systems on the fluid process of life mitigates against that acceptance. (137-38)

However, once we investigate Pynchon’s non-human creatures by hypothetically placing him as an object of study in between postmodernism and ecocriticism, we discover that this seemingly radical postmodern novelist can no longer be viewed as an authentic romanticist or a nihilistic

surrealist.

“You know I feel like I live with a menagerie of figurations,” says Donna Haraway, who might be one of the most significant postmodern-ecological critics. “It’s like I inhabit a critical-theoretical zoo and the cyborg just happens to be the most famous member of that zoo, although the ‘zoo’ is not the right word because all my inhabitants are not animals” (*How Like a Leaf* 135–36). In the case of Pynchon, his menagerie or zoo is also composed of a wide variety of non-human creatures, some of which exist between the natural and the artificial, just as Haraway’s cyborg does: amoebae and alligators in the sewer (*V.*); dolphins at the edge of the sea (*The Crying of Lot 49*); King Kong, a giant octopus, and the dodoes (*Gravity’s Rainbow*); an ordinary dog, porpoises, and Bigfoot in the redwoods (*Vineland*); Beetles, a mechanical duck, and a talkative Norfolk terrier called “the Learned English Dog” (*Mason & Dixon*); and literate dog named Pugnax (*Against the Day*).

If we call Pynchon’s imaginative world of non-human creatures a “menageries of representations,” then the purpose of this paper could be referred to as an effort to discover what might be termed an “ecology of representations.” In her book *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag puts forth the idea of an “ecology of images,” explaining that she feels some apprehensive about the postmodernist proliferation of images, especially photographic ones.² Against the backdrop of the late 1960s to the early 1970s when a dramatic rise in the environmental consciousness was seen across the nation, Sontag analogically explains the new necessity for this kind of ecology:

Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world

to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well. (180)

While Sontag is often figured as a “modernist,” whose seriousness seems to be turned into postmodern parodies in Pynchon’s way of thought, Pynchon’s imagination is sometimes directly synchronized with Sontag.

In the case of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the giant ape King Kong is predominant as “king” of the menagerie of representations, opposed to the V-2 rocket, its transsexual tyrant. Calling King Kong “your classic Luddite saint” (41) in his essay “Is It O.K. to Be a Luddite?” Pynchon prompts us to remember the final dialogue in *King Kong* (1933)—“Well, the airplanes got him.” “No... it was Beauty killed the Beast” (Ibid)—in which he could find “the Snovian Disjunction, only different, between the human and the technological” (Ibid). When we will investigate the mode of life in his menagerie, however, it should not be dismissed that here Pynchon causes animals to be lost between people and machines. Rather, there is a powerful animal kingdom in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, where, as Joseph D. Andriano points out, “Pynchon places both the sea monster, Grigori the giant octopus, and the land-monster, King Kong, in juxtaposition with the sky-monster, the Rocket/Dragon” (157).

While Andriano understates the possibility of giving these animals an ecocritical reading—“they are rarely placed in an explicitly evolutionary context” (165)—, we could be proactive in replacing them in an ecological context, not as the champions, but as the victims. The representations of the animals precisely give us a hint to retrospectively reread this monumental postmodern novel in the context of postmodern ecology. As my paper will work to clarify, while an inevitable gap exists between our environmental reality and our imagination concerning both human and non-human creatures,

this gap can be fruitfully bridged with an “ecology of representations” which has been evoked by diverse influences of Thomas Pynchon’s creative works.

Zak Smith: A New-generation Interpreter of Gravity’s Rainbow

“The reason why Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* has become well-established as a member of the postmodern canon,” analyzes Tatsumi Takayuki, “can best be explained by the fact that it acted as a seedbed for the next generation of creators from which they could gather the threads of their own inter-textual narratives” (*Metafiction* 54). The members of “Post-Pynchon,” borrowing Larry McCaffery’s concept, are listed as follows: William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), Steve Erickson’s *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989), Jack Womack’s *Terraplane* (1988), Donna Haraway’s *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (1989),³ and David Blair’s independent film *Wax: Or the Discovery of Television among the Bees* (1991). What this list of mixed genres shows us is that the Pynchonesque Luddite vision, which stands between nature, humankind, and technology, was certainly inherited by them.

