

The Economy of Consumption: The Entropy of Leisure in Pynchon's *Vineland*

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The hope that inspired Marx and the best men of the various workers' movements—that free time eventually will emancipate men from necessity and make the *animal laborans* productive—rests on the illusion of a mechanistic philosophy which assumes that labor power, like any other energy, can never be lost, so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish other, "higher," activities. . . . A hundred years after Marx we know the fallacy of this reasoning; the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites.

—Hannah Arendt (133)

When, "[l]ater than usual one summer morning in 1984 . . . with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof" (3), Zoyd Wheeler drifts awake, it is to a cacophony of echoes from Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and the Orwellian state, not to mention Pynchon's own *Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. During the period of most of *Vineland's* action, from 1945 to 1984, advances in video, audio and broadcasting technology made possible an increasing compression of "history," so that at its most frenetic, yesterday's news can appear repackaged as today's documentary. News programs offering up-to-the-minute or live coverage are one sign of the contemporary fixation on a present given the privileged status of the historical. Side by side with all the live coverage, we have reruns of old TV series, from *The Brady Bunch* to *CHiPs*, so that by 1984, there are effectively two time-frames in American society, the live and the rerun, and it is against these that Pynchon foregrounds his story of Zoyd, Prairie, Frenesi and Brock Vond. Video technology provides Pynchon with the perfect analogue to the consumption economy Hannah Arendt described in 1958.

One effect of the new wave of video is that, in the words of Neal Gabler, "real life [has become a] movie," indistinguishable from the real

thing, even by the actors themselves. Like Benny Profane in *V.*, who takes his wardrobe cues from movies of the thirties, Zoyd has come to depend on TV news coverage to legitimate his annual demonstration of insanity. When Zoyd's friend Van Meter calls from the Cucumber Lounge, we get this exchange:

"Got six mobile TV units waiting, network up from the City, plus paramedics and a snack truck, all wonderin' where you are."

"Here. You just called me, remember?"

"Aha. Good point. But you were supposed to be jumping through the front window at the Cuke today."

"No! I called everybody and told 'm it was up here [at the Log Jam]. What happened?"

"Somebody said it got rescheduled."

"Shit. I knew someday this act would get bigger than me." (8)

Zoyd's plan to try something new this year, destroying the inside of a loggers' bar with a chain saw, will not work; he has been "rescheduled." The "live" news has become as scripted as network programming, and he has to go back to transfenestration. When he arrives at the Cuke (what better venue for the Kook to perform?), "Zoyd began to feel nervous" (9). But he overcomes his stage fright and jumps through a stunt window made of clear sheet-candy. Part of the humor is that Zoyd's motives are perfectly sane. What is humorously insane is the extent to which Zoyd's role is fixed: insanity has become a ritual, perfectly orchestrated with the media. When real life is a movie, the intelligent thing to do is recognize it: "The smartest kid Justin ever met, back in kindergarten, had told him to pretend his parents were characters in a television sitcom. 'Pretend there's a frame around 'em like the Tube, pretend they're a show you're watching. You can go into it if you want, or you can just watch, and *not* go into it'" (351).

Another effect of television, particularly of reruns, which serve in some sense to freeze history, is to condition its viewers to accept some set of supposedly normative values, so that viewers wind up dissatisfied if their lives do not match the lives of TV characters. *The Brady Bunch* is one reason Prairie is unhappy that Zoyd has not remarried.

The two effects of television—real life as movie and the conditioning of viewers—are united in Millard Hobbs, an actor who does late-night television advertisements for a lawn-care service, and whose business career exhibits striking parallels to Reagan's political career: "People out in the non-Tubal world began mistaking him for the

real owner, by then usually off on vacation someplace, and Millard, being an actor, started believing them. Little by little he kept buying in and learning the business, as well as elaborating the scripts of his commercials" (46-47).

