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# "Been Hazed and Fused for So Long it's Not True" - Drugs and Television in Thomas Pynchon's Inherent Vice

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

“Been Hazed and Fused for So Long it’s Not True” – Drugs and Television in Thomas  
Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*

submitted by

William Moffett Jr. 2012

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
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## Introduction

“Man seeks to escape himself in myth, and does so by any means at his disposal. Drugs, alcohol, or lies. Unable to withdraw into himself, he disguises himself. Lies and inaccuracy give him a few moments of comfort.”

-Jean Cocteau, “On Invisibility,” *Diary of an Unknown*

“We gotta get out of this place/ If it’s the last thing we ever do/ We gotta get out of this place/  
Cause girl, there’s a better life for me and you.”

-The Animals, “We Gotta Get out of This Place,” 1965

Every man needs a vice? Perhaps every individual and social system inherently has one...or numerous ones. Thomas Pynchon’s 2009 novel *Inherent Vice* focuses on the fallibility of human nature in its struggle against a faceless system of oppression, through a philosophical meditation on detachment from time and place, posing as a “beach-read” pastiche of Raymond Chandler-esque detective novels and film *noir*. Perhaps it’s a paranoid reading, but there seems to be something desperately important bubbling underneath the surface of the novel’s playful tone, which rises up to comment on a world of seemingly irrecoverable loss and slow and sporadic gains.

By analyzing the concurrent presences of television and drug use within *Inherent Vice*, I will argue that the book presents 1970 as a time when the counterculture was facing a losing battle to authority and to its own hedonistic impulses. Why and how are these elements so pervasive, and what does their effect have on the characters? Television and drugs are both pacifying by being all-consuming, and create an altered sense of time and place. They are modes of consumption that consume the characters in the novel (best categorized as “hippies,” those that attempted to revolt against the status quo through a denial of its conventions), and distract them from the social unrest and political changes going on in the background of the United

States at the time. These elements are related to the vague sense of nostalgia in the novel (the text itself is in the form of nostalgic pastiche), as the characters implicitly and explicitly long for a different time and a place. Those familiar with Pynchon's other works may be underwhelmed and perplexed by the purpose of the novel, unless they know what to look for.

Many critics did not seem to get *Inherent Vice*, upon its release in August 2009. Louis Menand claims, "'Inherent Vice' does not appear to be a Pynchonian palimpsest of semi-obscure allusions. (I could be missing something, of course. I could be missing everything)" ("Soft Boiled"). I would agree with the last sentence in the parenthesis. Menand brushes at the bigger stakes, writing that "there are a few familiar apocalyptic touches, and a suggestion that countercultural California is a lost continent of freedom and play, swallowed up by the faceless forces of cooptation and repression." But he simplifies Pynchon's use of "pop period detail" (the saturation of references to television shows, movies, and other relics of mass-mediated culture) to mere chronological props, and notes "a lot of affection in these new pages for the way of life—surf, drugs, and rock and roll—they describe," not noticing the underlying tone of menace and disapproval in regard to this cultural context. Michiko Kakutani gets at the darker undercurrents of Pynchon's representation of the "slightly seedy aura of a metropolis" that is "in its post-Manson, paranoid phase," but still simplifies the text as basically consisting of a "cartoonish face-off" between "an amiable pothead" and "a bent law-enforcement system" ("Another Doorway"). She—like many of the critics I've read—undervalues the role of drug use (particularly marijuana) within the thematic structure of the novel. Kakutani refers to *Inherent Vice* as "a novel in which paranoia is less a political or metaphysical state than a byproduct of smoking too much weed."

One of the more scathing reviews, by Sam Anderson, condemns the novel's deconstruction of the constraints of the detective genre, claiming, "With no suspense and nothing at stake, Pynchon's manic energy just feels like aimless invention" ("Incoherent Vice"). However, Anderson inadvertently gets at some of the points that give the novel its vitality when he claims, "His [Pynchon's] types, after 45 years, have themselves become types. The characters in *Inherent Vice* are not only paranoid, they walk around constantly *talking* about their paranoia," and, "...one of the most unique careers in American literary history is going to end by endlessly repeating itself." But is this just lazy writing? His last novel, *Against the Day*, shows that there are clearly more than enough concepts and eccentric ideas left in the author's imagination. If Pynchon is rereading, it is for a reason.

These reviews make assumptions that need to be put into context. What these critics might not fully understand is the over-arching philosophical project of the author—an investigation into the effects of industrialization and consumerism on society and personal identity, and the way those spheres interact. Pynchon's works also gravitate—whether explicitly or obliquely—around a particular time and space: the 1960s counterculture of California, particularly the area surrounding Los Angeles (its northern brethren San Francisco being the more idealistic and less glamorized locus point of the sub-culture). Pynchon, while an icon in the countercultural movement, constantly deconstructs its logic. Stefan Mattessich's extensive work, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon*, establishes the failure of the counterculture in response to:

The rise of the military-industrial complex, consumerism, bureaucratization and specialization in the workplace, standardization at all levels of social life, the growing influence of the mass media—these features of late capitalism point for Pynchon to a transformation in the cultural time-sense or duration governing identity and place in contemporary America. (Mattessich 2)

Using these elements as the impetus of resistance, Mattessich analyzes the way that Pynchon achieves a sense of an “endlessly present past” (12).<sup>1</sup>

Through a shift in the political and cultural landscape of America in the decades following World War II, there was a sense of incoherence and digression (though this shift had already been set into motion with the monstrosities of modernity that became integrated into everyday life after the World War I). Pynchon’s novels reflect this through their unstable sense of time, having characters that are emblematic of the countercultural movement become lost in an ebb-and-flow of escape, repetition, and return. Through their “reverie” (Mattessich doesn’t directly say that everyone was consuming whatever drug they could get their hands on, but his use of the term “spaced-out” paints the picture), those that thought they were resisting the dominant status quo were just becoming subsumed in a different form of the same basic machinations of consumer capitalism (1-12). Throughout my paper, I will follow a similar thematic approach as Mattessich, albeit in a less technical and philosophically encompassing manner.

*Inherent Vice* fits into this dialogue, but crystallizes and stream-lines Pynchon’s aesthetic of abstraction and incoherence (it paradoxically makes the incoherent cohere). It should be read as a text with a nostalgic style that questions the nature of nostalgia itself, and as a narrative that responds to the ways specific obsessions of the milieu—brought to the fore and disseminated amongst the masses in the 1960s and early ‘70s—have created a counterculture generation of stunted outcasts that may be doomed to repeat the same patterns. The most overarching narrative

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Pynchon’s broader representations of escapism, and the way that history is manipulated and experienced, see; Schaub, Thomas, “History and Fiction: From Providence to Paranoia;” Smith, Shawn, “‘Truth or Falsity Don’t Apply’: V. and the Historiographic Method” and “*Gravity’s Rainbow*: Wrecking the ‘Elegant Rooms of History;” Weisenburger, Steven, “The End of History? Thomas Pynchon and the Uses of the Past.”

and cultural elements in the novel are television and drug use (mostly marijuana), and investigating how those operate within the novel will shed light on this historically specific failure (and may also point to issues that are still ongoing). Through these interlocked spheres of television and drugs, there's an effect of passivity, repetition, and a sense of constructed nostalgia and escape that portray a community in diaspora from itself.

*Inherent Vice* is a novel worthy of the author's insignia. Yes, gone are the byzantine sentences and narrative structure of *Gravity's Rainbow* (no Octopus or light-bulb frames of reference); the esoteric knowledge systems that overran much of his previous novels, particularly *Against the Day*; and the sense of non-linear metaphysical play that may have made his other books more explicitly profound. But instead of those distancing and estranging techniques, Pynchon crafts a novel that is personal and ultimately more human, despite its saturation of mad-cap antics and fragmenting allusions to pop culture. While the novel shares common narrative and thematic threads with *Vineland* (1990), there's something unique—a certain sense of proximity and ambiguity. The characters in *Vineland* reflect back on what went wrong in the '60s, and the novel seems to shift into a didactic stance that makes clear what the inherent vices were.<sup>2</sup> *Inherent Vice*, on the other hand, positions the reader during this period of cultural unrest and decay, showing the limits in action and knowledge that led to—or at least were closely connected with—the failure of systematic social and political change.

By focusing on the confines of a central character—Doc Sportello—the novel intimately portrays the psychological and social effects of drug and television addiction (Oedipa Maas in

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<sup>2</sup> In many ways, *Vineland's* Zoyd Wheeler is a grown up version of *Inherent Vice's* Doc (his drug-agent friend/rival Hector Zuniga is parallel to Bigfoot Bjornsen, both are embedded into the apparatus of television). Doc's estranged lover Shasta Fay Hepworth is also similar to Zoyd's ex-wife Frenesi Gates, right down to the way they both have affairs with characters that. *Vineland* takes place in the Orwellian-infused year 1984, representing the actualization of the surveillance society that is seen beginning to blossom in *Inherent Vice*.

*The Crying of Lot 49* being the only other sole-narrative focal point in Pynchon's seven novels). It becomes a personal story enmeshed in a larger context of a societal pathology. There's a sense of loss and detachment in Doc's life that he only occasionally becomes cognizant of. During the end of the novel, Doc sits in a restaurant, next to a plastic shrubbery in which refuse and drug paraphernalia are often lost. Doc reflects, "Maybe if he searched through it long enough, late enough into the night, he'd find something that might help—some tiny forgotten scrap of his life he didn't even know was missing, something that would make all the difference now" (*Inherent Vice* 295). His realization of this obscure missing piece in his life, and a chance to unveil the concealed truth of the societal system that is moving past him, may be too late. His memory and sense of identity are too fragmented to even articulate what it is he can't remember having lost.

The broader issues of cultural amnesia and doomed repetition are brought up in a monologue (by his usually detached lawyer) two chapters after Doc's introspection toward his insulation:

'...yet there is no avoiding time, the sea of time, the sea of memory and forgetfulness, the years of promise, gone and unrecoverable, of the land almost allowed to claim its better destiny, only to have the claim jumped by evildoers known all too well, and taken instead and held hostage to the future we must live in now forever. May we trust that this blessed ship is bound for some better shore, some undrowned Lemuria, risen and redeemed, where the American fate, mercifully, failed to transpire...' (341)

A sense of time, place, and purpose are jumbled in this section, and I will need to present the course of events and themes that lead to this moment. My first chapter will step outside of the text, and provide a brief discussion of the 1960s, and that context's relation to Thomas Pynchon; as well as the antecedents of television and drug use in his writings. The second and third chapters will delve into the text of *Inherent Vice*. Chapter two will analyze the concurrent behaviors of immersion in television and drug use, and the way that the characters become

passive because of it. Chapter three will view those behaviors in relation to the larger themes of repetition and time, interpreting nostalgia as a form of historical flight.

