

A Note On "Porky Pig and the Anarchist" in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*

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On April 4, 1936, just a little over thirteen months before Katherine Pynchon's blessed event in Glen Cove, Long Island, Leon Schlesinger, at "Termite Terrace" in Hollywood, released "The Blow Out," a Warner Bros. black and white Looney Tune.¹ These wholly unrelated events would cross paths when Mrs. Pynchon's son published *The Crying of Lot 49* in 1966 and *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973, alluding in each novel to this same cartoon:

"Did you ever see the one about Porky Pig and the anarchist?"

He holds out to her the ball of taffy he's been carrying, boobish as young Porky Pig holding out the anarchist's ticking bomb to him.²

"The Blow Out" seems so suited to Pynchon's multiverse that, traveling of late with Steven Weisenburger's *Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, I suspected at first a real-life case of *GR's hysteron proteron*.³ Will Friedwald, providing a blow-by-blow account of the cartoon (verifying that it is, indeed, *the one*), might almost be paraphrasing some excised Pynchon fragment:

Every time he turns around, the little guy is there. No matter where he tries to run and hide, the little guy is always there. . . . [A] mad bomber, newspaper headlines inform us, has been terrorizing the city. Meanwhile, Porky Pig has discovered he can earn the pennies necessary to purchase an ice cream soda by picking things up for people and handing them back to their owners. He sees the bomber leave behind a clock, and not knowing it contains a time bomb ("that'll blow up an entire city") he tries to return it to him, coyly stretching his hand out for the gratuity. The fiend runs up to the top of a building, and the little guy is there. He ducks to the bottom of a manhole, and the little guy is there. When a couple of poifice officers realize what's going on ("The little fella's got plenty of nerve to tackle a mug like that!"), the bomber escapes to his hideout and locks about five doors behind him. Somehow, the little guy is there too, and when he runs into the paddy wagon to get away from Porky, the pig shoves the bomb in at the last second. It explodes in close contact with

its maker. We end on the gleeful Porky enjoying his reward, ecstatically filling his face with one ice cream soda after another in rapid-fire succession.⁴

"The Blow Out" is a benchmark in film animation. The first real Porky Pig cartoon, featuring the character who became the studio's first enduring star, it was created by the father of Warner Bros. cartoons, the young innovator Fred "Tex" Avery (1908–1980). Avery had just come to Warners the year before, but in a matter of months it became clear that his work was turning the studio away from the conventions of Hollywood animation to a new direction.⁵ Steve Schneider remarks that Avery's "gag-filled anti-authoritarianism and his purposeful demolishing of sentimental expectations put the studio on the course that would earn it a niche in American culture" (44).

Pynchon's fondness for this animated short exercise of comic genius, which strikes the bedrock of his novels' paranoia, is understandable: "You'd never see the little fellow *get* there . . . he'd just *be* there" (Avery, quoted in Adamson 221). In its comic repetitions, manic zaniness and apocalypticism, as well as its metafiction, pop surrealism and undergirding paranoia, "The Blow Out" dishes up a pretty decent map of the rhetoric we encounter in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. Whether we choose to read our *sacra pagina* in the Calvinist soteriology of preterite vs. elect, in Weber's economics of charisma vs. routine, or in binary metaphors derived from quantum physics, Pavlovian psychology, Christian gnosticism, or what-have-you doesn't make much difference.

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Notes

¹Jerry Beck and Will Friedwald, *Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies: A Complete Illustrated Guide to the Warner Bros. Cartoons* (New York: Holt, 1989) 43–44. The other indispensable guide to Warner Bros. cartoons is Steve Schneider, *That's All, Folks! The Art of Warner Bros. Animation* (New York: Holt, 1988).

²Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966) 91, and *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1973) 545.

In *A Reader's Guide to Gravity's Rainbow* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1980), Douglas Fowler tells us merely what we probably already know, that the allusion in *GR* is to "a 1930s Warner Brothers cartoon" (212). In *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988), Steven Weisenburger, for once, completely misses the target. He not only mixes up Warner Bros. and Disney characters, but also says "the anarchist's bomb was a standard cliché"

in both comic books and animated cartoons of the period (235). Careful perusal of Beck and Friedwald reveals no other WB cartoon with this plot.

Sans anarchist and bomb, however, Tex Avery did develop the theme of "every time he turns around, the little guy is there." His cartoons-for-paranoids, or what Joe Adamson calls the "Ubiquity Theme," include "Tortoise Beats Hare" (1941) for Warner Bros., and "Dumb-Hounded" (1943) and "Northwest Hounded Police" (1946) for MGM (*Tex Avery: King of Cartoons* [New York: Da Capo, 1985] 205). Bob Clampett borrowed the formula in 1945 for a draft-dodging spoof, "Draftee Daffy," for Warner Bros. (available on laser disc in *The Golden Age of Looney Tunes, Vol. 2*).

Bernard Duyfhuizen kindly pointed out what may be the first imitation of Avery's formula, Howard and Dalton's Looney Tune "Porky's Phoney Express," released March 19, 1938. Here we find, not only the Pig, but also two other items important to *Lot 49*: the pony express, and Indians who don't look like Indians.

³That is, "a trope of backward motion, regression, and reversals of cause and effect"; see Weisenburger 29 and passim.

⁴Beck and Friedwald 43-44. Adamson 205 corroborates this synopsis.

Pynchon probably saw "The Blow Out" in television syndication in the 1960s. After color TV became commonplace, the early Looney Tunes, produced in black and white as late as 1943 (Schneider 42-43), seem to have been withdrawn from the air waves. "The Blow Out" is unlikely to become available on laser disc or video cassette any time soon. According to the proprietor of the largest catalog retailer of animated cartoons in the United States (Whole Toon Access of Issaquah, Washington), Warner Home Video feels the public has little interest in the black and white titles. A print of "The Blow Out" is available, according to Beck and Friedwald, at the UCLA Film Archive in Hollywood: UCLA, Theatre Arts Dept., UCLA Film Archives, Melnitz, Room 1438, Los Angeles, CA 90024 (213-206-8013).

⁵See Schneider 44-50, and Beck and Friedwald 44. The best English biography of Avery to date is in Adamson, "You Couldn't Get Chaplin in A Milk Bottle," 151-99. Two portfolios of Avery's work have appeared in print, both edited by Patrick Brion: *Tex Avery: la folie du cartoon* (Enghien: Artefact, 1986) and *Tex Avery, 1908-1980: dessins, croquis, études* (Paris: Nathan, 1988). Numerous examples of Avery's work for Warner Bros. and MGM are available on video cassette and laser disc. In 1992, MGM/UA released the MGM Avery *Gesamtausgabe*—all 67 MGM cartoons—on laser disc in *The Compleat Tex Avery*.