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**Márk Kaposvári**
***Vineland's America***

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***Introduction***

One of the major topics of American writers in contemporary literature is the culture and the representation of that culture within which they live and work. American culture has always had, from the very beginnings, a tendency toward self-definition. Even a discipline developed to provide a platform for this theoretical activity. American Studies, as such, looks at the American culture from many perspectives and tries to define and identify the various roles the United States plays in the world. It is small wonder therefore that such a culture's literature is permeated with a high degree of narcissistic approach towards its own culture and produces scores of fictions that are about American culture itself.

American literature went also through the major stages that European literature did in the twentieth century, among them realism, modernism and postmodernism. As literature and philosophical (metaphysical and ontological) thinking always go hand in hand, and when a paradigm-shift occurs a new literary tone always emerges in fictions also that strives to accord itself to the epistemological changes of the new era. So while

modernism took perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality, postmodernism, in contrast, tends to retain to relativism while abandoning the belief in the unified underlying reality. (Hawthorn 1992, 109)

In other words, "postmodernism takes the subjective idealism of modernism to the point of solipsism" (Hawthorn 1992, 110). It is consequential that this drift of thinking changed the nature of American narcissism in literature in weighing more emphasis on description than on definition. Definitions became suspect in the relativism of the new perception of reality and instead of definitions there emerged an emphasis on representations.

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, one important figure of 20<sup>th</sup> century American (postmodern) literature, in one of his work, *Vineland*, chose American culture and its (critical) representation as the main theme of his work. This novel is about the oppressive stance the United States took on in the eighties after the elimination of the counterculture in the sixties.

What is interesting in *Vineland* is looking at how Pynchon delivers his description and cultural portrait of America, for this is done both in terms of the content and the form of the novel, that is, both through the topical and the narratological build-up. The description gives a rather negative picture, or rather, a severe critique of the United States that appears as an infantile and strongly repressed nation in Pynchon's vision. This criticism includes the illustration of how the obsolete Puritan values of sobriety and (lucrative) work, exhorted by the government, permeate and oppress the American society, of how media-manipulated and shallow-minded the Americans became. *Vineland* is a parody of a couch-potato nation in which the average citizens are not even aware of their abused condition.

In the realization of this negative tone it is essential to look, besides the content, at the formal construction as well, at the narratological technique more closely, for the manner of that inevitably establishes satire. The consciously constructed film-like representation and the cohering storyline all create an atmosphere that articulates and reflects American governmental culture's infantilism and narrow-minded mentality. There is no postmodern "play" but a subjective idealism instead that unifies and makes transparent this set of world of the words. That is, besides "fascism" and repression depicted in the content, due to the simplistic and pop-culturally overloaded texture, a "fascism" and repression is inherent in the form of the novel as well that in turn also will help to convey the criticism. So even if *Vineland* is not the postmodern novel in substance, which according to Brian McHale is manifest in its presenting an ontologically fragmented vision (McHale 1987), still in spirit it remains postmodern in its consciously woven simplistic and streamlined nature that bespeaks of criticism directed against the domesticated and befogged America.

### **Satirical *Vineland***

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, one of the most reclusive American author, fits really well into his contemporary, Don DeLillo's, conceptions about authorship, according to which

the writer is the person who stands outside society, independent of affiliation and independent of influence. The writer is the man or woman who automatically takes a stance against his or her government. There are so many temptations for American writers to become part of the system and part of the structure that now, more than ever, we have to resist. American writers ought to stand and live in the margins, and be more dangerous. Writers in repressive societies are considered dangerous. That's why so many of them are in jail. (DeLillo 1988)

In fact, what Pynchon commits in his books and especially in this one is not merely a verbal resistance towards American culture, or rather, the American governmental culture, but also an extensive criticism that is exuding in a parody of contemporary American society. This criticism is well discernible in the parodist and satiric tone of the novel<sup>[1]</sup>. As parody is defined in the *Dictionary of World Literary Terms* it is "the imitation or exaggeration of traits of style so as to make them appear ludicrous" (Shipley 1979, 231), or as *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* puts it: parody "is usually achieved by exaggerating certain traits, using more or less the same techniques as the cartoon caricaturist" (Cuddon 1992, 640). Satire, in definition, is "an attack to expose folly or vice, dullness or evil ... whether by gentle rebuke or sacrificing verbal onslaught, by ridicule or invective, whether direct through burlesque or indirect through irony" (Shipley 1979, 286).