The critics I mentioned earlier may have taken the passage I just referenced as forced trappings of profundity, but this seems to be indicative of a milieu that is having fewer and fewer moments of clear *unmediated* reflection and understanding. The “affection” towards the way of life represented in the novel is not a cherished acceptance of those values. As with the broad feeling of nostalgia, there is a juxtaposition of longing and regret. Paranoia is not just a “by-product of smoking too much weed.” Like the spear that heals the same wound it creates, weed is both a medication against comprehending the full extent of the systematic abyss and something that makes its users unaware of the power struggles that they are thrown into (thereby making much of the paranoia real, yet undecipherable from illusionary fear). And it is not Pynchon who should be found guilty of endlessly repeating himself, but the sub-culture that detaches from the present and falls into performative and self-dissolving cycles of behavior. If the characters are stuck in self-reflective loops of detachment, it may be because they represent the society in the hang-over period of the “summers of love,” aimless and disillusioned, but incapable of sustained reflection and progress. To understand the novel, a reader needs to confront two enigmatic figures: the 1960s and Thomas Pynchon.

## Chapter 1: “*Something in the Air?*” – Cultural and Pynchonian Context of *Inherent Vice*

“Wouldn’t it be nice if we were older/ Then we wouldn’t have to wait so long/ And wouldn’t it be nice to live together/ In the kind of world where we belong/...Wouldn’t it be nice if we could wake up/ In the morning when the day is new/ And after having spent the day together/ Hold each close the whole night through.”

-Beach Boys, “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” *Pet Sounds* (1966)<sup>3</sup>

*Inherent Vice* focuses on Doc Sportello, a Private Investigator living in the fictional Gordita Beach (seen as representing Manhattan Beach, where Pynchon lived in the late 1960s and early ‘70s, while writing *Gravity’s Rainbow*).<sup>4</sup> He becomes enmeshed in a conspiracy that at first seems to adhere to the cut-and-dried principles of a conventional detective plot (convoluted though they may be), but that reveals a society that is undergoing severe and complicated growing pains. The year is 1970, Richard Nixon is president, Ronald Reagan is acting governor of California, Charles Manson is about to go on trial, the FBI-supported COINTELPRO (the Counter Intelligence Program) is engaging in secret and sometimes illegal activities to take down “subversive” political groups within the U.S., there’s a temporary lull in the no-end-in-sight “war” in Vietnam, the Cold War continues to unveil economic tensions in the geopolitical landscape, and underneath the surface of the earth lay atomic bombs capable of making

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<sup>3</sup> Doc sings a few lines of this song in his attempt to woo a female acquaintance that is using him to get information for the District Attorney’s office. Other Beach Boys songs referenced are “Help me Rhonda” (364) and “God Only Knows” (368). The mood these songs evoke is one of nostalgia and romantic idealism, a harsh juxtaposition to the dark dead-end avenues of Pynchon’s world.

<sup>4</sup> Garrison Frost’s “Thomas Pynchon and the South Bay” provides some fragmentary descriptions of Pynchon’s time spent in Manhattan Beach, and the influence of this location on his fiction.

everything moot. And as Rome burns, the characters in *Inherent Vice* spend most of their time watching television and getting high.

A typical image of the countercultural movement would place the hippie at a protest or in a field of flowers, rather than in front of a sterile piece of technology. It is through this device that many in the sixties experienced the ebb and flow of their society; staying up to date on the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy, and Martin Luther King (the last two being seen as martyrs for countercultural aspirations); watching the unruly dialectic between political activism and governmental oppression (such as the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968, in addition to numerous confrontations of the Civil Rights movement); and having viewed a manufactured presentation of the War in Vietnam that eventually depicted scenes of the lived horrors and battles (the My Lai massacre being an event with severe ramifications of cultural demoralization, as Richard Slotkin has eruditely researched). In *Inherent Vice*, the characters watch fictional programs (although those that are on drugs have trouble discriminating between “real-life” characters and fictional performers). While the outside factors may have contributed to the learned helplessness of hippies and other subversives, there is evidence that the hedonistic impulse underneath the logic of the counterculture was bound to be self-defeating. Pynchon is using this scenario to portray hollowness in a specific ideology. Raoul Duke, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, discusses the hopes and aspirations of the counterculture movement (specifically the hippies):

There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning...that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail... We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave (Dir. Terry Gilliam, 1998).

This sense of idealistic optimism, present in the mid to late 1960s, is constantly in the background of *Inherent Vice*. The “consciousness expanding” aspects of the 1960s represented a culture that would resist authority and attempt to bring peace and love to the world. While this mentality was spread throughout the country, California was the symbolic epicenter of the movement. Joan Didion’s *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* contains journalistic essays that engage with a slice of this lifestyle, and puts a critical eye to the counterculture, suggesting that people involved in it were more self-absorbed than collective, more chaotic than peaceful, and more lost than found.

My understanding of the 1960s and early 70s is similar to Pynchon’s representation of it in his novels, in that it is not necessarily based on specific facts and dates, but rather consists of the general outlines of a culture in flux. The hippie movement is viewed as something that didn’t put into action all the revolutionary ideals that were behind it. They talked the talk, but they did more sitting than walking. Andrew Gordon’s “Smoking Dope with Thomas Pynchon: A Sixties Memoir” provides an important window into a decade that “boggle[d] the imagination and seem[ed] too incredible to be real” (Gordon 167). Gordon uses a brief encounter with the novelist, as well as the content of Pynchon’s novels, to describe the disillusionment of a decade that made many unfulfilled promises. Rob Wilson’s “On the Pacific Edge of Catastrophe, or Redemption: California Dreaming in Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*” takes the type of humanistic loss represented in Gordon’s essay and shifts to a more Marxist conception of the failure of the “*Preterite* (surfers, dopers, fun seekers, rockers, hippie riffraff, drifters, seekers, Indians, the poor multitudes, restless homemakers in little bars” (Wilson 217). Wilson also admits to the elusiveness of the era, quoting Joshua Clover’s *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This to Sing About*, “history can sometimes only appear as trace, as mood and affect—the very things

pop [music] is more apt to capture than the grain of quotidian life amid great upheavals, or the subtleties and grandeurs of history writ large” (Wilson 218). Pynchon’s own recollection of the time period’s historical narrative may be a bit hazy, as alluded to in the cover jacket of the novel, “[*Inherent Vice*] provides a classic illustration of the principle that if you remember the sixties, you weren’t there...or...if you were there, then you...or, wait, is it...” Funny as this blurb may be, it hints at the theme of detachment from everyday life and history that the novel grapples with.

This blurb is part of the larger publicity campaign around the novel that attempted to sell it as a personal reflection of the author. This approach peaked with the release of a movie trailer of sorts for the novel, narrated by Thomas Pynchon and uploaded onto YouTube by The Penguin Press on August 4, 2009. The blurb that goes along with the trailer emphasizes the author further: “Part noir, part psychedelic romp, all Thomas Pynchon—private eye Doc Sportello comes, occasionally, out of a marijuana haze to watch the end of an era as free love slips away and paranoia creeps in with the L.A. fog.” The trailer contains quick cuts of shots of open surf and sky clashing against claustrophobic fences and signs that denote private property and decay. It is filmed with a shaky camera, and with numerous shots that go in and out of focus: a P.O.V. of haziness and indecipherability. Pynchon, narrating as Doc, lackadaisically bemoans the changes in Gordita Beach’s urban geography since 1970, while trying to contextualize the story that the novel will reveal. The narration ends with Doc/Pynchon saying, “Maybe you’ll just want to read the book, *Inherent Vice*, Penguin Press, \$27.95...\$27.95, really!? That used to be like three weeks worth of groceries man. What year is this again?” Once again, this is a very funny auxiliary that reveals the serious themes of the novel. Pynchon/Doc is too detached and buzzed to notice the very passage of time, and there’s ambiguity of tense and place.

There's a sentence that shows up in the middle of *Inherent Vice*, during a scene when Doc needs to take immediate action, "No time like the present" (231). Of course, forces outside of his control enter the scene and sabotage his goal. But this sentence, in the context of the novel and Pynchon's literary career, is hilariously ironic. Depending on the perspective, there is no time but the present in Pynchon's work, and even that is tenuous (there is a detachment from the embodied experience of the past, and no sense of being an agent in the trajectory of historical materialism). There may be no present, only a constructed past (made to represent either false idealism, or to be superficially devoid of ideology), and an American future that is indiscriminate and up-in-the-air (either assumed to be a utopian pipe-dream of egalitarianism, or a fatalistic vision of fascism and oppressive group-think).<sup>5</sup> This tension is embodied through Pynchon's frequent gravitation around California.

L.A. is a space whose streets and highways are literally and figuratively paved over dead bodies, a space that exists as both a real geography and as a hyperreal symbol. In his analysis of the symbolic and racial geography of L.A. in "A Journey into the Minds of Watts," Pynchon uses the Watts riots as a point of departure for discussing the types of illusions created within the city: "For Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-colored magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks. It is basically a white Scene, and Illusion is everywhere in it" ("Mind of Watts").<sup>6</sup> Back in 1966,

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<sup>5</sup> One of the songs featured in the novel is Doris Day's version of "Que Sera, Sera," and it can be read as an anthem of withdrawal and negligence ("whatever will be, will be/ the future's not ours to see"). In the context of the novel, the lyrics of the song support a passive denial of responsibility within History, as opposed to celebrating the limits of foresight.

<sup>6</sup> This sentiment is echoed in *Inherent Vice*, "People in this town saw only what they'd all agreed to see, they believed what was on the tube or in the morning papers half of them read while they were driving to work on the

Pynchon was already reflecting on technology's stranglehold on human experience, something he explores with more complexity through his novels. Yet, he also comes across as a person that cannot help but professing—two decades after his Watts article—about how he hopes that “Road Runner cartoons” never leave the airwaves (*Slow Learner* 19). As many addicts can attest, knowing that there's a problem does not guarantee that something will be done about that problem. An awareness of this issue, even a thorough understanding, sometimes just perpetuates escapist behavior. Sometimes it's thrilling to engage in “bad” behavior, and sometimes escape is necessary...to a certain extent.

The consuming behaviors associated with television became a topic of discussion in Pynchon's 1993 *New York Times* article on sloth, “Nearer, my Couch, to Thee.”

Tales spun in idleness find us Tubeside, supine, chiropractic fodder, sucking it all in, re-enacting in reverse the transaction between dream and revenue that brought these colored shadows here to begin with so that we might feed, uncritically, committing the six other deadly sins in parallel, eating too much, envying the celebrated, coveting merchandise, lusting after images, angry at the news, perversely proud of whatever distance we may enjoy between our couches and what appears on the screen. (“The Deadly Sins”)

He also mentions the way that the remote control and VCR can provide the illusion of controlling and maybe even escaping time. This shift is hinted at in *Inherent Vice*, but most of the television sets require the characters to actually get up and change the station, so they often end up watching whatever comes on, being too high and unmotivated to get up. In his broader discussion of sloth as something that shifted from religious to economic connotations, he mentions that sloth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is viewed “as primarily political, a failure of public will allowing the introduction of evil policies and the rise of evil regimes, the worldwide fascist

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freeway, and it was all their dream about being wised up, about the truth setting them free. What good would Lemuria do them? Especially when it turned out to be a place they'd been exiled from too long ago to remember” (*Inherent Vice* 315).

ascendancy of the 1920's and 30's being perhaps Sloth's finest hour, though the Vietnam era and the Reagan-Bush years are not far behind."<sup>7</sup> There are opportunities for doing "good"—on the scale of both the private and public realms—but they are ignored. It is easier to do nothing and withdraw into a television-induced hibernation. The Tube is an abstract world in itself, one that was an avenue of escape during its cultural rise to ubiquity, becoming the most encompassing form of disengaged engagement within the United States.