In this new century, we are encountering a new-generation interpreter of *Gravity Rainbow* named Zak Smith, “a guy best known for portraits of half-naked punk-porn chicks” (*Pictures* xi). Born three years after the publication of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, he came up with two gigantic artistic productions: *Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon’s Novel Gravity’s Rainbow* (original exhibited in 2004, published in 2006); “100 Girls and 100 Octopuses” (2005; Fig. 1). These function as a complementary pair that serves to represent Smith’s attitude toward *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The former is expressing his persistent effort toward *accuracy*—“I tried to illustrate the passage as literally as possible,” writes Smith, “if the book says there was a green Spitfire, I drew a green Spitfire” (Fig. 2)⁴; the latter is

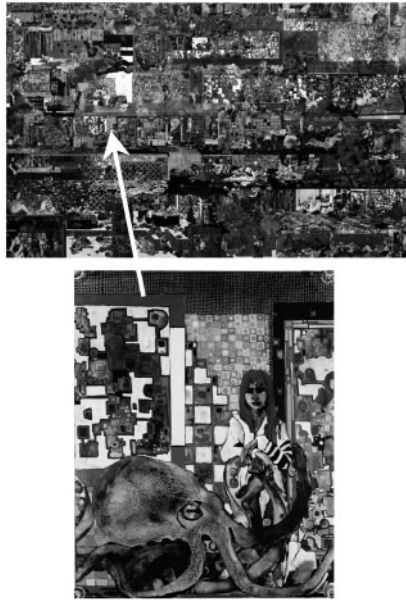


Fig. 1. “100 Girls and 100 Octopuses,” acrylic and metallic painting by Zak Smith (2005)
 < http://www.zaxart.com/octopus_girls/index.html >

something called “anti-Gravity’s Rainbow”(Valdes n.pag.).

Perhaps the key point about Smith’s representations of animals, as the title of the latter reveals, is their number as well as its size. In the case of octopuses, there are a single girl and one giant octopus in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, comparing to Smith’s “100 Girls and 100 Octopuses.” In the first section of Part 2 of the novel, American lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop encounters a giant octopus named Grigori, which is about to set at a girl, a Dutch double agent. As Charles Clerc points out, the leitmotif of this relationship between this monstrous octopus and its beautiful victim is *Beauty and the Beast*, which might be shared with that of King Kong, in which Fay Wray played the role of Ann Darrow (Clerc, *Approaches to Gravity’s Rainbow* 145). “Holy shit it’s moving—an octopus?” exclaims Pynchon’s narrator:

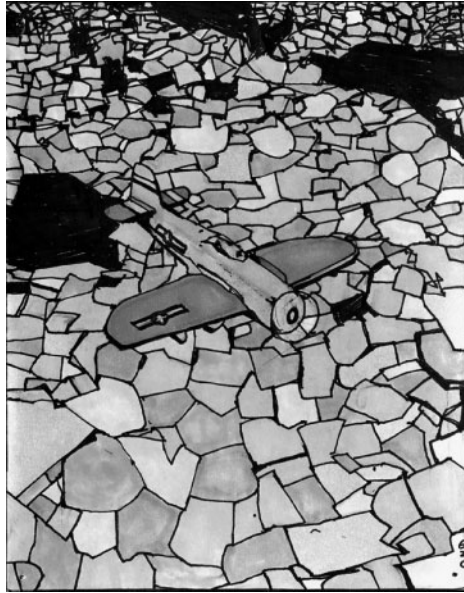


Fig. 2. "The Thunderbolt is painted Kelly green," Zak Smith, 620.

