

A PYNCHONIC COMMON LANGUAGE FOR AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL WORLD

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In his novella, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Thomas Pynchon forms a world teetering on the edge of a technological apocalypse. Rapid mechanical innovation threatens to consume Pynchon's city of San Narciso. As the city descends towards an artificial, mechanical state, humanity, and, in particular, the protagonist, Oedipa, become increasingly disoriented. The world veers away from natural, human communication leaving the humans behind in a state of disconnection and numbness; they are both isolated from their world and from each other. Pynchon's message, although a warning, also provides a solution. Pynchon suggests that, perhaps, the remedy for the modernizing world is human inter-connection through a common, human language.

Initially, Pynchon delves into a deteriorating feedback loop between actual and virtual spaces. Actual spaces are the uninterpreted, objective realms of being — the unmediated experience of the self. In contrast, virtual spaces, as defined by anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, are the “almost.”¹ The virtual is not exactly the actual world, but an interpretation of it.² The self in its physical form, for example, is actual, but the self’s translation into a handwritten letter or a Facebook profile, is virtual. As the actual, complete self is communicated, it becomes a separate, virtual thing. Boellstorff specifies that both realms are, nevertheless, “real.”³ Humans simultaneously build and exist in both spaces, actual and virtual, balancing one in terms of the other.

Through his narrative, Pynchon specifically explores the broken translation cycle between the actual and virtual realms. Within Pynchon’s created world, San Narciso, as the

¹ Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 21.

actual is translated to the virtual, it is fragmented into commodifiable data points. In other words, the fullness of the actual world, when translated into the virtual space, becomes a collection of commercially advantageous factors. As the actual-virtual feedback loop continues to cycle, the fractured form of reality within the virtual space, inversely, shapes actual reality. The virtual reality, a translated actual reality, imposes upon its original, actual form.

Given the structural limits of Pynchon's virtual space, the virtually-shaped actual self disseminates a shallow, inhuman virtual world within the actual world. Through Pynchon's toxic actual-virtual feedback loop, the actual world devolves into a mechanical world of categories — an utterly organized and capitalistic space. To various extents, actual characters reflect their consumption of the virtual space within the actual world. The most extremely virtually-transformed actual characters, in a sense, existing within Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum — the world of “impenetrable and meaningless surface[s].”⁴ Pynchon reveals a realm vacant of meaning and numb to feeling.

Ultimately, Pynchon reshapes the broken translation cycle into an illuminating feedback loop through his redefinition of the virtual substructure. Instead of maintaining rigid, capitalistic divisions, Pynchon holds the virtual space as an unfiltered repository of the actual world. The actual and virtual spaces become like sand and ocean — separate yet indistinguishable, flowing into one another. The actual and virtual, without measurement and, thus, without manifestation, coexist in complete and complementary forms. Through this equal and balanced state, Pynchon creates the possibility for communication without loss — a truly common language. Pynchon

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, comp. Mark Poster (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007), 216.

allows for unfiltered human communication and, inherently, an exponentially enlightening actual-virtual feedback loop.

Through his complex and intertwining actual-virtual cycles, Pynchon comments on the hazards of our increasingly technological world. As technological communication expands in capacity and speed, so too does it progressively impose upon the actual world. To avoid the surface-state of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon urges the reformation of technological communication; Pynchon reestablishes the human-form within the mechanically-overrun virtual sphere. In summary, Pynchon offers the potential for a common language within an actual-virtual feedback loop that translates the nuanced human form, rather than a commercially-driven set of data points, into a virtual realm.

Pynchon's plot centers around the tension between the actual and virtual spheres. Fundamentally, the emergence of the actual-virtual dichotomy arises from humans' ability to think imaginatively in collectives. Through our imaginations, we can endow the tangible world with symbolic meaning and, furthermore, we can communicate this symbolic meaning with others. Take, for example, a dollar bill: a dog may chew on a dollar bill because it is "chewable" and nothing more, yet through our collective fiction, we understand the value of the dollar bill. Instead of gnawing the dollar bill into shredded paper, we hand the dollar bill to a cashier and walk away with a hamburger. Both the customer and the hamburger-cashier exist within the same symbolic reality — the symbolic reality in which green paper is a store of value. The dog, upon watching this exchange, cannot understand why any creature would sacrifice chuck for a buck.

