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As Far as Pynchon "Loves Cameras"

Clément Lévy

Abstract

This essay studies photography as a technique and a metaphor in Thomas Pynchon's novels (from *V.*, 1963, to *Against the Day*, 2006). As an object, a photograph is very commonplace, but it can also be a fetish and, in some cases, a crucial conveyor of information. Using critical works of Paul Virilio, I show how photography, after it has become a dreadful weapon in Pynchon's works, smashes the ordinary continuity of space and time to pieces. It gives way to contemporary political and ethical problems about which Roland Barthes felt much concern. This could explain why Thomas Pynchon hasn't let any photographer approach him for more than forty years, while he publicly stated his love for cameras.

Photography addresses some of the most famous themes in Thomas Pynchon's novels: media, memory, and surveillance. It is one of the oldest and most present technologies in his works. Moreover, Pynchon builds many important metaphors around this art, as I will try so show. And yet, as a person, the author has fought many times to prevent any publication of his own photographic image. This paradox will introduce this reflexion on the part that photography as a technique (and also as an art) and pictures, play in Thomas Pynchon's novels until *Against the Day* (2006). I will discuss a number of passages where photography is described, in order to show how it is used in Pynchon's novels to convey information and to represent an opposition to the writer's freedom of creation when he describes objects and persons that do not exist in the set of references–space-time–that photography for a long time was thought to best represent.

Thomas Pynchon chose to appear publicly on TV screens as a character in two episodes of season 15 and 16 of *The Simpsons*, the cartoon series produced by Fox Broadcasting Company. In his first appearance he is asked by Marge's editor to dictate a blurb for her novel, *The Harpooned Hearts*, a sentimental and shorter version of *Moby-Dick*. This is

what he tells her: "Here's your quote: 'Thomas Pynchon loved this book. Almost as much as he loves cameras.'" Shall we take his words seriously?

During this twenty-second speech he is talking to the editor by telephone and is obviously joking about his legendary media shyness. It has been reported that in 1963 Pynchon eluded a photographer sent by *Time* Magazine to take his picture in Mexico City (Teresi, Ketzan). Since then newspapers and magazines thus can only display pictures which date back from his college and navy years, from sources unknown, or the infamous paparazzo shot that is too indistinct to make a difference.

Yet once cartoon Pynchon has hung up the phone, he faces the street and calls out to indifferent passers-by to take a photo with him under a gigantic billboard that reads "Thomas Pynchon's House. Come on in!" He adds: "Hey, over here, have your picture taken with a reclusive author! Today only, we'll throw in a free autograph! But wait, there's more!" This would mean that Thomas Pynchon really likes cameras and wants his picture to be taken.

The fact that the autograph is offered "today only" seems to show that Pynchon is used to welcoming lots of fans in his neighborhood for these strange photo sessions: this is pure non-sense, as the author is hiding his face under the now famous brown paper bag. And he is very well-known for his secrecy. Pynchon neither likes Marge's novel nor cameras. The billboard and signs are a way to show it very clearly. Nevertheless, two years after this ambiguous declaration of love to cameras, Pynchon's published *Against the Day*, a novel in which photographers and descriptions of different photographic processes abound to such an extent that there arises a need to reconsider photography in Pynchon's works in general. I want to address this need in the present essay.

Pynchon focuses on photography both as an optical and a chemical process, and while it is one among many technologies central to his works, it is also one of the oldest. *Against the Day* represents both balloon-aeronautics (which began in the 1770s) and photography (invented around 1839) with the Chums of Chance and Merle Rideout respectively, among other characters. Yet one historical person was *both* a balloonist and a photographer, and he may have inspired the author. Félix Tournachon, known as Nadar, took pictures of the most famous artists of his time, like Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, or Sarah Bernhardt, and as soon as 1855 he even tried to develop aerial reconnaissance using balloons and photography. However, photography in Pynchon's

work is much more than a historical marker. The very presence of photography at a large scale, and every step of the history of this technique is significant in his novels, as I will show in the following.