Yes it is the biggest fucking octopus Slothrop ever seen outside of the movies, Jackson, and it has just risen up out of the water and squirmed halfway onto one of the black rocks. Now, cocking a malignant eye at the girl, it reaches out, wraps one long sucker-studded tentacle around her neck as everyone watches, another around her waist and begins to drag her, struggling, back under the sea. (186)

The narrator emphasizes here that Slothrop has already experienced this kind of encounter *inside* of the movie. Because of its time setting in 1944–45, one might suppose the obvious framework to be that of the 1916 version of *Twenty Thousand League Under the Sea*, where Jules Verne's original description of the giant squid attack on a submarine was turned into its captain's encounter with a giant octopus. In *Monsters of the Sea*

(1995), Richard Ellis comments that “According to Williamson [who was an “underwater moviemaker” for this movie], people believed the encounter was genuine” (272). As Ellis points out, this film is “one of the first ‘special effects’ in movie history” (Ibid), and the future of its special effects is John Earnest Williamson’s patented octopus. Even though Pynchon’s narrator offers few specifics about the size of octopus except that it is “the biggest fucking octopus” or “a *big* one” (GR 186), we can find that the size of Smith’s versions of Grigori both in *Pictures* (Fig. 3–4) and “100 Girls and 100 Octopuses” are much closer to that of Williamson’s prototype octopus (Fig. 5–6), which is as large as an adult male, rather than being close to the size of another classic giant octopus in *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955)



Fig. 3. p186, Zak Smith, *Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow* (Portland: Tin House, 2006) 186.



Fig. 4. p186, Zak Smith, *Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow* (Portland: Tin House, 2006) 186.

designed by Ray Harryhausen, which attacks the Golden Gate Bridge.

While Williamson had to create a human-life-size octopus because of its operability, Smith seems to have had the intention of bringing the octopus size down in order to de-symbolize it. “Is the octopus a metaphor for anything?” asks Smith to himself, “No. There were tons of animals I could’ve used and didn’t because they had some obvious meaning.”⁵ As if he is attempting to make it different from the metaphorical image of King Kong, Smith disfigures the iconographical effect of the giant octopus. Indeed, the similarity between his illustration for page 186, the scene I quoted above, and each panel of “100 Girls and 100 Octopuses” is eloquent in Smith’s concern about salvaging the octopus from the traps of abstraction,

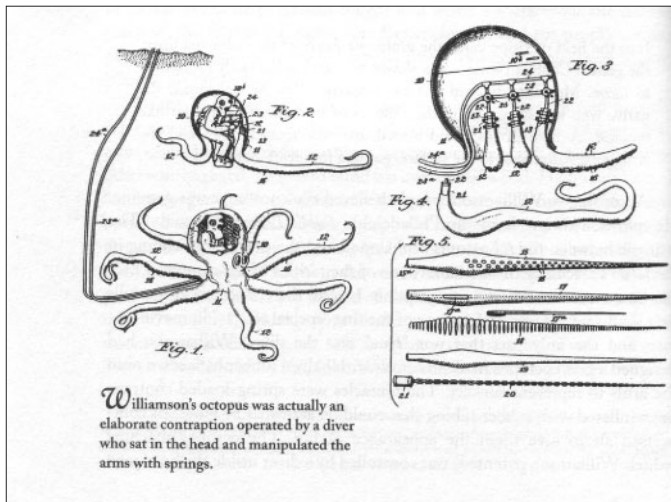


Fig. 5. Williamson's Octopus # 1; rpt. in Richard Ellis *Monsters of the Sea* (New York: Lyons, 2001)274.



Fig. 6. Williamson's Octopus # 2; rpt. in Richard Ellis *Monsters of the Sea* (New York: Lyons, 2001)274.

such that Pynchonesque Snovian Disjunction has caused the animal itself to become lost in the process of summarizing the narrative of *King Kong*. Through his artistic and organic view, Smith steps into Pynchon's literary world in order to change its rigid interpretation. Especially in "100 Girls and 100 Octopuses," the specific technique being tested for what might be called "anti-*Gravity's Rainbow*" is the proliferation of his octopuses as well as his girls.

