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Excess of Vision:
Modernity and the Body in Pynchon’s *V.*

Shizuka Hayasaka

In the epilogue of *V.* the narrator says: “. . . sometime between 1859 and 1919, the world contracted a disease which no one ever took trouble to diagnose because the symptoms were too subtle”¹. This novel, as may be supposed from the quotation, grapples with and depicts the disease of modernity and its effect on political, social, and cultural aspects of the modern Western world. In this essay, the representation of the essence of modernity in the novel is to be studied, focusing on the corporeal constituents of its characters. The dominant New Critical and post-structuralist studies of human bodies in Pynchon’s works have inscribed them as “perpetually empty space marking the play of signification within the text” (Kemeny 259).² However, the materiality of the body is accepted and considered as important in my discussion.

First, a summary of the generally accepted account of modern Western bodies will be introduced, as the basis for an exploration of Pynchon’s descriptions of human bodies in their socio-cultural context. Then the predominance of visual sensation is examined, involving the motif of physical and psychological mechanization — voyeurism, tourism, the image-directed body option of a young Jewish girl, and the use of the traditional poetic device, the blazon. It is expected ultimately to elucidate the crucial link between the precedence of eyesight and modern violence depicted in the novel.

Pynchon’s first novel *V.*, published in 1963, consists of two main narratives which alternate with each other and are intertwined with several common motifs. The historical chapters move from 1898 to 1943, narrated and edited by an Englishman, Herbert Stencil. He is
obsessed with a woman mentioned in his father’s diary only as V. who may be his biological mother. He tries to reconstruct his father’s life in order to find more out about this V. The other series of chapters centers on an American character, Benny Profane, an aimless wanderer, and takes place mainly in New York, from 1955 to 1956. The historical or diachronic and contemporary or synchronic chapters are arranged alternately, so that the whole novel skips around in time, and is not chronological in shape.

Before entering on the analysis of the novel, a brief outline of the plot will perhaps be in order. As to the historical episodes, five chapters draw out the story from various sources and documents concerning V. and Stencil’s father. They are connected with events of international violence or warfare. This part begins with the Fashoda incident, moving to riots in Florence connected with a plotted Venezuelan rebellion, other international cabals, spying, then to a native revolt in German South-West Africa in 1922 which leads to the German colonizers’ long and decadent siege party, and finally to the bombing of Malta during the Second World War. The last two chapters of the historical narrative disturb the chronological order. The last but one chapter is set in Paris in 1913 when the First World War is imminent, and the Epilogue is set in Malta at the time of the disturbances of 7 June 1919. In these apparently random historical episodes, V. has five verifiable incarnations. She is the young and beautiful Victoria Wren in Cairo and Florence, who experiences the excitement involved in international spying and plots by means of her sex appeal; she is the 33-years-old known only as V., who causes a riot and has a surreal lesbian love affair with a young ballet dancer and, in addition, one of whose eyes has become an artificial, clock-eye; then she is Vera Meroving at the German colonizers’ siege party in 1922, also with the artificial eye; then in 1943 the Bad Priest, a disguise assumed to be the half-mechanized lady V. with artificial hair, eye, legs and a star-sapphire navel; finally Veronica Manganese, who seems to have something to do with the Malta disturbances of June in 1919. As is made explicit above, the process by which V. becomes more and more involved with cruelty and violence goes hand in hand with the increasing incorporation of artificial objects into her body.

In the contemporary American episode, the central character Benny Profane wanders aimlessly from place to place, frequently changing his job, often involved in barroom brawls with sailors or young Puerto Ricans. He fears and avoids intimate relationships with women,
although women seem to like him supposedly because of his slow, passive, but gentle character. He is obsessed with a destructive nightmare in which he is gradually dismantled as if he were an automaton: “. . . here that it would turn into a nightmare. Because now, if he kept going down that street, not only his ass but also his arms, legs, sponge brain and clock of a heart must be left behind to litter the pavement, be scattered among manhole covers” (35). With all these characteristics, Profane finally gets acquainted and associates with a group of decadent New York artists known as the Whole Sick Crew. He meets Herbert Stencil there, and happens to travel with him and a Maltese girl named Paola Maijstral to Malta at the end of the novel where Paola’s father Fausto witnessed V.’s death in 1943. However, Stencil leaves Profane alone in Malta, setting off for Stockholm, to investigate another clue, in fact a piece of rather uncertain information, about the mystery of V. Finally, Profane runs through the darkness of the night “toward the edge of Malta, and the Mediterranean beyond” (491) with Brenda, an American university student, who seems to embody modern materialism.

