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**Objectivity Disguised: Ideas of Authenticity in the Novels of
Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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In Prague, August 1, 2020

Bc. Marek Torčík

Handwritten signature of Marek Torčík, consisting of a stylized 'M' followed by 'T' and 'R'.

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Introduction and Summary

Introduction

Authenticity – a word loaded with meaning, full of signification. Containing within itself whole centuries of philosophical thought, critical praxis, an almost excessive abuse by the media and cultural consciousness that have muddled over its meaning, obscured its use into an abstract concept that is always both an evasive thought and an almost esoteric desire for a greater sense of belonging to oneself.

The word itself is now often used to describe the status of a commodity – we calculate the value of pieces of art according to their authenticity, according to what Jean Baudrillard in *The System of Objects* calls the “traces of creation.”¹ Baudrillard sees authenticity within the capitalist society as a desired added value, seeking its own narcissistic pleasure. Phrases such as “I have an authentic Van Gogh” or “This is an authentic Warhol” are means of generating value – a performance designed to seek validity within a given system subset. To say so is to acquire a certain symbolic capital.

Yet another instance of the use of the word ‘authentic’ is its application on various subcultures, modes of performing one’s place within society. To be authentic means to act in accordance with one’s proclaimed values, to not be *pretentious*. Within the cultural industry, authenticity is used as a means of ridiculing those who are deemed inauthentic, frauds; it is a weaponized form of cultural stigma, often coinciding with the various structures of a given society – further increasing the inequality within its systems of power.

While these are the two most widely circulated current meanings of the word ‘authentic,’ there is also ‘authenticity’ signifying the philosophical term for the quality of existence. Stemming from the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, such ‘true’ existence is achieved via the authentic self.² This notion of authenticity relies on a deeper

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2005) 81.

² Cf. Samuel E. Stumpf, *Socrates to Sartre: A History of Philosophy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993) 488.

introspection of one's own modes of being – it is a concept used by the existentialists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre. Yet, this notion of authenticity is not complete either – what it misses is both its possibility towards the virtual acceptance of the self and a capability for misdirection.

Often in literary works of art, authenticity serves as a means for achieving identification – we read because we want to feel as if we are not alone, to identify, to feel seen and understood. Thus, notions of authenticity are variations on elemental themes in all of philosophy involved with identity. Charles Taylor in the 1992 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, amongst other things, explores the ways identity is construed and argues that “the genesis of the human mind is in this sense not ‘monological’ not something each accomplishes on her or his own, but dialogical.”³ Thus, for Taylor, authenticity is always articulated against the other, its dialogical nature is one of conversation, and it is a continuous process. This sentiment is acknowledged by Niklas Luhmann too, when in *Art as a Social System*, he writes that people “become individuals by observing their own observations,”⁴ thus acknowledging that identity is acquired through acts of self-observation as well as through observing others. Such an idea of authenticity then relies on the individual, an inner subjectivity composed out of experience and external stimuli. Notions of authenticity are thus fundamentally important for the very act of reading. If the self becomes individualized through acts of self-surveillance, as Luhmann argues, then all art is a mirror allowing one to observe the liminal states of existence.

In this work, I use authenticity in the sense of both a category of the individual's experience of the self and a general narrative power to convey subjectivity, or myth, in a relatable manner. What this work is primarily interested in, are the various modes of authenticity that contemporary novels use in order to build a certain mimetic possibility used to explore various notions of the self and thus providing a ground for observation of the ways these authentic selves change within the passage of time.

³ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2003) 33.

⁴ Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) 93.

While the selection of primary works for this thesis could indeed be different and accommodate better to the contemporary trend of auto-fiction, a genre exploring the very notions analyzed here in a rather explicit and straight-forward manner, and thus portray authenticity at the foreground of these works, I selected two of the most established contemporary American writers – the logic behind this is double: for one thing, both Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster have behind them a body of work that allows for a greater understanding of the development of the various notions of authenticity the two authors developed throughout the years.

Part of the reasoning behind the choice of works analyzed here is also the fact that neither Pynchon, nor Auster are explicitly involved with the genre of auto-fiction as such; yet, they are concerned with the very predicaments works such as *10:04* by Ben Lerner seem to be involved with. Lerner also explores the historical possibilities for representation of the self within a novel and he traces the fundamental changes opening within such selves in the flux of time. Indeed, Lerner and others like him build on the tradition of writers such as Pynchon and Auster. Thus, an exploration of the notions of authenticity at work within their writing is needed for a better understanding of the state of the contemporary Anglophone novel.

This thesis establishes an understanding of authenticity as a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in the logic of most contemporary American fiction; it explores notions of subjectivity and objectivity in their constant state of flux – everything is always reinvented, challenged by different modes of identities. Representation is never singular. Rather, authenticity is found in multiplicities, the objective hidden under the ever amounting subjective.

Summary

What follows is a series of close reading analyses of three most recent works by Thomas Pynchon and Paul Auster. The main objective of this thesis is to analyze ways in which authenticity operates within the selected works, how it functions in accordance with a deconstructed distinction between objectivity and subjectivity. Such distinctions within selected works cease to work; rather, both Auster and Pynchon use subjectivity and its implications on our understanding of truth and identity as a means to a critique of contemporary society. I selected three most recent works by each writer, not only due to their portrayal of themes analyzed here, but also due to a trace of evolution in both the aesthetic and thematic elements within them. Thus, this thesis traces the development of notions of authenticity amongst the three works by Paul Auster, namely *Invisible* (2009), *Sunset Park* (2010) and *4 3 2 1* (2017) and contrasts them to Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006), *Inherent Vice* (2009) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013).

This thesis is composed mainly of a series of close readings of the six selected works, followed by a critical analysis of various notions of authenticity at work within these works. In the first four chapters, I combine various texts from diverse fields such as critical theory, sociology and philosophy in order to argue for a specific understanding of the notions of authenticity. Primarily, I work within the theoretical framework of Niklas Luhmann's ideas of authenticity, as expressed in his seminal work *Art as a Social System*, as well as Theodor W. Adorno's notion of both authenticity and the subjective. Occasionally, this work makes use of various fictional works, pieces of poetry and so on, to support arguments regarding the multiplication of possibilities or the distinction between the virtual and the real.

The structure of this thesis rests on the first four chapters tracing the development of ideas of authenticity (and subjectivity) within each author's three most recent novels. In the first chapter, an analysis of *Invisible* and *Sunset Park* sets forth the basic narrative strategies within Paul Auster's work – that is, a certain refusal of his earlier experiments in exploring the existential crisis that took over the aesthetic side of

the narrative and providing a more cohesive structure for the books. I argue that the two novels are different in their approach towards the subject – providing two different strategies that are then combined in his most contemporary novel: *4 3 2 1*. While *Invisible* is still concerned with experimentation with formal belief systems and questions authenticity on the narrative level, *Sunset Park* is unquestionably a more conventional novel, in that it traces notions of the authentic self and focuses on the possibilities and unfulfilled expectations of its protagonist.

The second chapter combines the knowledge gained from analyzing the two novels in its discussion of Auster's most recent work, *4 3 2 1*. The novel itself is simultaneously a sharp divergence from anything Auster produced up to this date, yet deeply rooted in his experimentation with the subjective. It is here that possibilities for interpretative difference within the limits of the self are explored, as *4 3 2 1* creates four different version of its protagonist. Archie Ferguson is thus an experiment in potentialities, the virtual representation of what could have been. Auster's notion of authenticity within the novel explores the proverbial 'roads not taken' that are famously captured in Robert Frost's eponymous poem.⁵ By alluding to such particular virtuality, Auster allows for a narrative possibility, he traces individual's acts of creations through series of moments, points in time that provide the Derridean *différance* that constructs individual authenticities. *4 3 2 1* is a masterpiece of epic proportion, opening multiple representations, multiple instances of the individual at the core of its narrative. The humane and empathetic approach Auster adopts is overwhelmingly crucial for the understanding of modern society – how the flux of the notions of our subjective selves creates an invitation to an understanding that is always inclusive of difference.

An exploration of Thomas Pynchon's historical epos *Against the Day* and his somewhat more accessible *Inherent Vice* in Chapter III proceeds to articulate the strategic narrative differences between Auster and Pynchon. In *Against the Day*, Pynchon's long-lasting tendency to explore notions of historical truths, what Linda Hutcheon describes as

⁵ Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost," *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 3 May 2009, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken.

historical metafiction, opens a space for narratives that are diverging, creating multiplicities. In adopting the historical as a means to an authentic self, Pynchon is equating the historical with the paranoid. *Inherent Vice* then is an attempt to step away from the magnitude of historicity in order to focus more on its characters. Thus, there are essentially two versions of a Pynchon-novel. One is relying on the chaos of truths that cease to signify the real, the other is using the resulting chaos to portray a more modest experiment with characters and various states of minds they experience when faced with historical mechanisms that strip away their authenticity – often in Pynchon’s texts, characters become lost, disassembled, they are increasingly integrated into the chaos and disintegration of the entropic forces that direct our Universe into the ultimate heat-death it is destined to reach.

A combination of these two ways of narrating in Pynchon’s latest novel, *Bleeding Edge*, is explored in the penultimate fourth chapter. Here, Pynchon’s proclivity towards the historic is projected against the recent events of the 2001 terrorist attacks on World Trade Center. Pynchon explores the moment where the contemporary becomes the historical, the processes of the creation of history – moreover, he makes a direct parallel between paranoia and history, its only difference is perhaps in the very notion of truth he is seeking to destabilize with the help of the protagonist. In this chapter, an analysis of the various notions at work in Pynchon’s recent narratives works towards a definition of the historical as working in accordance with Allen Grossman’s notion of the ‘bitter logic of the poetic principle’ expressed in his seminal work *The Long Schoolroom* – there is never a true representation of the historical event. Rather, all facts are mere virtuality, hiding within them the potential for subjective interpretation.

In the final chapter of this thesis, there is a shift in its direction away from an attention of the particular works towards a critical assessment of the ideas analyzed in the previous chapters. Using the notions of the subjective within several seminal philosophical and theoretical texts, together with the idea of the Heraclitean flux, or an omnipresent and constant change, Chapter V offers an alternative mode of understanding authenticity, one that is realized through a series of multiplicities. There is no total and

objective category such as the historical truth or individuality, rather, what the works analyzed in this thesis all express is a certain direction towards the absolute – an understanding that everything is more complex, spun in a web of relations and dependencies. Thus, the works achieve objectivity and a special acceptance of a hinted authenticity through a series of opened possibilities. The acceptance of the impossibility of truth and totality of any notion leads to a different kind of objectivity, one that offers new ways of perception of narrative and the work of art itself.

Chapter I: The Texture of Imagination – Voices of the Subjective in Paul Auster's Work

Throughout the history of literature, questions regarding the possibility of certain forms of realism often recur. The seemingly contradictory dichotomy of reality and imagination permeates both individual works of art as well as theory, establishing a distinction between the two, a sense of estrangement: a divide that is always simultaneously being sealed and opened again.

The brilliance of poetic language lies in its ability to breach such divides, to establish tropes that go beyond such dichotomies in creating their own systems of signifiers and signifieds. William Carlos Williams in his 1923 *Spring and All* proved this by suggesting that the perceived *illusion* in art is a misunderstanding. “There is only ‘illusion’ in art where ignorance of the bystander confuses imagination and its works with cruder processes.”⁶ Williams further questions the futility of trying to copy or reproduce nature. Imitation is thus an empty endeavor. Rather, *Spring and All* presents a manifesto of creation – literature as a means to the authentic, a reality in its own sense, rather than its mere representation.