These features are verily present in *Vineland*. "It criticizes, unmasks, subverts the world we know, [it] attacks because man is ... engaged in a ceaseless battle against evil or dullness or (Frye) against some 'form of romanticism or the imposing of oversimplified ideals on experience'" (op. cit., 289). From where these oversimplified ideals are shown to be oozing from is the American media that is accorded to the government's vibes. Pynchon identifies the "evil with the Reagan administration and especially every kind of law enforcement" (Vanderbeke 1996) and his suggestion is "that the American dream has become a nightmare" (ibid.).

Briefly, the novel is about the eighties' America which is totally in contrast with the liberal hopes of the countercultural sixties. The protagonist, an aging doper, a hippie remnant of the sixties, Zoyd Wheeler and his daughter Prairie are living in the confines of the repressive nation the United States became. The tranquility of their life is highly threatened because of Zoyd's hippie past and present (present also, because his hippie mentality had not waned in the course of decades and thus is still 'a pain in the neck' for the government). As a result of this, Zoyd have to commit an insanity act annually that is always televised in order to receive the monthly disability check from the government by which he is easily kept track of. The conflict arises when the FBI agent, Brock Vond, appears on the scene in search for Frenesi Gates, Zoyd's former wife and Prairie's mother, with whom Vond had an affair in the sixties. Frenesi became an informer for the federal government due to this affair and was separated from Zoyd. She lives now in the federal witness protection program for former informers. When Brock Vond appears the plot and along with it the story of Frenesi's life slowly unfolds and Prairie gets acquainted with her mother's

misty past.

But first of all, let's consider the style that Pynchon chose in conveying his book and the plausible explanation why he did so.

As Larry McCaffery maintained in his book, *The Metafictional Muse*, “[f]iction cannot hope to mirror reality or tell the truth because “reality” and “truth” are themselves fictional abstractions whose validity has become ... suspect” (McCaffery 1982, 5.). He further added that “we are forever locked within a world shaped by language and subjective (i.e., *fictional*) forms developed to organize our relationship to the world in a coherent fashion” (op. cit. 6). And what McCaffery says further about the nature of human perception will illuminate partly why “Pynchon produces in *Vineland*, a fiction devoted less to indeterminate postmodernist “play” than to totalizing modernist “purpose” (Coward 1990, 67).

[P]artially due to human nature and partially due to the nature of the universe, we can never objectively know the world; rather, we inhabit a world of fictions and are constantly forced to develop a variety of metaphors and subjective systems to help us organize our experience so that we can deal with the world. These fictional systems are useful in that they generate meaning [and] stabilize our perceptions. (McCaffery 1982, 8)

So does the American government create its own fictional system that is instilled in the citizen's consciousness. Therefore, I cannot accept Bruce A. Sullivan's argument according to which in *Vineland* “[s]urprisingly ... Pynchon ultimately surrenders to the master-narratives, even as he seeks to question and subvert those same concepts” (Sullivan). It is true that there is a surrendering to master-narratives and a search for subverting them, but it is not at all surprising, I think. The surrender is conscious and deliberate and is done on purpose of subverting. In definition, master-narrative, or, meta-narrative “refers to a grand overarching account, or all-encompassing story, which attempts to give order to the historical record, and to justify the existence of social institutions and authorities” (Meta-narrative 2005). Thus, as the master-narrative is the language of the government, it becomes also to be the language of Pynchon's novel about the American government.

