

Tubed Out and Movie Shot in Pynchon's *Vineland*

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In the decade and a half that separates the publication of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) from that of *Vineland* (1990), extensive attention has been paid to Pynchon's reliance on movies for thematic and structural purposes. In one of the more exhaustive analyses of this subject, Charles Clerc sounds a warning to those bent on emulating Pynchon by having recourse to television, lest denotational succinctness become speedily outdated topicality and intellectual depth give way to slickness. "The short-hand method of pop-top culture robs the imagination: it makes for laziness, for shoddiness, for superficiality of response, for shallowness of perception. We become the gulls of meretricious hucksterism and commercial entertainment." Clerc concludes with a challenge: "The use that the fiction writer makes of television in the future thus may become the crucial issue" (Clerc 149).

Vineland publicly meets the challenge, offering anyone the opportunity to gauge the outcome. Television indeed forms the novel's warp and woof, and while fictional movies still feature prominently, they are increasingly recycled through video and Tube, precluding a pat transposition of conclusions from earlier analyses of *Gravity's Rainbow* by critics like David Cowart, Sherrill E. Grace, David Marriott, Mack Smith and others. One task confronting the reader of *Vineland* is to ascertain whether Pynchon has avoided the pitfalls set by his earlier achievement, and, if so, whether he has moved beyond his earlier position instead of being pinned down like a couch potato by the tubal rays.

In response to the first issue, I can already venture that the generality and number of references belonging to the same generic field easily make up for any missed allusions. The reader need not know every citation to grasp or enjoy this (post)modern book, because over-coding and hermeneutical and representational shortcomings are essential to Pynchon's message and method, leading Elaine Safer even to characterize *Vineland* as "absurdist" in Camus's sense (107). For TV- and movie-inspired characters like Brock, Hector and DL, the references are not meant to round out their psychology. Knowing the details of single episodes of *The Bionic Woman* is no prerequisite to

gathering that DL is a female amalgam of Zorro, Superman, Tarzan, the Karate Kid, the Ninja Turtles, and any other stereotypical products of power-mad and wishful thinking. Similarly, when the sentries at the military base compare the sounds from the College of the Surf to "hostile-native sounds in a movie about white men fighting savage tribes" (204), the reference to the western genre is general enough to be understood, perhaps even acquires extra connotative power.

The question of whether Pynchon has moved beyond his earlier position is more difficult to answer. Just as *Gravity's Rainbow* extensively warns against taking film for real at the risk of becoming an even easier victim of corporate control (whether that of the Totalitarian State, behaviorists or movie moguls), *Vineland* sounds the alarm with regard to television. While not so treacherous as cinema—where the size of the screen and the concentration and concertedness of the audience in the darkened theatre facilitate identification and deception, as opposed to the relatively unimpressive size of the television and the distractions assailing the viewers in the average American home—television's pervasiveness nonetheless augments the menace. What potentially results is a debilitating addiction, fictionalization, exploitation, repression and regression. At first sight, then, Pynchon has little new to add to the subject and does little to redress the critical balance, should that be needed. True, his satire and parody tend to mitigate the doom, and his inventiveness sufficiently makes up for the rather obsolete moral message.

More interesting, however, is the way television permits Pynchon to probe further his well-known concern with "alternative worlds," and, from this perspective, the medium would seem to represent one more squandered technological opportunity, an ambivalence raised metaphorically by the TV-addicted Thanatoids. Albeit possessing the promise of revealing "the 24-frame-per-second truth" (241), television all too often lingers "still this side of the Unimagined" (255). Corporate and personal interests combine into disinformation, distortion and depravity. If human fallibility has thus been reasserted, the medium, by calling into play a postmodern sublime, meanwhile points the way toward a potential redemption of the self and an all-embracing "accommodation" of sorts, no matter how arduous in a postmodern society. Pynchon seizes on the tensions between non-differentiation and differentiation, caused and exacerbated by the media, to create a realm which, through its paradoxical nature, resists easy recuperation by the System.

"Street-legal" and "full-auto qualified" television, for better or worse, has become the filigree of American society: standby around

the clock, beaming forth from sets of all types and sizes, portable or not, hooked up to the car's cigarette-lighter socket or "bootlegged onto the cable out on the highway by ingenious pole-climbing teenagers" (324). The incessant barrage of commercials, serials, sitcoms and movies has come to determine the viewers' general outlook on life, conscious associations, instinctive reactions, gestures and talk. Reality as a whole, through some extension of Pynchon's witty naming (how about Dr. Hugo Splanchnick, [310]) and acronymic game-playing (CAMP [49], ADHOC [208], BAAD and UHURU [231], FEER [249], PREP [268] . . .), has indeed acquired tubal coordinates. Events take place before or after "prime time" (124, 194), in or out of movie space (261), with distance measured in terms of TV-audibility (357). Film, faking continuity at a rate of 24 frames per second, and television, whose mosaic landscape is serviced by innumerable interchangeable channels, cut reality's time-space-continuum into loose fragments or equally arbitrary beginnings, middles and ends, which are then re-sequenced into what Raymond Williams has called a continuous screen "flow" (Tichi 481), affecting even Pynchon's style with its seamless transitions and digressions. Video recorders and movie projectors enhance the illusion that reality can be manipulated at will, slowed down, paused, rerun, even reversed. Not only does Technology grant its acolytes a pseudo-divine power; it has them live within its "falsely deathless perimeter" (293) on "borrowed time," like the beer-guzzling Corvairs, "passive, taken riders" of the "technowave," playing "motorhead valley roulette in the tule fogs" (37).

The opening of *Vineland* provides an extended case in point, reminiscent of Chapter 13 of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), in which, among the Edgar Allan Poe Towers in the Bronx, three dozen pickets await the arrival of television crews before demonstrating in favour of Henry Lamb and against Sherman McCoy, and only long enough for Channel 1 to secure the necessary news footage. In *Vineland*, Zoyd Wheeler dresses up once a year like a loony to jump through a window and earn his mental-disability check. Here Channel 86 calls the shots and forces Zoyd to go berserk at the Cucumber Lounge rather than the Log Jam, where the coming and going of George Lucas and his crew have caused "'a real change of consciousness'" (7). Lest he be eighty-sixed from Brock Vond's payroll, Zoyd obliges in a colourful party dress "that would look good on television" (4). Much to his surprise, the plate glass window at the Lounge has been replaced for the occasion with a stunt window made of clear sheet candy, on which Hector Zuñiga, DEA field agent and tubal addict, eagerly and ferociously feeds. Tubal violence has become

literal food for consumption, to Hector as well as to the snack vendors trailing the mobile TV units.

Hector's desire to enlist Wheeler as his informant makes the latter feel as if he is on *Wheel of Fortune*. Eager to escape his pursuer, Zoyd makes it home in time to check himself out on the news, which would have been taped had the VCR not been broken. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, or, reality sandwiched between pre-production and post-production, reduced to a two-dimensional pseudo-event, spectacle or simulacrum—a copy less of *anything* than of its tubal image, what it is supposed to look like on television. In the process, Zoyd's transference is depersonalized and domesticated, falsely emptied of pain and other emotions (despite the dubbed-in sounds of real glass), aestheticized and recycled in slow-motion and freeze-frames which easily "could have won photo awards someplace," and deserve "a nine point five" (15) on Prairie's personal scale. What used to be a scary act—Zoyd could have been speared several times—has become an enjoyable ritual and playful contest, providing an occasion for a good laugh amongst the audience and cozy sociability between father and daughter, sitting "together on the floor in front of the Tube, with a chair-high bag of Chee-tos and a sixpack of grapefruit soda from the health-food store" (14). Television and food consumption coincide, as when Prairie later retrieves a baloney recipe from the TV section (111).