Indeed, such a notion of art systems constituting parallel realities can even be explained in terms of modern physics. There is yet another aspect, another implication that this fractured, artistic reality creates. The role of the artist, a writer in this case, is increasingly more complicated. To navigate the whirlpool of fractured reality, at a time when the *real* world itself is questioning the truth value of all that is, necessary means to narrate stories. Such a subjective perception is thus increasingly on view – consciousness is the mediator of our experience of the everyday and, consequentially, art itself. The German sociologist Niklas Luhmann explores the various notions of perception and their origins in human consciousness in *Art as a Social System*. His notion of human perception is that “Day by day, minute by minute, consciousness is preoccupied with perception. Through perception it is captivated by external world. Without perception it would have

⁶ William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions Books, 2011) 29.

to terminate its *autopoiesis*, and even dreams can occur only by suggesting perceptions.”⁷ For Luhmann, the experience of the external world and its phenomena is mediated through our consciousness and only ever realized through it. By doing this, he opens up the ground to an absolute subjectivity of experience. Reality is thus a composite of “eigenvalues,” sets of constructions in our brains.⁸ Luhmann further argues that the difference in perception of any artwork compared to the everyday, is that all art seeks to mediate experience, to reroute our perception in order to highlight certain aspects of human experience. Literature especially is capable of such a feat through the process of “slowing down reading [...], particularly in lyric poetry.”⁹

Therefore, Luhmann’s fundamental idea is that art has the ability to reshape our experience of reality – to open new ways of awareness to particular aspects of it. Rather than a mere representational function, it reassembles our ability to perceive things.

Ever since his early novels, Paul Auster is concerned with the nature and effects of storytelling, using ways of achieving a different perception of the external world such as those described by Luhmann. In his works, the voice of the narrator is often overshadowing any other possible elucidation of the plot – a subjectivity that in fact acts as an instrument of authenticity. Through various protagonists, various aesthetic styles following their lives, creating miniature fictional cities, landscapes and histories mapping a way through the maze of modern life – Auster builds eerie worlds that exist apart from ours. Yet, they are always deeply rooted in our own experiences. As Williams says, what true art does is that it separates things of the imagination from life by putting to practice the most common experiences. The mundane as an invitation, an opening to a fantasy.¹⁰ In this sense, Auster builds stories that contain just enough known elements, points of contacts between reader and the fictional world – through his use of a subjective narrative

⁷ Luhmann, 6.

⁸ Luhmann, 6.

⁹ Luhmann, 14.

¹⁰ Williams, *Spring And All*, 30.

voice rather than a detached third person narrator, there is always a sense of unease, a confrontation with one's own existential anxiety.

The existential dread and rootlessness of life are leitmotifs permeating almost all of Auster's work. Chris Donovan, to put just one example, in *Postmodern Counternarratives* argues that while Auster's fiction is often starkly realistic, refusing some of the post-modern games of his earlier years, the works always at certain points take "on something other than a realistic tone, an existential feel."¹¹ In this chapter, I examine two consecutively published novels, with the aim to analyze their inner mechanisms and describe how they achieve authenticity, or rather, how Auster's play with notions of fiction and reality blurs any boundaries between the two, therefore rendering current notions of authenticity meaningless, confining it to a degree of personal identification. Two of the three novels analyzed in this thesis, *Invisible*, published in 2009 and *Sunset Park*, released in 2010, build a sense of anxiety and a lack of belonging that is put to use by a variety of characters whose narrative voices are explored to provide a full, disharmonious symphony of human lives. I argue that Auster, a master storyteller and mystifier, produces various analyses of modern life, a map of sorts that guides the reader through a metropolis of stories and emotions.

Both *Invisible* and *Sunset Park* are concerned with the very nature of an individual's authenticity and their conscious self. Thus, while every narrative draws from a deeply existential crisis, simultaneously it puts to use a multitude of voices and modes of narrations that further increase a sense of exploration of what it means to be a person, both to oneself and others around us. It is in his 2019 collection of writings and essays *Talking to Strangers* where Auster expresses his belief that "language is something we share with others, it is common to us all."¹² This language is, in Auster's own words, an ineffective tool, "it is not an experience. It is a means of organizing experience."¹³ Here

¹¹ Chris Donovan, *Postmodern Counternarratives: Irony and Audience in the Novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson and Taylor O'Brien* (London: Routledge, 2005) 73.

¹² Paul Auster, *Talking to Strangers: Selected Essays, Prefaces, and Other Writings* (New York: Picador, 2019) 383.

¹³ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 4.

then is an understanding of the language of fiction that is defined by its possibility to mediate an experience of commonality. Both *Invisible* and *Sunset Park* (and *4 3 2 1* too) are exercises in proving this, establishing spaces for communal meaning of existence, one that is trying to deconstruct the existential anxiety of the modern world.

Using the analysis of works from this chapter, the following one deals with Auster's latest novel, the break-through and over one thousand pages long masterpiece *4 3 2 1*. In his latest novel, Auster leaves the confines of a singular narrative space and rather explores the notions of multiple realities, the roads taken and not taken. *4 3 2 1* is a story of a boy growing up into four different versions of himself. The very structure and elaborate composition of the novel sets it apart from the rest of Auster's work, while also using his signature motifs and themes, it is distinct in its exploration of authenticity and identity and therefore demands a closer inspection.

In a way, the two novels preceding *4 3 2 1* are foreshadowing the extensive exploration of the very notion of authenticity that Auster undertakes. While *Sunset Park* is more concerned with notions of subjectivity and the status of an individual (as in the authentic self) *Invisible* deals with a very one-sided confidence-play and the notion of authenticity is touched upon in a game of Ponzi schemes, of constant questionings whether the characters and the events of the previous chapters are real, or invented by their narrator. In *4 3 2 1* the tactics of both of these novels are conjoined in unison and create a repetitive *tour de force* of human life and tragedy. Christopher Donovan was indeed wrong to assume that Auster's "language no longer features the somewhat absurdist or existential reductions"¹⁴ that are typical of his early works. The novel comes in a full circle and re-imagines what a language of existence can be: an ever repeating sequence of life and death, of creation and destruction. I argue that without first exploring these topics in *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*, Auster's study of authenticity in his latest novel would be impossible to fully interpret and understand.

¹⁴ Donovan, 66.

The Intensity of Life

In the corpus of Paul Auster's work, it is important to distinguish two often contradictory and mutually exclusive styles of writing and telling stories. Auster's more recent books tend to be preoccupied with the nature of the physical: bodies and their inner lives, a perception of the world through the senses – yet always mediated through words, language. In *Talking to Strangers*, Auster begins with a proclamation that: “To feel estranged from language is to lose your own body. When words fail you, you dissolve into an image of nothingness. You disappear.”¹⁵ Often biographical in this recent phase of his work, Auster creates memoirs of the body – such as the one in his auto-fictional *Winter Journal* in which life is perceived solely as a second person experience.¹⁶ A mapping of the passage of one's body through time and a duality of the mind and its vehicle.

The second and perhaps more well-known narrative style is his more meta-fictional, labyrinthine way of navigating through stories. It is akin to a map of modern cities. A rhizomatic structure where nothing ever truly has a beginning, nor an end. Here, Auster's characters are subjected to forces of an increasingly anxious world, one that disrupts notions of the self, truth and any objective meaning whatsoever. “The world is my idea,” as Auster describes his perception of fiction. “I am the world. The world is your idea. You are the world. My world and your world are not the same.”¹⁷

Thus – a notion of characters and narratives gravitating towards the subjective, an identity based on being not defined, but rather interpreted. Henri Lefebvre notices this when in his *Metaphilosophy*, he talks of the notion of subjectivity as always unconsciously deconstructing itself:

¹⁵ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 5.

¹⁶ Cf. Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (New York: Picador, 2012). In *Winter Journal*, Auster recalls his childhood, youth and years of early writing career through the phenomena happening to and inside his body. Thus a certain physical connection with the narrative and the external world is achieved.

¹⁷ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 3.

As a result, by claiming its freedom and right to existence, subjectivity scarcely escapes what affects and alienates it. If it believes itself to be moving in a dimension of its own, or an appropriate one, it loses its way.¹⁸

The notion of identity in Auster's more meta-fictional novels is based on what Lefebvre sees as an ever re-shaping subjectivity, that is always destroying itself on its way. There are always characters lost in their own desolation, as if decomposed by the centrifugal forces of the narrative. In this way, they are similar to the entropic powers described in the chapters concerning works of Thomas Pynchon, but unlike the decompositions of various systems in Pynchon's novels, the emphasis is rather on the level of characters – things simply fall apart.

Invisible, published in 2009, is one of these more experimental novels by Auster. As James Urquharth in his review for *The Independent* notices, its aesthetics refer us back to Auster's early years and offers a confidence play with both the reader and the characters themselves.¹⁹ *Invisible* is divided into four parts, each one is building on the events of the previous one.

The story revolves around the character of Adam Walker, a young student and a poet who acquaintances himself with Rudolf Born, a political science professor from France. Born offers Walker a chance to establish a literary magazine and asks Adam to write his biography for him. In the course of the novel, Adam Walker is increasingly dissociated from the narrative, as if taken away. A notion that is further supported with shifts within different narrators. For the first part of the novel, Adam is the sole narrator, concerned with the truth value and reality of things. This is important for the understanding of later shifts in the novel – Walker's acceptance of the biographer's task rests on his seemingly obsessive gravitation towards an absolute objectivity. The novel further explores this when Born makes his offer to Walker:

¹⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *Metaphilosophy* (London: Verso, 2016) 57.

¹⁹ James Urquhart, "Review: Invisible, By Paul Auster," *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 22 Oct. 2011, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/invisible-by-paul-auster-1811036.html.

I'll give you the whole story, he said, but in quieter surroundings. The whole story of my incredible life so far. You'll see, Mr. Walker. One day, you'll wind up writing my biography. I guarantee it.²⁰

The next part of the novel is told in second person narrative and recounts Adam's years following the events that transpired in the first part. It nevertheless ends with Adam Walker's death and with the manuscript, Born's biography, now in the hands of James, the narrator of the final two parts of *Invisible*.

It is in the following parts of *Invisible* that the true character of Auster's story comes to surface. There, it is James who, instead of the deceased Adam Walker, goes on to complete the story of Born, making use of Adam's notes that were given to him by his girlfriend Gwen. It is also in these two sections where it is revealed that not all the events of *Invisible* were entirely true. Each subsequent part of the novel is revealed to have distorted its "truth" and thus, it always questions the authenticity of the previous chapter, the previous version of truth. This is even subtly implied in the first section, when Adam comments on the nature of his love affair with Born's girlfriend, Margot: "Each word that came out of her mouth subverted what she had said a moment earlier."²¹

Furthermore, it is revealed that many of the events in the first part never even took place and James is struggling with his own writerly integrity, as he is supposed to change the names and actions of the characters. "There are no rules anymore."²² Thus, James is confronted with the very structure of truth and its subjectivity. Nothing is ever for certain in this textual world:

The names have been changed to protect the innocent. You change the names of the people and the places, you add or subtract any material you see fit, and then you publish the book under your own name.²³

²⁰ Paul Auster, *Invisible* (New York: Picador, 2009) 12.

