

## **“Dangerously Absent Dreamers”: Genealogy, History and the Political Left in *Vineland***

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In the presidential election year 1984, the American liberal left, with gaping mouth, found itself having already experienced four years of a Reagan presidency, and about to face four more. How had America arrived at such a point, when only twenty years before, Goldwater's defeat had marked Reagan as a "staunch proponent of seemingly outdated ideas" (Dallek 30)? Where was that liberal activism when Reagan was elected in 1980, "with only 28 percent of the eligible vote" (60)? What kind of political environment would allow a former movie and television actor to assume the powerful role of president of the United States? In *Vineland*, Pynchon looks at America during that election year and elaborates, in the form of the genealogy of heroine Frenesi Gates, its political malaise through a narrative representation of the twentieth-century American left's history and cooptation. Although many factors contributed to eclipsing the left's influence, Pynchon focuses on the cultural apparatus that simultaneously excuses and lays blame on the victim/participant—the apparatus of radio, film and television, whereby viewers are interpellated, according to the Althusserian definition, and come to desire their own commodification. Finally, Pynchon encourages us to read *Vineland* through the lens of traditional family values, thus establishing a reading code which provides a framework and closure for the novel, suggesting to some readers "the possibility of redemption," "a yearning for transcendence" (Porush 98, 104), or a recuperated salvation (Hayles 77–91). Instead, however, this code functions as what Fredric Jameson describes as "a preparation for the principal narrative . . . [as] a means to a more unexpected end" (163). In the unconscious of this principal narrative, the reader discovers both a shady political presence looming like *Vineland's* absent monster that left its footprint where the Chipco lab used to be, and an indictment of the transcendent and the history that results from our turning toward it.

Pynchon's latest novel, as David Cowart points out, is a "hybridization" of "modernist concerns and postmodernist techniques" (67). On the surface, *Vineland* appears to fulfill one criterion of Jim Collins's definition of a postmodern text, with its "juxtaposition of

popular and high art" (26), although the balance is disproportionately weighted on the popular side. Cowart is disturbed by the spare allusions to high culture and a concomitant "absence of historical depth" (71). As a modernist text, *Vineland* exhibits a utopian concern for America's political future, and relies on narrative to explain our postmodern fragmentary existence (Collins 121).

The initial impulse is to read *Vineland* in terms not of history but of the family. The reader's attention is focused on the mystery of the absent wife/mother, Frenesi, and the hoped-for reunion of the original nuclear family, or at least of the mother and daughter, at an actual extended-family reunion at the novel's end. The narrative formulates this reading code with the early identification of Zoyd Wheeler as a parent reading "a note from [his daughter] Prairie" addressed to "Dad" and signed with "Love" (3). Succeeding events introduce Zoyd's acquaintances in terms of their familial status and elucidate his traditional view of the family.

Zoyd's "troublemaking companion," Van Meter, lives in a sort-of commune, complete "with an astounding number of current and ex-old ladies, ex-old ladies' boyfriends, children of parent combinations present and absent" and various others. But such a life, where instead of "serenity" there is only incessant "bickering," is not what "Zoyd had hoped for" (9). Ralph Wayvone, Jr.'s extended mob family, which we see at a stereotypical Italian wedding à la *The Godfather*, is motivated by the violence and paranoia of Mafia legend. Hector Zuñiga, "Zoyd's longtime pursuer" (10) from the DEA, has a wife and children, but his Tube addiction has broken up his marriage:

his ex-wife Debbi . . . 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. (348)

Prairie's boyfriend, Isaiah Two-Four, is the child of Zoyd's "'hippie-freak'" (16) friends—pacifist vegetarians who have a negligible effect on their son's dream of opening a chain of family "violence centers" (19). These families are so weird that Zoyd's begins to look traditional by comparison.

The center of Zoyd's family ideal is his "love for Prairie, burning like a night-light, always nearby, cool and low, but all night long" (42). In fact, the pattern of Zoyd's life stems from an agreement he made with government agent Brock Vond because the "crazy motherfucker was

after his child" (299). In a particularly sincere passage, when Prairie is sick at the "age of three or four," Zoyd has a fatherly coming-of-age and realizes "that he would . . . do anything to keep this dear small life from harm" (321). After fleeing with Prairie to the northern California community of her maternal family, Zoyd comes "to relax some, to understand that this had been the place to bring her and himself after all, that for the few years anyway, he must have chosen right for a change, that time they'd come through the slides and storms to put in here, to harbor in Vineland, Vineland the Good" (322). This passage, with the stamp of authorial approval in its sincerity, and with its placement directly before the morning scene at the Traverse-Becker family reunion, reinforces the authority of the Zoyd-Prairie-Frenesi unit as the principal narrative. The ideal of this family unit, however, is called into question soon and often enough to undermine and decenter this reading.

