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ARTICLE

Embodied Vision in *Against the Day*

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In this article, I argue that vision in *Against the Day* is an embodied experience. Drawing upon the work of Merleau-Ponty and Vivian Sobchack, I present a reading of perception in the novel as one that involves a corporeal viewing eye. While critics have focused on the disembodied element of vision in the novel, I suggest that Pynchon grounds all seemingly disembodied encounters, including the scene with the Merle Rideout's 'Angels of Death' and the doubling and bilocation of characters, in the very material, organic body. By doing so, Pynchon eliminates the conventional subject-object divide and gives vision a tactile dimension that reflects phenomenological perspectives on the intrinsic relationship between the eye and the world it perceives.

Nine years after the publication of *Mason and Dixon* (1997) Thomas Pynchon returned with the highly anticipated work, *Against the Day* (2006). The renowned complexity and ambiguity of Pynchon's work are certainly evident in the novel's fragmented story lines. James Lasdun perhaps describes the novel best when he argues that "the stories drift apart, their energies dissipate and the book turns into a transglobal picaresque" (par. 7). Critics have written extensively on the inconsistent nature of the text, focusing particularly on the futile search for 'truth' and meaning in the novel. As Jared Smith suggests, "(t)he sheer complexity of the novel's interconnecting themes and ironic use of genre have led many reviewers to lament Pynchon's apparent affinity for equivocation." (par. 2) Yet, despite the doubling of identities and language that Richard Hardack (1) analyzes, and that is best described in his phrase "consciousness without borders," and in the midst of all the novel's myriads, vision and visual technologies have a prominent place. Critics have certainly addressed aspects of the visual and visual technology, such as photography, in the novel; however, the relationship between visual technologies and the embodied nature of seeing has been overlooked. What is particularly significant is how the imaginative aspects of vision in the novel are directly related to the potentialities and limitations of the act of seeing.

When referring to the "embodied nature of seeing," I am referring to the corporeal dimension of sight, a dimension that focuses on the eye as a physical organ that enables sight. In his book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993) Martin Jay presents the conceptualization of the sense of vision from antiquity to modern time showing how sight was initially perceived as reliable and superior to other senses; however, this superiority was gradually subverted by theorists. Scientific laws and theories asserted that the tendency to trust our vision often leads us to being "fooled by visual experience that turns out to be illusory" (Jay 8). This contrast between the seeming "nobility of sight"¹ and illusory experience is especially important in the novel. In *Against the Day*, Pynchon

¹ Martin Jay refers to Hans Jonas's essay "The Nobility of Sight." See Jay 24.

foregrounds the disembodied aspects of seeing, such as imagination or 'the mind's eye', in order to highlight the limitations of seeing.

The act of seeing in *Against the Day*, an act that is situated between the imaginative and the corporeal, then, is one that mirrors the different realms of history in the novel; just as vision lies between the 'real' and the illusory, history too lies between the 'real' and the surreal in *Against the Day*. Pynchon scholarship has foregrounded the importance of history in the novel both as a genre and a theme. The novel takes place between the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 and a period shortly after the First World War. Yet, despite the reality of these historical events, the novel immerses us in a world that transcends conventional tropes of time and space. *Against the Day* is replete with fantastical elements; from the mysterious airship *Inconvenience* to the references to bilocation and time machines, objective notions of time and space are constantly subverted. In his discussion of time in the novel, Louis Menard argues that "*Against the Day* is a kind of inventory of the possibilities inherent in a particular moment in the history of imagination" (par. 10). This idea of possibility has been central to several scholars' readings of the characters' agency within the novel's historical framework. For instance, Tore Rye Anderson argues that despite the characters' knowledge of the looming war, they show no desire to prevent the war from happening (3). Anderson suggests that by "drifting passively along with the flow of history and considering the not yet materialized war to be a *fait accompli*, the characters submit to a false determinism and thus contribute to the reduction of a historical field of possibilities into a foregone conclusion" (3). Moreover, David Cowart notes Pynchon's "calculated refusal to represent fully" the First World War, suggesting that this "refusal" relates to bilocation and doubling in the novel (394). Cowart argues that the predominant doubling throughout the text shows that for Pynchon, history not only repeats itself, but it "repeats itself as yet greater tragedy" (394). On the other hand, Pynchon scholars have also focused on how the last sentence of the novel poses a potential challenge to the concept of inevitability. The Chums of Chance "fly toward grace" (Pynchon, *Against the Day* 1085). Krzysztof Piekarski et al. suggest that the final sentences of the novel show that while "the Chums of Chance have been playing by the rules of a mappable fiction for the length

of their existence,” they now “move toward the miraculous freedom of textual possibility” (62). Moreover, the authors argue that as opposed to the “mappable” certainty of the Chums of Chance’s journey, the reference to being “taken aloft” at the end of the novel implies “the escape (from) the closed fate implied by mapping” (62). Thus from the beginning to the end of the novel, the characters are framed between the certain and the uncertain and confinement and escapism.