1. The Historical Context

During the 1950s, the mainstream of the United States enjoyed postwar prosperity—increases in wages, employment, population growth (a one-third rise over the 1930s), and the industrial boom, which continued through the Korean War and the Cold War into the early years of the Vietnam War. However, despite this apparent prosperity, American life was full of discords: unequal distribution of wealth, devastated urban areas, ravages to the natural environment, and the discriminations of race and sex. Besides, because of the globalization of the Cold War, begun straight after World War II, science and technology were being promoted and granted importance by governments for the purpose of national defense. In this postwar atomic age, technology and science were increasingly felt not only as serviceable but also potentially life-threatening, as they were associated with memories of the holocausts from Auschwitz to Hiroshima. As Vincent B. Leitch points out: “Despite the apparent mobility, comfort, and wealth of American life, many intellectuals saw in contemporary mass society as well as postwar technological science much decadence and danger, much alienation and absurdity, much repression and sickness” (149). He further surveys a significant feature of numerous influential
sociological studies in the 1950s:

What emerged from such analyses, among other things, was an urgent historical narrative about the dispossession of rugged individualists in favor of outerdirected conformists who were manipulated by government bureaucracies and corporations and stripped of political and psychological potency. Mass man was puny, weak, dependent, repressed, controlled, and absurd. The subduers of man were corporate capitalism, big government, mass advertisement, rampant technology, rigid social conventions, coopted science, and total administration—all of which tamed forms of opposition and fostered docile conformity. (150)

The American novelists sympathized with this tendency in sociological studies. Frederick Karl gives an account of American fiction in the 1950s:

While the country went one way—toward prosperity, cold war obsessions, national security and world power, industrial growth, egalitarian participation, school integration—fiction seemed to go another: toward rejection, withdrawal, aggressive hostility to systems, imitation as a mode of life, disintegration of acceptable behavior. Implicit in the literature of the 1950s is a foreshadowing of nearly every aspect of social and political behavior of the 1960s; in literary terms, the two decades are seamless . . . (176)

American fiction in the 1950s tends to attack modernity, technology, or everything having to do with systems. Pynchon, too, criticizes modernity in his novel, V., placing its eponymous heroine, a gradually mechanizing woman, as the key figure in the plots— which concern various international modern riots and violence.

2. Modern Western Bodies

Having looked at the historical context of the novel, and noted its crucial concern with the nature of modernity, its corporeal constituents are to be studied since they have been neglected or denied in earlier criticism. Close attention should be paid to the emphasis and the predominance of the visual sensation of characters in the description of human bodies.

The modern Western body is evidently the basis of the characters’ communication in the novel. Phillip Mellor and Chris Shilling explain that “there has long been consensus on the dynamic nature of modern forms of embodiment, specifically with regard to the classical modern project’s dependence on the ‘disciplined individual’ able to
make rational decisions on the basis of ‘autonomous self-interest’ (Smith, 1950 [1776]), and to the prioritization of cognitive thought expressed through the pervasiveness of plans, projects and designs (Bauman, 1995)” (41). The influential idea in this consensus is René Descartes’ conceptualization of the mind/body dichotomy: “His [Descartes’] Cogito ergo sum, (‘I think, therefore I am’) was linked at one level to a complete devaluation of all the body’s senses” (Mellor and Shilling 6).

Here, in order to explicate further what constitutes the modern Western body, a general theory advanced about the important connections between Western modernity and Protestantism will be introduced. V. J. Siedler argues that modernity is “a secular form of Protestantism” which tells people to distrust nature, that is, their emotions, feelings and desires, and, to listen instead to “the clear voice of reason” (25-26). Modernity, especially modern instrumental reason, has been achieved by controlling the workings of one’s own emotions conceptually and producing a mechanical nature out of the empirical one, thus also repressing desire and irrationalism. Ann Swidler asserts that “the essence of [Max] Weber’s concept of rationality resides in the methodical control over the individual’s life, then the high degree of affinity between Weber’s concept of personality and the archetype of the ascetic Puritan becomes apparent. One can then understand why Weber—going against the spirit of his age—established a connection between religion and rationality” (39). Furthermore, Friedrich Nietzsche notes: “Both of them, science and the ascetic ideal, are still on the same foundation . . .” (120). It seems reasonable to suppose that the essence of Protestantism is common to that of modernity, in their attitudes towards desire and irrationalism.

Bearing this account of the close connection between modernity and Protestantism in mind, I would like to introduce Mellor and Shilling’s detailed study of modern Protestant bodies. They explain that Protestantism has made linguistic symbols and narratives (which could be thought with, spoken and read) a central source of people’s self-identity, by seeking to dislocate people from their natural, supernatural and social environments. Therefore, “the Protestant flesh was something which had to be made subordinate to these (religiously justifiable) narratives; the body had, in other words, to be controlled by the mind” (42). This meant that “Protestants gave priority to their ‘distant contact’ senses. These enabled individuals, distanced from their surroundings, to visually and aurally monitor, judge and antici-
pate natural and social phenomena before making close contact with them (Falk, 1994)” (Mellor and Shilling 44).

To put the whole issue briefly, modern Western people tend to regard the flesh as inferior to and separate from the mind, and prioritize such ‘distant contact’ senses such as the sense of seeing and hearing. This attitude entails the danger of considering others as mere flesh, that is, mere objects, and is crucially connected with the mechanistic view of the world we have seen above. Besides, it encourages people to keep their distance from others and rigidifies their individuality and, furthermore, it may lead to unsympathetic and inhuman acts inflicted upon others.