²¹ Auster, *Invisible*, 54.

²² Auster, *Invisible*, 145.

²³ Auster, *Invisible*, 259.

The nature of truth and authorship, the very question of identity and how it can shift from person to person – all this is of concern to Auster in *Invisible*. When the response to James' worries about the inauthenticity of such changes in the biography are voiced, it is followed by a dismissal: "Not if you frame it correctly."²⁴

Invisible is a novel with the notion of authenticity wedged at the very heart of the story. It is a conceptual examination of what it means to be a person that stays true to themselves; a sort of eternal oscillation between authenticity and whatever its opposite is. What Auster is aware above all in his narrative, is that human subjectivity and human individualism, are based on certain inner integrity to himself. Jean-Paul Sartre talks of this need to stay true to oneself in his *What Is Subjectivity?* – a discussion of the nature of subjectivity and an opposition to his contemporary philosopher György Lukács. Here, Sartre establishes that:

This is the first essential characteristic of subjectivity: if subjectivity is, by definition, non-knowledge, even at the level of consciousness, it is because the individual – the organism – has to be his being – *être son être*.²⁵

Indeed, the possibility of becoming one's own authentic self is the predominant theme underlying all of *Invisible*. When Adam in the second part of the novel comments on his sudden depression and feelings of inauthenticity alienating him from the fragile perceptions of himself built over the years, there is an explanation as to why: "I felt crushed, humiliated, numb. Born had defeated me. He had shown me something about myself that filled me with revulsion [...]."²⁶ Auster thus explores what it means to be confronted with a different image of oneself. To create a fictional "mirror" that would reflect the true self in order to distort illusions. However, such a distortion does not end there. Rather, it is an endless circle oscillating between states of truth and illusion – one never really peaks behind the façade of reality. In Auster's fictional world, authenticity is

²⁴ Auster, *Invisible*, 259.

²⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Subjectivity?* (London: Verso, 2016) 73.

²⁶ Auster, *Invisible*, 71.

always challenged, always escaping a more concrete understanding of what it was, is and will be.

The Nature of Being Alive

In contrast to *Invisible*, Auster's subsequent novel seemingly returns to a less meta-fictional and more grounded narrative. The 2010 novel *Sunset Park* is, much like other novels by Auster, set in New York. While the events of *Invisible* and *4 3 2 1* take place amidst the tumult of history, the plot of *Sunset Park* is, at least on the first sight, uprooted from any significant historical events. Miles Heller, the protagonist of the novel, escaped his former life of a university student and a son of a famous book publisher, as a form of penance, an act of self-defiant, damning purgatory for his past mistakes. He lives in Florida, where he falls in love with an underage girl Pilar. The two are happy for a period of time. However, due to a series of unlucky circumstances, Miles is forced to flee again, back to New York City, where he takes refuge in an abandoned house, a squat in the Brooklyn neighbourhood of Sunset Park. From this point, Auster is able to navigate his characters and events throughout the novel by interchanging perspectives from the view of the narrator; various characters in the book compose together a portrait of Miles through different eyes.

Sunset Park's composition thus effectively establishes a way of balancing between subjectivity and objectivity. Rather than portraying the events through the prism of a single character or narrator, Auster focuses on establishing a heterogenous perspective that builds towards a certain experience of a *gestalt* of human identity. The turns in perspective of different characters within alternating chapters provide a more complex narrative that reveals its true nature only gradually, piece by piece.²⁷

²⁷ See: Patricia I. Escárcega, "On the Strangeness of Being Alive: Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*," *Slant Magazine*, 13 Apr. 2019, www.slantmagazine.com/books/on-the-strangeness-of-being-alive-paul-austers-sunset-park/. Escárcega writes that: "Auster takes turns with his characters, alternating chapters and points of view, inhabiting most of these with convincing insight."

Sunset Park begins with a section narrated by Miles himself and from very early on, it is established that the troubled history of the protagonist, the guilt of accidentally killing his brother, is what separates him from the rest of the world. The sense of isolation invoked by Miles and his refusal to participate in any societal circles or to be involved with life in any way apart from reading, his ascetic life, all this portrays the narrator as a fractured being: “To have no plans, which is to say to have no longings or hopes, to be satisfied with your lot, to accept what the world doles out to you from one sunrise to the next – in order to live like that you must want very little, as little as humanly possible.”²⁸ This feeling resurfaces later, as Miles and his efforts to find a place where he would be happy, fail spectacularly. In *Sunset Park*, Auster creates a circular story of grief and redemption, that is forever repeating, forever coming back in waves. Life in *Sunset Park* follows a path that has neither a beginning nor an end. Everything is merely connected, intertwined.

In this sense, *Sunset Park* is a book about the human condition, a survey of suffering and joy in one’s life, the balance between the two. As the trajectory of the story progresses, its characters go through their ups and downs with a certain passivity inherent to many characters in Auster’s works. As quoted above, they often simply refuse to act or intervene; rather, they embrace blindly what is going to happen. This trait is shared by both Miles and his father, Morris Heller, the owner of a publishing house slowly slipping into bankruptcy, partly due to the advent of the 2008 financial crisis.²⁹ The silent acceptance of fate’s inevitability, together with a refusal to do anything, coincides with his personal life and a stagnant and damaged relationship with his wife.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is a distinct character set apart from others (not unconnected but rather distinct in her condition) – Ellen Brice. Ellen suffers from mental disorders caused by a self-enforced abortion that she had when she was younger. As an

²⁸ Paul Auster, *Sunset Park* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010) 6.

²⁹ Auster, *Sunset Park*, 148.

artist she has “the constant and ever-pressing desire to get it right.”³⁰ This is not only true when trying to understand her behavior towards others, her anxiousness when communicating, but also and most importantly when it concerns her painting: “She wants her human bodies to convey the miraculous strangeness of being alive – no more than that, as much as all that.”³¹

What sets Ellen apart is also her idiosyncratic perception of the world. She shares with Miles a certain perception of beauty based on some of the ideas Theodor Adorno expresses in his lectures on the principles of aesthetic theory. Rather than the classical form of beauty, both of them opt to perceive the beautiful as the real. Adorno describes in one of his lectures the idea of beauty as understood by Plato himself. He explains that:

In Plato's theory, then, beauty is characterized by a certain kind of paradox. And it has been said, not without reason, that whatever one rightly finds beautiful somehow exhibits a paradoxical quality. The paradox inherent in beauty is that it is at once the bearer of something absolute, something spiritual, of the idea and also something sensually present; that the idea itself, as philosophy later expressed it, is for us in its immediacy, namely as an intuitive idea.³²

Thus, the beautiful is always both profane and sacred and in between these two poles, both Ellen and Miles are lost in their troubled ways as they try and search for a sense of belonging, a place would be able to call home. It is through this notion of the beautiful that many of the characters find their inner authenticity; through it they try to find a place for themselves within the world. For Bing, the strongman character with a tender heart, it is house itself (as well as its inhabitants), the way of life where nothing is ever constant. Yet, in this realization, everything is translated into an acute sense of temporality and thus a sense of a certain authentic feeling is allowed to expand. For Miles, it is the possibility

³⁰ Auster, *Sunset Park*, 219.

³¹ Auster, *Sunset Park*, 219.

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum Books, 2002) 99.

of a future with his young lover Pilar; for his father it is his infatuation with the desired but absent wife.

It is on these two levels where *Sunset Park* is involved with notions of authenticity on two different levels. Firstly, there is the level of the narrative, with its shifting perspectives allowing for a better and more complex understanding of what is happening to various characters. The overall structure of the novel can be compared to what Herman Melville was trying to achieve in his *The Confidence-Man*: to capture the inexplicable nature of our impressions *of* and *on* someone; the every-day, make-believe nature of human relationships and the interpretative illusions we create around ourselves and others.³³ In that sense, *Sunset Park* shares a certain characteristics with notions connected to *bildungsroman*. However, rather than focusing on a single character and their life story, it produces a variety – multiple interpretations of what a character supposedly is and what it is allowed to become. Thus, truth and authenticity carry a fragmented, fragile sense to them.

The sense of differentiation and detachment leads to feelings of unease throughout the book. All characters appear to run in circles of despair – each and every time they try to inspect the world around them and see themselves in it, they perceive no static place, only change. By providing different narrative voices within his book, Auster achieves an individualization used to further highlight feelings of loneliness in each character. His is a lexicon of solitude, where only in states of extreme separation we are able to truly grasp the nature of each character.

The way in which *Sunset Park* integrates this analysis of human loneliness, is through a series of interactions and the capacity of its protagonists to observe and analyze others. Hence, their own self is always superimposed on that of others, always compared and reflected back on them. Always a dissection: as if there was no “I” existing apart from the external world. In this way, Auster questions the old Emersonian credo of self-reliance, arguing that while individuality is important, it is through others that we are able to formulate any idea of a self. Only through a sense of belonging to someone and

³³ Cf. Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1999).

somewhere are we able to postulate the basis of our identity. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in his essay entitled 'Self-Reliance' of the superior nature of the individual; he mentions that: "The only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it."³⁴ Auster's characters are both in sync and at odds with this notion; always balancing this almost Nietzschean individualism with a certain identifiable, tangible collective empathy. By making this dichotomy visible, Auster builds a sense of duality: on one hand, there is the individual, the sense of an authentic and self-sustaining character, alone in its textual world; on the other hand: an interconnection, a linked web of relations and emotions for another human being that tie and influence everything. Through this, Auster's exploration of loneliness, especially within the phenomenon of the modern city, culminates in an exploration of human society. It is fundamentally an analysis of our inability to create connections to others, the impossibility of ever truly being able to perceive others for what they are. Bound to the ever repeating circle of false interpretations of their actions. However, what Auster sees in this interconnected individuality, is a web of influences, various linkages. A chain of actions and reactions. Not only are his characters influenced by every word uttered by others; not only do they imitate and reproduce their actions – their way of making it through the narrative is influencing others too. Such a notion of interconnectedness is permeating all Auster's novel and represents one of the most important facets of his aesthetics – just as the portrait of a modern city that he often strives to capture, there is also a portrait of a society that is almost brutally imperfect and isolationist, that excludes and separates but it is worth exploring nevertheless.

The Collective as the Individual

As in much of Auster's earlier work, the nature of the individual within the frame of the works analyzed in this chapter is never rigid. Rather, the individual is used as a medium through whom events in the narrative run. In this way, the individual is deconstructed,

³⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: The Modern Library New York, 1950) 132.

reduced. Yet, never a mere observer – a stoic point in the tumult of events around them. Much like the others, individual protagonists also fall into disarray. Auster’s work with notions such as this, his portrayal of individuals as essentially without any real volition, but rather as forced by external events and situations to act, are instrumental in order to understand how authenticity works within the scope of his work.

In *Totality and Infinity* Emmanuel Levinas translates the Hegelian term “*bei sich*” into French as “*chez soi*,” its meaning denoting an original form of something that comes into existence. The translator of the English edition, Alphonso Lingis, rephrases this as “being at home with oneself” – a proof that only in the act of “being at home” somewhere, in the act of inhabiting, is the self truly asserted.³⁵ Much of Paul Auster’s *Sunset Park* is concerned with such possibilities of inhabiting. When Miles runs away from his childhood home, escaping from his family, he is finally able to perceive his true self from depersonalized distance. This is repeated again and again, as *Sunset Park* builds occasions where individual characters are forced to re-examine their place within the world. On the more physical level, the way in which one inhabits space, in this instance through squatting, is built into the narrative as a metaphor of a communal refusal of American individuality. “No man is an island” writes John Donne in his famous poem³⁶ – indeed, the occupants of *Sunset Park* are never truly alone, they are always dependent on others. If Auster agrees that language is a collective experience, so are the individuals inhabiting it. Even though their project ends in a disaster, the journey of finding this communal self only strengthens the perception of such sense of belonging as crucial for the development of an authentic notion of the I.