Given the significance of the historical backdrop of the text, and the idea that *Against the Day*’s historical premise is situated between fact and fiction and limitations and possibilities, a close-reading of the act of seeing in the novel is essential to understanding the role of vision in the midst of these opposing forces. In this article, I present a reading of the text that highlights the connection between the disembodied, imaginative dimension of seeing and the very tangible, organic nature of seeing, in order to argue that the body, as a material entity, is central to perceptual experiences in Pynchon’s fiction. The novel’s far-reaching and indeterminate historical premise casts a shadow of doubt on all aspects of the characters’ being; the novel itself, similar to the airship *Inconvenience*, is hard to grasp or anchor. Yet, the primacy of the embodied nature of vision counteracts this intangible history of the novel, providing a palpable perceptual experience. In this essay, I will examine how the characters’ visual experiences foreground the presence of a material body, giving a sense of corporeal presence to a text that is otherwise interwoven with loss, absence, and uncertainty.

Vision, Art, and Phenomenology

To establish the constancy of the physical body in *Against the Day*, I will provide a reading that connects visual experience in the novel with Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualization of vision. First, it is important to note that the eye’s physical limitations are directly related to the development of optical technology. In the seventeenth century, an increasing interest in the act of seeing led to the development of devices such as the microscope, the telescope, and X-rays, that would “reveal worlds hidden from human eyes” (Warner 136). Thus, the aim was to utilize these devices for empirical means to enhance human vision. However, the devices never really succeeded

in divorcing vision from the uncanny; instead they “were modelled on pre-existing ideas of the inner eye, the organ of envisioning, and they also reproduced mental imagery, and projected phantasms, dreams, and memories from the dark chamber of the mind into the light of day” (Warner 136). Indeed, Marina Warner argues that the inward eye has been “a practical stimulus to technological invention,” inspiring optical media such as the cinema to “reproduce the mind’s capacity to form images with eyes closed, or with eyes open in the absence of empirical data of any kind” (136–137).

Thus, the invention of the telescope and microscope motivated scientists to utilize these new possibilities in inventive ways. One of the scientists who is especially relevant to my discussion of Pynchon is Athanasius Kircher, who in the 1640s used “magic lanterns,” and mirrors to create images of phantasms (Warner, 138). The uses of the magic lantern were developed further after the French Revolution, when “the showman and inventor Étienne-Gaspard Robertson staged a *son-et-lumière* . . . under the name of ‘Fantasmagorie’; coined from Greek, phantasmagoria means an assembly of phantoms” (Warner 147). The props for this show included the Fantascope and a projector (Warner 147). The aim of giving this summary of the history of phantasmagorias is to show awareness of why visual technology is often associated with the disembodied; its link to the uncanny is deeply entrenched in the historical connotations of the mind’s eye. However, I intend to examine how several examples in the novel depict a tension between this disembodied perspective and embodied vision.

To analyse this tension closely, I will draw upon Jeffrey Severs’s insightful connection between Pynchon’s phrase “dynamic ambiguity”² and the production of art in the novel. However, I will take this argument a step further to address how this “dynamic ambiguity” relates to embodied vision. As Severs notes, in Thomas

² In Jeffrey Severs’s article, “The abstractions she was instructed to embody: Women, Capitalism, and Artistic Representation in *Against the Day*,” in *Pynchon’s Against the Day: A Corrupted Pilgrim’s Guide*, Severs provides a reading of the phrase “dynamic ambiguity” that Thomas Pynchon uses in his introduction to Jim Dodge’s *Stone Junction*. I connect this reading to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective on the body.

Pynchon's introduction to Jim Doge's *Stone Junction* (1997), Pynchon uses the phrase "dynamic ambiguity" when he discusses a method of resistance to the digital age:

One popular method of resistance was always just to keep moving – seeking, not a place to hide out, secure and fixed, but a state of dynamic ambiguity about where one might be at any given moment, along the lines of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. Modern digital machines, however, managed quickly enough to focus the blurred hyperellipsoid of human freedom down to well within Planck's Constant (ix).

For Pynchon, "dynamic ambiguity", defined as incessant movement, is a form of escape from any kind of fixed or certain existence. The uncertainty principle to which Pynchon refers states that "the more precisely the position (momentum) of a particle is given, the less precisely can one say what its momentum (position) is" ("Uncertainty Principle", *Stanford*). This tension between certainty and uncertainty is one that Pynchon finds essential to the notion of freedom; human freedom lies in the "blurred hyperellipsoid" as opposed to the fixed.

Severs examines this notion of "dynamic ambiguity" in relation to art. In *Against the Day*, Arturo, an artist whose extraordinary skills are likened to a magician's, creates statues of what he calls the "Angel of Death" (894). Each statue is based on a female figure posing, her head covered with a hood, and in the case of Fiona Plush, haunted by her own "pair of predators' wings emerging from her back" (Pynchon, *ATD* 894). As soon as Arturo sees Dally, he decides that there is something exceptional about her and that he would make her his new angel. Dally follows Arturo to a cemetery for soldiers who died in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Arturo directs Dally towards a sculpture, and as Dally moves closer, she is drawn to a compelling image. Arturo informs Dally that this is a sculpture of one of his better "A.O.D.'s" (Pynchon, *ATD* 894). When *Dally* first looks at the sculpture, she sees a hooded woman with a dying infantryman's head in her lap. The woman with predatory wings on her back "gently console[s] him, one hand touching his face, the other raised in a curious half-beckoning, half-commanding gesture" (Pynchon, *ATD* 894). What is particularly telling about this image is that it merges two very contradictory states.

