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International Pynchon Week 2017 in La Rochelle, France, 5-9 June 2017

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Introduction

- 1 On the heels of Thomas Pynchon's 80th birthday last May, the 2017 edition of *International Pynchon Week*, organized by Bénédicte Chorier-Fryd (University of Poitiers) and Gilles Chamerois (University of Western Brittany), was a chance to take stock of a more than fifty-year literary career. With more papers investigating Pynchon's later novels—*Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009), and *Bleeding Edge* (2013)—, the conference sought to map Pynchon's "new worlds" as well as reinvestigate the old. Throughout the week, scholars noted a more nuanced representation of both gender and family, a growing interest in "genre-poaching" and a continued attention to the politics of space. An evermore-varied theoretical toolbox also offered new insights into Pynchon's literary output as a whole. Along with stimulating archival research, postcolonial studies, affect studies and even stylometry were all solicited this year to great effect, opening up new avenues of research for future Pynchon scholars.

Treasure trove

- 2 Archival findings, in particular, shed new light on decades-old mysteries this year. A notable highlight was the father-daughter collaboration of Nina Engelhardt (a lecturer in English literature at the University of Cologne) and Harald Engelhardt (a biologist at the Max-Planck-Institute for Biochemistry), who finally closed the book on *Gravity's Rainbow's flummoxing second equation*. Presenting original documents on German rocket research during the Second World War, they convincingly demonstrated that the equation is not nonsensical, as was previously thought, but an accurate representation of motion control which echoes nicely the wider theme of control in the novel¹. Biographical and genetic research also illuminated Pynchon's early intellectual development. Matthew Cissel

(University of the Basque Country) postulated a link between the young Pynchon and an influential New York family, the Meyerhoffs, while Ali Chetwynd (American University of Iraq) investigated Pynchon's materials at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Chetwynd contended that early drafts of *V.* and the unfinished musical *Minstrel Island* signpost a significant shift in Pynchon's early conceptualization of gender and violence.

Gender politics

- 3 This week aimed at continuing the work on gender laid out two years before in Athens. While a collection of essays, *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender*, is still to be edited in the wake of research dedicated to Pynchon's career-long engagement with such questions, several panelists scrutinized his changing constructions of gender in his most recent novels. Basing his research on Pynchon's pastiche of Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe novels and the Coen brothers' film *The Big Lebowski*, Sean Carswell (California State University Channel Islands) examined the deviation from the tough guy in *Inherent Vice*, proposing that Pynchon's later novels explore more fluid gender tropes than in the past. Kostas Kaltsas (University of Southampton) focused on the unexpected reclaiming of the nuclear family in *Bleeding Edge*, which introduces a mother as main character. He contended that by choosing a successful mother, Pynchon addresses previous criticisms of his work and suggests that he has unambiguously moved beyond his early sexism, and beyond the failure of normative motherhood that stained the reception of *Vineland*.

Genre Poaching

- 4 One of the most striking features of this edition of the conference was the influential way in which Brian McHale's genre-poaching theory has been shaping recent Pynchon studies. In his essay, he argues that Pynchon engages in the practice of "*mediated historiography* – the writing of an era's history through the medium of its popular genres," (McHale, 25) seeking to bring to light "the repressed content of the genre itself." Outlining a subgenre termed Hollow Earth Stories, popular in the 19th century, Kyle Smith (Perth College University) used the exploration of the bowels of the earth in *Against the Day* to show how these narratives examine otherness, moving through a variety of alternative landscapes. Bastien Meresse (University of Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle) framed his analysis by looking at the politics of *flânerie* in *Bleeding Edge*: by choosing to parody chick-lit, Pynchon features degraded versions of consumption. His characters are faced with the decaying forces of the new, signaling the obsolescence of the walker as a figure of resistance. Several panelists also looked for new literary filiations. Among them was Chad Hegelmeyer (New York University), who turned to New Journalism's relationship to truth to examine Pynchon's non-fiction piece "A Journey into the Mind of Watts." His demonstration delved into the consequences of metaphorically describing a situation in which differences of experience and racial identity constitute distinct worlds, and how Pynchon's article takes interest in maintaining these poles while trying to subvert them.