Pynchon's juxtaposition of food and television consumption adumbrates the central issue of addiction—not only to television, but also to drugs, alcohol, sex and power (270), the latter pair embodied by Brock, who goes wherever his penis takes him (377), and by addictive computer games like "'Nukey,' which included elements of sex and detonation" (160). The issue of addiction—which rather qualifies Safer's claim that television viewing is voluntary (108, 112)—generates tell-tale associative strings, as when Zoyd settles down in front of the soundless Tube with a joint or eager for one (21, 59, 309), or when he, Frenesi, and Brock masturbate in front of the set (59, 84, 278), or when Hector talks to it as if "loaded" (41). Disappointed by Weed Atman's alleged betrayal, Howie characteristically "reached for the Tube, popped it on, fastened himself to the screen and began to feed" (236). Frenesi equates film with television as a panacea for reality. Her betrayal made her feel:

as if on some unfamiliar drug [. . .] walking around next to herself, haunting herself, attending a movie of it all. If the step was irreversible, then she ought to be all right now, safe in a world-next-to-the-world that not many would know how to get to, where she could kick back and watch the unfolding drama. (237)

Cowart is worried by "Pynchon's somewhat disturbing refusal to depict drugs in a negative light"; with the exception of Mucho Maas, whose later entrepreneurship makes him even more suspect than his former addiction, "taking drugs (as opposed, perhaps, to dealing them) remains a powerful metaphor for the idea of an alternative to the rapacious capitalism and consumerism that afflict American society" (Attenuated 74). But a closer look at the equation of drugs with television and food consumption yields a different conclusion. Whether or not drugs are combined with screen-watching, the enslavement remains as part of a larger frame-up in which law and order, industry and religion collaborate. Thus the police's persistent badgering of the Holytail hippie community suggests the prospect of a future without marijuana, if not without tranquilizers:

Sooner or later Holytail was due for the full treatment, from which it would emerge, like most of the old Emerald Triangle, pacified territory—reclaimed by the enemy for a timeless, defectively imagined future of zero-tolerance drug-free Americans all pulling their weight and all locked in to the official economy, inoffensive music, endless family specials on the Tube, church all week long, and, on special days, for extra-good behavior, maybe a cookie. (221–22)

Throwing its distractive light over the domestic landscape, television creates a boundless anemic vacuum, void of experience, thoughts, and emotion. By contrast, Pynchon's fictional world, for all its quick-bloodedness, is also marked by a coagulation of normal reality, as that effected by the narrating parrots—"telling bedtime stories to years of children, sending them off to alternate worlds" (223)—creatures straight from Gabriel García Márquez's magical-realistic world.

The addiction theme is sprung to the fore and satirically expanded through Hector Zuñiga, "dope cop" and "Tubefreek," in therapy with Dr. Dennis Deeply of NEVER, the National Endowment for Video Education and Rehabilitation, which "'stud[ies] and treat[s] Tubal abuse and other video-related disorders,'" and whose fitting emblem is "a struck circle around a TV set, above the Latin motto *Ex luce ad sanitatem*" (33). Hector is such an intractable case, remaining impervious to both the underexposure and the overexposure of the homeopathic and the Transcendence-Through-Saturation treatments (335), that "'[h]e's already in the literature'" (33)—a nice metafictional touch.

Hector's relegation to the medical annals emblemizes Pynchon's textualization of television (and movies), itself a transposition of how the media textualize reality, robbing it of historical depth and

substance, and ultimately capitalizing on it. Pynchon's novel, much like E. L. Doctorow's work as a whole, tries to chronicle the past, in this case four generations, beginning with the thirties. With regard to the later decades, Pynchon bears the burden of having to represent that past through its superficial images and styles, disembodied stereotypes, a problem he partially solves by his reliance on the universal histories or metanarratives of myth Cowart (Attenuated 71–75) and Safer (109ff) discuss—Faust, the Garden of Eden, the American Dream—and on the native American folklore of the Yurok and Tolawa tribes. *Vineland* should therefore be seen as an attempt to re-colonize and re-historicize Viking explorer Leif Eriksson's "Vinland" according to a scenario different from the one traditional textbooks have made us familiar with.

It is no coincidence that women, apart from their healthful critique of male doings (53, 80, 166, 305, 347, etc.), provide "continuity" (284) in Pynchon's scenario. The primary genealogy traced is that of Prairie, Frenesi, Sasha Gates and Eula Becker, while the background of the men is left open or satirically filled in, as with Brock's calling, "brass choirs on the sound track, to power in the white mother city" (274). *Vineland's* feminist slant gives the lie to the frequent claim that the postmodern novel, especially of the fifties and sixties, is misogynist (Hite 698). The Becker-Traverse party, Pynchon's version of Martin Luther King's dream of human brotherhood, joins people from different sexes, places, generations, and professions (369). Not just by virtue of including different nationalities (Japanese, Russian), *Vineland* is more than a national narrative. The characters' destination is Vineland International, "to honor the bond [. . .] that lay beneath, defined, and made sense of them all" (369). Home, the novel's last word, is where the heart(h) is, an ardent wish made through, not only the Traverse-Becker clambake, but also the Thanatoid roadhouse party, and the revisionist allegory of hell, whose "original promise was never punishment but reunion, with the true, long-forgotten metropolis of Earth Unredeemed" (383). Pynchon's book thereby joins the innumerable extant and contradictory scripts of past periods, like those of the Hollywood blacklistings (81) and the counterculture (101). And scriptlike it is, insofar as Pynchon's novelistic technique of cutting and splicing different eras and realms, televised, filmed or other, approximates that of the montage.