Shortly after Hector reminds him of Frenesi, Zoyd rehashes "the olden times" with Van Meter in "a booth way in the back of the Steam Donkey." Zoyd's reminiscences illustrate how mismatched he and Frenesi were from the beginning: she was "Educated pussy. . . . a filmmaker, went to Berkeley, I was working on people's gutters, she rilly freaked when she found out she was pregnant" (41).<sup>1</sup> As if their backgrounds and interests were not enough to have predicted a split, Van Meter reminds Zoyd of "the *other* federal guy [who] was porkin'" Frenesi while Zoyd wasn't looking (42). When Frenesi is introduced in the narrative's present, we learn she is part of an underground, government-approved marriage, complete with another child, Justin. Our hopes for reunion should be pretty much exploded after this discovery, even though Frenesi's connection to her new husband, Flash Fletcher, does not seem to be an emotional one. We come to realize that marrying Zoyd was only a way for her to escape her culpability for the radical professor Weed Atman's death, and to try to "re-enter the kinship system" (Hayles 80), where she thinks she can hide. Neither Flash nor Zoyd holds any particular meaning for Frenesi; in fact, when they question in unison Prairie's assertion that she "'can see why [they] married'" Frenesi (375), they seem to be only different versions of the same person.

Frenesi and Prairie's long-awaited meeting provides an anti-climactic closure for the novel in terms of the familial reading code. While Prairie resolves a "Mother situation" in "the traditional nonstop crazy eights game," another mother situation waits "[o]utside the trailer" (367). The narrator describes Frenesi from Prairie's point of view rather than dialogically representing their first meeting, in which Prairie's observations about her mother's appearance are unemotional

and trivial: "a woman about forty, who had been a girl in a movie, and behind its cameras and lights, heavier than Prairie expected, sun damage in her face here and there, hair much shorter and to the cognizant eye drastically in need of styling mousse, though how Prairie could bring the subject up wasn't clear to her" (367). Neither do we hear any of their conversation, other than Frenesi's "'It's OK . . . I think it's her way of trying to help'" (368), in response to Sasha's nervous babbling. Instead, the narrator says, from an omniscient point of view, only that Frenesi and Prairie sat under a tree "for hours, spinning and catching strands of memory" (368). Then the narration wanders off into the reunion, as later does Prairie.

The anti-climactic resolution of the Zoyd-Prairie-Frenesi separation leads us to the reunion of Frenesi's maternal family, the Traverse-Beckers. This is also where we should look for the principal narrative.<sup>2</sup> The principal narrative in *Vineland* is not simply the story of a *bigger* family, but one we are meant to read allegorically as the representation of history. Pynchon does not allow the initial narrative of the ideal nuclear family to survive as the dominant narrative. Rather, the initial narrative directs us to the principal narrative, with which it does not compete, but which it tells us how to read. Pynchon draws our attention to the relation between genealogy and history, implying a definition of history, "in the bad sense," as a "chronological presentation of historical sequences" (Jameson 35). In this text that offers something for every critical persuasion, Pynchon manipulates the idea of history as an "absent cause" available to us "in textual form" (35), and makes of it an allegorical absent character.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the events that define the Traverse-Becker clan and culminate in the character Frenesi is Pynchon's absent cause of our woes, or, more properly, the absent/present bogeyman of the eighties—Ronald Reagan.

Pynchon interweaves the fictional history of the Traverse-Beckers with the actual events in Reagan's life by citing locales that recall such events and using scenes that would place *Vineland*'s characters in proximity to Reagan. It is no accident that *Vineland* is in California, the state that gave rise to Reagan the politician. The move from Dixon, Illinois, where his father, Jack, was a straight-ticket Democrat, to Hollywood, California, signaled Reagan's break with his own political genealogy, and the subsequent formation of his right-wing politics. Pynchon parallels the rise of Reagan on the right by chronicling the activities of the Traverse-Beckers on the left. The implication is that Reagan was right next to us all the time, like "'Chuck," the world's most invisible robot'" (146), and his move into the White House occurred, not only because we were not looking, but because the

structure of an increasingly fragmented society called us to look elsewhere, and we answered the call.

