

## A Note on Television in *Vineland*

Albert Piela III

One of the reasons some Modernist authors appropriated myths for their works was that myths provided writers and readers a shared way of speaking about and understanding the world. While Modernists informed their works with classical and Biblical myths, their successors tend to be more playful. In *Vineland*, his fourth novel, Thomas Pynchon evokes the myths of popular culture, especially those shaped by television. Television programs function mythically because they compose a body of stories, characters, and symbols that give expression to the aspirations and values of American culture. As Brad Leithauser notes, a television mythology assists communication among *Vineland's* characters. In a review of the novel, he writes: "Whatever the disparities in their outlooks, Pynchon's characters are united in having television serve as their communal well of learning, from which they draw their humor, morality, locutions, analogies" (7). But even more important, Pynchon and his public share a television mythology, and the author dips into this reservoir of myths to communicate with *Vineland's* readers. Some critics question this practice. Paul Gray, for example, considers it "disquieting to find a major author drawing cultural sustenance from 'The Brady Bunch' and 'I Love Lucy' instead of *The Odyssey* and the Bible" (70).

As a matter of fact, *The Odyssey* and the Bible do have an oblique role here: Prairie, Pynchon's quester, undertakes a reverse Telemachiad, a search for the mother—who proves to have been the fallen Eve of the edenic 1960s. But Gray rightly underscores the density of allusions to popular culture. The point is that, by recognizing the mythopoeic qualities of television programs and characters, Pynchon upsets a hierarchy that privileges classical and Biblical myths as those appropriate to a high-cultural activity like literature. Pynchon, though, does not simply invert the hierarchy. Rather, he shows the displacing myths, in their very proliferation, as self-canceling, auto-deconstructive.

Pynchon subverts privileged myths by demonstrating the capacity of television programs to provide a shared language between author and readers. Rather than needing to recognize a number of specific allusions to Odysseus (as readers must to understand, say, Pound's *Cantos* fully), readers of *Vineland* need to identify such mythic figures

as Mr. Spock, Jaime Sommers, and Oscar Goldman. Much of the time Pynchon employs television references to make readers laugh, as when Hector Zuñiga tells Baba Havabananda, “‘you sound like Howard Cosell’” (52), a comment that underscores Baba’s verbosity and compares him with a ludicrous television sports commentator. But, to laugh, one must know the mythical Cosell. Readers familiar with the old *Star Trek* and with that program’s Lieutenant Uhura—the *Enterprise*’s Communications Officer and the only black character in the series—will appreciate Pynchon’s parodic version of the myth in which “all the actors were black except for the Communications Officer, a freckled white redhead named Lieutenant O’Hara” (370). But in this example, while employing *Star Trek* to speak to his readers, Pynchon simultaneously offers a competing version of the myth. By the same token, as David Cowart has pointed out (186–87), Sister Rochelle introduces a feminist version of the Eden myth when she tells Takeshi that, originally, “‘Paradise was female,’” and “‘A character named Adam was put into the story later to help make men look more legitimate’” (166). Thus Pynchon subverts the idea that one myth may be privileged as “true,” and demonstrates the multiplicity of versions of a story.

As well as facilitating communication between author and readers, myths also allow a writer to comment on the culture that values those myths. For example, by appropriating the myth of Icarus and Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce signaled that the story of an artist who escapes from his homeland was still important in twentieth-century Anglo-Irish culture. Similarly, by appropriating artifacts like *The Brady Bunch*, *CHiPs*, *The Bionic Woman*, and *Hawaii Five-O*, Pynchon emphasizes certain cultural values that figure prominently in contemporary American society. *The Brady Bunch* reflects and asserts the importance of family integrity, harmony, and prosperity. This myth, however, does not go unchallenged by Pynchon, who introduces a competing version of family at the Becker-Traverse reunion. Unlike the Brady family (in which the father is an architect, the mother a housewife, and the children a neatly symmetrical group of three girls and three boys), the motley Becker-Traverse clan is composed of “choker setters and choppers, dynamiters of fish, shingle weavers and street-corner spellbinders, old and beaten at, young and brand-new” (369). Pynchon offers another version of the American family and undermines the exalted status of the Brady myth.

Television myths like *CHiPs*, *The Bionic Woman*, and *Hawaii Five-O* illustrate the importance of law and order in American society. The heroes of those programs are motorcycle policemen, a government

agent, and a group of detectives, respectively. Each episode retells a similar story: the proponents of law triumph over the opponents of law. Without fail, the heroes restore order. Pynchon, however, allows the myth to deconstruct by dramatizing the tension between law and lawlessness in a way which does not subscribe or conform to the pattern of the television myths. The agents of law (Brock Vond and Hector Zuñiga) appear evil or laughable, while those who break the law (Zoyd Wheeler, who smokes marijuana; Vato and Blood, who steal automobiles) go unpunished. Pynchon upsets a traditional hierarchy asserted in the television police dramas that constitute one type of cultural myth.

Pynchon's examination of television as myth comes at a time of national debate over what ought to constitute the privileged myths in American culture. Many scholars are calling for the recognition and inclusion into the canon of myths from previously marginalized groups like African Americans and Native Americans. Conversely, critics like Allan Bloom assert the disadvantages of cultural relativism and argue that Americans need to reestablish conversance with the heritage of classical and Biblical myth. Clearly, Pynchon's frequent references and allusions to television in *Vineland* demonstrate the capacity of television to provide an alternative mythology of characters, stories, and symbols from which authors may draw to inform their works. Yet Pynchon does not evoke his television myths uncritically. In fact, he reveals their instability by continually offering alternative cultural fictions. *Vineland* thus demonstrates both the multiplicity of myths and the difficulty of establishing those myths in any hierarchy.

—University of South Carolina

#### Works Cited

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