

## Thomas Pynchon's "Event in the sky": simulations, interpretations

Anne BATESTI  
Université de Paris-Nanterre

It is impossible to forget and forfeit the promises of "the event", by now philosophically prestigious and politically suspicious, but in our historical situation, it is equally difficult to fully respond to its allure: the allure of its world-changing potential, of its kinship with advent, adventure, *avenir*, of its potential sublimity, of its somewhat inebriating temporal and spatial paradoxes, and of its enduring challenge to understanding, and to representation.

This challenge and this allure, as well as the terror of the event, are major forces in Thomas Pynchon's texts. There are of course many scales and paces for an event and the rift in time it brings, from the imperceptible to the thundering, from suddenness to slow motion, and all of these together; and literature is where these various and often collapsed modes of happening are most finely deployed and persuasively performed. Several of Pynchon's novels, famously haunted by mass destruction and its apocalyptic model, have approached and avoided a mesmerizing thunderous event, or the event itself as inconceivable fulguration, and this is where I will start, but against chronological common sense: with an "Event in the sky" in *Against the Day* (2006), because this episode explores the tension between *event and meaning*, their mutual inadequacy as well as their inevitable encounter. I shall then discuss Pynchon's mode of representation of other events "in the sky", moving back in time to *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and to *Bleeding Edge* (2013), to show how Pynchon's tireless project of cautionary historical elucidation has moved from a certain sublime *simulation* of the "Event", to its utter remoteness in the *simulacrum* of *Bleeding Edge*.

### **Making sense of the "Event in the sky" in *Against the Day* (2006)**

The "Event in the sky" (792) occurs among many other variants of the explosive illumination, a lasting source of dread and fascination in Pynchon's novels, in high and low guises including of course that of parody, throughout this tale of anarchist resistance to a ruthless plutocratic order in the late nineteenth century and till the eve of the Great War: the anarchist's dynamite in Colorado mines opens "cracks in the fabric of air and time" (96), in the hope of a "world-reversing" explosion (97).

Much later, two chapters (779-805) are devoted to "the Tunguska Event" (as it was called at the time), which happened in Siberia early in the morning on 30th June, 1908: "A heavenwide blast of light." This nominal sentence opens the whole sequence, suspending temporal landmarks, and is followed by a blank on the page: these are the sole inscriptions of the Event itself in the text, where the visible is said and made to collapse through an excess of light. But questions and conjectures immediately take over, and persist throughout most of the two chapters, though interspersed with some fragmentary descriptions of the Event's visible effects: at close range, millions of trees flattened and gone white, "a horizonless disaster" (780) yet "no sign" of a forest fire, no crater, but miles away on the taiga, "with no announcement everything, faces, sky, trees, the distant turn of the river, went red", before "a great roaring could be heard" (782). And further away still, the Event is "too general in space or memory to know where to look till the sound arrived, ripping apart the firmament over Western China (792): it is unlocatable and uncontainable, propagating invisibly, the missing cause of a violence "booming away at six hundred miles per hour, all through the darkless night, one seismograph to the next, across Europe to the Atlantic." (797) Various memorable oddities of sky and light, sometimes comically treated, are observed in Venice and Trieste, in Vienna, in Mentone, while many in the city crowds do not even notice: again, its appearance is a vanishing. In the account, which combines chronological sequence and simultaneity (sometimes difficult to

tell apart for the reader), the Event thus keeps appearing or fading, and changing, and soon some even wonder if it happened at all.

This digressive and recursive twenty-five-page narrative thus foregrounds the *reception* of the event. Its effects are seen from various angles and distances according to the geographical position of the witnesses in a broad radius from central south Siberia to China, and Western Europe, and Pynchon orchestrates the wondering, the attempts to make sense, and ultimately the fading memory of the event. No omniscient narrator offers to explain that this explosion did happen, nor what it was: we have to step outside the fictional world to find out that a meteor exploded about five to ten kilometers above Siberia, knocking down some eighty million trees, with an energy roughly estimated to have been one thousand times greater than that of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

So instead of opposing a natural event to “man-made” events, a distinction which is the very first question among distant witnesses, Pynchon somehow likens them: he seems to import the cosmological accident’s total absence of meaning (unless one believes in omens like Hawthorne’s sky-gazing characters in *The Scarlet Letter*) into the field of historical events, to be puzzled over by characters and readers alike. In both cases indeed, the event produces a temporal and semantic astonishment, and, in the words of Lyotard, “in its initial otherness, cannot come from the world, which we are attuned with through meaning.”<sup>1</sup> It is an alien block of reality, incomprehensible yet immediately and conspicuously delivered to the human effort of elucidation, from scientific enquiry and geo-political speculation, to rumours, superstitions, visions and fabulations, soon forking out into utopian and dystopian versions of apocalyptic renewal or devastation.

