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[Review] Yvonne Klose (2012) "How had it ever happened here?": a constructivist reading of Thomas Pynchon's the crying of lot 49 and its role in the Pynchon canon

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Abstract:

Review of *"How had it ever happened here?": A Constructivist Reading of Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 and its Role in the Pynchon Canon*, by Yvonne Klose (2012).

Review of "How had it ever happened here?": A Constructivist Reading of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and its Role in the Pynchon Canon, by Yvonne Klose (2012)

Zac Rowlinson

Though not the first to devote a monograph almost entirely to *The Crying of Lot 49*,¹ given Pynchon's (relative) publishing hyperactivity over the last fifteen years—not to mention the fact that criticism on *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day*, and *Inherent Vice* is still very much in the process of emergence—Yvonne Klose's appraisal of Pynchon's slightest, and arguably most critically saturated, novel comes at a curious time. Still, I suppose there is no harm in taking stock, and Klose certainly gathers together all our old friends: media, naming, puns, metaphors, history, and—you guessed it—entropy, roped back in just as you thought he might have been, poor fellow, edging out the door. The question is, though, just how many new stories are there to tell?

Klose undoubtedly makes a strong case for the importance of *Lot 49*, its "elegance" lying, she argues, "in its seeming simplicity."² Beneath this there lurks, to borrow slightly conceitedly from the novel, a "secret richness and concealed density," a density that Klose hopes to uncover through her constructivist reading of the text.³ The driving force of her study—and, Klose will argue, Pynchon's fiction as a whole—is the by now familiar question Oedipa asks herself towards the end of *Lot 49*: "how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity?"⁴ Very much emphasising the 'how'—how does Pynchon show we construct reality, "how much of what we might take as objective knowledge might really be an illusion"?—Klose's constructivist perspective, and her almost singular focus on the text of *Lot 49*, play to the strengths of this critical intervention, yet, it must be added, its notable weaknesses, too (9).

The text starts uncertainly, as Klose fails to make full use of what is, in the end, an all-too-brief overview of constructivist theory. While she appropriately notes the diversity of constructivist approaches, we are taken on the most rapid of journeys through this far from homogeneous body of thought. Sure, a text that begins with a bombardment of theory can defeat a reader before the battle has even begun; but with only six pages devoted to her study's theoretical underpinning, with various yet passing references to Ernst von Glaserfeld, Heinz von Foerster, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Arnold Gehlen, Siegfried J. Schmidt etc.—none of whom, symptomatic of the study as a whole, Klose engages with in any depth—it all feels a bit ungrounded, in need of substantiation. There is virtually no context or history, no construction of constructivism.⁵ Klose does rightly acknowledge that constructivism often fails to take into account the role played in the "larger construction of reality" by the "strings of power [and] money"—which are, Klose notes, "themselves constructions," and, I would hasten to add, central Pynchonian concerns (14).

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However, given the paucity of theoretical engagement, and given Klose's bold claim that her constructivist approach "has the potential to hit the very mark of what it is that makes Pynchon's novels such important works of our time," (3) a deceptively simple, yet important question remains unanswered: how?

And so, still scratching around on the surface, we enter the main body of the text, which is divided into two parts. The first, the bulk of the study, concerns itself with a constructivist reading of *Lot 49*, whilst the second, a mere third of the length of the first (a deep structural flaw I will return to below), extrapolates this reading into Pynchon's other texts.

Part One—"This is America, you live in it, you let it happen"⁶—is divided into three main chapters, each of which has further subdivisions. We begin, as Oedipa does, "stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube,"⁷ with Klose's first chapter essentially exploring how, in *Lot 49*, media are revealed to be "essential parameters of reality" (Klose 17). *Lot 49* is said to expose a world of "Media as Epistemology."⁸ Marshall McLuhan rears his head here, expectedly, as Klose addresses failed communication in the novel, but so too does Neil Postman, which is where Klose attempts to build on prior criticism. This criticism is extensive though. Aside from a few nice quotes from Postman about how TV is "the command center of the new epistemology of the electrical age"—not to mention the inevitable ironic chuckle that comes with the application of a theorist named Postman to *Lot 49*—Klose has entered fairly saturated terrain here and her own voice duly struggles to emerge.