As Joseph Tabbi noted in his essay, “Pynchon's Groundward Art”,

for all *Vineland's* reputed ease and accessibility, [Pynchon] can't resist giving his own, indeterminate twist to his popular and realistic material, and the hybrid fiction that results has neither the emotional charge of realism nor the rich fabulism and science-based clarities of the earlier, more overtly experimental work. (Tabbi in Green 1994, 93)

At the conclusion of his essay, Tabbi says that “[m]aybe it is to be expected that Pynchon, working closer than ever to conventional novelistic forms and evoking conventional expectations, would subvert them” (op. cit. 97).

This sentence is of primary importance in my paper since looking closer at the formal construction of the novel will show how Pynchon makes a stylistic twist and achieves thus a satiric tone. *Vineland* is not the over-fractured and scattered kind of postmodernist novel for this very satiric reason. *Vineland* rejects presenting a world that is heavily torn ontologically (McHale 1987) and that is ungraspable and cannot be tackled down; it rejects to depict it as infinitely folding out. It is rather a unified and closed system with coherence and clear description of the society embedded in a simplistic narrative discourse. Take for example that while in his previous novels Pynchon never identifies the mysterious forces or the people who are in actual control of our lives and to what he in *Gravity's Rainbow* sometimes referred to as *Them* (in opposition with *Us*) now, in *Vineland*, is readily identified with the State and its appendices (like that of the FBI that help in the process of the government's exertion of power). In Mark Webster's words: “[a] nameless, faceless menace no longer hovers somewhere just out of view, controlling events and people for unknown and vaguely sinister reasons, [t]he villains are known and quite familiar: the federal government” (Webster 1990). David Cowart reassure these statements in saying that “the discoveries of connectedness that propel and sustain the quest in Pynchon's earlier work ... give way to more commonplace discoveries of governmental conspiracy. The paranoia in *Vineland* is rooted in the political here and now. It becomes less metaphysical, more local” (Coward 1990, 178).

N. Katherine Hayes proposes a telling metaphor: “[i]magine that Thomas Pynchon has been kidnapped and that his captors censor everything he writes. He determines to communicate with the outside world through coded writing that appears innocuously sentimental but has an ironic undertow” (N. Katherine Hayes in Green 1994, 14). This metaphor makes well felt the nature of *Vineland* that is a hybrid of realism and postmodernism. The blend of lucidity and obscurity, of how culture is perceived and how culture really is.

So the content and the construction of the plot of *Vineland* is a master-narrative about an America that became a "scabland garrison state" (Pynchon 1991, 314) where political forces both overtly and covertly repress its citizens' life. This repression takes many forms and withers the culture from many sides pressing heavily on the American citizens. Not only via police power and law enforcement, but through the main (unnoticeably) domesticating force, the media too.

This domesticating force of the media and television plays a crucial role in the American society of *Vineland*. Let's consider some implications. First of all, in the novel there is a Drug Enforcement agent, Hector Zuniga, who is the ultimate enemy of addiction but who also is severely addicted to 'the Tube'. While he pursues dopers, he also is pursued by the doctors of a 'tubal detoxification' center, the N.E.V.E.R (National Endowment for Video Education and Rehabilitation). Hector constantly hums the theme songs of television programs (like that of the Flinstones) and has a TV set on the back seats of his car that he watches even when he drives. What is more, Hector divorced his wife because she would not accept that the television set should become a member of the family. In the end of the novel, Hector contacts Frenesi because he wants her to play the lead role in his film "Drugs – Sacrament of the Sixties – Evil of the Eighties". Here Frenesi "points out how deluded Hector is, but in so doing implicates the entire American viewing public in his neurosis" (Robberds 1995, 245):

It was disheartening to see how much he depended upon these Tubal fantasies about his profession, relentlessly pushing their propaganda of cops-are-only-got-to-do-their-job turning agents of government repression into sympathetic heroes. Nobody thought it was peculiar anymore, no more than the routine violations of constitutional rights these characters performed week after week, now absorbed into the vernacular of American expectations. (Pynchon 1991, 345)

Similarly, Brock Vond's partner, Roscoe, gives voice to the same idea when in a near-death moment he says: "Feel like we been in a Movie of the Week" (op. cit. 271).