The Event is therefore potentially initial, charged with revolutionary hopes for some, and final. It is both elliptic, and

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1. My (approximate) translation of “L’événement, dans son altérité initiale, ne peut provenir du monde, en lequel nous sommes accordés en sens.”, in Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1985, p. 22-23. The slightly agrammatical, polysemic formulation “en lequel nous sommes accordés en sens”, might also be translated, just as approximately, by, “in which meaning is what accords with us”.

ubiquitous in its propagation, and though it seems “extraterrestrial” or else “extratemporal” (781), it is the bearer of a both retrospective and prospective cluster of historical events. Retrospective, because even though the explosion was “the voice of a world announcing that it would never go back to what it had been” (782), it may have happened before: “no one could dare say which was worse, that it had never happened before, or that it had” (796). Prospective or even prophetic because it is also “an artifact of repeated visitations from the future” (782), with more or less explicit references to both World Wars, to Hiroshima, Tchernobyl, all forms of large-scale disaster, and possibly the September 2001 attack in New York (which had taken place by the time Pynchon was writing the book). The Tunguska Event, anachronistic and non-human but immediately annexed by human historical concerns, is thus turned into a paradigm of the event that signals and perhaps even signifies, although inconclusively and through productive misunderstandings, our historical predicament and possibilities. This is how Foucault viewed his own interest in historical events: “[...] in my books, I try to grasp an event which has seemed to me, which does seem to me, important for our current situation, although it is a former event. [...] I try to understand under the sign of which event we were born, which event is still travelling through us.”<sup>2</sup>

The Event in the sky in *Against the Day* is therefore not a mere cosmic accident, but may well offer a model of the collective event in general, whether elating or catastrophic. First, being the result of complex intersecting causal chains, which it will take time to elucidate, it does have *causes* (the Latin verb *evenire* indeed means: to come out of, to have an outcome, a result ; hence, to happen). Second, strictly speaking, however, the sheer violent reality of its occurrence has *no meaning*. Third, it cannot therefore be fully explained and understood; but it can and will be *interpreted*. So

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2. My translation of “[...] dans mes livres, j’essaie de saisir un événement qui m’a paru, qui me paraît important pour notre actualité, tout en étant un événement antérieur. [...] j’essaie de saisir quel est l’événement sous le signe duquel nous sommes nés, et quel est l’événement qui continue à nous traverser.”, in “Sexualité et pouvoir” (a conference in Tokyo on 22nd April, 1978), published in *Dits et Ecrits III*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, text number 234.

that meanings, necessarily man-made and inevitably divergent, will indeed be produced, meanings which are either excessive or insufficient, incommensurate with the event itself.

Pynchon's novels are always historical investigations, most memorably through the mobilisation of an encyclopaedic knowledge bound to exceed the reader's competence, but nonetheless meant to try and elucidate a historical event or set of events, and to arm collective memory and intelligence against the day... To arm imagination as well, since understanding is something else than the explanation of causes, and literature is concerned with experiential understanding; with its refinement as well as its limits<sup>3</sup>. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, understanding and failing to do so come together, through an excessively mimetic approach of another event in the sky.

### **An “incident” in the sky of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)**

Within the event of World War II, within its myriad personal and collective events and their reverberation well beyond the war period, the uncontainable event in the sky is the descent and explosion of a missile. It is heard in the very first line, starting the London Blitz, it misses its aim, returns and crashes over and over again, then keeps multiplying in the text in more or less isomorphic variants and travesties, finally descending over the readers of 1973 and ever after. We are immersed in a text which seems either to espouse or to parody its object of reminiscence and dread: the all-unsettling flight and fall of a supersonic rocket bomb, only heard after its crash and thus shattering the very experience of consecution and causality. The narrative and the syntax tend to perform, in countless modulations, such temporal and spatial paradoxes: imminence together with belatedness, where past, present and future collapse into one haunting moment which is never over; irruption together with disappearance, singularity with

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3. Claude Romano emphasises the distinction between experiential understanding, and explanation or commentary, “these modes of understanding which fall short of the event as such, which do not apprehend it as what initiates a meaning, but as a link in a causal network.”, in *L'Événement et le monde*, Paris, PUF, 1998, p. 278, my translation.

replication, surprise with recognition, lack and excess, exhaustion and rebound, escape and entrapment. To some extent, the novel is a textual *simulation* of the event, in the scientific sense of the term: “the technique of imitating the behaviour of some situation or process by means of a suitably analogous situation or apparatus” (Chambers)<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, its many forms of obliquity enact an aversion, an avoidance of the full event, indeed a total that “bring[s] events to Absolute Zero” (3).

The massive night bombing of Lübeck by the British on the eve of Palm Sunday in March 1942 is one of those previous but analogous events in the sky, approached sideways, in a literally eccentric fashion: merely through “an incident during the Lübeck raid” (146), unreported officially by the pilot but part of his file in the hands of one Ronald Cherrycoke, a “psychometrist” working for the British army. The incident is aptly named: as an adjective, the word means, “falling upon something, liable to occur, naturally belonging to, consequent” ; the meanings of the noun are “that which happens, that which naturally belongs to or is consequent on something else, a minor event showing hostility and threatening more serious trouble, a brief violent action e.g. a raid or a bomb explosion”. This incident is all of these things, and happens on the wildly improbable margin of the event of the raid itself, in this digressive and extremely allusive sentence:

[...] [Cherrycoke] does receive emanations, impressions... the cry inside the stone... excremental kisses stitched unseen across the yoke of an old shirt... a betrayal, an informer whose guilt will sicken one day to throat cancer, chiming like daylight through the fourchettes and quirks of a tattered Italian glove... Basher St.Blaise's angel, miles beyond designating, rising over Lübeck that Palm Sunday with the poison-green domes underneath its feet, an obsessive crossflow of red tiles rushing up and down a thousand peaked roofs as the bombers banked and dived, the Baltic already lost in a pall of incendiary smoke behind, here was the Angel: ice crystals swept hissing away

4. Webster defines a scientific simulation thus: “the representation of the behaviour or characteristics of one system through the use of another system, especially a computer program designed for the purpose.” I chose to quote the Chambers definition, above, because of its use of the word “imitating”.

from the back edges of wings perilously deep, opening as they were moved into new white abyss...

For half a minute radio silence broke apart. The traffic being:

St.Blaise: Freakshow Two, *did you see that*, over.