Little doubt should exist about the textuality of Pynchon's fictional realm and the exterior one it draws on. Characters from earlier novels—Takeshi Fumimota from *Gravity's Rainbow* and Wendell "Mucho" Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49*—reappear, mixing with famous literary-critical duos like Deleuze and Guattari (97) and Gilbert and

Gubar (274). Actual movies stand next to invented ones like *The Robert Musil Story* with Pee-Wee Herman (370) and *Young Kissinger*—a parody of Mel Brooks's *Young Frankenstein*—with Woody Allen (309). If on the ice rinks of older malls, teenage kids "swooped, turned, leapt to the beat of canned TV-theme arrangements, booming in the chill" (326), then the security cameras of present-day shopping malls surely spot teenagers hip-hopping or rapping to popular TV and movie-tunes. As on the boxes of La Vache Qui Rit cheese reality is ever distanced, so life is finally elided from the perfect loop of the closed video circuit. With cameras recording TV imitations, the ideal Thanatoid sitcom—"scenes of Thanatoids watchin' the Tube" (171)—has become an actuality. Not only is reality recycled into movies and movies into videos at an accelerating pace (see the example of the NBA play-offs [371]); in the constantly repeated mechanical reproduction process and through its mediation, attempts to reconnect with human presence founder. "[I]n the sullen Tubeflicker," Zoyd and Brock masturbate to *remembered* images of Frenesi (59, 278). Through the Tube, Zoyd and Takeshi expect only indirect human contact: the one fantasizes a commercial for his dream album, the anthology of torch songs *Not Too Mean to Cry*, broadcast on the chance Frenesi would watch it (36); the other, on the lam from death, accidentally tunes in to a rerun of *Babies of Wackiness*, in which his ex-wife, Michiko, acted (160–61). With Raoul, the robot fridge with "two round video screens side by side, each with an image of a cartoon eye" (193), we reach the Baudrillardian "hyperreal" or "simulation": efforts to mime the human have simply been given up, the signifier sundered from some original signified, irretrievably sinking into the hermeneutic past. As in Brock's reduction of Frenesi to a fetish, the signifying process is halted at the signifier, with whose possession he has to be satisfied (141, 268).

Communication now concerns traffic among images and has to make do with what Fredric Jameson calls a "meaning effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of Signifiers among each other" (72). The representational urge is slaked in a funhouse of self-reflecting images. No wonder *Vineland* is rife with doubles, from identical to astrological twins whose speeches overlap, from double agents and aliases to reincarnated Thanatoids and impersonators of media fantasies.

Without lapsing into sterile self-reflexiveness, Pynchon grants the artificiality of his intertextual movie and television world, freely, jocosely, even magnanimously, for the admission empowers his fiction with a critical awareness and the potential for social transformation. Prairie and the other guests of the Kunoichi Sisters on kitchen duty, for

instance, go for the eerily luminescent, because moldy, Variety Loaves, “stepping in time to the music on the radio, *which happened to be* the theme from *Ghostbusters* (1984)” (190; emphasis added). Time and again, Pynchon subverts his already ironic because absolutist fantasies with further invention, as when DL, after a brief confrontation with a “señorita” in Brock’s reeducation camp, vanishes like Zorro over her “balcony,” “emerging, *as a matter of fact*, right between two sentries making their rounds, unseen, unheard, though perhaps, *who could be sure*, not unscented” (254; emphasis added).

This is innocent sport indeed, and for the greater good. It is a far cry from DL’s bungled job in Tokyo, where she—as much as her foil, flawed Frenesi (who confesses not being “some pure creature [. . .] the Film Queen, some no-emotion piece of machinery, everything for the shot” [260])—is made to suffer from movie-induced standards of perfection. Things get even worse when the media collude with business and the gutting of reality, its endowment with a dreamlike, paracinematic quality, goes hand in hand with a detrimental commodification. One of L.A.’s business/shopping complexes stood on a former movie-studio lot: “Space devoted to make-believe had, it was thought, been reclaimed by the serious activities of the World of Reality” (192). And “the new Noir Center, loosely based on crime movies from around World War II and after [. . .] was yuppification run to [a desperate] pitch [. . . an] increasingly dumb attempt to cash in on the pseudoromantic mystique of those particular olden days in this town,” which had, in truth, been very corrupt (326). For simultaneous derealization and exploitation, there is hardly any distinction between movies and television. A “popular television comedian” agrees to emcee the Japanese meat show of white slaves (136). The fear of hidden cameras used for commercials endows reality with a surreal flavour (158). And the Cable Companies, like developers, divide Vineland into easily exploitable, artificial Cable Zones, “which in time became political units in their own right as the Tubal entrepreneurs went extending their webs even where there weren’t enough residents per linear mile to pay the rigging cost, they could make that up in town, and besides, they had faith in the future of California real estate” (319).

Hector’s propagandistic bid for riches and fame threatens to turn the whole of *Vineland*, like *Gravity’s Rainbow*, into a movie with the “zippy working title, ‘*Drugs—Sacrament of the Sixties, Evil of the Eighties*’” (342), a movie with precursors like *The French Connection*, featuring Gene Hackman in the role of Popeye Doyle (338). The circularity is compounded by the historical parallelism with the witch-hunts of the thirties and fifties: “Communists then, dopers now,

tomorrow, who knew, maybe the faggots, so what, it was all the same beef, wasn't it? Anybody looking like a normal American but living a secret life was always good for a pop if times got slow—easy and cost-effective, that was simple Law Enforcement 101" (339). Since Hector's thought processes and habitual behaviour are a circumstantial montage of bits and pieces carefully culled from his favourite programs, he tries to pressgang Frenesi into signing on to his movie deal with a combination of *Hill Street Blues*, *Ironside*, and *Mod Squad*, all "cop shows" which belonged to what the "right-wing weekly *TV Guide* [the characterization is Frenesi's] called Crime Drama":

It was disheartening to see how much [Hector] depended on these Tubal fantasies about his profession, relentlessly pushing their propaganda message of cops-are-only-human-got-to-do-their-job, turning agents of government repression into sympathetic heroes. Nobody thought it was peculiar anymore, no more than the routine violations of constitutional rights these characters performed week after week, now absorbed into the vernacular of American expectations. (345)

Through sheer tubal conditioning, reality and fiction have fused, resulting in an even greater subjugation.

Beyond such explicit passages, the narc's blind inconsistency (ever heard of a Tube fiend set on eradicating drug addiction and hoping for his anti-drug movie to become a box-office success, the new hype?) is indication enough of where Pynchon stands on law enforcement and the deprivation of human freedom. The Tube allows him to make his point directly and indirectly, like the euphemistic "witness protection" program (71), which forces informants to go underground but prevents their escape from the clutches of the State, until their files are deleted from the Computer and their pseudo-existences terminated. The upshot is an Orwellian vision—the story's narrative present is, significantly, 1984—of televisions and computer monitors being turned into Big Brother's instruments of control and repression: "As if the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you'" (340), a threat humorously subverted in the Tubaldetox's house hymn:

Oh . . . the . . . Tube!
It's poi-soning your brain!
Oh, yes. . . .
It's dri-ving you, insane!
It's shoot-ing rays, at you,
Over ev'ry-thing ya do,

It sees you in your bedroom,
 And—on th' toi-let too!
 Yoo Hoo! The
 Tube. . . .
 It knows, your ev'ry thought,
 Hey, Boob, you thought you would-
 T'n get caught—
 While you were sittin' there, starin' at "The
 Brady Bunch,"
 Big fat computer jus'
 Had you for lunch, now Th'
 Tube—
 It's plugged right in, to you! (336-37)

The totalitarian spectre has become more than feasible since the advent of interactive television and computers prodding lethargic users, a situation already adumbrated in *V.*, but with a difference. There the TV turns itself off when Whole Sick Crew member Fergus Mixolydian, who has hooked himself up to the set, dozes off. In *Vineland*, Prairie is given no respite: a blinking terminal rouses her from a "hypnagogic gaze" to the accompaniment of the Everly Brothers' "Wake Up, Little Susie" (115). In Pynchon's America, God's omnipresent eye—by now "jaundiced and bloodshot" (361)—has been replaced by those of the camera and Tube: "throbbing" (210) and rolling, winking and hoodwinking. No need to lapse into science fiction, for satellites already check everybody's moves in our global village (28), down to the most private ones in some secluded Oklahoma motel room, where the "infrared-sensitive eye" of a weather satellite, besides charting an impending storm on the TV screen, also spots Frenesi's erect, "steadily glowing" nipples (212-13). The satellite, with its potential for psychic expansion (in Frenesi the storm triggers premonitions of a world beyond, for she has "never seen a sky like this on Earth, not even with the help of LSD" [215]), is degraded into a High-Tech Peeping Tom, a pimp of perverse entertainment, which Brock watches like a commercial.