Within these examples the seeds of the parody, through the exaggeration of the Tube-mentality, are well identifiable. "What happened to the Rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow* happens to television in *Vineland*, an instrument for change becomes an instrument for the status quo" (Robberds 1995, 246). To put it simply, the Tube became the "governing authority" (Geddes) of the United States.

### ***Underpinning theories***

Now, taking into consideration some theoretical and conceptual understanding of the role the media plays in our everyday life, first I quote Fred Inglis:

Power is exerted over people ... whenever we open a newspaper or watch television: the language and images direct the audience to think and feel largely as those with power of production prefer. It is this sense of power when we speak of "manipulation" by the mass media. (Inglis 1994, 75)

Inglis goes further, bringing attention to the power relations inherent in the perception of our cultural reality:

We all tend to naturally to believe that we are free individuals, and cheerfully overlook the circumstance that we have little choice but to think along the lines organized for us, above all, by the massive information institutions – schools, universities, newspapers, televisions, societies and associations, churches, political parties. These are the agencies of power, and therefore of ideology. Any

version of the truth, we should remember, is necessarily attached to its power to win a hearing. Truth can't win by its purity as we'd like to think; it must have muscle. (op. cit. 82)

To what these thoughts can be subtly connected are Louis Althusser's ideas about ideology. Althusser's main arguments are that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser in Rivkin 1998, 294) and "[h]owever, while admitting that they do not correspond to reality, i.e. that they constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality" (ibid.). Another important thought is that "[i]deology has a material existence ... an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices" (op. cit. 296). That is, in other words, "what is real to our eyes is what somebody else (state apparatus) constructs, makes up" (Inglis 1994, 87).

These ideas are also echoing back in Jean Baudrillard's famous essay, "Simulacra and Simulations", in which he, similarly to Pynchon, criticizes America and its practices of forging a sham reality to substitute for what is really 'out there'. In his essay Baudrillard states that "it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them" (Baudrillard 1998) and that "[b]ehind the baroque of images hides the grey eminence of politics" (ibid.). In other words, we see what 'They', in authority, show us. Baudrillard also discusses how America presents Disneyland as an imaginary world "in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (ibid.). Disneyland "is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the 'real' world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere" (ibid.). Similarly, the Watergate scandal is presented as a scandal in the media "to conceal the fact that there is none" (ibid.) for actual political reasons.

Simulation is characterized by a precession of the model, of all models around the merest fact - the models come first, and their orbital (like the bomb) circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events. Facts no longer have any trajectory of their own, they arise at the intersection of the models; a single fact may even be engendered by all the models at once. This anticipation, this precession, this short-circuit, this confusion of the fact with its model (no more divergence of meaning, no more dialectical polarity, no more negative electricity or implosion of poles) is what each time allows for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory — all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable, in the image of the models from which they proceed, in a generalized cycle. (ibid.)

Naturally the models in *Vineland's* America are provided through the main source, the media, and through other state apparatuses and their practices. Baudrillard says that "power risks the real, risks crisis, it gambles on remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, -political stakes" (ibid.). The media manipulates its audience. In Dirk Vanderbeke's words, in *Vineland's* America "[t]he world is constantly being told and retold on the screen, until the narrative claims priority over the world itself" (Vanderbeke 1996).

