

# The Simulated Identity in Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and Mason and Dixon

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**Abstract:** This paper purports to analyze the psychological trauma that hurts the development of the Western masculine identity. In this approach, I will not place the postmodern within a modern order of complete masculine selfhood. The present thesis, therefore, rejects this suggestion since it explains that the postmodern ego completely shatters the shackles of classicism by a subversive strategy. The paper is availed to the task of investigating the postmodern and the subversive gestures deployed by Thomas Pynchon with a deep focus on the relation between the individual and the technological. As shall be mentioned in the course of my analysis, Pynchon establishes a tradition of subversion which adopts a contradictory vision that at once uses and abuses, installs and destabilizes the enlightenment conventions in parodic ways.

**Keywords:** Psychoanalysis, selfhood, masculinity, postmodernism, enlightenment and subversion

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## 1. Introduction

Offering a new model for mapping the borderland between discourses, past and present, madness and reason, unity and fragmentation, text and context, fiction and history, modern and postmodern, Pynchon hints that there should be no way for concepts like continuity, transparency and subjectivity. Then, my focus will be on what I think offers the best model for the distortion of the Western male identity in Pynchon's novels. I am fully aware that Pynchon's novels are a good case of study in this respect, and it is for this reason I have chosen to examine the effects of the postmodern technology in the creation of the technological identity. I will explain the relation between this techno-production and the psychological status of the male Western identity.

To evoke identity and technology together is directly to inquire what kind of complementarities between them? This question can never be separated from evoking cyborg origins. In this vein, Victoria Pitts suggests the following,

In recent years, new and re-circulated body modification technologies have been deployed by queer and other sub-cultural communities to create anomalous, spectacular figures that not only provoke shock or consternation but also underscore norms of embodiment, sexuality and gender. Preceded by the longer history of tattoos in the West, and accompanied by a renaissance in their popularity, the last three decades have seen a rise in the invention, revival, appropriation, and deployment of other body technologies, such as scarification, branding, binding, sub-dermal implants, and earlobe stretching. Many of these are highly stigmatized; 'neo-tribal' practices modeled after the rituals of non-Western indigenous groups, and some are also linked to established and emerging fetish and SM styles. In the last two decades, the expansion of popular and sub-cultural performances, discourses and texts on nonmainstream forms of body modification (including such ephemera as zines and e-zines) has culminated in what some researchers call the body modification and the development of critical discourses surrounding it underscores bodies as potential sites of opposition and cultural-political contest, and it raises questions about the possibilities of agency within self-representational body practices (*Body Technologies and Sexual Politics*, 1).

She suggests a deconstructed body with hybrid construction. The above contribution seems to be an effort to investigate the figure of the new man. What is important is the connectedness of the body with technology. This means that the postmodern body is conceptualized in a new way. In fact, traditional notions that assume of the body as an independent unit shifts to aspects that posit the human body in relation to the new technology, which undermines all the certainties about what counts as a natural body. In this sense, the relationship between humanity and technology in contemporary post-industrial society has often been described through the metaphor of the cyborg.

This metaphor appears when the boundary between the human body and machine becomes problematic. In this sense, the cyborg, or the figure of the new man as a mixture of organic and technological elements, has played an important consideration in the contemporary literature. It suggests that the body is conceptualized in a different presentation. In fact, one cannot deny the fact that Pynchon's central theme is the problematization of the border between

the body and the machine. In this reading, I will reveal that the male Western identity seems to activate this set of pairs of concepts at the base of our thinking. I will interpret the development of the body technology with regard to the specific subject position, and I will address how such development engages in the deconstruction of the Western male identity.

Before starting my analysis, however, it must be noted that the term cyborg has contemporary relevance for a number of reasons. In the first place, the figure represents an important counter-example to the contention of modernism constructed by certain contemporary theories of postmodern art. In other words, the postmodern account of modernism exposes modernism as an ideology of formal purification and reflexivity, which at the same time, emphasizes a sense of the artist's subjectivity or self-consciousness as central to the work of art. This significant view results in lulling us into solemn acceptance of the alleged contention that the Western male identity is free. However, the tension between humanity and technology comes into play when all certainties about what counts as nature and culture disappear. In this, the unpredictable development of science and technology gives rise to a new shape of identity. This formation seems to be devoid of moral values.

