

Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon

<https://www.pynchon.net>
ISSN: 2044-4095

Author(s): John Dee
Affiliation(s):
Title: Pynchon's Public Profile (or lack thereof) – A Personal View.
Date: 2012
Volume: 1
Issue: 2
URL: <https://www.pynchon.net/owap/article/view/20>
DOI: 10.7766/orbit.v1.2.20

Abstract:

Letter to the editors.

Pynchon's Public Profile (or lack thereof) – A Personal View.

John Dee

Dear Sir/Madam,

In 2011, together with Martin Eve, I organised the first 'Pynchon In Public Day' on 8th May, to celebrate the author's work. It was primarily promoted on the microblogging service Twitter and aimed at existing fans. Pynchon is well known in academic circles but his profile amongst the wider reading public is limited. We could not predict the level of interest.

The response to the first event was modest reflecting his existing readership. Groups and individuals from various countries, including the UK, the USA, Germany and Spain participated, posting photos of themselves reading his work in public space.

Pynchon's work has surfaced in the mainstream media several times since 2011. There was speculation that *Inherent Vice* might be filmed, and this added interest was helpful when promoting the May event. Later there was a donation of his first editions to the UCLA writing programme, the sale of the house in which he lived whilst writing *Gravity's Rainbow* and his perennial consideration by the bookies as an outside chance for the Nobel Prize for Literature.

The event was repeated in 2012 and had a bigger turnout, including participants from the USA, Europe and Russia. On 7th May, a character in the TV series 'Mad Men' read *The Crying of Lot 49* during his commute. The show, about 1960s advertising executives, prides itself on attention to period detail. There was also an article reviewing the 2011 event in the New York Daily News. We received photos of fans reading in varied locations, including Russian forest and the Big Brother diary room chair. Several disguised themselves with Kraft paper bags, as per Pynchon's appearance in 'The Simpsons'.

Since May there has been more media coverage of Pynchon. He was mentioned when the transit of Venus occurred on 6th June, a theme in *Mason & Dixon*. In June Penguin Press published his entire backlist in digital form. They promoted this with a 'worldwide' (read as 'in the USA only') papertrail of Trystero muted posthorn symbols. This event attracted a great deal of publicity. To date there has been more news, confirming that Paul Thomas Anderson would be directing *Inherent Vice*.

Copyright © 2012, John Dee

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

DOI: 10.7766/orbit.v1.2.20

As already touched upon, outside academic circles, Pynchon's influence is less pervasive in comparison to other cult authors such as Robert Anton Wilson, William S Burroughs and Hunter S Thompson. Wilson popularised the Bavarian Illuminati conspiracy theories. Thompson coined the term 'gonzo'. Burroughs has had several film cameos. Their cultural contributions thus extend beyond those who have read them. Pynchon's self-imposed avoidance of publicity has decreased his overall public profile whilst prompting much speculation amongst fans and academics. Many authors actively seek film adaptations, which greatly increases their exposure. Until recently, Pynchon avoided this.

The most surprising aspect of Pynchon's public profile, or lack thereof, given his reclusivity (even if he would not term it so) is that, in the contemporary, commercial, author-publicity culture, this behaviour would surely lead, in the case of a new author, to not being read at all.

Pynchon's influence is subtler, though, and requires more direct knowledge of his work to detect. References are to be found in various subcultures, which is to be expected, given the consistent focus in his works on the marginalised. There are references in band names, character as forum usernames, avant-garde electronic music, an online coffee shop and fan fiction. The iconic W.A.S.T.E. muted post horn is the most commonly appropriated aspect of his work. It is referred to in conspiracy theory games, computer programs, tattoos and so on.

The response to the two events was an informal indicator of Pynchon's public profile. The recent ebook publications will likely increase readership and bodes well for 2013. The downside is that they lack cover art, they present problems with gratuitous visibility during a public reading!

It still seems incumbent on existing devotees to ensure that Pynchon continues to be read and discovered by new readers, further consideration of this will help in arranging future events.

The above is my personal view and I welcome any comment or addition to this. I would be particularly interested in other examples of events for reading, or otherwise celebrating, other writers of Pynchon's calibre in public.

Yours sincerely,

John Dee [real name supplied]

neoliminal99@hotmail.com

References

Pynchon in Public Day. <http://www.pynchoninpublic.com>, accessed 2012-10-10.

Kellogg, Carolyn. (2012, June 20). "Secret codes, the Trystero: A mysterious Thomas Pynchon hunt". *LA Times: Books*. <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/jacketcopy/2012/06/trystero-thomas-pynchon-hunt-mystery.html>, accessed 2012-10-10.

Nazaryan, Alexander. (2012, May 07). "Pynchon in Public Day is tomorrow: Authorities prepare for widespread allusion to 'Gravity's Rainbow,' postmodernism". *NY Daily News*. <http://www.nydailynews.com/blogs/pageviews/2012/05/pynchon-in-public-day-is-tomorrow-authorities-prepare-for-widespread-allusion-to-g>, accessed 2012-10-10.