

## The History Written on the Body: Photography, History and Memory in Pynchon's *Vineland*

Phillip Gochenour

When, near the middle of *Vineland*, DL and Takeshi open their “karmic adjustment” office in the Thanatoid Village, DL, looking out the window at the residents of their new hideaway, comments:

“Fumimota-san,” DL turning from the window, the newly sun-filled streets below, “some of these folks don’t look too good.”

“What do you expect? What was done to them—they carry it right out on their bodies—written down for—all to see!” (174)

Like Frenesi’s maternal grandfather, Jess Traverse, who had a tree dropped on him as evidence of what could happen to uppity Wobblies, the Thanatoids bear on their bodies the signs of a history, a history that has been forcibly inscribed on them. That history is the story of the State, its means of control, the batons of law-enforcement cracking open the skulls of American citizens in the name of keeping order. It is the story of Brock Vond, of his “rapture,” and of American citizens who refuse to believe that things like that can happen in this country.

But nightsticks and bullets are not the only means of inscription; the disappearance of a limb or an entire person is not the only kind of absence that points back to a presence. There are far more subtle ways of carrying out such an inscription, perhaps none more subtle than photography. After all, as the Death to the Pig Nihilist faction of 24fps reminds us, “‘A camera is a gun,’”<sup>1</sup> and “‘this is about shooting folks here’” (197).

Photography, far from being an objective representation of the world, has been a means for writing on bodies since its initial development. *Vineland* illustrates the violence inherent in the photographic act, an illustration that renders problematic Brian McHale’s assertion that “film is associated in *Vineland* with the revolutionary aspirations of the 1960s, a positive value for Pynchon, and its displacement by TV functions as a kind of synecdoche, simultaneously symbol and example, of the betrayal and collapse of the revolutionary ethos” (121–22). All media images, whether cinematic or televisual, pose the same threat in *Vineland*, and work the same violence on their subjects. This violence is far from revolutionary, and

in fact can bring about only a reign of terror that runs directly counter to any notions of freedom that a rebellion could bring about. Alan Trachtenberg's *Reading American Photographs* demonstrates the many ways photography has been used in the past to further ideological goals.

The origin of the modern camera can be traced to the camera obscura of the sixteenth century, a device which, in turn, grew out of a concern for perspective as theorized by Leon Battista Alberti in *On Painting* (1435). For our purposes, the most significant aspect of this theorization was the situating of a viewer and the ordering of all visual elements in the painting in relation to that spectator's point of view, creating a rendition of the "natural world." In 1525, Albrecht Dürer wrote that the camera obscura was "'good for all those who want to make a portrait of somebody, but are not sure about it'" (qtd. in Newhall 9). The "not sure about it" is the important phrase here, because it indicates, first, that there is a correct perspective that should be attained, and second, that the observing eye of the artist may be faulty. This is a crucial realization for the beginnings of empiricism, which places emphasis entirely on the observable. If the artist (who will also function eventually as a naturalist) cannot trust his or her eye to receive accurate impressions of the visual field, then the need arises for a device that can correct this faulty vision, which will allow the "real" to manifest itself without the mediation of flawed human observation.

So first the camera obscura, then the camera seems to answer this need for an objective device. Some of the rhetoric in early writings about photography is quite striking. As Trachtenberg notes, "The most common figure of speech was that, through the camera, 'nature paints herself'" (14). What is really there is made manifest, and what we see in the photograph is the unmediated rendering of Nature. Photography's claim to objectivity seemed to be borne out by the minute detail which can be found in a photograph, detail which is not noticeable to the naked eye, but which can be found upon examination with a magnifying glass. Writing of his examination of an early daguerreotype, Samuel Morse notes:

In a view up the street, a distant sign would be perceived, and the eye could just discern that there were lines of letters upon it, but so minute as not to be read with the naked eye. By the assistance of a powerful lens, which magnified fifty times, applied to the delineation, every letter was clearly and distinctly legible, and so also were the minutest breaks and lines in the walls of the buildings; and the pavements of the streets. The

effect of the lens upon the picture was in a great degree like that of a telescope in nature. (qtd. in Trachtenberg 15)

Morse equates the photograph with nature, and to examine it with a magnifying glass is to be like an astronomer observing the heavens with a telescope; in both the sky and the photograph, natural laws can be observed, tested and recorded.