Insidious as their influence may be, satellites are also far from conspicuous. Such is hardly the case with the intrusive "mindbarf" (330) or "audio treacle" (109) of Muzak and the persistent drone of commercials, which infiltrate even restrooms (98) and phone conversations (121), relentlessly pummeling people into the preferred mould. It is well known that the tempo of the Muzak piped through shopping malls is carefully engineered to put customers in an agreeable mood—neither fast enough to chase them from the premises nor slow

enough to engender listlessness. The marketing specialists' manipulation of consumers through Muzak and commercials is abetted by the vigilant video cameras of security police (326) and the banks' never-sleeping computers (91). Consequently, society is turned into an intricate cybernetic system whose nerve centre is the stock exchange. So apart from basely exculpating himself and anticipating the constant betrayals—by Frenesi, Hub (who joined the reactionary IATSE union [289–91]), and Zoyd (who suffered from his scab activities [320])—Flash is also right that: “‘Everybody’s a squealer. We’re in th’ Info Revolution here. Anytime you use a credit card you’re tellin’ the Man more than you meant to. Don’t matter if it’s big or small, he can use it all’” (74).

Economic and technological repression go hand in hand, and, what is worse, people frequently enjoy it too, thus becoming their own jailors. Frenesi’s sexual attraction to uniforms, which television plays up and hands down from one generation to the next, makes her wonder “if some Cosmic Fascist had spliced in a DNA sequence requiring this form of seduction and initiation into the dark joys of social control” (83). In Weed’s visits to “Dr. Larry’s World of Discomfort” (227–28), social regimentation assumes Kafkaesque dimensions, humorously justifying Charles Murray’s fear in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* that social services victimize to the degree they increase dependence. Recombinant DNA and genetic engineering in the near future may threaten to turn humanity into the utterly dependent and predictable, machine-generated creatures from Huxley’s *Brave New World*. For the time being, and thanks to the ethical objections and stalling manoeuvres of environmental activists like Jeremy Rifkin, the subservience, as yet primarily social rather than genetic, may still be remedied. This does not mean that a change of attitudes is easily accomplished. Television’s brainwashing is so thorough that the images stored in Weed’s “deathstunned memory” (unerasable, like the circuitry etched into ROM-chips) are not those of the actual Dr. Larry Elasmó, but those from “his stridently hypnotic, often incoherent radio and TV commercials” (226), which even overwhelm the frightening recollections of the College of the Surf debacle.

Such devastating effects presuppose constant repetition and social training, once more as in Huxley, from the earliest age onwards, a point repeated in a welter of studies from McLuhan’s *Understanding Media* (1964) to Libert, Serafkin and Davidson’s *Early Window: Effects of Television on Children and Youth* (2nd ed., 1982). In *Vineland*, the conditioning begins with the seemingly harmless phantasm of the Tubal Guardian or Nurturer, benevolently overlooking sleeping children (71,

82) and shaping their dreams (351), or fooling birds into singing back to the commercials, offering the neighbourhood kids a Tube-induced lullaby (82). Justin learns from the smartest kid in his kindergarten that the easiest way to render parents inoffensive is to consider them characters in a TV sitcom (351). While he judges them "the least objectionable programming" once the cartoons have ended (87), his attitude is double-edged, embracing and distancing. The grown-up Frenesi still acts like a naive child when relying on the Tube to scatter evil spirits (83). Her daughter provides an even better and equally instructive example of tubal indoctrination, one that should not be glossed over as "Tubal trivia" (Hayles 88) or "inane conversation" (Safer 121). The musical theme of *Gilligan's Island*, the first thing Prairie, as a three-month old baby, ever noticed on the Tube (368), has been indelibly seared into her memory, thus enduringly attaching her to the Tube as maternal substitute. The process suggests the imprinting of ducklings on their mother (here diverted to the perceptually lively television), which, in normal circumstances, defines the ducklings' sense of species and the focus of their later sexual attention (Krech xvi-xvii). Through imprinting, certain songbirds can also learn the songs of other bird species. Who knows but Brock's movie-character image may help to explain his appeal to Prairie and Frenesi as a result of imprinting. In any case, Pynchon conjures up the process of imprinting twice, first by comparing Weed's followers to "ducklings looking for a mother" (229), and second by depicting Hub Gates in Frenesi's dream as barrelling down the road in his truck, "bringing behind him like ducklings a line of lamps, generators, and beam projectors each on its little trailer rig" (370).

Like Proust's madeleine, the theme from *Gilligan's Island* is a sure-fire way of reconnecting Prairie to her past, as well as associating her with her mother, who in turn, through Bette Davis movies, can "warp back into infant memories of a giant unfocused being holding her up at arms' length" (81). On the one hand, television here serves a bonding function. On the other hand, the pervasiveness of reruns on television is symptomatic of many characters' regressive tendencies. DL's shattered nerves after her attempted homicide call for the Kunoichis' "Regression Room," where she can wallow in "old movies on the Tube" (153). As an adult who wants to reach beyond the movie image, Frenesi has not progressed much beyond the stage at which the baby Prairie "wanted to climb inside the television set, and right onto [*Gilligan's Island*]" (368).

Combining a sense of personal history, filial affection and Faustian aspirations with indulgent self-pity, infantile animism and ontological

confusion, Tubal regression is but one of the equivocal manifestations in *Vineland* of the great reunion/accommodation theme, whose multiple, complex ramifications call for a cautious assessment. The theme extends from the Kunoichi Attentives' payback scheme, Gorman ("The Specter") Flaff's springing for the education of Thi Anh Tran (182), DL and Takeshi's karmic adjustment business, Yurok animism, and East-West reconciliation, through drugs, oriental philosophy, and astrology, to the Thanatoids' zeroing out of life and death (219-20, 364) and their resentment, Jess Traverse's sense of retribution and divine justice, and the surreptitious circulation of power, money, and information in late capitalist society. Lest the novel's final shot of Prairie and Desmond be taken for a retrograde idyll or happy ending (Porush, Purring 99), it is worth recalling that Prairie sticks up for herself when she is about to be kidnapped by Brock (375-76) and that Desmond has been devouring blue-jays (385) and defying death by deer rifle in chasing cows (357). True, Prairie also desires Brock's return, illustrating the passing on from mother to daughter of the enslavement to power and uniforms, as well as the adolescent's attraction to danger and sexual thrills. At the same time, Prairie's desire, like the finale's "trans-night crossing" (384), may be a submerged allusion to the implied reader's difficulties taking leave of the novel and returning to the world beyond. Prairie's waking up resembles the famous lyrical dawn with which Chapter 19 of *Huckleberry Finn* opens in that both passages offer only brief respite from life's hazards and disillusion. *Vineland's* precarious condition is perhaps best conveyed by DL and Takeshi, who in the end "found themselves slowed to a paranoid dancers' embrace at the unquiet center of the roadhouse party crowd" (384). Given the myriad menaces to *Vineland*, "the unrelenting forces that leaned ever after [humanity] into Time's wind," "the faceless predators" (383), including Brock, Hector, Chunko Willis and inexplicable supernatural forces, the novel homes in on the eye of the storm, suspends movement in a tension-ridden poise similar to that at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, leaving readers dangling.