Although Reagan is just a boy in Illinois when Jess Traverse and Eula Becker are working through the Wobbly years,<sup>4</sup> events in their lives speak to the later Reagan presence. Jess's crippling accident occurs when he is "trying to organize loggers in Vineland, Humboldt, and Del Norte" (75). The tree that falls on his legs, "one of a stand of old redwoods" (75), symbolizes a turn of events in the mid-sixties that would put Reagan almost on the same side as Jess—supporting the loggers against conservationists. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, two "large redwood forests of national park caliber" (Gentry 34) had been cut by loggers; only two remained—one in Humboldt County and one in Del Norte County. After years of political delay during which many trees were felled, a "very small two-unit park" (293) was formed in these two counties. During Reagan's campaign for governor, he told a sympathetic convention audience, "'A tree's a tree. How many do you need to look at? See one, you've seen them all'" (39).

Sasha Traverse (later Gates) began her activism in the late thirties; Reagan came to Hollywood in 1937. While Reagan was beginning his career in the movies, Sasha became acquainted with all kinds of workers, especially farm workers with whom she lived "on ditch-banks . . . standing midwatch guard against vigilante squads and hired goons" (77). When, after Reagan had become governor of California, farm laborers refused to pick "fig and tomato crops" for unfair wages, "Reagan supplied convicts from state prisons to pick them" (Gentry 294), a telling act in light of his early claim of support for labor unions and his active participation in them. Sasha and Reagan shared a love for FDR. For Sasha, however, the attraction was suspect because an agreement not to strike until the end of the Second World War halted her union activity. She worried that "'it was some last desperate capitalist maneuver'" to distract workers from "'the struggle'" (77). For Reagan, the "red-hot Roosevelt Democrat" (Edwards 177), the appeal was partly a natural extension of his father's political influence and partly Roosevelt's platform: "'It was all for states' rights, and it also promised to reduce the size of the Federal Government and cut the budget by 25%'" (119).

The Traverse-Beckers and Reagan come in more direct contact during the "anticommunist terror" (Pynchon 81) of the Hollywood blacklisting years. In fact, they may even have belonged to some of the same organizations for a while. After the Second World War, Reagan was "'hell-bent on saving the world from neo-fascism'" (Dallek 21). He joined the American Veterans Committee, the United World Federalists and the Hollywood Independent Citizens Committee of the

Arts, Sciences, and Professions (HICCASP), but quickly “broke with them” (21) when he discovered their Communist sympathies. In the “complex court dances” of the period, Reagan becomes one of the “fuckers,” and Sasha and Hub two of the “fuckees” (Pynchon 81). Hub’s first day at the Warner studio lands him in the middle of the battle over representation between the IATSE (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees and Motion Picture Operators) and the CSU (Conference of Studio Unions). Pynchon’s description (289–90) of mob/studio collusion and of Reagan’s participation is an accurate summary. By 1947, Reagan was the president of the SAG (Screen Actors Guild), and gave friendly testimony to the House Select Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). The SAG went along with the blacklisting that cost Sasha and Hub so many jobs and infuriated them as they watched the credits and noted the cheap sets of old movies. Hub admits that he finally “sold off [his] only real fortune—[his] precious anger—for a lot of got-damn shadows” (291) when he joined the IATSE.

Frenesi and Reagan—the “young gaffer” (201) and the Gipper—have ideological pasts that are bound to clash in the sixties and thereafter. They are tenuously connected, for example, by references to Berkeley. Sasha reminds Frenesi that “demonstrations had been going on [at Berkeley] before Mario Savio was born” (77), alluding to the Free Speech Movement (FSM) that began shortly before Reagan became governor and led to his firing of the University’s president, Clark Kerr. Frenesi’s guerrilla filmmaking begins when she and the Pisk sisters take over “what was left of the Death to the Pig Nihilist Film Kollektive, based in Berkeley” (197), where we can imagine she is among the professional and amateur news organizations filming the FSM demonstrations.