### **The Content**

What sets the novel in a telling direction, or, in other words, erupts an immediate onrush of associations, is a direct reference to George Orwell's *1984* at the beginning of the novel, for this is the year in which the enframing plot is set. There are many analogies between Orwell's dystopic and Pynchon's realistic world, and even if these analogies are exaggerated somewhat, still there is connection between them that points to an America that is absolutely inconsistent with its own notions of (ultimate) freedom. Like in *1984*, where people are constantly under surveillance and observed through the so-called 'telescreens', in *Vineland*, besides such direct allusions as: "as if the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, 'From now on, I'm watching you'" (Pynchon 1991, 340), and "I knew someday this act would get bigger than me" (op. cit. 8) when the protagonist refers to his yearly 'televisual insanity act' (the procession of which, including the place, time and manner of that, is dictated by the media instead of him); Pynchon indirectly represents a culture that is saturated to the bone with televisual culture. This culture is shown to be heavily domesticated and "Tubed out", believing and living, or to put it this way, 'be-

lie-ving' in a simplified film-like world, with the sham discourse of personal liberty constantly instilled into the devout lambs of America following its uniformed shepherds.

What makes *Vineland* darker in tone than that of *1984* is that while (*1984* is an imaginary world, *Vineland* portrays realistically, and):

[i]n Orwell's *1984* the telescreen serves as the ubiquitous instrument of control because it can monitor each and every move, in *Vineland's* America of 1984 this has proven to be quite unnecessary because each and every move is motivated by the images and characters observed on the screen. (Vanderbeke 1996)

“That the television screen directs people’s vision in an Orwellian horror, intensified ... because viewing [in *Vineland's* America] is done by choice” (Safer 1990, 112). And as to how does television oozes into the citizen’s consciousness Pynchon trims a little song:

#### THE TUBE

Oh ... the ... Tube!  
 It's poi-soning your brain!  
 Oh, yes....  
 It's dri-ving you, insane!  
 It's shoot-ing rays, at you,  
 Over ev'ry-thing ya do,  
 It sees you in your bedroom,  
 And – on th' toi-let too!  
 Tube....  
 It knows, your ev'ry thought,  
 Hey, Boob, you thought you would-  
 T'n get caught –  
 While you were sitting there, starin' at “The  
 Brady Bunch,”  
 Big fat computer jus'  
 Had you for lunch, now Th'  
 Tube –  
 It's plugged right in, to you!  
 (Pynchon 1991, 336-37)

To thicken further these televisual notions Pynchon writes a passage when one of the novel's characters (Isaiah 2:4) sheds light on the assumption that the television's hegemony originated in the sixties' counterculture, when he says: “[m]inute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it, that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians sold it all to your real enemies, and even in 1970 dollars...it was way too cheap” (op. cit. 373).

And at one point of the novel there is an instance, where Prairie faces the past during her research after her mother, and what she finds is “an America of the olden days she'd mostly never seen, except in fast clips on the Tube meant to suggest the era, or distantly implied in reruns like “Bewitched” or “The Brady Bunch” (op. cit. 198). Such passages constantly refer to the unknowable and constructed nature of past and present reality playing a heavy role in people's everyday lives.

In *1984* the protagonist works in an agency, where every day history itself is changed attuned to the needs of the Party. It is inescapable to realize that both in *1984* and *Vineland* the media is the main link between reality and people. The platform of the media is where people get to know reality through language and its institutions like that of newspapers, public announcements and television coverage. In *Vineland* the Tube is the number one tool for the government in establishing its rule. The distorted world it emits is instilled in the citizens who succumb to its dictates. Aaron Rosenfeld in his essay titled: “Orwell, Pynchon, and the poetics of Paranoia” refers to Orwell who in his essay “Politics and the English Language” conceives of language “as that which is imposed from ‘outside’ rather than being generated from ‘inside’ the subject's own perceptions” (Rosenfeld 2004, 345). This thought reverberates in Orwell's novel, when O'Brien, the head of the Thought Police, says “[r]eality is not external ...[it exists] only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal” (Orwell 1981, 165), referring to the linguistically determined nature of reality. In other words, it is the Party that defines the parameters reality, similarly to the Pynchonian federal government. The language of the Party, Newspeak, also

contributes to its aims of depicting reality as it is desired. Newspeak involves doublethink, which is

the telling of deliberate lies while genuinely believing them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just so long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies. (op. cit. 143)

All in all, what Pynchon implies with all these similarities, or rather, features, is a criticism on an America that is defining itself through the media that in turn is under the auspices of a certain inscrutable (and dubious) authorities.