As many critics have explored, the media philosophy of Marshall McLuhan was crucial in "framing" Pynchon's novels (McLuhan is also a figure inscribed into the countercultural mythology of the 1960s). Thomas Moore, in *The Style of Connectedness*, charts the similarities between Pynchon and McLuhan's views on the relation of media structures and sensory experience. But Moore also stresses that whereas McLuhan may have seen the presence of electronic media as a path to a unified utopia, Pynchon portrays media as dangerously consuming and potentially deceptive. Pynchon deals with lives that are "irremediably framed, multiply mediated, by complexly reified moirés of the projections, systems, and plots that life makes for itself" (Moore 15). Technological systems of broadcasting, with their ability to communicate diversionary products to a wide audience, are the most interesting and potentially destruction systems Pynchon focuses on (not as literally destructive as weapon systems, but closely cemented alongside them).

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<sup>7</sup> The only type of social activism that Doc is mentioned performing is in the summer of '68 (the same summer of the Student Revolution in France), when he is involved in a "demonstration against NBC's plans to cancel *Star Trek*," during which he and other angry viewers dress up as Dr. Spock in their attempt to save their beloved sci-fi fantasy (*Inherent Vice* 73). What Doc recalls most vividly from the experience is a Fast Food restaurant he finds (they would put a joint in between the buns of a hamburger). Consumption takes priority. Despite his deficiencies in particular social movements, Doc is a humanist at heart, caring deeply about the people in his life.

Television is an integral part of Pynchon's other novels, particularly *Vineland*, where it is explicitly seen as an agent of cultural failure, ossification, and detachment.<sup>8</sup> Smith's interpretation in particular (a response to Berressem) details the way that television becomes an alternate reality, a confined space in which time is seemingly frozen, creating a world of artifice and detaching the characters from history (Smith 119). At one point a character that represents the youthful rebellion of the 1980s chastises the problem with Zoyd's generation (those embodying the spirit of the '60s): "you believed in your revolution, put your lives right out there for it – but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute 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" (*Vineland* 373). In *Inherent Vice*, L.A. is described as a "city long devoted to illusory product," where "Circa 1970, 'adult' was no longer quite being defined as in times previous. Among those who could afford to, a strenuous mass denial of the passage of time itself was under way" (*Inherent Vice* 172).<sup>9</sup> While there are many factors that contribute to this idea, television is certainly presented as one of the ways that time is manipulated and maturity in development is slowed down.

Hand and hand with television is drug use in *Inherent Vice*, particularly marijuana. Looking outside of the text, Pynchon's stance on marijuana (and other recreational drugs) may seem ambiguous, but a critical view of the substance is not unprecedented in his novels, even if

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<sup>8</sup> See Berressem, Hanjo "Vineland: Everything under Control;" Olster, Stacey "When You're a (Nin)jette, You're a (Nin)jette All the Way—or Are You?: Female Filmmaking in *Vineland*;" Safer, Elaine "Pynchon's World and Its Legendary Past: Humor and the Absurd in a Twentieth-Century *Vineland*;" Slade, Joseph "Communication, Group Theory, and Perception in *Vineland*;" and Smith, Shawn "Simulated History: *Vineland* and Postmodern America."

<sup>9</sup> Though, in this context, the phrase is being mentioned in the narrative voice of a girl that is mentally ill, but this illness is posited as a symptom of a larger cultural disease, as opposed to an internal frame of reference that projects onto the milieu.

he and critics have provided mixed messages. This is an author who, according to Gordon, more or less chain-smoked joints and gave his ex-girlfriend a kilo of Mexican weed for a wedding present (Gordon 172). In 1985 Pynchon wrote about his experiences during the Beat movement, “I was hugely tickled by all forms of marijuana humor, though the talk back then was in inverse relation to the availability of that useful substance” (*Slow Learner* 8). It is vague what he means by “useful,” and whether he’s speaking universally or just about his own experiences in general. While he may have gained literary inspiration and a sense of self-actualization, the characters in his novels are more enslaved and limited than liberated (“stoners” who are able to retain the amount of knowledge and wisdom that Pynchon has tend to be exceptions to the rule).

Simply because the characters in his novels enjoy drug use doesn’t mean that Pynchon is condoning and celebrating the life-style. John Carvilll, in an incredibly insightful reading of *Inherent Vice*, missteps in assuming that it is “a celebration of the joys—and to hell with the downsides—of casual drug abuse....it’s evident that Pynchon’s attitude toward dope smoking is still located somewhere on a sliding scale between ‘tacit approval’ and ‘rabid evangelism.’” (“The Bong Goodbye”). David Cowart had also defined Pynchon’s presentation of drug use (referring primarily to *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*) as a metaphor for resistance to the dominant forms of consumer capitalism (Cowart 11). Yes, getting stoned may seem like good fun in the moment, but at what cost? Perhaps drugs are used as an escape from the “dominant forms” (though the explicit psychological motive depicted in Pynchon’s literature is “if it feels good: do it”), but they are just a different mode of co-optation. In his essay on Watts, Pynchon mentions that white youth are conditioned to use drugs as escape, integral to the constructed lifestyle, because the “L.A. Scene makes accessible to him so many different forms of it” (in this case hallucinogens, but marijuana as a substance has similar—if less pronounced—effects on

altering consciousness and crafting a structured experience of illusion) (“Mind of Watts”). Moore is one of the few writers I’ve encountered who understood Pynchon’s ambivalence toward drug abuse, even before the publication of the more explicit *Vineland*. He relates drugs to the broader theme of paranoia, seeing drug use in Pynchon’s earlier novels as evasions of both “rationalized life” and “whatever real chances there may be to make practical assaults on Their evil” (Moore 113).

While Pynchon’s drug habit is documented until at least *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it is unclear how late into his career he kept it up, and to what extent he justified the Dionysian impulses he lived through. By the time of *Inherent Vice*’s publication, the author may have been looking back at his previous lifestyle with a mixture of sentiment and regret (then again, it could be likely that—in his 70s—he was still having a toke). At the very least, Pynchon is aware of what is lost with too much time spent getting high. According to his friend Jules Siegel, Pynchon described the process of writing *Gravity’s Rainbow* to him, “I was so fucked up while I was writing it...that now I go back over some of those sequences and I can’t figure out what I could have meant” (“Who is Thomas Pynchon”). This sort of detachment echoes within the novel itself.

In viewing sections of *Gravity’s Rainbow* with the death knell of the 1960s and drugs-as-historical-escape in mind, there’s a thematic undercurrent to the 1973 novel that becomes more explicit in *Inherent Vice*. The gradual dissolution of Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is linked to the moment when—in his flight from powers unknown—he stumbles upon Säure Bummer<sup>10</sup> and a group of outcasts who are akin to beatniks or hippies transported back in time to war-torn

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<sup>10</sup> Säure being German for acid, which to stretch an interpretation, may be meant to invoke the other hippie drug of choice, L.S.D. His last name, Bummer, is usually associated with the hippie lexicon, meaning a disappointment or “buzz kill.” Säure is Slothrop’s Virgil in his descent into drug-fueled mock heroism (with a name like his, it’s bound to be a bad trip).

Europe, who get him high and are the catalyst for his Rocketman alter-ego (he later gets a mission to bring back six kilos of hash, fittingly during the Potsdam Conference, which is described more like a Hollywood premiere gala than a political summit).<sup>11</sup> A song called “The Doper’s Dream” shows up during his revelry, about a Jinni that brings the singer to a land of narcotic excess; the Jinni turns out to be an undercover narcotics detective that busts him (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 375). The paranoia towards narcotic agents, crucial strands in both *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice*, had already been implied in Pynchon’s magnum opus. This kind of cultural unrest, with the idealism of a supposedly care-free life being confronted by systematic oppression and duplicity, is briefly acknowledged by Doc: “...it was like the beach, where you lived in a climate of unquestioning hippie belief, pretending to trust everybody while always expecting to be sold out” (*Inherent Vice* 225).

Near the final descent of *Gravity’s Rainbow* narrative, there’s a surreal scene between Slothrop and his father, as they have a conversation about “screwing in,” which involves connecting a direct electric plug into the head (which also transfers wave signals). This seems like an oblique reference to the television apparatus, contrasting it with drug use:

Maybe there *is* a Machine to take us away, take us completely, suck us out through the electrodes out of the skull ‘n’ into the Machine and live there forever with all the other soul’s it’s got stored there. *It* could decide who it would suck out, a-and when. Dope never gave *you* immortality. *You* hadda come back, every time, into a dying hunk of smelly *meat*! But *We* can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified Electroworld. (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 713)

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<sup>11</sup> Note the “Sloth” in Slothrop’s name, and Pynchon’s later explication of the sin, “...sorrow, deliberately self-directed, turned away from God, a loss of spiritual determination that then feeds back on in to the process, soon enough producing what are currently known as guilt and depression, eventually pushing us to where we will do anything, in the way of venial sin and bad judgment, to avoid the discomfort” (“The Deadly Sins” Online). While there are other explanations for Slothrop’s narrative fragmentation, his drugged out escapism could be read in relation to the crippling and detached effects of the hippie medication-of-choice (it may be a simplification to see parallels between Pynchon’s position in L.A. during his writing of *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Slothrop’s absorption into a counterculture, but there are many other similarities between the author and his pseudo-protagonist).

This passage is crucial for understanding *Inherent Vice*, showing an attempt at transcendence through immersion in drugs and television (or a type of technological connectedness that suggests a televisual cog); by plugging into a system of undifferentiated bliss, the basic cognitive experience of both forms of escape. *Gravity's Rainbow's* initial title was *Mindless Pleasures*, and it is safe to assume that Pynchon was surrounded by the unreflective hedonism hinted at in that name. Bigfoot, in a moment of stark social commentary, tells Doc, “We’ve found the gateway to hell, and it’s asking far too much of your L.A. civilian not to want to go crowding on through it, horny and giggling as always, looking for that latest thrill” (*Inherent Vice* 209). Like moths flying towards the flame of false salvation, the spaced-out pleasure-seekers may be drifting toward self-immolation.

On one level of representation, *Inherent Vice* depicts a specific sub-culture and its failure. The characters in the novel may be influenced by people Pynchon knew during his time in California, people who were stuck in a detached loop of paranoia and addicted to consumption, while feigning to be against the forces that fostered consumerism. An acquaintance of Pynchon during his time in Manhattan Beach recalls how the author “studied people,” claiming that personal anecdotes between them showed up in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* (“Thomas Pynchon and the South Bay”).<sup>12</sup> If any of the events or characters seem too absurd to be based on real events, keep in mind Gordon’s view that “The truth of the sixties is stranger than fiction” (Gordon 168).

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<sup>12</sup> Gordon also notes Pynchon’s penchant for voyeuristic inspiration, “In the sixties, Pynchon lived a peripatetic life; as in the Beatles song, he got by and he got high with the help of his friends. Throughout the decade, he was close to the life of the counterculture, absorbing its values and smoking its weed, but always listening and observing intently, storing sensations for later use” (Gordon 177).

Pynchon is also presenting a picture of broader cultural malaise, one that seems even more rampant today. On the figurative level, the novel represents loss and longing; drugs and television being an illusory reprieve from the claustrophobia of a society becoming more confined and controlled. There's a flight toward atomization, a desire to live in the fractured image and in an alternative time, drugged and dragged backwards to a prelapsarian state that never was.

