

Anarchist Miracles: Distributed Communities, Nodal Subjects and *The Crying of Lot 49*

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Throughout his works, but especially in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland*, Pynchon is concerned with the ability of individuals and groups to resist forces of domination and control. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, the preterite must struggle against those who see them as little more than human resources subject to cybernetic manipulation. Resistance finds expression in the actions of the Counterforce, but the dialectic that eventually evolves between the Counterforce and the anonymous forces of control characterized as Them is clearly worrisome:

[T]he failed Counterforce, the glamorous ex-rebels, half-suspected but still enjoying official immunity and sly love, camera-worthy wherever they carry on . . . doomed pet freaks.

They will use us. We will help legitimize Them, though They don't need it really, it's another dividend for Them, nice but not critical. (713)

Here the problem of resistance is one of the Counterforce's becoming the esteemed opposition, integrated into the overall system instead of actively opposing it from outside. In *Vineland*, I have argued elsewhere (Gochenour 1995), Pynchon poses a different form of resistance, one that situates individual memory and storytelling as a counter to media representations and Official History. There, rather than solidifying into a counterforce that becomes only the other half of a destructive parabola, resistance is distributed, dependent on the relay of information from one individual to another.

Both novels can easily be related to the cultural context in which they were produced. *Gravity's Rainbow*, published in 1973, responds to the countercultural movements of the late 1960s, which came to the edge of overthrowing dominant authority, only to settle for compromises that kept the entire system intact. *Vineland*, published in 1990 and set in 1984, satirizes the increasing hyperreality of American politics, and urges the necessity not only of avoiding the traps of media representation (in which resistance has indeed become camera-worthy) but also of instructing another generation in the possibilities and perils of resistance.

Compared to these two novels, which carry impressive theoretical and critical weight as well as political import, *The Crying of Lot 49* may seem lightweight. Extraordinarily short by Pynchon's standards, and dismissed by Pynchon himself as a "story . . . marketed as a 'novel' . . . in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I'd learned up till then" (SL 22), *Lot 49* is often taught to undergraduates as a typical text of postmodernism, with attention to problems of narrative and reading. All the Pynchonian themes are there, from the preterite to paranoia, making it a good introduction to Pynchon; but rarely is *Lot 49* seen as having the same political urgency as Pynchon's other works.¹

Can any political lesson be gleaned from *Lot 49*? If so, does that lesson have any relevance for us today? In the era of virtual communities, nodal subjectivity and broad-based cultural movements such as rave culture, we have now reached the point where we can derive relevant political content from *Lot 49*. To do so, we must first explore the vision of political utopia in the novel, the "anarchist miracles" that appear in various guises in its pages.

Networks of Consensus and Nodal Subjects

Lot 49's exiled Mexican revolutionary, Jesús Arrabal, describes an "anarchist miracle" for Oedipa Maas:

"You know what a miracle is. Not what Bakunin said. But another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm. Like the church we hate, anarchists also believe in another world. Where revolutions break out spontaneous and leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself. And yet, seña, if any of it should ever really happen that perfectly, I would also have to cry miracle. An anarchist miracle." (120)

Later, Oedipa witnesses just such a miracle, though it is not enough to effect a conversion within her, when the drunken deaf-mute delegates in her hotel drag her to their party:

Each couple on the floor danced whatever was in the fellow's head: tango, two-step, bossa nova, slop. But how long, Oedipa thought, could it go on before collisions became a serious hindrance? There would have to be collisions. The only alternative was some unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed

easy, predestined. Something they all heard with an extra sense atrophied in herself. She followed her partner's lead, limp in the young mute's clasp, waiting for the collisions to begin. But none came. She was danced for half an hour before, by mysterious consensus, everybody took a break, without having felt any touch but the touch of her partner. Jesús Arrabal would have called it an anarchist miracle. Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized. She curtsied and fled. (131-32)

This "unthinkable order of music, many rhythms, all keys at once, a choreography in which each couple meshed easy," also recalls Mucho Maas's miraculous "vision of consensus," arrived at through the sacrament of LSD:

"I noticed it the other night hearing Rabbit do a commercial. No matter who's talking, the different power spectra are the same, give or take a small percentage. So you and Rabbit have something in common now. More than that. Everybody who says the same words is the same person if the spectra are the same only they happen differently in time, you dig? But the time is arbitrary. You pick your zero point anywhere you want, that way you can shuffle each person's time line sideways till they all coincide. Then you'd have this big, God, maybe a couple hundred million chorus saying 'rich, chocolaty goodness' together, and it would all be the same voice."