The dog, in short, does not possess the ability to communicate in a collective fiction, to exist within a symbolic reality or to even comprehend one.

The philosopher and historian, Yuval Noah Harari suggests that fictional speech separated humans from animals, yet fictional speech in collectives irreparably tore humans from the animal world.⁵ Through fictional speech in collectives, humans were empowered “to cooperate flexibly in large numbers.”⁶ Groups of humans could, to some extent, coexist and produce solely through “an imagined reality out of words.”⁷ Humans, ergo, created systems of culture and fostered senses of self. Collective fictions sprung humanity into an exceptional binary of real and imagined — of actual and virtual.

As shared fictions upwardly spiraled the cultural progress of the human race, so too did these fictions produce technology — the physical implementation of the human imaginary. The symbolic mind can create technology because it can imagine beyond nature. Through the proliferation of technology, specifically communication technology, humans exponentially expanded both the capacity and the reach of collective fictions. Eventually, communication technologies streamlined and mechanized the virtual world. Collective fictions, hence, produced technologies that, in turn, further spread collective fictions — a ceaselessly spinning cycle.

Kevin Kelly, a technologist and futurist, describes this post-Industrial Revolution state of technology as a “coevolutionary dance.”⁸ As “human minds mastered” technological innovations, the innovations propelled “human minds” and, subsequently, human minds produced “more technological inventions.”⁹ In other words, the symbolic capacity of the human

⁵ Yuval N. Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (Harper Collins, 2015), 22.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁸ Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants* (New York: Viking, 2010), 99.

⁹ Ibid.

mind allowed for the production of technology which, cyclically, enhanced the symbolic mind.

Kelly's model illustrates the inherently symbiotic process between the collective fictions and technology. Collective fictions sprung communication technologies that, thus, disseminated collective fictions.

Kelly defines the all-encompassing evolution of technological growth as the "technium."¹⁰

¹⁰ The "technium" is the "system of tools and machines and ideas [that is] so dense in feedback loops and complex interactions that it spawned a bit of independence... [and] began to exercise autonomy."¹¹ The technium is the uncontrolled cycling between collective fictions and communication technology. Kelly posits that the technium is growing so complex that it is already self-perpetuating and, even, autonomous. In an autonomous condition, the technium morphs into Baudrillard's simulacrum — an image, a virtual realm, that has "no relation to any reality [or actual] whatsoever."¹² Pynchon locates his novella at the exponential "knee" of the technium's autonomous trajectory, at the potential dive into the simulacrum.

Finally, media philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, analyzes various communication technologies' magnitude of loss in their translations and enactments of the virtual world upon the actual world. McLuhan understands various technological systems in terms of "cool" and "hot" mediums.¹³ A cool medium gives "little information" and, subsequently, "much has to be filled in" by the audience.¹⁴ In contrast, a hot medium is one that is "filled with data" and does not "leave so much to be filled in."¹⁵ An oral reading of Romeo and Juliet would be a cooler medium

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 216.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Georgetown, 1964), 23.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

than, for example, Baz Luhrmann's blockbuster movie. The oral retelling of the play allows for more "participation" than the movie.¹⁶

As communication technologies advance, we can transmit more information, in a shorter amount of time, and with greater accuracy. The overall improvement of communication technologies has, inevitably, "risen" the temperature of our media. Pynchon's protagonist, Oedipa's, world approaches the precipice of the simulacrum as communication technologies race towards a nearly uninterpretable, maximally-hot stage. As the actual-virtual cycle turns, the increasingly-hot virtual commands the formation of the actual. The actual can neither interpret nor interact with the virtual space; in line with the simulacrum, the world becomes increasingly "impenetrable" as warming technologies drive the actual closer to a purely-surface state. In Oedipa's deconstruction of a simulacrum-fate, she seeks a communication technology that is cool enough to cycle through a wholly unattached, unimposing actual-virtual feedback loop — a traceless rotation.