After Frenesi escapes the political life by marrying Zoyd, and finds herself pregnant, she is advised to get an abortion, “not that easy to come by in those days unless you drove south of the border. If you wanted to stay north of it you had to be rich and go through a committee exercise with gynecologists and shrinks” (41–42). Since Prairie was born in May, 1970, Pynchon is alluding to the availability of abortion around 1969. In 1967, Governor Reagan “accepted the provision for abortions in pregnancies resulting from rape or incest and in cases where a panel of physicians concluded that the child’s birth would gravely impair the mental or physical health of the mother” (Dallek 44). Later he regretted the inclusion of the clause about the mother’s mental health because he thought it would become a “loophole permitting abortions for almost any reason” (45). Frenesi does not opt for the abortion, but she does develop an intense

postpartum depression. Reagan feared that a woman's potential for such a serious depression would become an often-used "loophole."

The interweaving of liberal left and conservative right culminates with Frenesi, who is almost completely coopted into the other side. Even near the end, though, she still has the traditional liberal reaction to a picket line. As she and Flash and Justin are about to fly off to the Traverse-Becker reunion, they encounter "some service workers out on strike" at the airport. Justin panics because he knows his mother "didn't cross picket lines" (351), something she expects him to understand when he is older. Finally the picketers tell her it is OK to go through, as if they are surprised by her sense of commitment. The reality of 1984 is that Reagan had already busted the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), "fir[ing] all the strikers and decertif[ying] the union" (Dallek 92). The mood in the nation was largely unsympathetic. Frenesi's reaction is simply outdated, and even the strikers understand that.

Even though *Vineland* indicts the carelessness that allowed a Reagan to happen, Pynchon understands the power of popular culture to distract us from our stated political goals. Fittingly, his vehicle for illustrating the cooptation of the left is the media of Reagan's expertise—radio, film and television. Reagan's was the first administration "to contain an Office of Communications that would coordinate the 'message' flowing outward from the administration to the world" (Barilleaux 135). But the real work of mediating is done by the receiver of the message. Of course it is 1984 in *Vineland*, but there is no Big Brother watching our every move. We watch ourselves (sometimes literally) on television and produce our own subjectivity. As in the classic Althusserian proposition, the cultural apparatuses of radio, film and television function by allowing us to reaffirm our recognition of ourselves as "concrete, individual, distinguishable and . . . irreplaceable subjects" (173). Most important, in terms of *Vineland*, we function in a culturally approved manner that requires no supervision. With television in particular, the viewer is the mediator of the messages of ideology and production. In a culture where few viewers may be actual producers, consumption is the primary means of reproducing the means of production. Thus the messages are mediated by the viewers when they purchase the products that allow them to continue to be the subjects they know they are.

Not only do viewers institutionalize their own subjectivity (Jameson 154), but they also come to desire their own commodification. It is not enough for Zoyd to buy Count Chocula, Froot Loops and Nestle's Quik; he actually confirms his subjectivity to the government by performing yearly acts of public insanity for television viewers and signing the

mental-disability checks he receives as a payoff. His act for the cameras, which has become a "'now familiar yearly leap'" (14) in the community, is also Zoyd's way of "'check[ing him]self out on the news'" (14). Prairie helps him discover himself by rating his jumps and by revealing to him the actual danger he has been in on previous jumps, a danger of which he has been unaware. The desire to subject himself has distracted him from the necessity of self-preservation. Zoyd's desire to go beyond subjectivity is revealed in his dream of advertising himself singing love songs, "late at night on the Tube, with a toll-free number flashing over little five-second samples of each tune" (36), as a way of communicating with his ex-wife. Selling ourselves becomes the ultimate gift of love. Along the way, however, we sell our history as well. Pynchon shows how we are interpellated and commodified, not only through the examples of his characters, but also by interpellating the reader with a text that comes as close to a representation of media as possible while maintaining the traditional narrative form.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the Traverse-Becker clan, media become a means of selling out. When Sasha has a child, she does not give her a revolutionary name like her own, but one "celebrating the record by Artie Shaw that was all over the jukeboxes and airwaves" (75). She describes the events in her life in terms of popular culture. She meets her husband in one of those "'joints. . . Wild and rowdy like the Clark Gable movie'" (78). She becomes a singer with a band, knows the words to all the popular songs, fixes "her hair like Veronica Lake" (79). When she becomes "bitter" about the fifties' blacklisting, she "cover[s] it with deliberate cool flippancy learned from watching Bette Davis movies" (81). She is finally left raging at the Tube about past injustices, although "in extreme cases" (82) she changes channels, and passes on the Tube life to her daughter and grandchild. At the family reunion, Sasha reminds Prairie of her infantile performances of the *Gilligan's Island* theme, from the sitcom in which an ensemble of castaways maintains the cultural *status quo* of a class society. This show was regular fare for Prairie as a toddler. Sasha is more concerned with the cuteness of Prairie's imitation of "'a little lounge vocalist'" (368) than about the political indoctrination Prairie was undergoing.

