

History, Refusal and the Strategic-Essentialist Politics of Pynchon's *Vineland*

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After a while her thoughts started falling into place. The injustices she had seen in the streets and fields, so many, too many times gone unanswered—she began to see them more directly, not as world history or anything too theoretical, but as humans, usually male, living here on the planet, often well within reach, committing these crimes, major and petty, one by one against other living humans. Maybe we all had to submit to History, she figured, maybe not—but refusing to take shit from some named and specified source—well, it might be a different story.

—Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (80)

How are we to reconcile these two seemingly incongruous political programs? As Pynchon describes Sasha Gates's recognition of the allure of refusal, with a trademark flourish, he capitalizes History, creating for it a counterbalancing air of ominous inescapability, transcendence and heavy predestination. Still, he will not have Sasha be totally discouraged: even in the face of this stark opposition, she sees that "refusing to take shit" might not be futile. Though strife and oppression seem preordained in a world subject to the laws of some abstract and theoretical "History," a practical mode of refusal—one recognizing that problems begin with other real and accessible "humans" necessarily "living here on the planet, often well within reach"—just might constitute an effective response.

Can History and refusal coincide? Can oppressive and exploitative forces, despite the ever-accumulating evidence of their inextinguishability in our late-capitalist, media-saturated culture, still be combatted? Can such resistance succeed, or even be hoped for, at a time when the capitalist system so long held by a formidable tradition of leftist critique to be the root of oppression has achieved seemingly unassailable, monolithic proportions? These are the questions that give *Vineland*, as it careens dizzily between "yeses" and "nos," its deeply contradictory impetus, pushing and pulling so violently at its fabric that its diegetic space cannot help but rupture now and then to

admit the bizarre UFOs and Godzilla-like monsters that terrorize its characters. These questions, though, do not originate with or belong solely to Pynchon's novel. Rather, they constitute a hotly-debated field of inquiry for a group of contemporary theorists of postmodern culture and politics—a group that both precedes and includes novelists like Pynchon. Its ongoing argument over the fate of oppositional politics in contemporary Western cultures only fuels the desire to see those questions answered satisfactorily and definitively.

While *Vineland* may careen between affirmatives and negatives as it makes its own contribution to the conversation, it finally goes beyond such conventional reactions to do something particularly noteworthy: it succeeds, by maneuvers demonstrating its agreement with the “strategic essentialism” proposed by Gayatri Spivak (SR 216), in answering the above questions with something other than the reductive yeas and nays that have enticed too many thinkers in the past. Before we look at how *Vineland* does this, though, we should situate ourselves more firmly within the debate over the meaning, usefulness and correct mode of resistance in contemporary Western societies.

Cognitive Maps, Evil Objects and a Brand New Essentialism

The best place to begin is with the camp holding that capitalism in its present form still can be combatted, its logic indicted, its grip on us never totalized so long as countercultural activists and intellectuals continue to challenge it diligently. This view is espoused most famously by Fredric Jameson, who, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), admits that the Marxist thinker in postmodern culture is indeed trapped by a number of seemingly insurmountable problems. The most formidable of these is that the sort of “critical distance” on which he or she was once able to depend has been “abolished” by the “new space of postmodernism”—thus “the possibility of . . . positioning . . . the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital” essentially no longer exists (48). This has happened because it is by now almost impossible to find any cultural space not already infiltrated by capitalism—any “exterior” that might serve as a leftist “foothold” or “enclave” (48). More than any other “symptom” of postmodernity, this one characterizes the disorienting new “postmodern hyperspace” (44) that effectively disables critical thinkers. Just as postmodernist architecture, Jameson says, advances a new type of physical space that “transcend[s] the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually,” so the new postmodernist cultural landscape inaugurates an “incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global

multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (44).

Jameson goes on to assert, though, that present-day leftists need not resign themselves to being dizzy and decentered. For once we recognize that it is multinational and simulation-laden “late” capitalism that has so completely disoriented us, we become just as quickly reoriented and can begin again the vital process of “cognitive mapping” whereby leftist and Marxist modes of critique will be re-empowered. In this way, “we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle” (54). In Jameson’s ultimately optimistic view, the Marxist Left is not dead, but only slumbering through some weird dream, waiting to reawaken wiser and stronger.

The position opposed to Jameson’s holds that traditional leftist Marxism is wholly incapable of eradicating what it has too simplistically believed to be the scourge of capitalism. This position is advanced by Jean Baudrillard, whose work is informed by a poststructuralist sensibility Jameson takes to be nothing more than a “very significant symptom” of the “postmodernist culture” Jameson deplors (12). This poststructuralist influence, which grows progressively stronger over the course of Baudrillard’s career, is already evident in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1972), in which he proposes that the laws governing capitalism are actually one with the unbending, inescapable laws governing language and every other type of signifying practice. His argument is expressed most succinctly in a diagram

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{EV} & & \text{Sr} \\ - & = & - \\ \text{UV} & & \text{Sd} \end{array}$$

showing that the Marxist concepts of exchange value (EV) and use value (UV) have the same relation to each other as the structuralist concepts of signifier (Sr) and signified (Sd) (Baudrillard 70). Just as Saussurean structuralists believed too readily, Baudrillard says, in the ability of real, indisputable signifieds to anchor and provide stability for what are actually slippery and uncontrollable signifiers, Marxists have made the same philosophical error by using a supposedly natural and indisputable use value to wage war on evil monetary exchange value. Baudrillard insists that the same function—that of the “alibi” (76)—is performed by both use value and the signified, and throughout his essay he disdainfully refers to the type of thought upholding them as “magic.” Not only does this philosophical error, Baudrillard says, represent the sort of fascistic ideology against which Marxists ought to

be fighting; Marxists themselves, by their own unexamined belief in a real and recoverable use value, have been perpetuating this ideology all along.