Pynchon includes many differents types of camera and processes. Some of them are very famous, as the Kodak Brownie (from 1900 to the 1960s) in *Against the Day*, used by Wren Provenance to document her research on Ute vestiges, and by Merle Rideout after his apprenticeship with heavy tripods, wooden chambers and glass plates:

> As years went along, the film got faster, the exposure times shorter, the cameras lighter. Premo came out with a celluloid film pack allowing you to shoot twelve at a time, which sure beat glass plates, and Kodak started selling its "Brownie," a little box camera that weighed practically nothing. Merle could bring it 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, sometimes, Dally and Merle agreed, more real, though they never got into "real" that far. (*AtD* 72)

The much smaller and more accurate 24x36 LEICA camera is also mentioned by its brand name in *V.* (the company has been producing cameras since 1925 to this day), as it is used by Teflon to steal pictures of Paola Maijstral and Benny Profane making love:

> Groan, went the bed. Before either of them knew it:
> Click, went Teflon's Leica.
> Profane did what was expected of him: came roaring off the bed, arm terminating in a fist. Teflon dodged it easily. (*V.* 19)

This German camera is very famous among photographers (notably because its shutter is very quiet, and the lenses very sharp and clear), and Henri Cartier-Bresson did much for its praise, calling it "the extension of [his] eye" in the introduction to *The Decisive Moment*. Michael Naumann, who was CEO of Henry Holt publishing company (1996-1998) and became the German Secretary of Culture (1998-2001), said in a radio interview that Pynchon once told him that what all he wanted for his birthsday was an old LEICA camera from the 1930s. Not surprisingly then, throughout *Gravity's Rainbow* German cameras are highly valued and used as a means of exchange:

> Pirate, driven to despair by the wartime banana shortage, decided to build a glass hothouse on the roof, and persuade a friend who flew the Rio-to-Ascension-to-Fort-Lamy run to pinch him a sapling banana tree or two, in exchange for a German camera, should Pirate happen across one on his next mission by parachute. (*GR* 6)

For American soldiers, cameras are part of the spoils of war in the Zone, "champagne, furs, cameras, cigarettes" (*GR* 302), and they were used on black market, as Säure Bummer recalls: "Remember how the Wilhelmplatz used to be? Watches, wine, jewels, cameras, heroin, fur coats, everything in the world" (*GR* 376).

Cameras and photographs are so frequently mentioned in Pynchon's novels because they became part of everyday life in Western cultures during the 20th century. Photographic portraits are everywhere, and everyone keeps pictures of their loved ones or of people they admire. We can find "oversize photos of John Dillinger" in the bar called Chicago in *Gravity's Rainbow*'s Berlin (*GR* 374), and when Mayva Traverse meets Stray Briggs near the end of *Against the Day*, they exchange tintypes of their sons Jesse and Reef (*AtD* 980-1). The sentimental mood of this encounter is made stronger by the contemplation of pictures showing cherished but absent people.

Yet photography's foremost function is to gather and communicate information. Tourists take photographs of their travels to remember them and show them to their friends once they will have returned home, a stereotype Pynchon often exploits. It is parodied when the guide who leads Slothrop down to the Mittelwerke in Nordhausen offers him to rent a camera (*GR* 300), but the parody is most efficient where it combines with that of national stereotypes. The Japanese in *Against the Day*, as in *Vineland* during the strange Chipco incident, cannot seem to help taking snapshots. Each member of the "Japanese trade delegation" in Telluride "carried a pocket Kodak with its shutter ingeniously connected to a small magnesium flashlight, so as to synchronize the two" (*AtD* 292). And when in the Cosmopolitan Gambling Club Merle Rideout tries to warn them against a nervous Bob Meldrum,

> [a]ll at once, magnesium flash-lights were exploding everywhere, each producing a column of thick white smoke whose orderly cylindrical ascent was immediatly disarranged by attempts of customers, in some panic, to seek exit, the unexpected combination of brightness and opacity thus quickly spreading to fill every part of the saloon. (*AtD* 293)

This great uproar is all the more funny as it sounds anachronistic. But the tourists taking pictures of a traditional scene of the West are also performing a pyrotechnical display, photography being a technological show in itself.