. . . He gazed at her, perhaps having had his vision of consensus as others do orgasms, face now smooth, amiable, at peace. (142-43)

In all three passages, the term that stands out is *consensus*. It implies a complex system of individual parts that simultaneously function both separately and together. This consensus can also be described as "phasing," or "phase-locking." The dancing deaf-mutes, all following different beats and different sets of steps, are nonetheless able to phase together in the dance, avoiding collisions. Shuffling time lines sideways until they coincide is a process by which waves moving at different frequencies can be manipulated until they phase together to become the same frequency. This phasing, then, is the anarchist miracle. Though the dancers express their own individuality through the form of their dances, the way their chosen dances phase together produces a new order, "spontaneous and leaderless," where "the masses . . . work together without effort, automatic as the body itself."

In this other world, where other orders are able to manifest, the relation of one thing to another (or intersubjectivity, in the case of people) is more important than the things (or people) themselves. As the dancers move together and create their consensus, as the power

spectra are moved through time to create one voice, the way each element functions with all the rest is the critical component of the miracle. The miracle is in the network of relations among all the individual elements. Pynchon's anarchist miracle can be characterized as a new type of relation established among individual elements, each of which functions as a node or relay point in a complex network. As they are linked together, a new order of relations, beyond the immediate and face-to-face, emerges in the form of a distributed network.

This new order also requires the creation of a new subject to inhabit it. The order of corporate capitalism depends on the creation of subjects who perceive themselves as isolated monads in competition with one another, where individuality is a hard-won possession, perhaps the only one subjects feel they truly own, and it is unlikely to be surrendered to the promises of anarchist consensus or phasing. But for a distributed network to function, not only must each individual be willing to work with other individuals to create an order of consensus, but all must also understand that they themselves are not singular, but multiple. As a node in the overall distributed system, each individual can be said to present a different face to other nodes with which they interface.

Contemporary media theorists such as Vilem Flusser and Sherry Turkle have developed the concept of nodal subjectivity in some depth, but it can also be seen as an essential component of Pynchon's miracle. Mucho's revelation, for example, comes only after experiences with LSD have led him to realize his own many-in-one nature, the sense that he too contains multitudes working in concert to create the illusion of a unified subject. Internally, just as the singular actions of the dancers must phase to create the unified order of the dance, so too must the individual elements within Mucho phase together to create a sense of unification. Realizing the nature of his internal order, however, also makes it possible for Mucho to understand and create a new external order, one in which radically different elements can nonetheless cooperate to create a higher order of complexity without necessarily losing their own identities.

Pierce Inverarity's late-night phone calls to Oedipa provide another example of this multiple, nodal personality. Inverarity may be The Shadow or a lecher, a Gestapo officer or second secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate; but all of them are still Inverarity, and each voice/personality is simply a different way of interfacing with Oedipa, perhaps in an attempt to appeal to various personalities within her. Each of these personalities is a link in a system, and Inverarity himself is "the linking feature in a coincidence" (120-21). He provides a link among events and pieces of information that Oedipa then tries to

assemble into a whole. Her mistake is to try to place Inverarity at the top of a chain of meaning as a Master Signifier that ensures the stability of an entire symbolic order, rather than to see him as a node in a system whose interconnectedness—the phasing and interfacing of elements—creates the whole and the overall meaning of the system.

The ultimate example of nodal subjects functioning within a distributed network is the WASTE system. If we begin with the idea of a multiple subject and of various nodes phasing together and presenting multiple opportunities to interface with one another, then move up an order of magnitude to see these same processes at work in creating the new order of the deaf-mute dance, the WASTE system represents the third order of magnitude in the expression of these processes and systems. After a night of finding WASTE post horns all over San Francisco, Oedipa begins to understand the extensive network of relations they represent:

Last night, she might have wondered what undergrounds apart from the couple she knew of communicated by WASTE system. By sunrise she could legitimately ask what undergrounds didn't. If miracles were, as Jesús Arrabal had postulated years ago on the beach at Mazatlán, intrusions into this world from another, a kiss of cosmic pool balls, then so must be each of the night's post horns. For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world. (124-25)

