

## Midterm Essay: Close Reading Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*

6-8 pages

Due Tuesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>

due as hardcopy in class and uploaded to SafeAssign

In the closing pages of Donna Haraway's seminal essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985), she tells us that science fiction writers like Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and others "are our storytellers exploring what it means to be embodied in high-tech worlds. They are *theorists for cyborgs*."<sup>1</sup> And we might easily be permitted to claim that Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) participates in and extends this tradition of cyborg writing; Pynchon, even though he writes about a world fourteen years in the past, is a *theorist for cyborgs*. *Bleeding Edge* asks us to think very hard about various issues confronting our posthuman past, present, and future. The novel pursues questions about information, networks, surveillance, social media, privacy, politics, subjectivity, history, power, knowledge, and control. And it pursues these questions through narrative, through *writing*.

For your midterm essay I want you to take up the challenge of treating Pynchon as a theorist for cyborgs, to take seriously the novel's insights into the past, and, perhaps most importantly, to consider how the text complexly engages with its present. I want you to take up the implicit challenge of treating *Bleeding Edge* as "cyborg theory," to think about *writing* as a site of cyborg thinking, and I would like you to do so by making an *argument* for an *interpretation* of the text.

There are two major requirements for how I would like you to build and support your argument. First, I would like you to focus on a few (say, three or four) significant passages or scenes of your choice, and by *narrowly* and *specifically* focusing on the text itself, I would like you to support your argument for an interpretation by closely and carefully analyzing and reading the moments you have chosen to focus on. As we have seen, Pynchon's prose is meticulously constructed, rich and suggestive, allusive and playful, so the more *narrow* and *specific* your focus, the more complex your reading will be. There is a lot going on in the novel, so do not feel as if you have to get at everything. Choose something *specific*, *concrete*, and relatively small to work on. Also, keep in mind the difference between mere description and interpretation when composing your thesis and in your reading of specific moments in the text. (Remember, I have read the novel, I know what happens; I am more interested in what you have to *say* about the text, about why it is *important* to notice what you have.)

Second, I would like you to engage with some of the theory we have read so far this semester by putting your work in conversation with either Frank Kermode, Martin Heidegger, Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, or Alexander R. Galloway. How you choose to mobilize one of these theorists is up to you. Your discussion can be an extended discussion of, say, Heidegger vis-à-vis Pynchon, or it can be as little as a well-considered footnote. I am less interested in how you might argue with (agree or disagree with) one of these theorists than I am in seeing how you might productively apply or extend their conversation, how you might mobilize their insights and thinking toward productively reading and analyzing *Bleeding Edge* in a rigorous, compelling, and complex way.

And lastly a few notes and questions. I am asking you to construct an *argument* here, an argument for an interpretation, so this will involve looking at how *Bleeding Edge* constructs

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway, Donna, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31, my emphases.

*meaning*. You should be doing considerably more work here than simply describing the text or providing a synopsis or book report. A good interpretation is one that could potentially be agreed with or disagreed with—thus, it requires an argument. Recall how Kermode argues that meaning is created through narrative's structuring of time, and then he goes on to support this argument through close, careful attention to various texts and historical events. Kermode's scope is *much* wider than yours should be here, but some of his lessons are still applicable: he focuses on *form*, the things specific to the medium he is investigating. So looking at language, narrative structure, characterization, genre, etc., in the novel will greatly benefit you in supporting your larger argument. Lastly, a few questions to keep in mind when you are writing. Ask yourself: Do I have an *argument*? Is my argument clear, concrete, specific, and explicitly stated? Do I have a *complex* thesis? Have I suggested why it is important to notice what I have about the text, why my argument matters? Is there a purpose to my writing? Is there something at stake for me as a writer? What am I suggesting is at stake for the *text*? Asking yourself these and other questions will help you in the conception and composition of this essay. And as always, when I am grading these papers I am primarily interested in the quality of your idea and the strength of your argument.

You have just under a month to complete this essay, so you should feel free to talk with me during office hours or make an appointment, get help about ideas you might want to pursue, or ask me to look at early drafts. Students should also be aware that I will be out of town February 26<sup>th</sup> – March 1<sup>st</sup>, and will be mostly unavailable during this time by email, so they should bear this in mind, meeting with me well before the last minute if they desire help. Also feel free to take advantage of talking with our undergrad TAs, as they will be happy to talk with you about your ideas for this paper; they also have a good idea about what my expectations are.