Thunderclap Newman's song "Something in the Air" portrays the counterculture as a unifying force that is riding the crest of revolution, an image of flower power becoming militant and triumphing over evil.<sup>13</sup> In the L.A. depicted in *Inherent Vice* (after a price-tag was put on the "free love" culture) the air is saturated with the disorientating smog of marijuana and the hypnotizing allure of television waves (the revolution will not be televised).

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<sup>13</sup> Near the end of *Inherent Vice*, Doc sees a group of people listening to the song, and wonders "how many would have recognized revolution if it had come up and said howdy," expressing his newly appreciated sense of disillusionment toward his society's rigid power relations (*Inherent Vice* 356).

## Chapter 2: “Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out”<sup>14</sup> – The Interrelated Numbing of Television and Drugs

“I think part of the allure of both drugs and entertainment is escape, yes, from my problems and my life, and having to be stuck in here [points to head]; I can pretend I’m James Bond. It seems fine over the short haul, as a way of life is doesn’t work all that well, no?...The more general allure of drugs...it’s a pretty natural extension of corporate capitalist logic, which is: I wanna feel exactly the way I wanna feel—which is good—for exactly this long, and so I will exchange a certain amount of cash for this substance...but it’s all of course a lie, because the control gradually goes away and it stops being because I want to do it, and becomes that I feel I need to do it.”

-David Foster Wallace, Edited Version of ZDFmediatek interview, 2003, YouTube

As I’ve begun to tease through in the last chapter, Thomas Pynchon creates a link between the effects of herd-like participation in the world of drugs and television in *Inherent Vice*. With drugs, I am primarily referencing excessive and constant marijuana intake, but Pynchon’s narrative also covers LSD, amphetamines, cocaine, and heroin. Broadcast television is the most consuming form of mass-media, although music is a pivotal undercurrent. Even though many films are mentioned, there is almost no reference to the communal process of going to a movie-theater.<sup>15</sup> The only time that anyone is mentioned going to the theater is when Doc

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<sup>14</sup> *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Dir. Terry Gilliam, 1998), Raoul Duke, “We are all wired into a survival trip now. No more of that speed that fueled the 60’s. That was the fatal flaw in Tim Leary’s trip. He crashed around America selling ‘consciousness expansion’ without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him seriously...All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy peace and understanding for three bucks a hit. But their loss and failure is ours too. What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped create...a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody...or at least some force—is tending the light at the end of the tunnel.” This type of disillusionment should be kept in mind throughout the trajectory of Pynchon’s novel, in regard to other factors of the counterculture movement in the 1960s.

<sup>15</sup> Although, in having a V-2 rocket crash into a movie theater at the beginning and end of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, perhaps the theater is not a sanctuary, but it at least provides “the comfort, to touch the person next to you” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 775-776).

sees a double feature of *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (Dir. Sergio Leone, 1966) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (Dir. Ronald Neame, 1969), and Doc explicitly reflects very little about them aside from the “big tits” in *Jean Brodie* and liking Lee Van Cleef in Leone’s picture.<sup>16</sup> Doc, having become accustomed to mindless pleasures, interprets these movies through a primal lens. Most of the cinematic texts alluded to in the novel were engaged with through television viewing, and it is that mode of mass-consumed spectatorship that influences his cognition.<sup>17</sup>

In Pynchon’s world, television is not just a technological apparatus; it is as a quasi-spiritual force. The “Tube,” as it is often referred to, becomes a vehicle for regressive ecstasy, in the same manner as drugs. Characters stare “tubeward,” and approach both television viewing and drug use (which are often concurrent activities) as religious rituals. However, while there may be some mental expansion that comes from these events, Pynchon shows, again and again, that any epiphanies gained are inherently empty and without intent. Utilizing drugs and television may seem like an escape from the “system,” but they are just more devious forms in which the system prevents people from knowing and acting. Characters are prevented from playing an actual role in Pynchon’s world, instead becoming—as Doc sings near the end of the

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<sup>16</sup> Sergio Leone’s epic Spaghetti Western is actually very similar to Thomas Pynchon’s novel. It saturates itself with genre elements to a level of excess that borders on parody, and has a very fun and exhilarating tone. Yet underneath its style, humor and seeming amorality is a stark critique of contemporary capitalist society. The film reveals a stark world where the sanctity of life and ethics are disregarded due to blind greed, and also contains a strong anti-war message through a Civil War landscape meant to invoke Vietnam.

<sup>17</sup> Since movies in a theater gain their revenues through ticket prices, the kinds of films that are shown on television need to attract and maintain the support of corporate advertising to be financially viable. As such, the form and content of films are altered. Any content deemed offensive is edited out, the aspect ratio and quality of the image is degraded, and the running length is condensed. See David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s *Film Art: An Introduction*; Chapter 1, “Film as Art: Creativity, Technology, and Business.”

novel—“bit actors” (*Inherent Vice* 337).<sup>18</sup> There’s an illusion of collectivity, but they are actually led to participate in a realm of self-absorption and neurotic ignorance.

A throwaway character’s name and occupation associate the narcotic effects of television and drugs early on in the novel.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Buddy Tubeside works on the bottom floor of Doc’s office, and his practice consists of “vitamin B12” injections, “a euphemism for the physician’s own blend of amphetamines.” One of the types of clientele that Doc sees repeatedly lined up for Tubeside’s treatment includes “actors with casting calls to show up at” (13). Those who constantly use narcotics to get through the day take a daily pilgrimage to someone whose name suggests both a friend and someone that has a tube constantly on their side (your “Buddy” surely wouldn’t lock you in to a cycle of addiction and enslavement, just to make a profit...right? Neither would your constant companion, the tube...right?).<sup>20</sup>

Since some of Dr. Tubeside’s clients are the same kind of people (actors) who are used as props within the types of visual entertainment disseminated through television, there is a figurative cycle of enslavement. Influenced by a discussion with a pimp (who aspires to be a talent agent; Doc notes that there is not much of a difference), Doc realizes the “vertical integration” of the L.A. centered drug trade (the same organization that is behind the influx of

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<sup>18</sup> Pirandello writes, “The film actor...feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence...The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera” (Benjamin 800). This kind of tension and alienation seems to encapsulate the experience of those in the novel, suggesting that lack of boundaries between the performances on screen and the performances of daily life.

<sup>19</sup> A similar type of linguistic association also occurs later on in the novel, when Doc is offered lines of coke from a Dentist who tells him, “No worries, it’s on the house, as the TV antenna man always sez” (*Inherent Vice* 168).

<sup>20</sup> Pynchon may also be invoking the well-trodden phrase, “the country’s going down the tubes.” This phrase is often used by conservatives to bemoan the perceived and unrecoverable decline of the United States, and the novel clearly shows that television obsession is having a crippling affect on his characters and their engagement with society.

drugs in L.A. is also behind a rehabilitation clinic), “Get them coming and going, twice as much revenue and no worries about new customers—as long as American life was something to be escaped from, the cartel would always be sure of a bottomless pool of customers” (192). There seems to be no escape from pacifying control. Berressem has already detailed a similar type of ubiquitous state-sponsored control in *Vineland*, quoting the passage, ““They just let us forget. Give us too much to process, fill up every minute, keep us distracted, it’s what the Tube is for”” (Berressem 232-233).<sup>21</sup> There is a detachment of mind and body in that novel, with characters who understand the over-stimulated paralysis of being a United States citizen. However, the characters in *Inherent Vice* have yet to fully understand the trap that they are inadvertently falling into, and would rather repress than confess.

Whenever something occurs that challenges a character’s hermetically-sealed world, he/she often takes sanctuary in being high or watching television. When “junior hell-raisers” invade Gordita Beach during a college spring-break, Denis responds, “I’m sticking close to the tube till it’s over.” He and Doc then immediately smoke weed (257). When a character declares, “Ain’t like this is the Mob. Not even the pretend Mob you people think is the mob,” the next two sentences are, “Doc fumbled for a joint. ‘I’m not following’” (247).<sup>22</sup> The kind of preconceived notions fostered by television and drugged-out paranoia are directly upended. As he does perpetually, Doc uses marijuana to blot out some concept he’d prefer to not think about.

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<sup>21</sup> This is said by Mucho Maas in *Vineland*, a character who also appears in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which his marriage and world-views are irrecoverably changed through high intake of LSD.

<sup>22</sup> Soon after this exchange Doc—maybe not explicitly aware of Puck’s influence—plays with the a couple Deputy DAs that interview him, saying, “...but in terms of Mob folks, if that’s what you’re getting at, were they wearing black fedoras, making with Eddie Robinson remarks? no, not that I know of?” (282).

The combined engagement with television and drugs can provide moments of insight into the societal machinations that surround the characters, but they are often inappropriately timed and disregard more pressing matters. This is best represented through the character of Doc's lawyer, Sauncho Smilax, a constantly stoned television philosopher. Sauncho's name can be read as a postmodern equivalent to Cervantes' Sancho Panza, as he is the main confidant and source of counsel to Doc's "Don Quixote." The roles are mostly reversed, though, with Pynchon's Sauncho spending much of his time charging towards the wind-mills in his mind, and Doc attempting to ground him. Sauncho also echoes Dr. Gonzo, the brilliant but insane lawyer to Raul Duke in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (I've only seen Terry Gilliam's 1997 film adaptation). When Doc is detained by the police, he is giving a "three-minute call" to his lawyer. Sauncho is irritated that Doc is disturbing his television viewing and goes into a diatribe about cartoons, and Doc runs out of time (28).<sup>23</sup> Sauncho is ripped (manically intoxicated on cannabis fumes) and engaged in deep thought, but this doesn't do his client any good. In the midst of a conversation that will eventually turn out to be a linchpin in Doc's investigation, Sauncho breaks off mid-thought to watch his soap opera.<sup>24</sup> He updates Doc as if the trials and tribulations of the show were happening to people he knows personally.

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<sup>23</sup> He actually gets at a pretty astute point in regard to the assumptions we make with stagnant media images, through seeing a Disney cartoon in which Donald Duck gets stubble. Sauncho questions whether the audience should assume that Donald needs to wake up every day and shave. To him, this seemingly insignificant moment fundamentally changes spectatorship.

<sup>24</sup> The first person I remember being obsessed with "their stories"—as soap operas are often referred to, expressing an invested ownership of an external narrative—was my grandmother. I always had the bleak and condescending thought that "older people" were fascinated by soap operas because of nostalgia for youth, most of the characters being young and virile (of course, there would often be the older and more restrainedly melodramatic characters). But a soap opera strikes me as a form of escape for any age bracket, particularly the disenfranchised that would prefer heightened emotions and outlandish fictional plots to the tedium and repetition of their everyday life (airing in the late morning to early afternoons, the assumed audience of soap operas are the wistfully unemployed).

Sauncho's television engagement is presented as so unmediated that Sauncho watches with his face planted directly against the screen, as to limit the "real world's" encroachment into the periphery of his vision.

The connection between television and drugs goes to an absurd and literal level near the end of the novel, after Doc stashes a kilo of heroin in Denis's apartment:

Only then did he happen to notice that the carton he'd pulled out of that dumpster in the dark had once held a twenty-five-inch color TV set, a detail he had no cause to think about til next day when he dropped in on Denis about lunchtime and found him sitting, to all appearances serious and attentive, in front of the professionally packaged heroin, now out of its box, and staring at it, as it turned out he'd been doing for some time.