Wingman: This is Freakshow Two -affirmative.

St.Blaise: Good. (150-51)

The “incident” occurs indeed incidentally in the syntax, and incongruously, within the loose allusive list or drift of received “emanations, impressions”, while the event of the bombing itself remains elliptic; only the pilot’s preposterous name, through paronymy, suggests the “blaze”<sup>5</sup> at ground level... What does appear is a sort of doubler of the bombers, moving in the same way: an angel, without time markers (“rising”, followed by a long apposition also resting on a present participle); then again, suddenly, “here was the Angel”. This is both a repetition (of the word “angel”), and an irruption, through a syntactic disruption since nothing is at hand to repair the lack of a main verb in the preceding sequence. Presentation (“Basher St. Blaise’s angel”, in fact already announced a couple of pages before) is thus duplicated by sudden appearance, with a difference however since the “Angel” has now acquired a capital letter. An event does occur (“here was”), both announced and somehow sudden, and opening up new spaces, on a new scale: “perilously deep”, “into new white abyss”. So this angel/Angel is indeed new and unexpected, yet already present, old, and recognizable: profusely connoted and allusive, not only biblical, but also a reminder of Rilke’s angels, and of Benjamin’s angel of History. Besides, it is a variant of quite a few others in the book, not to mention the occasional verbal play on “angel” and “angle” elsewhere in the novel: it has to do indeed with finding an angle of approach, a mimetic slant<sup>6</sup>.

5. The allusion here is also to the legend of Saint Blaise, a fourth-century Armenian martyr, who was believed to have saved Dubrovnik by appearing in the sky over the city to announce an imminent attack by the Venetians in 971. He was also credited in 1298 for saving the Italian town of Fruggi, under attack, by conjuring flames in the sky to let the assailants believe their own allies had already stormed and burnt down the town: devious, friendly flames indeed...

6. And by the way, the shape of the blasted expanse of forest after the Tunguska

This overwhelming “incident” on the oneiric or visionary fringe of the bombing event, and which is formally akin to the haunting event of the book, has its grotesque lining: in the code name “Freakshow” (and if you are suitably paranoid, “Freakshow Two” can be read as a parody of the double apparition devised by the sentence); and through the recycling of the angel’s “wings” in the word “Wingman”. All in a brief pastiche of war film dialogues, with the overacted emphasis on the italicized “*did you see that*”, and the final comment “Good”, so incommensurate with the unthinkable visitation just recounted.

Returning now towards the beginning of the quotation, which is not even the beginning of the sentence itself, one is struck again by its arresting analogical density and novelty: “the yoke of an old shirt”, and above all, “whose guilt will sicken one day to throat cancer, chiming like daylight through the fourchettes and quirks of a tattered Italian glove”. Such analogies, indebted to surrealism, impose the utmost degree of incongruousness between the likened objects, and remain too enigmatic to be read merely as mannerist ornamenting. There is an absolutely singular, secretive allusiveness, never fully accessible to the reader, hence carrying its own mysterious pathos. All in all, this long incident drift towards and into the “Lübeck incident” grants language a certain opacity and a striking “eventness”<sup>7</sup>, which makes us merely skirt the bombing itself while being immersed in an inconceivable side-show that cannot quite be framed either. But although endowed with the bombing’s attributes of both suddenness and return, the angel is also a counter-model: in contrast with “an unannounced need to climb”, it announces (indeed other fatal flights and explosions in the course of the war, and of the novel) ; and it is a helpless though gigantic witness of the flight’s power:

[...] fiery leagues of face, the eyes, which went towering for miles, shifting to follow their flight, the irises red as embers

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Event, seen from a plane far above, “looks like a butterfly” to one crew member, or like “An angel” to another... (*Against the Day*, p. 780).

7. The term is Derek Attridge’s, in *The Singularity of Literature*, London, Routledge, 2004: literary forms *happen* to the readers, they are a performance, that of “taking form”, or “forming”, or even “losing form” (p. 113).

fairing through yellow to white, as they jettisoned all their bombs in no particular pattern, the fussy Norden device, sweat drops in the air all around its rolling eyepiece, bewildered at their unannounced need to climb, to give up a strike at earth for a strike at heaven... (151)

This incident Angel is even a sort of comic-book figure (“sweat-drops in the air all around its rolling eyepiece”) of witnessing the bewildering “Event in the sky”. But it also exceeds form, like a sublime object<sup>8</sup>, “miles beyond designating”.

### Mimetic excess

The question of excess, of limits and their transgression, essential to Pynchon’s radically updated indictment of Promethean overreaching, together with the question of mimetic plasticity, are related to the “sublime style”: Longinus’ praise of Homer celebrates forms of syntactic excess and analogical profuseness, which alone can rise to the dynamic grandeur of his epic heroes, and more generally to heroic human endeavour (*On the Sublime*). In the words of French poet Michel Deguy, commenting upon Longinus’ treatise, “the poem “imitates”, in its own way, the pathos which it is about”<sup>9</sup>. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, what is imitated in many ways is flight and fall: the *élan* and indeed catastrophic pathos, both of the victims’ fate and of the killers’ literally transgressive yearning

Walter Benjamin established a kinship between the mimetic faculty and ancient magic practices (as performed by witch doctors, shamans), testifying to a fundamental anthropological “compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of [man’s] higher functions in which the mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role”<sup>10</sup>.

8. I am borrowing the phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy, about an art which is “the pure production of an excess over all forms (termed sublime)”: my translation of “la production pure d’un excès sur toute forme (nommé sublime)”, in *Au fond des images*, Paris, Galilée, 2003, p. 149.