Upon the introduction, Pynchon sets the narrative within the thrusts of Kelly's technium. Pynchon places Oedipa's dystopian adventure within the tyrannically-virtual San Narciso, California. According to Oedipa, San Narciso is "a grouping of concepts — census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, [and] shopping nuclei."¹⁷ Oedipa views San Narciso not as a cohesive, actual "city,"¹⁸ but, rather, as a collection of data. Oedipa's interpretation of San Narciso as a "grouping of concepts," as data points, reveals the virtual-imposition upon the actual world. Virtual constructs, like the census and districts, impose upon and configure the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 24.

¹⁸ Ibid.

actual landscape. As Oedipa looks across the land, she sees “a vast sprawl of houses” that reminds her of a “printed circuit.”¹⁹ Quite literally, Oedipa understands the actual landscape as a reflection of virtual values.

As Oedipa reads the landscape, she is unable to understand it. Oedipa feels as if the landscape holds “concealed meaning” that lies “just past the threshold of her understanding.”²⁰ In her analysis, Oedipa believes that the virtually-mandated actual-world means something beneath its surface. Oedipa mistakenly assumes that the virtual “transistor,” or “circuit,” allows for more “sprawling” and connected communication.²¹ Oedipa’s fundamental assumption, however, projects human qualities upon a mechanical system. A circuit is limited by its technological structure; Oedipa misinterprets the circuit’s lacking abilities for “concealed meaning.”²² The circuit cannot communicate the completeness of the actual world, let alone surpass the communication of the actual world. The circuit merely connects and communicates through a binary and limited system.

Through the introductory landscape, Pynchon frames the sickening state of the actual-virtual feedback loop. The actual-virtual feedback loop, in an unbalanced state, morphs into a hybrid actual-virtual landscape. The actual world cannot fully translate into the virtual world and, therefore, the virtual world returns to the actual world in an incomplete form. The actual world adopts the incomplete form of the virtual world and, in doing so, perpetuates a cycle that is fundamentally draining. The actual world, particularly the one that Oedipa sees, begins to transform the virtual world — the “circuit.”

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Through this actual-virtual hybrid form, Pynchon warns of Baudrillard's "simulacrum" condition.²³ The simulacrum, as realized by Baudrillard, is the virtual, or the surface, with no connection to the actual. As Baudrillard writes, within the simulacrum, there is "no more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept; no more imaginary coextensivity."²⁴ Baudrillard's simulacrum rids of the duality of the actual and the virtual; the actual and the virtual collapse into a single surface and, hence, do not require translation.

As Oedipa discovers, however, within this state of near-simulacrum, of hyper-reproduction, the world becomes opaque — an impenetrable surface. Oedipa falsely believes the surface to disclose a greater meaning, but, in line with Baudrillard, there is nothing behind the "screen,"²⁵ or circuit. San Narciso is, instead, becoming the circuit itself. As Baudrillard predicts, San Narciso inches closer to total "absorption into the transparency of computers."²⁶ The actual world merges with its virtual creation. Through this ominous start, Pynchon sets the precedent for an increasingly oppressive actual-virtual existence.

While Oedipa disassembles the virtual-traces of her dead lover, Pierce Inverarity's, life, she experiences the creeping effects of the broken actual-virtual feedback loop. To various extents, Oedipa's actual world blends and merges with its virtual representation. Oedipa's actual world falls into a seemingly-cryptic, but more-often shallow, actual-virtual state. As Oedipa searches for meaning and tries to escape an emerging numbness, she engages with an array of stages within the actual-virtual feedback loop.

²³ Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

In her execution of Inverarity's estate, Oedipa initially pursues legal guidance. Firstly, Oedipa meets with her own lawyer, Roseman. Roseman is utterly obsessed with the Perry Mason television program.²⁷ On the television program, a virtual space, an actor plays the role of a fictional lawyer, Perry Mason. Roseman holds a "fierce ambivalence" towards Perry Mason, "wanting at once to be a successful trial lawyer like Perry Mason, and, since this was impossible, to destroy Perry Mason."²⁸ Roseman desires to embody Perry Mason, but, given Perry Mason's virtual state, Roseman is unable to do so. Roseman channels his inability to access Perry Mason into an actual, deep antagonism towards Perry Mason.