In view of this account of the modern body, it is appropriate to review and summarize the predominance of eyesight in the modern age. It is pointed out that modern Protestant bodies tend to prioritize the visual and auditory senses. Additionally, Mellor and Shilling note that “the emphasis on mind and sight has been an extremely influential aspect of the conceptualization of the links between culture and bodily forms in the West”, particularly exemplified by Descartes’ mentality, “I’ll believe it when I see it” (7). They go on: “In a similar vein, John Locke devalued the senses other than sight and his Essay on Human Understanding expressed an emphasis on the visual basis of mental understanding (Classen, 1993: 27; see also Jenks, 1995: 3; Rorty, 1980)” (7). The sight is generally regarded as one of the most “distancing senses”. It maintains a distance between the seer and the seen, the subject and the object. As Michel Foucault defines it, sight is the basis of the modern power system, that is, the modern disciplinary society founded on surveillance, the visual sense which distinctly separates the ruler and the ruled.

An analysis of a passage in one of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays will provide another example of the modern consciousness of eyesight and the dichotomy between mind and body.

When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate somewhat of the angular distinctness of objects. If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. (Emerson, 25)

This quotation reveals a characteristic romantic attitude which gives priority to the spirit over the material. Eyes are here used as a
metaphor for reason. What is apparent is the connection between mind and eye. The object for the working of reason will be appreciated in its spiritual essences beyond the physical world of appearances. Here, the metaphoric eye erases materiality. Even the romantics, who criticized the modern idea which regards rationality as important, have accepted the modern dualism of mind and body.

All these examples suggest that the precedence of eyesight has a tendency towards a distancing of the subject from the object, a decreasing of people’s close and humane contact with each other, leading finally to an unsympathetic attitude to others’ bodily, and physical sensation. Indeed, Pynchon associates various kinds of modern personal or collective violence with the attenuated and neglected sense of the body and decreased compassion for others caused by the romantic and modern priority of eyesight, mind, and the spiritual. He indicates the potentially violent nature of the romantic and modern body in his novel, *V*.

My discussion of the novel will be focused firstly on some characters’ voyeuristic attitudes that often reveal their moral non-involvement. Secondly, the motif of tourism will be examined: its commitment to surface, to the visual of the world. The third observation considers the image-directedness and the objectified state of a young girl called Esther who undergoes cosmetic surgery. Finally, the essence of the literal and the parodies of the poetic “blazon” which recur in the novel will be discussed.

3. Voyeurism

Tonny Tanner points out that “various forms of voyeurism are part of the normal behaviour patterns of a world where any attempt at human inter-subjectivity has been replaced by the disposition to regard people as objects—inside the field of vision but outside the range of sympathy, if indeed any such range exists” (*Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*. 25). As it is explained in this passage, several voyeurs, often involved in some kind of violence are depicted in the novel. In chapter 9, “Mondaugen’s Story”, one of the historical episodes, Herbert Stencil tells his friend Dudley Eigenvalue a story he heard from Kurt Mondaugen long after the event. Mondaugen, one of the ‘voyeurs’ in the novel, has been posted to South-West Africa in 1922 to conduct observations of radio signals known as sferics. He
has been alarmed by undertones of an uprising of the native Bondels (Bondelswarts or Bondelswartz) tribe of the region and is told by a local administrator that he would be safer if he took refuge in the villa of a German colonist called Foppl, a veteran of von Trotha’s genocidal army. So Mondaugen stays at Foppl’s farm, where the people from various colonial nations gather, holding a Siege Party for two and a half months. Presently he enters into a hallucinatory state, the product of scurvy-induced dreams which occur intermittently. In these dreams, the decadent, sado-masochistic behavior of the people who stay at Foppl’s house becomes mixed with reports of the campaign of 1904, when the German army slaughtered sixty thousand Hereros, and of the soldiers’ daily life in those days. In the narrative of Mondaugen’s feverish dreams about the atrocities committed by German soldiers on native people, the problem of narrative authority and point of view is complicated. Here, I shall examine an episode in Mondaugen’s dream which depicts one of the soldiers’ most dreadful inhuman acts:

Together the troopers [German soldiers] sjamboked the Hottentot [one of the native tribes] on the buttocks and thighs, forcing him into a queer little dance. It took a certain talent to make a prisoner dance that way without slowing down the rest of the trek because of the way they were all chained together. (279)

What is clear in this passage is that the soldiers relish visually the natives suffering the pain as “a queer little dance”. Their inhuman, unsympathetic attitude is clear in this phrase. However, the dreams seem to result from the stories which Mondaugen has obtained by questioning spontaneously the German colonial soldiers. As he thinks that “he had a gift of visual serendipity: a sense of timing, a perverse certainty about not whether but when to play the voyeur” (260), he more or less takes pride in and enjoys his voyeuristic attitude, to peek into the decadent sexual behavior Foppl’s guests. Not until he catches sight of the extreme union of cruel colonial violence and the perverse, sadistic sexual behavior acted out by Vera Meroving, does he decide to leave Foppl’s place:

Hanging over the rows, each wrist attached to a different stringing-wire, feet gangling over young hops already sick with downy mildew, was another Bondel, perhaps Foppl’s last. Below, dancing about the body and flicking its buttocks with a sjambok, was old Godolphin. Vera Meroving stood by his side and they appeared to have exchanged clothing. Godolphin, keeping time
with the sjambok, launched quaveringly into a reprise of Down by the Summertime Sea. (278)

Having looked at this brutal spectacle, “Mondaugen this time withdrew, preferring at last neither to watch nor to listen” (296). Here, the narrator Stencil suggests and casually denounces Mondaugen’s decadence itself. Nevertheless, ironically enough, Stencil may also be responsible — as he, too, may have to some extent enjoyed or been excited by Mondaugen’s story. Pynchon clearly calls into question the ethical aspect of the relation between a voyeuristic attitude and rampant violence, the moral non-involvement of the voyeur.