9. Michel Deguy, “Le Grand-Dire”, in Jean-François Courtine *et al.*, *Du Sublime*, Paris, Belin, 1988, p. 27.

10. Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty” [1933], collected with some of his other essays in *Reflections*, New York, Schocken Books, 1986, p. 333.

This mimetic faculty has persisted mostly in man's capacity for producing similarities and thus explore differences, especially in language, a non-representational mimesis: "language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behaviour, and the most complete archive of non-sensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic." (*Reflections*, 336).

Theodor Adorno took up Benjamin's intuitions, agreeing that magic mimicry might be the fundamental mimetic model, in which the identification with the aggressor results in an immunization, an elimination of danger and mortal threat: mimicry is originally an adaptive behaviour. But it is also the source of the impulse to represent: "Art is a refuge for mimetic behaviour" and "its magic legacy has obstinately endured throughout all its metamorphoses"<sup>11</sup>; bearing in mind that "mimetic behaviour does not imitate something but assimilates itself to that something." (*Aesthetic Theory*, 162), even if at the same time, "the mimesis of works of art is their resemblance to themselves." (*op. cit.*, 153)<sup>12</sup>. Hence Adorno's statement on twentieth-century literature: "The efforts of prose writers since Joyce [...] might be explained as attempts to transform communicative language into a mimetic language." (*op. cit.*, 164).

Pynchon, who has paid tributes to "magic"<sup>13</sup>, performs radically mimetic counter-attacks, while also endorsing in his earlier

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11. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London, Routledge, 1984 [1970, posthumous], p. 79.

12. This is part of the complexity and fertility of the broad and most often elusive definition of the term "mimesis" by Adorno: for instance, it can be seen as "the hidden face of a figure whose explicit face is sometimes enigma, sometimes language, a figure in which subject and object, psyche and matter, are both continuous and discontinuous", according to Shierry Weber Nicholson in *The Semblance of Subjectivity. Essays on Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, Tom Hunt and Lambert Zuidervaart (eds.), Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997, p. 55. My main reason for quoting this, is to give an idea of how much, of the admirable wealth of Adorno's thought, I am leaving out and simplifying.

13. See for instance, in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Song is the magic cape." (p. 701); or the conjurer Zombini in *Against the Day*, a who has invented the "doppiatrice", a vanishing cabinet based on a double mirror device, which

books the mimetic plasticity of the sublime style, especially in *Gravity's Rainbow*, where the text often seems to become “like” the event it keeps elliptically registering and announcing, to the point that sometimes a sentence seems to be both about itself and about its object. The novel ultimately enacts an overall mimetic crisis, in several ways. Thematically, in the sense of René Girard’s analysis of sacrificial violence and scapegoats (in the novel, the extermination camps are off-screen but ever lurking, as early as “the final archway” in the opening nightmare); also through an excessive “sublime” verbal and enunciative plasticity ; and finally, because the sublime of the rocket’s flight is of course a spurious one, a travesty of erotic energy, of liberation and escape. So that the text may be seen as a simulation in the sense of an imitation intended to deceive: a feint, or even a “counter-feint”, as it is phrased in *Against the Day* (676). A “magic” of both imitation and contagion is at work here, as well as its critical parodies<sup>14</sup>. Hence the crucial role of impersonation, aping and grotesque “badassing”, of parody and self-parody. All are modes of an ironic outdoing of the deadly ironies, or perverse reversals, which are at once imitated and attacked: in a sort of “identification with the aggressor”, which might both “immunize”, and afford a mimetic immersive understanding of the event of mass destruction.

Trapped inside the last missile and also first A1 rocket launched at the end of the narrative, the young German soldier about to fly off and burn to his death thinks, “At last, something real.” (754). He yearns for the shattering excess of the real, in other words for an event freed from its anachronistic and ever incomplete appropriation, and blooming into the ecstatic experience of pure, sustained presence, liberated from meaning at last. If an event is the irruption of the real through our habitual and habitable world, *Gravity's Rainbow* registers this violence, while questioning the allure of the event as an access to the intensity of the real.

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does not cut his assistant in half but “creates two complete individuals” (p. 355), each then following two different life paths and time lines.

14. Magic of contact (or contagion), and magic of imitation, were the two main procedures of ancient magic rituals, according to James Frazer in *The Golden Bough. A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890-95), mentioned in Pynchon’s V.

Pynchon may however pay homage to the Dyonisian face of this impulse, as when another character, a woman in love and would-be witch wandering on the heath at night, is waiting and waiting for Pan to appear: "Is she ready for something that real?" And Pan does suddenly leap, beautifully, "into the sure bones of fright –" (720).

Suddenness here is a vector of what Hans Gumbrecht calls "presence effects" in the aesthetic experience: a flickering passage, involving both "suddenness and farewell" (Gumbrecht p.101), and ever in tension with "meaning effects"<sup>15</sup>. *Gravity's Rainbow*, abounding in literary "eventness" and mimetic pathos, produces such memorable presence effects. But its mimetic excess also serves a sobering simulation, through grotesque mimicry and various forms of irony, resisting the enchantment of presence and the allure of the event. And presence effects in a text can also result from the beauty of suspended violent intensities. The first section of the novel, "Beyond the Zero", is set during the 1944 period of "Advent"<sup>16</sup>. It includes a digressive, eccentric episode about the Advent evensong in an English country church (128-136). As the London Blitz is under way and Christmas is nearing, one is "watching again for the yearly impossible not to occur" (133), and though the double negation leaves a very thin margin of uncertainty within the repeated inscription of absence, the passage here and there offers a wonderful *elegy* of presence. It conveys the pathos of wartime exhaustion, of dim hopes and overwhelming fears, now suspended and now reverberating in the precarious community of song: a shared respite is something

15. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence. What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004.