If the medium is the message, image is the imperative. One index of image-construction in *Vineland* is the Log Jam, once a working class bar, now converted to an upscale drinking establishment where loggers wear "three-figure-price-tag" designer jeans and "sip kiwi mimosas" (5-6). The source of this upscaling? Hollywood, in the form of a cash-infusion from "George Lucas and all his crew" (7). Even at the most basic level, then, every character in *Vineland*, from DEA field agent Hector Zuñiga to the U.S. Marshall to Frenesi to Mafia Don Ralph Wayvone to Brock Vond, can be seen playing a role, borrowing from Hollywood images that are not limited to costumes but extend to scripted speeches and appropriate dramatic actions.

So far the novel might seem only a bit of lightweight fun, but in the sections covering Frenesi and 24fps circa 1968-69, things take on a more serious hue. When Gil Scott-Heron predicted that "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," it seemed he had grasped an essential fact about the nature of media and government power. But as the years that followed, particularly the Reagan years—and more recently the Bush years—have shown, Scott-Heron's revolutionary insight turned out to be about as naive—and wrong—as it could be. Likewise, in *Vineland*, Frenesi mistakenly believes the movie camera more powerful than the gun. No doubt she was right to attribute *some* power to film, but that was in 1968 or '69, before Washington had learned to use the new technology, before those in power had learned to manipulate the image, the script, the illusion. In new historicist terms, whatever revolutionary potential film once possessed as a means of revealing the truth has been subverted and contained; cinematic techniques are used now to reinforce the powers that be, to reinscribe the revolutionaries themselves. Not only will the revolution be televised; it will be made into a TV series and broadcast in syndicated reruns.

The reruns, of course, are not limited to television. In the consumer economy, anything that can be produced can be reproduced, from retro-clothing to videotapes of wartime news coverage. (As early as the summer of 1991, discriminating shoppers could, for \$9.95, purchase a videocassette of the Gulf War's Greatest Hits.) Pynchon, having become somewhat of an institution himself, and vogue as any other California fad, spoofs his own work in *Vineland* with reruns from his previous novels. Paranoia has become just another hip stance, another available role, no less ritualized than any other: witness the

commercial success in *Vineland* of *Lot 49*'s rock band, the Paranoids, now playing shows at the Fillmore. Takeshi, a character with a bit part in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Mucho Maas, now a music industry executive, reappear as well. Maxwell's Demon is nowhere in sight, but entropy, oft' proclaimed the central metaphor in Pynchon's early work, recurs in *Vineland*. Pynchon's use of the entropy metaphor, however, changes from work to work. Briefly reviewing its import in the early novels will help us understand how it operates differently in *Vineland*.

According to Edward Mendelson, *V.* presents a world of thermodynamic entropy, *Lot 49* a world of information entropy. As he explains:

Thermodynamic entropy is (to speak loosely) a measure of stagnation. As thermodynamic entropy increases in a system, and its available energy decreases, information about the system increases: the system loses some of its uncertainty, its potential. In the language of information theory, however, entropy is the measure of *uncertainty* in a system. As you *increase* thermodynamic entropy, therefore, you *decrease* information entropy. (200)

Mendelson claims that thermodynamic entropy "increases in *V.*, and the world slows down," but that in *Lot 49*, the situation is reversed, so that "the effect of the increase is invigorating rather than stagnating" (200). But is that the case? It certainly does not seem to be the case in *Lot 49*, where the increase in information entropy results in a situation every bit as stagnant as that in *V.* What Mendelson fails to recognize is that Oedipa Maas *is* Maxwell's Demon: *Oedipa herself* is operating in a closed system, sorting not molecules but pieces of information. Mendelson has simply not extended his reading to the end of the novel. Maxwell's Demon sits still only at a moment of complete stagnation. And at the end of the novel, Oedipa, having sorted all the information into either "a transcendent meaning, or only the earth," into "[o]nes and zeroes" (181–82), has come to a complete rest, waiting, in a locked room, for a piece of information that never, in the book, arrives. The temptation for the reader, of course, is to extend the book, to grasp for that next piece of information, to try to decide whether the world will end with a bang, or a whimper. But we get neither. The end of the novel presents a moment of utter stagnation.