Frenesi inherits from her mother a love of movies that helps her create a nifty "version of how [Sasha and Hub had] met" (75), reminiscent of the film *The Way We Were*, which also has a character named Hubbell and is about American leftists from the thirties through the blacklisting years:



an upsweep come partly unpinned, a jaunty angle of sailor hat over eyebrow, jitterbug music, a crowded endless dance floor, palm trees, sunsets, warships in the Bay, smoke in the air, everybody smoking, chewing gum, drinking coffee, some all at the same time. A common awareness, as Frenesi imagined it, no matter whose eyes should meet, of being young and alive in perilous times, and together for a night. (75)

Even Prairie, the last female in the Traverse-Becker line, is mesmerized by film and the Tube. Her meeting with Frenesi at the reunion is a let-down because she thinks she has seen her *real* mother in the 24fps archival films. She even imagines that, by watching the films taken from Frenesi's point of view, she can "absorb, conditionally become, Frenesi, share her eyes, feel, when the frame shook with fatigue or fear or nausea, Frenesi's whole body there" (199). But this transcendent moment does not have as much impact on her as the Tube has had. All Prairie's ideas about herself and family have come from the Tube: "On the Tube she saw them all the time . . . teenagers in sitcoms, girls in commercials learning from their moms about how to cook and dress and deal with their dads . . . Prairie feeling each time this mixture of annoyance and familiarity, knowing like exiled royalty that that's who she was supposed to be" (327). Her ideal family is "some family in a family car, with no problems that couldn't be solved in half an hour of wisecracks and commercials" (191). Like most of the characters in *Vineland*, Prairie is a good person with good intentions who just has a short attention span. Yet, in one of several glimpses into Prairie's future, Pynchon makes clear that we should not pin our hopes on Prairie for some redemption: when she and Thanatoid Weed Atman become "an item around Shade Creek . . . seldom if ever would either talk about Frenesi" (366).

Pynchon's allegorical Thanatoids have become distracted from their journey "further into the condition of death" by the Tube. Bound "by history and by rules of imbalance and restoration," they "feel little else beyond their needs for revenge" (171)—sort of an ungrateful dead. In this they are not much different from the Traverse-Beckers, who meet every year just to hear old Jess read someone else's (William James's) quotation from Emerson about "[s]ecret retributions" and "divine justice" (369). In all these years, apparently, no one has considered it necessary or advantageous to find the primary source. The Thanatoids, like the Traverse-Beckers, are so distracted they do not even know they are dead. But then neither do some readers: N. Katherine Hayles thinks they are some kind of "cult" and that Weed Atman was "apparently only wounded" (88). Pynchon can apparently distract us from seeing that *we* are *they*.

*Vineland*'s leftists are gradually distracted from their struggle by radio, then film, then television, a progression that parallels Reagan's media rise and the increasing power of his influence.<sup>6</sup> The 24fps theory that "through the medium of the human face the photographic image would reveal lies" (Hayles 83) centers on the "humanist-religious ideological function of the human face . . . [as] the seat of the 'soul'" (Althusser 238). Here the radical filmmakers agree with Reagan, who writes: "you can't lie to the camera. When it rolls in for that bigger-than-life closeup, you'd better mean what you say, for insincerity will show up like a putty nose" (131). Frenesi's film crew sees corruption especially "written into that most sensitive memory device, the human face," so that their photos become "mug shots of the bought and sold" (195). The 24fps manifesto incorporates the radical philosophy of the Film Kollektive 24fps absorbed: "'A camera is a gun. An image taken is a death performed. Images put together are the substructure of an afterlife and a Judgment'" (197). This conviction is realized in *Vineland*, not in the politically redemptive form the leftists had hoped for, but as the pseudo-afterlife of the Thanatoids. The image, whether on film or on the Tube, is the state-approved drug of the postmodern age, as long as it is used within limits. When users like Hector become abusers and threaten the peace, the state creates an agency to help: the "National Endowment for Video Education and Rehabilitation" (33). Isaiah Two-Four sums up what the radicals did not see in terms of the Tube's power: "'Whole problem 'th you folks's generation . . . is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it—but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians, sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970 dollars—it was way too cheap'" (373). Even Brock Vond's "genius . . . to have seen in the activities of the sixties left . . . unacknowledged desires for" order (269) does not prepare him for the power of the Tube, which eventually makes his PREP (Political Re-Education Program) camp unnecessary: "'since about '81 kids were comín in all on their own askín about careers, no need for no separate facility anymore'" (347). The interpellation process reproduces itself as well as its product.