16. An "advent" is a coming, an arrival, from the Latin *advenire*, to arrive, to happen, and *adventare*, to approach: arrival and approach, or an event and its announcement or imminence, cannot quite be separated; "adventure" obviously has the same etymology. And it is interesting that the adjective *adventicius-a-um* should mean, "coming from outside, from foreign parts; coming unexpectedly, accidentally; pertaining to arrival" (my source is the venerable Latin-French Gaffiot dictionary). Once capitalized, "Advent" of course refers to the first coming or to the second coming of Christ, as well as to the period including four Sundays before Nativity: it is at once the waiting, the birth or beginning, and the apocalyptic return which ends human time.

real too. This advent is a brief suspension of events, a promise, no matter how frail, as well as a disenchantment repaired by song.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is a counter-simulation of an event in the sky which itself is a travesty of utopian *élan* and transgressive liberation. This counter-simulation therefore involves elements of simulacrum, in the sense of imitated imitations, but it cannot be reduced to it, thanks to the bewildering persuasiveness of the text, its aesthetic energy.

The visible effects of the Tunguska Event are explicitly available for simulacra<sup>17</sup>, “copies of copies”:

Photographs would in due course begin to emerge, as if from a developing-bath, and be circulated... then copies of copies, after a while degraded nearly to the most current of abstract art, but no less shocking – virgin forest – every single trunk stripped white, blown the unthinkable ninety degrees – flattened for miles. (*Ag. Day*, 796)

These non-figurative simulacra are ambivalent themselves, as they produce a degradation which does not seem to erode the visual impact of an “unthinkable” violence. Despite their banality (“the most current of abstract art”), they bear witness to a disastrous geometrical reconfiguration of the world’s forms: this is “shocking”, and necessarily in a different sense from that of the hackneyed bourgeois disapproval of Modernist aesthetics (the year is 1908). Does the processing of the event’s traces by

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17. The notion of “simulacrum” is complicated because it can refer to contradictory characteristics. In Plato’s indictment, an *eidôlon* (the etymology of “idol”) is such an illusionist copy that its absolute resemblance to its model conceals the real, the Idea behind the form. It is a simulacrum, a mere appearance which no longer refers to the real: Greek sculpture is disparagingly opposed to the *eikôn* of Egyptian painting, recognizably a copy of something more real which is fully suggested by its approximate image (see *The Sophist*). So the perfect, illusionist copy is paradoxically like the copy of a copy, at least twice removed from the real model. Hence the usual sense of the term: “a slight, unreal or superficial likeness or semblance” (Webster), in other words an imperfect copy, signalling its distance from its model. This ambivalence may be awkward, leading to unclear reasonings, yet it is a fruitful one, all the way to Baudrillard’s disheartening use of the term (see below, about *Bleeding Edge*).

“mechanical reproduction” trivialize it? Yes and no, Benjamin argued, since such large-scale reproduction destroys an art work’s “aura” and “authenticity”, or even that of a natural landscape when photographed (Benjamin p.144); while this very decline after all bears new possibilities of social and political empowerment<sup>18</sup>. In his next two novels (*Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge*), Pynchon has more than ever before sought to turn mass culture into an angle of attack. But of course reality is itself eroded by the habits of perception, and by occasional affinities with technicolor, so that the event in the sky’s significance is threatened by oblivion:

It went on for a month. Those who had taken it for a cosmic sign cringed beneath the sky each nightfall, imagining ever more extravagant disasters. Others, for whom orange did not seem an appropriately apocalyptic shade, sat outdoors on public benches, getting used to the curious pallor. As nights went on and nothing happened and the phenomenon slowly faded to the accustomed deeper violets again, most had difficulty remembering the earlier rise of heart, the sense of overture and possibility, and went back once again to seeking only orgasm, hallucination, stupor, sleep, to fetch them through the night and prepare them against the day. (*Ag. Day*, 805)

### **The “too distant” event in *Bleeding Edge* (2013)**

This novel is about stupor indeed, the background of “the atrocity” of September 11th, 2001<sup>19</sup>. The event occurs quite late in the narrative, despite being situated half-way through the covered period. The heroine hears about the first attack incidentally and from a distance, in a corner shop uptown: “Something bad is

18. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” [1936] / “L’Œuvre d’art à l’âge de sa reproduction mécanisée”, in *Ecrits français*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991. Benjamin contrasts two types of reception of the work of art, contemplation (“recueillement” in French); and inattentive entertainment (“distraction”) in the case of mechanically reproduced works (photography, and above all, film), which is no obstacle to the wide-scale “politicization of art” (*Ecrits français*, p. 171) made possible by mass culture.

19. Pynchon refuses to call it “9/11”, to him the slogan of an unprecedented attack upon liberties, as part of the neo-conservative backlash.

going on downtown. ‘A plane just crashed into the World Trade Center.’” (316). When, back at home, she turns on the television, the second attack has already taken place: “And there it all is. Bad turns to worse. All day long” (316), with “the single constant telephoto shot of the smoking towers, already too distant” (317). No description is conceded, no attempt is made to repair this lack of presence by imagining the event from the point of view of the victims or of those close to them, and Pynchon has obviously declined to venture in the already explored field, by the time he was writing this novel, of personal trauma and its hauntings<sup>20</sup>. Here, the event happens to no one in particular, or rather to everyone remotely, becoming an elusive public property that cannot be quite appropriated. And although its elision makes it literally “impresentable”, the event is denied any sacred opacity<sup>21</sup>, as the novel from then on revolves around the characters’ more or less blasphemous comments and criticisms during the following weeks. Again staging the ceaseless attempts to make sense of what happened, Pynchon this time grants his characters (or should I say mouthpieces) a certain power of elucidation, in response to “the same news that’s no news” (324): in the total absence of historical and political explanations, the event is cancelled by its television coverage, and merely made to serve the confiscation of “our own precious sorrow” (377). Pynchon’s quarrel is indeed with a national stupor serving the ideological purposes of the G.W. Bush administration, among television viewers already adhering to “some stupefied consensus about what life is to be” (51), and now “infantilized by fear” (336).