The entropy in *Vineland* is a different animal altogether, one I will call the entropy of leisure. Here, the system in question is the consumer economy of the mass society, and this economic system—like the thermodynamic system that is the world in *V.* and the information system that is the world in *Lot 49*—is also in the process

of stagnation. The entropy of leisure, then, is the loss of energy that results from non-productive consumption, television being one among many available consumer goods which serve only to exhaust the potential energy embodied in leisure. It might be argued that the U.S. economy is not, strictly speaking, a closed system, but such an argument hardly counters Arendt's point that "the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption." Compared to watching television, even so apparently frivolous an activity as playing horseshoes involves a substantial return to the productive system: not only are muscles being exercised, but interactive human relations are being developed, relations which should result in greater cooperation—and hence greater returns—in future productive enterprises.

Recorded audio and video are the perfect products for the consumption economy because they can be replayed over and over, thus allowing an accumulation of available consumer goods. In addition, any technological improvements in recording or playback make such products better approximations of—and substitutes for—non-recorded reality, thus absorbing ever increasing amounts of leisure time and reflecting an ever greater loss of productive energy. When people have wall-sized televisions in their living rooms and have five hundred programs available, including the day's news, they will have little if any reason to leave their houses and negotiate a non-video world, especially considering the prospect of interactive TV, which will allow the ordering via television hookups of all available goods and services (including information). Excepting certain services connected with personal hygiene, such as dental work, birth and death will become virtually the only human activities for which no video substitutes are available. (Sex has already been taken care of.) What hardly need be pointed out to veteran readers of Pynchon is that, in behaviorist terms, the value of a product that can be exactly and endlessly replayed is incalculable to a government concerned with control.

Several indicators point to a leakage of energy in the consumption economy, and the compression of history already referred to is one of them. As the system loses energy, it can reckon on fewer and fewer new productions, and comes to depend more and more on old productions recycled. We have already noted the importance of television reruns in this society, and closely related are the new programs that feed off existing ones, the pre-game warmup, the sequel. Hence Justin finds his father and Zoyd watching "'Say, Jim,' a half-hour sitcom based on 'Star Trek'" (370). When that program ends, the boredom of television threatens for a moment to allow real

interaction between Justin and Prairie, whose “attention kept wandering to each other” (371). In desperation, Justin reaches for the *TV Guide*, whose slim pickings offer another instance of history-compression: “‘There’s the Movie at Nine,’ Justin said, looking in the listings, ‘*Magnificent Disaster*, TV movie about the ‘83-‘84 NBA playoffs—wasn’t that just back in the summer? Pretty quick movie’” (371). Not only will we watch the playoffs; we will watch a movie about the playoffs. Not only will we watch *Star Wars*; we will watch an additional two hours of programming called *The Making of Star Wars*. So all areas of contemporary life have their rerun analogues: musically, Zoyd fantasizes about “an anthology of torch songs for male vocalist, called *Not Too Mean to Cry*” (36); architecturally, we have a new mall called “the Noir Center, loosely based on crime movies from around World War II and after, designed to suggest the famous ironwork of the Bradbury Building downtown, where a few of them had been shot [. . . an example of] yuppification run to some pitch so desperate that Prairie at least had to hope the whole process was reaching the end of its cycle” (326); in transportation, we have the kit-car, and the “conversions” of Rick & Chick’s *Born Again*; and in clothing, the jeans we buy are made from denim that is not only prewashed and preshrunk but pre-faded, “factory-stressed.”