While his interviewers often view Smith's projects as an "obsession," the artist has denied such an interpretation on each occasion: "People ask about my 'obsession' with *Gravity's Rainbow*, but I wouldn't say I was obsessed—I was just doing the thing the way it needed to be done" (*Pictures* xiv). Moreover, he also denies the idea of "paranoia," even though it has been recognized as one of the most important literary themes of Pynchon's works. The project titled *Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel* is, in Smith's words, fundamentally intended to make "Pynchon fans" gratified with its validation of "the real-world utility of the Pynchonish style of thought": "*Pay attention to everything interesting because everything is connected*" (Ibid, xii–xiii, italic original). Everything is connected—this remark comes from the oft-quoted line of *Gravity's Rainbow* concerning "paranoia":

Like another sorts of paranoia, it is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge, of the discovery that *everything is connected*, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly One, but at least connected, and perhaps a route In for those like Tchitcherine who are held at the edge.... (703, italics original)

This could be seen as related to one of the many "drug-epistemologies"

(582) that this Soviet intelligence officer called Tchitcherine seems to share with protagonist Tyrone Slothrop as well as the whole narrative structure of this book. Pynchonesque paranoid is “necessary for the investigation of reality,” in the words of Mark Richard Siegel, in its postmodern world, while in this case, Smith’s reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* seems to begin by denying Pynchon’s paranoia as a “pathetic” one: “People often call this style of thinking “paranoid,” but that word connotes pathetic rather than something that might be creative or useful” (*Pictures* xiii).

The “Pathetic Paranoid”

Pynchon’s critics usually advocate cultivating “creative paranoia” to “understand the seeming contingency of the fictional world” (Schwab 111); Smith negatively chooses the conception of “pathetic” as if he wants to go back to John Ruskin’s modernist idea, i.e., the “pathetic fallacy.” In the field of ecocriticism it may be appropriate to borrow from Neil Evernden the line “the Pathetic Fallacy is a fallacy only to the ego clencher” (101), and reshape it, asserting that the “pathetic” paranoid holds a view that is totally opposed to the ecological world-view. Therefore, Smith’s validation of “the real-world utility of the Pynchonish style of thought” seems to be very significant for our rereading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* because it will make it possible for us to regard the connectedness of this narrative not as a form of “paranoia,” but as a expressing a type of “ecology,” just as Glen A. Love, author of *Practical Ecocriticism* (2003), evaluates the possibility of this newer literary criticism with the following words: “ecocriticism has the potential to contribute to the study of values in what we increasingly find to be a world where, to cite an ecological maxim, everything is connected to everything else” (7).

While Slothrop himself remains a paranoid in the story, it is worthy of

attention that Pynchon also seems to attempt to prevent the giant octopus Grigori from being abstracted. After saving Katje from Grigori, Slothrop begins to doubt if everything has been plotted. By explaining that it is “a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia” (188), Pynchon’s narrator confirms that behind the paranoia is a Puritan principled thinking, which is directly linked with “Slothrop’s own Puritan hopes for the Word” (571). Indeed, if we look back to his encounter with Grigori, as I have already discussed in the essay “Octopus Never Barks: Body and Word in *Plasticman* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*” (Hatooka, 2002), we will find that Pynchon causes our attention shifted from the physical bigness of the octopus to the metaphysical bigness of the Word:

But there is a mad exuberance, as with inanimate objects which fall off of tables when we are sensitive to noise and our own clumsiness and don’t *want* them to fall, a sort of wham! ha-ha you hear that? here it is *again*, WHAM! in the cephalopod’s every movement, which Slothrop is glad to get away from as he finally scales the crab like a discus, with all his strength, out to sea, and the octopus, with an eager splash and gurgle, strikes out in pursuit, and is presently gone. (187)