So far I have mainly analyzed the covert repression that domesticates the citizens who are unconscious about it but Pynchon did not stop here, he also gave account of overt forms of repression that are part of the American world.

As for overt repressionistic forms we can read about such institutional establishments as camps for nonconformists to where people, in need of attunement to the government's rhetorics, are sent, and the phenomenon of the 'war on drugs', namely the CAMP (Campaign Against Marijuana Production). So, "[a]gain, a screaming comes across the sky, this time 'helicopters descending' [Pynchon 1991, 248], latter-day versions of 'the sleek raptors that decorate fascist architecture' [op. cit. 287]" (Cowart 1990, 182). These apparatuses and its agents are also similar to Orwell's informants of the Party serving Big Brother.

"For Pynchon, the War on Drugs has been a pivotal battle in the government's war on civil liberties" (Geddes). "The federal war 'on a botanical species' (Pynchon 1991, 271) ... is part of a larger government program. The war on drugs tends to become a convenient excuse to harass the ... nonconforming" (Cowart 1990, 180). Pynchon sees civil liberties seriously hurt and puts forth his supposedly personal opinion through Mucho Maas' words who somewhere in the novel says: "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" (Pynchon 1991, 313).

As for the underground detention center where Frenesi is held captive by Vond it is interesting to see how Pynchon writes about it:

In the olden days we called it the last roundup," DL explained. "Liked to scare each other with it, though it was always real enough. The day they'd come and break into your house and put everybody in prison camps. Not fun or sitcom prison camps, more like feedlots where we'd all become official, nonhuman livestock."

"You've seen camps like this?"...

"Yep, I've seen 'em, your mom was in one, you'll recall, but better than us reminiscing and boring you, go to the library sometime and read about it. Nixon had machinery for mass detention all in place and set to go. Reagan's got it for when he invades Nicaragua. Look it up, check it out." (op. cit. 264)

Aside these institutions, repression appears in the form of relating an assault as well. When a campus community decides on rebelling against the government and establishing its own republic, the 'People's Republic of Rock and Roll', the PR<sup>3</sup>, the government finally resolves to destroy the community by using military force. "By morning there were scores of injuries, hundreds of arrests, no reported deaths but a handful of persons unaccounted for. In those days it was still unthinkable that any North American agency would kill its own civilians and then lie about it" (op. cit. 248). (This last suggestive sentence speaks for itself.)

According to Dan Geddes, "the War on Drugs in *Vineland* is shown as a perpetual attack by a corrupt government upon its people" (Geddes). Geddes points out, that "[n]ot only does the government frame suspects, bribe informants, burn marijuana plants, seize property, the final irony is that they are a ultimate source of drugs" (ibid.). He emphasizes the importance of the following passage from the novel that reveals this:

notice how cheap coke has been since '81?...Harken unto me, read thou my lips, for verily I say that wheresoever the CIA putteth in its meathook upon the

world, there also are to be found those substances which God may have created but the U.S. Code hath decided to control. Get me? Now old Bush used to be head of CIA, so you figure it out? (Pynchon 1991, 354)

In summary, we can assert that Pynchon is against the culture that the American government generates and domesticates through the media. As David Cowart suggests, Pynchon is chiefly against the traditional stifling values of America that are originating from the very beginning of the culture:

In *Vineland* as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon notes the strange tenacity of Calvinist and Puritan values in American culture: the encouragement of sobriety and plain living, the intolerance of idleness and 'mindless pleasures', the sanctity of work (which promotes the growth of capital), and especially the distinction between the regenerate saved – a select remnant – and the vast body of unchosen. (Cowart 1990, 183)

### **The Form**

Having analyzed the content of the novel, now let's consider the formal architecture of *Vineland*, for it will show interesting features that help in identifying satire.

