

### **Blog Post 3: Unpacking the Cultural, Historical, and Theoretical Context of *Bleeding Edge***

Minimum 500 words

Due Tuesday, February 24<sup>th</sup>

As should be clear at this point, Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) is a novel thoroughly steeped in the twenty-first century. From its setting in the opening days of the millennium, to the way it anticipates recent political and technological developments, Pynchon's novel makes the present itself into a kind of character, a time relatively familiar to its contemporaries (i.e., ourselves). But for all its familiarity, Pynchon's twenty-first century may often seem confusing or strange. Not only is *Bleeding Edge*, for all its contemporaneity, an *historical* novel, readily drawing upon the immediate cultural surroundings of New York City circa 2001, it also presents a somewhat *alternative* history (though to what extent is debatable). Actors appear in films that never existed. Bleeding edge technology seems readily available to anyone who wants it. And indeed, what at first might seem like a relatively straightforward narrative, especially compared with the opacities and difficulties of Pynchon's other novels, *Bleeding Edge* remains a complex, meticulously constructed work of fiction that readily draws upon its social and historical context in order to produce and construct a variety of potential meanings. Through its engagement with the twenty-first century, and particularly the encounter it stages with technology, *Bleeding Edge* defamiliarizes the familiar, forcing us to question the very historicity of our experience of the present.

For this blog post I would like you to tackle the novel's contemporaneity head on, and I would like you to do so in one of the three ways listed below. As any quick search of the various wikis devoted to Pynchon's work will demonstrate, *Bleeding Edge* calls for, encourages, and has produced considerable *collective* engagement. I would like to see us do something similar with the novel by using the tools of the blog to collectively and critically engage with the novel, turning the blog into a site of research and a resource for other students that draws upon the communal nature of blogging to produce more knowledge and critical engagement than any of us could alone. To reflect such an engagement, I have provided three options for how you may add to our collective critical reading of *Bleeding Edge*. Please choose one option for Blog Post 3.

#### **Option 1: Intertextuality**

*Bleeding Edge* is a highly allusive, referential text that draws upon and points toward many other cultural artifacts, including literary texts, films, television shows, songs, and videogames (some of which do not even exist). For this option I would like you to get into the archive a bit and see what you can do with Pynchon's wild referentiality.

First, *choose one or two intertextual references* that Pynchon makes, report on them, explore them, and see how you might read those references with regard to Pynchon's larger novelistic project. After you have selected a cultural reference or allusion you find interesting, problematic, strange, confusing, etc., I would then like you to do the following things. First, consult the *Bleeding Edge Wiki*.<sup>1</sup> What does the *Pynchon Wiki* say, if anything, about the reference you have found? Where might it lead you?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the *Bleeding Edge Wiki* see [http://bleedingedge.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://bleedingedge.pynchonwiki.com/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page).

<sup>2</sup> N.b. that I will be also offering a small amount of extra credit to anyone who locates an aspect of Pynchon's novel that is unaddressed by the *Bleeding Edge Wiki* and then updates the Wiki themselves, adding that information. If you do this, provide a link to your addition to the wiki at the bottom of your post. Extra credit will be based on the rigor and care of your scholarship.

Second, I would like you to do some further digging on your own. What else might you learn about this reference? For this you will want to get into the archive. Perhaps you might begin by consulting Wikipedia, but as this is a notoriously unscholarly and inaccurate resource, I do not want you to stop there. Get into the library, into the stacks, into PittCat's databases and see what more you can learn. Consult books and articles. If the reference is to a film, see if you can find the film and watch it; if the reference is to a videogame, see if you can play it or find a video of someone playing it; if a song, listen to it; if a work of literature, read an excerpt, etc. In short, allow your research to expand your understanding of what Pynchon is drawing upon.

Third, I would like you to report on your findings. For this option, quote the moment where your reference occurs at the top of your post. In your first paragraph, begin by describing the intertextual reference that Pynchon is making. Then provide some context for where and how this reference is made in the novel. In your second and third paragraphs, provide a short "research report" on your findings. What is significant about Pynchon's reference? Where did this reference take you? What sources did you look at (cite them)? What interesting discoveries did you make? Were there dead ends? Why or why not? What further avenues for research might there be that you did not have time to follow up on?

