

Research Project

Pynchon's Sonic Fiction

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Principal Investigator(s) [Schweighauser, Philipp](#) ;

Project Members [Hänggi, Christian](#) ;

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Departement Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften / Amerikanistik (Schweighauser)

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Music is ever present in Thomas Pynchon's literary work but little attention has been paid to it. The present dissertation aims to fill this gap and present the first book-length monograph dedicated to cataloging, exploring, and interpreting the musical dimension of Pynchon's work. It argues that music is the most consistent and most central cultural reference point throughout the author's career. Music is of symbolic and structural importance and it helps set the historical frame. It permeates the writing, from basic structural metaphors to its style. And, finally, throughout Pynchon's work there is a strong moral undercurrent, an allegiance with the underdog, a solidarity with the preterite. This moral undercurrent is particularly strong with the way he treats music.

The dissertation reads some of the most salient passages concerning music and organizes them along different although at times intertwined trajectories. Chapter 1 is dedicated to a review of the existing literature on the topic and a musical biography of the author. Chapter 2 looks at the ways musical instruments are portrayed. It takes as a starting point the physical fact that every musical instrument only produces sound because it resists its player. By analogy, one could say that music is born out of resistance, and this is played out in the way a handful of instruments enter Pynchon's stories, in particular the ukulele, the kazoo, the harmonica, and the saxophone. Chapter 3 takes its cue from Jacques Attali's widely discussed thesis (which he adapted from Plato) that the development of music prefigures the organization of society and the distribution of power. Emblematic readings confirm the importance of this belief for Pynchon's characters. Chapter 4, finally, approaches the subject from a quantitative angle. Every identifiable reference and allusion to historical musicians and works of music is analyzed in terms of frequency, genres, temporal distribution, gender, and media to produce some unexpected findings and confirm some intuitively held assumptions.

Keywords music, literature, Pynchon, American literary and cultural studies

Add publication

Published results

2262885, Hänggi, Christian, Der diskrete Charme der Verschwörungstheorie, Publication: NewsItem-Print (Artikel in einer Tages, Wochen- oder Monatszeitschrift)

3393997, Hänggi, Christian, 'Harmonica, kazoo – a friend.' Pynchon's Lessons in Organology, 978-1-940813-84-4, America and the Musical Unconscious, Publication: Book Item (Buchkap., Lexikonartikel, jur. Kommentierung, Beiträge in Sammelbänden etc.)

4491548, Hänggi, Christian, The Pynchon Playlist: A Catalog and Its Analysis, 2398-6786, Orbit: A Journal of American Literature, Publication: JournalArticle (Originalarbeit in einer wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift)

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