The Tube is indeed powerful, and Pynchon imitates that power by overwhelming the reader much as the Tube might: "'Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it's what the Tube is for'" (314). Whether we agree with Cowart that Pynchon presents a mere catalogued surface (70) or with Jody Bilyeu that he shares a Bakhtinian "will to reference" (10-11), *Vineland* oppresses us with an overwhelming amount of cultural and critical *stuff*.<sup>7</sup> The academician

who never watches television sitcoms or made-for-TV movies is in real trouble. Likewise with the uncultured reader who may know the words to the *Gilligan's Island* theme but be embarrassed to admit that neither he nor his spell-checker recognizes the reference to Bach's "Wachet Auf" or to Robert Musil. Pynchon allows us to validate our identity in this text as feminists, Marxists, New Historicists, poststructuralists, etc., because there is truly something for everyone here. We can be as distracted and as coopted as the American liberal left has been, and withdraw like the mythical *woge* "into the features of the landscape, remaining conscious, remembering better times, capable of sorrow" (186), and not notice the politics around us and in *Vineland*. One suspects, however, that Pynchon hopes finally to shake us out of our complacency and make us see that we need to look for ways to make a difference in the world. Thus, the reader must not be lulled, by the fairy-tale conclusion that ends with the word "home," into thinking that all is well in *Vineland's* America, in 1984 or thereafter. We must resist the temptation to be "dangerously absent dreamers" (198), if Pynchon's call is to have any effect.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Zoyd's attitude toward Frenesi's education echoes Metzger's description of Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49* as one of those "'lib, overeducated broads'" (76).

<sup>2</sup>This analysis is drawn from a similar one in Jameson (151–84), in which the reader derives from the "initial narrative movement" an "allegorical by-product" which "reorients the narrative around its new interpretive center, retroactively returning" the initial movement to the margins. That an analysis like Jameson's can be applied to *Vineland* supports the idea that the novel is more modern than postmodern.

<sup>3</sup>The phrase "absent cause," used here by Jameson, is taken from Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979) 189. Jameson's *Political Unconscious* is in part a rereading of Althusserian structural Marxism.

<sup>4</sup>The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded in 1905, and was almost non-existent by 1920. Reagan was born in 1911.

<sup>5</sup>The process of establishing a reading code which leads to a principal narrative can also be seen as a form of interpellating the reader. See Collins (83–89) for a discussion of competing narratives and how the reader knows which narrative call to answer.

Hanjo Berressem similarly notices a relation "between the subject and power" in *Vineland*, a relation of "complicity" (207). One difference in our

readings lies in the consciousness of the subjects' actions. Interpellation is an ideological recruiting process that requires, not willful complicity, but merely the capacity to be distracted. Berresse's "complicity" implies a stronger indictment of the revolutionary torchbearers of the sixties, and puts less blame on the power of popular culture.

<sup>6</sup>The only historical reader in the novel, DL, who sees that Reagan wants, through some sort of political anxiety of influence, to "dismantle the New Deal, reverse the effects of World War II, restore fascism at home and around the world" (265), is herself interpellated by a religion in which she seeks transcendence or escape. Religious interpellation is not within the scope of this essay.

<sup>7</sup>Cowart's claim notwithstanding, much of this *stuff* is not merely superficial. There is an equally rich depth of popular-cultural references in *Vineland*. Bilyeu notes, for example, the indebtedness of Brock's seduction of Prairie to *The Empire Strikes Back*, among other *Star Wars* saga allusions. Mucho Maas's story (310) of the doctor who cures addictions with the threat of violence is a variation on a Stephen King story that eventually became part of the movie *Cat's Eye* [1985]. My point, as stated above, is that such a surface dissuades the reader from looking beneath it.

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