Two of Baudrillard's later works—*Fatal Strategies* (1983) and "The Masses" (1985)—continue from this initial realization, ultimately proposing a new form of cultural resistance that could never console any traditional, revolutionary Marxist, holding as it does that the best resistance is nothing other than total compliance. This idea is announced in "The Masses," where Baudrillard suggests that we are wrong to interpret the "forced silence of the masses"—especially that imposed by mass media—as a "sign of passivity and alienation"; rather, we should see it for what it is—an "original strategy" and an "original response in the form of a challenge" (208). To understand how such silence is desirable, we can look at the strategy of the evil object Baudrillard outlines in *Fatal Strategies*. Here Baudrillard takes a stand against all "banal theor[ies]," or those familiar and characteristically humanist ones in which "the subject always believes itself to be more clever than the object" (198). He proposes we turn instead to "fatal theor[ies]," or those in which "the object is always taken to be more clever, more cynical, more ingenious than the subject, which it awaits at every turn" (198).

Baudrillard realizes that the pernicious ideology of truth and reality advanced by structuralists and Marxists alike has always been contingent on the positing of subjects (who know things) and objects (which are known). Since there can be no ideology without subjects, we strike a massive and fatal blow against ideology whenever we heed a certain perverse desire not to be subjects—a desire entailing an "ironic power of nonparticipation, of nondesire, of nonknowledge, of silence, of absorption of all powers, of *expulsion* of all powers of all wills, of all knowledge, of all meaning onto representatives surrounded by a halo of derision" (217). This fatal strategy of the object is "evil" (not a pejorative word in Baudrillard's lexicon) because it potentially results in a triumphant "abduction, rape, concealment and ironic corruption of the symbolic order" that oppresses us (199).

The shrewd vigilance of Baudrillard's poststructuralist logic makes it easy to believe in the near-unassailability of his position—and easy to see in Jameson's work just the sort of magical thinking Baudrillard relentlessly mocks in his own. Despite Jameson's frequent cautionary statements (for example, "this is not . . . a call for a return to some older kind of machinery, some older and more transparent national space" [54]), *Postmodernism* still upholds, from a poststructuralist perspective, a highly suspect essentialism. It relies on certain fundamental, universal, totalizing truths, the main one being that all

social phenomena are understandable, as all problems are solvable, in terms of their relation to (late) capitalism. Such essentialist suppositions are, to Baudrillard, just more absurd magic.

But there is a serious flaw in Baudrillard's armor too, one sure to be exploited by anyone with reservations about the usefulness of Baudrillard's mode of resistance. (How practical are his ideas, after all? Will silence and complicity—the strategy of the object—end racism, sexism or homophobia? Will they aid striking workers? Will they ensure that anyone who needs to can see a physician?) This flaw—which does not necessarily extend to poststructuralist philosophy generally—is fear of even a guarded essentialism. With his fatal strategy of the object, Baudrillard unnecessarily takes his own poststructuralism to an *n*th degree that threatens to cripple it outside all but the most abstract of arenas. (He acknowledges, in fact, that within his schema “there is perhaps . . . only one fatal strategy: theory” [198]). He is not, perhaps, as true to the spirit of poststructuralism as is Spivak, who helps us understand how Pynchon can acknowledge both capital-H History and the urge to refuse to take shit, sometimes within single sentences, pointing the way to a more practical and authentically poststructuralist mode of dissent.

Like a number of other poststructuralists, Spivak has come to posit that the *attempt* to essentialize, at least, is inevitable, that every act of speech or writing is predicated on a belief, mistaken or not, in our ability to essentialize. We could not communicate if we did not believe we could say what we mean, or if we did not think we could make stable connections between signifiers and signifieds. Baudrillard will not admit the impossibility of eschewing essentialization: the urge to be rid of it informs his fatal strategies, which would eliminate the subject positions that inevitably give rise to it.

Examining Spivak's ideas, Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean shed more light on this unavoidability of essentialization:

if one sets out to do a critique of metaphysics, there is no escape from the metaphysical enclosure. You cannot simply assert, “I will be anti-essentialist” and make that stick, for you cannot *not* be an essentialist to some degree. The critique of essentialism is predicated upon essentialism.
(7)

This point is further illuminated (as Landry and MacLean point out) in Spivak's 1976 translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967), where Derrida writes that “deconstruction” (synonymous here with poststructuralism)¹ “always in a certain way falls prey to its own work” because it “operat[es] necessarily from the inside, borrowing all

the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure" (24). Spivak's "strategic essentialism" simply condenses this awareness into a more wieldy phrase. As a countercultural political tool, it allows us to invoke, albeit highly self-consciously, the sorts of essentialist notions that are helpful, even necessary, in combatting opposing and oppressive essentializations. At the same time, strategic essentialism does not demand long-term adherence to those notions, which are always at least potentially fascistic, and which must be jettisoned when not applicable.