'It said on the box it was a television set,' Denis explained.

'And you couldn't resist. Didn't you check first to see if there was something you could plug in?'

'Well I couldn't find any power cord, man, but I figured it *could be* some new type of set you didn't need one?'

'Uh huh and what...' why was he pursuing this? 'were you watching, when I came in?'

'See, my theory is, is it's like one of these educational channels? A little slow maybe, but no worse than high school...'

'Yes Denis thanks, I will just have a hit off that if you don't mind...' (339)

Once Doc gets high with Denis, even he begins to see colors and shapes start to appear on the heroin package, with eyes "glued" forward.<sup>25</sup> Other friends of Doc's show up, and they all sit in front of the package, eating and "gazing". Denis then refers to what they are watching as a "documentary," and in a way it is (340). But it is him and the others who are embedded in a "meta-documentary," one focused on consumers implicitly agreeing to accept the lie in front of them. They are the spectacle, existing as "living" examples of their generation's failure, prisoners to mass consumption, who have developed Stockholm syndrome. Having numbed out

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<sup>25</sup> My friend took a class with Trinity's Professor Johnny Williams, in which they were assigned to stare at a turned-off television set for 30 minutes, to see what kind of odd phenomenology occurs during engagement with the technological object itself.

the pain of being human, the characters become docile beasts for the reader to “look” at from afar.

The heroin/fantasy-TV-set was planted in Doc’s car by his cop friend/enemy Bigfoot, and we are to presume that the shady and ubiquitous organization it belongs to (the Masonic *Golden Fang*) would most likely kill Doc and his friends if he did not return it. Doc has to tear himself away from the group-delusion, and calls himself the “bad guy” for needing to get the package out of there. His friend Jade wants to wait for them to “see what happens” in the illusory program, as if they expect something different from an object of dramatic stasis (340). Even though Doc’s life and the safety of his friends are on the line, it takes tremendous effort to escape from his engrained behaviors, despite the blunt metaphor of the opiate-like stupor caused by passive spectatorship staring him in the face.

In opposition to the electronic media of television, it tends to be through the use of mass-mediated music (which acts as a sort of background score, and provides cultural and thematic signifiers in the novel) when moments of clarity in regard to cultural enslavement arise.<sup>26</sup> It is not that the mode of experience (usually the radio of a car, giving a soundtrack to the framed visuals of driving) is not also pacifying, but the songs presented throughout the novel often act as a technological Greek Chorus, commenting on themes that their listeners may be oblivious to. As Doc is cruising off the freeway, a song by the fictional band Spotted Dick (from Britain) plays on the radio, titled “Long Trip Out.” This song seems to speak directly to Doc’s existence in the novel, yet he does not reflect on the content at all. It contains the lyrics, “Goin around in this peculi-ar mood, wond’rin/ How did he get back here in the World/ With the freaked-out hippies

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<sup>26</sup> As part of the novel’s film-like publicity campaign, Thomas Pynchon coordinated with Amazon.com to release a soundtrack of songs referenced in the book.

and the Dopesmokin girls,” and “Don’t even know who/ He’s hangin with here, and that/ Joint you been smoking that you thought would help/ It’s just makin things worse, you’re even/ Foolin yourself...And you won’t know how, to/ Get back home again” (198-199). Marijuana and television may seem like a salve to Doc’s ennui, but his perpetual reliance on them makes him a slave. His “smoke-screen” keeps him in a fog of ignorance.

There is a moment when Doc has a deep epiphany about the insulating shift in musical culture, yet it doesn’t directly cross his mind that what he realizes might also apply to the cult of television and drugs. From my experience, addicts tend always to have an unconscious awareness of the oppression caused by their vices but often project those fears onto a safer outlet. The epiphany occurs when Doc is being driven through Hollywood and passes Wallach’s Music City (he is over-stimulated on cocaine at this point):

In every window, one by one as Japonica crept by, appeared a hippie freak or small party of hippie freaks, each listening on headphones to a different rock ’n’ roll album and moving around at a different rhythm. Like Denis, Doc was used to outdoor concerts where thousands of people congregated to listen to music for free, and where it all got sort of blended together into a single public self, because everybody was having the same experience. But here, each person was listening in solitude, confinement and mutual silence, and some of them later at the register would actually be spending money to hear rock ’n’ roll. It seemed to Doc like some strange kind of dues or payback. More and more lately he’d been brooding about this great collective dream that everybody was being encouraged to stay tripping around in. Only now and then would you get an unplanned glimpse at the other side. (176).

Doc’s friend Denis<sup>27</sup> attempts to flash peace signs at the oblivious listeners, and makes an unintentionally brilliant association: “Far out. Maybe they’re all stoned. Hey! That must be why they call those things *headphones!*” (*head* as in good weed, and also as in a metonymy for the brain). Technological advancement and cultural/human advancement seem to be inverted. There

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<sup>27</sup> Denis is probably a contender for the biggest burn-out and space cadet within Pynchon’s cavalcade of substance-abusers. This is no small accomplishment.

is a cog-like system of individuals who are paradoxically becoming more compartmentalized from each other, and let consumerism detach them from embracing a collective experience. Those music listeners represent individuals trapped in their own minds, and confuse a dream-like delusion for the waking life. Yet Doc's "unplanned glimpse" at that point in the novel has yet to give him a full realization of what his personal habits are doing to him and his milieu.

There is a metaphoric presence of zombification throughout the novel (Sauncho's favorite drink is a Tequila Zombie), taken to extremes when a household of Tube-obsessed, drug-infused rockers literally become zombies (132-134). Those that live in the cocoon of television and drugs are the walking dead, having the complexity of choice and freedom reduced to an unnatural drive to consume. The metaphor of the remnants of countercultural death has precedent in *Vineland*, as Madeline Ostrander interprets the "Thanatoids" (a group of hippie ghosts in exile) as the failure of the "hippy project," viewing the novel ultimately as the supplanting of the "hippy ideology" with the "cult of technology" (Ostrander 125-129). These "living dead" spend most of their time watching television and regretting their past limitations. Similarly, Pynchon uses *Inherent Vice* to investigate a problem that—while seemingly particular to a certain cultural type—in indicative of a larger fragmentation in historical narrative, a detachment from the present moment and a reliance on fabricated nostalgia. The repeated patterns found in drug use and television entertainment are signifiers of something far more complex and nefarious.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Benjamin's critique of the state of art in 1935 seems more applicable to the world Pynchon mediates on, "Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (Benjamin 811).

## Chapter 3: “Ceaselessly into the Past”<sup>29</sup> – Doped up on Nostalgic Escapism

“In a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.”

-Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” pgs 285-286

The “comfortably-numbing” effect of drugs and television is not the only quality of those avenues of flight that prevent people in Pynchon’s world from true engagement with their surroundings. The novel also focuses on the way that characters get stuck in a cycle of repetition and view their world through a lens of nostalgic motifs—mainly due to their immersion in television and substance abuse.<sup>30</sup> Outside of the nostalgic structure and tone of the novel as a whole, many of the characters in the story become stuck in patterns of manufactured behavior and of looking backwards—particularly Doc (as the novel’s narrator, much of the pastiche could be contributed to the way he views the world). Substance abuse, aside from the way that it keeps the present moment hazy, also tends to make people grasp onto a fleeting past (from my

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<sup>29</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is a pre-electronic-media take on the way that immersion in detached nostalgia and not letting go of a past moment can lead to both illusory self-construction and literal self-destruction. Like Pynchon, Fitzgerald uses a personal story to reflect on larger issues in regard to the United States’ historical narrative. The spot where Gatsby and Nick view the elusive green light of the future becomes an abstraction. Fitzgerald writes, “He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” Pynchon focuses on the opposite coast as a symbol for the vestigial undercurrents of Manifest Destiny.

<sup>30</sup> Nostalgia itself becomes a drug; and many sober characters fall into its clutches. Bigfoot is obsessed with Wild West paraphernalia. It is revealed that his resentment and uptightness throughout the novel is due to the murder of his partner and its orchestrated cover-up, which included the involvement of his police department. He cannot have the retributive showdown he desires—this is done vicariously through Doc—so surrounding himself with signifiers of the Old West may help create a safe-zone where he can sublimate his fantasies of justice.

experience, constant substance abuse makes a person have to frequently remind himself of previous incidents in order to retain the memories of them; along with watching television, the most frequent pastime of stoners tends to be telling stories about past events).<sup>31</sup> Artifacts of mass-media are inherently tied to a past moment, represented as fossilized remnants of fictional events that never happened—viewed by spectators that don't have the ability to fully discriminate between worlds. These factors, along with Pynchon's use of metaphor, combine to create a social milieu that one character describes as "The Endless Bummer" (47). Nostalgia (something that fosters, and is fostered by, repetition and backwards thinking) represents a longing for the past in order to blot out the grim realities of the present and immediate future. This form of escape is a way that Pynchon's novel deals with broader issues of time, memory, and the trajectory of history.

Television and drug use are used to deny time and place, as I began to argue in my first chapter. Ralph Harper's *Nostalgia: An Existential Exploration of Longing and Fulfilment in the Modern Age*, released in the mid 1960s, presents nostalgia as an attempt to assuage modern alienation, as an "escape from the tyranny of impersonal time and face-less society" (Harper 9). Nostalgia contains the feelings of homesickness and anonymity, and relies on simplified narratives to rekindle belief in justice (Harper's example in his text is the fairy story). Harper uses the analogy of Sleeping Beauty to describe the sense of waiting and detachment inherent in the nostalgic. There's a desire to be recognized and feel a sense of presence, but done through a mode that requires concealment and a sense of absence. The detour of nostalgia may be

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<sup>31</sup> When Doc reflects on a past experience with his ex-girlfriend, Pynchon notes, "Being the site of a classic dope misadventure, [it] had remained permanently entered in his memory" (167). The physical and mental obsession with marijuana adds emotional resonance to memories of events that revolve around it.

beneficial, if a person is able to maintain presence and look toward the future, which those in Pynchon's world have difficulty accomplishing.

Characters in *Inherent Vice* paradoxically fall prey to nostalgia for ideas and notions that are spread by the technologically "progressive" vehicle of television. Carvill has already alluded to the ways that *Inherent Vice* fits into the previous uses of film/television archetypes within Pynchon's earlier work. Characters emulate the behaviors, gestures, and dialogue of visual narratives. Yet, he doesn't quite dig deep enough in understanding what it is about the nature of television (being the main technological mode in which images are digested) that keeps spectators stuck in a performance hall of mirrors. Carvill does note the high prevalence of references to movies from "Hollywood's golden age" ("The Bong Goodbye").