Sensing Pynchon

- 5 If Pynchon's novels poach other genres, they also borrow liberally from literature's competing sister arts. Pynchon's frequent references to the *visible* (cinema, photography, but also painting) and the *audible* (music, soundscapes, the withheld breath of an ellipsis) are countless adumbrations of the *invisible*. Lucille Hagège (University of Paris-Sorbonne) suggested that, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, ekphrastic descriptions of paintings and other references to visual art act as "stilled" counterpoints to cinema, freezing and framing the politically overlooked. Arkadiusz Misztal (University of Gdańsk) evoked the "convergence of silver, time and light" (*Against the Day*, 454) in the early process of photography, a metaphor to which Pynchon returns in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against The Day* in order to articulate the temporal dimension of political or civic engagement.
- 6 It is also at the edges of the visible that the sounds of the silenced dwell, and whisper of revolution. Justin St. Clair (University of South Alabama) argued that Pynchon's elision of the visible world in *Mason & Dixon* via references to sound, and silence, heightens both the power of listening and the political import of sounded space. In the same novel, Zofia Kolbuszewska (Wroclaw University) saw Jenkin's ear, and the museum that houses it, as a cryptophore and a heterotopic space, where visual modernity undergoes defamiliarization, allowing the ear to function as a means of alternative communication. Finally, Christian Hänggi (University of Basel) visually rendered the "silent" songs that pepper Pynchon's prose in an exhaustive statistical analysis of musical references in all his works.

Places of Power

- 7 A fair number of presentations also attempted to map Pynchon's use of space to articulate power and resistance. Tiina Käkälä-Puumala (University of Turku) and Inger Dalsgaard (Aarhus University) both focused on the structural influence of real estate in Pynchon's framing of power arrangement in his later fiction, and suggested that real estate continues Pynchon's long-standing equation of land and conquest. Heidi Lavine (Westminster College, Missouri) examined the New World as a site over which Pynchon inscribes transatlantic relationships of power: the coffee and sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean in *Mason & Dixon*, and the character's ubiquitous overindulgences and complicity with systems of global trade. Virtual space in Pynchon's most recent novel, *Bleeding Edge*, also suggested new areas of research. Delving into virtual reality as narrative, Melissa Leismer (University of Granada) surveyed new modes of description in Pynchon's quasi-imagined world, *Deep Archer*, and the novel's lackluster retelling of 9/11.

"It's code's all it is" (*Bleeding Edge*, 356)

- 8 Technology also provided a segue into discussions of literary style. Martin Eve (Birkbeck, University of London) introduced Pynchon scholars to 'computational stylometry', the measurement of stylistic properties of texts using computers. As a quantifying method, stylometry has a long and varied history, from legal court cases where the accused was

acquitted on the basis of stylometric evidence, to literary authorship attribution. Using, as an example, the mistaken attribution of Adrian Jones Pearson's *Cow Country* to Pynchon, Eve demonstrated the possibilities and limitations of tools, such as "most-frequent-word comparisons" and "part-of-speech frequency comparisons" to contrast the two authors' styles. Though still being perfected, the tools of literary forensics could have useful applications in the field of stylistics (or, as some luddites fear, allow computers to write fiction on their own, and thus spell the end of literature as we know it... A rather Pynchonian vision). Using more traditional stylistic analysis to break fresh ground, Erica Tasch (Minneapolis Northeast Middle School) presented a study of economic metaphors in Pynchon's early short story "The Secret Integration" (1964). Metaphors of payment and debt in his work, she argued, are foundational to Pynchon's experimentations with racial "passing" and the relationship between whiteness and capitalism.

Coming up Next

- 9 The conference's forays into these "new worlds" allowed scholars to move even further beyond the somewhat worn-out postmodern approaches to the Pynchonian corpus and uncover productive new areas of research. Archival work, investigations of race, gender and space, generic studies and the use of new technologies are sure to be explored further in the next edition of *International Pynchon Week*, which is scheduled to take place in Rome in 2019. A call for papers will be broadcast in early 2018. In the meantime, the conference's full program and recorded proceedings can be found [here](#).

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NOTES

1. For further details and images of the Engelhardts' source material, please see their upcoming publication in *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*.

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