Asked in an interview "how [one] can *use* universalism, essentialism, etc., strategically, without necessarily making an overall commitment to these kinds of concepts," Spivak answered, "you *are* committed to these concepts, whether you acknowledge it or not. . . . Even as we talk about [for instance] *feminist* practice, or privileging practice over theory, we are universalising—not only generalising but universalising" (PC 11). Because, then, "the moment of essentialising, universalising, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible," she continues, we should "at least situate it at the moment"; we should "become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it" (11). We see in these lines the call for unabashedness (because we already are committed) and for provisionality (we should situate our essentializations at the moment). Also of interest is the tinge of ire that enters Spivak's words when she discusses that "totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating" essentialism. It gathers strength as she explains that "the great custodians of the anti-universal"—those who refuse to "throw away" their "theoretical purity"—are

obliged . . . simply to act in the interest of a great narrative, the narrative of exploitation, while they keep themselves clean by not committing themselves to anything. In fact they are actually run by a great narrative even as they are busy protecting their theoretical purity by repudiating essentialism. (12)

Moralistic to a degree seldom seen in academic theorists, Spivak pulls no punches here, unless it is by the restraint she shows in not naming names. Named or not, though, Baudrillard is clearly indicted, since his radically anti-essentialist and purist strategy of the object would undoubtedly infuriate Spivak, who has been committed throughout her career to bettering the situation of third-world subalterns. We can look now at the ways *Vineland* expresses its accord with her less pure but more conscientious brand of poststructuralism.

Vineland, Essential and Simulated

Vineland may be, as Christopher Walker observes, Pynchon's easiest-to-read, "most user-friendly" work (4). Nevertheless, it will demonstrate its kinship with his other, more famously difficult books to anyone who, tricked by its relative accessibility, expects it to offer up easy or clear-cut opinions about its surprisingly summarizable subject matter: the American political Left and its persecution, mainly in the 1960s, by a sinister and relentless conservative Right. The ambiguity of the novel is suggested in Geoffrey Green's unanswered questions about it:

Does the decision to focus . . . on the sixties indicate that Pynchon is nostalgic still for that momentous era in our past? Or does it demonstrate merely his desire to document the themes and drama of that historical epoch? Does Pynchon's dynamic and poignant evocation of countercultural life-styles indicate an embrace of those life-styles as well? . . . [A]re the political ideas expressed in the novel his? are they ours? or are they merely a parodied representation of political viewpoints? (ix, x–xi)

Some critics have simply overlooked the novel's irksome ambiguities the better to discern which political option, continued struggle or weary surrender, Pynchon finally advocates. Susan Strehle hears in *Vineland* Pynchon's rousing call for a return to dissent: she takes his message to be that the American "dream of [a transcendent justice] is illusory and dangerous," and that "justice is *not* innate but won only through hard work and human struggle" (115, 114). Joseph Tabbi, on the other hand, comes away all but disgusted by Pynchon's refusal to resist or to offer any serious mode of resistance: "What is needed" in *Vineland*, he declares, "and what has been oddly lacking in recent fiction and theory, is a new style of resistance to the simulation culture that [the novel] documents" (99).

Vineland, however, is more complex than either Strehle or Tabbi gives it credit for being, and offers, in fact, just the new style of resistance Tabbi, despite calling for it, cannot recognize, perhaps because it does not look like resistance as we have traditionally conceived it. Strehle misses Pynchon's new style too. Her own political sensibility, as conventional as Tabbi's, leads her to privilege the novel's call to struggle over what should be its equally compelling recognition of "transcendence," as she calls it—something operating through an immutable "gravitational field" that "governs human affairs with . . . impersonal power" (Strehle 114).² Strehle and Tabbi are not both wrong in their assessments of Pynchon's politics; in a way, they are both

right: Pynchon insists on struggle, and he also concedes a type of defeat. The fact, however, that Strehle and Tabbi are both right—that Pynchon’s text will support both their assertions—indicates that neither is right enough.

More sophisticated assessments of the novel’s divided nature and of its impetus toward some new political mode have come from other critics—Johan Callens, for instance, who touches briefly on *Vineland*’s “paradoxical nature” (140). This, he says, springs from the novel’s determination to have “it both ways: offering glimpses into the transcendental” even while “contributing toward Jameson’s project of a cognitive mapping of postmodern America” (139). Callens’s reference to Jameson is serendipitous, as is his use of the concept of the transcendental, which here, as in Strehle’s critique, represents some set of implacable laws impervious to Jamesonian dissent, not unlike those held by poststructuralists to govern all signification. His reading points toward the more complex strategic-essentialist thinking that will help us apprehend Pynchon’s political philosophy.

Before we determine the ways *Vineland* is strategic, though, we should consider the chief essentialist notion informing it: that power, which it explicitly associates with characteristically right-wing American social and political institutions, is intrinsically repressive and unjust. Thus the oppression power engenders can be dispelled only by the adoption of a philosophy and/or mode of living that rejects its fascistic propensities—that, namely, of the many counterculturals (Zoyd Wheeler, Darryl Louise Chastain [DL], Frenesi Gates and others) whose stories the novel generally celebrates. These characters frequently give voice to this assumption, perhaps never more strikingly than when campus revolutionary Rex Snuvvle describes to Weed Atman the enemy they must soon face down, warning him:

“You’re up against the True Faith here, some heavy dudes, talking crusades, retribution, closed ideological minds passing on the Christian Capitalist Faith intact, mentor to protégé, generation to generation, living inside their power, convinced they’re immune to all the history the rest of us have to suffer.” (232)

Also, Frenesi dreams “of a mysterious people’s oneness . . . the people in a single presence, the police likewise simple as a moving blade” (117), and Wendell (“Mucho”) Maas warns Zoyd about the evil days awaiting them in the Nixonian 1970s: “‘soon they’re gonna be coming after everything, not just drugs, but beer, cigarettes, sugar, salt, fat, you name it, anything that could remotely please any of your senses, because they need to control all that. And they will’” (313). Even the

narrator gets in on the act at times, sharing apparently unmediated political opinions with us, which thus assume an authoritative, omniscient credibility. Here is the narrator's description of the likely fate of a well-known pot-growing town in Pynchon's fictional Vineland County, California:

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

Vineland's war between good hippies and bad Feds is not totally one-sided, though, as conservative characters are now and then allowed to score small points. The principal villain—Department of Justice heavy Brock Vond—is given to moments of chilling insight that can become half-persuasive: his “genius,” the narrator concedes, “was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it”—to have recognized in hippies “the deep—if he'd allowed himself to feel it, the sometimes touching—need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family” (269). Still, this admission of Vond's genius comes in the midst of a description of the insidious PREP (Political Re-Education Program) camps he intends to open to turn leftist political detainees into federal snitches. Thus Pynchon's “political sympathies,” as David Cowart notes, are “plain enough” (12). There can be no better proof of his sympathies than his banishment of Vond at the end of the novel, by the agency of the “legally ambiguous tow-truck team” (44) of Vato and Blood, to Hell itself.