Roseman manifests his ardor in a lengthy indictment, "*The Profession v. Perry Mason, A Not-so-hypothetical Indictment*."²⁹ Through his indictment, Roseman carries the virtual Perry Mason into the actual world. Perry Mason, nevertheless, remains an incomplete and surface virtual character. Even though Roseman attempts to attack an actual being, Perry Mason exists as nothing more than a commercial product, a virtual representation of a self. Roseman directs his anger at a surface and, in doing so, creates the surface within the actual world.

As Oedipa continues to seek legal guidance, she comes upon, the similarly mononymous, Metzger. When Metzger arrives, Oedipa remarks that he "had to be an actor."³⁰ Through Oedipa's perception of Metzger, Pynchon circles back to Roseman's obsession with Perry Mason, an actor who plays a lawyer. Oedipa finds out, however, that Metzger is, in fact, both an actor and a lawyer.³¹ Metzger coexists in the virtual, TV space, like Perry Mason, and in the

²⁷ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

actual world as a lawyer, unlike Perry Mason. Metzger enacts Roseman's desired transformation: the translation of a virtual self into an actual, prosecutable lawyer.

While Oedipa spends time with Metzger, they watch a movie that stars a child Metzger. Oedipa, alongside an actual Metzger, watches a virtual Metzger, under the name of "Baby Igor."³² During the movie, the actual Metzger interacts with his virtual representation. At times, Metzger acts as if the virtual has seeped through the screen and into the actual. When there is a "terrific explosion" on the "TV set," for example, Metzger "cover[s] his head and roll[s] away."³³ Metzger creates a nebulous, disorienting space as he draws the virtual world within the actual world. Metzger, like Roseman, cannot distinguish between virtual representation and actual existence.

Metzger further muddles the actual-virtual binary when he describes his lawyer-turned-actor friend "Manny DiPresso."³⁴ DiPresso is a "one-time lawyer" who became an actor. As Metzger explains, DiPresso plays a Metzger in a TV pilot about Metzger, "an actor [who became] a lawyer [who] revert[s] periodically to being an actor."³⁵ DiPresso encompasses both the virtual and actual forms of Metzger, the Baby Igor and the lawyer, and translates, or flattens, them into a virtual space, a TV pilot. Through the TV pilot, DiPresso spins the actual-virtual cycle; he carries a virtual thing in an actual space, Baby Igor, into a virtual space, the TV pilot. DiPresso performs this conversion within the capitalist, "Hollywood" system.³⁶ The Hollywood complex, thus, tailors the entirety of Metzger into a commodity, a marketable product. The already fabricated Baby Igor reenters the commodity-based virtual world and drifts

³² Ibid., 30.

³³ Ibid., 32.

³⁴ Ibid., 33.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid

even farther away from the actual world. Metzger's convoluted self, through an actual-virtual loop, becomes increasingly transformed into data points — increasingly surface.

Interwoven into Metzger's loop is the more stark actual-virtual loop of "Turkey." Within Metzger's Baby Igor film, the heroes, Baby Igor and his father, "torpedo the Turkish."³⁷ The film, somewhat inexplicably, enacts a war against Turkey. Amidst the great Turkish violence, the TV screen cuts from the movie to a commercial. The commercial advertises "a Turkish bath in downtown San Narciso."³⁸ The screen abruptly switches from virtual violence to the virtual commodification of an actual luxury. The virtual Turkish are translated and thrust back into the actual world through commodification, a Turkish bath. As the Baby Igor movie returns, Baby Igor "disguise[s] [himself] as a Turkish beggar lad."³⁹ After the virtual Turkish are brought back into the actual world, through Turkish baths, the virtual Turkish disappear from the virtual world of the movie. Baby Igor, a virtual representation of the actual Metzger, forms a virtual interpretation of a Turkish beggar. More simply, once the warfaring, virtual Turkish are commodified into a Turkish bath, an actual thing, the virtual Turkish disappear and are replaced by a virtual interpretation of the Turkish, Metzger's beggar.