Morse's simile is more than poetic usage; it points to how the photograph could surpass its role as representation of nature, and, in some way, *become* nature. Oliver Wendell Holmes, for example, believed that once an object had been photographed, there was no longer any need for the original:

*Form is henceforth divorced from matter.* In fact, matter as a visible object is of no great use any longer, except as the mould on which form is shaped. Give us a few negatives of a thing worth seeing, taken from different points of view, and that is all we want of it. Pull it down or burn it up, if you will. (qtd. in Trachtenberg 18; Holmes's emphasis)

Morse reveals how photos came to be viewed as evidence, as objective representations that could capture the world and allow it to be studied; from this point on, photography would be an invaluable scientific tool. Holmes reveals how the photographic representation came to surpass what it represented, could in fact come to exist in a reality apart from the photographed object, a reality we might call the hyperreal since it is based on images. Holmes refers only to objects; but what is the effect, we might wonder, when the matter involved is human?

In hyperreality, images of human subjects exist primarily as icons, as the entire history of portraiture attests. As an icon, a representation of a human being provides certain information, for example, the sitter's social status, occupation, even, in more didactic works, virtues and vices. Several examples of such iconography can be found in photography's early history. In 1850, Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz, with the aid of daguerreotypist J. T. Zealy, set out to prove, through photographic means, that whites and blacks did not have a "common center." As Trachtenberg describes the project, "Zealy's pictures would supplement [Agassiz's] anthropometric evidence with visible proof of 'natural' difference in size of limbs and configuration of muscles, establishing once and for all that blacks and whites did not derive 'from a common center'" (53). Agassiz's goal was to compile information from a series of photographic images, information that could then be used to construct an image of nature.

Another, earlier example is Marmaduke Sampson's *Rationale of Crime* (1846), a series of photographs meant to represent the types of "criminal faces"—in other words, a work of phrenology. Each subject was chosen to illustrate a particular type of "criminal feature," and from the images a virtual catalog of criminal aspects was assembled. The photographer on the Sampson project was none other than Matthew Brady, who, a year earlier, had begun a similar project, *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans*. Published in book form in 1850, *The Gallery* was a series of twelve engravings taken from daguerreotypes of famous men, "illustrious" in the sense that they were intended to serve the didactic purpose of illustrating the face of American civic virtue. *The Gallery of Illustrious Americans* and *The Rationale of Crime* together provided Brady a way to construct the opposite poles of a systematization of nature through images. Though *The Gallery* was, in a sense, a more positive undertaking, Brady did no less violence to his subjects in it than he did in *The Rationale*. Trachtenberg notes an odd comment in the published version of *The Gallery* by the copywriter, C. Edwards Lester, who speaks of the subjects as if they were dead, though they were very much alive at the time. Trachtenberg observes that Lester's "rhetoric requires at least a figurative death, a dying into a fixed image, as a precondition for illustriousness; his subjects must die in order to live forever" (49). Again, as Holmes argues, once subjects have been photographed, we no longer need them. Any information they can provide is right there in the photograph, waiting to be examined.

So, while photography purports to show us "nature" or "what is really there," what is "really there" is entirely a construction by the photographer. In photographing a black slave, for example, as having an anatomy different from a white's, the photographer establishes the paradigm through which the photo must be read; in photographing a particular face as either criminal or virtuous, the photographer makes his subject either a criminal or an illustrious American. This process is what Roland Barthes might refer to as constructing the "connotation" around a photograph, which in and of itself *seems* to have no code. This creation of connotation is also the creation of form, a structure around the photograph. As Holmes points out, it is only this form that matters, not the actual object itself. The object as object disappears through the influence of the connotation assigned to it. There are no longer objects or events, only images built up out of connotation, form without substance. This is the essence of the hyperreal.

The impact of this hyperreality can readily be seen in the realm of history, which brings us back to *Vineland*, where the lives of four generations and three historical periods (the Depression and the Second

World War, the sixties, and the almost-present eighties) are laid out. The history in *Vineland* is not static, but in flux, because from the perspective of now, the only moment when a "real" perspective might be possible, all we have are images of history, images that have come down to us through the Tube. We are living, in the 1984 of the novel, in hyperreality, where nothing seems real or true.

The novel begins by questioning whether what we see on the Tube has any basis at all in reality. Zoyd Wheeler, to qualify for his disability checks and keep Vond off his back, has to go through his annual ritual of window-jumping. Zoyd makes all the necessary preparations, including notifying the local media. The entire event, once Zoyd arrives at The Cucumber Lounge, takes on the appearance of a full-scale film production, where "[p]roduction staff murmured into walkie-talkies, technicians could be seen through the fateful window, waving light meters and checking sound levels" (11). Zoyd does his dive, "obligingly charging at each of the news cameras while making insane faces" (12), and *voilà*, we have the image of Zoyd Wheeler, nut case, to let Vond know Zoyd is still under control, when in reality Zoyd is just another guy caught in a dumb deal and trying to raise a daughter.