The belief, though, that power is necessarily repressive and fascistic, unilateral, hierarchical, inflicted on some people by others, is exactly the sort of essentialist proposition Pynchon, as a poststructuralist, cannot leave unexamined. Spivak argues that deconstruction, with “its suggestion that masterwords like ‘the worker,’ or ‘the woman’ have no literal referents,” is an effective “political safeguard” (PC 104). Pynchon has so far led us to use such masterwords ourselves: “liberal,” “conservative,” “countercultural,” “dominant,” “the people,” “the struggle,” etc. The problem with such terms, Spivak suggests, is that they inflict meanings or perspectives on the situations they would explain: they “necessarily obliterate or finesse certain possibilities” that could “question the availability of [our]

premises in an absolutely justifiable way" (104). In short, such masterwords are reductive: they simplify matters, shutting out ill-fitting and potentially disruptive possibilities, consequently threatening to become instruments of the same fascism they may have been intended to combat.

Michel Foucault insists in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that we learn to think of power not as "the 'privilege,' acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but [as the] overall effect of its strategic positions" (26). In this light, power is not simply repressive: it is "not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it'"; instead, it "invests [those people], is transmitted by them and through them" (27). Power relations, then, "are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes"; rather, they emerge as a conglomeration of "micro-powers" that do "not obey the law of all or nothing" and cannot be "overthrown" by "a new control of the apparatuses nor by a new functioning or a destruction of the institutions" (27).

The concept of power we have so far traced in *Vineland* is exactly the kind Foucault warns against: the control an enormous and corrupt state protecting a Christian Capitalist Faith exercises via evil agents like Vond over relatively helpless citizens, disruptable only by some nebulous and decidedly non-micro-political entity referred to only (as in Frenesi's fantasy) as "the people." *Vineland*, however, goes on to problematize this essentialist understanding of power in two notable ways. First, a number of occurrences disrupt the macro-political schema the book has so far seemed to advance. Vond, for instance, persuades Frenesi to carry a handgun onto the home base of the People's Republic of Rock and Roll (PR³) at the College of the Surf. "I only want you to get it to Rex'" (240), he tells her, knowing what will most likely happen when Rex receives it. And indeed it does happen: distraught by the state of PR³ under Weed's allegedly duplicitous leadership, Rex uses the gun to kill Weed right in front of Frenesi's radical 24fps film collective's cameras.

Because, Foucault insists, power is not a transcendental, monolithic "property," but something that works on a more modest scale, through localized "dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings" (26), it can "sometimes [be] extended by the position of those who are dominated" (27). This is what happens in *Vineland*, in Frenesi's fateful conversation with Vond, and Rex's murder of Weed. Though she is a leftist involved in revolutionary organizations, Frenesi still perpetuates the power schema she opposes, convinced as she is by a particular person at a specific time and place and under the sway of a certain mix of emotions, to carry a gun—emblem of the fascism she despises, and

the thing Vond claims always “[s]ooner or later . . . comes out” (240)—into the revolutionary camp. There it is used again under still more exacting circumstances by another leftist against yet another leftist.

Vineland is thick with such wrenching betrayals and the regrets that inevitably follow. In the course of betraying Weed, Frenesi understands “that she [has] taken at least one irreversible step to the side of her life, and that now, as if on some unfamiliar drug, she [is] walking around next to herself, haunting herself” (237). Rex, badly shaken after the murder, is seen on film “tightening in pain all over, holding the gun but no longer in possession of it. He walked over to Weed’s body, went down on one knee, laid the gun beside him” (247). Twenty years earlier in Hollywood, Frenesi’s father, Hubbell, committed his own betrayal: “‘I let the world slip away,’” he tells Frenesi, “‘made my shameful peace, joined the [anti-union] IA, retired soon’s I could, sold off my only real fortune—my precious anger—for a lot of got-damn shadows’” (291). And Frenesi’s one-time best friend and 24fps partner, DL, marvels at her own disregard for her Ninjette training after she descends “‘into the corrupted world’” to participate in mob-boss Ralph Wayvone’s unsuccessful plot to kill Vond: she “remembered [her martial-arts teacher] Inoshiro Sensei’s remarks about those who never get to be warriors, who on impulse go in, fuck up, and have to live with it for the rest of their lives” (154).

In its more sober moments, *Vineland* is a bitter meditation on how the sixties New Left and even the wobblies preceding it did indeed go in and fuck up, and on how they must now live with it. What all these betrayals and regrets finally suggest, though, is the inexplicability of individual lives, decisions and actions (all micro-political) by such totalizing macro-concepts as the state, the people, etc. If they were defined purely by their leftness, Frenesi could not have been coerced by Vond, and Rex could not have killed Weed with Vond’s gun. Both characters discover that they are snared in a web too intricate to be mapped (to use Jameson’s term) by the sort of “naive and simplistic” “Freudian repressive hypothesis” that M. Keith Booker astutely observes they have employed (88). Frenesi at one point demands of her revolutionary colleagues, “‘Don’t any of you kiddies understand, we either have 100% no-foolin’-around solidarity or it just doesn’t work’” (235). The great irony of her saying such things when she knows herself to be the one truly rotten link in PR³’s chain only amplifies *Vineland*’s insistence that 100% solidarity, in the face of the maneuvers, tactics and functionings of de-centered, unhierarchized power systems, is an impossible dream.