The novel is another loose version of the American detective story, after its outright parody in *Inherent Vice* (2009), and the quest for intelligibility is, as usual in the genre, a partial failure.

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20. There are a few echoes of DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007): the family and homecoming story, the female point of view, the figure of the child. Other novels (and lesser than DeLillo’s) on the 2001 attack include Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2006), Jay McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2006, scornfully alluded to in *Bleeding Edge*), and Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* (2012).

21. What should be sacred is “the atrocity site” itself, but it is already desecrated by commodification, turned into a tourist attraction (*Bleeding Edge*, p. 328).

The heroine's initial investigation, loosely but persistently related to the approaching event, becomes increasingly centrifugal and inconclusive; all the more so, as the absence of narrative omniscience clears the stage (or rather, the TV screen) for dialogues, which make up a major part of the text. This is immersion indeed, this time in conversations, while in addition the narrator most often adopts the same language as his characters. Pynchon thus stakes everything on democratic agents of discourse, and of what is termed "the civic imagination" (329). He does so at the risk of the glib novel of ideas, parrying the danger with the absence of a narrative authority, with the very bulk of the dialogues, and with their concocted, imitative nature, which maintains the reader's awareness of artifice. Nevertheless, the paranoid "counternarratives" (388, alas a hackneyed phrase by now) prevail, voiced by the most likeable characters, and they emphatically reinstate the authority of an author's 'messages'. The mass of dialogues has therefore little effective power of disorientation, nor is it a vector of hermeneutic complexity. The "pandemonium of commentaries" (388) on the Internet and among the many characters is rife with the self-styled "truthers'" suspicion of a right-wing plot, incriminating the Bush administration, in cahoots with Mossad or else Persian Gulf monarchies, or both, and above all with global capitalism, its "corporate sins" (169) and "the holy fucking market" (338).

The "old-lefty" (321) character, loyal to the 1960's counter-culture, as Pynchon himself has always been, explains thus the attraction of the conspiracy theory: "Our yearning. Our deep need for it to be true. Somewhere, down at some shameful dark recess of the national soul, we need to feel betrayed, even guilty. As if it was us who created Bush and his gang" (322). What is desired here is a narrative of expiation, in often religious terms (sin, corruption, innocence), for an America led astray by capitalist greed and its "myth of the limitless" (353). This new "jeremiad" is the symmetrical reverse of the Republicans', which blamed the weakening of the United States on irresponsible liberal day-dreamers at last chastened by reality<sup>22</sup>. Both claim that America

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22. These adverse "jeremiads" are what Hanjo Berressem discusses in "... without

had it coming, and the event of September 2001 is viewed by one character as an apocalyptic self-revelation:

“When everything was revealed. No grand Zen illumination, but a rush of blackness and death. Showing us exactly what we’ve become, what we’ve been all the time.”

“And what we’ve been is...?”

“Is living on borrowed time. Getting away cheap. Never caring about who’s paying for it, who’s starving somewhere else all jammed together so we can have cheap food, a house, a yard in the burbs.” (340)

Pynchon may have chosen the only part of the event he felt he could honestly and decently hope to examine, while the “rush of blackness and death” itself (and this is the only imaginative phrasing of the event in the whole book) must remain unnamable. But the partial elucidation proposed here nonetheless tames the singularity of what happened, dragged, as it were, into the somewhat familiar light, albeit adversarial, of the American family circle. The event of September 2001 is turned into a purely national affair, whose international ramifications in the Middle East and in tax havens are mentioned but not pursued, because mobility and the bird’s eye view are the privilege of the powerful, whereas all the others are captives, swimming around in a fish-bowl they do not rule but have helped fabricate.

### **The pop simulacrum**

The very form of the novel is experienced as that of a collective insider’s job, creating a sense of either claustrophobia, or exclusion (and this is no longer the price of immersion into complexity and dialogic plurality, as in *Gravity’s Rainbow*)<sup>23</sup>. *Bleeding Edge* may well be, at least for non-American readers, the least hospitable of Pynchon’s novels, although one of the easiest to read in terms of

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shame or concern for etymology: 11 September in Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*, *electronic book review*, 2014.

23. Tom LeClair calls it “complication rather than complexity”, in a review entitled “Blunted Edge”, *American Book Review*, May-June 2014, vol. 35, n° 4.

construction and verbal density. For it takes an insider to make sense of the countless allusions to American popular culture, and of the characters' "knowing banter"<sup>24</sup> and witty repartees, after the model of some detective fiction, classic Hollywood comedy, and TV series. Insiders' jokes indeed<sup>25</sup>, thus often difficult to share, and mostly bandied within the restricted space of circulation and coincidence of Manhattan: this is the small, garrulous world of many TV series, a major formal model for this novel.