We remain on equally boggy ground (this really is a metaphor of many parts) as we move into Klose's second chapter on language and modes of thought. Concerned to show how "language *has* enabled man to build realities [original italics]" by structuring and ordering them (51), in come familiar names and ideas—Saussure, Derrida, text, logocentrism—to demonstrate how we are, like Oedipa, "So hung up with words, words."⁹ Again, though Klose does offer some interesting remarks on Pynchon's "surrealistic method of assemblage" in the construction of his fictional world, whether we hear much beyond what we have heard before is questionable (63). The sub-chapter on names, in particular, admits that it "aims not so much to add" to, rather to give "an overview" of, other critics' interpretations of the names in *Lot 49* (67). Though this is all useful, and key to Klose's constructivist reading—as well as helping us "Remember that [literary critics are] utterly devoted, like [Puritans], to the Word"¹⁰—the first third of Klose's study is not so much a remapping but a tracing of already, and extensively, mapped ground.

Where Klose's study begins to pick up the pace, where new vistas begin to emerge, is in her subsection on puns and metaphors, particularly in relation to Maxwell's Demon. Although entropy is something of a stalwart in Pynchon criticism, understatement notwithstanding, Klose manages to reenergise (forgive me) the debate, in a way that is pleasantly surprising. Though her assessment of the Demon metaphor is too dense for me to do it full justice here, Klose reads *Lot 49*, in contrast to many other interpretations, as beginning in "a state of both low thermodynamic and low informational entropy" (91). The initial middle-class stasis in which Oedipa begins—

she is returning from a Tupperware party remember—is facilitated by the Demon of capitalism sorting the Pierce Inveraritys of this world from the various waifs, wastrels, and WASTED Oedipa encounters over the course of the novel. Wrenched from her comfortable "hothouse" by having to be the executrix of Inverarity's will, which forces her to see the human cost of the maintenance of stability on the "street," Oedipa can be seen, Klose argues, as the sensitive of the Nefastis machine, despite her failed attempt to be so in the novel.¹¹ Oedipa is able "to at least temporarily step outside of the system and become what constructivists call an observer of the second order" (93). Rather than seeing the novel's conclusion as suggestive of a societal heat-death at the hands of the irreversible Second Law of Thermodynamics, nor as a loss of subjectivity amongst an overbearing wealth of information, Oedipa, in stepping out to observe the construction of the societal system, intimates the possibility of a reset, of a way for opening up the chances for diversity once more.

Now whether Klose's reading of the metaphor holds—indeed, it may well reveal a flaw in her approach, as if the only reality we can know is constructed, how do we, Oedipa included, step outside into something which is not itself a construct?—and whether we really can see Oedipa as one of the "few visionaries: [wo/]men above the immediacy of their time who can think historically,"¹² is debatable.¹³ Nonetheless, it provides food for thought, and now that Klose has got us thinking historically she takes us into her third chapter on history. Here Klose attempts to show how, despite its seeming simplicity, *Lot 49* is a text in which "dark history slither[s] unseen."¹⁴ In comfortably the strongest of her chapters, by stripping off the "G-strings of historical figuration,"¹⁵ Klose certainly comes, as it were, close to "a comprehensive investigation of the many ways the novel critically deals with history" (139). The historical detail is indeed extensive—philately, *Gaidamak*, Gallipoli etc.—and synchronises well with other recent developments in this regard.¹⁶ To have such a wealth of historical information collated in one volume, particularly as this has been a somewhat neglected area in relation to *Lot 49*, is something for which Klose deserves high praise.

Would that the book had finished here! Instead, in the second part—coming in at a meagre fifty pages—Klose attempts to use her analysis of *Lot 49* as "a key to an enhanced appreciation and understanding" of *all* Pynchon's other novels (161). With such limited space given to what thereby becomes an impossible task, we are left with but the faintest tracings. Media, language, and history are themes so vast, and so important in Pynchon's fiction, that to approach all of these in *Gravity's Rainbow* over a mere eight pages, for example, is, with all due respect, bordering on futile, and this all serves to undercut the momentum Klose has built, her argument reaching its own terminal Brennschluss too soon, terminating in something of a tragic whimper, rather than a "cry that might abolish the night."¹⁷

This is a real shame. The inherent structural flaw prevents development of Klose's more interesting ideas—that *Against the Day* is "Pynchon's most consistent," "most consequent" work from a constructivist point of view, for example, or the notion of "intermedial fiction" in light of the cross-media promotion of *Inherent Vice* (195, 211, 204)—and the second part is thus made

up of "almost offhand things."¹⁸ Though Klose characterises Oedipa's quest as one much like Stencil's of "Approach and avoid,"¹⁹ regrettably hers becomes much the same, and we start to feel, like Oedipa, "the absence of an intensity, as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus."²⁰