The WASTE system is constituted of disparate elements that all function as nodes in the system. The meaning of this system, which Oedipa so diligently pursues, is not traceable to merely one element or another, one single node in the network, but derives from the higher order ("the separate, silent, unsuspected world") that arises as a result of these elements' creating systems of relation—phasings and interfaces—among one another. Meaning and identity emerge from within the system as such rather than inhering in a part or being imposed from without. As Arrabal tells Oedipa when she notices a 1904 "copy of the anarcho-syndicalist paper *Regeneración*,"

“They arrive. . . . Have they been in the mails that long? Has my name been substituted for that of a member who’s died? Has it really taken sixty years? Is it a reprint? Idle questions, I am a footsoldier. The higher levels have their reasons.” (121)

Whatever these higher levels might be (though there is no doubt that Pynchon allows for the possibility of higher orders of complex systems²), Arrabal’s identity is constituted by the system itself. And whatever the meaning of the copies of *Regeneración* he receives, we can be sure that (to borrow a concept from Lacan) the letter has indeed reached its destination.

Thus Pynchon’s anarchist miracle begins with a revelation about the nature of internal individual identity, and proceeds by orders of magnitude to reveal the same systems of nodes, phasings, interfaces and meaning in the external world. It is through these systems and processes that new orders of complexity and interaction can arise, though it would be a mistake to believe that such innovations necessarily prevail in the world. Indeed, new orders such as the WASTE system arise as alternatives to dominant concepts of identity and order. As Oedipa’s character and quest demonstrate, capitalist concepts of the monadic individual and of a hierarchic order in which ultimate meaning is determined by those at the top (God, Inverarity, the Boss) fully govern most people’s perceptions. Oedipa’s character also demonstrates that this kind of thinking is a delusion that keeps people chasing after an ever receding and always foreclosed meaning.

Monadism, a Partialism

At the beginning of the novel, Oedipa’s malaise is interpreted through Remedios Varo’s *Bordando el Manto Terrestre*:

[I]n the central painting . . . were a number of frail girls with heart-shaped faces, huge eyes, spun-gold hair, prisoners in the top room of a circular tower, embroidering a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void. . . . She had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there’d been no escape. What did she so desire escape from? Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental: that what really keeps her where she is is magic,

anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all. (21)

This crucial passage adumbrates Oedipa's character and motivation. Throughout the novel, metaphors of isolation, encapsulation and insulation describe her. Her search for the truth of Inverarity's legacy is an attempt to weave together the explanation of an entire world—all the objects within the world and their unambiguous relations to one another. However, as the example of the dancers shows, meaning and relation are part of an emergent order rather than inherent in each object as such. As with the words of *The Courier's Tragedy*, Oedipa seeks a revelation in the words themselves, but, as any actor knows, the words of a play are only the medium for an emergent order of relations among the players.³ For Oedipa to understand the world in this way would require her to think in terms of mobility and multiplicity, how elements and individuals can change meaning as they phase and interface with others, internal and external.

Reading Oedipa's situation through the metaphor of the girls in the tower, we realize that her situation is one of immobility and consolidation: both the tower and her ego are only incidental, but both are the result of the anonymous and malignant magic visited on her from outside, for no reason. What the tower represents in the physical world, the ego represents in the realm of the psyche: consolidation, differentiation and isolation in respect to self and other. It is this very drive toward differentiation, consolidation of the ego and the resulting monadic isolation that constitutes the formless and malignant magic. (This magic is little different from the consolidation of power that Mike Fallopian sees in the suppression of private postal routes, in that both are motivated by a drive toward unity, stability and homogeneity [cf. CL 53-54].) *Gravity's Rainbow* also articulates this view of the relation between external systems of power and internal psychic structures: "The Man has a branch office in each of our brains, his corporate emblem is a white albatross, each local rep has a cover known as the Ego, and their mission in this world is Bad Shit" (712-13).

As Oedipa searches for the truth of Inverarity's legacy, she also searches for an absolute, stable meaning that is tied to her understanding of her own existence:

Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero behind the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant

to it, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia.
(182)

She thinks like this throughout the novel: either/or, ones or zeros, binaries, something or nothing. If there is something, Oedipa can trace the outlines of her relation to it and find stable identity in that relation; Inverarity assumes the role of Master Signifier in an overall symbolic order that Oedipa can eventually learn to read. If there is nothing, the only way to preserve her identity and ego is to become an alien and a paranoid. If no central truth can be found, it must be invented, and the subject must close in on itself, full circle, undivided, to preserve the ego. The outcome, as in the case of the Counterforce, is powerlessness. As the novel ends, Oedipa (along with the reader) is suspended in the moment before the revelation of the Word, the ultimate truth that will resolve the Trystero mystery. But as Oedipa steps into the auction room, “[a]n assistant closed the heavy door on the lobby windows and the sun. She heard a lock snap shut; the sound echoed a moment” (183), and once again Oedipa is locked in her tower, contained. Either answer leads her back to the same point, the formless magic once again exerting its power over her.