The second way *Vineland* censures its own essentialist Left/Right sensibility is through its assessment of the mass media, the novel’s

ubiquitous emblem of a capitalism so pervasive, so disseminated, that it cannot be exteriorized, finally representing the very limits of thought. Again, though, a balance is struck here, and *Vineland* just as often resists this formulation, adhering to a highly traditional leftist assessment of mass culture. Like Guy Debord, who insists in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) that media images represent the “acme of ideology” and work toward the “impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life” (151), Pynchon longs, on one level, to see a population hypnotized by ideologically-loaded media reawakened to struggle. His disdain is evident in his creation of Ernie Triggerman and Sid Liftoff, the Hollywood producers who equate “viewer” with “brain-defective” (337), as well as in Sasha’s words about Hollywood: “History in this town . . . is no more worthy of respect than the average movie script” (81). It is also evident in Mucho’s assumption about the media’s servitude to state control and corporate interests:

“Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it’s what the Tube is for, and though it kills me to say it, it’s what rock and roll is becoming—just another way to claim our attention, so that beautiful certainty we had starts to fade, and after a while they have us convinced all over again that we really are going to die.” (314)

The capital-T Tube that pervades *Vineland*, becoming a conscious force that “knows, your ev’ry thought” and is “plugged right in, to you” (337), evokes Orwell’s Big Brother (the novel’s present-day action occurs, tellingly, in 1984), and is repeatedly held up as ridiculous, if ominous and highly addictive as well.

But again, Pynchon complicates things, and in ways that would seem to push *Vineland* out of Debord’s essentialist Marxist camp and into Baudrillard’s militantly poststructuralist one instead. Again, to Baudrillard, reality—whether expressed in terms of a signified or of a use value—is nothing but a magical construct, an alibi keeping our tenuous metaphysical systems operable. He also recognizes the role the media have played in bringing us to this realization. Our immersion in images and simulations, he says in *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981), inaugurates an era marked by the “precession of simulacra” (166), a state in which images totally divorced from any type of reality become our primary ontological realm, our actual reality. Far from deploring simulation, though, for stealing reality from us, Baudrillard believes its propensities this way should be celebrated, since our move toward a world filled only with simulacra—“models of a real without origin or reality” (166)—means we are nearer to freeing ourselves from the ideological tyranny of the real.

As with the evil object, complicity with the sorts of forces Debord attacks—a determination to abandon all subject-dependent revolutionary projects—distinguishes Baudrillard's approach. *Vineland* adopts this poststructuralist tack itself, suggesting that we not fight the simulations of the capitalist media to restore some reality, but that we accept and even embrace them for their ability to undermine truth systems. It does this in at least three ways:

1) The novel suggests that neither its characters (revolutionary ones included) nor its narrator is entirely able to apprehend the world in any but mass-mediated terms. For instance, Zoyd—reflecting on DEA agent Hector Zuñiga's repeated efforts "to develop him as a resource" (12) and on his own susceptibility—imagines his plight as "like being on 'Wheel of Fortune,' only here there were no genial vibes from any Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and beautiful Vanna White at the corner of his vision to cheer on the Wheel" (12–13). The narrator characterizes Zoyd's relation with long-time nemesis Hector as "a romance over the years at least as persistent as Sylvester and Tweety's" (22). The 1960s, the narrator also tells us, were "a slower-moving time, predigital, not yet so cut into pieces, not even by television"; thus Zoyd and Frenesi's wedding day "would be easy to remember . . . as a soft-focus shot, the kind to be seen on 'sensitivity' greeting cards in another few years" (38). And betraying Weed and PR³ for Vond, Frenesi finds "No problem anymore with talk of 'taking out' Weed Atman, as he'd gone turning into a character in a movie, one who as a bonus happened to fuck like a porno star . . . but even sex was mediated for her now—she did not enter in" (237; Pynchon's ellipsis). Other instances abound. A page of *Vineland* rarely goes by, in fact, without some character likening an experience to something from "the Tube" or suggesting, by an excision of metaphor (Vond *is* the Roadrunner [153]), that she herself or someone else actually exists within movie space, on or in the screen itself. A rattled Prairie, having seen her mother's films from the sixties, finds herself afterward "reentering *non*movie space" (261; emphasis added). The truth is, though, that neither she nor the novel as a whole ever entirely does reenter that space. In true Baudrillardian fashion, *Vineland's* characters abandon the real at these moments. They forgo the urge to view the world as an unmediated thing in itself.