Moreover, both *Sunset Park* and *Invisible* are novels concerned with a dichotomy between a sense of belonging and a certain aspect of modern rootlessness; the experience of being uprooted from one’s own nature, family and the inner authenticity

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979) 33.

³⁶ John Donne, “No Man Is An Island,” *PoemHunter.com*, 3 Jan. 2003, www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/.

one used to possess. In many ways, both novels are searching for such sense – they form a way of reclaiming the self and its authenticity.

Still, rather than showing the end-result, the finished *wholeness* of characters, the novels are concerned more with processes: processes of becoming, of stepping into oneself – its strategies can indeed be likened to the aesthetics of *bildungsroman*. Yet, they are also fundamentally different in their nature. Auster closely follows the disheveled and broken people of his narratives. In this symbolic ‘Hospital of broken things’ (to steal the name of a shop where Bing Nathan works in *Sunset Park*),³⁷ these broken characters, seemingly incomplete and crippled, are essential to the aesthetics and the meaning of both *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*. In the very beginning of *Sunset Park*, Miles is working as a collector of garbage, left-overs from foreclosed houses, the remnants of human misery, testifying to the tragedy deeply embedded in everyday life. Miles takes photos of these broken, decomposing places, seemingly for no other reason but his own pleasure, “each time he walks into a house, he senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in voices of the people who are no longer there, asking him to be looked at one last time.”³⁸ These pictures exist for his own reassurance that beauty can still be created even amidst all consuming suffering.

Fundamentally, *Sunset Park* and *Invisible* are stories of failure. Their quest for unity, happiness and a sense of belonging is always already disturbed and made impossible due to its shifting nature. For Auster’s characters, nothing is ever certain except of their own physical integrity. Authenticity is thus based on the recognition of one’s own impermanent self. It is never a concrete, graspable thing. Rather, the internal conflict within each book is used to portray the process of searching for a feeling of authenticity, a quest towards the true self that often ends in a realization of one’s own futility. Auster’s characters are thus time and time again killed off, broken, further descending into their nihilistic nature.

³⁷ Auster, *Sunset Park*, 72.

³⁸ Auster, *Sunset Park*, 5.

For Miles, this acceptance of one's own futility and incompleteness is revealed when he recognizes that the only way to make it through the madness of modern life is to have "no ambition at all," to hope for nothing and merely to exist from moment to moment:

and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever.³⁹

It is in this *now* where both books end; with a silent, unarticulated question mark over the fate of respective fictional worlds, never quite certain what the truth was and what reality constitutes anymore.

³⁹ Auster, *Sunset Park*, 308.

Chapter II: To Begin Anew – Reinventing Auster in *4 3 2 1*

One can always easily begin a story with descriptions of rooms, places or people. Then: an event formed of a single sentence sets the story in motion – the choice of a path, a textual road through fictional life. To follow this path in a somewhat linear way is to retrace how life, a person's history, operates within the maze of situations and to pin it down on the background of a bigger picture. At least that is how Paul Auster usually structures his novels. Much of them are, in some ways, retracing the most fundamental aspects of the human condition.

In the case of *4 3 2 1*, such a premise of an exploration of what it means to exist adopts a form unlike any other work Auster authored up to this day. Continuous reinventions of the same leitmotif in his previous works all happened to revolve around the idea of a single, crucial event in one's life; transformative, rupturing events taking hold of a person's future, changing and reshaping their world. Christopher Beha notices this when he comments on the structure of a typical novel by Auster: “[He] has always been interested in life's inflection points, those chance events [...] that send a person whose life was running smoothly on one track careening off in some unexpected directions.”⁴⁰ This is an ongoing interest of Auster's – to explore the defining moments in one's life. In his autobiographical works, such as the 2012 memoir *Winter Journal*, the author applies this strategy even on his own life, creating a rhizomatic map of his own life, connected through a series of ever reverberating and transformative events.

4 3 2 1, published in 2017, differs from its predecessors in many ways. For one thing, it spans over almost a thousand pages, a *magnum opus* compared to Auster's usually slim volumes. For another, it introduces different and restructured poetics, relying

⁴⁰ Christopher Beha, “How Paul Auster Delivered His Most Intricate Novel Yet,” *Esquire*, Esquire, 11 Oct. 2017, www.esquire.com/entertainment/books/a51764/paul-auster-4321-review.

on repetition and difference almost as much as on those focal points in our lives when everything changes; the little exclamation marks in a sea of commas and periods.⁴¹

In this chapter, an analysis of *4 3 2 1* and its comparison with Auster's previous two novels, *Invisible* and *Sunset Park*, argues for an understanding of the novel as essentially dealing with notions of authenticity in a way none of the other books in this work are capable of. Auster's ideas of both subjectivity and objectivity intertwine and create a cohesive narrative that feels so painfully human: a boy's life rewritten four times as he grows up, each time with a different set of wounds, different scars, on the background of history. Auster's *4 3 2 1* is a masterpiece of genre-less fiction, his very own form, that he built up to throughout the years.

Four Individual Histories

A new beginning: after a series of short, brisk novels, a thousand pages long epoch. The physicality of *4 3 2 1* evokes a heavy atmosphere, its big corporeal form suggests a lengthy and detailed narrative. However, Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1* is, perhaps deliberately misleading, not only in its visual facets, but in every other aspect too. Published in 2017, this long and subversive masterpiece explores a single human life, that of a boy named Archie Ferguson, and follows him from childhood to adulthood. It maps his history, the struggle of growing up while historical events unfold in the background, shaping to various degrees the structure of Ferguson's life.

While so far, such a description brings nothing new to the corpus of Auster's work, *4 3 2 1* detaches from his usual tropes in what is already suggested in its title: the story of Ferguson fractures into four different versions of the boy, four possibilities. From the very beginning, four versions of Ferguson are established, each formed by different, pivotal events. Events at crossroads, such as deaths of family members or broken limbs.

⁴¹ Marc-Christopher Wagner, "Paul Auster Interview: What Could Have Been," *YouTube, Louisiana Channel*, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVOaO6cvVT8. Auster here describes the need to pay attention to the empty space between and inside sentences. A full stop thus produces, according to him, a different sound, a different mood in its every instance, further helping to create a melody. Writing is thus akin to musical composition.

Auster is concerned with an idea of external influence on an individual's life and the "roads not taken."⁴² He creates potentialities for his protagonist to evolve in different ways, grow into entirely different versions with varying levels of success in life.

Archie Ferguson, born 1947 to a middle-class New Jersey family, a child of the suburbs on his way to grow up in a turbulent era in American history. This is the constant, the mainframe out of which four versions of Archie sprout to become variants, an actual *what-could-have-been* in corporeal form.

Following an introduction on the origin of the boy's family, a history of how they acquired their name (a chance encounter with the notion of linguistic noise and its effect on the understanding of what others say) and how Ferguson's parents met, the reader is introduced to Ferguson himself. It is impossible to understand Auster's actual premise this early on – it looks as if Ferguson fragmented, divided as a cell in four different variants. What is surprising however, is that Auster's logic for this division, is fundamentally a scientific one – it is a multiverse of each decision, each encounter, each injury and every and all events and as such, the possibilities created are infinite.⁴³ Auster thus creates a kind of multi-novel, with its own big bangs and its own heat-deaths. From the same origin, the same matrix of indexical characteristics, the four Fergusons diverge, and as the novel continues, their differences grow too, setting them apart as individuals and authentic entities. This differentiation is seldom gradual and almost never random. Auster, who often describes himself as a socialist,⁴⁴ views life as essentially a social struggle. The four Fergusons thus achieve their diffusion through different statuses that they occupy, as well as different environments, social circles, and hence events in their

⁴² Marc-Christopher Wagner, "Paul Auster Interview: What Could Have Been," *YouTube, Louisiana Channel*, 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVOaO6cvVT8. Auster talks of his interest in the possibilities of a person's life. It supposedly was the driving element behind writing *4 3 2 1*.

⁴³ The idea of a multiverse possesses substantial scientific grounds. Stephen Hawking, for example, mentions it in his *A Brief History of Time*, when he argues that "quantum mechanical effect can give rise to the multiverse", the universe then, always striving to reach the thermal equilibrium, maximum entropy, involuntarily creates patches of high energy fluctuations. Out of these patches, entire universes arise (Hawking 229). See: Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (London: Penguin Random House, 2016).

⁴⁴ See: James M. Hutchisson, *Conversations with Paul Auster* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2013).

lives. For it is mainly society, both its microscopic and macroscopic aspects and its pressures and defining elements that shape characters within Auster's books.

It has often been pointed out that Auster combines elements of both the traditional, continental social and philosophical tradition with the idiosyncratic American naturalism of figures such as Thoreau, Hawthorne, Emerson and Melville. Mark Ford for example contrasts Henry David Thoreau and Auster in his essay 'Inventions of Solitude: Thoreau and Auster.'⁴⁵ Even in *4 3 2 1*, the differentiated Fergusons have something in common, some essence – a mainframe of the most basic elements of their personalities. Each of the four versions is an excellent student (with varying degrees of determination and success), each one good at sports (although the particular sport is changed from baseball to basketball and vice versa), each possesses the same drive towards the world of words, the literary. Positions and roles of various people in the lives of Fergusons change, but they still remain more or less the same set of individuals. What changes: his parents are in one version divorced, in others widowed; he is once poor and then rich; as well as his love for Amy, a girl to whom he is once step-brother, step-cousin or her lover. The extent to which the different versions of Ferguson differ varies too. While one version dies at a very young age (a consequence of a wild storm at a childhood camp) another version merely witnesses another boy die of a sudden brain aneurism. Events like this take their toll on Ferguson's future, shaping the individual instances of the boy into increasingly singular entities.

Thus, the very *locus* of the argument Auster is making in *4 3 2 1* rests in a carefully negotiated balance between Emerson's argument for an inner value of one individual's nature and a socially aware understanding that human beings are shaped by their environments, their personal histories. It is here where the idea of authenticity first starts to show up.

In his 1841 essay 'Self-Reliance,' Ralph Waldo Emerson articulates an argument for some of his recurring themes of self-consistency and non-conformity. In his

⁴⁵ Cf. Mark Ford, "Inventions of Solitude: Thoreau and Auster," *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1999, pp. 201–219.

words, each person should be true to their respective, true self; an emphasis on the individualism that is now permanently imprinted into the American psyche. Emerson establishes a certain “aboriginal self” to which an individual remains faithful. Thus, Emerson argues that one always already possesses the answer, the truth of which they are convinced:

The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instil is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men that is a genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment.⁴⁶

In other words, what is natural for someone must always be perceived as universal, true to the nature of the respective person. Further supporting this, Emerson writes: “Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.”⁴⁷ The individual is thus reassured as being true to themselves. Always and under any circumstance, one must follow one’s true self. Through this, Emerson argues, we are able to achieve true happiness.