While the sculpture is immobile and solid, the use of words such as “console”, “half-beckoning”, and “half-commanding” reflect liveliness and motion. Severs argues that Arturo’s attempt to transform Dally into one of these statues reflects “art’s ability to somehow honor the animate subject while offering her inanimate rendering” (279). Severs points out that this connection between the animate, Dally, and the inanimate, a statue, reflects Pynchon’s notion of the “dynamic ambiguity” of people. This is evident in Dally’s experience when she sees a “living dynamism and specificity in the face of the first A.O.D. she sees” (894). Though the sculpture is a fixed product, the images that Dally sees reflect movement and life. Moreover, Severs argues that this relationship between Dally and art “is a corollary of *Against the Day’s* far broader exploration of (...) dynamic ambiguity” (232).

Dally, in a way that is similar to a seventeenth-century audience, witnesses the illusions of Fiona’s sculpture, almost as though the sculpture were haunted by Kircher’s magic lantern. Thus, there seems to be an overwhelming sense of the disembodied in the connotations of light and spirits. It may initially seem as though the corporeal eye is trivialized, while the mind’s eye or imagination is the only facet accountable for Dally’s perception. However, Pynchon then counters the disembodied with the embodied aspect of seeing as the physical eye becomes more central:

There were perverse intentions at work here, procreative as much as mortal. In the complicated drapery of the A.O.D.’s garment, at certain times of day, beneath the duress of the prevailing light, one saw clearly in the shadows of the gown the shape of an infant, or sometimes more than one, clinging to what might have been an indifferent body. When the clouds thickened, drifted or passed, or the day drew to evening, these figures disappeared, or sometimes modulated to something else that likewise did not invite close inspection (Pynchon, *ATD* 894).

On the one hand, there is something seemingly mysterious about these modulating figures; yet, the statement that when these figures change they “do not invite close inspection,” indicates that the eye, as an organ, is part of the making of the image. In a particular light, the eye can capture the hidden figures; as this light fades, these fig-

ures disappear because the eye loses this particular light that facilitates the process of inspecting. What Pynchon does is certainly characteristic of his ambiguous style; he creates an image that is based upon the disembodiment of death and phantasms, an inspiration for the artistic uses of optical devices, and then foregrounds the eye's materiality to bring the attention back to the body. One finds here a theme that reflects Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of the body in relation to the world. Jack Reynolds clarifies this concept best when describing the connection between the subject and object: "What we literally see or notice is not simply the objective world, but is conditioned by a myriad of factors that ensures the relationship between perceiving subject and the object perceived is not one of exclusion" (9). For Merleau-Ponty, the body is always central to perception; this makes it impossible to exclude the perceiver's physical being from a visual experience:

If the subject is in a situation, even if he is no more than a possibility of situations, this is because he forces his ipseity into reality only by actually being a body, and entering the world through that body. In so far as, when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from this body and this world (*Phenomenology of Perception* 475).

Subjectivity is "bound up" with the body. One can only experience the world "as a body". Merleau-Ponty describes the implications of this inextricable connection between the body and the world particularly in relation to vision. In the following discussion of perception, he describes the act of perceiving a table, highlighting the role of the physical eye:

I must acknowledge that the table before me sustains a singular relation with my eyes and my body: I see it only if it is within their radius of action; above it there is the dark mass of my forehead, beneath it the more indecisive

contour of my cheeks – both of these visible at the limit and capable of hiding the table, as if my vision of the world itself were formed from a certain point of the world. What is more, my movements and the movements of my eyes make the world vibrate – as one rocks a dolmen with one's finger without disturbing its fundamental solidity (*The Visible and the Invisible* 32).

Merleau-Ponty describes the act of seeing as one where the eye is not merely a subject, but it is also part of the object. The object's presence is contingent on the existence of the eye; and the eye's movement changes the focus of that which is being perceived. When Dally perceives the image of the statue, she wavers between seeing less and seeing more, depending on the light; this involvement of the sense of vision with the object of vision depicts inclusion as opposed to exclusion. Her eyes engage with the object of perception and that object visually transforms as a result of the changes in her field of vision. Throughout the novel, we see examples of this as Pynchon portrays vision as taking part in the making of the perceived image, as opposed to being confined to a subject-object divide.

It is useful to consider that this concept of inclusion is not new to Pynchon's fiction. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, Rószavölgyi who finds the shadow corner of Pointsman's room daunting, tells Pointsman, "Mis-ter Pointsman, I-don't like it in there, at all. What possible kind of a thrill can anyone get, from *such* an unwholesome experience. Eh?" (Pynchon, *GR* 633) The corner Rószavölgyi refers to is "the one corner of the room...which is not brightly lit, yes kind of an optic anomaly here, just a straight, square room, no odd-shaped polyhedrons in Twelfth House" (Pynchon, *GR* 633). The description of the room as being an "optic anomaly" foregrounds the strangeness of this object that is being perceived (Pynchon, *GR* 633). Yet, what is of greater significance is how Rószavölgyi becomes an anomaly himself, as his eyes struggle to adjust to his surroundings. His eyes, as opposed to being detached from the object perceived, physically transform during the encounter:

Rószavölgyi now is nearly invisible in the shadow, and the whites of his eyes are actually glowing white, jittering around in the air, winking-out-coming-back.