2) In its form, the novel emulates the very media—film and television—it elsewhere berates as oppressive, conservative or sometimes just inane (consider "the Eight O'Clock Movie" Prairie and Justin watch together—"Pee-Wee Herman in *The Robert Musil Story*" [370]). Like many of the films it names (the first is *Return of the Jedi* [7]), the novel flaunts an impossibly upbeat ending—one featuring an

all-American family reunion, a Russian would-be rock star's defection, a mother's meeting with her long-lost daughter, the consummated union of a couple (DL and Takeshi Fumimota) we have long been rooting for, and a thwarted villain's banishment to Hell. Even Desmond—Prairie and Zoyd's dog, who vanishes early on when their house is occupied by Vond's DEA forces—reappears in time for the novel's closing sentence. *Vineland's* emulation of popular media forms is not restricted to its ending, either. A lengthy subplot narrating DL's Ninjette training and her role in Ralph Wayvone's screwball scheme to kill Vond is easily read as a heart-felt thank-you to the martial-arts film, or to such 1970s television adventure-dramas as *The Bionic Woman* (a show alluded to more than once). Its frenetic, slapstick humor also evokes the many cartoons mentioned throughout the book; thus it is fitting that DL's "'Aauhhghh!,'" loosed when Prairie asks her to describe her first meeting with Takeshi, is the "[f]irst time outside of Saturday-morning cartoons Prairie had ever seen anybody scream with this intensity" (129). Again, the implication in all these instances is that image is all there is. The fundamental reality that ought to ground the novel's political war is repeatedly denied as *Vineland* deliberately invokes the shallow artifice of the TV and movie screen.

3) A number of plot events illustrate the media's disregard for all essentialist political agendas. Baudrillard says in *Simulacra and Simulations* that "the work of the Right is done very well, and spontaneously, by the Left on its own," and that "the Right itself also spontaneously does the work of the Left" (174). This happens because both conservative and revolutionary politics make the same ideological mistake by holding to essentialist models of truth and reality, refusing to acknowledge that all discourses are ultimately ungrounded, or simulated. Since the Left and Right share a belief system, their erroneously polarized agendas will at times bleed together, especially when such simulational media as film and television get hold of them. Baudrillard says "all . . . hypotheses of manipulation are reversible in an endless whirligig"; "manipulation is a floating causality where positivity and negativity engender and overlap with one another" (174). This is surely what Vond and Frenesi's stunning love affair teaches us—a lesson continuing into the novel's depictions of the media, which are consistently shown to be incapable of any sort of political allegiance. Frenesi's 24fps "guerilla movie outfit" (194), whose members would be "'architects of a just Hell for the fascist pig'" (197), winds up documenting Weed's murder and the consequent violent dissolution of PR³—right-wing triumphs recorded by the very filmmakers who had sworn to defeat fascist conservatism. The media's lack of allegiance cuts both ways, though, as we learn with Hector's Tubal addiction—a

condition for which he is repeatedly committed to Dr. Dennis Deeply's "Tubaldetox" center (45). That Hector, "[a]fter a lifetime of kicking other people around," should suddenly find himself, owing to the Tube, "put down among the administered, judged as impaired, sick, and so, somehow, expendable" (336) hardly bears out Mucho's assessment of the Tube as something "they" (the political Right) inflict on "us" (the counterculture) to preserve control. If Mucho were correct, Hector would be immune to Tubal effects. That he clearly is not immune eventually serves leftist interests, as his urging Frenesi to meet Prairie at the Becker-Traverse reunion lays the groundwork for the novel's cautiously Left-affirming ending, and must stem at least in part from his love of family sitcoms. He is, after all, "[k]nown in [the Tubal abuse] field as the Brady Buncher, after his deep although not exclusive attachment to that series'" (33).

Equally damaging to any theory of the media's intrinsic conservatism is the defunding of Vond's zero-tolerance programs by none other than Ronald Reagan—a media-icon, movie-star Republican, who, during his tenure as head of the Screen Actors Guild, "controlled the working lives of everyone in the [film] industry who'd ever taken a step leftward of registering to vote as a Democrat" (289–90). The media, embodied here in Reagan, their spawn, whose face appears in the novel only on a television screen (342), exhibit again their unwillingness to bend to any agenda. As a mode of signification, they steamroll over all essentialist political positions, achieving an autonomy and strength that threaten to force everything to conform to their rules. Thus Hector's plan to have Frenesi not only direct but star with Vond in the film he proposes to make, "Drugs—Sacrament of the Sixties, Evil of the Eighties" (342), winds up sounding only so hare-brained.

Immanence and Transcendence

The problematic essentialism informing traditional political schemata is also at the root of another of Pynchon's most obsessively recurring themes: paranoia. It manifests itself in *Vineland* the same way it does in his other books, with certain characters suffering from a sickening feeling they are being stalked or controlled by some omnipotent force they cannot quite name and that forever remains just beyond their peripheral vision. Eerily returned as a Thanatoid bent on understanding his murder, Weed tells Prairie, "[I u]sed to think I was climbing, step by step, right? toward a resolution—first Rex, above him your mother, then Brock Vond, then—but that's when it begins to go dark, and that door at the top I thought I saw isn't there anymore, because the light behind it just went off too'" (366). Vond, for his part, suffers from a

torturous longing to join a mysterious group of elites he can think to call only “the Real Ones” (276), enduring nightmares in which he “mov[es] through rooms of a large, splendid house belonging to people so rich and powerful he’d never even seen them” (275). Frenesi’s son, Justin, fears “the thing pursuing” him and his ever-frantic parents, which, “[a]ccording to his dreams, a nightly news service . . . was big and invisible” (351). And Sister Rochelle, DL’s mentor, contemplates

the unrelenting forces that leaned ever after [Takeshi and DL] into Time’s wind, impassive in pursuit, usually gaining, the faceless predators . . . who . . . had simply persisted, stone-humorless, beyond cause and effect, rejecting all attempts to bargain or accommodate . . . continuing as a body to refuse to be bought off for any but the full price, which they had never named. (383)

The unreachable doors, unknowable masters, invisible forces and faceless predators of these passages remind us of Baudrillard’s tyranny of the truth—a truth available here only for some impossible full price never named. *Vineland*’s readers are invited to realize what its characters cannot: there *is* no one behind the door at the top; there are no Real Ones; there is no fundamental real. The maddening paranoia from which Vond, Weed and the others suffer—a paranoia continuing Oedipa Maas’s legacy from *The Crying of Lot 49*—is the consequence of not renouncing truth, and it affects both right-wingers (Vond) and revolutionaries (Weed) alike.