With *4 3 2 1* (as well as in his other novels), Auster problematizes this notion into a complex intermingling of such Emersonian “aboriginal self” with a more socially aware understanding of an individual. Ferguson and all his four versions truly have a common essence, a repeating matrix of values and interests, as if imposed on them by a higher entity. Yet, one of Auster’s main premises is the underlying influence of society and its experience on one’s self. The external influences on various internal structures of a person do not negate what is noticed by Emerson; rather, they force us to consider a certain complexity of an authentic being.

In *4 3 2 1*, it is the combination of personal events and the historical background that carries the power of changing a person’s self. Consider a passage where Ferguson

⁴⁶ Emerson, 145.

⁴⁷ Emerson, 146.

experiences a transformative event, when he witnesses the news coverage of president Kennedy's assassination:

The big event that rips through the heart of things and changes life for everyone, the unforgettable moment when something ends and something else begins. Was that what it was, he asked himself, a moment similar to the outbreak of war? No, not quite. War announces the beginning of a new reality, but nothing had begun today, a reality had ended, that was all, something had been subtracted from the world, and now there was a hole, a nothing where there had once been something, as if every tree in the world had vanished, as if the very concept of tree or mountain or moon had been erased from the human mind.⁴⁸

Here, it is not only the political that shifts Ferguson in a certain direction. As it happens, the assassination coincides with his loss of virginity and the start of a relationship with the long desired and loved Amy. Thus, a certain fatality of the transpiring events is doubled – the personal intertwined with the political, united and inseparable from each other. The novel is full of such instances, transformative events such as the loss of a thumb, broken legs, first loves and break-ups, deaths and personal catastrophe always coexist with another historical event, as if the whole world was intertwined in a unity of musical proportions. Or rather, the world corresponds with the individual as if the two were one. A singular harmony of society and the individual.

Anything Can Be Changed

In the background, historical events transpire while four Fergusons struggle through their own personal histories. Life meandering in every unexpected way. In *4 3 2 1*, Auster undertakes a journey examining one of the constants in this world: change. The shifts and rifts in continuity described above form tensions that drive the novel forward – a careful balance suggesting that even with everything around us changing, even with no stone left untouched and all completely re-done, a person can still be true to themselves. A perception of continuity as a form of authenticity.

⁴⁸ Paul Auster, *4 3 2 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017) 179.

Change as a fundamental law in the structure of *4 3 2 1* corresponds with the fourth version of Ferguson, the one who ends up as the last one left, revealing in the end the artificiality of the whole undertaking. It is he who, while studying at college and struggling as a writer encounters John Cage's major work on change and chance in music – his 1961 *Silence*. It is this encounter that has a transformative influence on that particular itineration of Ferguson:

Twice before, a book had turned him inside out and altered who he was, had blasted apart his assumptions about the world and thrust him onto a new ground where everything in the world suddenly looked different – and would remain different for the rest of time, for as long as he himself went on living in time and occupied space in the world.⁴⁹

Shattered apart, disassembled, the fourth Ferguson is forced to reconsider the structure of the world around him. Akin to various historical events that weave into a person's life, Auster portrays art as having a certain transformative power. In *Talking to Strangers*, he talks of the "uselessness of art" arguing that "a book has never prevented a bomb from falling on innocent civilians in the midst of war."⁵⁰ While acknowledging the artifice of all aesthetic forms, Auster adds that "the making of art is what distinguishes us from all other creatures who inhabit this planet, that it is, essentially, what defines us as human beings."⁵¹ Indeed, art in *4 3 2 1* and its various forms (with special emphasis on the literary) bears a potential for change, a shift in one's authenticity towards a more complex understanding of the world. It influences events too, as when the third version of Ferguson experiences life through the prism of films.

Theodor Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory*, defines authenticity amongst other things as "this element by which, even in music, in spite of its non-representationality, the distinction can be made between formalism as an empty game and that for which there is

⁴⁹ Auster, *4 3 2 1*, 736.

⁵⁰ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 383.

⁵¹ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 384.

no other term than the disreputable one of profundity.”⁵² In other words, authenticity of a work of art is something left unsaid, some deep longing and desire, a feeling of subjective sincerity – devoid of all hollow formalism. In a way, Auster in *4 3 2 1* relies on Adorno’s definition of a work of art. As mentioned earlier in this work, Adorno’s definition of the beautiful as fundamentally paradoxical forms an important aspect of Auster’s body of work. Adorno’s influence, however, is also revealed in the way he perceives its very essence, its impact on the audience. According to Adorno:

Artworks would be powerless if they were no more than longing, though there is no valid artwork without longing. That by which they transcend longing, however, is the neediness inscribed as a figure in the historically existing. By retracing this figure, they are not only more than what simply exists but participate in objective truth to the extent that what is in need summons its fulfilment and change. Not for-itself, with regard to consciousness, but in-itself, what it wants the other; the artwork is the language of this wanting, and the artwork's content [Gehalt] is as substantial as this wanting.⁵³

Thus, mere formal perfection (music composed without a single mistake or a novel written in a perfect form) is devoid of such authenticity. Change, fluctuations, a language of both longing, wanting and some transcendental effect resulting from this unutterable other, this meaning that is impossible to pronounce, it exists apart of the translatable experience. All this is present in *4 3 2 1*, it is an underlying argument that both the author and his four versions of a single character possess; a dialogue: should the work of art always be sincere to its premise and what precisely does this sincerity consist of?

No wonder then that John Cage and his metaphysical (for lack of a better word) essays enter so heavily the very structure of *4 3 2 1*. Indeed, its composition is in itself structurally akin to his early piano pieces. *In a Landscape* in particular bears a striking resemblance to what Auster creates. A series of movements, at the beginning unrecognizable from one another, gradually gains independence, a river of noise

⁵² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 307.

⁵³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132.

diverging into several differently curved streams with their own intensity. The rhetorical “what could have been” that is the premise of the book.

Cage himself talks of change, fluctuation and chance in *Silence*. More than anything else, *Silence* is a manifesto of understanding, an acceptance of the entropic forces in our lives and an inclusion of their potential in our view of the human condition: “Things fall apart,” as the famous poem of William Butler Yeats⁵⁴ begins his *The Second Coming*. It is through this notion of an always approaching end where the universal declaration of impermanence pierces through both Cage’s and Auster’s work.

In *Silence*, an overarching question: “Is it true that anything can be changed, seen in any light, and is not destroyed by the action of shadows?”⁵⁵ Indeed, the answer in the context of Auster’s *4 3 2 1* is affirmative. Things change, disassemble, but they form new patterns, reminiscent of the past, the four versions of Ferguson are always counting on this temporality of things. It is the fundamental drive forward, the possibility of change is not seen merely as a threat. More often than that it is an option for creating something better, something more. Thus, as seen repeatedly when different versions of Ferguson undergo some traumatic experience, these are gradually transformed into parts of their being, their unique sense of the self.

In *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben argues that “modern man’s average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience.”⁵⁶ This argument is at odds with the very premise with which both Cage and Auster operate. The mundane is never to be underestimated, for even in the overload of information, the mundane act of reading newspaper can be translated as experience – the shock at historical events can shatter one’s soul too. It is precisely the mundane, the everyday experience, the street sounds that compose the music of a novel.

⁵⁴ William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats,” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 2003, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming.

⁵⁵ John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013) 104.

⁵⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History* (London: Verso, 2007) 15.

The Gods Were Silent

Once a *terra ignota*, a metaphysical starting point in the journey of Archibald Ferguson, *4 3 2 1* becomes increasingly a narrative focusing on its own nature. The path of each Ferguson comes to an end at different points in their lives. Their deaths in order: the second Ferguson gone at an early age, the third run over by a car on his way to his first literary reading, the first version burnt alive in his bed. All except one die of sudden deaths, as if a *deus ex machina*, an outside force, decided to end their lives at moments of peace. The remaining Ferguson, a semi-established writer, the one with a keen appetite for John Cage's writing, is revealed as having made up the other four versions and that the whole of *4 3 2 1* is but an exercise in imagination. A futile attempt to save, reinvent, create anew: "Out of that question Ferguson's next book was born."⁵⁷

What was the question that gave rise to a book that sparked four different Fergusons? Throughout American literary history, the question of one's past, one's ancestry, played a vital role. Christian Salmon in his book on the way narrative influences our thinking and shapes society entitled *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind*, argues that the American narrative in novels such as those by Mark Twain and others is a distinct form of the national myth:

For a long time, America represented much more than a destination on a map and was magnified by Hollywood's images of a "narrative horizon" to which emigrants from all over the world flocked. It was a country where anything was possible. Everyone could write their story on a blank page and start a new life. It was both a nation and a narration.⁵⁸

This self-portrayal of America as a land where it is possible to begin a new life, sparked many stories. It created a symbolic, mythical and deeply problematic blank slate, a *tabula rasa* on which nothing is forbidden and erasure is a constant fact. Years later, with Auster's *4 3 2 1*, the myth of America as the country of starting anew is rethought,

⁵⁷ Auster, *4 3 2 1*, 1065.

⁵⁸ Christian Salmon, *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* (London: Verso, 2017) 5.

repurposed in order to form an allegory – the immigrant origin of all four Fergusons, as well as the origin of their name create an allusion, a multiplication of the myth itself – new starts, different paths in life, yet always already doomed by their very premise.

In many ways, *4 3 2 1* forms a metalanguage of fiction, it is an experiment in writing that tries to define what a novel stands for, an experiment unlike those of the avant-garde (concerned with form more than content) but rather one that explores the very premise of storytelling – it is the culmination of all of the author’s previous books. His two before, *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*, already pointed at the direction in which the next novel will go. And truly, while their scale and content is much more modest and less metafictional, both deal with the same theme of change and authenticity. In *Invisible*, there is the first hint of reinventions, of variations and additions to the story – three narratives diverging from a single, original event told through various interpretative points. In *Sunset Park* – a personal history revisited, a map of one’s life retraced to its breaking points, the ruptures that set its events in motion.

In *4 3 2 1*, Auster combines both narrative strategies to create a work that comments on our time: it is an exploration of notions of both subjectivity and objectivity or the nature of an individual amidst historical events. Raising questions regarding the modes of authenticity that one often takes for granted.

4 3 2 1 forces its reader to reconsider objectivity and what it truly stands for. In a passage where one of the younger versions of Ferguson worries about the reception of his early short story, the one that was produced from the absurd nihilism of witnessing his friend die of aneurysm, his commentary on the nature of such a reception reveals what Auster sets the reader against:

The same manuscript perceived differently by different pairs of eyes, different heart, different brains. It was no longer a question of one person being punched while another person was being kissed, it was the same person being punched and kissed at the same time.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Auster, *4 3 2 1*, 333.

The simultaneity of bad and good reception, the subjective nature of interpretation, multiple readings, multiple eyes watching and understanding in yet more and always increasing ways. There is a certain futility to language and communication. After all, Auster often admits that language is also limited.⁶⁰ Noise bites on everything, it feeds on ambivalence. That which to one person appears beautiful, another finds immoral. It is only after many novels, stories and poems, both read and produced, that the last Ferguson, the writer, reaches the conclusion that the only way to ever achieve objectivity, is to rely completely on the subjective. It is here that the inner authenticity of *4 3 2 1* reveals itself. Only through releasing one's hold on the fleeting nature of "the truth" can one achieve the truest form of expression.