According to Catharine R. Stimpson, there is also an episode in chapter 7 that depicts V. as a voyeur. In Florence, when the Venezue-
lans begin to riot, she watches, safe inside the building.

She saw a rioter. . . being bayoneted again and again. . . . She stood. . . still. . . ; her face betrayed no emotion. It was as if she saw herself embodying a feminine principle, acting as complement to all this bursting, explosive male energy. Inviolate and calm, she watched the spasms of wounded bodies, the fair of violent death, framed and staged, it seemed, for her alone in that tiny square. From her hair the heads of five crucified also looked on, no more expressive than she (emphasis mine). (220)

Victoria is totally detached: she shows no sympathy or response, “inviolate and calm” and “no more expressive” than “the heads of five crucified” which are carved on her ivory comb—although she catches sight of the rioter being brutally attacked, “being bayonetted again and again”. Despite responding to this spectacle of physical violence, she attaches an abstract argument to the scene: “herself embodying a feminine principle”. She is morally distanced from the riot, totally uninvolved.

These voyeurs scarcely feel any sympathy with the victims of violence, because of the distancing nature of sight. The precedence of sight make them lose effervescent, bodily, tactical sensation, allowing them to remain calm and indifferent to others’ sufferings and pains.

4. Tourism, a Dancer, and Commodification of the Visual

Having seen the cold, cruel, and indifferent attitude of voyeurism associated with colonial or political violence, we now go on to consider the descriptions of tourism, another aspect of voyeurism in the novel. Chambers points out that “for Pynchon tourism is a derogatory
term to describe voyeurs, those spectators of life who travel thousands of miles to another country only to set about creating ‘a most perfectly arranged tourist-state’ (V., 71). Tourists remain insulated against the beauty and diversity of the culture they pretend to visit” (63). In the third chapter, the native Egyptian Aieul, a café waiter whom Stencil impersonates, explains the concept of tourism as a kind of mentality which seeks to appropriate the superficial, ‘the visual’, characteristics of the landscapes through which they pass, and miss the intrinsic values: “Let them [tourists] be deceived into thinking the city something more than what their Baedekers said it was: a Pharos long gone to earthquake and the sea; picturesque but faceless Arabs; monuments, tombs, modern hotels. A false and bastard city; inert—for ‘them’—as Aieul himself” (60). Another person whom Stencil impersonates, a denizen in the Baedeker land, Maxwell Rowley-Bugge considers himself “as much of a feature of the topography as the other automata: waiters, porters, cabmen, clerks. Taken for granted” (66). Automata are nothing more than “things” or objects. To regard others as automata is to value others only in terms of their mechanical functions or appearances. Pynchon represents tourism’s superficiality and its materialistic and mechanical view of the world in regarding the native people and landscape as without any intrinsic value.

Let us look at the clear-cut explanation of the nature of tourism in the novel. In the penultimate chapter, “V. in love”, V. is described as having “found love at last in her peregrinations through (let us be honest) a world if not created then at least described to its fullest by Karl Baedeker of Leipzig”. Baedeker (1801-59) is the publisher of detailed guidebooks for tourists. The passage continues:

This is a curious country, populated only by a breed called ‘tourists’. Its landscape is one of inanimate monuments and buildings; near-inanimate barmen, taxi-drivers, bellhops, guides: there to do any bidding, to various degrees of efficiency, on receipt of the recommended banksheesh, pourboire, mancia, tip. More than this it is two-dimensional as is the Street, as are the pages and maps of those little red handbooks. As long as the Cook’s, Traveller’s Clubs and banks are open, the Distribution of Time section followed scrupulously, the plumbing at the hotel in order... the tourist may wander anywhere in this coordinate system without fear. War never becomes more serious than a scuffle with a pickpocket, ... depression and prosperity are reflected only in the rate of exchange; politics are of course never discussed with the native population. Tourism thus is supranational, like the Catholic Church, and perhaps the most absolute
Here, tourism is defined as a substitute for humanity in the modern Western world. Tanner describes how in the passage “the religious parallels only serve to enforce the fact that the ‘tourist country’ lacks any religious or spiritual dimension (what Henry James called ‘the forth dimension’) not to mention an emotional, human third dimension” (Thomas Pynchon, 51). Tourism’s superficiality is expressed: “Its landscape is one of inanimate monuments and buildings” and “it is two-dimensional”. In addition, the mechanical view of the world is emphasized here, “near-inanimate barmen, taxi-drivers, bellhops, guides”. Furthermore, it should be noted that tourism is based on commercialism or capitalism. This is apparent in phrases such as “there to do any bidding... on receipt of the recommended banksheesh, pourbouire, mancia, tip”, and “depression and prosperity are reflected only in the rate of exchange”. In such a structure the native people and landscape are debased into commodities whose superficial and sensational aspects only, especially their visual factors, are noticed. Considering this point, the sameness of the tourist experiences may be understood as a product of modern capitalistic standardization with its focuses on efficiency and rationality. It follows from what has been said that in tourism, there can be seen the debasement and violation of the natural or the original by converting them into commodities or objects in the system of modern commercialism and capitalism.