Accepting simulation is the strangely saner alternative, first announced in *Vineland* by Zoyd’s televised annual leap through a local bar’s front window—a bizarre ritual resulting from a deal he has with Vond that allows Zoyd to keep custody of Prairie so long as he publicly proves himself once a year to be insane. Zoyd’s 1984 leap speaks especially eloquently to the issue of simulation. The performance, not only simulated on TV screens but originating from a simulated insanity demonstrated by the courting of a purely simulated danger (the window of the Cucumber Lounge, though Zoyd does not realize it until after his leap, has been replaced with clear sheet candy), is too hollow to inspire anxiety about sinister faceless predators or invisible forces. It is all surface, entirely dissociated from reality—the Baudrillardian simulacrum *par excellence*. While this ritual may once have had roots in an authentic political and personal situation (federal agent Vond’s neutralization of hippie Zoyd, who is potential competition for Frenesi), any essentialist origins have vanished into the ether of pixelation. The media themselves, in their servitude to a signification turned viral, turn everything to spectacle, setting the agenda themselves, requiring Zoyd

and his incidental political baggage to conform to their needs, forcing him to be where they want him to be, to perform to their specifications.³

Such rampant, ungrounded simulation is Baudrillard's antidote to the essentialism that poisons traditional contentious politics. Yet Pynchon's endorsement of this strategy remains decidedly lukewarm. The image of Zoyd and Prairie sitting "on the floor in front of the Tube, with a chair-high bag of Chee-tos and a sixpack of grapefruit soda from the health-food store," waiting for simulated Zoyd as the news's "kissoff story" (14) does not feel particularly celebratory. In fact, the whole incident, which includes other weird details like "cop vehicles . . . playing the 'Jeopardy' theme on their sirens" (9), seems intended to unsettle more than relieve us. In this light, the novel's many loopy media-emulations—including its ending, happy unto goofiness—may be read as suggesting the danger of simply surrendering, *à la* Baudrillard, to the fatal strategy of simulation. It cannot, *Vineland* seems to say, be that easy.

What *Vineland* finally works toward, then, is a negotiated, strategic essentialism, validating Baudrillard's evil poststructuralism even as it upholds Jameson's essentialist dissent in the drawing of cognitive maps. The novel follows dual and seemingly incompatible impulses, continuing a tradition of leftist critique even as it indicts the essentialist suppositions informing it. The deep rift separating these ambitions becomes evident in the novel's presentation of almost annoyingly incongruous, though equally credible, ideas. Seeing a computerized photograph of her mother, Prairie observes that simulation has "sharpened [the image] up pixel by pixel into deathlessness" (115); later, though, Frenesi, seeing her life as a video game, understands she is trapped within simulation's "falsely deathless perimeter" (293). Also, while 24fps's manifesto holds that "[i]mages . . . are the substructure of an afterlife and a Judgement" (197), Frenesi's assertion (however duplicitous) to DL that "'[t]he minute the guns came out, all that art-of-the-cinema handjob was over'" (259) censures the manifesto's claim. In both pairs of quotations, the poststructuralist understanding of simulation as an absolute (it confers deathlessness; it is as eternal as an afterlife) is weighed against a less theoretical, more practical recognition of simulation's inability to keep real people from getting hurt: back in Vond's clutches, Frenesi sees that her "game time" (293) is only falsely deathless; after the destruction of PR³, she says guns prove theory is just a handjob. These pairs play out in miniature the novel's larger investigation, finally returning us to Sasha's weighing of History—something as immutable and incontestable as the forces of simulation—against refusal, which always sees the potential for, as

Sasha says, “a different story,” and seeks room to maneuver within History’s inescapable laws.

While Strehle does not begin with Sasha’s terms, she does see a debate much like the one we have traced being played out at the end of *Vineland*, where two more important passages are juxtaposed. The first has Sasha’s father, Jess Traverse, reciting some lines from Emerson (by way of William James) at the Becker-Traverse reunion:

“‘Secret retributions are always restoring the level, when disturbed, of the divine justice. It is impossible to tilt the beam. All the tyrants and proprietors and monopolists of the world in vain set their shoulders to heave the bar. Settles forever more the ponderous equator to its line, and man and mote, and star and sun, must range to it, or be pulverized by the recoil.’” (369)

Strehle rightly asserts that “[t]his passage . . . characterizes [justice] as a wholly natural force, a gravitational field governing human affairs with the same impersonal power it uses to regulate stars and suns.” It holds there to be, in other words, an “innate balance of justice” in the universe (114). The second passage is Sister Rochelle’s allegory about Hell. In a great war between Heaven and Hell, she says, Hell gained possession of Earth. For some time, Hell’s citizens, having free run of the place, “‘flock[ed] up to visit Occupied Earth on group excursion fares, swarming in their asbestos touring cars and RV’s all over the landscape.’” Eventually, though, “‘the novelty wore off, and the visitors began to realize that Earth was just like home’” (382), and so they stopped visiting. Sister Rochelle teaches us, Strehle says, that justice is not some divine and immutable inevitability, not some “transcendent given in Heaven and Hell”; instead, “justice is created by and on Earth. . . . It is a human longing, not something established with the order of the universe” (115). That is what we are meant to glean from this vision of a world abandoned by divine and eternal powers, left “‘Unredeemed’” (383).