To complicate matters in Zoyd's life, Hector Zuñiga, DEA agent and long-time thorn in Zoyd's side, appears at this year's media event. Hector is trying to track down Frenesi, Zoyd's ex-wife, so he can make "'a Film about all those long-ago political wars, the drugs, the sex, the rock an' roll, which th' ultimate message will be that the real threat to America, then and now, is from th' illegal abuse of narcotics?'" (51). The question mark at the end of that sentence is not just an attempt at dialect humor; it makes Hector seem a little uncertain about his own message, as if he is asking Zoyd to tell him that this is the true story—the official story he, Hector, the DEA man, has been buying into for years—that this is what was really going on. Of course, as a certified Tubehead, Hector has his own problems sorting out reality. It is a wonder Hector, career agent of a government Pynchon not-so-obliquely compares to Orwell's Ministry of Information, has any grip on reality at all.

Which brings us to the heart of the novel, Frenesi and 24fps. Vond turns Frenesi from being a revolutionary to being a narc, but, as a professional photographer/filmmaker, she seems not to have had very far to go in the first place. Members of 24fps "particularly believed in the ability of close-ups to reveal and devastate. When power corrupts, it keeps a log of its progress, written into that most sensitive memory device, the human face. Who could withstand the light?" (195).

The lineage back to Marmaduke Sampson's *Rationale of Crime* is fairly direct. True, phrenology was concerned primarily with the shape

of the skull, but phrenologists like Cesare Lombroso attempted to incorporate other features as well. Vond, a disciple of Lombroso, when he finally gets Zoyd busted and is talking to him in his cell, asks Zoyd if he would "maybe pull back your upper lip" so Vond can get an idea of his "gnathic index" (298). For both Vond and 24fps, what is most important dwells on the surface, is a question of a particular image.

It is easy to see, then, how Frenesi might get sucked in by Vond, who is "photogenic . . . with his high buffed forehead, modish octagonal eyeglass frames, Bobby Kennedy haircut, softly outdoor skin" (200). The reference to Bobby Kennedy suggests that Vond's appearance is the perfect screen against any suspicions Frenesi might have: how could anyone who looked like St. Bobby be evil? At the same time, Zipi and Ditzah have a strange bias against Howie, because his "xanthocroid" looks identify him as a "typical" surfer (197). The great danger, then, is being corrupted by someone who does not look bad, while turning against a would-be ally who does not look quite right.

Frenesi seems to be caught up in hyperreality, where meanings shift according to the images used to present them. When Vond gives her the gun to slip Rex, he tells her "It's only a prop" (240), as if what is about to happen were only a movie, and Frenesi, even as she contemplates what is about to happen, can think only in terms of lighting, of getting the shot: "Light this little 'sucker here about eight to one, soften the specular highlights, start in on a tight close-up" (241-42).

Even more frightening, Frenesi realizes what happens when she takes a photograph. She tells Vond that, if he really wants to destroy Weed, all they have to do is film him: "Once we have him on film, whether he lies or whether he confesses, he's done for, it doesn't matter" (240). Of course, Weed has nothing to lie about or confess to; he does either only in the context of being filmed as someone who is corrupt, a role Vond and Frenesi have written him into. Howie protests against filming Weed, saying "It's takin' his soul, man" (236), recognizing that a filmed Weed will appear as abstracted information, a vision of the "corrupt" face, which may or may not have anything to do with who he is.

Howie's protest also reminds us that part of the 24fps manifesto proclaims, "A camera is a gun. An image taken is a death performed" (197). As "one of the . . . Death-to-the-Piggers" puts it bluntly: "this is about shooting folks here, is it not?" (197). Like Brady, 24fps must kill their subjects, must at least figuratively murder them to turn them into information, into abstract icons, because if the subjects continue to live, they may act in ways that invalidate the hyperreal image. Not

only *can* the image be substituted for the real thing; for the image to become iconic, it *must* replace the real thing. And this explains why Vond wants Weed dead. Vond, after all, is making his own movie, suggesting to Frenesi “what to shoot to begin with” (209), a film in which he will finally capture Weed’s “‘spirit’” (213), that of the innocent around whom a revolution can be realized. Film provides the means in an almost superstitious sense, by capturing Weed inescapably, by putting him up on a screen as the evil informer who finally gets wasted by his own. And in this version, there is no getting back up after the climax, and Weed is no longer around to protest his characterization. Weed’s dead body is not what Vond wants: if they simply killed him outright, he could easily become a martyr. They must rob him of his innocence, and film is the medium for doing just that.