Pynchon clearly associates the superficiality of tourism with V.’s voyeuristic love affair with a ballet dancer called Melanie. In their relationship V. reduces young Melanie to a visual love object, a fetish: “certain fetishes never have to be touched or handled at all; only seen, for there to be complete fulfillment” (440). Thus this relationship is introduced as the ultimate form of the image-directed, sterile, decadent, and narcissistic objectification of others:

But such was her [V.’s] rapture at Melanie’s having sought and found her own identity in her and in the mirror’s soulless gleam that she continued unaware, off-balanced by love; forgetting even that although the Distribution of Time here on pouf, bed and mirrors had been abandoned, their love was in its way only another version of tourism; for as tourists bring into the world as it has
evolved part of another, and eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city, so the Kingdom of Death is served by fetish-constructions like V.’s, which represent a kind of infiltration. (443)

“The Kingdom of Death” expresses the tourist country, Baedeker land. Here, V’s voyeuristic love affair and tourism are clearly associated with each other as they are both committed to visual appearance. The phrase “mirror’s soulless gleam” implies Melanie’s degeneration through attaching importance only to the corporeality, the material object, completely separate from her mind. This attitude is shared by the tourists’ materialistic view of the world. Here, the tourists are described as not respecting others’ otherness, but tending to take a self-centered point of view. Robert Newman describes this as the colonial mentality: “The tourist possesses the colonial mentality in being unwilling to see the land on which he is trespassing from the native’s perspective. Instead, he chooses to interpret his experience from a familiar and self-contained viewpoint which differs very little from that of other tourists. . . rendering travel a solipsistic rather than a broadening experience” (49). This “colonial mentality” of the tourist suggests the self-centered and self-contained nature of the predominant visual sensation. In order to discover the rich and complex value of an object, one needs to probe through its surface, into the ideal and the spiritual. Moreover, Melanie may be considered to have become one of the commodities of the stage managers, being a dancer. Melanie the visual love object of the lady V. as well as the visually-appreciated commodity of the stage manager, in the last part of the story, happens to be killed in the theater during a performance when she is impaled on a sharp pole, having forgotten to put on the metal plate intended to protect her. It is important that the theater is a place where the audience enjoys watching performances. Pynchon makes crucial links between the precedence of the image, the mechanization and objectification of the seen, the violation of the natural, and the dreadful violence in this episode of the lady V.’s voyeuristic love affair.

From these observations on the motif of tourism, it is clear that Pynchon depicts it as a kind of voyeuristic pseudo-communion in the modern Western world. The tourists with their commitment to the surface reduce the native people to mere automata lacking any spiritual or emotional dimension. Here, mechanization or the homogenization of the natural by modern commercialism and capitalism is also explicit.
5. Modern Image-directed Bodies

Pynchon takes the specific example of cosmetic surgery to demonstrate the image-directed condition of modernity and its relation to the motif of mechanization. This is another example of the prioritization of the superficial and visual appearances usurping intrinsic values and forcibly transforming people into objects. Mellor and Shilling summarize this dominance of image in modern society:

Anthropologists of the senses have associated modernity with a growing importance of the eye, and a partial diminution of the body’s close contact senses (Classen, 1993; Corbin, 1986). People’s visual sensitivity, and their existing ability to change their bodies, is already creating greater space in their identities for the influence of collective factors. … On the negative side, image-directed, technologically informed body options can easily implicate people in the signifying practices of others (Pfohl, 1993). Images of the ‘perfect female flesh’, for example, continue to exert a massive influence over women (Wolf, 1990). (51-52)

In chapter 4, one of the contemporary American episodes, Esther Harvitz, a member of the Whole Sick Crew, believes her nose is too far from the WASP stereotype promoted by the media. She therefore decides to undergo a cosmetic surgery, a rhinoplasty performed by the surgeon Shale Schoenmaker. Pynchon stresses the grotesque violence of the surgery and the bizarre sado-masochistic relation between Schoenmaker and Esther:

It was a routine operation; Schoenmaker worked quickly, … Caressing spongestrokes made it nearly bloodless. …
“Now,” gently, like a lover, “I’m going to saw off your hump.” Esther watched his eyes as best as she could, looking for something human there. Never had she felt so helpless. Later she would say, “It was almost a mystic experience … where the highest condition we can attain is that of an object—a rock. It was like that; I felt myself drifting down, this delicious loss of Estherhood, becoming more and more a blob, with no worries, traumas, nothing: only Being” …
“Take that back,” he smiled. “It [a nostril] doesn’t want to come just yet.” With scissors he snipped the hump loose from the lateral cartilage which had been holding it; then, with the bone-forceps, removed a dark-colored lump of gristle, which he waved triumphantly before Esther. (106-107)

As both Levine and Newman point out, Esther’s selfhood is lost and
she is transformed into a “blob”, an object, during the operation — and she relishes this, as is clear in the phrase “this delicious loss of Estherhood”. Schoenmaker uses the extremely insolent word “hump” for her nose, which reveals his view of her as an object for sculpting, with no respect for her humanity at all. In addition, his inhuman and emotionally distanced attitude is clear from the expressions, “[Esther] looking for something human there”, “he [Schoenmaker] smiled”, and “triumphantly”. It is also remarkable that the narrator uses the word “hump” too. The narrator’s detailed, detached, and indifferent explanation of the surgery has something in common with the doctor. Here, the connection between image-directed people and psychological mechanization is explicit. In this episode, Pynchon caricatures modern people’s obsession with the superficial and their estrangement from the natural. Mechanization is both physical and psychological.