It is not, at all, his sort of place. For one thing, the rest of the room seems to be at more of a distance, as through the view-finder on a camera (Pynchon, *GR* 633).

This example directs the focus away from the representational or imaginative connotations of the eye to its corporeality. One significant aspect of vision that is addressed is the notion of proximity. According to Edward Hall, unlike the sense of hearing where distance significantly affects the communication between the voice and the perceiving ear, the naked eye “sweeps up an extraordinary amount of information within a hundred-yard radius and is still quite efficient for human interaction at a mile” (43). An important theme in Pynchon’s fiction that is often overlooked, is the materiality of the visual experience even with a significant distance between the perceiving subject and the object. In this example, the materiality of the eye is described as “glowing white, jittering around in the air,” (Pynchon, *GR* 400). This description enunciates the eye’s motion as opposed to an “atemporal and static” state (Hall 6). The verb jittering is also telling because it reflects, not only a physical irregular movement, but it could also be used to imply a convergence of the senses. There is something visual, tactile, and auditory about a jittering signal, and Pynchon’s use of this word foregrounds the extensiveness of the perceptual experience. This perspective is aligned with phenomenological conceptualizations of the senses that draw attention to the integrated nature of sensory experience. The senses, as opposed to being separated from each other, are “integrated with, and transform one another, so that we should think of them as internally related components of a unified perceptual system” (Romdenh-Romluc 68).³ The overlap between the senses is especially telling in Pynchon’s fiction; Pynchon gives a tactile quality to vision that subverts the idea that perception can be wholly disembodied.

In another significant example, Pynchon transforms an encounter between Webb Traverse and his daughter Lake into the tension between the phantasmal associations of magic lanterns and the corporeal nature of sight. Here, the division between

³ Romdenh-Romluc explains Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the unification of the sense. Romdenh-Romluc’s explanation relates in particular to Merleau-Ponty’s example of seeing glass.

subject and object is subverted as Frank's imagination and memory become part of his visual experience. Moreover, similar to the previous examples, Pynchon constructs a convergence of the senses, where the sight of Lake creates a physical impact on Traverse's body. When Traverse refers to his daughter as "child of the storm," the narrator describes the incident that led to this name (Pynchon, *ATD* 219). On a day where lightning is prevalent, Traverse is haunted by Lake's image:

Her young face just so clear to him, the way the fierce light had struck her hair nearly white, streaming back from her small face as if from that wind, though the air in the little shack was still. Under the black apocalyptic sky. He had got something down his spine that he thought meant he was about to be hit by lightning (Pynchon, *ATD* 219).

When the predatory light strikes Lake's hair, the effect on Frank is tactile. The description of "something down his spine" reflects the concept of inclusion (Pynchon, *ATD* 219). Moreover, it also depicts what Vivian Sobchack's definition of the gaze in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's conceptualization of vision, as a "'transfer point' of the commerce between and commingling of matter and meaning" (*Carnal Thoughts* 100). There is no boundary between the tactile and the visual as Traverse experiences what seems to be a mere representation as a material effect in the depths of his body. In other words, instead of being depicted on the basis of a subject versus object dichotomy, Pynchon projects vision in a manner that reflects Sobchack's theorization of the visual experience as "embodied and enworlded in the manner-and matter-of that at which it looks" (*Carnal Thoughts* 100). For both Merleau-Ponty and Vivian Sobchack, vision is an embodied act, one that is rooted in the indivisible connection between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Similarly, for Pynchon, the visual experience is entrenched in the materiality of the body.

Moreover, Pynchon constantly reminds us of the eye's limitations. As Katie and Dally walk down from Bleaker street, they reach an Italianate townhouse where "a butler or two bowed them in the door, and they ascended into a ballroom dominated by a huge gas chandelier, blindingly bright" (348). The walls of the house are described as "being reserved for R.W.'s art collection, which required a tolerant eye

and on occasion an educated stomach broadly indifferent to manifestations of the queasy" (348). Both examples reflect the extent to which vision is not reliable, an idea far removed from the conventional notion of the perfection of vision. Moreover, the reference to the "tolerant eye" is especially telling; the description implies different modes of seeing. It is because vision is not perfect or detached that it becomes like hearing or touching, subject to the individual's interaction with the world. Moreover, the description implies that one may have the capacity to adjust their vision accordingly, but only with a patient eye. Thus, for Pynchon, there is an extent to which vision is related to a person's conscious effort. David Levin's conceptualization of vision is especially relevant to this discussion:

What we do with our natural endowment – how we respond to the gift of nature- constitutes the *character* of our vision. Whether, and how, we take up our visionary project, that is the measure, the test, of our character, our development of self (56).