After Oedipa observes Metzger's complex translations through the actual-virtual feedback loop, she finds him "fast asleep" on the floor.⁴⁰ As Oedipa peers closer, she "notice[s] a fat stomach [that] the suit had hidden."⁴¹ Beneath Metzger's many interpreted layers, lies a fleshly, imperfect being. Once Oedipa beholds his actual form, she "rushe[s] to him... with a

³⁷ Ibid., 31.

³⁸ Ibid., 39.

³⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 41.

⁴¹ Ibid., 42.

cry.”⁴² As the two physically embrace, Oedipa approaches an irreplicable actual human experience — sexual climax. The peak, or “climax,” of Oedipa and Metzger’s sexual encounter, “coincide[s] with every light in the place, including the TV tube, suddenly going out, dead, black.”⁴³ Oedipa tears through Metzger’s imposed virtual iterations of self and reaches him in his most actual, human form. Once Oedipa touches the actual Metzger, the looming technium halts and, for a moment, shuts down.

Throughout Metzger’s experience in the commodified San Narciso landscape, his actual self proliferates into a seemingly-endless series of interpreted, virtual selves. Metzger, as Baby Igor and through Manny DiPresso, is translated into the virtual world — the representative world. As Metzger’s self moves from the actual to the virtual space, it becomes increasingly commodified. The actual Metzger, when presented in a virtual space, is simplified and categorized to maximize consumer engagement. Metzger, therefore, embodies the decaying state of the actual-virtual feedback loop. Similar to the “circuit” of houses, as Metzger encourages the virtual world into the actual world, he exacerbates a destructive binary.

The Numbness of the Broken Actual-Virtual Feedback Loop

The actually-virtually tangled Metzger reflects the greater decaying state of Oedipa’s world. As the San Narciso area perpetuates a destructive actual-virtual hybrid state, it grows, like the simulacrum, increasingly numbed. Oedipa experiences the rampant numbness within “The Scope,” a bar for “electronics assembly people from [the] Yoyodyne [plant].”⁴⁴ The assembly people construct the structures of the virtual space. In comparison, the assembly people function

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 47.

in the same role as the “prisoners in the top room of a circular tower” of Varo’s painting.⁴⁵ The prisoners “embroid[er] a kind of tapestry... and the tapestry [is] the world.”⁴⁶ The assembly people, like the prisoners, produce the virtual elements that entrap them in a virtual-actual hybrid environment. The “circular tower,” like the actual-virtual cycle, appears because of the assembly people’s own creation. Both peoples are enslaved by the technium. They become nothing more than “the sex organs of the machine world,”⁴⁷ they perpetuate their own bondage and demise.

Despite all of the patrons in “The Scope,” the only sound is “Stockhausen” music.⁴⁸ All of

the electronics assembly people wear “glasses and stare... silent.”⁴⁹ The assembly people’s glasses, like Oedipa’s “bubble shades,”⁵⁰ place an artificial filter over their eyes, actual reality; the glasses are “scopes” with which to see the world. Through their ears, the crowd consumes the German electronic music composer, Stockhausen. Stockhausen created the “first synthetic sound.”⁵¹ the first sound completely disconnected from any natural, recorded sound. In terms of the actual-virtual world, Stockhausen creates a virtual world absolutely removed from the actual one. Stockhausen’s sound is a purely artificial thing, a perfect surface. The assembly people flood their ears with Stockhausen’s synthetic, virtual creation.

Stockhausen produced his music through the superimposition of the sine tones of a sine-wave generator.⁵² In essence, Stockhausen dissected actual sound to the atomic level and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 46.

⁴⁸ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 48.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

⁵¹ Richard Toop, “Stockhausen and the Sine-Wave: The Story of an Ambiguous Relationship,” *The Musical Quarterly* LXV, no. 3 (1979): 380, doi:10.1093/mq/lxv.3.379.

⁵² Ibid.

produced a pure sound, a sine-wave tone. Stockhausen then wove sine-wave tones together to form sound compositions.⁵³ Through the creation of his sound compositions, Stockhausen deconstructed the actual world into its most fundamental elements and, through the discovery of these fundamental elements, reconstructed a perfectly virtual world. As the electronics assembly people absorb the music, they drain themselves of an actual existence and fill themselves with a virtual one.