Although the iconographical symbolization of Grigori seems to be the same with that of King Kong, the octopus does not bark, but makes a sound “WHAM!” as its original roaring. For Slothrop, therefore, what causes him to feel threatened is nothing but onomatopoeia itself, which overwhelms the physicality of the giant octopus. This emphatic sound of the capital letters is essentially close to the onomatopoeic label of the comics: that is, they are absolutely iconographical objects and the reader does not “hear” the sounds, but just “sees” the written ones. The narrator puts such visualized

sound as “WHAM!” into “Plasticman sound” (331) after the name of the protagonist of Slothrop’s favorite comic book. After the encounter with Grigori, Slothrop becomes increasingly obsessed with this visualization of the sound: “She looks at him curiously, but doesn’t ask why—her teeth halt on her lip, and the *warum* (varoom, a Plasticman sound) hovers trapped in her mouth. Just as well. Slothrop doesn’t *know* why” (331). Such visual dominance of the Word over the reality is essentially the same with what Pynchon’s contemporary Pop artists did with their cartoon-strip style art. Among them, Roy Lichtenstein’s “Whaam!” (1963) literally privileges the onomatopoeia, relatively making the downed battleplane recede into the background. Both in Pynchon’s and Lichtenstein’s works, the word “Wham” is something ontological, which even possesses a physicality that has greater impact and presence than evident in the monster or the technological. That is to say, their privileging of the Word results in a canceling out of “the Snovian Disjunction [...] between the human and the technological” as well as between the human and the non-human creature.

Moreover, the author’s eventual salvation of Grigori, which should be called “post-Ruskin” modernism, seems to present a representational possibility that points us toward postmodern ecology. In a nice little twist, when his writing privileges the Plasticman sound “WHAM!” more than the giant octopus’s body, Grigori seems to be able to gain its freedom from the circulation of metaphorical abstraction: “A faint babble of English voices, and even occasional songs, reaches across the water to where Dr. Porkyevitch stands on deck. Below, Octopus Grigori, having stuffed himself with crab meat, frisks happily in his special enclosure.... Grisha, little friend, you have performed your last trick for a while” (189). Re-named Grisha by Dr. Porkyevitch, the octopus can retrospectively gain its own time.

If Zak Smith’s life-size visualization of the octopus helps us to imagine

the possibility of an ecological rereading of Pynchon's animal representation, this new relationship between Grisha/Grigori and its original keeper also suggests that here Pynchon certainly dares to allow the octopus to be put down into ecological time, which his entropic narrative of *Gravity's Rainbow* is continuously depriving from all of its creatures.

“Ruskin Business”: Pynchon as a Painter

At the time when he was visualizing *Gravity's Rainbow*, Zak Smith was twenty-nine years old. Interestingly enough, as he writes in his forward to *Pictures*, he provocatively identifies himself with young Pynchon, who was around twenty-six years old when he began to work on *Gravity's Rainbow* as well as *The Crying of Lot 49* after the publication of *V.*, circa 1963. What is the most contributive perspective of his project is probably that Smith straightforwardly regards Pynchon as a young artist of equal status to himself and one whose nature is not that of a novelist, but that of a painter:

Gravity's Rainbow in particular seems to have been written by someone who began with no other project than to observe, write essays about, and know the history of nearly everything that interested him in the one-eyed hope that, in the end, it would all be connected—the hope that after 760 pages some thread connecting warfare, behaviorism, and bad limericks would emerge and that this thread would be relevant, if not to the entire world, then at least to the life of the author.