Lastly, in however many paragraphs seem necessary, I would like you to then use what you have found out in your research to read the passage in which the reference occurs, and potentially use this reference to open up some other aspect of the novel. Basically, how might this reference allow you to interpret Pynchon's text? What kinds of close readings might it produce? What else in the novel might be important to consider with regard to your research? In short, what kind of *argument for an interpretation* does researching and understanding Pynchon's cultural reference allow you to make?

Please provide a Works Cited list at the bottom of your post and be sure to format your citations correctly according to MLA style.

## **Option 2: Historical and Social Context**

Just as Pynchon is highly allusive and referential to other works of culture, his work is *immensely* informed by history. His novels all show a fine-grained sense of historical and social context. But they also often depart, sometimes rather significantly and anachronistically, from that historical context. So for Option 2, I would like you to do something very similar to Option 1, but with history.

First, *choose one or two historical or social references* that Pynchon makes, report on them, explore them, and see how you might read those references with regard to Pynchon's larger novelistic project. After you have selected an historical aspect of the novel you find interesting, problematic, strange, confusing, etc., I would then like you to do the following things. First, consult the *Bleeding Edge Wiki*. What does the *Pynchon Wiki* say, if anything, about the reference you have found? Where might it lead you?

Second, I would like you to do some further digging on your own. What else might you learn about this historical reference? For this you will want to get into the archive. Perhaps you might begin by consulting Wikipedia, but as this is a notoriously unscholarly and inaccurate resource, I do not want you to stop there. Get into the library, into the stacks, into PittCat's databases and see what more you can learn. Consult books and articles. Read contemporary newspapers, whether online or in print. (For example, looking at microfiche of *The New York Times* during the period Pynchon represents in the novel can be highly illuminating, as he has

been known to draw *extensively* on such sources.) In short, allow your research to expand your understanding of the history of what Pynchon is representing.

Third, I would like you to report on your findings. For this option, quote the moment where your reference occurs at the top of your post. In your first paragraph, begin by describing the historical reference that Pynchon is making. Then provide some context for where and how this reference is made in the novel. In your second and third paragraphs, provide a short “research report” on your findings. What is significant about Pynchon’s particular engagement with history? Where did this reference take you? What sources did you look at (cite them)? What interesting discoveries did you make? Were there dead ends? Why or why not? What further avenues for research might there be that you did not have time to follow up on?

Lastly, in however many paragraphs seem necessary, I would like you to then use what you have found out in your research to read the passage in which the historical reference occurs, and potentially use this reference to open up some other aspect of the novel. Basically, how might Pynchon’s engagement with history allow you to interpret his novel? What kinds of close reading might it produce? What else in the novel might be important to consider with regard to your research? In short, what kind of *argument for an interpretation* does researching and understanding Pynchon’s sense of history allow you to make?

Please provide a Works Cited list at the bottom of your post and be sure to format your citations correctly according to MLA style.

### **Option 3: Theory**

Thomas Pynchon is a notoriously voracious, well-informed, and savvy reader. There is ample evidence throughout his work that he is not only familiar with the thinking of people like Gilles Deleuze and Marshall McLuhan, but that he often readily conceives of portions of his novels as direct conversations with twentieth century theory, criticism, and philosophy. For the third option for Blog Post 3, I would like you to put *Bleeding Edge* in direct conversation with one of the theorists we have read up until this point in the semester. Drawing upon the work of either Frank Kermode, Martin Heidegger, Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Alexander R. Galloway, or Marshal McLuhan, I would like you to read some *specific* aspect of *Bleeding Edge* in conversation with that theorist. Like your first blog post on *Global Frequency* (2002-2004), I would like you to articulate an *argument* for an *interpretation* of the novel that is supported by your engagement with one of the essays we have read so far this semester. Focusing *narrowly* and *closely* on a *specific* aspect of the novel and carefully reading and interpreting that moment will help you articulate a rigorous, complex argument.