Throughout the novel, vision is a means of obscuring the boundary between the material and the immaterial. And again, it is Pynchon's use of shadows and light, aspects of visual experience associated with the disembodied, that enable him to question any categorical reading of the senses. When Dally first arrives in New York, she watches shadows of birds on sunlit walls. The narrator describes the sidewalks as "crowded with men in black suits and white high collars, in the tangible glare of noontide that came pushing uptown, striking tall highlights from shiny top hats, projecting shadows that looked almost solid" (Pynchon, *ATD* 337). The narrator also describes the women as different; in contrast to the men, the women "were rigged out in lighter colors, ruffles, contrasting lapels, hats of velvet or straw, broad-angled brims throwing faces into girlish penumbras as becoming as paint and powder" (Pynchon, *ATD* 337). In both examples, Pynchon uses concrete words to describe the light and the people's shadows. The noontide, as opposed to an immaterial reflection, has a "tangible glare," physically "pushing [and] striking," the solid shadows (Pynchon, *ATD* 337). Even the girlish penumbras, though reflecting a more partial

eclipse-like illumination, are evidence of the existence of a body. According to Marina Warner, what is often overlooked in the idea that light and shadows are immaterial is the fact that the presence of a shadow or a reflection also means the presence of a body. A paradox in this is that the reflections and shadows' "immaterial and insubstantial presence accompanies the being that casts them and gives evidence of that entity's materiality" (Warner 175). Warner describes this as follows:

Doubled by a form that has no substance, we paradoxically possess a certificate of life. The attenuated darkness of our shadows and the illusion of our mirrored self hold within them the warrant of our existence in solid flesh—strange as it may seem (175).

Pynchon uses light and optical techniques that seem to reflect the mysterious or the supernatural, only to show that embodied vision remains paramount. Pynchon succeeds in using light, an immaterial entity, to foreground the tactile and imperfect nature of vision. Pynchon depicts vision as embodied, affected by the eye's corporeality and the individual's engagement with the perceived object. This has significant implications on the concept of embodiment as a whole. If vision, the sense that is conventionally associated with placing a barrier between us and the world, is actually far from being a detached sense, then there is no clear boundary between the characters and the world. As opposed to excluding us from the world, our body allows a meeting point. Pynchon seems to agree with Merleau-Ponty's words that "the world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 474). Moreover, while Severs's argument on "dynamic ambiguity" and its relation to art in *Against the Day* is essential to our understanding of perception on the novel, the motion and uncertainty implied in this ambiguity does not take away from the body's primacy. It is the body that enables this perceptual experience, both imaginative and 'real'. It is through this inextricable connection between the body and the world that the eye engages with its object of perception, enabling an experience that encompasses both the possibilities and the limitations of vision.

The Eye, the Body, the Camera, and the Spirit

Thus far, I have examined the relationship between optical illusions and vision to show that perception is a highly embodied experience in *Against the Day*. Moreover, I have highlighted the interrelationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object in *Against the Day* in light of Merleau-Ponty's theorization of perception to show that the corporeal eye's engagement with the perceived object is one of inclusion as opposed to exclusion. Another aspect in the novel that is directly related to perception is photography. The mechanical eye, unlike the human eye, is capable of "fixing its ostensible subject quite literally as an *object* for vision" (Sobchack 142). Thus, there is an empirical quality associated with photography, not only because of its precision, but also because "it reproduces the visible in a *material process*- that like the most convincing of scientific experiments- produces the seemingly same results with each iteration" (Sobchack 142). This question of credibility that I have thus far examined when addressing phantasmagorias is one that is also especially relevant to Pynchon's take on photography. When addressing vision, Pynchon's task becomes even more problematic with photography, a technology that seems to further ascertain the conventional boundary between the perceiving subject and object. This boundary may imply a detached vision, divorced from both the physical limitations of the eye and any external factors that may impede perception.

My aim in this section is to address how Pynchon manages to keep embodied vision paramount to any disembodied notion of visual perception, even when advancing from the late seventeenth-century optical illusions to the early nineteenth-century invention of photography. Throughout his fiction, Pynchon considers the line between representation and 'reality' that defines photography, but it is not until *Against the Day* that Pynchon seems to have found a way of liberating the technology from its predominantly representational role. Critics have certainly addressed the theme of photography in the novel; however, the analysis is often connected to temporality or representation. Arkadiusz Misztal argues that "Pynchon's subversive strategy in *Against the Day* is to use one of the great inscribing engines of modernity, photography, to explore the multiplicity of temporalities that the forensic imagination fails to register" (57). Furthermore, Clément Lévy argues that "for Thomas

Pynchon, photography is a key element of the twentieth-century history because it gives form to our representation of the world, an idea described in a similar way by Jean Baudrillard when he makes simulation a crucial concept for the study of societies and art forms" (165).⁴ Both perspectives provide insightful takes on the concepts that underpin Pynchon's use of photography; taking this analysis a step further, it is possible to consider the relationship between the eye of the camera and the material eye of the perceiver.

First, it is important to examine how the characters relate to the photographic experience and how this relationship is relevant to several theories on photography. From the very beginning of the novel, when Merle Rideout is first introduced to photography, the narrator describes the mystery that underlies the process and thereby captivates Merle. However, despite the initial captivation, Merle becomes increasingly sceptical of the relationship between 'reality' and photography. Merle at first sees nothing problematic about taking a photograph; it is as easy as an "idiot's game, line them up, squeeze the bulb, take the money" (Pynchon, *ATD* 64). He wonders about what actually happens "during the mysteriously guarded transition from plate to print, but never enough to step across any darkroom's forbidden doorsill to have a look" (Pynchon, *ATD* 64). When Roswell Bounce invites Merle in to see what takes place in the dark room, Merle finds the process striking. As he watches the images appear, they "come in out of the plain Invisible, down into the otherwise explainable world, clearer than real" (Pynchon, *ATD* 64). Yet, while looking at the images again, he notices something strange. The whites of the inmates' eyes are dark grey and the windows that should have been light-colored are also dark, "as if light had been witched somehow into its opposite" (Pynchon, *ATD* 64). He asks Roswell to explain why the inmates look like "spirits, or haunts or something" (Pynchon, *ATD* 64) Thus, Pynchon establishes the mixed feelings that Merle has toward photography; while