Painters do that, too. The one who lived near the mountain painted the mountain, the one who liked bullfights painted the bullfight, the one who watched the light pass through the greasy glass and hit the orange peel on the kitchen counter painted the light passing through the greasy glass and hitting the orange peel on the kitchen counter—not

because they *knew* that looking closely at these things would tell them something but because they *hoped* it would. (*Pictures* xiii, italic original)

Here, Smith tries to understand Pynchon as a “painter” whose business is just to “look” at something *real* which is just outside of him, and perhaps outside of postmodern world. Although it might be a Ruskinish modernist image of author/painter, it is also true, as we confirmed in the case of the octopus representation, that Smith’s denial of the “pathetic” will allow us to break the routine, departing from a regular series of Baudrillardian interpretation: “[the image] has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

While Steve Erickson, one of the “Post-Pynchon” postmodernists, claims in the introduction for Smith’s work that “the only way to make a visual representation” of *Gravity’s Rainbow* might be “to surrender to the inkblots of whatever Rorschach the novel inspires” (“Introduction” ix), this intergenerational negotiation between Smith’s graphic images and Pynchon’s verbal ones will take on new meaning, especially when Smith says clearly that “this book is not some hippie word-association game” (xvi):

I am conventional and sober-minded enough that when Pynchon writes, say, “ambulance,” I see an ambulance in my head, not a washrag. I might even go look up a 1940s German ambulance to make sure I get it right. (Ibid.)

His insistence on such “accuracy” is what makes his work different from a simple “creative paranoia.”

Interestingly enough, his persistence to accuracy seems to be rather

closer to what Pynchon terms “Ruskin business.” Pynchon used this expression to explain the notion of “accuracy” concerning the process of writing historical fiction. It is just after publishing of his latest historic novel, *Against the Day* (2006), that Pynchon wrote this letter of support for the British novelist, Ian McEwan, who was accused of “plagiarizing” the details for his historical novel. “Oddly enough,” writes Pynchon, “most of us who write historical fiction do feel some obligation to accuracy”:

It is that Ruskin business about “a capacity responsive to the claims of fact, but unoppressed by them.” Unless we were actually there, we must turn to people who were, or to letters, contemporary reporting, the encyclopedia, the internet, until, with luck, at some point, we can begin to make a few things of our own up. (“Letter” n.pag.)

What Pynchon says here is another version of his confession of his own “plagiarism” in his introduction to the *Slow Learner*. When he tried to write one of his early short stories, “Under the Rose,” he actually *looted* from a guidebook “all the details of a time and place [he] had never been to, right down to the names of the diplomatic corps” (17). While emphasizing that his confession remains a good lesson for the younger generation, Pynchon claims not to forget the importance of “reality,” which should come before representation: “Without some grounding in human reality, you are apt to be left only with another apprentice exercise, which is what this uncomfortably resembles” (18).

An ecology of representations demands that both the author and the reader (or the painter) exert an effort to view the gap between reality and imagination as a physical space where Pynchon’s menagerie of representa-

tions can exist. In my paper, I tried to show how recognizing and understanding the operation of the representations is crucial in evaluating not only Thomas Pynchon's "postmodern" work but also the next generations of artists, and how an analysis of the non-human representations in their works can stand as a significant contribution to postmodern literary theory and the field of ecocriticism as well.

Notes

- 1 For a farther discussion of representations of the dodo bird, see Hatooka, "Nostalgia and Extinction Narrative: A Comparative Study of Popular Science Writers and Postmodern Novelists."
- 2 W. J. T. Mitchell suggestively points out that "Susan Sontag gives eloquent expression to many of these commonplaces in *On Photography* [...], a book that would more accurately be titled "Against Photography" ("What Is an Image?" 532n)
- 3 In his interview with Donna Haraway, Tatsumi draws out Haraway's own testimony that *Gravity's Rainbow* continued to serve as her inspiration while writing *Primate Vision*.
- 4 Smith, Zak. "Zak Smith's Illustrations for Each Page of *Gravity's Rainbow*." <http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/zak_smith/title.html>.
- 5 Smith, Zak. "The Zak Smith Interview." *The Quarterly Conversation*. <http://esposito.typepad.com/TQC_5/Zak_Smith.html>.

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