Auster's writing in *4 3 2 1* is thus directly in conversation with Luhmann's ideas of perception of art, as explored in the beginning of this work. These parallels are employed on two different levels. Firstly, within the narrative, various art forms experienced (or created for that matter) by Ferguson contain within them a possibility for a change in perception. They indeed carry a loaded significance – music capable of changing lives, books directing entire life events. It is the poetics of change that has already been described earlier, hidden in the confines of artistic experience. John Cage's *Silence* is formative to Ferguson precisely for its ability to shift ways of perception towards new ways of experiencing thing. This is what Luhmann means when he writes that:

If, however, one looks for another form at the undetermined side and marks this form, then one can return to the beginning and find it changed. It is now on the other side of the other side. Its meaning has become more complex, and perception encounters a contingency that was invisible in the first operation. The result is a re-description.⁶¹

Such re-descriptions of events, categories and characters consist also of the always recalibrating ways of experiencing the world. Categories never stay permanent, characters

⁶⁰ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 4.

⁶¹ Luhmann, 30.

always evolve, they get older and with that they shift, start perceiving things differently or enter different modes of interpretation. It is a concept of identity that stems from the notion of Heraclitean flux, the impermanence of things. For Auster's versions of Ferguson, it is true that all things change and that: "Just as the river where I step is not the same, and is, so I am as I am not."⁶² Identity is always escaping, always its own becoming. Art exists as a framework for reclaiming it. Or rather, it helps in its renewal, reshaping the always retreating boundaries. Auster shows this in a masterful way by having four different versions of a single character. The gradual shift towards differentiation is not forced, but rather, it flows as a river. Consider the bisexual, queer variant of Ferguson – for him identity is neither a set fix of permanent categories, neither a limiting notion. Although he is confused and uncertain, he discovers his fluidity through experience and experimentation. Thus, Auster builds authenticity of identities that always already contains its next version, its newest form.

Luhmann's idea of perception works in its relationship to Auster's piece as a connecting element, in the way particular works communicate with their audience – operating with experimental states of being and the flux of identity that nevertheless remains true to itself. While Auster's writing is hardly experimental in the formal, more contemporary meaning of the term (indeed Auster seems to be resistant to the trendiness of formal deconstructions of the page), there is certainly an element of the experimental in *4 3 2 1* (as well as in his earlier works). These experiments tend to be involved with said notions of identity, its liminal states and the way it can be captured within his novels. In *Paul Auster's Postmodernity* Brendan Martin argues on an example of Auster's arguably most famous piece of writing, the novella *The City of Glass*, which is one of the three pieces consisting *The New York Trilogy*, that the author's constant effort to question what makes us human, what shapes our composite identities, results in an identity that "is fractured, unstable, and easily discarded. Any semblance of selfhood becomes untenable."⁶³ Yet, there are more or less stable instances of selfhood within all of Auster's

⁶² Heraclitus, *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus* (London: Penguin, 2001) 74.

⁶³ Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster's Postmodernities* (New York: Routledge Books, 2007) 104.

novels. What Martin misrepresents is the fundamental fluidity of identity. It is safe to say that identity is a leitmotif for Auster – the way its various instances melt, change and shift within the proverbial river of life. Time and time again, this can be traced through the *telos* of Auster's writing: his earlier work is full of existential despair and uprootedness of characters that are always in search of their past selves, ignoring the selves that are set in the present (hence Martin's misinterpretation of this phenomenon). In Auster's newer writing, selfhood and identity are means of achieving authenticity – or rather a certain idea of objectivity through an endless reaffirmation of the subjective experience.

When encountering Auster's most contemporary novels, it is crucial to realize that their exploration of the limits of human experience helps to articulate the differentiation of experience and works to, in the line of argumentation set forth by Niklas Luhmann, mediate such an experience to its readers – reshaping and expanding their perception of the world. Their fundamental aim is to explore the possible modes of inhabiting life, its unexplored instances and paths towards its more authentic experience.

Chapter III: Multiplying Failure – Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day* and *Inherent Vice*

Each word and every concept have their own history – loaded signifiers, symbols pointing elsewhere in the matrix of human communication. It is increasingly harder to navigate such a complex system, to operate within its various rooms and try to convey meaning, narrate stories that are acutely aware of their own function in the world, the realities behind them. Moreover, there is an increasing awareness of the possibilities for interpreting history, how it is feasible to rethink events in the light of ever renewing sets of information. Years pass by and the frames of thought within different societies shift too. So does their interpretation of history. Questions arise, such as: Where does authenticity and its role lie in this field of no constants; how do themes of identity, both as subjective or objective categories, function within individual narratives? Such notions are always embedded in storytelling; the power of fiction is precisely in its ability to employ and portray the multiplicities at work in human society.

Thomas Pynchon is an unorthodox writer in this regard. Stemming from a long tradition of American fiction, he is more finely tuned to the realities of literary language than many others. In contrast to Auster, who is more concerned with notions of concrete forms of identity and whose works I discuss in the previous chapters, Pynchon is involved with what is fundamentally the very nature of history, both individual and collective, together with the individual’s role within it. It is a kind of historical fiction that re-invents its very predicaments – themes of paranoia and entropic forces that drive our civilization towards a constantly increasing chaos, or at least isolated pools of it, going against the usual organized and linear nature of novels. His *tour de force* novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* or the more accessible *The Crying of Lot 49* deal explicitly with a certain underlying impossibility of communication, the impossibility of coherent language. The novels explore modes of organization that show language stripped bare and revealed useless, incapable of conveying meaning. His later books, however, turned towards a more complex understanding of these systems of communication – with two novels perhaps best

exemplifying Pynchon's interest in a very specific notion of authenticity within individual works of art and its implication on the society from which it arose.

Often with Pynchon's writing, there is an oscillation between the serious and the profane; a balance between truth and fiction. The boundaries of many established binaries are not precisely delineated, or even more so – they are being destroyed by the very act of writing. Fuzzy and blurred, they stand in opposition to established norms. Thus, even themes of sexuality are not confined to traditional distinctions. Rather, as Marie Franco notices in her essay 'Queer Sex, Queer Text' in the study on Pynchon entitled *Thomas Pynchon, Sex and Gender*: "Like Foucault, Pynchon identifies sexuality as a disciplinary regime that contains within it the potential to disrupt binary meaning-making systems."⁶⁴ Indeed, one of Pynchon's signature character types in many of his books are young men transcending the confines of their gender and sexuality. In *Against the Day*, it is Cyprian Latewood, in *Gravity's Rainbow* – Blicero's Gottfried. This refusal to stick to any rigid system of signs connects Pynchon to the line of thought established by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus*.⁶⁵ Deleuze and Guattari perceive as an ideal form of organization the structure of a rhizome – a non-hierarchical organization.⁶⁶ Rhizomes are always opposed to binaries and always create multiplicities. "Speeding anuses, flying vaginas, there is no castration"⁶⁷ – reality for Deleuze and Guattari, is not composed of simplistic binary categories; it is not a set of simple pathways, but rather always more complex, always inexpressible. Much like the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Pynchon's body of work resists any coherent identification, there are simply too many opposing opinions, too many interpretations of his works. Yet, it is clear that the very nature of his writing is playing with the subjective. The works are hard to delineate

⁶⁴ Ali Chetwynd, et al., *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018) 94.

⁶⁵ Indeed, Pynchon is well aware of Deleuze and Guattari's writing, even referencing the two philosophers, when he mentions in his 1990 novel *Vineland* the 'Italian Wedding Fake Book' that their fictional counterparts co-authored.

⁶⁶ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) 34.

⁶⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 32.

precisely for the porousness of their boundaries; their plot often appears as if it was falling apart because it is meant to destruct on its way. It is an exercise in entropy. In my Bachelor thesis entitled *Entropy in Three Early Works of Thomas Pynchon* I explored the formative influence of notions of entropy, or the second law of thermodynamics, on the narrative structure of three early works of Pynchon's. Entropy is often misrepresented as an ever increasing measure of chaos. The current scientific consensus is different, in that it perceives entropy, rather than a straight path towards an ever increasing levels of disorder, as always a matter of fluctuations between states of high and low order.⁶⁸ I argue that in Pynchon's work, as well as in contemporary physics, the concept of entropy is used to describe fluctuations between states of high and low order and that it is employed to undermine any "totalitarian concepts and regimes and [it] works against the ubiquitous They systems and the paranoia they sow in the characters."⁶⁹ Entropy is pervasive in Pynchon's newer writing too – to a degree that it is possible to speak of entropy as Pynchon's leitmotif.⁷⁰

As noticed by Ian Rankin in his article on Pynchon's upcoming novel for *The Guardian*,⁷¹ Pynchon's work often has two modes – one represented by major works such as *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) or *Mason & Dixon* (1997), establishing epic historical narratives; the other is Pynchon's more relaxed venture into the detective genre.⁷² Neither remains clear of the influence of the other. This means that, much as in Auster's work, there is a distinct dichotomy of style and its objective.

⁶⁸ Cf. R. Gasser, and W. Richards, *An Introduction to Statistical Thermodynamics* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1995) Print.

⁶⁹ Marek Torčík, *Entropy in Three Early Works of Thomas Pynchon* (Bachelor thesis, Masaryk University, 2017) 52.

⁷⁰ In the introduction to a collection of early short stories *Slow Learner*, Pynchon himself admits to somewhat abusing the concept. Cf. Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984).

⁷¹ Ian Rankin, 'Ian Rankin on His Love of Thomas Pynchon,' *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 Nov. 2006, www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/18/fiction.ianrankin.

⁷² A discussion on the connections and differences between Pynchon's and Auster's ideas of the detective genre follows in the last chapter of this thesis.

In many ways, *Against the Day* (published 2006) and *Inherent Vice* (2009) exist in different dimensions. With the former spanning over a thousand pages, introducing a narrative universe teeming with different characters and various subplots, *Against the Day* is Pynchon's reimagining of the great historical novel. The latter is a more modest and organized take on the detective genre. Pynchon's use of traditional genres signifies their radical readjustment – neither novel is what it appears to be on the first sight; rather, they contain within them various forms of appropriation strategies. Genre is thus merely a pathway, means to an exploration of the ways in which narrative operates in modern fiction. *Inherent Vice* on the other hand, functions as a *noir* detective story set in the “hippie” 1970s. The tropes of each genre are appropriated by Pynchon to show the underlying mythology of our culture, society and the very identities we inhabit. It is a notion also observed by Miroslav Petříček in his *Filosofie en noir* (Philosophy En Noir). Petříček argues that the detective genre manifests the failure of governments and institutions to provide authentic truths, a safety net of reliable information.⁷³ The two novels can thus be thought as Pynchon's conversation on some of the recurring ideas in his work – with different, often contradictory, strategies of thematic and information overload, radically diverging approaches to structures and characterizations of a novel.

This chapter analyzes notions of authenticity and the idea of truth in both novels, arguing that both history and conspiracy, together with appropriation of different literary genres function as a means of achieving a mode of organization that is both subjective while at the same time its openness towards other forms of meaning, different forms of organization, achieves a certain objectivity. The two strategies employed by Pynchon are then ingeniously combined in his latest novel, *Bleeding Edge*, which is the subject of the subsequent chapter of this thesis.

⁷³ Cf. Miroslav Petříček, *Filosofie en noir* (Prague: Karolinum, 2018) 53.