The Politics of Dancing

To extract from *Lot 49* a series of political lessons that are relevant for us today, it is necessary first to try to locate *Lot 49* in relation to the cultural milieu of its production, and then to bring the concepts of the novel forward to our own time, the era of distributed communities and increasingly nodal subjects.

Pynchon’s choice of a group of people dancing together, as well as the phase shiftings of music, as a model for his anarchist miracle is understandable in the context of mid-sixties dance culture: In 1960, the twist appeared in American culture as the first free-form dance to accompany the new sound of rock and roll, with Chubby Checker as its herald. Music critics Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton describe the dawning era of free-form dance in terms remarkably evocative of *Lot 49*:

Now, released from the constraints of formal steps and partners, the dancer was free to build something completely new. . . . You could dance however your imagination suggested.

The popularity of the twist set in train a raft of similarly freeform dances—the frug, the mashed potato, the pony, the hully gully, the

monkey. Within a few years, dancefloors had thrown up the freakouts of the flower power era and the acrobatic flips and spins of northern soul. The twist had dropped an H-bomb on dance conservatism and stripped away the dancefloor's tightly policed rituals. (57)

At the same time, DJs were being slowly elevated from purveyors of the schlock ("all the fraudulent dream of teenage appetites" [CL 15]) that so depresses Mucho at the beginning of the novel to creators of a new musical form that rests very much on the shuffling of points in time. DJ Francis Grasso, as Brewster and Broughton describe him circa 1969, fulfills Mucho's vision of consensus through the technique of phasing:

He would play "Soul Sacrifice" by Santana and put the live Woodstock version of the same song on the other turntable. By moving back and forth, alternating between the two records, he could extend the song and keep the dancers locked in its groove. But then by blending the two songs—overlying one completely over the other—he could achieve a dramatic echo effect. It sounded, he says proudly, "phenomenal." Skilful DJs today do something very similar called "phasing," where, by playing two copies of the same record very slightly out of synch, they produce a climactic whooshing sensation in the sound. (137)

Here, in mid- to late-1960s popular culture, we find evolving dance and music forms that relate directly to Pynchon's anarchist vision. In free-form dance, each individual is free to "dance however your imagination suggest[s]," allowing the emergence of private worlds into the public, each one working with all the others to create a dancefloor utopia of consensus—what contemporary dance-culture practitioners call "the vibe." At the same time, DJs like Grasso use techniques such as beat-matching and phasing to create other orders of their own, shuffling points back and forth in time to create unified visions out of isolated songs.

This emerging dance culture was only one face of an emerging political order composed, like the WASTE system, of a network of "alternate universes":

It was summer, a weekday, and midafternoon; no time for any campus Oedipa knew of to be jumping, yet this one was. She came downslope from Wheeler Hall, through Sather Gate into a plaza teeming with corduroy, denim, bare legs, blonde hair, hornrims, bicycle spokes in the sun, bookbags, swaying card tables, long paper petitions dangling to earth, posters for undecipherable FSM's, YAF's, VDC's, suds in the fountain,

students in nose-to-nose dialogue. She moved through it carrying her fat book, attracted, unsure, a stranger, wanting to feel relevant but knowing how much of a search among alternate universes it would take. For she had undergone her own educating at a time of nerves, blandness and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them, this having been a national reflex to certain pathologies in high places only death had had the power to cure, and this Berkeley was like no somnolent Siwash out of her own past at all, but more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about, those autonomous culture media where the most beloved of folklores may be brought into doubt, cataclysmic of dissents voiced, suicidal of commitments chosen—the sort that bring governments down. But it was English she was hearing as she crossed Bancroft Way among the blonde children and the muttering Hondas and Suzukis; American English. Where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth? In another world. (CL 103–04)

The Berkeley campus provides Oedipa with another version of the WASTE system in miniature, another set of undecipherable alternatives that, by their very existence, threaten the known order of things. The campus itself functions like the WASTE system, providing a medium for students to interface, creating vast networks of connections out of subjects who are, no doubt, learning much about the ways of multiplicity.