Accompanying the retro quality of contemporary culture is the loss of critical ability, or at least the transformation of a critical function aimed at explanation and evaluation into one consisting of hype, which is, after all, more useful to a consumer economy. Such a transformation is perfectly suited to a society that mistakes change for progress, and is represented in *Vineland* by the boom in the music industry. Pynchon’s description evokes a stock market about to crash—or, in more recent memory, the junk-bond market just before its collapse:

talent was signed that in other times would have kept on wandering in the desert, and in what oases they found, playing toilets. On the assumption that Youth understood its own market, entry-level folks who only yesterday had been content to deal lids down in the mail room were suddenly being elevated to executive rank, given stupendous budgets, and let loose, as it turned out, to sign just about anybody who could carry a tune and figure out how to walk in the door. Stunned by the great childward surge, critical abilities lapsed. Who knew the worth of any product? (283)

Given the entropy of leisure, then, *Vineland* can be seen as a systematic illustration that Marx’s reasoning was, as Arendt proclaims,

fallacious. No matter how much leisure they secure, the characters in *Vineland* never do get around to Marx's "higher" activities. Even the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives has degenerated since its more idealistic early days into an institution now merely "notorious . . . for having the worst food in the seminar-providing community" (109). When Prairie asks if she too could learn an apparently mystic technique, the Head Ninjette asks her, "'why should you want to?'" (112). There is not much emphasis on enlightenment at this mountainside retreat. According to DL, "'now it's group insurance, pension plans, financial consultant name of Vicki down in L.A. who moves it all around for us, lawyer in Century City, though Amber the paralegal has been taking over most of his work since the indictment'" (128). The consolidation of information and the consolidation of resources in the consumer society are additional indicators of increasing entropy in the consumption economy. If this is our brave new world, we may well ask whether a revolutionary stance is still possible—a question phrased by Hector, and later Frenesi, as "'Who was saved?'" (29, 259).

Frenesi has renounced her revolutionary activities, having come to live according to the poetics of snitch, and thinks at one point that, under the Witness Protection Program, she has been granted a kind of immunity: "she understood her particular servitude as the freedom, granted to a few, to act outside warrants and charters, to ignore history and the dead, to imagine no future, no yet-to-be-born, to be able simply to go on defining moments only, purely, by the action that filled them" (71–72). But Frenesi is given a rude awakening when she and Flash are de-funded, wiped off the computer.

Most of these characters get so wrapped up in reconstituting real life as a movie that they are incapable of revolutionary activity. Not even an act of violence as serious as murder, once considered a true measure of dedication to the cause, is anything more than a stance. After Rex picks up a gun and kills Weed Atman, we see him "staring into the camera, posing, pretending to blow smoke away from the muzzle of the .38" (246).

Brock Vond, the "provincial whiz kid called early" (274)—read "preterite"—falls prey to the same misconception, with the difference that he commands enough resources to produce of his life a big-budget movie. In the script according to Brock, of course, the credits will roll and the curtain close with his being granted membership in the elect. Brock's "conception of the perfect underling [. . . is] a sort of less voluble Tonto," and when his sidekick, Roscoe, saves his life, Brock yells, "'Feel like we been in a Movie of the Week!'" (271). At his most

dramatic, he acts out a montage that might appear at the beginning of a weekly television series starring Robert Mitchum:

Brock . . . out traveling in a tight formation of three dead-black Huey slicks, up and down the terrain of Vineland nap-of-the-earth style, liable to pop up suddenly over a peaceful ridgeline or come screaming down the road after an innocent motorist, inside one meter of the exhaust pipe, Brock, in flak jacket and Vietnam boots, posing in the gun door with a flamethrower on his hip. (375)

Brock's act has its desired effect on Prairie. When he swoops down on her—during prime time, and with a remote control in his hand—she thinks that he “look[s] just like he had on film” (375).

That Brock uses staging techniques and the manipulation of images to underscore his power is not lost on the other characters. When Flash suggests killing Brock, he does so in video terms: “You know . . . easiest thing might just be to go find the son of a bitch and cancel his series for him” (374). Earlier, Brock goes up before the ratings board, and at the end, before Brock can grab Prairie, word comes that Reagan has pulled the plug on REX '84, which amounts to the same thing as the withdrawal of corporate sponsorship.