After reading *Vineland* there is an aftertaste, on reflection, that renders the book similar to a script of a Hollywood movie, and the reader in his mind inescapably imagines the whole novel as a movie or even a comic-strip, with many flashbacks, flash-forwards, speech-bubbles containing words like "whreeeeeeeezzz", close-ups of the character's faces in taut situations and so on.

What happens, in fact, is a deliberate spinning of a yarn by Pynchon who consciously fills up his novel with elements of the televisual and creates an atmosphere of a simple, easily digestible story about a disintegrated family which in the end integrates and (falsely) promises some happy ending and continuity.

These elements are not only referred to by the character's (speaking about movies, films and other pop-cultural artefacts directly) but also are incorporated in the organism of the text, setting up the cinematic climate. To read some such examples, let's pay attention to these quotations in which the parodist overtones cannot be passed unmarked: "Van Meter flashed Mr Spock's hand salute" (Pynchon 1991, 11), "it was like being on the Wheel of Fortune" (op. cit. 12), "only a couple of more commercials just hold on Prair" (op. cit. 105),

...as they loaded him into the Tubaldetox paddy wagon, which went screeching off just as Isaiah 2:4 and his friends came screeching in...and quickly in an arc unexpectedly graceful, they had all turned outward, tached up, engaged, and like a time machine departing for the future, forever too soon for Zoyd, boomed away up the thin, cloudpressed lane. (op. cit. 54-55)

"Spanish guitars ringing in her mind, DL slipped the girl's shirt off and with a black-gloved finger traced a big letter Z – above, between, below her breasts. "Hasta la próxima, querida mia," and over the senorita's balcony she did vanish" (op. cit. 254), and so on.

The whole novel is represented as a movie with one line of plot that is merely twisted chronologically, and never in the postmodernist manner, as Brian McHale articulates in his famous book, *Postmodernist Fiction*, ontologically. There is no collision of discourses and worlds in the novel but only one world with one discourse is what is presented. We are given a picture about the picture, that is, the author does not strives to give back (the chaotic, contingent and many times inscrutable) reality (as he tried earlier in *Gravity's Rainbow*, or the *Crying of Lot 49*), but only to give back how American authorities stage reality. So the stylistic twist here, as it is already mentioned, is that Pynchon writes in terms of master-narratives in order to deconstruct their credulity.

Writing about pop-culture in the manner and parameters of pop-culture itself, in turn, assigns a parodist tone to the book. And this is where Ernest Mathijs fails, when in his essay, "Reel to Real:

Film History in Pynchon's *Vineland*" he claims that "in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon talks about the history of cinema, references create an aesthetic feeling, and film techniques are employed for artistic reasons. In *Vineland* there is no such intention. Here film is a popular commodity, and its relation toward reality is underlined" (Mathijs 2001). For, to borrow another one of Mathijs own sentences in a twisted understanding according to which "there is the explicit presence of artificial light sources" (ibid.), I claim that film techniques, indeed, are employed here for artistic reasons. The whole plot and its characters and the whole atmosphere of the novel gives off a filmic or comics-like flavor.