References to cinematic entertainment—particularly older films from the 1930s up to the early '60s—are infused within the literal and metaphoric landscapes of the novel. A character moves like "an assassin in a kung fu" movie (*Inherent Vice* 61), someone buys the exact white loafers worn by the titular villain in the 1962 James Bond film *Dr. No* (118), a woman speaks in an affectation of "an old-movie society-lady screech" (135), a casino owner is described as "a banker in an old movie" (238), a setting is described as looking like "glass mattes in old Technicolor movies" (189). Movement, clothing, speaking, demeanor, and the lived environment are all experienced via a filmic frame of reference. It is sometimes ambiguous whether the actions described are from characters who have internalized these behaviors, or if Doc—being a TV junkie—just invests his perceptions with a media schema. Keeping in mind the almost constant stream of marijuana that flows through Doc's consciousness, a media-infused paranoia would be suitable, but he also exists in a world that Pynchon intentionally crafts as a medley of Hollywood (including broadcast television) patterns. Characters also self-reflexively comment

on their situations being like a work of visual entertainment, and make assumptions based on that, as when Doc comments on Bigfoot's plan to steal evidence, "I saw the movie, man, and as I recall, that character comes to a bad end" (328). The future is predetermined by narrative expectations.

The world of the novel is so atomistic that nostalgia is not just represented as a longing for previous decades (mediated via older films, TV series, and music), but as a desire to return back to objects of previous consumption (whether it be a joint or a favorite TV show). Both the radio and TV sets of *Inherent Vice* contain marathons, and there are many references to television reruns. Characters keep cycling back to the past, whether it's through programs that focus on a past setting, or by watching entertainment they've already seen.<sup>32</sup> There is an overabundance of references to loops in the novel, literal and metaphoric. When Doc gets hassled by FBI agents, Pynchon writes, "It was hard for Doc not to imagine these two as surf Nazis doomed to repeat a film loop of some violent but entertaining beach-movie wipeout" (73). Moments repeat, and characters are stuck in audiovisual patterns of pastiche.

Doc sees the world through a cloud of smoke that keeps him propelled backwards. Pynchon establishes Doc's regressive mindset through "doper's memory" and "media memory." Doper's memory is mentioned whenever Doc realizes that he has forgotten something crucial to his forward moving case of investigating what happened to Mickey Wolfmann (the missing land developer that is the impetus of the plot). This cognitive fracturing makes him reread similar lines of thought, and his pot smoking often gets him reminiscing about his failed relationship

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<sup>32</sup> Maintaining the novel's walking dead metaphor, Pynchon writes about the film *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), "He had seen this zombie picture a hundred times and still got confused by the ending, so he spent the news hour rolling joints to help him through, especially with the calypso singing, but somehow despite his best efforts fell asleep in the middle, as so often before" (261).

with Shasta, rather than thinking about what the actual elements of the case might mean. Doc's melancholic and lovelorn regret is enabled by the music he likes to listen to (country standards, songs about optimistic and pure love).

“Media-memory” describes the way that Doc maps out his experience along the iconography of filmed entertainment and song, and is more reliable than his recollection of events that actually happened to him. It is first explicitly mentioned when Doc encounters Agents Borderline and Flatweed eating (in synch), “Well, Doc supposed, the FBI did have to eat someplace. He searched his media memory for instances of Inspector Lewis Erskine ever eating anything, and came up blank” (222). When Doc first sees the agents, he jokes, “Gotta say I've always admired you guys, eight P.M. every Sunday night, wow, I never miss an episode!” (72). Media-memory becomes more reliable, consisting of easily digested images. These are patterns that can be re-enacted and perceived easier, but simplify the complexities of embodied experience in consumer society. After a young woman shows up at Doc's office (like the femme fatale of a Film *Noir*; a scenario that is depicted several times in the novel), he expects a “romantic smoke sequence along the lines of *Now, Voyager* (1942),” only to be disappointed by the brevity of the moment and a lack of sentimentality (his primal desires—represented by an erection—are still enflamed, even if his nostalgic idealism is doused) (146-147).

Doc is often called out for his “old-fashioned” ways. When puzzled in regard to being offered marijuana from Bigfoot in exchange for being a police informant, Bigfoot chastises him, “Try to drag your consciousness out of that old-time hard-boiled dick era, this is the Glass House wave of the future we're in now” (33). This occurs right after Doc thinks about the lieutenant as “Right out of the background of some *Adam-12* episode, a show which Bigfoot had in fact moonlighted on once or twice” (32). Doc, who was influenced to become a P.I. based on

Hollywood Film *Noir* from the 1940s and '50s, dismisses the contemporary (as in 1970) line-up of police procedurals as propaganda, yet he never questions the validity of his own image-indoctrinated views.

Media-memory is not just exhibited by stoners or through recollections of moving images, as the need to encapsulate the past into an image is shared by many other types throughout the novel. Hope Carlington, a former heroin-addict, relies on Polaroids to remember the time with her husband and the father of her child, Coy (who is presumed dead at this point, yet Hope thinks he is still alive).<sup>33</sup> She shows Doc the pictures, saying, “I should’ve probably thrown ‘em all away a long time ago. Detach, right? move on, hell, I’m always lecturing everybody else to. But Ammie likes them...and she should have something anyhow, when she gets older, to remind her. Don’t you think?” Doc reflects on how “Polaroids have no negatives and the life of the prints is limited,” and notes that the colors of the pictures have already degraded. He wishes that he had Polaroids that represented every minute of his life, stored in a warehouse for posterity (42). Clearly his memory is too fragmented by being “pickled in cannabis fumes” for him to retain the passing moments of his life. Yet an imagistic memory as represented through Polaroids is doomed to degrade.

During this sequence Hope’s daughter Amethyst<sup>34</sup> (Ammie), is watching a *Mighty Mouse* episode in the background, and the sound of the television interjects Doc and Hope’s

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<sup>33</sup> Coy is alive, taken in by an organization meant to represent COINTELPRO. He sobers up through a method of controlling addiction called, “the Higher Discipline,” described as “more demanding than religious or athletic or military discipline because of the abyss you had to dare successfully every moment of every day” (300). This is a methodology that demands presence, and an acceptance of the dark aspects of everyday life, unmediated by a spiritual or quasi-spiritual safety-net.

<sup>34</sup> According to Merriam-Webster, Amethyst is from the Greek *amethystos*, which means a “remedy against drunkenness;” reflecting her parent’s hope that her birth would set them “straight.”

conversation. After Doc takes a photo and prepares to leave, Amethyst runs into the room and sings the theme song of the cartoon, “Here I am...to save the day!” The young girl is already emulating elements of mass-media tropes.

Hope—in her discussion of the motives behind heroin addiction—gets at some of the bigger issues of the novel’s milieu: “...all we saw was freedom—from that endless middle-class cycle of choices that are no choices at all—a world of hassle reduced to one simple issue of scoring” (38). The bourgeois lifestyle contained choices that were just more of the same, but heroin seemed like a better alternative due to its all encompassing simplicity. She is aware of the blotting out effects of repetition, when—in a different context—she mentions, “They kept using exactly the same phrases, over and over, I mean, talk about denial” (41). This is right after Doc thinks about a “particular kind of disconnected denial” that he had frequently seen amongst dopers, in regard to facing death (an unavoidable signifier of mortality and the irrecoverable effects of time).<sup>35</sup> They wouldn’t want to believe that their loved ones died, and would come up “with all kinds of alternative stories so it wouldn’t have to be true” (40).

Ultimately, drugs and television create these alternative stories that discombobulate the spectator’s sense of time and place. An important show in the novel is *Dark Shadows* (referenced at least three separate times), a trippy and campy horror soap-opera.<sup>36</sup> Amongst many of its unconventional plots, there are strands that are relevant to *Inherent Vice*: time travel, getting trapped in time, exile, immortality, and the relation of images (although paintings instead of moving pictures) to the past. Pynchon mentions that the “parallel time” plotline—

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<sup>35</sup> He attributes this to someone’s astrological explanation of young dope-fiends being born between “the dopers’ planet” and “the planet of rude surprise.”

<sup>36</sup> Fittingly, Tim Burton’s surreal film adaptation of *Dark Shadows* is coming out May, 2012. From the trailer, the film is set in 1972, and seems to have a very self-reflexive revelry of pastiche, with a nostalgic aesthetic.

incomprehensible to those with their “wits about them”—is easily followed by dopers, and to them “it seemed basically to mean that the same actors were playing two different roles, but if you’d gotten absorbed enough, you tended to forget that these people were actors” (128). The “parallel time” plotline is actually not as simple as that explanation, but this section still shows the escapist and time manipulating effects of drugs and television, as investigated through a TV show that also deals with the concept of the confinements of the past.

Aside from the broad concept of detaching from linear time, television is used as a particular escape from the historical context of 1970. Shasta describes the reverberations that went throughout the Hollywood starlet community after the Manson murders: “Once-overs you’d found ways to ignore now had you looking for the particular highlight off some creep’s eyes that would send you behind double and triple locks to a room lit only by the TV screen, and whatever was in the fridge to last you till you felt together enough to step outside again” (309). Charles Manson is a specter that haunts the novel as a symbol of the dissolving counterculture. Television is a flattened tunnel of escape from the Manson-inspired fear, which can contain the hectic consciousness of someone that’s tweaked out. By traveling to a world of false control, the spectator can get the pacification of nostalgia for the rigid and seemingly eternal archetypes presented by many television programs.

One of the most referenced pop-culture characters in the novel is Godzilla (there are several Godzilla references in *Vineland*, as well, with the creature possibly crushing a factory within the “lived world” of the novel). This, more than any of the other entertainments used, relates to the countercultural denial of history. The original film *Godzilla* (Dir. Ishior Honda, 1954) was an effective parable about the fear of the atomic age, using the havoc of a radiated monster to reflect on the rupturing moment in which the U.S. dropped two nuclear bombs on

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Cold war fear about the presence of atomic weaponry was constantly in the backdrop of the 1960s, yet Pynchon strategically avoids having too many direct references to it in *Inherent Vice*. The most vivid connection is when Doc gets stoned and watches the made-for-TV movie *Godzilligan's Island*, a fictitious combination in which the castaways of *Gilligan's Island* are terrorized by the lizard. Godzilla, something that symbolizes a real global threat, becomes a mad-cap farce. Doc loses track of the movie (i.e. passes out from being too high) and awakens to see Henry Kissinger on the *Today* show saying, “Vell, den, ve should chust *bombp* dem, schouldn't we” (246). There is a faint echo of the real fear that is occluded by pop culture.

The more metaphysical qualities of television are made explicit after a pivotal shift in the novel's narrative and thematic trajectory, when Doc is driven out of Las Vegas by his friend Tito.<sup>37</sup> Out in the desert, they search through “Arrepentimiento,” a sophisticated commune that Mickey started to build to provide shelter for the disenfranchised citizens he had previously

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<sup>37</sup> A separate but related essay could be spent analyzing the Las Vegas setting. As a Mecca of gambling and false hope, Las Vegas—like the novel's primary location, Los Angeles and its surrounding communities—has been conceptualized as a post-modern city of over-stimulation, detachment, pastiche, and alienation. In one “scene,” Doc sits around a hotel room, watching “*Monkees* reruns until the local news came on.” The news program contains an interview with a Marxist economist:

‘Las Vegas,’ he tried to explain, ‘it sits out here in middle of desert[sic], produces no tangible goods, money flows in, money flows out, nothing is produced. This place should not, according to theory, even exist, let alone prosper as it does. I feel my whole life has been based on illusory premises. I have lost reality. Can you tell me, please, where is reality?’ The interviewer looked uncomfortable and tried to change the subject to Elvis Presley. (232)

While seemingly irrelevant to the topic of this thesis, this quick moment of philosophy reflects on the bigger economic underpinnings of the novel, which are occluded by drug use and engagement in the more mind-numbing offerings of television (Doc makes no acknowledgement of this moment, and right afterwards mentions a basketball game he saw on the Tube). The interviewer clearly prefers not to carry on a critical deconstruction of space and reality, and wants to discuss Elvis Presley; an icon whose song “Viva Las Vegas” (recorded in conjunction with the 1964 film of the same name) portrays an exuberant city that sets the soul on fire (the song does hint at some of the contradictions in the city, but ultimately claims that a “swinging time” is more important than any dashed hopes). Pynchon portrays Las Vegas as emblematic of a culture that prefers to numb and destroy the soul, rather than inflame it.

oppressed.<sup>38</sup> During this sequence, Doc discovers that the entire plot he got dragged into had nothing to do with his expectations (primarily based on stoner-logic and the schemas embedded into his mind via police procedurals and hard-boiled detective films), but was rather an elaborate set-up by powers outside his ken, done to prevent any change to “the system,” and to protect those higher organizational “powers.” It is made explicit that the “powers” preferred to capitalize on the plights of the narcotized herd (a herd that the “powers” would shepherd into a constructed past, keeping their attentions away from the present and the daunting future).