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the connection between death and photography in light of Barthes, see Clément Lévy's "As Far As Pynchon Loves Cameras?" *Against the Grain: Reading Pynchon's Counter-narratives*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 2010) 157–166. Lévy considers the need to re-examine photography after the publication of *Against the Day*. He makes an especially insightful point regarding the foreboding nature of a photograph and the political landscape in the novel.

the images gradually appear “clearer than real,” there is something equally haunting or unreal about them (Pynchon, *ATD* 64). Though this may initially seem like a contradiction, we begin to understand why Merle feels that there is something deadly about a photograph.

There are two distinct aspects of the connection between death and photography that Pynchon depicts. On the one hand, the connection is linked to the uncanny feeling of looking at an image from the past. On the other hand, Pynchon portrays the photographer as the one who creates this death; eventually, for Merle, being a good photographer is like being a “sharpshooter” (Pynchon, *ATD* 72). He carries his Kodak and captures images with precision:

Merle could bring it [the camera] anywhere as long as he held everything steady in the frame, and by then – the old glass plate folding models having weighed in at three pounds plus plates – he had learned to breathe, calm as a sharpshooter, and the images showed it, steady, deep (Pynchon, *ATD* 72)

Merle is always doubtful regarding the ‘reality’ of a photograph, and Dally and Merle finally agree that no matter how “calm as a sharpshooter” Merle is when taking a photograph, the images were “more real, though never got into ‘real’ that far” (Pynchon, *ATD* 72). Thus, Pynchon foregrounds a connection between photography and death that reflects a significant theoretical approach to the technology. Lucy Lipard, a scholar who wrote about owning a photograph of a Native American family, finds reasons to justify the “photo-steal-your-spirit syndrome” (38). According to Lipard “[t]he more we know about representation, the more obvious it becomes that photography is a spirit snatcher” (38).

To a certain extent, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag share a similar approach to photography, especially when considering the relationship between photography and mortality. Sontag refers to photography as a “memento mori,” because taking someone’s photograph is equivalent to taking part “in another person (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (15). According to Barthes, the photograph creates “a micro-version of death (of parenthesis),” or a transformation into a “spectre”

(14). Since the photograph represents both an absence and a presence, one wavers between the certainty that “it is not there,” but also that “it has indeed been” (Barthes 115). He argues that this discrepancy that arises when experiencing a photograph indicates that photography is a “bizarre medium, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time (Barthes 115).” In line with Barthes’ and Sontag’s conceptualization of photography, Pynchon depicts the camera as an object with supernatural connotations that never fully captures the ‘real’. The camera is similar to the historical premise of the novel in that it lies between fiction and reality. One can describe history in *Against the Day* in the words that Barthes uses to define the camera, “a new form of hallucination” (115).

It is useful to refer to how Pynchon negotiates these contradictions that surround the conceptualization of photography in his other work. Making these references helps establish the significance of the ‘camera as weapon’ theme in Pynchon’s fiction, but also foregrounds the difference between *Against the Day* and the other novels. In *Vineland* (1990), the connection is made between the camera and a gun when a group comprised of members of the “Death to the Pig Nihilist Film Kollektive” refer to the link between the two in their manifesto: “A camera is a gun. An image taken is a death performed” (Pynchon, *Vineland* 197). This relationship between the camera and death is highlighted when Vond tells Frenesi that carrying a camera is like carrying a gun:

But you can bring a camera. Can’t you see, the two separate worlds- one always includes a camera somewhere, and the other always includes a gun, one is make-believe, one is real? What if this is some branch point in your life, where you’ll have to choose between the two worlds? (Pynchon, *Vineland* 241).

The choice between “the two separate worlds” requires a choice between the representational weapon, the camera, and the ‘real’ weapon, a gun. Thus Vond, similar to Merle and Dally, is not wholly convinced by the authenticity of a camera. Pynchon’s fiction constantly wavers between the power and the weakness of the camera. It is

important to note that there is no general agreement between the characters as to what exactly the camera represents, and thus we find that Pynchon makes his own perspective ambiguous. Does the camera depict the 'real'? Is it merely an impassive representation? Hannah Möckel-Rieke seems to have some of the answers to these questions as she makes an insightful connection between the metaphorical and physical power of photography in *Vineland*:

The media photography and film are part of a memory dispositif which is associated with specific forms of political control and resistance in the book. Thus, the ideology of the film collective 24ps, the groups in which DL and Frenesi are politically active, centers around the mnemonic function of these media. By using close-up techniques, the film is intended to reveal a physical memory as a kind of visually unconscious truth which can be held against the lie of political discourse. The camera, however, does not merely document this body memory, it rather stimulates a weapon, firing light at the body and thereby, practically at the price of death, forcing its secrets from it (55).