In these circumstances, it clearly will not do to say Pynchon either waxes sentimental or simply looks down on the sixties' communal dream, whose deterioration through personal and social causes, and dogged resurgence he particularizes in Frenesi's and Prairie's stories. Brock offers such a one-sided, Freudian-inspired interpretation of the period as a warrant for his scheme to infiltrate former hippies into college campuses, portraying it as the wish fulfillment of "the classical postcollegiate Dream of Autumn Return, to one more semester":

Brock Vond's genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep—if he'd allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching—need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family. (268–69)

Regression here figures as a perversion of the familial impulse, or, to use N. Katherine Hayles's terms, as Brock's inscription of the kinship system within the snatch system (81), the success of which can be measured by the closeness of the sixties' communal dream, Frenesi's dangerous longing for the people's "oneness" (117), to the fascist crowd or state, precluding diversity (Slade 136). While not entirely oblivious of the media's complicity, Hayles considers "money and the computer, dollars and information" the essential ingredients of the appropriation (83, 86). However, Brock's recuperation of the family in *Vineland* allows us to infer a subtle Tubal distortion of the sixties in their reduction to the "youth revolution against parents of all kinds" (emphasis added). On the one hand, this is a case of dividing the enemy in order to reign; on the other hand, the generational conflict was a corollary of the socio-political conflict, neither an inevitability nor the primary issue, a point established by Frenesi and Sasha's *shared* radical ideals. It is radical opposition that the corporate forces want to avoid at all cost. Thus, for example, the Sister Harleyites are neutralized, sapped of their earlier readiness to die to recapture Zoyd's house, by overwhelming media attention (372–73).

The shift from the National family to the private one notwithstanding, the Tube's intercession remains constant, as when Brock, who uses the medium to flaunt his supposedly "smart-assed charisma" (279), also ridicules Zoyd's longing for "the basic triangle, the holy family" by measuring it against the ideal image propagated by commercials (301). TV makes this ideal, in Prairie's eyes, both other-worldly and fatuous, and it renders human reality to a proportionate degree painfully inadequate—precisely the feeling Brock wants to instill in his opponents. As it is, Zoyd's endearing schlemiel qualities, the naive self-deception of the citizens of the People's Republic of Rock and Roll, the flawed assessment of the odds against them, and the blinding, self-indulgent nostalgia the sixties still generate are greater liabilities than the idealism which feeds revolutions or the yearning for some human warmth. Nor should we forget the novel's dedication to Pynchon's parents.

Manipulation through and of television, whether for personal or corporate ends, underscores its reputation as boob Tube, reserved for

fools and kids, a distressing fall from the promise the new medium initially showed. Merely to castigate television as the boob Tube, however, would be to take it less than seriously, a mistake *Vineland* warns against in two ways: 1) through Pynchon's appreciation of fools and kids—a category which includes, besides Zoyd and Prairie, the last persons to know the overgrown tunnel entrances to earth's prehistory or humanity's deeper self (383)—and 2) through Pynchon's predilection (to be expected from a U.S. citizen) for the American idiom "Tube" over the British "telly." (Something similar could be argued about the predominance in *Vineland* of American "movies" over European "films": restricting and relegating *cinema* to the separate artsy, intellectual realm would minimize or neglect that medium's commercialization and consequent penetration.) In an episode reminiscent of the Transcendence Treatment at the Tubaldetox, Brock himself once experiences the corrosively debilitating potential of television. "[D]angerous gusts of amusement" on the Tube make him erupt into boundless laughter: "diverging toward some brain state he couldn't imagine, filling and flooding him, his head taken and propelled by a supernatural lightness, on some course unaccounted for by the usual three dimensions" (278). Assisted by nausea and his fear of the unknown, the Prosecutor stops short of any revelation, saved "from whatever his laughter had nearly overflowed him into," and resumes control. Paradoxically, this check identifies Brock with the children and "neighborhood idiots" of Sister Rochelle's allegory about Hell, who dared go inside the tunnel entrances "only as far as the first turnings and loss of outdoor light" (383). Perhaps it is just as well, for whenever Brock seeks access to a world beyond, he does so with the express intent of appropriating and corrupting it: witness his recourse to Frenesi's camera skills to finish off Weed.

While privileging documentary movies rather than television as the source for mind-shattering experiences like Brock's, Frenesi nonetheless agrees with Brock about the Tube's mis-presentation of reality. News teams are selective, ignoring, for instance, "the repression of farm workers" in the U.S. (195), or complying with police ordinances, as during the crisis in Trasero County when they stayed "at a harmless, unbridgeable distance" and "24fps had exclusive coverage of the story, if anybody survived to bring it out" (203).

Of course, Frenesi ignores the dependence of the media's depth of perception on their operators' capacities, prerogatives and intentions, which dependence divests her camera of its putative machine-neutrality. This levelling commonplace does not necessarily invalidate Deborah L. Madsen's argument that television tends to express a corporate consciousness and movie representations individual agency

(131), but is nonetheless supported by Pynchon's insistence on the "Tubeshaped frame" of Frenesi's camera (200, 202) and by the fact of her employment by Brock. Both exemplify the System's colonizing power, a phenomenon institutionalized, among other ways, by Congress's starting to rely on footage from independent film-makers in hearings (Slade 128). Journalists like Frenesi and officials like Brock, apart from the mental limits they share to varying degrees with humanity at large, are on the payroll of institutions too well aware of the media's power to assemble and re-assemble reality in the service of geo-political, financial, and ideological interests. The prosecutor's "Mad Woman in the Attic" dream betrays, not only how much fear for women is the rationale for his rapist behaviour, but also that he is employed by "people so rich and powerful he'd never even seen them" (275). Brock imagines hitting rock bottom in that most ephemeral realm behind the phenomenal one, inhabited by the ghouls running him, the level "where everybody knew everybody else, where however political fortunes below might bloom and die, the same people, the Real Ones, remained year in and year out, keeping what was desirable flowing their way" (276).

To the bland use of television, the revolutionary collective 24fps all the same opposes the merciless, revelatory film documentary. They make maximum use of "the ability of close-ups to reveal and devastate" (195), and of the inability of the corrupted human face to withstand scorching photofloods. For them, "[a]n image taken is a death performed. Images put together are the substructure of an afterlife" (197). Such sloganesque cinematographic power is bought at great cost. The collective has two eternal arguments. The first concerns the light—the essence of 24fps, symbolic of their belief in Liberty (261), righteousness and salvation, and an obsession for Frenesi, who can only relax as long as she has the light (202) and who accordingly sees everything, from saving Brock to the everyday sky, in terms of luminosity (216). Like her father, proprietor of "Lux Unlimited" (370) and conjurer of shadows, she is a magician, briefly transmuting the Central Power System's energy to Truth, before it gets adulterated into the Tubal flicker (371). Incidentally, the System's diverted and subverted power illuminates so much more than any alternative energy source: after the electric current is cut off at the College of the Surf, the 24fps crew has to rely on a generator, but the images of the riot lack "the depth [. . .] Ditzah would have liked" (247–48).

