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Abstract:

A letter offering a defence and interpretation of the trailer for *Bleeding Edge*.

Defending Pynchon's Publicity

Mark Kohut

Pynchon, who has never been away, is back. The Pynchon with an edge who angers people. Like the Pulitzer Committee which called *Gravity's Rainbow* obscene. Like lots of publishing professionals who didn't like Professor Irwin Corey as his spokesman at the National Book Awards in 1974, spouting like Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. Like a couple-three otherwise superb readers who hated, morally, –not aesthetically– *Against the Day*.¹

And I'm not talking about his new novel *Bleeding Edge*. I'm just talking about his brilliant five minute Vimeo trailer for it. Have you seen it? <http://thepenguinpress.com/2013/09/be-among-the-first-to-see-the-new-video-for-thomas-pynchons-bleeding-edge/>

Which has gotten heavy dissing all around the Shallow Web (Pynchon takes us into the Deep Web in the novel); which has been disliked heartily by many of his most obsessive fans. “So badly done”. “meh”. “Guess I gotta read the book”. “WTF?”. [See Twitter. See the Pynchon list serve: “W.A.S.T.E.”] Why? Why am I reminded of Dylan when he got booed by his first proud fans at Newport for going electric? Dylan turned to his band and said, “Play it fuckin' louder!” Pynchon might have decided to do this trailer as a response to some cultural chatter typified, perhaps, in a recent *New York Magazine* which ran this piece on him <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/48268/>. He took it on head-on, if so.

Watch that trailer again (“There is no reading, only rereading”, as Nabokov is always saying): <http://thepenguinpress.com/2013/09/be-among-the-first-to-see-the-new-video-for-thomas-pynchons-bleeding-edge/>.

Firstly, note that Pynchon and his wife-agent have always exerted the right to do their own ancillary marketing, from cover, to catalog copy, to pub dates, etc. to the last trailer in which TRP did voice-over, which makes it a near-certainty that TRP wrote and orchestrated this video.

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So, who IS that guy? I mean within the video? First, he's good. Ironically perfect. He is not from the novel. He says he is an Upper West side 'macher', a Yiddish word already self-mocking when used, the dictionaries say. He wears a T-shirt that says "I Am Tom Pynchon" but we know he isn't. As we watch, Pynchon's sly genius emerges. The macher talks as if he might BE Pynchon, perhaps IS him narratorially, the semi-omniscient, character-blending narrator often called an "all-seeing eye", a phrase of the macher's AND one used in *Against the Day* in the macher's way. Macher says he is not into "the power hierarchy thing" but works "in the margins" as is said of lifelong Pynchon themes and stances. Consider some other phrases: "Like Karl Rove", this is surely a humorous reference (LOL, as the novel might put it?) to the fact that Rove's mind was at maximum influence during the years of *Bleeding Edge*, as we remember. The Rove, that is, whose strategy was to turn any criticism back on the accuser, to attack the opponent's strength, resonantly relevant given Pynchon's reputation for paranoia, especially ways of social control. I double down this argument IF Pynchon was motivated by the *NY Magazine* piece. "Only if Karl Rove were Jewish... and a liberal", ha! or "ROFL" even... as the "pastrami mafia" trope has Pynchon sending up the stereotypes of Jewish control of the media and New York. We gotta love it when SLEAZUS uses a word—which we get defined!—that he doesn't know. (In *Slow Learner*, the middle-aged Pynchon said he didn't even know what the word "tendrill" meant in an early story—since: never again.)

Or, what about the later phrase: "Information flows from here to there, from there to here"... INFORMATION, one of the earliest thematic handles around Pynchon's work. Consider "entropy" which is defined as "the amount of additional information needed to specify the exact physical state of a system", perhaps the first solo word meme around Pynchon. *Bleeding Edge* is about the the flow of information and money and the physical state of New York at a certain time.

There's also Tom, back in Not-Tom character saying, "I don't know how the story ends",—not just a poke at busy New Yorkers who don't need to finish books, or a comment on the near-contemporaneity of *Bleeding Edge* but perhaps a sly anticipation of possible responses to the deaths in *Bleeding Edge* as well... In the particulars of *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon may be answering in advance a reader's possible question in the way Raymond Chandler, a Pynchon favorite, responded when asked, during filming, whether the chauffeur in *The Big Sleep* was murdered, "Damned if I know."

Is "not knowing how the story ends" even more allusive? To the novels which end open-endedly, most notably, *The Crying of Lot 49* and to a couple-

three-maybe even seven?-types of ambiguity? As Pynchon is a novelist who has a world-historical vision of how his times are the way they are; a novelist who seems to believe this line from one of his novels, "History is a step-function" would say, he does not know how the story-History; the world after the end of *Bleeding Edge*-ends. If one of Pynchon's overarching themes is believable ambiguities, then for the actor who says he is Tom Pynchon not to know how the story ends is another joke about narrative control and a writer's vision. If he doesn't know, who does and I would say it is Pynchon reinforcing a belief perhaps best expressed by D. H. Lawrence, "Trust the tale, not the teller." He has written that all his meanings are on the page. If he spoke in public, he might say, "I have nothing more to say." Which would mean his open-future endings are part of his overall meaning.

Then SLEAZUS gets satirically knifed with a video riff on the class privileged 'perfectionism' of shopping for food... "little thinner, little thinner"... just "a sample, a sample"... hilariously, asking almost righteously about the nature of the soil the cows roll around in. And more. Pynchon's "hysterical realism" skewers the indulgent well-off everywhere, maybe "not too close to the head"-another metaphor?-and maybe especially in that foodie city, New York, New York.

Finally, there's a homage and joke for Philip Roth: "He's everywhere"-publicly the anti-Pynchon whom the literary world has believed is hoping for and has lobbied for the Nobel-and an over-the-top ending, smoked fish as eyeshade, "natural exfoliants", "something the moisturizing conglomerates"-perfect or what?-"don't tell you".

No wonder William Gibson called this trailer the best, for a novel, yet made in the history of the world.

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End notes

1. As one of the goals of *Orbit* is to facilitate discussion between academic and non-academic communities, the journal welcomes notes and letters from non-academics written in less formal styles. These are published at the editors' discretion.