Pynchon declares this actual-virtual experience through the “green neon sign” outside of “The Scope.”⁵⁴ The sign depicts “an oscilloscope tube, over which flowed an ever-changing dance of Lissajous figures.”⁵⁵ Simply, an oscilloscope measures voltage as a function of time. The oscilloscope can, thus, convert sound into a 2D graphic display. The particular “Lissajous figures” on the sign, are a mathematical illustration of complex harmonic motion. Like Stockhausen, an oscilloscope breaks sound down into digestible data, visual representation. A Lissajous figure, through measurement, distills harmony into its most fundamental elements. Pynchon actively translates actual wholeness, natural sound, into virtual bites, Lissajous figures. A graphic image, nevertheless, cannot communicate the completeness of music, of sound.

As Oedipa continues her deconstruction of Inverarity, she comes upon the myth of Maxwell’s Demon. Maxwell’s Demon is a machine that promises to “lose entropy.”⁵⁶ A symbolic “demon” within the machine sorts hot from cold particles to reduce the entropic state. The demon sorts according to the information that the “sensitive” communicates.⁵⁷ Maxwell viewed

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 47.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

this state as a remarkable exception to the second law of thermodynamics: the reversal of entropy. Through communication, the transfer of information, Maxwell's Demon eradicates loss.

The machine, nevertheless, proves to be a misinterpretation of scientific laws. When the "sensitive" communicates data to the demon, the demon "collects data."⁵⁸ The inherent act of data collection and communication increases entropy. Maxwell does not consider that the processing of information itself is a form of entropy. Information processing through Maxwell's Demon, subsequently, must entail a loss. Oedipa cannot "keep [energy] cycling" through a lossless loop; the data collection and conversion, by the laws of physics, must factor in some increase in entropy. While Oedipa tests the machine, she focuses on a "cylinder."⁵⁹ The cylinder remains no different than the "circular tower" or the broken actual-virtual feedback loop — all are myths of wholeness.

As Maxwell attempts to solve the problem of loss in thermodynamics, Pynchon's character, John Nefastis, metaphorically attempts to solve the loss of "information flow."⁶⁰ Nefastis aligns the language of Maxwell's Demon with McLuhan's analysis of digital communication. Coincidentally, McLuhan's vocabulary surrounding "cool" and "hot" mediums⁶¹ reflects the language of thermodynamics. As thermodynamics encompasses the manipulation of physical heat, McLuhan's definition of information flow measures the effect of a communication method through nominal heat.

Ideally, Maxwell's Demon should process information in a frictionless, entropy-reducing pattern. In terms of McLuhan, a perfectly "cool" communication system allows for a message to

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 23.

be medium-less. In other words, one can communicate without the imposing bounds, the heat, of a technological system. Oedipa realizes that Maxwell's Demon is, all in all, a delusion both in terms of thermodynamics and information flow. Oedipa concludes that Maxwell's Demon is a "coincidence,"⁶² rather than a "metaphor;"⁶³ the association is baseless, two superficially "alike..." equations"⁶⁴ without an actual foundation, meaning.

Eventually, spiraling down San Narciso's crushing feedback loop, Oedipa descends into mental chaos, entropy. Oedipa is "swept... [and] jammed"⁶⁵ through a world of "empty eyes"⁶⁶ and "fragments of dreams."⁶⁷ The "eyes" are not "empty" like Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalist "transparent eye-ball,"⁶⁸ but rather they are "blank."⁶⁹ Furthermore, the eyes within San Narciso are not, like Emerson suggests, selfless and without an ego, but, instead, are absent and "void."⁷⁰ The self behind the eyes is lost, not transcendent. Through the "impenetrable and meaningless surface[s]"⁷¹ of the eyes Oedipa spins towards Baudrillard's simulacrum. Those around her seem to have an "absence of a profound reality,"⁷² a single step away from the total erasure of "profound," actual reality itself.

⁶² Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 109.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*,

<https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/naturetext.html>.

⁶⁹ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 112.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 170.