Here, one notices another commodification of visual pleasure. Rachel, a friend or pseudo-mother of Esther’s, visits Schoenmaker to pay him $800, the fee for the surgery on behalf of the penniless Esther: “she takes home 50 a week, 25 comes out for analysis, 12 for rent leaving 13. What for, for high heels she breaks on subway gratings, for lipstick, earrings, clothes. Food, occasionally” (45), according to a friend of hers. Thus Esther ‘buys beauty’; in other words, she implants an artificial ‘uniform’, and “retroussé nose the sign of the WASP or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant in the movies and advertisements” (40) for $800. Further, Rachel is lost in thought: “it takes four months for a nose job to heal. Four months from now would be June; this meant many pretty Jewish girls who felt they would be perfectly marriageable were it not for an ugly nose could now go husband-hunting at the various resorts all with uniform septa” (40). Considering the issues, that is, buying artificial noses for marriage, and the financial effect of the institution of marriage on women’s lives, it may be said that the girls who undergo the surgery are making arrangements, adjusting themselves to the standardized beauty, for the ‘trade’ of marriage, where they themselves will be treated as commodities. It may be said that Esther is not only objectifying herself, but also making capital in the system of modern capitalism, which reminds one of tourism or Melanie.
6. Blazoning V.

I would like to illustrate another example of the connections between the motif of mechanization, its accompanying violence, and sight, one expressed by Pynchon’s use of a traditional rhetoric based on the politics of the gaze. Both Esther and V. succumb to the lure of the “ideal body” whose standard is established by patriarchal society:

Her [Veronica Manganese’s] face... was at peace, the live eye dead as the other, with the clock-iris. He (Old Stencil)’d not been surprised at the eye; no more than at the star sapphire sewn into her navel. There is surgery; and surgery... Even in Florence... he had noted an obsession with bodily incorporating little bits of inert matter.

“See my lovely shoes”,... “I would so like to have an entire foot of amber and gold, with the veins, perhaps, in intaglio instead of bas-relief. How tiresome to have the same feet:... But if a girl could have, oh, a lovely rainbow or wardrobe of different-hued, different-sized and –shaped feet...” (528, emphasis mine)

Here, it is to be noted that V. is increasingly composed of “the inanimate”, dead matter. There are several references to V.’s body—how it looks young for her age by “incorporating the inert matter”. By these surgeries she maintains “the ideal body”, which at the same time is a symbol of her moving from a natural, human state to a decadent, inanimate one. V.’s incorporation of objects, particularly precious metals and jewelry, and the anatomizing of her living body reminds one of a traditional poetic device, the blazon. Blazon is usually understood as “a richly ornate and mannered evocation of idealized female beauty rendered into its constituent parts” (Jonathan Sawday, 191), which are to be the ‘objects of male gaze’. By this poetic form, women became arrayed for the consumption of men, flaunted and divided before an audience as something to be looked upon. It may be said that blazon has its basis in the visual more than any other sense. Therefore, it is possible to regard the fact that V. is dividing her own body up into inanimate parts as a literal, not metaphorical, blazon actually taking place in the novel. There is a crucial resemblance between V.’s inanimate-incorporated body and one of the sonnets of Edmund Spencer, which Sawday describes as follows: “So begins Sonnet XV of ‘Amoretti’ a blazon which divides the female body into a pile of treasure: sapphire eyes, ruby lips, pearl teeth, ivory forehead, gold hair, and silver hands... the familiar conceit of a poem which flourishes the divided female before other men is apparent. The sonnet marks a
moment of conspicuous consumption, a chance for the narrator to ‘display’ his wealth” (200-1). He outlines the languages of blazon especially in England, “which were peculiarly consonant with an emerging ‘science’ or knowledge of the body . . . . The English blazon, . . divided the female body to celebrate its partitioned exploration as a geographical entity. This organism could be ‘discovered’ (literally ‘disclosed’—rendered open to sight) and then subjected to an economy of trade, commerce and mercantile distribution” (197-8). Consequently, her apparent submission to the ideal of female beauty prescribed by patriarchal society and to the dividing and destructive male gaze is, at the same time, her making a display of her opulence and power of mastery there. Considering how V.’s physical mechanization as literal blazon taking place, its essentially visual character may be confirmed.

In another example of blazon in the novel, the destructive power of the male gaze upon women is apparent. Stencil has a vision of V., who has became entirely an inanimate object of erotic desire after the love-game with the fetish-girl, Melanie, at age seventy-six:

. . . skin radiant with the bloom of new plastic; both eyes but now containing photoelectric cells, connected by silver electrodes to optic nerves of purest copper wire and leading to a brain exquisitely wrought as a diode matrix could ever be. Solenoid relays would be her ganglia, servo-actuators move her flawless nylon limbs, hydraulic fluid be sent by a platinum heart pump through butyrate veins and arteries. (444)

In Stencil’s use of excessively scientific technical terms can be found a modern parody of blazon. Sawday explains the rhetoric’s relation to science, as follows:

. . . the vogue in the sixteenth century for the blazon, the detailed enumeration of the parts of the woman’s body, can be seen as reflecting the new scientific mentality with its mastering gaze, its passion for mapping the world in order to gain power over it .

