

Surrealism, Postmodernism, and Roger, Mexico

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Thomas Pynchon is considered a major representative of American postmodernism, and hardly a discussion of postmodernism fails to mention *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is important, however, to see the extent to which Pynchon adheres to a surrealist aesthetic if one is to better understand the measure to which his postmodernist writing is shaped by the earlier movement. Elsewhere I have pursued Pynchon's own remarks in the preface to *Slow Learner* about his commitment to surrealism by tracing connections between *V.* and the surrealist presence in New York City.¹ Here I merely note a West Coast connection between Pynchon and surrealism, and a further connection between *Gravity's Rainbow* and the general surrealist context of Pynchon's work.

In 1966, two surrealist exhibits took place in Santa Barbara, California--one presented by the University of California at Santa Barbara, the other by the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. The University's exhibit was titled "Surrealism: A State of Mind, 1924-1965," while the Museum's exhibit was titled "Harbingers of Surrealism." The concurrent exhibits showed the genesis and development of surrealism. Their catalogues presented chronologies of the movement from its incipience in 1924 to the then present--1965-66.² The exhibits were important because, as one of the shows' organizers said, "No significant exhibition devoted to surrealist art alone [had] been held in any public gallery on the West Coast for over twenty years."³ Though the surrealist presence in New York had been strong and uninterrupted, especially after Breton's arrival in 1940,⁴ the same could not be said for the surrealist presence on the West Coast, where, apart from the Beats, interest in the movement had been intermittent.

Surrealism was in large measure a movement incited by reaction to the mass destruction and death of the World Wars. That the movement received renewed interest in the mid-Sixties, when Vietnam's horrors scathed the conscience of a generation, would not have surprised Andre Breton, because he knew the movement appealed to youth appalled by twentieth-century warfare.⁵ This temporal overlapping of an aesthetic with perennial mass destruction has something complexly to do with how surrealism shaped the postmodernism of writers like Pynchon. The oppositional, dissenting

aesthetic of surrealism was reinvigorated by the sequential disasters of the World Wars and Vietnam. This might be considered the social matrix of correlations between postmodernism and surrealism, but there is an aesthetic and cultural matrix of their correlations that space does not permit discussion of here.

The West Coast exhibitions of the Sixties are merely two of many examples of surrealism's resurfacing in America. Others abound. For example, Sidney Janis, the early New York collector and expositor of surrealism, first published *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* in 1944, against the backdrop of war; significantly, the book was reprinted by Arno Press in 1969, amidst the turmoil of Vietnam.⁶ Pynchon's first three novels all were created within this social, cultural, and aesthetic matrix of surrealism's persistence as an "avant garde" liberationist aesthetic--the chief characteristics of postmodernism being its radical critique of historical knowledge, its relativization of aesthetic form, its fundamental revolt, its disgust at the mass violence of western Reason and technology.

It comes down to details. One Santa Barbara exhibition's chronology, citing various key exhibits and events of the movement, contains the following:

1950 *Surrealism in Mexican Advertising*, Galeria Roger, Mexico.⁷

If Mathew Winston's biographical sketch of Pynchon is correct, Pynchon seems to have been on the West Coast around 1965-66. *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), as Winston remarks, evidences Pynchon's "familiarity with the distinctive madness of Southern California,"⁸ and his June 1966 *New York Times Magazine* essay, "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," also demonstrates an obvious familiarity with Southern California. Thus biography, fiction and journalism all encourage speculation that Pynchon might have visited these exhibitions in Santa Barbara during his Southern California stay. If Pynchon moved up and down the coast between Los Angeles, Mexico and the San Francisco Bay Area (and the North Coast that appears most recently in *Vineland?*), he may have followed common practice in those years to go to San Diego, make the short shuttle into Tijuana, buy transportation in Mexico, where prices were cheaper, and head south, even to visit a gallery like Galeria Roger, presumably in Mexico City.⁹ In any case, after such south-of-the-border sojourns, return trips up the beautiful coast almost invariably included stops at Santa Barbara and Big Sur if one was heading for northern California. With *V.* behind him, and *The Crying of Lot 49* evidencing Southern California connections, the appearance of "Roger, Mexico" in a chronology of the surrealist

movement may indicate Pynchon's abiding interest in this formative literary and artistic movement as he worked on that ultimate postmodernist novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*.

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Notes

¹ See my "Pynchon, V. and the French Surrealists," *Pynchon Notes* 18-19 (1986): 29-38, and "Thomas Pynchon's Intrusion in the Enchanter's Domain," *Twentieth Century Literature* 35.2 (1989): 131-46.

² "Surrealism: A State of Mind, 1924-1965" ran from February 26-March 27, 1966; the catalogue was published by Arno Press in 1966. "Harbingers of Surrealism" ran concurrently; its catalogue was published by Noel Young, Printer, the same year.

³ Michael Canney, Foreword to *Surrealism*, n. pag.

⁴ See William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968, 1977, 1982). Rubin's book was also originally the catalogue for an exhibition of the same name, which ran at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 27-June 9, 1968, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, July 16-September 8, 1968, and at The Art Institute of Chicago, October 19-December 8, 1968. The book's re-editions in 1977 and 1982 confirm its central argument that there is an enduring surrealist and dadaist influence.

⁵ See Breton's 1942 speech to the students at Yale, in which he said: "Surrealism appeals to youth as the only defense against the rationalism and 'good sense' of adult generations which twice in twenty years have brought catastrophe upon humanity. Surrealism was born of the unlimited faith in the *genius* of youth." The speech is printed in *VVV* 2/3 (1943): 44-53.

⁶ *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944; New York: Arno, 1969).

⁷ See the "Chronology" in *Surrealism*, n. pag.

⁸ "The Quest for Pynchon," *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. George Levine and David Leverenz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976) 260.

⁹ David Cowart, building in part on often-repeated rumors that Pynchon lived in Mexico during the early to mid-Sixties, speculates about the possibility of Pynchon's having visited other Mexico City galleries to see the paintings of surrealist Remedios Varo (*Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980] 24-25).