Another reason why the cyborg identity has contemporary relevance is its close connection with various types of media, which is used more and more today in contemporary art and popular culture. My focus will thus be on the different forms of the cyborg and the ways in which the figure was used to reflect upon the mechanization of both consciousness and body. In this process, Pynchon introduces a technological identity devoid of sensation as well as imagination. The novelist wants to put gloss on the fact that the Western male identity becomes decrypted. In this, the emergence of cyborg body foreshadows the fallibility of the postmodern subjectivity. The very subjectivity loses its real face and meaning. It starts to be technological rather than ontological. Following this, Pynchon delineates,

The voice, which he's heard only once before—last year at a briefing, hands and face blackened, anonymous among a dozen other listeners—tells Pirate now there's a message addressed to him, waiting at Greenwich. "It came over in a rather delightful way," the voice high-pitched and sullen, "none of my friends are those clever. All my mail arrives by post. Do come collect it, won't you, Prentice." Receiver hits cradle a violent whack, connection breaks, and now Pirate knows where this morning's rocket landed, and why there was no explosion. Incoming mail, indeed. He gazes through sunlight's buttresses, back down the refectory at the others, wallowing in their plenitude of bananas, thick palatals of their hunger lost somewhere in the stretch of morning between them and himself. A hundred miles of it, so suddenly. Solitude, even among the meshes of this war, can when it wishes so take him by the blind gut and touch, as now, possessively. Pirate's again some other side of a window, watching strangers eat breakfast (*Gravity's Rainbow*, 11).

This description leaves room for one significant aspect of contemporary literature that is the intensification of our lust for new technologies. In this reading, I will argue that Pynchon offers two main models whereby the techno-man seems to be in a continuous fragmentation, decentralization and chaos. In fact, the interference of the technological with the corporal produces the new techno-flesh that makes redundant any single story about the meaning of identity, as well as any attempt to fix absolute definitions of the Western male identity. Therefore, the novelist seeks to inculcate the idea that the independent identity starts to be a mere mirage that does not have any connection with the existence. The only outlet for this transformation is the appearance of the techno-body.

Pynchon seeks to represent a contemporary cultural conjunction wherein body and technology are combined. This means that the machine starts to incarnate organic functions and the body is substantially redesigned through the use of newly developed machines. In this, this new visualization traces the development of the virtual body via the drive toward ever more cultural and biological interchanges with machines. Pynchon highlights the idea that the postmodern technology enables us to re-make and re-configure the body and its special position. By offering the new interpretation, the novelist allows men to technologically speak, react, interact, think and dream. The writer wants to say that the postmodern man's speech, reaction, interaction, thought and dream possess technological signification. By this saying, the writer repositions the male body from activity to passivity. He shows how technology can voice instead of the masculine identity.

**Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*** has obvious delineation of this situation. The novelist's presentation of Slothrop offers the reader a justification for the dominant presence of technology in the construction of the character. In this sense, Slothrop seems to be the creation of a technological projection. Slothrop's body is absorbed by technology. This absorption considers the male weakness in relation to the scientific marginalization of the humanist aspect of the Western

male identity. The postmodern scientists provide no importance to the feelings of the postmodern body. They regard the postmodern identity devoid of sensation and creation. Their main interests are to treat the postmodern identity in the name of science and technology. The very treatment cannot concretize the illness that haunts the capacity of identification as well as creation for the Western male identity.

Significantly, the cyborg identity creates a space allowing anxiety and defamiliarization to be played out through technically enabled modes of creation and reproduction. Applying the observation to cyborg identity, one cannot hide the fact that the masculine body too can be conceptualized as a site of an inescapable disappearance. Ultimately far from being an immense labyrinth of the masculine entity, fictional cyborg body stands for a computerized brain used to deconstruct and control the Western male's equation of domination. In fact, the only motivation for creating mechanical functionality is to prove a desire that could be seen as a form of transcendence for the traditional hierarchy. In this process, technology embodied by the Western male corpse is regarded as a potentially manipulative force to challenge masculinity by giving access to the pain of living without a concrete body. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Slothrop and Pointsman were technologically formed and existentially unlivable. Indeed, one reads that their divided selves are a straightforward acceptance of the technological man.

Slothrop seems to be a young lieutenant who, Got into investigating V-bomb "incidents." Aftermaths. Each morning—at first—someone in Civil Defense routed ACHTUNG a list of yesterday's hits. It would come round to Slothrop last, he'd detach its pencil-smear buck slip, go draw the same aging Humber from the motor pool, and make his rounds, a Saint George after the fact, going out to poke about for droppings of the Beast, fragments of German hardware that wouldn't exist, writing empty summaries into his notebooks—work-therapy. As inputs to ACHTUNG got faster, often he'd show up in time to help the search crews—following restless-muscled RAF dogs into the plaster smell, the gas leaking, the leaning long splinters and sagging mesh, the prone and noiseless caryatids, rust already at nails and naked thread surfaces, the powdery wipe of Nothing's hand across wallpaper a whisper with peacocks spreading their fans down deep lawns to Georgian houses long ago, to safe groves of holm oak . . . among the calls for silence following to where some exposed hand or brightness of skin waited them, survivor or casualty. When he couldn't help he stayed clear, praying, at first, conventionally to God, first time since the other Blitz, for life to win out. But too many were dying, and presently, seeing no point, he stopped. (*GR*, 250)

This contention puts Slothrop in direct communication with a series of electronic experimentation on his body to effectively fall victim to his own machinations. According to this logic, a self with a technological body might be regarded as supermen to whom the postmodern male ambition aspires. The desire to perform this ultimate task requires the deconstruction of the mythic image given to the status of manhood. Indeed, this decentralization of the traditional conception of male identity highlights the complex virtual reality of the phenomena, and begs an analysis of the western male identity as representative of a particular socio-cultural context with regard to gender, sex, and social mores. What is interesting for Pynchon's characters is the way in which they come to consciousness and the way they express their positions.