Constructing Realities

In much of his writing, Thomas Pynchon situates his characters on the backdrop of historical forces, articulating their dehumanizing powers and the way entropy, or the measure of disorder, works against any human effort to organize the world around us. Indeed, entropy seems as the nearest thing approaching a leitmotif within Pynchon's work. His early works are full of references to the Second Law of thermodynamics (consider the eponymous short story 'Entropy'⁷⁴) and theoretical physicists such as James Clerk Maxwell⁷⁵ play a vital role in novels such as *The Crying of Lot 49*. In my previously mentioned thesis *Entropy in Three Early Works of Thomas Pynchon*, I analyzed the influence of the concept of entropy on Pynchon's early writing, arguing that the notion of entropy works as a higher organizing principle in said works.⁷⁶

In his 2006 epic *Against the Day*, Pynchon yet again explores such entropic forces of history. However, compared to his earlier novels such as *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day* is disorganized from the very beginning, its framework and inner mechanisms are those of disorganized and chaotic intertextuality. While *Gravity's Rainbow* in its aspiration to become more and more chaotic, results in a complete "heat-death" of any established structures, *Against the Day* refuses logical modes of organization from its very beginning. Its logic is that of multiplicities, or as Deleuze and Guattari describe such modes of order: "Heavenly nuptials, multiplicities of multiplicities."⁷⁷ The anti-structure of a non-linear chaos. This continues to be noticed by various reviewers. For instance, Michael Wood argues in his review for the *London Review of Books* that "*Against the Day* is lengthy and rambling, and not half as much

⁷⁴ The short story 'Entropy' is included in *Slow Learner: Early Stories*.

⁷⁵ Maxwell and his theoretical concept of the so-called Maxwell's Demon is one of the driving forces behind Pynchon's 1965 *The Crying of Lot 49*. The concept is described as the only possibility of decreasing levels of entropy within a closed system. Cf. Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006).

⁷⁶ Torčik, 15.

⁷⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 35.

happens as you are hoping for. Each new chapter, even halfway through the book, feels like a new bit of exposition.”⁷⁸ In a review for *The Independent*, Tim Martin calls *Against the Day* “a startlingly discontinuous novel.”⁷⁹ Such reviews are abundant, each combining praise with a confusion and with the exception of Wood, an inability to perceive its fundamental aim.

Against the Day revisits much of the literary tropes of the end of the 19th century. Pynchon is appropriating literary styles such as that of Jules Verne and other writers of this era, perhaps in order to create an authentic *mise en scène* for his characters – although that is hardly the sole reason. Rather than Auster’s ideas of the individual as a character and their way of inhabiting the world, Pynchon refuses characterization. His works are subjective through their surroundings, various modes of inhabiting space. *Against the Day* consists a multitude of voices, subplots, characters, although neither gains enough ground to become central. What is central, however, are themes, ideas, notes in a composition: what Pynchon builds is a recreation of the real world, whose authenticities lie in the multitude of different and often confusing voices.

The multiple characters Pynchon explores and narrative lines he begins but seemingly never ends, are tied together by ambitious appropriation of various literary styles. While the precise aim of this can indeed be interpreted in different ways, the fundamental principle is that of heteroglossia. Pynchon creates pools of authenticities within his differentiations – his novel is thus a sequence of conjoined events. Perhaps the clearest two narrative lines (and consequentially the most elaborately described characters) are in the Chums of Chance plot line and in the story of Webb Traverse and his children.

According to Michiko Kakutani’s 2006 *New York Times* review of the book, *Against the Day* is a failure of a novel. Its cartoonish nature, Kakutani argues, culminates in a complete dissolution of the composite whole. However, she notices that:

⁷⁸ Michael Wood, “Michael Wood · Humming along: The Amazing Thomas Pynchon · LRB 4 January 2007,” *London Review of Books*, London Review of Books, 7 Nov. 2019, www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v29/n01/michael-wood/humming-along.

⁷⁹ Tim Martin, “Against the Day, by Thomas Pynchon,” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 22 Sept. 2011, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/against-the-day-by-thomas-pynchon-425938.html.

No doubt the point of all these snapshots is to give the reader a sense of the myriad individuals who either played a part in the lead-up to the war or who will see their lives irrevocably altered by the fallout of that conflict.⁸⁰

Interestingly enough, other reviewers note Pynchon's megalomaniac appropriation of characters and literary styles as a showcase of his abilities.⁸¹ What remains unnoticed by Kakutani and others, is the ingenuity and subversiveness of Pynchon's appropriations. Their logic is that of authentication – Pynchon knows full well the failure of great historical novels; he is not concerned with imitation – rather, like William Carlos Williams and his ideas of literature involved with creations of virtual realities, he focuses on deconstruction of the myth behind it, achieving the paradoxical objectivity or authenticity within the narrative by denying its possibility as anything else than a writerly scam. He often uses phrases where the reader is directed towards fictional secondary reading materials, such as in the following passage, where the crew of the ship *Inconvenience* is forced to intervene in the politics of a certain fictional region:

For detailed account of their subsequent narrow escapes from the increasingly deranged attentions of the Legion of Gnomes, the unconscionable connivings of a certain international mining cartel, the sensual wickedness pervading the royal court [...] readers are referred to *The Chums of Chance in the Bowels of the Earth* – for some reason one of the less appealing of this series, letters having come in from as far away as the Tunbridge Wells, England, expressing displeasure, often quite intense, with my harmless little intraterrestrial scherzo.⁸²

Here, Pynchon is concerned not only with appropriating a style of writing common for the *fin de siècle* era, but also with a certain self-awareness of his texts, their virtuality. By employing this within his narrative and simultaneously making the 'Chums of Chance' storyline the only one explicitly using such tactics, he subverts all textual expectation. It is this strategy that allows him to caricature both historical and modern tendencies. In the

⁸⁰ Michiko Kakutani, "A Pynchonesque Turn by Pynchon," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 20 Nov. 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/11/20/books/a-pynchonesque-turn-by-pynchon.html.

⁸¹ Cf. Michael Wood, who argues that *Against the Day* is an impressive feat, as it shows both "ambitious but low-key, amiable even in its anger" writing that is comparable to Pynchon's most critically acclaimed writing (Wood).

⁸² Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day* (London: Vintage Books, 2006) 132.

introduction *The Ruins of Urban Modernity*, a crucial study of the notions of urbanism in *Against the Day*, Utku Mogultay argues that one of the reason behind such explicit admissions of fictionality is that “*Against the Day* abounds with such narrative miniatures in which historicity and contemporary aesthetic sensibilities bleed into each other.”⁸³ Indeed, miniature and the fractured nature of the narrative within the framework of the novel functions as a means of accessing a certain authenticity of the contemporary – Pynchon not only retraces the history behind one of the greatest tragedies known to mankind, World War I, he also uses the multiple histories of paranoia and interconnectedness to create a portrayal critically involved with the present. It is a certain structural authenticity in which Pynchon is not interested in creating “believable” character, or exploring individuality. Rather, in *Against the Day*, he composes a symphony of multiple voice – it is a novel of communal meaning, full of episodes portraying a more holistic picture, one that is simultaneously set in the past and the present. Mogultay argues that this is Pynchon’s appropriation of the capitalist ability to mingle facts and fiction: “The spectacle of commodity culture thus virtually cast out the dullness and tedium of the mechanistic world of modernity, by infusing material reality with the magic of fantasy and dream.”⁸⁴ Thus, Pynchon imitates and repurposes the very strategies he criticizes. What he creates is a mythology of the origins of modern society, its traumas, and fictions – while simultaneously stripping the veil of authenticity from them.

However, *Against the Day* is more than a single thing – it resists any simplistic interpretation. Consisting of complex systems of its own mythology, the novel establishes fictional spaces, islands of alternative histories and conspiracies, literary *uchronias* or parallel timelines.⁸⁵ Pynchon uses myths and mythologies for his own purposes, similar to how Martin Procházka in his essay from the 2005 collection of texts *Time Refigured: Myths, Foundation texts & Imagined Communities* entitled ‘Imagined Communities

⁸³ Utku Mogultay, *The Ruins of Urban Modernity: Thomas Pynchon’s Against the Day* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) 4.

⁸⁴ Mogultay, 141.

⁸⁵ Uchronia is a term widely used to mean alternate history, timelines which are to a smaller or bigger degree different than the actual. Cf. Helga Schmid, *Uchronia: Designing Time* (Berlin: Birkhauser, 2020).

Revisited,' establishes myths as "discursive practices shaping collective memories and influencing social behavior, particularly identifications with certain values, however mundane, commercial, trite or dangerous they may seem."⁸⁶ Indeed, there is plenty of occasions that establish further development in the plot – Pynchon is a master of foreshadowing, his characters and the events he portrays are in a way his victims, fully controlled by the abstract entity of the author. Myths and hearsay, within the framework of the novel, play an important role in establishing the various *uchronias* where events of the novel transpire. The mystical ideas on light that many characters share, are only one such instance. The difference between Pynchon and other fiction writers concerned with myths and mythology, is that he understands myths as a more archaic version of paranoia, a feeling that in his work connects the most unlikely things, it binds the whole universe of his fiction together. In *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon*, David Seed even argues that paranoia functions as "the organizational possibility" in all of Pynchon's work.⁸⁷

When the forces of paranoia driving the narrative are finally too much to bear, there always comes a moment of a near-total awareness of the self in Pynchon's characters – the second they realize the truth behind individual myths, behind the very fabric of their own narratives. Finally, as in the case of Kit Traverse in *Against the Day*, the interconnectedness of the world comes to the front: "Kit understood for a moment that forms of life were a connected set – critters he was destined never to see existing so that those he did see would be just where they were, when he saw them."⁸⁸ Thus, paranoia is analogous to myths in Pynchon's writing precisely in the functions Procházka talks about – it is the formative and discursive practice that shapes all subsequent action. Furthermore, paranoia is the fundamental authenticity of all of Pynchon's writing. Kit realizes this a few

⁸⁶ Martin Procházka, "Imagined Communities Revisited," *Time Refigured: Myths, Foundation Texts & Imagined Communities*, edited by Martin Procházka, (Prague: Literaria Pragensia, 2005) 106.

⁸⁷ David Seed, *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988) 135.

⁸⁸ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 879.

pages later, when he explains his desire to discover the mythical Shambhala, which is impossible for him, precisely because he is aware of the mythos behind it:

I wish it could be Shambhala that I seek. But I no longer have the right. I have since learned of other cities, out here, secret cities, secular counterparts to the Buddhist hidden lands, more indelibly contaminated by Time, deep in the taiga, only guessed at from indirect evidence [...] ⁸⁹

It is clear to Kit, as well as the other characters, that after being able to see through the fabric of conspiracy, the texture of the world, it is now impossible to ever truly feel as a whole, to ever perceive reality in the same way. Here, the authentic experience of the world relies on one's perception of its fragmentation. Reality and its subjects are authentic, precisely in their awareness of the construed, orchestrated nature of everything around them.

The Hymn of Life

Jacques Rancière in his seminal work *Aisthesis* (2011) examines aesthetic mechanisms of the modernist perception of art. His exploration of the relation of art to politics and society leads him to a conclusion that art can be free only when it is aware of its own conventions, its limits, and when it tries to abolish them. Rancière establishes of the literary work of art that:

[...] fiction has embraced the movement of history described by revolutionary science: the great upheaval of property; the rise of financial moguls, shopkeepers, and sons of property; the artificial paradises of the city of trade and pleasure, misery and revolt, rumbling in the industrial infernos. But it does so only to replace the future promised by social science and collective action with the pure nonsense of life, the obstinate will that wants nothing. ⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 887.