Weed himself is no advocate of the gun. In response to the question why it is wrong to pick up the gun: “Once he would have proclaimed, ‘Because in this country nobody in power gives a shit about any human life but their own. This forces us to be humane—to attack what matters more than life to the regime and those it serves, their money and their property.’” His faith in this vision fades, but he “still preach[es] humane revolution” (229), if more wearily and desperately. Perhaps Frenesi (and 24fps?) turns against Weed because his vision of revolution undercuts hers. Frenesi is caught up in the idea of a violent, street-battle revolution as a kind of testing ground:

Frenesi dreamed of a mysterious people’s oneness, drawing together toward the best chances of light, achieved once or twice that she’d seen in the street, in short, timeless bursts, all paths, human and projectile, true, the people in a single presence, the police likewise simple as a moving blade—and individuals who in meetings might only bore or be pains in the ass here suddenly being seen to transcend, almost beyond will to move smoothly between baton and victim to take the blow instead, to lie down on the tracks as the iron rolled in or look into the gun muzzle and maintain the power of speech—there was no telling, in those days, who might unexpectedly change this way, or when. Some were in it, in fact, secretly for the possibilities of finding just such moments. (117–18)

Given her activist and revolutionary lineage, Frenesi seems to be one of those in it to see what they will do when the chips are down, almost as if she is trying to live up to the example of her mother, Sasha. But when the chips *are* down, Frenesi lets Weed take the bullet, and her moment—which she tries to direct as a kind of hyperreal scene with herself as the heroine, a scene which depends on violence to be brought off—passes by, destroying the potential for any real change.

Yet Pynchon holds out another possibility for us, that of memory. So far, we have examined the way photography can be used to inscribe a certain vision, even a certain kind of history (as a criminal or a model of virtue) on a person, and the way these images can be used to write a particular version of history, like Hector's film about the sixties and the film about PR<sup>3</sup> Vond directs through Frenesi. The subjects photographed must be "killed off" so they cannot speak for themselves and destroy the created image of them or their period. This analysis runs counter to McHale's reading of media images in *Vineland*, at least in respect to film. But McHale also argues that "TV's primary function in *Vineland* (though not its only one) is to complicate, diversify, and destabilize the ontological structure of the fictional world" (135). As the examples of Hector, Vond and 24fps show, the purpose of making a film is to stabilize a structure built around a certain set of images so the form of the film can take the place of the substance of the actual events. What it takes to destabilize this structure, especially if that structure is something called history, is another set of images, in this case memory.

As Takeshi says, then, what was done to the Thanatoids is written on their bodies for all to see; but how are we to read it? The surface, as we have seen, can be subjected to a number of readings, even to the effect that the wounded bear their scars as evidence of their own criminality. Consider, for example, the punitive branding of criminals in some cultures, or the doctrine held by some fundamentalists that birth defects are the signs of sin. Under the scarred surface, however, remains the personal memory which contains the story behind the scars, a story that presents its own images to counter the attempt to construct an official story. After Jess Traverse is crippled by the Employers' Association for trying to organize loggers, the best he can do is to be there "'to remind everybody—any time they see a Traverse, or a Becker for that matter, they'll remember that one tree, and who did it, and why. Hell of a lot better 'n a statue in the park'" (76). Better than a statue because, if Jess were dead, just another victim of capitalist oppression, all he could be is an icon, a statue whose significance would quickly fade. But alive, he is there to tell everyone what happened, to remind everyone around him of "who did it, and why." Without his story to express through his physical state, he is only another cripple, just as a Thanatoid divorced from his or her memories is only another dead person.

The Thanatoids, however, are much more than that. Like Jess, they are memory that will not fade: "What was a Thanatoid, at the end of the long dread day, but memory?" (325). Thanatoids are reminders of wrongs not yet righted, of injustices carried out under the guise of



history, by the state and frequently out of not-so-official greed. They are the bearers of images, in the form of memory, that suggest, in McHale's words, "unrealized possibilities" (138), like justice or the struggle against oppression. Such memories often suggest a significantly different version of history from the received one, as Prairie knows from her grandparents. Even as she goes to check out a new mall called the Noir Center, she knows there is a difference between the image of "golden" Hollywood projected by the movies and what really went on:

She happened to like those old weird-necktie movies in black and white, her grandfolks had worked on some of them, and she personally resented this increasingly dumb attempt to cash in on the pseudoromantic mystiques of those particular olden days in this town, having heard enough stories from Hub and Sasha, and Dotty and Wade, to know better than most how corrupted everything had really been from top to bottom, as if the town had been a toxic dump for everything those handsome pictures had left out. (326)

Frenesi too points to the moment she realized the difference between what was on the screen and what went on "behind" it as the beginning of her political education:

Frenesi had absorbed politics all through her childhood, but later, seeing older movies on the Tube with her parents, making for the first time a connection between the far-off images and her real life, it seemed she had misunderstood everything, paying too much attention to the raw emotions, the easy conflicts, when something else, some finer drama the Movies had never considered worth ennobling, had been unfolding all the time. It was a step in her political education. (81-82)

As she listens to her parents heap contempt on the names listed in the credits, Frenesi learns that much more is going on than what is displayed on the surface. A film, like history, insists on a unity of structure on the part of the creator and a persistence of vision on the part of the viewer to keep it whole. Should the viewers, for even a moment, catch a glimpse of the workings and maneuverings behind the surface, then the superficial image is destroyed, our disbelief is no longer suspended, and we can no longer be taken in by the hyperreality offered to us. This is precisely the function of memory: to introduce another set of images, another kind of testimony, that disrupts the smooth continuity of history, opening up for us the "unrealized possibilities" of the past for our consideration in the present.

But to argue for memory against the media image is not to claim there is something more *essential* about the images generated by memory. Neither should we think the Thanatoids or Jess Traverse has an authoritative role through which we get the "real story." Rather, history is always a construct, a particular kind of language game, the construct in this case of a series of images. To construct histories out of images, Hector, 24fps and Vond must also excise those images that do not fit, that threaten to destroy the montage of their historical projects. Memory must be silenced, the free flow of information interrupted; and instead of viewers' having the freedom to click from one channel to another, thereby being able to construct their own impression of events and sense of meaning, they are limited to one channel, one set of outcomes, one interpretation. This is what Jean-François Lyotard describes as "terror":

By terror I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened (there are many ways to prevent someone from playing). The decision makers' arrogance, which in principle has no equivalent in the sciences, consists in the exercise of terror. It says: "Adapt your aspirations to our ends—or else." (64-65)

This terror, this threat to "eliminate" the players of a language game, is at the very heart of *Vineland*, in the actions of The Employers' Association, in Vond's police-state tactics, even in the "shootings" of 24fps. The seeds of the counterrevolution are always present in the revolution, and this very willingness to eliminate the opposition, to limit the free flow of information or free play of images by physical or filmic means, turns justified rebellion into the same old story of terror. Memory, as images, may not get us out of the hyperreal and return us to a more "substantial" version of history, but that does not really seem to be the point. To pit one version of history against another would be to play the same old game, one point of view trying to silence another. What seems most important here, as McHale suggests, is the potential for disruption of the whole structure through opening access to more images and more information. *Vineland's* "[w]hat-is-reality exercises," as McHale calls them (137), are not intended, it seems, to come to a conclusion, but rather to keep us constantly asking the question. The images memory counterposes to those created by the media are essential for keeping these exercises energized.

The novel concludes with a family reunion, an opportunity to get re-acquainted and to pass down memories to the next generation. At the reunion dinner, Jess Traverse reads a passage from Emerson by way of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*:

"Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.'" (369)

In the workings of divine justice, the man who dropped the tree on Jess collides with a logging truck, and Vond will get his bones removed. Justice can have meaning, however, only if there are also "unrealized possibilities," if there are actions not yet taken, wrongs not yet righted. Official history, on the other hand, would have us believe that the outcomes we have are the only possible outcomes, that the coming-into-being of the historical present has encompassed and realized all possible actions, that things could not be different. In such a schema, justice would always already have been done, but anyone with eyes to see plainly knows this is not so. Memory serves, not as the anchor bringing everything to rest and revealing the truth of history, but rather as the means of destabilizing history and bringing injustice before us. Memory is the only means of bringing terror to an end. At the end of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard calls for giving "the public free access to the *memory* and data banks" (67; emphasis added). Let us open the memory banks, *Vineland* also seems to say, and take a new look at the world we have made.

—Emory University

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>DL, the "gun" for 24fps who takes care of security, shares her initials with the Bell and Howell 60DL movie camera, the famous wind-up camera used in newsreel photography from the '30s through the '60s.

#### Works Cited

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

McHale, Brian. *Constructing Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

- Newhall, Beaumont. *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Vineland*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990.
- Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.