For instance, Slothrop is stimulated into desiring physical contact when one of the scientist's wives, Mrs. Elizabeth, dances naked before one of the computer's external sensors, then presses her breasts against the grass of the building in a deliberately sexual manner. Mrs. Elizabeth has been told that the computer has male characteristics. Elizabeth reveals that she has been programmed by her creators to feel sexually attracted to science. This admission hints the extent of the erotically complex relationship to technology. Pynchon puts forward an essentialist, and pathologizing image of humiliation. The postmodern novelist relies on hyper-traditional notions that evoke the supremacy of manhood. However, Pynchon does much to underline the highly problematic erasure of the body in cybernetic experiment, and debunk the validity of the dualistic conceptions of the Western male identity.

Following this, no one can deny the fact that the postmodern fiction privileges the technological progress at the expense of the body, just as Western epistemology has privileged rationality over corporality. In his study of the Western identity, Pynchon argues that methods of connecting human consciousness with computer technology will devise the electronic postmodern body. This identity does have impotent authority with respect to the incorporeal flows of information with which the Western man is surrounded. In a similar vein, many postmodern approaches to the question of cyborg identity argue for reclamation of the technological.

For example, François Lyotard asks whether thought can go on without the body. Similarly, Lyotard thus resolutely champions a plurality of discourses and positions against unifying theory. Supporting this suggestion, one can assert that Lyotard's position is of fundamental importance for contemporary postmodern theory and in this part I will discuss his idea which we find to be most central to the illness of the Western male identity. In this, the critic cannot ignore the fact that the path through which Pynchon took up and developed the discourse of the postmodern male identity in American society. Accordingly, there is continuity between Pynchon's novels and the theory of Lyotard. I shall explain how the novelist's characters adopt a postmodern attitude. They are foreshadowing their apocalyptic end through the massacre of alienation and limitation. The prospect of alienation is mostly based on the substitution of the human body with a technological one. The act of limitation suggests the jeopardization of the mind-body relation.

As far as *Mason and Dixon* is concerned, Pynchon emphasizes the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland that we know today as the Mason- Dixon line. This story features the problem between the Native Americans and frontier Folks. This very issue raises the questions of the ripped bodies, the erotic conspiracies and the political abuses. However, taking into account the erasure of the distinctions between Natives and Folks, Pynchon wishes to enter a computerized matrix, disavowing boundaries in order to welcome the theoretical postmodern imagination of the technical body. In this process, Pynchon puts forward the body and embodied sexuality in our technologized future. This avowing of the technical identity cannot be performed without being devoid of natural sexuality.

The point that the novelist wants to convey is that the Western male body is no longer a meaningful corpse. The postmodern male identity, in the name of Slothrop and Pointsman, seems to be deprived of the sensational representation. It is not considered as refuge for relief, happiness and joy. However, the Western masculine identity becomes a matter of scientific experimentation. What strikes me about this representation is that Pynchon foreshadows cyborg identity as a new condition that confines the Western masculinity within a form of weakness. The postmodern man becomes mechanized, unable to move beyond his role as a sexual object or productive entity. The novelist recurs to the cyborg image as a transgressive paradigm used ironically to demote the accustomed image of manhood. It is an apocalyptic figure, which could potentially enable the collapse of totalizing theories and traditional hierarchies. For Pynchon, the appearance of the cyborg and its hybrid qualification provide a way out of rigid gender categories.

Furthermore, this hybridity seems to be an empowering challenge to the essentialist conceptions of masculinity. The novelist wants to debunk the normative role of masculinity. Notably, one can confirm that it is not uncommon to devise absurd feature of masculinity in contemporary science fiction. As Nicola Nixon argues in her essay, "*Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?*" "Many such texts are in the end, not radical at all. (Their) sickness and apparent subversiveness mask a complicity with the eighteenth conservatism or any other filament of conventional normativity, which is perhaps confirmed by the amazing acceptance of the genre by such publications as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *the New York Times*" (qtd.in. *Creating the Ideal Post Body*, 237).

With this in mind, it seems that the interference of technology hinders the constituent parts of identity, because this intervention inevitably brings to the foreground the objectification of the Western male identity over the human being. This is to say that the postmodern subjectivity seems to be irrelevant. Put another way, the very sense of self is frequently obscured by the progressive means of technology. This marginalization of the postmodern body delineates a disfavored anthropological territory because within the discipline the Western male identity exposes a psychoanalytical framework in which the techno-man cannot establish his masculinity in a continually fragmenting, decentered, and chaotic world.

## References

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