After getting to a point where he could no longer ignore the bigger stakes of his world, Doc encounters the most symbolic location in Pynchon’s text (aside from the acid and PCP-induced dreamscapes which are present twice during the main plot), the Toobfreex motel.

Pynchon portrays the elusive location:

Tito and Doc drove till they saw a motel with a sign reading, WELCOME TOOBFREEEX! BEST CABLE IN TOWN! and they decided to check in. Time-zone issues too complicated for either of them to understand had leveraged the amount of programming available here, network and independent, to some staggering scale, and creative-minded cable managers were not slow to exploit the strange hiccup in space-time...Everybody was here to watch something. Soap enthusiast, old-movie buffs, nostalgia lovers had driven here hundreds, even thousands, of miles to bathe in these cathode rays, as water connoisseurs in Grandmother’s day had once visited certain spas. Hour after hour, they wallowed and gazed, as the sun wheeled in the hazy sky and splashing echoed off the tiles of the indoor pool and housekeeping carts went squeaking to and fro. (253-254)

While compared to a “spa,” this location has more in common with an opium den. The motel is a site of religious pilgrimage (just like Dr. Buddy Tubeside’s office), where people blindly travel long distances to become enveloped in the womb-like safety of the television screen. “Nostalgia lovers” are the catch-all clientele that make the trek, seemingly homesick for a constructed

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<sup>38</sup> As a counter argument to my thesis, it is supposedly Mickey’s foray into marijuana and acid that gives him his humanitarian-epiphany; but it can be read that his drug-use brings him closer to those at the fringes of society, whereas the drug-use of the marginalized just pushes them further from enlightenment.

reality that is contained by the television's frame. The location supports countercultural flight, existing slightly outside of the normal confines of space and time (although still controlled by capitalist interests); with sensory stimuli of the embodied world existing faintly in the distance (the rays of cathode tubes being preferable to the sun's). In opposition to the desolate woodland environments of *Vineland*, Toobfreex represents a more over-stimulated avenue of attempted escape from time and conventional reality.

The motel becomes a more explicit metaphor for the novel's milieu when Pynchon portrays Doc's delayed epiphany:

Out there, all around them to the last fringes of occupancy, were Toobfreex at play in the video universe, the tropic isle, the Long Branch Saloon, the Starship *Enterprise*, Hawaiian crime fantasies, cute kids in make-believe living rooms with invisible audiences to laugh at everything they did, baseball highlights, Vietnam footage, helicopter gunships and firefights, and midnight jokes, and talking celebrities, and a slave girl in a bottle, and Arnold the pig, and here was Doc...(254)

"Fringes of occupancy" doesn't refer to the literal rooms of the hotel but indicates a figurative space of existence. Juxtaposed against the previous revelation of Mickey's housing plan, there's a stronger link between Pynchon's portrayal of land-development and his description of the worlds created by mass-media. Television creates a "video universe," linking its audience into a world that seems connected, but is viewed through separate rooms of the motel (similar to the constructed collective of drug use). The syntax of this sentence becomes as over-stimulated as the world of spasm-inducing channel changing. Each clause describes a type of entertainment (directly referencing the shows *Gilligan's Island*, *Gunsmoke*, *Startrek*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, and *Green Acres*), and contains references to Vietnam and other war footage that may or may not be fictional. The spectators of television become implicated in the programs they watch, and desire to exist in a less complicated form of reality.

Doc is sober (“on the natch”) during this epiphany at Toobfreex, and he can’t rationalize himself out of a deep feeling of dread and alienation. His thinking culminates with the suspicion that: “the Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and all be lost, taken back into darkness...how a certain hand might reach terribly out of darkness and reclaim the time, easy as taking a joint from a dooper and stubbing it out for good” (254-255). There is a subtext that the literal light of the television screen may blot out the figurative light of social wisdom that was promised in the hippie culture. The metaphor of a stubbed out joint alludes to marijuana being a sabotaging element of the counterculture’s desire to move closer to utopia.

The present moment of political/social upheaval and violence in 1970 is presented as something that is itself a cycle of sin, and there’s a karmic battle that keeps things anchored to the past. It is during an LSD trip that this theme is mentioned, but Doc is unable to fully understand what it means. Doc’s tripping “Guru” who sets up the background by “putting onto his stereo, at top volume, Tiny Tim singing ‘The Ice Caps Are Melting,’ from his recent album, which had been somehow fiendishly programmed to repeat indefinitely” (108). The song is actually titled “The Other Side,” and after listening to it, I can see why Pynchon would allude to it at this point. The song itself begins psychedelically, before segueing into a joyous background score (like a ragtime march), and celebrates the prospect of the ice-caps melting. This cataclysmic event covers up the signifiers of the industrial age (trapped under the seas, “Cars are waiting,/ Windshields wiping,/ Nowhere left to go!”), and the chorus describes the tide coming in “to wash away the sin.” The song ends with a spoken stanza, with Tiny Tim reaching out to his listeners, “I tell you my dear friend, oh how wonderful it is. No matter wherever you are, we can all be happy and singing! No matter if you’re out there, parked along that car by the highway, or if you’re at home, sitting by the radio...or whether you’re by the TV set, let

everyone sing about those melting ice-caps...and let us all have a swimming time, as we sing!” Connected by the technological arms of mass media, the masses revel in the destruction headed their way. Like *Inherent Vice* as a novel, this song offers a seemingly light and goofy experience, but reflects a yearning for social justice and responsibility, under the dark guise of detached nihilism.

The themes of the song, and having it be played in a seemingly never-ending loop, are analogous to the meaning of Doc’s trip. He encounters a “vortex of corroded history,” where the current war in Vietnam is seen as archetypal forces butting heads through “repeating a karmic loop as old as the geography of those oceans” (109-110). The United States (and the California coast, in particular) is stuck in between two ancient and sea-sunken civilizations. Lemuria (one of the islands closest to the countercultural spirit, symbolically associated with grace), mentioned in this trip, becomes an Oz of sorts, a space of prelapsarian innocence in the geography of stoner metaphysics.<sup>39</sup> At the end of Doc’s trip he begins to explain it, then stops and says, “Huh, what was I talking about?” The acid provided Doc a genuine engagement with the imprisonment in the past of his milieu, but he seems to forget about it instantly. The fog of time keeps the United States in a cycle of past mistakes.

In the last chapter of the novel, Pynchon offers a glimpse of hope, showing that there may be a way to push through the relics of the past and engage with the future.<sup>40</sup> Doc turns off his

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<sup>39</sup>Dorothy’s incantation of “There’s no place like home” in *The Wizard of Oz* seems like a plea that many of the characters in *Inherent Vice* would make, if only they knew where (and when) home was. *The Wizard of Oz* is seen as an inspiration for the plot structure of *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The movie is referenced in *Inherent Vice*, when Sauncho—upon realizing the mind-blowing conundrum of Technicolor to Dorothy’s visual perception—discusses a plan to sue MGM (of course, Doc faintly tries to ground him).

<sup>40</sup> It seems telling that the final chapter is number 21, often seen as the age of maturity/transition into adulthood. Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1963) concludes with a 21<sup>st</sup> chapter, in which the main character decides to leave his cycle of violence and sociopathy behind (although it seems that he can’t completely change his inner-

television—after realizing that the basketball team he bet money on will lose (the Lakers-Knicks basketball final is a constant chronological signifier throughout the novel, blending televisual reality with the world outside the Tube), and goes to pay his friend Fritz at his office (a surveillance organization that utilizes a prototype form of the internet, ARPAnet), but finds Sparky there instead. Sparky had been brought up a few times previously, as a computer prodigy, but had yet to show up in the narrative. Doc’s meeting with him needs to take place after Doc had gone through the convoluted trials of the narrative and begins to see the complex machinations of a society that is moving past him.

Sparky admits to not smoking weed, since the drug makes it harder for him to do work.

He then refutes the view that ARPAnet is like a psychedelic, saying:

‘The system has no use for souls. Not how it works at all. Even this thing about going into other people’s lives? it is not like some Eastern trip of absorbing into a collective consciousness. It’s only finding stuff out that somebody else didn’t think you were going to. And it’s moving so fast, like the more we know, the more we know, you can almost see it change one day to the next. Why I try to work late. Not so much of a shock next morning.’ (365)

He then admits to the discrepancy between the false technology represented in entertainment and the actual computer technology that he is working with.<sup>41</sup> Sparky offers to give Doc his own computer set-up and echoes Bigfoot’s earlier quote by saying, “‘It’s the wave of the future, ain’t it?’”

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nature). The first American publications of the novel, as well as Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film adaptation, cut out this chapter.

<sup>41</sup> His statement, “‘Down in real life, compared to what you see in spy movies and TV, we’re still nowhere near that speed or capacity’” (365) parallels the beginning of the novel when Doc’s Aunt mentions, “‘Someday...there will be computers for this, all you’ll have to do’s type in what you’re looking for, or even better just talk it in—like that HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*?—and it’ll be right back at you with more information than you’d ever want to know;” which is followed by the narration, “‘Till then, in the real non-sci-fi world...’” (7).

Immediately after the scene between Doc and Sparky, Pynchon ends with Doc driving down the freeway, stuck in a fog and having to rely on following the tail lights of the cars in front of him, being caught in something “like a caravan in a desert of perception.” Doc wants to keep on driving, hesitant to return to the world of concrete brick and television (he wonders how many people are “indoors fogbound in front of the tube or in bed just falling asleep;” juxtaposing the literal fog with the abstract cloud of the television culture). The final passage of the novel portrays a person “borne back ceaselessly into the past,” but desperate to break out of the confines of his nostalgic society and “beat on” into something different:

Maybe then it would stay this way for days, maybe he'd have to just keep driving, down past Long Beach, down through Orange County, and San Diego, and across a border where nobody could tell anymore in the fog who was Mexican, who was Anglo, who was anybody. Then again, he might run out of gas before that happened, and have to leave the caravan, and pull over on the shoulder, and wait. For whatever would happen. For a forgotten joint to materialize in his pocket. For the CHP to come by and choose not to hassle him. For a restless blonde in a Stingray to stop and offer him a ride. For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead. (369)

As Bigfoot mentions in his last encounter with Doc, “What goes around may come around, but it never ends up exactly the same place, you ever notice? Like a record on a turntable, all it takes is one groove's difference and the universe can be onto a whole 'nother song” (334). Amidst the repetition and seemingly cyclical nature of L.A.'s slouching movements, there's a chance that there will be someone—or hopefully many—who becomes enlightened and sees through the pacifying illusion, and can hope (and hopefully act) for a different future.

