

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Eve, Martin Paul (2015) Review of Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture by Joanna Freer. *Journal of American Studies* 49 (04), pp. 946-947. ISSN 0021-8758.

Downloaded from: <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/13298/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Joanna Freer, *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture*,

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, £60. Pp 165; 978-1-107-07605-1.)

This is an author's accepted manuscript of MARTIN PAUL EVE (2015). Review of 'Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture' *Journal of American Studies*, 49, pp 946-947. doi:10.1017/S0021875815001607.

The past year has been fruitful for Pynchon studies. Among many other works – most notably Clément Lévy's French monograph on “géocritique” and an edited collection from Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée – there have been three monographs that all explicitly situate Pynchon within various political and cultural discourses of the sixties Left. One of these books is my own. The other two are Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger's *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* and, most recently, Joanna Freer's *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture*.

It has long been known that Pynchon's novels harbour sympathies for a range of countercultural views. The persistent return to anarchism as a theme throughout his oeuvre, for instance, is more than a simple tic. Likewise, the focus on race, mind-altering substances and alternative realities in Pynchon's works are all elements that find an often-conflicted locus in the sixties counterculture. This engagement between the novelist and the social history is rarely straightforwardly enthusiastic, though. For an example, one need only remember the “counterforce” in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the short-lived and (in some readings) ineffectual agent of revolutionary change.

In her new book, Joanna Freer offers a compelling and readable account of the ways in which Pynchon's fiction interacts with the American counterculture of the sixties. Enlightening, historical

and theoretical, this book is a much-needed addition to the body of existing Pynchon scholarship that is deserving of serious attention for both its political and archival considerations.

Freer's book is structured into five chapters, respectively covering the Beat influence in *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*; the role of "love" as a binding force of the New Left in *Gravity's Rainbow*; drugs and psychedelia in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Against the Day*; the potential influence of the Black Panther Party on *Gravity's Rainbow*; and the place of feminism and its various incarnations in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland*.

By way of brief overview, the first chapter, on Kerouac and the Beats in Pynchon's work, is primarily concerned with the conceptual role of movement in American literature and a swing towards notions of "communitas" in Pynchon's work. This is defined as a "feeling of oneness with humanity as a whole" and "is strongest when the fixed bonds of the social structure are felt to be at their weakest" (29). While Freer then delineates Pynchon from the hedonistic liberation found in Kerouac's work, the many overlaps found here are persuasive and thoroughly mapped.

In the second chapter on the New Left, Freer draws on a range of sources, from Pynchon's endorsement of Kirkpatrick Sale's study of the SDS and his journalism on Watts, through to the intra-textual depictions of student life in *Lot 49*. This centres around an innovative reading of the role of "love" in *Gravity's Rainbow* as an ideal but not an end, a mode in which "to be politically effective, love must always be coupled with self-awareness and independence" (53).

When Freer turns to the influence of the psychedelic movement in Pynchon's work, the result is no less powerful. Remaining rigorously historical, Freer challenges the direct correlation between Timothy Leary and *Lot 49*'s Dr. Hilarius, an assertion that others have made. This is then expanded to consider the role that "fantasy" might play in achieving political goals, with particular reference

to Guy Debord. Full of rich potential sourcing, as is the rest of the work, this chapter gives a unique grounding for Pynchon's alternative realities.

In its penultimate chapter, *Thomas Pynchon and the American Counterculture* works on the civil rights movement and examines the potential matches between Newton's "revolutionary suicide" and the philosophies of the various Zone Herero in *Gravity's Rainbow*. This chapter, among the most theoretical in the text, is commendable for its analysis of Marxist dialectics and the ideologies of Pynchon's Herero as compared to the Black Panthers. Ultimately concluding with a constructivist view of race, Freer here makes an important contribution to the postcolonial Pynchon explored by David Witzling.

Finally, Freer addresses what she perceives as a "flaw in Pynchon's revolutionary strategy": his treatment of women. Arguing that the "apology" in the introduction to *Slow Learner* is insufficient and far from sincere, this chapter adeptly charts the progression of Pynchon's approach to feminism both moderate and radical. Oscillating between a scepticism towards Pynchon's continued fetishisation and objectification of women and the genuine attempt to depict equality, this analysis will prove key as a touchstone for future engagement with Pynchon's politics.

That said, Freer's book is clearly not comprehensive (how could it be?) and leaves scope for other investigations. This is not only explicitly signposted in her conclusion but is also evidenced by some curiosities of the work. While these do not significantly detract from the overall quality of the scholarship, which is superb, I was left with some queries.

Firstly, certain of Pynchon's novels receive a great deal more attention here than others. While the recent *Bleeding Edge* is deliberately excluded, fans of *Mason & Dixon* and/or *Inherent Vice* will be disappointed by the lack of sustained focus in this volume. This can't be excused solely on grounds

of them being “lesser” novels. *Mason & Dixon* is certainly a masterpiece that projects forwards to the 1960s with Benjamin Franklin appearing in groovy sunglasses. *Inherent Vice*, although perhaps less monumental, is actually set in the period in question. The second minor gripe I had was the approach to the introduction to Pynchon's *Slow Learner* collection. While, at times, I felt that Freer was spot on with this (such as with her concise deconstruction of the sexist/proto-fascist apology), at other points I wondered whether there was more irony in this piece than the author credited.

Overall, however, this is a book that deserves to be read. Freer's study is important for our continued understanding of the ethics, aesthetics and historical contexts of the novels of Thomas Pynchon, one of the most interesting American writers of the past fifty years.

Dr. Martin Paul Eve

Birkbeck, University of London

Bibliography

- Eve, Martin Paul, *Pynchon and Philosophy: Wittgenstein, Foucault and Adorno* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)
- Herman, Luc, and Steven Weisenburger, *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013)
- Lévy, Clément, *Territoires Postmodernes: Géocritique de Calvino, Echenoz, Pynchon et Ransmayr* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014)