(emphasis mine, 192)

Both male erotic desire and the scientific mentality sought to gaze upon the body while dismantling it, piece by piece. In the passage quoted above, V. is disassembled metaphorically in Stencil’s imagination, anatomized by a modern scientific mentality, the male gaze, and erotic desire.

As pornographic as Stencil’s 76-years-old V. is the less intellectual-
ized blazon of Profane’s all-electronic woman: “Someday, please God, there would be an all-electronic woman. Maybe her name would be Violet. Any problems with her, you could look it up in the maintenance manual. Module concept: finger’s weight, heart’s temperature, mouth’s size out of tolerance? Remove and replace, was all” (414). Although his blazon is less scientific and cold than Stencil’s, the destructive nature of the male gaze and its mechanization and objectification of the female body are clearly seen in these examples. Whether literal or metaphorical, Pynchon’s use of the poetics of blazon reveals the inseparable relation between violence brought about by the predominance of visual sensation and the motif of mechanization.

7. Disassembly, Blazon, and Modern Protestant Bodies

There is another synchronous representation of the predominance of visual sensation and the mechanical objectification, and the literal blazon depicted in the novel. Chapter 10, the fourth historical section, is quite different from others in that it consists of a man’s manuscript of his confessions. The author of the manuscript is Fausto Majistral, who is the father of Profane’s Maltese girlfriend, Paola. Paola gives it to Stencil. Her father’s confessions, which concentrate on the Axis’ siege of Malta, consist partly of passage from his diary and partly of comments on them. The diary was written from 1937 to 1943, and is given the commentary and editing in 1955. He divides his life into four segments, tracing them through his four identity-phases, numbered Fausto I-IV, whose discontinuity is produced by the tumultuous and violent state of war in those days in Malta. He is estranged from the ancient Maltese matriarchal culture, because the Maltese have been invaded, colonized by Italy, England and others. Moreover, he conceives of himself as “a new sort of being, a dual man” (330), being educated in English, not Maltese, a consequence of the colonial rule by England. Thus, speaking and thinking in both languages, English and Maltese, Fausto is torn between two cognitive modes. Through his English education he seems to achieve the cognitive mode of the Protestants, prioritizing the distant contact senses, and making linguistic symbols and narratives a central source of people’s self-identity. As Fausto describes the transition of his personality, in respect of his changing attitudes to, and use of, language, it is likely that the foundation of his identities is that of modern Protestants. Here, it is necessary to review Mellor and Shilling’s account of the modern Protestant
The emphasis placed on the word can be seen as part of a Protestant attempt to control the body through cognitive narratives of the self. By making the body individual, Protestantism helped remove it from the sensual experience of effervescent sociality and turn it instead into a vehicle for thought and belief. . . . Instead of being driven by sensual desire, Protestants sought to ensure that their bodies would fit their narratives of self.

(43-44)

The closest of all his identity-phases to a state of non-humanity is Fausto III, who gradually emerges when the condition of the war becomes more violent, identifying himself with the rockhood of his home island, Malta. Fausto III is also characterized not only by inanimation but also by “sensitivity to decadence”. During this period, his wife Elena is killed in an air-raid and he witnesses the disassembly of the Bad Priest by some of the Maltese children in his neighborhood, the last avatar of V., who is pinned under the wreckage after a German bombing raid:

. . . Up came one of the slippers and a foot—an artificial foot—the two sliding out as a unit, lug-and-slot.

“She [Bad Priest] comes apart”. . . . At her navel was a star sapphire. The boy with the knife picked at the stone. . . . He dug in with the point of bayonet. Blood had begun to well in its place. . . . I wondered if the disassembly of the Bad Priest might not go on, and on into evening. Surely her arms and breasts could be detached; the skin of her legs be peeled away to reveal some intricate understructure of silver openwork. Perhaps the trunk itself contained other wonders: intestines of parti-coloured silk, gay-balloons lungs, a rococo heart. But the sirens started up then. The children dispersed baring away their new-found treasures, and the abdominal wound made by the bayonet was doing its work. I lay prone under a hostile sky looking down for moments more at what the children had left; suffering Christ foreshortened on the bare skull, one eye and one socket, staring up at me: a dark hole for the mouth, stumps at the bottoms of the legs. And the blood which had formed a black sash across the waisting down both sides from the navel.

(369, emphasis mine)

The first thing one notices is that Fausto remains an idle onlooker observing minutely the atrocious “disassembly” conducted by the children, though he has the ability to chide the children into letting the Bad Priest go. The detachedness and non-involvement associated with the predominance of the sight is explicit. Curiously distanced from the sit-
ution, he wonders about and imagines the process of dismantling. We notice the recurrence of the use of blazon in his fancy. This attitude may be understood as a manifestation of his modern Protestant mentality, which gives priority to the ‘distant contact senses’ and enables individuals to “visually and aurally monitor, judge and anticipate natural and social phenomena before making close contact with them” (Mellor and Shilling, 44, emphasis mine). Here, Fausto “visually monitors” the process of “disassembly”, and remains an onlooker by keeping his distance, lost in contemplation. It may be said that the modern (Protestant), distant, and unsympathetic mentality that prioritizes sight is associated with inhuman violence. The disassembly by which the children raven away, piece by piece, the parts of the Bad Priest’s body consisting of precious metals and jewelry can be regarded as the most destructive literal blazon actualized in the novel. Given the visual nature of blazon, the connection between the predominance of visual sensation and inhuman violence is again made explicit.