## Conclusion

*Inherent Vice* does not divorce the type of complex thought espoused in Pynchon's other novels, but acts as a conduit in which the human and social messages of the author's overarching themes can come to life. Through my interpretation of *Inherent Vice*, and its relation to television and especially drug use, I felt closer to Pynchon than I had during my last decade of reading his novels.<sup>42</sup> His reclusion seems to make this kind of discovery ambivalent. Moore notes a "self-effacement," a lack intervention of the author's self-image, in Pynchon's earlier novels (Moore 12). *Inherent Vice* may not completely strip the fiction from the author, but it does reveal a vulnerability that has been underappreciated by critics. Through a personal story (twisted as it may be by genre deconstruction and goof-ball digressions), there is insight into a culture that Pynchon views with bittersweet nostalgia. If there seems to be sparse introspection and literary complexity in the novel, it is because Pynchon is presenting a particular moment in which there was a systematic obstruction of insight. There is a fog of history that made it difficult for citizens to fully appreciate the importance of the unfolding 1960s to U.S. culture, just as—40 years past— it still occludes full understanding. During his writing of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon himself may have been unwilling to explicitly state the types of problems he and his fellow dreamers dealt with. The characters in *Vineland* could reflect on it due to the passage of time, the years of regret and reflection on what happened, with the Reagan presidency

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<sup>42</sup> Teenage me probably didn't have the cognitive capacity to understand the subtext, or even know what to look for.

as an affirmation of all the issues that they were unable to fight when they had the chance (although, as Frederic Jameson's view about the periodization of the 1960s states, maybe there was no other way for the decade to turn out). I can understand if others would disagree with the significance I've attributed to this "beach read," since at first glance *Inherent Vice* appears humorous and insignificant; but there's tragedy underneath, boiling up through the surface with the depiction of junkies (to TV and reefer) lost in time and lost in space. This tension is described by Gordon in his essay on *Vineland*, "if somebody told you the history of the decade as a story, you wouldn't believe it. You'd wonder: Is this for real? Is this some kind of joke? Is it supposed to be a farce or tragedy? You wouldn't know how to feel, to laugh or to cry" (Gordon 168).

Through Janus masks, Pynchon creates a world that warrants both laughter and tears, and there is as much empathy and understanding directed toward his "dramatis personae" as there is criticism and ridicule. Moore, in an analysis of the anti-historical and anti-intellectual countercultural attitudes found in the characters of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *V.*, writes, "But Pynchon clearly feels tender toward his hedonistic preterits, although their nihilism is not his own, and although he disapproves of their defensive wish to deny history and moral responsibility by reveling in mindless pleasures" (Moore 18). I have investigated *Inherent Vice's* relation to the type of framework established by thinkers like Moore and Mattesich, viewing it as a novel of countercultural flight. Pynchon's novel pushes to the periphery many important historical signifiers, replacing them with the fantasies of television and drugged-out reverie. The book's own style of anachronistic homage and cross-medium genre medley break it from the

Apollonian confines of a conventional historical novel, warranting further inquiry into the novel as a text version of a “nostalgia film.”<sup>43</sup>

Frederic Jameson popularized the term “nostalgia film” in his discussion of the cultural logic of Late Capitalism. The films, in general, evoke a stylistic and narrative recall of the past. The characteristics of the nostalgia film, while being rooted in mass culture, call attention to previous aesthetic concepts of form and content. It is not simply the retold plots and mise-en-scene of these films which are pastiche, but the very atmosphere which is stylistically presented. A nostalgia film doesn’t necessarily need to have its story temporally rooted in the past. Both Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* and Ridley Scott’s *Bladerunner* embody the formal elements of a film *noir*. One film is set in the past, while the other is set in the distant future, yet both are distanced from the contemporary:

It seems to me exceedingly symptomatic to find the very style of nostalgia films invading and colonizing even those movies today which have contemporary settings, as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present, as though we had become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. But if that is so, then it is a terrible indictment of consumer capitalism itself- or, at the very least, an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history. (Jameson 287).

Although the neo-Marxist view point would state that this “imprisonment in the past” is something imposed by the capitalistic framework and consumer society in general, Jameson discusses pastiche and the “nostalgia film” in a way that it appears like a self-imposed exile. It seems very difficult to determine the main perpetrator. Are the presence and popularity of these kinds of distanced works attributable to a societal need to avoid its contemporary state? Or is the presence and marketing of these films due to an innate feature of the capitalistic mass culture,

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<sup>43</sup> Essays on Pynchon’s integration of cinematic and novelistic discourse, particularly in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, are extensive; Cowart, David, “‘Making the Unreal Reel’: Film in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” Clerc, Charles, “Film in *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” and Simmon, Scott, “Beyond the Theater of War: *Gravity’s Rainbow* as Film.”

one that distracts its audience from noticing the machinations of the newly established corporate system? Pynchon uses a similar nostalgic framework to veil the issues of a present society that is overrun by a soul-crushing technocracy.

*Inherent Vice* is in pre-production for a film directed by Paul Thomas Anderson, the first of Pynchon's novels to actually take off the ground for adaptation to the cinema. It remains unseen whether the film can invoke the themes of the novel, or if it may itself be co-opted into a diversion that keeps audience members entertained and unenlightened. Ironically, the same thing that makes *Inherent Vice* so appealing for filmic adaptation and mass commercialization—its hedonistic and detached relevancy, the haunting driving scenes, glossy style, representations of film, and seemingly straightforward narrative—may arise because the book is a step toward a complete actualization of the age of the image. In a “Simulacrum Society” there is a false sense of immediacy, a façade of totality, so many memories and heuristics that were placed into individuals' heads from a flat rectangular screen that they become detached and alienated from embodied experience. The same effect of transitory stimulation overload arises from drug use, with events melding into an oneiric blur. A grand illusion is created, more vicious than the previous modern mythology, with mankind mistaking their sense of fracture as a sense of place.

Perhaps, instead of being a literal critique on the real-world experiences of drug use and television spectatorship in 1970, Pynchon is using the character of Doc Sportello as an emblem of the postmodern subject (this would be a topic requiring a broader context and more specific methodology than present in this paper). A stoned private eye, trying to piece together a convoluted and multi-tiered conspiracy is a caricature of a modern subject trying to articulate his or her own lived experience.

For Jameson, the postmodern spectator is forced to map the “great global, multinational and decentered communicational networks” in a disorienting and cognitively dissonant hyperspace (291). Change in the social order of capitalism has made the characteristics of the modernist aesthetic impossible. Jameson reiterates the point that the emergence of postmodernism is closely tied to the emergence of consumer or multinational capitalism. A consequence of both these features is the “disappearance of a sense of history.” Much blame is put on the news media for contributing to a “historical amnesia.” Technology, in combination with the corporate capitalist structure, and postmodern art, all work to merge different forms of discourse into an undifferentiated whole. The subject is stricken with alienation at the prospect of this “postmodern war,” in which reality is transformed into images, and time is lost (292).

Jameson, like Walter Benjamin’s suggestion in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” claims that perceptual habits need to change to navigate through mutations in both lived space and the abstract cognitive avenues of consumer capitalism. However, sensory emancipation may not be enough. Being aware of the rules of a system does not mean that there is individual agency to change that system. *Inherent Vice*, with juxtaposition of both the ossification and the unpredictable shifts of cultural and historical landmarks, would warrant further analysis along Jamesonian lines of thought (which would also need to involve the related theorists Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard).<sup>44</sup>

In the 1970s, Pynchon took recourse to World War II to express his feelings about the social and theoretical nexus he resided in. In the late 2000s, he dug through his memories (obscured by time and countless joints) to use 1970—and the carnivalesque decade that led up to

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<sup>44</sup> Jameson, in “Totality as Conspiracy,” uses Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* to investigate the relation of paranoia to political commodification and cognitive mapping.

it—to say something about contemporary society. By late 2009, there were rampant social and political issues within the United States, and increasing geopolitical chaos, masked by the televised political rhetoric of change and optimism. The economy and many businesses were crippled by unethical practices and the fragmented playfield of globalization. Homeownership and sub-prime loans became buzzwords in a frustrating society of loss and upheaval (probably the reason for *Inherent Vice*'s focus on land development) Many young people in this new millennium engage with unfolding history through a late-night toké and *The Daily Show*, choosing to blot out the severity of events through ironic self-distancing and cynicism. The realm of U.S. politics has literally become the media-circus caricature of itself, with the lines between parody and reality no longer being discernible or even necessary to demarcate. It seems as though novels are decreasingly belittled as sources of knowledge and insight, and reading for the pure pleasure of it is less socially acceptable. YouTube is the new collective consciousness, and Facebook is the bastardized version of the Platonic Academy. Technological dependency has created a job market that is not conducive to the type of literary and subversive thinking Pynchon embodies. Though his most recent novel has many tongue-in-cheek references to modern internet surveillance and other contemporary signifiers, it doesn't draw attention to its current relevancy.

In a parallel move to following up the colossal and encyclopedic *Gravity's Rainbow* with the polarizing *Vineland*, Pynchon follows his grand and overly ambitious *Against the Day* with *Inherent Vice*, a novel that I find to be more human and effective due to its seeming simplicity. Gordon, in his concluding remarks on Pynchon and the Sixties (in relation to *Vineland*), writes:

He [Pynchon] has forgotten nothing of that intense, contradictory decade, neither the dewy-eyed revolutionary idealism nor the grim paranoia, neither the comic excesses nor the tragic waste. The era raised issues that are still unresolved in American society and

culture. We keep going back to the 1960s, just as we keep going back to the Civil War of the 1860s: these are contested terrains. (Gordon 177)

Pynchon harks back to this transitory time period because it may have been a chance for a true cultural revolution, one that could make citizens fully aware of the disastrous effects of unbridled consumer capitalism, and give them the tools necessary to deconstruct it. Yet the opportunity was not taken. The hippies either burned out or sold out. Pynchon sticks to this milieu not simply out of nostalgia for the way things were, but because he sees it as an era where lessons should have been learned but weren't fully embodied. Because those without power became more disenfranchised and pacified by the narcotic numb of mass-media and drugs, those that knew the rules of the game could dominate. So, instead of climbing the summit of human potential, the United States (as represented by denizens of L.A. and Las Vegas, the final literal markers in Manifest Destiny) is stuck in a Sisyphean loop, doomed to repeat the same cycle of pain and oppression. Unless his characters and readers start to dig underneath the veil of illusion, and the masses detox from their literal and metaphoric opiate binge, then the inherent vices in society can never be exorcised. By digging underneath the surface of things (something many of the characters never do, and that Pynchon may do a bit too deeply) within the novel, it becomes evident that Pynchon is—like the metaphysics explored in all his novels—looking at multiple directions at once. The perpetual past, the seldom acknowledged present, and the ambiguous future are all combined in phantasmagoric pastiche.

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