⁷² *Ibid.*

As Oedipa sinks to the nadir of San Narciso, she comes across an “old man huddled, shaking.”⁷³ The old man “stare[s] into her eyes” and, finally, connects with her. Oedipa is suddenly “overcome all at once by the need to touch him.”⁷⁴ When her actual self connects with and “[holds]” his actual self, she begins to uncontrollably “cry.”⁷⁵ Through this physical touch, Oedipa mends the shortcomings of her tryst with Metzger. The old man, unlike Metzger, maintains no virtual layers; he does not exist on Baudrillard’s spectrum of simulacrum.

The old man stews upon the “insatiable stuffing of a mattress.”⁷⁶ In an unadulterated, uninterpreted human form, the mattress “keep[s] vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream.”⁷⁷ The mattress soaks the brilliant wholeness of actual being. To use Jacques Lacan’s language, the mattress achieves *jouissance*, “an excess of life.”⁷⁸

The mattress, unlike the other feedback loops, retains the entirety of the actual experience. Oedipa understands the mattress as “the memory bank to a computer of the lost.”⁷⁹ Unlike the filtered and mediated forms of other virtual repositories, the mattress retains the complete human experience. The mattress repairs the loss of the actual communicated by translating an unrestricted, fully-embraced human experience. Oedipa continues to ascend with the old man when she climbs with him “way up” to the mattress. The glorious mattress lies besides “a picture of a saint, changing well-water to oil for Jerusalem’s Easter lamps. Another

⁷³ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 125.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Lacan

⁷⁹ Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, 126.

bulb, dead.”⁸⁰ Like the Easter lamps to Jesus, the mattress reveals Oedipa’s resurrection. The light bulb, a technological light, does not guide Oedipa — the divinity of humanity does.

Like the Easter lamp, Oedipa envisions the “mattress flared up”⁸¹ around the old man. The illuminating death of the mattress, in Oedipa’s imagination, includes the “sure decay” of “stored, coded years of uselessness.”⁸² The mattress, although a virtual communication device, is completely self-sustaining and independent. The destruction of the mattress, therefore, is a final “irreversible process.”⁸³ Unlike the complex and splintering actual-virtual interactions within the rest of San Narciso, the complete mattress “bear[s] no... trace.”⁸⁴ In essence, the mattress achieves McLuhan’s coolest information channel; it is an utterly receptive, unbiased medium of communication. Additionally, the mattress does not fight, as Maxwell’s Demon does, the entropic fate of the universe. The burning mattress is a “massive destruction of information,”⁸⁵ the maximal enactment of entropy. Ultimately, the mattress exposes a lossless communication system as the coolest and most entropic path. To completely grasp the actual, the virtual mattress must hold the entirety of the actual’s energy; the virtual cannot lose energy in restructuring the actual as more marketable virtual, data set.

The old man’s “dt” tattoo further reiterates the necessity for two unmanifested and equal realms. Metaphorically, the “dt” is “delirium tremens:”⁸⁶ the intense disorientation from the removal of alcohol. Separately, yet equally, “dt” is also “time differential.”⁸⁷ A time differential

⁸⁰ Ibid., 127.

⁸¹ Ibid., 128.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 129.

is “a vanishingly small instant in which change [has] to be confronted.”⁸⁸ A “dt,” in terms of time differential, is a particular function’s rate of change in respect to time. Like a sine-wave tone, time differentials attempt to deconstruct a function into its most elemental form. Unlike a sine-wave tone, however, a time differential is infinitely small, rather than small enough. Although a time differential can be calculated, a precise moment within a time differential is impossible to discern. The “dt” tattoo, as both delirium tremens and time differential, reveals a real “metaphor.”⁸⁹ Unlike Maxwell’s Demon, the metaphor is rooted in the actual world, in the flesh of the old man, not on a fantastical machine.

Upon the old man’s hand both “dts,” delirium tremens and time differential, exist simultaneously. The two translations of the tattoo remain in an unmeasured, unmanifested state. In a sense, the tattoo, reflects Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. According to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, one can never precisely know both complementary variables of a physical property of a particle and, more specifically, a wave-like system. Following Heisenberg, to measure a property within a wave-like system is to both manifest that property and to erase the complementary property. If one were to measure the position of a wave, for example, one could not simultaneously measure the momentum of that wave.