The film collective's other ongoing debate centers around "the claims of film against those of 'real life.'" Would it be necessary someday for one of them to die for a piece of film? One that might

never even get used? How about crippled or hurt? What was the risk level supposed to be?" (202). Frenesi too offers "her sacrifice at the altar of Art" (346); yet for her—whose spectacles are "round wire-rims with ND-1 filters for lenses" (239) and whose eyes, during parental quarrels, would switch back and forth "as if cutting together reverse shots of two actors" (81)—the claims of the documentary movie transcend the human sacrifice to acquire ontological and epistemological dimensions. It may seem ironic that a medium traditionally constrained by so-called objectivity is here used as a means of imaginative expansion. The irony disappears if we realize that these higher claims put the rationalist project of the Enlightenment in a different perspective. More than anybody else, Frenesi believed her 16mm Canon Scoopic allowed her to cross some imaginary line into Truth, into "a world sprung new, not even defined yet, worth the loss of nearly everything in this one" (117). This cinematographic realm granted her, so she thought, immortality and immunity (116, 202, 287, 293), while also equipping her with blinders and imprisoning her in the delusions it fosters. Until Prairie meets her mother in person, the latter exists for her only in the 24fps archives, "as if Frenesi were dead but in a special way, a minimum-security arrangement, where limited visits, mediated by projector and screen, were possible. As if somehow, next reel or the one after, the girl would find a way, some way, to speak to her" (199). Although Frenesi never steps out of the frame to treat her daughter to the "primal Tubefreek miracle" (84), the camera on one occasion comes close to achieving the impossible. The footage of Weed Atman's final moments caught:

not only the look on his face [. . .] but the way that what he was slowly understanding spread to his body, a long, stunned cringe, a loss of spirit that could almost be seen on the film, even after all the years between then and the screen in Ditzah's house in the Valley . . . some silvery effluent, vacating his image, the real moment of his passing. (246)

This proof that the camera can kill, touch the soul, trap the spirit—as Brock had demanded (213) in an unwitting allusion to Weed's name, which resembles "Atem," the German word for "breath"—is also a bitter, oxymoronic testimony to Frenesi's treason, treason against Weed and treason against her faith in the camera's revelatory power. Consider her "movie sincerity" when persuading Weed of the harmlessness of filming his confession, because no one is judging him, and the camera is only a machine (244). The filmic foreshadowing of Weed's physical passing, a close call fraught with Frenesi's treachery—indeed, coinciding with Weed's recognition of it—paradoxically reminds

us that the camera's devastating power is metaphorical *and* real, "a thrust at truth and a lie," whatever Brock claims to the contrary. To him, the worlds of guns and cameras are separate: "'one is make-believe, one is real'" (241); hence the collective's "doomed attempt to live out the metaphor of movie camera as weapon" (197), or so Zipi and Ditzah conclude from the Trasero County crackdown (259) and Brock is eager to have them believe, thus conceding the inequality of a fight the revolutionaries are bound to lose. In any case, Brock's potentially mind-enlarging experience and the footage of Weed's passing thoroughly gainsay Molly Hite's claim that *Vineland* has "no epistemological impasses or withheld revelations" and that its "'real story' is fully visible" (719).

The marital tribulations of Hector Zuñiga, alias Ricardo Montalban, provide a humorous counterpart to both Brock's frightening taste of madness and the revolutionaries' serious ambitions. The passage below offers lavish evidence of Hector's not-so-crazy logic and the maniacal meticulousness with which he reports the case and identifies one of the casualties. Logic and meticulousness here are clearly products of excessive indignation, magnificently served by the unrelenting drive and creativity of Pynchon's prose. Meanwhile, this consummate demonstration of the implied author's knack for impersonation brings home the repeated difficulty of distinguishing him from his characters:

Hector went off mooning about his ex-wife Debbi, who during the divorce proceedings, on the advice of some drug-taking longhair crank attorney, had named the television set, a 19-inch French Provincial floor model, as correspondent, arguing that the Tube was a member of the household, enjoying its own space, fed out of the house budget with all the electricity it needed, addressed and indeed chatted with at length by other family members, certainly as able to steal affection as any cheap floozy Hector might have met on the job. As long as she'd happened, moreover, to've destroyed this particular set with a frozen pot roast right in the middle of a "Green Acres" rerun that Hector had especially looked forward to viewing, possibly thereby rendering moot her suit, he decided in the heat of his own emotions to make a citizen's arrest, charging Debbi with Tubal homicide, since she'd already admitted it was human. In the movie of his life story, with Marie Osmond as Debbi and no one but Ricardo Montalban as Hector, it would be one of those epic courtroom battles over deep philosophical issues. Is the Tube human? Semihuman? Well, uh, how human's that, so forth. Are TV sets brought alive by broadcast signals, like the clay bodies of men and women animated by the spirit of God's love? There'd be this parade of expert witnesses, professors, rabbis,

scientists, with Eddie Albert in an Emmy-nominated cameo as the Pope. . . . All just dreams of what might have been—in non-Tubal “reality,” both actions were thrown out as frivolous, and they got a simple no-fault divorce, on the condition that Hector immediately enter a Tubal Detoxification program. (348)

The curtness with which the actions of both Debbie and Hector are dismissed betrays the impatience or common sense of the judge—or is it the author?—and possibly the disappointment of the addict, whose perspective resurfaces in the quotation marks around non-Tubal “reality.” Beyond characterizing Hector and drawing marital partners-at-war to a T, Pynchon has a dig at critics from English, Popular Culture Studies, and Communication Departments, among whom the omnipresence of the Tube in *Vineland* might prompt just such discussions of its ontological status.

Even so, the passage above does not allow us to dismiss the Tube. The enlivening, critical, and disruptive power of humour in Pynchon’s fictions, together with his validation of popular culture, precludes the equation of television, on the evidence of Brock’s unsettling experience or Hector’s divorce proceedings, with mindless and free-ranging abandon, as opposed to, say, the documentary movie’s tight focus and willful concentration. Frequently Pynchon’s discourse also approaches pastiche rather than parody, and then the mimicry offers a pleasurable tribute rather than a poisonous attack. Pynchon, like Zoyd, stands under suspicion for knowing just too many television programs (33), which softens the edge of his critique, which nowhere approaches anything like the one-sided indictments of Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451* (1950) and John Gardner in *October Light* (1976). (Incidentally, apart from William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*, books are hardly mentioned in *Vineland*.) Novelistic evidence abounds that tubal bounties include education on the side (88, 137), cheap therapy (286), minor comfort (298), even a solution to small quarrels (191), although this hardly warrants us to speak of Pynchon’s “romance” with technology, as David Porush does (Purring 99–100). Perfectly adaptable to circumstances, television can be made to serve any purpose, assume any shape, good or bad. Like other technological manifestations in pre-twentieth-century literature, television remains a heuristic means by which to measure progress or decline (Tichi 471); but instead of conducting the appraisal from the high ground of high culture, Pynchon has simply joined the crowd, even disappeared in it. His relative validation of popular culture also emerges from his love of music, whether folk, rock and roll, soul (314), Motown (315), or blues (see the epigraph from Johnny Copeland). From this standpoint,

Zoyd's appearance—a "generic longhair with a Zappa mustache and wire-rimmed yellow shooting glasses" (281)—acquires extra significance. Ever since his days with the Mothers of Invention, Zappa has always combined excellent tunes with social criticism and witty self-irony (see, for instance, his album *We're Only in it for the Money*), and his political ventures include symbolically running for president as well as opposing repressive attempts of parents from the moral right to censor rock lyrics.