There seems to be no escape from mediated experience, and the attack on the first tower is formulated as a Baudrillard-like collapse of reality into its image: "And then they blew it to pixels", the heroine claims (446), where "they" seems to conflate the terrorists, and media technologies. But it is within simulacra, nevertheless, that a critical enquiry is made to emerge, among subjects fashioned, alienated, but potentially armed, after all, by the shared American habitat of popular culture. The novel somehow rests on a pop art of speech, a conspicuously artificial or simulated naturalism always contaminated by previous utterances and gestures, especially on screen. In this renewed ventriloquy, more unified (and monotonous) than ever before, the characters may have "a morning talk show kind of conversation" (441), and no one is immune from 'sitcomic-strip' situations:

"Eric, what's this, did you just... come, on my feet?"

"Um, yeah? well not 'on' exactly, coz I'm wearing a condom?"

"You're worried about what, funguses?"

"No offense, I just like condoms, sometimes I'll wear one just to have it on, you know?"

"OK..." Maxine glances quickly at his dick, and her contacts flip inside out and go sailing across the room.

"Eric, excuse me, is that some lonesome skin disease?"

"This? Oh, it's a designer condom, from the Trojan Abstract Expressionist Collection I believe, here-" He takes it off and

24. Carl Watson, review of *Bleeding Edge*, tribes.org, January 21, 2014.

25. One British reviewer granted that "most of us have seen enough about America on film to know what [Pynchon] is getting at", but complained that "even so, such provincial references, if they were made in reference to London, or Berlin, would be found meaningless by an American audience, and therefore unpublishable" (Talitha Stevenson, *The Observer*, 28 September 2013).

waves it at her.

“No need, no need.”

“Was that OK for you?”

Why, the sweetheart. Well ? Was it? She angles her head and smiles, she hopes not too sitcomically.

“You don’t do this a lot.”

“Not that often, as Daddy Warbucks always sez...”<sup>26</sup> (225-226)

Seeking agency within the puppetry of hyper-mediated lives, and despite the affectionate satire of such mildly eccentric and well-meaning New York liberals, Pynchon vindicates irony as empowerment, together with “all kinds of make-believe” (355). This is his response to a controversial article published barely two weeks after the attack in *Time* magazine, vengefully announcing “the end of irony”: “For some thirty years [...] the good folks of America’s intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real”, and all because of “our chattering classes – our columnists and pop culture makers –”<sup>27</sup>. To this, one character (who of course happens to be a professor of popular culture) replies:

“As if somehow irony [...] as practised by a giggling mincing fifth column, actually brought on the events of 11 September, by keeping the country insufficiently serious, weakening its grip on ‘reality’. So all kinds of make-believe – forget the delusional state the country’s in already – must suffer as well. Everything has to be literal now.” (335)

She links this to the proliferation of TV “reality programming”, and voices the paranoid suspicion that “Somebody needs this nation of starers believing they’re [...] freed from the fictions that led them astray, as if paying attention to made-up lives was some

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26. Daddy Warbucks is a character from the comic strip “Little Orphan Annie”, by Harold Gray, which first appeared in the *Daily News* strip in 1924. A rags-to-riches “zillionaire”, an industrialist and philanthropist, he is usually the mouthpiece of its author’s free-market political views. The character also pursued an independent fictional life, including in six “Annie” films between 1932 and 2014.

27. Roger Rosenblatt, “The Age of Irony Comes to an End”, *Time*, 24 September 2001.

*evil drug abuse* that the collapse of the towers cured by scaring everybody straight again.” (335). This kinship between fiction and irony, for Pynchon two modes of counter-simulations challenging the definition of reality, brings me back to the question of mimesis. It is raised explicitly by the same know-it-all Heidi (the academic...), about a Hallowe'en party she has been attending, a few weeks after the event:

“Children of all ages enacting the comprehensive pop cultural moment. Everything collapsed into the single present tense, all in parallel. Mimesis and enactment.” She may be having a little incoherence here after a while. Nowhere did she see a perfect copy of anything. Not even people who said, “O, I’m just going as myself” were authentic replicas of themselves. “It’s depressing. I thought Comic Con<sup>28</sup> was peculiar, but this was Truth. Everything out there just a mouseclick away. Imitation is no longer possible. Hallowe’en is over. [...]”  
 “And because you tend to be a blamer...»  
 “Oh, I blame the fuckin Internet. No question.” (374)

The claim that the distinction between a thing and its representation has “collapsed” (like the towers) seems at odds with the sense that this very hiatus is visible everywhere, betraying the imperfection of all “replicas”. Heidi’s “little incoherence” may stem from the very ambivalence of simulacrum (see above my footnote on this word), but she has also read Baudrillard; or how empty signs of the real supplant the real, making all its images fakes, and yet the only thing there is<sup>29</sup>: in Heidi’s words, “mimesis” is a devouring “enactment” rather than a representation leaving

28. “Comic Con” stands for the San Diego Comic Book Convention, launched in 1970. Initially dedicated to comic books, it later became more broadly about pop culture: films, TV series, cartoons, mangas, graphic novels, toys and card games, video games, and heroic fantasy fiction. There is also a Comic Con in New York, the largest pop cultural event on the east coast.

29. As early as 1981, Baudrillard claimed that “The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this death agony of strong referents, the death agony of the real and the rational which ushers in an era of simulation” (my translation of “Le grand événement de cette période, le grand traumatisme, est cette agonie des référentiels forts, l’agonie du réel et du rationnel qui ouvre sur une ère de la simulation”, in *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris, Galilée, 1981, p. 70). He

its model standing, and yet “copies” always appear as such; and her pronouncement that “this was Truth” echoes Baudrillard’s paradox, according to which “Simulacrum is true” because it shows there is no truth behind the image<sup>30</sup>. Hence her claim that “Imitation is no longer possible”, in this overall crisis of both similarities and differences, and of travesty itself (“Hallowe’en is over”).