A note too on the text. Typos will always be a part of the publication process, but some here—such as the repeated paragraphs (82-3), or where Frank Kermode is said to express a "constrictivist view" (18), or where Theodore Khapertian's study has morphed into *A Hand at the Turn of Time*, subtly yet radically altering the final hymn of *Gravity's Rainbow*²¹—begin to undermine Klose's otherwise conscientious research. It all feels a bit rushed, as if the publication burden which now weighs upon us all has got, well, just a little too much. There is clearly potential in Klose's voice, but too often her study reads either like a hastily edited literature review, a thesis ill-adapted to a monograph, or, given the structural issues mentioned above, an introductory gloss that fails to penetrate the textual surface.

Of course, any approach will necessarily involve "another string of decisions taken, switches closed."²² But those taken here cause severe limitations. Choosing to make *Lot 49* the focus means that Klose, in spending too much time treading well-worn paths, has missed out on her own chances for diversity. Consequently, Klose's text will likely only prove of interest to someone new to Pynchon criticism—an undergraduate, perhaps—where Klose's cataloguing of previous ideas alongside her own thorough, intriguing work on Maxwell's Demon and history in *The Crying of Lot 49* will no doubt prove a valuable, accessible introduction. And this is no bad thing. Yet a reader familiar with the ever-burgeoning body of Pynchon criticism, searching for new critical insights, for "pulsing stelliferous Meaning," may well be struck instead by the "absence of surprise."²³ Unfortunately, despite Klose's aim to "hit the very mark," it all too rarely happens here.

End notes

1. This was Georgiana Colville, *Beyond and Beneath the Mantle: On Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49*. Hereafter I will abbreviate *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Lot 49*.

2. Klose, p. 159. Hereafter, all references will be made parenthetically in the text.

3. Pynchon (2000), p. 117.

4. Pynchon (2000), p. 125.

5. What little context there is is itself dubious. For example, a rather curious binary is set up between the "philosophical and constructivist approaches towards reality" (9), with the entirety of Western philosophy—apparently a homogeneous body of thought—too easily equated with solipsism (philosophical, for Klose, seems to mean solely a solipsism inspired by the thought of Descartes), whilst constructivism seems to be not itself a philosophy, rather some salvaging truth-giver, as Klose's highly questionable title of her overview, "Truths about Realities," suggests. Klose has a worrying tendency to gloss over crucial theoretical junctures, to the detriment of her argument. We see this also in her decision to avoid the term "postmodern" when discussing Pynchon, a term which is said to be at once "a fashionable, rather fuzzy, all encompassing [sic] and overused label for all sorts of works from various arts," yet is, in relation to Pynchon's work, "somewhat self-explanatory [sic]" (3). It is not so much that I object to not using the term—far from it, in fact—but I don't believe its self-explanatory nature can be assumed: we are certainly no clearer to understanding what Klose means by the "postmodern" and why the term can be so cursorily dispensed with.

6. This is of course what Oedipa tells herself in the novel. Pynchon (2000), p. 103.
7. Pynchon (2000), p. 3.
8. Klose is quoting the title of the second chapter of Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.
9. Pynchon (2000), p. 53.
10. Pynchon (2000), p. 107.
11. Hothouse and street are, of course, Sidney Stencil's terms that Klose borrows from V.. See Pynchon (2000b), p. 468.
12. Pynchon (2000), p. 113.
13. This is where more on Heinz von Foerster's "cybernetics of cybernetics" or "second-order cybernetics," for example, would have been useful in Klose's introduction, making her argument more rigorous. We see here, also, that constructivism, at least as far as Klose has approached it, is unable to take into account the gendered aspects of power.
14. Pynchon (2000), p. 112.
15. Pynchon (2000), p. 36.
16. I am thinking here of Martin Paul Eve's "Historical Sources for Pynchon's Peter Pinguid Society".
17. Pynchon (2000), p. 81.
18. Pynchon (2000), p. 29.
19. Pynchon (2000b), p. 55.
20. Pynchon (2000), p. 12.
21. It should read, of course, "a Hand to turn the time". See Pynchon (1973), p. 760.
22. Pynchon (2000), p. 71.
23. Pynchon (2000), pp. 56, 118.

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