With Hector's distinction or failure to distinguish between Tubal and non-Tubal "Reality," Frenesi's between "Truth" and Falsity, and Brock's between the shifting political fortunes and the constant "Real Ones" or the counterculture's latent and manifest desires, the novel ventures into a highly problematical area, that of the postmodern sublime, whose economies center around 1) "the imperatives and limits of totalization" and 2) "the commerce between subjectivity and impersonality" (Redfield 153). It is a drama enacted on the story and discourse levels, resulting in quite opposite currents, for it would seem that Pynchon is moving, as so often before, toward some zero-point fantasy of non-differentiation (Redfield 154), whereas several characters, threatened as their world and separate identities are by the pervasive media, attempt to re-establish differences, goaded by Pynchon's clues of an other-worldly existence.

The same tension between non-differentiation and differentiation governs Jameson's model of the postmodern condition, marked as it is by temporal and spatial telescoping in both directions, for example, by the collapse of the economic into the cultural sphere and by its relegation to some "Other" dimension, within or without, which can be only dimly perceived through layers of inadequate metaphors (Connor 47-48). The computer is but one of them, and "high-tech paranoia" but one of the "degraded attempts—through the figuration of advanced technology—to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson 80). In Porush's related analysis of *Vineland*, the computer and the Puncutron machine feature as oxymoronic means of resolving the novel's epistemological and ontological quandaries into the transcendental (Purring 103-05). But Porush fudges the issue of whether this transcendentia consists of the world (textual and non-textual) remade or of another world elsewhere, imaginary or real, immune to the postmodern or infected by it, accessible or not. He also neglects the part played by the media.

Three phases can be discerned in the plight of Pynchon's characters: 1) the threat of non-differentiation, mediated and exacerbated by TV and movies; 2) the resistance against non-

differentiation, facilitated by the recuperative economics of the postmodern sublime and the subsequent recuperation of any counterforces, illustrated in Frenesi's monism, the science fiction elements, and astrology; 3) the move toward a zero-point, non-differentiation of a different kind, the accommodation. In this interpretation, TV and movies may very well function as the catalysts triggering a revolution of sorts—perhaps less apocalyptic than the ending of *Gravity's Rainbow*, but no less indispensable. *Vineland* thus assumes an equivocal place in the millennial tradition that, since New England's colonial days, has privileged technology as a means of building an ideal realm on earth (Tichi 467–68), as well as fitting Jameson's dialectical assessment of late capitalism "as catastrophe and progress all together" (86). Utopianism and dystopianism merge, or, in Cowart's formulation: "Pynchon exposes the millennial canker in the flower children as rigorously as he diagnoses the reactionary carcinoma of the next generation"; *Vineland* "looks back to [the Summer of Love]—and forward to some Republican version of the thousand-year Reich" (Attenuated 74).

1) We have seen how TV and movie manifestations in *Vineland* substantiate the abolition of the modernist separation between the cultural and the economic: cultural representations have been radically appropriated by commerce, a process in which the self and the world have been made volatile. On the one hand, the media foster a regression to infantilism which threatens to dissolve the difference between the self and the other, or between reality and fiction. On the other hand, while the pervasive cinematographic and tubal images are condensing the three-dimensional reality, the potential for a political praxis gets expunged in ever-widening circles. Consider Millard Hobbs's commercials for his lawn-care service: "The Marquis de Sod" is taken for—and indeed eventually becomes—the real owner, and his scripts grow "from those old split 30's during the vampire shift to what were now often five-minute prime-time micromovies," invariably ending with the company jingle, a "postdisco arrangement of the *Marseillaise*" (46–47).

2) The process frequently seems reversed, with two-dimensional reality blown up again, as with the apparition of the U.S. Marshal (84), DL's reflection in the restroom mirror at Ralph Wayvone's estate (99), and the induction of Bigfoot from its footprint (169). Joseph W. Slade sees in the last example an application of the principles of group theory, which "permits information about the larger wholes to be 'generated' by part of that whole" (140). Who knows but group theory's search for universals, the invariants beneath the surface,

which partakes of the time-worn essentialist project, here also interferes. Marc W. Redfield has indeed interpreted the conflict between the loss and preservation of differentiation as the return of substantialism or the repressed self, and as the sublime's domestication of the postmodern condition that inspired it (152).

From this perspective, Hector may have recourse to the specious argument that his (or Brock's) identifications with TV or movie images shore up his imperiled self. If origins have vanished from postmodern society, there is no point in adding that Hector's identification with TV images fictionalizes Hector rather than granting life or actuality to the fictions. This exercise in sophistry, like earlier examples of media-induced wishful and power-mad thinking, demonstrates how easily sublime countermoves against the postmodern condition are impaired, the more so since the source of danger is depended on to provide succour or breakthroughs. We have already seen the havoc caused by the Transcendence Treatment at the Tubaldetox and Brock's brush with madness during a gust of Tubal entertainment. Frenesi provides another example of how victimization is heightened by resistance to it. During her revolutionary days, she imagines another world beyond the camera image, in reaction against conformism and state control; yet it is a monistic realm, where outside coincides with inside, and people's diversity is threatened by "oneness." Meanwhile, she pretends the camera reduces her to an impersonal eye, and allows Brock to turn her into an accessory, thereby compounding the reification. By the end, having first gone underground, actually becoming "an average, invisible tract-house mom" (300), and then returned to public life, taking on a nondescript job as a cocktail waitress in Las Vegas, she has made no progress whatsoever.

3) It would seem, then, that the predicament the characters face lies with themselves and with the delusions fostered by technology in postmodern society. Yet Pynchon too has a hand in all this. It is not just that the characters substantiate the sublime's ploy of "sacrificing perception in order to produce a supersensory truth *structured* like a perception" (Redfield 152), or that Technology can only metaphorically conjure the sublime and should not be equated with it (Jameson 79). *Vineland* does offer many glimpses into an alternative realm, and a quite paradoxical one to boot, lying within and without the dominion of the postmodern.