This use of the photographic medium and its practice as a way to build photo albums and put souvenirs together is quite harmless, even when it drives a whole assembly of

gamblers and drinkers to such a tumult. But as it is also used for political purposes, a shadow of mistrust is cast on photography. Spying relied on photography in the twentieth century whereas it has had to rely only on traitors for ages before. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, aerial photo reconnaissance is so widely used by Allied intelligence that "these days, with so much death hidden in the sky, out under the sea, among the blobs and smears of recco photographs, most women's eyes are only functional" (*GR* 235). Later in the novel there is a direct mention of Constance Babington-Smith, a WAAF[1] officer whose mission was to decipher reconnaissance photographs, and who first identified a V1 on its launching ramp (*GR* 740). Of course, we also remember how Teddy Bloat used his "midget spy-camera" (*GR* 17) to take a picture of Slothrop's map, "click zippety click" (*GR* 19). However, modern spying techniques have rendered the photographer obsolete. Automatic cameras take pictures of areas under surveillance, and these photographs are taken by satellites on orbital flight since the 1960s. The camera thus became ubiquitous, and from then most of the photos taken, after a careful study, are discarded because they do not convey the information wanted. Modern spying techniques thus built a new space of control where the now classical conception of a space-time continuum does not make sense any more. This is what the French architect Paul Virilio in *The Lost Dimension* (originally published as *L'Espace critique* in 1984) calls "speed-space" (96). According to the author, this concept has many applications for modern warfare, geopolitics, and social control. As satellites glide around the Earth, they automatically record and transmit digital pictures that are used to control troops on the ground and missiles in the air. These recent trends in mass destruction, developed during Cold War, seem to concern specifically Pynchon's works. *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Vineland* help illustrate the danger of war industries, simply because "The true war is a celebration of markets" (*GR* 107). But the new ways of finding and transmitting strategic information do not meet the author's interest for photography even if the objects described by Paul Virilio in *The Lost Dimension* are creations that originate in the desire to control a military operation from above, through optical devices. Air reconnaissance gave birth to satellite surveillance, but digital pictures took the place of photographies, and thus the image as an information medium disappeared: it was replaced by an ever-changing flow of electronic signals, pure speed without any space. We thus can read in Pynchon's novels the entire story of photography from its origins and its

[1] Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

use for military purposes until the disappearance of the photographic picture in the very domain where it was supposed to play a major role: war and intelligence.

But as the most powerful states can decline in a few years, we must remember that every photograph is momentary and bears a strong relationship to death. As polaroids appear in the short time of a chemical revelation, older pictures in family albums will tend to fade away. In the process of its making, a silver print reveals itself to the photographer when he plunges the sensitive paper into the developer bath after projection of the negative film. It is not by accident that Pynchon compares the Raketen-Stadt in *Gravity's Rainbow* to a photograph: "it resembles a Daguerreotype taken of the early Raketen-Stadt by a forgotten photographer in 1856: this is the picture, in fact, that killed him – he died a week later from mercury poisoning after inhaling fumes of the heated metal in his studio" (*GR* 740) Here as in *Against the Day*, Pynchon displays an extended knowledge of the art to his readers. The fluid metal also used in alchemy gives access to a fatal understanding of the city through its photographic representation. Of course, Raketen-Stadt "the ceremonial City, fourfold as expected, an eerie precision to all lines and shadings architectural and human, built in mandalic form like a Herero village" (*GR* 740) has a perfect architectural and symbolic organization. But its form is always changing: "there seems to be building, or demolition, under way in various parts of the City, for nothing here remains the same, […] engineering changes to the Rocket create new routes of supply, new living arrangements, reflected in traffic densities as viewed from this unusual height" (*GR* 740). From high above the city (possibly from a balloon?), the viewer can imagine the life of its inhabitants, and the growing of the organism it constitues with the rockets assembly lines. We should add that a daguerreotype, a picture left on a metal plate after an exposure to the natural light, is quite difficult to look at. One has to alternatively lower and raise one's gaze in order to understand plainly what is printed on the plate. This could explain why the image of this city is constantly changing. Another hypothesis could be the uncertain situation in time of this ideal city. It is a strange vision of the future for the main characters of the novel who see the first attempts in rocketry, but if it is portrayed on a Daguerreotype, it could also be an utopian metropolis of the 1850s.