Having established that there are conflicting views that pertain to photography in Pynchon's fiction, we can now consider how these conflicting issues figure in *Against the Day*. In order to connect these issues to the materiality of the body, it is important to consider the theme of bilocation in the novel. What I find particularly significant about bilocation is that it allows Pynchon to examine photography on his own terms; in other words, Pynchon uses this technique to bridge the gap between the perceiving subject and perceived object that the photograph seems to impose. According to Sobchack, there is a cost to photography's ability to freeze a moment: "It cannot entertain in the abstraction of its visible space, its single and static *point* of view, the presence of a lived and living body- so it does not really invite the spectator *into* the scene so much as it invites contemplation *of* the scene" (144). Pynchon scholars have written about this concept of frozen time in the novel. Misztal argues that Pynchon's use of photography in *Against the Day* is one that challenges "the temporal freeze . . . by giving way to the imaginary possibilities which are fundamental in

Pynchon's strategy of resistance to the 'orthogonal temporality' of systemized clock and machine time" (57). Indeed, as Mitzal suggests, the novel "never loses track of the temporal possibilities inherent in the 'natural magic' of photography" (57). But beyond the "temporal possibilities", photographic technology in *Against the Day* is presented in a manner that mirrors embodied vision; characters embody the camera's technology through the process of bilocation. The body itself becomes technological, and in the process, the subject-object divide between the photographer and the photographed is dismantled.

Given its prominence in the novel and that a whole section is titled "Bilocation," it is not surprising that critics have shown a keen interest in this theme. However, the readings have generally considered two aspects, namely bilocation as a structural and temporal framework to the novel and bilocation as symbolic of hybrid identity. For example, Hardack argues that doubling in *Against the Day* is "imperfect, which also has connotations for the narrator, who in some ways seems as the double for all the characters" (113). Bilocation is a term that Pynchon refers to as originating from mystical cultures such as Shamanism and is used to describe being in two different places at the same time. When one examines this concept closely, one finds several connections between this mystical idea and mirror technology. Foucault explains it best when he says that "due to the mirror, I discover myself absent at the place where I am, since I see myself over there" (179). In other words, "I am over there where I am not" (179). It is often the case in *Against the Day* that the characters' responses to mirror technologies correspond to their attitudes toward spiritual traditions. The example of Shamansim and bilocation in the novel illustrates this attitude. When Dr. Vormance doubts the possibility of Magyakan's presence in the same city, when he is supposed to be elsewhere, Throyle tells him that this is possible due to the nature of Magyakan's powers:

"He can't actually have come all this way on foot," said Dr. Vormance sceptically. "Actually, most likely he flew here, and not only is he here visiting with us but also and simultaneously, I've no doubt, back in the Yenisei watershed with his people as well." "You are beginning to worry me, Throyle" (Pynchon, *ATD* 143).

A glance at the conversation between Dr. Vormance and Throyle reveals a connection between bilocation and optical illusions. Magyakan, similar to an optical anomaly, is in two places at the same time. Throughout *Against the Day*, characters are perplexed by the idea of bilocation or two people being the same. Another example of this is Lew's realisation that Renfrew and Werfner are the same person. Lew cannot stop thinking about "the mystery of why Werfner should be in town at all, so far out of his ground, so close to his British adversary" (Pynchon, *ATD* 683). Lew's mind is full of thoughts of Werfner's presence; to Lew, this presence is like "the classic nightmare scene of the man who is standing where he should not be" (Pynchon, *ATD* 683). A question to pose here is: why does Pynchon focus on bilocation, a concept that underlies mirror technology and also photography, as opposed to simply depicting the image of a character looking at a photograph? And how does Pynchon use bilocation to show a convergence of as opposed to a dichotomy between the human and the technological?

Bilocation allows a physical connection between the corporeal eye and the object of perception. This connection becomes especially evident when the magician, Luca Zombini, shows his son one of his magic acts; to demonstrate this act, he unrolls an expanse of absolute fluid blankness and explains that it is the "magician-grade velvet, perfect absorber of light" (Pynchon, *ATD* 354). Luca then explains the importance of the perfect light and the perfect mirror:

The perfect mirror must send back everything, same amount of light, same colors exactly-but perfect velvet must let nothing escape, must hold on to every last little drop of light that falls on it. Because if the smallest amount of light you can think of bounces off one single thread, the whole act- affondato, vero? It's all about the light, you control the light, you control the effect, capisci? (Pynchon, *ATD* 354)

Thus, Luca draws attention to a technique that is dependent on the external manipulation of light. What is especially striking, however, is how this seemingly immaterial technique has a material effect on the characters:

You already know about this stuff here [the Iceland Spar] Doubles the image, the two overlap, with the right sort of light, the right lenses, you can separate them in stages, a little further each time, step by step till in fact it becomes possible to saw somebody in half optically, and instead of two different pieces of one body, there are now two complete individuals walking around, who are identical in every way, capisci? (Pynchon, *ATD* 355).

The Iceland Spar, a crystal that was used as part of the polarization of light process that led to polaroid technology, is used as a medium for doubling in the novel. What is particularly striking about Luca's description is the reference to the process as one that is very material and embodied. The words "saw(ing) the body in half optically" reflect an intrinsic connection between vision and the body; the body, literally, is divided by a visual process.