As for the characters and their comics-like bearing, consider for example Hector Zuniga's overpowering tubal mentality, or Frenesi's friend, DL Chastain, who is a highly skilled ninja and can become invisible by the play of shadows and lay the 'ninja death touch' on anybody which upsets the person's chi flow and causes death as soon as a year has elapsed. And there is Zoyd who is a typical dope-smoking hippie with a caring heart and a good-hearted naivety. Even two Beavis and Butthead-like character is woven into the texture of the novel; they are Vato and Blood. They have an own theme "based on the Disney cartoon anthem" (Pynchon 1991, 180), Chip 'n' Dale, which goes like this, "I'm Vato, ... I'm Blood, ... we just some couple of crazy bastards, ... out to kick some ass" (op. cit. 181). Their behaviour is indeed very cartoon-like, take for example the following instance: "They ran through a Vietnam-style handclasp set to the tune of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), going "Dum, dum, dum," in harmony, "DAHdahhhh!" slapping a high five, "Dum, dum, dum, daDAHH!" spinning around, slapping palms behind their backs" (op. cit. 178).

What further pertains to the development of the filmic and (thus) parodist mood in the tone is the evocation of popular songs and themes in certain instances of the plot when it seems, in fact, to dub the scene. Take for example the scene when at the Kunoichi Retreat (again a filmic element with ninja nuns living there) Prairie decides to face and prepare the "Variety Loaves" (Pynchon 1991, 189) for a dish that are notorious for glowing "softly blue green" (ibid.) in the freezer. At this point the radio starts playing the theme from the *Ghostbusters*, neatly bringing together the image and the sound, like in a movie. Or when Prairie and her friend Ché take part in a roller-skating "snatch-and-grab mission" (op. cit. 328) at a new Noir Center (op. cit. 326) "[t]he tune coming out of the speakers as the girls dispersed into the evening happened to be a sprightly oboe-and-string rendition of Chuck Berry's 'Maybellene'" (op. cit. 328).

So, once again, what Pynchon does, according to parody's definition, is the exaggeration of certain qualities of American culture so as to reveal its salient features. The way he does this is through portraying overt and covert repressions in *Vineland* and through the use of the televisual language that builds up its discourse.

## Conclusion

Re-reading *Vineland* during the steady loss of civil liberties during the George W. Bush regime, we are reminded of the long genesis of the repression: police used as strike-breakers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in Hollywood in the 1930s, the COINTELPRO activities, and the 1980s war on drugs (mainly marijuana) in the novel. ... A close reading of *Vineland* reveals Pynchon's concerns about the state of American liberties even during the late 1980s, when he must have been completing *Vineland*. The erosion of these liberties has only quickened since then, in the wake of anti-terrorist legislation passed after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, or the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. (Geddes)

*Vineland* is Thomas Pynchon's political satire where criticism is directed against the American government that deviates more and more from American democracy and its promise. What *Vineland* shows is that there is an ever growing pressure of repression upon the citizen's life, whose liberties are getting more and more limited. The culture is infantilized in order to make it docile and easily handle-able. The sad fact is that the citizens are unconscious of this tendency and let themselves to be brain-fed through the media. Pynchon in delivering this analysis resorts to write in a parodist tone to build up the satire. The result is a book that at first reading gives off a cartoon-like and filmic flavor that is intended to depict American reality. On second thought it becomes clear that the abundance of pop-cultural elements and the pop-cultural-like narration is a deliberate act for the very reason of parodying. Pynchon consciously blurs the division between the irreducible reality and the heavily reduced world of 'governmental culture' bringing forth a

postmodern novel of generic hybridity. It is thus, he tries to show how this highly reduced world impregnates American reality. At the conclusion of the novel Pynchon goes:

And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupedified years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows. One by one, as other voices joined in, the names began – some shouted, some accompanied by spit, the old reliable names good for hours of contention, stomach distress, and insomnia – Hitler, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover, Mafia, CIA, Reagan, Kissinger, that collection of names and their tragic interweaving that stood not constellated above in any nighttime remoteness of light, but below, diminished to the last unfaceable American secret, to be pressed, each time deeper, again and again beneath the meanest of random soles, one blackly fermenting leaf on the forest floor that nobody wanted to turn over, because of that lived, virulent, waiting, just beneath. (Pynchon 1991, 372)

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Note

[1] In my essay parody and satire will be taken in a narrower sense that they actually possess



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