To return to “dt,” if the old man were to declare, or measure, the tattoo in terms of a single translation, he would lose the complementary translation. In terms of actual-virtual translation, if the actual is measured and, therefore, manifested during translation, then it loses aspects of its actual state. As the mattress, the actual can neither be measured nor manifest, it must coexist alongside the virtual — a flowing exchange of information, sand and water. In the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 128.

perverted feedback loop of San Narciso, the deficient measurement of the actual in the virtual leads to the manifestation, and negation, of the original actual form. Again, in the most extreme condition, the “real is no longer real;”⁹⁰ the virtual replaces the actual in the simulacrum.

Oedipa can irrepressibly connect with the old man because there is no loss in translation — there is a common language: a perfect, frictionless connection. The mattress, as a language, carries the entirety of the human experience. When touching the old man and embracing the mattress, Oedipa no longer feels disoriented and confused. Unlike Metzger on a mattress, the old man on a mattress does not cycle through a leaky actual-virtual loop. As the old man swells the mattress, he pours his entire actual self. Through this perfect translation, there are no remnants of the broken cycle; there is no confusion between what is actual and what is virtual because they correspond indefinitely and continuously.

Through her experience with the old man, Oedipa finally feels the ecstasy of full human connection. Through an unmediated stream of information between actual and the virtual realms, Pynchon forms the potential for a common language — a language rooted in the complexity of the human experience rather than the value of human statistics. Pynchon allows for the human imaginary to remain separate from the actual, yet not oppressive over the actual. Through this balanced structure, Pynchon shifts away from the simulacrum. The technium no longer pushes towards absolute tyranny; the actual, human element of the technium withdraws from the virtual thrusts and stands as an equal counterpart.

Although Pynchon frames his work within a fictional narrative, his calling for and creation of a common language echoes louder in the present day. Since Pynchon’s 1966 piece,

⁹⁰ Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 175.

the rate of technological innovation has exponentially increased.⁹¹ Subsequently, our actual lives have grown increasingly intertwined with virtual spaces. Our methods of interaction are increasingly dependent upon virtual structures. Given our reliance on virtual spaces, our actual selves proliferate into many virtual selves. As each respective virtual self sprouts in a virtual sphere, it, reciprocally, feeds off of our actual self. The actual self, like Metzger, risks becoming a lost amalgamation of actual remains and virtual commands.

An attention-based economy commands the virtual space, as it currently exists. Through an attention-based economy, virtual mediums seek to monetize by encouraging attention. In order to maximize viewership, the actual self, when translated into the virtual space, becomes a collection of commercially-advantageous data points. When virtual selves then impose on the actual self, the actual self more closely aligns with a capitalist-driven, attention-based virtual form.

The increased atomization of actual selves within a virtual space, inherently, also drives individuals to define themselves. To avoid falling into a seemingly infinite collection of entropic data points, the actual individual feels the need to become an outstanding product. The fate of the virtual self, in turn, becomes the fate of the actual self. The actual self, deconstructed into data points, feels numb and disconnected.

Additionally, perhaps, our recent implementation of identity politics is a result of a broken actual-virtual feedback loop. A broken actual-virtual feedback loop segments individuals into data categories to be advertised to. The attention-based model, however, also feeds individuals information that they are most likely to view, to purchase. In this flawed structure,

⁹¹ Kelly, *What Technology Wants*, 98.

the foundation of an echo-chamber, or perhaps an echo-tower is formed. If actual individuals are fed information that their virtual profiles align with, it is likely that, to some extent, actual selves are also shaped by their virtual profiles.

Identity politics, fundamentally, is the division of diverse and complex individuals into rigid categories; categories that are best advertised to. Through identity politics, both the nuances of the individual are lost and “an other” is formed. Our societal manifestations of in-groups and out-groups reduce collective empathy and collaboration. If we are to follow Pynchon’s solution, we cannot measure and, thus, manifest the actual self in a virtual space — we need to create a fluid exchange. In other words, the infinitely intricate actual individual cannot be broken into simplistic data points in the virtual space. The more we break down, measure, the actual self within the virtual space, the more we perpetuate loss. To establish a common language in a virtual era, we must allow the actual and virtual spaces to parallelly, equally, and independently flourish.

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