Moreover, by creating doubles from the Iceland spar crystal, Pynchon creates characters that embody the Polaroid technology. Earlier in the novel when Merle and Roswell discuss Blinky Morgan's picture, there is a direct reference to the embodiment of double refraction. What is peculiar about Blinky's picture is that each of his eyes "saw the world differently, the left one having undergone an obscure trauma, either from a premature detonation during a box job or from a naval howitzer while fighting in the Rebellion" (Pynchon, *ATD* 61). Another character Ed Addle suggests that Blinky is "a walking interferometer" (Pynchon, *ATD* 62). Roswell adds that Blinky is a double refractor, since, as Merle adds, he represents "an asymmetry with respect to light." Pynchon abolishes the boundary between the perceiving subject and perceived object using the very technique, double refraction, that underpins the seemingly impassive technology of photography. The characters begin to increasingly embody the vision of asymmetry and refraction.

In the section where Dally is in Venice and spends time in the Princepessa Spongiatosta's Palazzo, Dally is curious about the Princess's strange appearances. She begins to think that "there might in fact be more than one of the Princess," (Pynchon, *ATD* 583). Dally believes that the Princess's "appearances were multiple and not consecutive," but also doubts what she sees because "what went on at the

corner of Dally's eyes had always enjoyed with her about the same status as dreams" (Pynchon, *ATD* 583). This description of Dally's act of seeing is particularly relevant to the discussion on the possibilities that are contained in the eye. The corporeal reference to the "corner of Dally's eyes" draws attention to the eye as a physical entity; yet, this material eye is also described as a space for dreams (Pynchon, *ATD* 583). Ultimately, the eye in *Against the Day* is both the material and the supernatural, but the supernatural is only possible because of the eye's physical limitations. The eye is easily deceived. Dally considers that the Princess's appearances might be "mirror tricks," and thinks that "Luca would know" (Pynchon, *ATD* 583). It is justifiable for Dally to think what she sees may be the result of an illusion or a trick. Venice is also the home of the "Isle of Mirrors", a place where mirrors do not actually 'mirror' in the sense of replicating images; on the contrary, they transform images to their opposite. Professor Svegli speaks about the Isola Degli Specchi, the Isle of Mirrors, where specialists worked with anamorphoscopes, "mirrors, cylindrical or conical, usually, which when placed on or otherwise near a deliberately distorted picture, and viewed from the appropriate direction, would make the image appear 'normal' again" (Pynchon, *ATD* 249). According to the Professor, a percentage of these specialists had to go to mental asylums and could not bear to look at any sort of mirror again, and were kept "scrupulously away from reflective surfaces of any kind" (Pynchon, *ATD* 249). This extreme effect that these mirrors have on their perceivers shows the extent to which the eye is interwoven with that which it perceives. The effect is physical and mental and foregrounds the indivisible connection between the eye and the world.

Thus, by depicting characters who embody photographic technology, and subverting the subject-object divide that conventionally defines photography, Pynchon challenges what David Levin refers to as photography's "aggressive frontal ontology" (120). Levin draws upon Heidegger's work on the conceptualization of vision to explain the relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object of visual technology. If we consider the theoretical implications of this, we find that Pynchon is faced with a dilemma that figures prominently in his literature; how to foreground the embodied nature of visual experience when using a theme that is mostly associated with detached perception. Levin argues that "photography is very

deeply rooted in the metaphysics of reified presence" (123). The "aggressive frontal ontology" that Levin refers to is a result of the "impassive gaze" (123). By creating characters that embody the very essence of photographic technology, Pynchon shows that perception is far more than a simple perceiver versus perceived dichotomy. Vision is not "frontal" in *Against the Day*; it is an immersive experience that defies such rigid boundaries.

Vision in *Against the Day* is an essential part of the larger historical framework of the novel. The novel redefines history itself by merging various genres and narratives into a large, ambiguous text. While one can pinpoint certain historical events in the novel, the pervasive surrealism undermines the text's historical credibility. Critics have found that this imaginative dimension to history opens the text up to the notion of possibility; moreover, while the approaching war is a significant force in the text and seemingly inevitable, the "turn in the wind", and "the fly toward grace" (Pynchon, *ATD* 1085) signify a possible world far from the "great Tragedy" (Pynchon, *ATD* 1026), despite Martin Paul Eve arguing that the "grace" is ironically the Second World War (90). Because vision in *Against the Day* allows imaginative possibilities, it becomes a form of escapism in itself. Even the notion of "grace" at the end of the novel is intertwined with vision. On the one hand, Miles is certain that something is approaching "but invisible" (Pynchon, *ATD* 1085). On the other hand, "they will put on smoked goggles for the glory of what is coming to part the sky" (Pynchon, *ATD* 1085). Thus, this very moment of potential grace is marked by both the seen and the unseen. The "smoked goggles" are a hint that their eyes may play a sensory role in this moment. In a world characterized by loss, vision is one experience that gives a sense of possibility to the characters. While the characters have no control over history, they can master the tricks of illusion, embody the technologies of photography, and live through the imaginative possibilities of the play of light and shadow. Thus, the very limitations of the corporeal eye that allows these deceptive visual experience is in itself a form of "grace". Their escapism comes through the possibilities that result from faulty vision. Throughout the novel, visual experience is presented as highly tactile and the perceiving eye is engaged materially with the perceiving object. *Against the Day* does not make the body obsolete; instead, it highlights a tension

between the immaterial and the corporeal that is interwoven with the language of the text. For Pynchon, the body may be transformed, morphed, and divided; however, it remains.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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