

Thomas Pynchon: Schizophrenia and Social Control

"You must ask two questions. First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control?"

—Thomas Pynchon (*Gravity's Rainbow*)

This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.

—Donna Haraway (*Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*)

As with most great things, it began in a bar. We were basking in the afterglow of the first "Virtual Futures" conference, in May 1994. As usual, conversation turned to Pynchon. He hadn't come to the conference. And yet in many ways "Virtual Futures" was about *Gravity's Rainbow*. With pints at hand to ease a post-conference lull that marked the end of this interregnum and the reinstatement of order in our academic lives, we decided a conference detailing the impact of Pynchon on contemporary digital culture was the next logical step. Thus from the ashes of "Virtual Futures" arose the grim phoenix of "Thomas Pynchon: Schizophrenia and Social Control."

While "VF" '94 had brought together a collection of our favorite anarcho-materialists, a fusion of Luddites and cybnauts gathered in an ecstatic survey of cyberculture, many who attended that conference clearly took their critical orientation from the schizoid discourses of the early 1970s. And with good cause. As Pynchon knows, perhaps the most significant element of modernity is the incorporation of an arrow of time into models of reality and thus a reconceptualization of historical processes. The hallmarks of the modern novel—a penchant for linear narrative, the excessive interiority of the psychological monologue, an overemphasis on narrative technique, and a curious lack of imagination that culminates in a pseudo-mechanistic description of reality—will someday be viewed as mere byproducts of a secular model of time that dominated occidental culture until 1973, if not beyond. Pynchon's digital dramas push the conventional definition of entropy to its extreme edge while exploring many of the cultural issues that dominate contemporary discussions of technology and literature, if not the Information Age in general. If cyberpunk is world-systems theory,

then *Gravity's Rainbow* is its apocalyptic precursor. Pynchon's text is one of the few works to take seriously (though not without also treating sarcastically) the theme of cybernetics and capitalism, or a machinic process underlying history. Everything is connected, if accessible only from a certain schizoid perspective.

"Thomas Pynchon: Schizophrenia and Social Control," held at Warwick University, November 19–20, 1994, was the first conference ever devoted entirely to Pynchon's work. It brought together more than 120 people from six continents. Some thirty presentations over two days made for a chaotic affair, an intense mixture of people, performance, and ideas. This admittedly confused design was actually an idealistic attempt at creating a conference based on the very tenants of decentralized structure, concentrated matter and innovative ideas often associated with the nonlinear models we hoped to explore. What else will emerge from the conference remains to be seen.

The conference was academic iconoclasm, an event, much like the first "Virtual Futures" conferences, that sought to open new vistas for exploration between the arts and cyberculture. The essays collected here are a sampling of only a few approaches, those that, for better or worse, perhaps best represent the aim articulated in our call for papers:

This conference is an interdisciplinary event that aims to examine the relation between philosophy and literature through the work of Thomas Pynchon. Themes to be explored include Pynchon's link to cyberspace, Pynchon and cyberpunk science fiction, chaos theory and literature, postmodernity, with particular interest paid to the work of Gilles Deleuze, apocalypse and narratives of disintegration.

While those aims define the criteria for inclusion in this collection, they in no way capture the range and quality of papers presented at the conference. In fact, the diversity evident at the conference is markedly absent from this collection, which perhaps opens us to a significant criticism. Is this strain of research, like the demographics of cyberculture itself, a domain controlled by a patriarchal hegemony which perpetuates a certain advantage? We hope and believe not. The focus of this issue is information culture, Pynchon and Deleuze, an area of research which has benefited greatly from the work of such eminent scholars as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles and Sadie Plant. We see no reason future research will not produce an equally impressive and better diversified array of studies.

In a broad sense, the essays collected here explore the strategic value of using language and concepts taken from science as tools in a literary praxis. Since Pynchon's appropriation of Wiener, writers have

been quick to track and drive mutant cybernetics through a compressing sequence of paradigm shifts or intensive thresholds (catastrophe, chaos, complexity, component systems . . .). At the same time, it is common for critics of such projects to denounce the appropriation of scientific ideas as facile. (Pynchon himself seems—though perhaps disingenuously—to share some misgivings about the use of entropy in his own work.) On the one hand, if comparisons between chaos theory and postmodernism, or, more generally, science and literature, are not to risk being seen as merely naive appropriations of exclusively scientific ideas, they must move beyond the purely conceptual and begin disclosing the empirical foundation of literature as a material system. And yet, on the other hand, such objections fail to appreciate the exploratory potential driving the incorporation of nonlinear dynamics into literary and cultural tropes. If we are to heed Haraway's warning as anything more than irony, or the self-effacement of critique, we must recognize the process of synthesis and control underlying the nightmare of capitalism as a struggle over the boundaries between organic life and death transfigured. As J. G. Ballard makes clear in the preface to *Crash*, science and technology increasingly control the paranoid regime of capitalism and its pathological synthetic obsessions. In the Age of Information, the language and concepts of everyday life are often the products of such repression. The use of scientific language and ideas is a critical means of tracking the ever mutating conjunction of technology and capitalism. The essays presented here use the language of science in a way that allows critics to write science fiction in the form of analytic essays. To combat the mechanisms of control, we must risk a complicity with the process; or, as Ballard observes, "Either we use those languages, or we remain mute."

The fact that "Thomas Pynchon: Schizophrenia and Social Control" occurred at all indicates the strangely attractive force surrounding Pynchon. From idea, to announcement, to realization, the conference came together in less than six months, with no significant financial support from any academic or private institution. None of this would have occurred without the Internet, which allowed us graduate students to dispense with the usual scholastic channels and break the time frame usually associated with academia. Part of the motivation for organizing a conference stemmed from the fact that no professors at Warwick, in the Department of Philosophy or Literature, were actively interested in reading Pynchon. Our aim thus became twofold: to bring the best researchers in this field together, and, as graduate students and consumers, to control if not create our own academic product. In retrospect, it is striking to see how a few sips of stout can cause a

seismic shift in the Pyndustry. Perhaps this conference exemplifies two people doing things without knowing what it all meant, a movement into the virtual realm of the memosphere that owes much of its success to the people and energy already there before we arrived.

We did receive significant support in real time, though. In particular, we would like to thank Sadie Plant for her continued and active interest in all explorations of cyberculture. Michael Bell and Andrew Benjamin provided the support of the Center for Research in Philosophy and Literature. Heather Jones was kind enough to help guide two bumbling graduate students through the day-to-day details of conference organizing. We would like to thank Greg Hunt and Keith Ansell Pearson in the Department of Philosophy. Otto Imken's unsurpassed skills helped in the organizing and throughout the conference. Duffy Duyfhuizen and John Krafft, the editors of *Pynchon Notes*, were avid supporters of the conference from the beginning, and were kind enough to share information that helped make it such a well-attended event. We would like to thank them for their patient support and encouraging demeanor, without which this collection would never have found its way to publication. Finally, we would like to thank Nick Land. His research, commitment and unstinting support opened an innovative space for graduate work and theoretical exploration.

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