Strehle concludes, though, that *Vineland* finally sides wholly with Sister Rochelle’s belief in “values of immanence rather than transcendence” (115). This is a problematic assertion if the transcendence Emerson theorizes is analogous to the transcendence of simulation—a force that ignores the divisions in the political struggle Strehle upholds, a force that is as solid as Emerson’s ponderous equator, always restoring the level through such secret retributions as Vond’s infiltration of PR³ and Hector’s Tubal addiction. It seems instead that *Vineland* validates both the immanence and the transcendence Strehle describes, and can do so without forging some bogus

compromise or simply oscillating between them, because it finally subscribes to a poststructuralism more akin to Spivak's than to Baudrillard's. *Vineland* acknowledges Jameson's essentializations to be, as Spivak says, inevitable and irreducible, and so it makes them unapologetically, constructing a cognitive map on which the conservative Right is despicable and oppressive and the Wobbly-cum-hippie Left is morally admirable and correct. Still, the book interrogates that map's essentialist topography, not only by suggesting, in a Foucauldian vein, that power is never as bipolar and predictable as a Left/Right spectrum posits, but also by insisting, as Baudrillard does, that all signifying practices are themselves simulations—maps that can refer to no original reality.

Simulation, *Vineland* tells us, is a fact: it is the point to which all signification flows, filmic, televisual or literary. Still, such essentialist political discourses as those of liberal versus conservative and yuppie versus yuppie are often all we have in our struggle against the oppression that follows us even into an era as hyperreal as our own. Pynchon thus insists that those discourses, however insufficient they may sometimes be, have to follow us into that era as well, for when they are used provisionally, cautiously, they can help us map our surroundings. When Prairie goes to the Noir Center—a Hollywood shopping plaza “loosely based on crime movies from around World War II” and featuring such shops as “Bubble Indemnity” and “The Mall Tease Flacon” (326)—her surroundings are as simulated and disorienting as any Jameson describes in *Postmodernism*. This does not prevent Prairie, though, from observing the political undercurrents running through the place. She understands that the mall represents “yuppification run to some [desperate] pitch,” and she

personally resent[s] this increasingly dumb attempt to cash in on the pseudoromantic mystique of those particular olden days in [Hollywood], having heard enough stories from Hub and Sasha . . . to know better than most how corrupted everything had really been from top to bottom, as if the town had been a toxic dump for everything those handsome pictures had left out. (326)

Having learned from her leftist Hollywood-worker grandparents, Prairie is carrying on their tradition, demonstrating the possibility of political consciousness in a culture that seems wholly uninterested in any political reality. She might thus appear to have moved back entirely into Jameson's territory, since, having mapped her simulated postmodern surroundings, she seems close to reestablishing some revolutionary consciousness. Instead of imagining the abolition of capital or the

abandonment of such ideological temples as the Noir Center, though, Prairie simply finds herself nostalgic for the shopping malls of her childhood:

the malls [she]’d grown up with, when security was not so mean and lean and went in more for normal polyester Safariland uniforms, where the fountains were real and the plants nonplastic and you could always find somebody your age working in the food courts and willing to swap a cheeseburger for a pair of earrings, and there even used to be ice rinks, back when insurance was affordable. (326)

Prairie’s desire for real fountains and plants and for the simplicity of friendly barter does call up Marxist notions of use value, to be sure, and may even display vestiges of revolutionary thought. This is counterbalanced, though, by the fact that she pines for a place no less capitalistic at root than the space she stands in now: she hypothesizes that the skating rinks are gone, not because capitalism forbade them, but because capitalism (via unaffordable insurance) has become too rampant, too unchecked. She does not dream of a new, utopian social contract outside the parameters of her grandmother Sasha’s capital-H History. She simply dreams of a more tolerable version of the existing one, perhaps available through little-r resistance. Her hopes are in keeping with Sister Rochelle’s earlier advice to her: “‘knowledge won’t come down all at once in any big transcendent moment’”; rather, “‘it’s always out at the margins, using the millimeters and little tenths of a second, you understand, scuffling and scraping for everything we get’” (112). We have here the foundation for a strategic resistance that operates at individual moments and small locales, abandoning the drive for totality that has been the undoing of all traditional modes of dissent. It implores us to resist history rather than History, since resisting the latter only reinforces that impervious and ponderous equator.

When Zoyd learns he will not be forcibly retaking his house from the DEA because the members of the Harleyite Order whose help he relied on have, after an appearance on *Donahue*, become famous, Prairie’s boyfriend, Isaiah Two Four, delivers to him arguably the novel’s most important line: “‘Whole problem ‘th you folks’s generation . . . nothing personal, is you believed in your Revolution, put your lives right out there for it—but you sure didn’t understand much about the Tube’” (373). *Vineland* works to ensure we do not make the same mistake twice.

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Notes

¹Derridean deconstruction provides many of the fundamental tenets of the larger, more inclusive poststructuralist movement. Raman Selden notes Derrida's indictment of "innumerable" essentialist terms "Western thought has developed" to "operate as centering principles: being, essence, substance, truth, form, beginning, end, purpose, consciousness, man, God, and so on" (87). Derrida's questioning such essentialist signifieds aligns his project with that of poststructuralism.

²Strehle paraphrases here the language of an Emerson quotation that appears in *Vineland* (369). I return to her consideration of that passage later.

³Zoyd arrives at the Log Jam, his chosen venue, only to find that it has become, after a visit from George Lucas, a kiwi mimosa-serving New-Age bar (the director's presence has initiated "'a real change of consciousness'" there [7]). He learns also that someone, apparently from a TV station, has "'rescheduled'" (8) his act without telling him; thus he must rush to the Cucumber Lounge to perform.

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