The event is ever more distant here (including in my own comments), but there is no evidence of Baudrillard’s both bitter and gleeful nihilism in Pynchon’s novel; and it is after all in the virtual reality of “the fuckin Internet” that its victims’ presence may finally be registered in the text, as if the trap of forged realities was pried open at last, within the very technology which has allowed an unprecedented proliferation of simulacra. For *Bleeding Edge* is also an invitation to break through the screen, against “the bleak feeling, some mornings, that the country itself may not be there anymore but being silently replaced screen by screen with something else, some surprise package, by those who’ve kept their wits about them and their clicking thumbs ready.” (339).

Digging into the “Deep Web”, the heroine has discovered a hidden world, and in “the vast indefinite anarchism of cyberspace” (327) a both disturbing and enchanting site named “DeepArcher”, or a departure which offers inconceivable plunges into uncanny spaces. Still a precarious haven of anonymity, it is also sheltered from insignificance, surveillance and commerce; immersive, centrifugal, anarchic, literally utopian but also sinister at times, this visual maze may even afford an access to the invisible. Perhaps some “refugees from the event at the Trade Center” can be glimpsed there, together with the casualties whose “likenesses have been brought here by loved ones so they’ll have an afterlife, their faces scanned from family photos” (357-58): tentative “likenesses”, ranging from the inexpressiveness of emoticons to full festive animation, do persist, even in new forms, at the heart of simulated realities. And the “deeper” one moves into this

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saw in Disneyland a fit emblem of the widespread simulacrum: a children’s world, maybe recognizable here in the phrase “children of all ages”.

30. This is from the short epigraph of the first chapter of *Simulacre et simulation*, a fake quotation from *Ecclesiastes*.

haunted Underground, the closer the approach to a sidereal dark abyss, on “the edge of the known universe, [...] the edge of the unnavigable, the region of no information, [...], the edge of the beginning of the Word” (358). This virtual space is haunted by the September event, by the “edge” the victims stepped over, into the void. It may fork out into either “high hard radiation, vacuum, lifelessness” (358), or “a void incalculably fertile in invisible links” (359). It is also the realm of silence, the negative lining of a garrulous text and perhaps, for Pynchon, the only possible tribute to unimaginable deaths.

## Conclusion

Like those oblivious witnesses of the fading “Event in the sky”, I read *Bleeding Edge* too “calmly”: failing to care for “made-up lives” almost wholly entrusted to simulacra even while struggling to find some way out of the always already copied “hyperreality” of the event. Pynchon still performs an immersive simulation. But, in an attempt to open up a wake of the event, it is into commentaries and interpretations mostly toying with conspiracy theories, and without much effective irony about them. Paranoia here is not woven into the reading experience, but seems to be just what it usually is on the Internet: an easy way of making sense. As for the virtual world of DeepArcher, it is more a theme than a formal model for a text which gives much to hear but not much to “see” apart from the déjà-vu, as if in response to the obliteration of the event by its image on screens. Simulacrum, or counter-simulacrum here, renouncing all presence-effects, produces a mostly unpersuasive immersion (unless it be saved by a compelling enough humour): it somehow blocks imaginative presentation.

“Presentation”, which in Kant’s vocabulary is the specific faculty ensured by the imagination, is not a frontal, stable image-making, but according to Jean-Luc Nancy, “the event, the flash and brilliance of an appearance or a disappearance”<sup>31</sup>. Gumbrecht

31. My translation of “l’événement et l’éclat d’un apparaître ou d’un disparaître”, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s preface to Jean-François Courtine *et al.*, *Du Sublime*, Paris, Belin, 1988, p. 8.

(explicitly indebted to Nancy) says something similar about the aesthetic experience itself, whose temporality is that of “an event” (*op.cit.*, 111), as “it undoes itself while it emerges” (113); while Laurent Jenny<sup>32</sup>, and later Derek Attridge, although for different purposes, both talk about “events” in literary texts, Attridge specifying that their “emergence is also [their] erosion” (*op.cit.*, 64). These partial analogies, if not affinities, between the experience of an event and literary (or more generally, artistic) experience, are questionable: the danger is to deny the event’s deadly weight of reality, and to aestheticize events, no matter how destructive. But these analogies cannot be dismissed; not even on the grounds that literary mimesis is radically unsettled by the violence of the event, which widens the gap between reality and its possible representation, and ruins or at least threatens the mimetic faculty’s mediation between ourselves and the real. The possible relation, or negotiation, between the event and literature, is to be found in this productive tension between affinity and utter disjunction: here are two separate, discontinuous regimes of “happening”, of intensity, of felt reality. They are incommensurate with one another, opposed in many ways yet partly akin; hence the possibility for literature to enact something of the event’s haunting irruption and vanishing, its wake, its negativity and productivity.

In Pynchon’s towering apocalyptic events, this involves a crisis of “imitation”. An immersive simulation, in all the senses of the term, takes over, combining mimetic insufficiency and mimetic excess, from a sublime obliquity and plasticity to the carnival of mimicry and parody; or to the eventless realm of sheer simulacrum around the total ellipsis of an event too untractable (“too distant” but also, probably, too close to the writer in space and time) for any attempt at sublime figuration. But inherent in all degrees of simulation is irony, an antidote to the mesmerizing powers of the event. It is granted a critical function, together with “all kinds of make-believe”, in the inconclusive task of understanding.

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32. The first chapter of L. Jenny’s *La Parole singulière* is entitled “L’événement figural” (Paris, Belin, 1990).

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