From *Vineland*, though, we know what happens to this anarchist miracle of the Berkeley campus, or at least to its metaphorical equivalent, the College of the Surf: it will become infested with informers and spies, and be brutally repressed by the very order it challenges. What possibility then remains for this network but to go underground, to follow the example of the WASTE system: "Whatever else was being denied them . . . this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. Since they could not have withdrawn into a vacuum (could they?), there had to exist the separate, silent, unsuspected world."

Which brings us to today. Pynchon's novel of 1966 uses the model of a mail system, a network that, in the process of linking groups together, creates an entire alternative universe, where individuals exist not as isolated monads but as linked nodes, where meaning and power are to be found in those linkages rather than in the individuals or groups themselves. Today this alternative universe exists in the World Wide Web and the distributed communities that have been born from it. The anarchist miracle of music and dance lives on as well, in one of the

global youth cultures that uses this network to pursue its own goals and to give its members an opportunity to explore their own being-in-consensus and multiplicity. This global youth culture is the world of raves.

Raves began in Britain and Europe in the late eighties, and were the very essence of a distributed community. The only way to find out about a party was to be part of the communications network, and each party functioned as the gathering of a temporary, autonomous community. Much has been written about the political significance of rave culture. Daniel Martin, for example, describes raves as operating in "wild zones" that "are the re-appropriation and subversion of rational space and also alternative spaces where other discourses can be articulated" (83). He sees the real significance of raving, however, in dancing: ravers lose the sense of individual subjectivity, becoming "phase-locked" (to borrow a term from music critic Simon Reynolds) with one another. Here is the image of consensus once again, this time in fluorescent Day-Glo colors.

Like those in the WASTE system, who have created a world of their own in response to the powers exercised over them, ravers create their own temporary, virtual communities. For Martin, this is the significance of raving as a political act, since its invisibility means that it cannot be known and mapped by systems of power and knowledge. As Martin puts it,

The rejection of a certain notion of subjectivity, the negotiation of alternative spaces (I would not say that they are really "won," as the warehouse or field is never a permanent hold—rather the space is used and the parties move on) are powerful forms of resistance in that they reject the very possibility of being incorporated into the realm of governmentality as we know it. (95)

Linked together by a communications network into a virtual community, searching out forgotten spaces in which to gather as a community and there seeking to bring another world, one of consensus, into being—this is the rave as an anarchist miracle.

The Crying of Lot 49 has value as a political text for today because, a generation or more before the fact, Pynchon envisioned in the WASTE network the distributed community linked by a communications system that would later be realized through the internet and the World Wide Web. He also envisioned a subject that was nodal, multiple in its relation to other subjects, capable of containing multitudes and choosing among many possibilities to interface with other subjects. This too is a feature of our new virtual world, where singular identity has

given way to multiple personas, and where individuals are defined less by their relation to a hierarchical order than by the complexity of the network in which they are situated. Like Pynchon's Berkeley campus of the sixties, these distributed communities and the nodal subjects who inhabit them present us with alternative universes where we are free to create new forms of being and new orders of consensus.

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Notes

¹Significant political readings of *Lot 49* can be found in John Dugdale's *Thomas Pynchon* and in Charles Hollander's "Pynchon's Politics" and "Pynchon, JFK and the CIA." Both Dugdale and Hollander concentrate, however, on reading Pynchon as an act of decoding, a means of unravelling and revealing secret histories and political content. In this way, they locate Pynchon within a tradition of political satire and commentary. My reading, on the other hand, while locating Pynchon in relation to contemporary cultural concerns, concentrates on *Lot 49* more as a simulation model of resistance, situating Pynchon as a political theorist whose model of action is available even to those without the scholarly means to decode his fascinating ciphers.

²Although beyond the scope of the present essay, the connection here to general systems theory is quite strong. To offer just one tantalizing quotation from Niklas Luhmann's *Social Systems*: "Society . . . is a result of interactions. It is not an authority set up independently of what it selects. It is no God. To a certain degree, it is the ecosystem of interactions, which changes itself insofar as it channels opportunities for interaction" (433).

³Actor-director Randolph Driblette tries to warn Oedipa: "'You know where that play exists. . . . The words, who cares?'" (79); and "'You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several. . . . You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth'" (80).

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