In the consumer society, conventional revolutionary activity is bogus, serving only to provide Hollywood with characters and plots for movies. Revolutionary aims are transformed into just another commodity, another product to be consumed. In yet another instance of history-compression, Hector plans to make a movie about all these characters playing themselves, a movie which will be, effectively, a film of the cinematized real lives of the characters. When the manager of Bodhi Dharma Pizza pronounces judgment on Hector—“Risking a lifelong career in law enforcement . . . in the service of the ever-dwindling attention span of an ever more infantilized population. A sorry spectacle” (52)—it is Pynchon who laughs hardest, recognizing that Hector's apparent career change is an illusion. In the consumption economy, movie production and law enforcement are complements: people who are watching do not need to be watched.

The only true revolutionary, the only really dangerous insurgent, in the consumption economy is the non-participant. From this perspective, Zoyd is the hero in *Vineland*. It is Zoyd whose life provides an alternative to the official economy, Zoyd who is the real enemy of the state. “Starting with a small used trailer,” Zoyd has built his own house, “working by himself or with friends, using lumber found washed up on the beaches, scavenged off the docks, brought home from old barns he helped take down” (358). He supplements his

income with "a sideline in crawfish with a bush vet and his family" (35). True, Zoyd's business as hunter/gatherer of crawfish is tied to the consumer culture and the yuppies who create the demand for these "Vineland Lobster," but that does not negate the fact that, by one scheme or another, Zoyd is self-sufficient and, since moving to Vineland, has been able to "put together a full day's work, piece by piece" (319).

Although Zoyd's heroism would also appear to be tempered by his dependence on federal disability checks, we never know the extent to which he actually depends on that money and the extent to which he transfenestrates simply to fulfill his part of the bargain with Brock. Ranged against his acceptance of the federal disability checks is his participation in another sector of the unofficial economy, the marijuana cash crop. The camp acronym CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Production) reveals the real reason for the War on Drugs, which is about as legitimate as the invocation of civil RICO, and has nothing to do with the moral majority, except as its morality is tied to the moral imperative to consume: "Sooner or later Holytail was due for the full treatment, from which it would emerge . . . 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" (221–22). When it comes to how he spends his leisure, however, Zoyd is no more involved in "higher" pursuits than the other characters, except in the metaphorical sense.

Prairie represents the video generation. Her first words were the lyrics to the *Gilligan's Island* theme. When she sees her mother for the first time since infancy, she sees "a woman about forty, who had been a girl in a movie, and behind its cameras and lights" (367). Earlier, she has contrasted her life with television fare: "On the Tube she saw them all the time, these junior-high gymnasts in leotards, teenagers in sitcoms, girls in commercials learning from their moms about how to cook and dress and deal with their dads" (327). And at the end of the novel, alone in the clearing, "with the alder and the Sitka spruce still dancing in the wind, and the stars thickening overhead" (384), in a perfect moment of leisure, in the consummate Walden moment (prepared by Jess's "annual reading of a passage from Emerson" [369]), here, given this perfect opportunity for contemplation, now, when the transcendental is all but tangible, Prairie can only produce—and consume—another fantasy about Brock.

When at the end of the novel Prairie wakes to a moment that recalls the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, with the blue jays that seemed to bode evil for Zoyd destroyed by Desmond, who stands "wagging his tail, thinking he must be home" (385), Pynchon might seem to suggest

that there is a way back to Kansas after all. But Desmond is not Toto. He is not home. All we have to call home is the recognizable. What we recognize is what we have seen before, on the screen.

Given the entropy of leisure, the consumer economy can only recycle itself. Now that we have had an actor as president, it seems only logical that Gorbachev has signed a contract to appear in Wim Wenders's upcoming sequel to *Wings of Desire*. He will play himself.

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