So far a range of Pynchon’s representations of the precedence of visual sensation has been examined in the relation between, and communication among, the characters that embody the motif of physical and psychological mechanization. First, the voyeuristic characters who witness some fierce political violence are studied, and it is made clear that their prioritization of sight seems to result in their loss of bodily sensation, and ends in unsympathetic and indifferent attitudes to others’ sufferings, and a moral non-involvement in the face of rampant violence. Secondly, the nature of the motif of tourism was focused on, one which is depicted as also having a voyeuristic attitude. Another example of the crucial connection between the predominance of the image, namely, the mechanization and objectification of the seen, and inhuman violence is revealed. Further, in this motif, the modern commodification and standardization of the living are described as a violation and debasement of the natural. Thirdly, the Jewish girl Esther’s cosmetic surgery, another example of the characters’ commitment to the visual, is analyzed. Her masochistic enjoyment in becoming an object made clear the connection between image-directedness and her psychological mechanization. Besides, she and other girls like her who undergo such surgery may be understood in a sense to be capitalized and commodified. Finally, Pynchon’s repetitive use of the blazon is examined, which has its basis exclusively in visual rather than any other bodily sensations. By using
and parodying the poetic device, the author shows the violent nature of the mastering male gaze and its mechanization and objectification of the female body.

All these observations make it clear that an excess of sight results in human beings’ loss of and alienation from their own bodies: the seers lose their bodily sensations and regard others as mere objects, in other words, corporealties lacking any inner life. Here, the Cartesian dualism of mind and the corporeal is apparent. Human bodies are mechanized in that they are only considered as material corporealties that are separated from their minds. It is also noted that the precedence of vision itself is a result of modern dualism. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose that the relation between dualism and reification caused by the excess of seeing is circular: they are in a vicious circle where the dualism creates the reification and the reification reinforces the dualism. The deprivation of the close-contact senses impels us to commit inhuman violence to others in an unsympathetic and detached attitude, insensible to their physical pain. The critical relation between the precedence of sight and modern political violence are presented in the novel.

Pynchon depicts the devastating nature of modern human bodies through the descriptions of modern ferocities and cruelties. It should be noticed that those motifs of physical and psychological mechanization are often linked not only with violence but also with death, such as Melanie and V. Another point to note is that one of the protagonists, Benny Profane is threatened by the nightmare in which he turns into an automaton and suffers his own dismantlement. Finally, it may be inferred that he meets his end with an American girl who seems to embody modern materialism. Thus many of the characters in this novel are encroached on and violated by the destructive and murderous sway of mechanization. However, it is to be emphasized that the mechanized V. is ultimately dismantled, which would not have happened, had it not been for her own transformation into the mechanical. Thus, it follows from what has been said that Pynchon denies and criticizes such modern mechanization through the description of ruin and death brought on by its self-destructive nature.

Notes

1 “David Richter has identified the significance of 1859 as the year in which
both Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* and Darwin’s *Origin of Species* were published” (Madsen 51).


3 For another example, Kevin Robins persuasively explains the idea of “the sight as distancing senses”. He gives examples of modern, highly developed visual technologies that are exploited for military operations, such as military simulations and the use of photographic guidance in smart bombs. McGuigan comments on Robins’ argument as follows: “fantasies of order and control are built into the design of information and image technologies, resulting in a separation of the human subject from palpable reality and the difficult problems of lived experience” (78).

4 “Mondaugen” means “moon eye” in German (which is ironic because the moon is the symbol of a goddess, and V. is personified as a degenerated goddess) (Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon* 78-79).

5 For arguments about Pynchon’s use of the terms “tourism” and “tourists”, see Deborah Madsen, *The Postmodern Allegories of Thomas Pynchon*, 34; Tony Tanner, *Thomas Pynchon*, 52.

6 For useful discussions of Esther’s rockhood, see George Levine, “Risking the Moment”, *Thomas Pynchon: Modern Critical Reviews*, 64; Robert Newman, *Understanding Thomas Pynchon*, 43.

7 The definition of the poetic blazon is given in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*: “a poetic genre devoted to the praise or blame of something”. The author suggests the approximation of the term to—catalogue—one of which, he explains can be “often used for itemizing topics such as the beauty of woman”.

8 On this point, see Deborah Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon*, 35-36. She points out, “Fausto I is characterized by a love of high-flown rhetoric, Shakespeare and Eliot; whilst Fausto II, a product of the siege of Malta, is ‘more Maltese and less British’; he is a ‘young man in retreat,’ a retreat into religious abstraction and poetry. ‘Moving towards that island-wide sense of communion. And at the same time towards the lowest form of consciousness’ [PC336]. It is a communion in ‘Purgatory,’ and a retreat into non-humanity. As Fausto III begins to emerge, abstraction gives way to a ‘sensitivity to decadence’ or inanimation”.


Works Cited


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—. “Risking the Moment”. Levine 113-136.