Here we should note the fantastic elements from what Porush calls the "ineffable" or "implausible" narrative register, as opposed to the inevitable and plausible one (Purring 99). Some of these SF-like references can be ascribed to the influence of television and movies,

from references to *Star Trek* and Mr. Spock (11, 321) to Prairie's thinking of extraterrestrials when she meets Alexei (377). Others are of the characters' own invention, like Frenesi's UFO reveries at her mother's house (282), notably her apocalyptic and futuristic Dream of the Gentle Flood, featuring "a wind that might really be her own passage, destination unknown" (256). But still other references of this kind are the obvious product of Pynchon's imagination, such as Zoyd's encounter with "not exactly a UFO" (64) on one of his Kahuna Airlines flights. Much as in Vonnegut's fiction, these references provide an other-worldly perspective from which critically to evaluate the postmodern world. But, unmistakably, it remains an infra-terrestrial other-worldly perspective.

This terrestrial orientation is obvious in those metaphors that dispel or show up the fantastic hue of a human reality in which the Fourth Amendment is flouted (360), family life is punished as an unforgivable act of rebellion (300), or well-deserved happiness is all too easily curtailed by dangerous illness (321). But even with apparently outward-bound fantastic elements, the grip of the sublunary postmodern world is reasserted. Mirage's astrological knowledge deals with powers beyond and "beneath the visible everyday," and, through mythological names (that of Pluto turns Frenesi and Prairie into Proserpine figures), encompasses the superlunary and the subterranean, presumably the realm where money and technology work their influence in hidden ways (graft, DL's Trans-Am, Chipco's Chuck). But instead of liberating, astrology has become another computerized tool of control, "Business As Usual," with the emphasis on the literal meaning of the phrase describing Pluto's predominantly "nihilistic ways" (262). By being computerized, the supernatural, as in Frenesi's comparison of God to some Super-Computer or supreme hacker (91), offers less comfort, for, according to the Tubaldetox's house hymn, computers, like television, belong to the enslaving technological realm.

And yet this is evidence, not of Pynchon's throwing in the towel, but rather of the honesty with which he carries out his task. The Thanatoids and their critical reception further exemplify the difficulties he is up against. Safer considers the Thanatoids the machine-like living dead products of watching too much television (112); her version of their "crossing the boundary" between life and death is largely negative, albeit mitigated by black humour. Slade interprets the Thanatoids negatively *tout court* because they do not like rock and roll, because their living death openly mocks the radicals' belief in spiritual immortality, because they mimic community and domesticity (as do Hector before his divorce and the prison inmates Ché meets [330])

(Slade 131, 133–34). And we could easily add the real estate boom caused by the Thanatoids (321), requiring the cheap, scab labour of Zoyd and his like.

The Thanatoids' function of expressing Pynchon's misgivings about overexposure to television does not, however, exhaust the metaphorical usefulness of these humanoids, or that of television for that matter. Besides being a partial cause of the Thanatoid condition, watching television is also one of its effects, an activity that best fits the Thanatoids' immaterial state and suits their function, which is to "monitor" life, literally to view it from afar. The Thanatoids' distance from life grants someone like Ortho Bob insight into, and triggers his resistance to, the escapism TV caters—"all these shows where, you got love, is always winnin' out, over death? Adult fantasy kind of stories" (171–72)—while also making him less susceptible—he had, after all, "been damaged in Vietnam" (174)—of DL's atonement for Takeshi's suffering and of the accommodation Pynchon is calling for. But then, if DL and Takeshi's Karmic Adjustment is one better than actual Thanatoid revenge (a reflection making Jess Traverse's divine retribution equally suspect), television should be too. What works as a sop for the activists may do so for Vietnam veterans as well, or positive television indoctrination may provide a welcome antidote to the deathmongering.

Of course this is where the shoe pinches: television has precisely trivialized "the Big D" (218). Yet each Thanatoid also represents a *memento mori*, reminding the children of the sixties of their mortality and their dead, the former through the latter, instead of repressing them. In Slade's facile stabs at "the Nazi sympathizer" Martin Heidegger (130) and at American spiritists (134) as deathdealers, more appropriate to *Gravity's Rainbow* than to *Vineland*, can thus be spotted the germs of the very fascism against which he rightly vituperates. Dreaming is all right, but it may be better to do it wide awake, for fear of being taken in by the corporate forces, like Frenesi. True, the Thanatoids' attempts at reincarnation are couched in the sleazy imagery of blue movies, as they "[seek] out men and women in the act of sex, looking for a just-fertilized egg, slipping to and fro with needful dim others in a space like a bleak smoke-tarnished district of sex shows and porno theaters, looking for the magical exact film frame through which the dispossessed soul might reenter the world" (364). Still, Weed tried to merge with Prairie because, as he understood it, giving birth to Prairie after killing him might have been Frenesi's "strange idea of making it right. A life for a life, zero out the account" (364). In this sense, then, Weed's would-be reincarnation resembles DL's atonement or Takeshi's karmic adjustment, even if it would have been

preferable to convey the readjustment or levelling in more appetizing imagery, as in Blood and Vato's ritualized descent into the underworld.

Unlike Brock, who is afraid to cross any boundaries, the Thanatoids, Frenesi, and Hector—through whose movie-director's immunity Frenesi is allowed to be reunited with Prairie (355)—all try to penetrate the "magical exact film frame" and reach beyond. While that attempt is fraught with hindrances in the postmodern age, Pynchon keeps inviting readers of *Vineland* to explore the interface, the "excluded middle," to zero out distinctions, not, as the Thanatoid fantasy perhaps implies, to erase the actual differences of life and death, races and genders, but to share them, while foregoing the false distinctions of wonted hierarchies. Such postmodern social intercourse approximates the currents flowing in the circuitry of a huge cybernetic system, a high-tech network of communicating vessels. Instead of accepting Callisto's seclusion in "Entropy" as the answer to an eventual heat death, Pynchon, through Zoyd's emblematic transfenestration, symbolically repeats Aubade's smashing of the window, straddling, like Maxwell's demon, different realms and weathering the whirling backdraft, that of critics condemning him for sentimentality included.

Vineland bears witness to Pynchon's enduring concern with viable and humane social intercourse, paradoxical as this may seem given his practical disappearance from the public scene. His invisibility is doubtlessly prompted by the media's obtrusive role in the literary profession. But instead of focusing on the institutional aspects of writing in America, the conditions of literary production, Pynchon has preferred to comment on the all-pervasive influence of television in particular on post-war America at large, an influence decisive enough to have caused qualitative changes in reality and its perception. The situation is all the more reprehensible in view of the concomitant exploitation and the temptation to gloss it over by reference to the medium's positive potential. And yet, the ontological and epistemological investigation of the media contributes to opening up and exploring another world, normally suppressed, within the everyday one, which Porush has labelled the "magic middle" and David Wills the "prosthesis" filling the gap resulting from the postmodern prizing apart of signifier and signified (cited in McHoul 42).

In dealing with the media, then, Pynchon, bent as usual on totalizing, has it both ways: offering glimpses into the transcendental, and contributing toward Jameson's project of a cognitive mapping of postmodern America (involving its inhabitants' imaginary relations to their existential conditions) and in turn toward a political praxis, because to demonstrate the world's textuality is also to demonstrate

that it can be rewritten, remediated, remediatised. Although skirting nostalgia, *Vineland* should ultimately foster, not passivity, but a critical and humorous inquiry into cultural phenomena as exponents of political and economic forces, and its paradoxical nature should shield its proposed solutions from easy recuperation.

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