Yet the most striking aspect in this passage is the way an imaginary object, the Raketen-Stadt, is compared to an imaginary photograph the narrator describes to the reader. This happens many times in Pynchon's works, and it deserves close attention because unlike

postmodernist writers who includes pictures – drawings, photographs, typographical assemblage – in their fictions (e.g. William T. Vollmann, William Gass, or W. G. Sebald), Pynchon seems to prefer to compare an object of his fictional world to a fictional photograph which is even absent from his work. In *V.*, the plastic surgeon Dr. Shoenmaker uses photographs as an evidence of real facts opposed to zany theories:

> "So with Lamarck, who said that if you cut the tail off a mother mouse her children will be tailless also. But this is not true, the weight of scientific evidence is against him, just as every photograph from a rocket over White Sands or Cape Canaveral is against the Flat Earth Society." (*V.* 47)

Of course, Pynchon's novels are full of the phenomena despised by Dr. Shoenmaker, from the Hollow Earth to Bigfoot, UFOs and the underground mail system W.A.S.T.E. But such fantasy is a realm where photography is totally useless.

However, in some occasions, Pynchon, by ways of a metaphor, has his own fantasy meet the photographic picture. In *Against the Day*, when Miles Blundell goes for a bicycle ride in Flanders with Ryder Thorn, he has a strange feeling that is compared to entering a photography:

> it was like passing through an all-surrounding photographic negative–the lowland nearly silent except for water-thrushes, the harvested fields, the smell of hops being dried in kilns, flax pulled up and piled in sheaves, in local practice not to be retted till the spring, shining canals, sluices, dikes and cart roads, dairy cattle under the trees, the edged and peaceful clouds. Tarnished silver. (*AtD* 553)

Miles has not gone through the looking-glass, but he finds himself in a bright and shiny world, silent, filled with scents, but bearing the anachronistic stain of a future catastrophe that turns out to be World War I. The photographic images bear the morbid aura that Roland Barthes conceives in every photo. In his essay on memory and photography the semiologist writes:

> in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography. (Barthes 76-7)

The thing that will have been there (the *ça-a-été*: "that-has-been" as Barthes puts it) is in this page of *Against the Day* the peace of a summer that precedes the horrendous massacres and trenches that are described in Brigadier Pudding's story in *Gravity's Rainbow* (*GR* 78). Here,

the comparison with a photo allows a pause that fixes a landscape forever in a form bound to disappear. Pynchon describes photographic images for the fatality they entail. In *Vineland*, this darkness of death looming in every picture becomes a reason to produces pictures and films, when young activists of the 24fps collective document the repression of junkies and left-wing activists in the 1960s, claiming that "A camera is a gun. An image taken is death performed" (*VL* 197). This brief anarchist manifesto sentences capitalists to death, and Frenesi as the camera-operator is the executioner, as her daughter Prairie discovers later. But it is also worth a remark that the People's Republic of Rock 'n' Roll movement in which Frenesi is involved is also watched closely by her lover Brock Vond (she even gives him her films). Vond is federal prosecutor, and at the College of the Surf, during the revolutionary events,

> No hour day or night was exempt from helicopter visits, though this was still back in the infancy of overhead surveillance, with a 16mm Arri "M" on a Tyler Mini-Mount being about state of the art as far as Frenesi knew. (*VL* 209)

Aerial surveillance is also used much later in the novel, during the War on Drugs led in Vineland County by Kommandant Bopp. The "former Nazi *Luftwaffe* officer" leads "helicopter and plane crews" of voluntary "antidrug activists" (*VL* 221). The reconnaissance techniques even involve the use of airborne radar equipments: "AWACS planes in the air round the clock" (*VL* 222).

For Thomas Pynchon, photography is a key element of twentieth-century history because it gives form to our representation of the world, an idea conceived in a similar way by Jean Baudrillard when he makes simulation a crucial concept for his study of our societies and art forms. The fact that photos are everywhere, and do not mean much once they have had their effect on the consciousness and triggered decisions that are always political, helps define the camera as a ubiquitous and panoptic substitute of the eye to which not everybody is given access. But in a fictional world cameras instead become images of an eye that is taken everywhere, and of a gaze that can lead to considerable knowledge but also to dreadful consequences, as in the case of the Mason-Dixon line, which is run across the open space of America after every point of it has been fixed by astronomers gazing at the stars through their optical instruments. The precision of Pynchon's discourse on photography, and the ways he

uses it as a theme and as a metaphor, makes me think that he loves cameras as much as he fears them.

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