⁹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (London: Verso, 2019) 52.

Thus, for Rancière, works such as Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, celebrate "the hymn of life obstinately pursuing its own nonsense."⁹¹ Out of this sense arises Pynchon's premise in *Against the Day*: the beginning of the industrial age, the rampant rise of capitalism and man's fight against the totalizing orders of this world. For Pynchon, Rancière's premise of the inability of fiction to provide a clear path out of the politics of the individual is simultaneously both true and false. In *Against the Day*, as well as in the rest of his work, Pynchon breaks free of the confines of individuality. In fact, it often appears to be his sole premise: to demolish the ego of his characters, their bodies fall apart, they are disassembled through the flux of the plot. In *Against the Day*, Pynchon is acutely aware of the realities later described by Rancière – that the novel as a form is stuck in mere replication of individualities, concerned with the capitalist nonsense of its own making. Thus, the novel poses a refusal of such forms, it establishes multitudes in the place of individualities, fragmentation instead of unities. The only certainty and the only authenticity lies with the ever increasing forces of chaos, entropy. The capital's relationship to order is articulated through corporations, conglomerates – Pynchon is tracing their origins, questioning the structures that gave them a place in the world. It is an enquiry on the mythos behind our modern civilization. Pynchon's historical metafiction is in fact a commentary on contemporary structures, a retracing of the origins behind much of the problems we face today. It is a form of writing that is entirely political – satirical fiction that is also genuine in its purest form.

What Pynchon is aware of, is something noticed by Guy Debord in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, the 1988 extension of his classic text *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord explains that all objective historical knowledge is now impossible due to, amongst other things, the possibility to manipulate individual reputations.⁹² He writes that "A person's past can be entirely rewritten, radically altered, recreated [...]."⁹³ It is no

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1998) 18.

⁹³ Ibid.

longer responsible to believe what others have to say. “There is no longer even any incontestable bibliographical truth.”⁹⁴

Hence, *Against the Day* (and subsequently also *Inherent Vice*) is concerned with a portrayal of this fragmentation of objective knowledge. Everything even approaching the absolute category of “truth” is ridiculed and “subjectified.” This is visible both in the way narrators make their language filled with uncertainty and inner doubt embedded in individual characters. “According to one version,” recounts one character, Luca, a mythical story he heard.⁹⁵ Elsewhere, the narrator describes a scene inside a huge storm in a way that only increases the uncertainty of what is going on:

They seemed to be in the midst of some great storm in whose low illumination, presently, they could make out, in unremitting sweep across the field of vision, inclined at the same angle as the rain, if rain it was – some material descent, gray and wind-stressed – undoubted human identities, masses of souls, mounted, pillioned, on foot ranging along together by the millions over the landscape accompanied by a comparably unmeasurable herd of horses.⁹⁶

Indeed, such a description makes relative any interpretation – its stress is on the inability of objective “field of vision.” Pynchon’s opposition to any kind of totality was already mentioned. It is represented either in the constraints of literary genres or the world itself. In *Against the Day*, both the narrative and the plot oppose the very frames of reference established by their nature. It is a subversion of any imaginable idea of order.

Christian Salmon in a 2007 book *Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind* explores the history and possibilities of storytelling when used in contemporary news, marketing and politics. Yet what he discovers is also present in some form in Pynchon’s historical fiction:

The synchronization of fiction with reality does away with the temporal and symbolic distance that is characteristic of all representation. Events are shown both as they are lived and as they are represented, acted out, and perceived

⁹⁴ Debord, 20.

⁹⁵ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 640.

⁹⁶ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 454.

without any distance, and in a synchronization that makes it possible to fuse virtuality and reality.⁹⁷

The fusion of virtuality with reality, its acute awareness, is perhaps the greatest and most acute warning Pynchon has for his audience. In a way, through these tactics, the historical becomes politicized – Pynchon never writes mere historical fiction, or even ‘historical metafiction’ a concept established by Linda Hutcheon in her seminal work *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Hutcheon describes her concept as a writing that:

[...] keeps distinct its formal auto-representation and its historical context, and in so doing problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge, because there is no reconciliation, no dialectic here — just unresolved contradiction, as we have just seen in the last chapter.⁹⁸

Thus, such writing is inherently aware of the problems with notions of authenticity in historical fiction; or rather: aware of the very impossibility of such authenticity. Rather, through a synchronization of the real with the fictional, the contemporary and the historical, Pynchon forms narratives that are always already aware of their subjectivity – thus making them more open to an idea of the objective as an admission of the system’s incompleteness, open towards any possible interpretation, any possible reading. When Theodor W. Adorno proclaims in his 1951 *Minima Moralia* that “The coming extinction of art is prefigured in the increasing impossibility of representing historical events”⁹⁹ Pynchon replies in this imaginary conversation of minds that such a representation is and always was fiction. The resulting freedom from the oppressive tendencies of the objective “historical knowledge” is the underlying principle at work in *Against the Day*.

⁹⁷ Salmon, 122.

⁹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2004) 106.

⁹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005) 143.

Paranoia and the Powers that Be

On the other side of Thomas Pynchon's corpus of work, there are the often seemingly more easily accessible books. While shorter in length and more modest in ambition, these works are nonetheless serious and often provide a clearer image of the themes that Pynchon's writing is concerned with through a more comprehensive approach to its topic than his more expansive works. *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon's 2009 novel set in Los Angeles during the 1970s is among such novels. In her *New York Times* review of the novel 'Another Doorway to the Paranoid Pynchon Dimension,' Michiko Kakutani describes what is fundamentally a "big, clunky time machine of a novel."¹⁰⁰ She notices that the novel is a more "successful" undertaking than his previous *Against the Day* and calls it a "lighthearted" success. The whole review, however, fails to notice the new and intriguing possibilities in writing that were opened with Pynchon's more courageous works. *Inherent Vice* is thus only possible as a result of more serious explorations provided in *Against the Day*.

Should one take in regard its length, *Inherent Vice* can indeed be perceived as one of those 'light-hearted' novels that many reviewers fantasize about. On the first sight, it is a conventional detective story: set in 1970, it deals with a majorly straightforward narrative. Doc Sportello, a private eye from Los Angeles, investigates the mysterious disappearance of a real estate mogul named Mickey Wolfmann, the lover of Doc's ex-girlfriend Shasta Fay, discovering on the way a covert organization. Having to deal not only with murderers but also with an antagonistic police officer Christian F. "Bigfoot" Bjornson. Indeed, the story has all the elements of a classic Pynchon story-line – paranoia is abundant and the plot is set on the backdrop of historical events, such as the Watts Riots and Charlie Manson Murders. In the novel, Pynchon explores the limits of understanding, of interpreting events by having his characters experience drug induced states, paranoia and insanity. Thus, Sportello is often seen as incapable of fully grasping exactly what is

¹⁰⁰ Michiko Kakutani, "Another Doorway to the Paranoid Pynchon Dimension," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 3 Aug. 2009, www.nytimes.com/2009/08/04/books/04kaku.html?searchResultPosition=1.

going on around him. There are several instances where he loses consciousness while things unroll around his oblivious self: “He didn’t find out. Maybe it was all the exotic sensory input that caused Doc about then to swoon abruptly and lose an unknown amount of his day.”¹⁰¹ Much like Kakutani noted in her review, this novel is the ultimate guide to concepts of paranoia within Pynchon’s body of work. The novel explores the all-pervasive feelings that arise out of paranoia and the way they influence bodies of various characters. This narrative approach is fundamentally aiming at creating a similar kind of admission of the novel’s own subjectivity as seen at work in *Against the Day*.

Paranoia in Pynchon’s works is indeed a widely discussed topic. Leo Bersani in his essay ‘Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature’ describes the author’s perception of the phenomenon as going against the Freudian negative.¹⁰² Rather, Pynchon understands the phenomenon as enabling one to perceive different forms of order hidden behind the fabric of reality.¹⁰³ Taking examples from Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Bersani argues that Pynchon is in his novels often trying to “attack the binary paranoid structure of We opposed to They.”¹⁰⁴ In other words: by recognizing the power-play of hidden forces of the world, characters often achieve a certain sense of ‘self-less’ freedom.¹⁰⁵

Within the structural integrity of *Inherent Vice*, Doc Sportello follows a path reverse to that of Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. The ‘self-less freedom’ Bersani talks about is fundamentally an ability of the protagonist to get out of the narrative maze and its entropic drive untouched, or even somewhat whole again.

This is portrayed within the course of the novel through various instances where Sportello is confronted with his own fictionality, an inability to perceive the world as it truly is. Bigfoot often mocks him for his lack of sense for reality, the drug induced

¹⁰¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice* (London: Vintage Books, 2009) 22.

¹⁰² Leo Bersani, “Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature”, *Representations* 25 (1989): pp 99-118. 22 July 2020, 99.

¹⁰³ Bersani, 100.

¹⁰⁴ Bersani, 114.

¹⁰⁵ In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the protagonist, Tyrone Slothrop is gradually seen as decomposed, his character within the progressing novel is effectively multiplied and becomes a series of consecutive identities. See: Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, (London: Vintage Classic, 2013).

paranoia. As the novel progresses however, such a suspicion is revealed to be real. Furthermore, while Sportello is unaware of much of what is going on around him, he possesses a certain *naïveté*, a child-like wonder, making him immune to any destructive forces the world may come up with. This is exemplified in his belief that the fictional detective character created by Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, was a real detective:

“He did coke all the time, man, it helped him solve cases.”

“Yeah but he ... was not real?”

“What. Sherlock Holmes was—“

“He’s a made-up character in a bunch of stories, Doc.”

“Wh— Naw. No he’s real. He lives at this real address in London. Well, maybe not anymore, it was years ago, he has to be dead by now.”¹⁰⁶

Another instance where it is possible to hear directly from Doc an admission of his own inability to decode reality, is in a conversation with Bigfoot:

“Another case of apparent resurrection,” Bigfoot shrugged [...]

“Does that mean LAPD officially believes that every return from the dead is some kind of a con?”

“Not always. Could be a mistaken or false ID type of problem.”¹⁰⁷

However, this proves more than just Doc’s inability to distinguish between facts and fiction. Indeed, the boundaries between these two particular binaries are blurred throughout the whole narrative. By deconstructing this distinction, Pynchon achieves a fluidity of meaning, he disturbs both his characters and the narrative. As the story progresses, it becomes increasingly harder to navigate through all the complexities of its own making. What the narrative builds into instead is an absence of absolutes, absence of objectivity – there are no bad or good characters, everybody and everything is open and inviting to interpretation; the all-permeating drug haze helps to blur boundaries between these binary categories too. Paranoia, fear and suspicion – the story with its characters is increasingly permeated by the inability, much like Sportello’s, to decode reality. “What, I

¹⁰⁶ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 96.

¹⁰⁷ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 138.

should only trust good people? man, good people get bought and sold every day,”¹⁰⁸ Doc asks towards the end of the novel – these feelings constitute, unlike elsewhere in Pynchon’s writing a sense of resignation helping Sportello to realize the futility of his own actions. Pynchon thus creates a different version of authenticity, one that relies on the framework of paranoia and multiplying realities.

The Potential for Failure

Inherent Vice is in many ways a radically different novel to *Against the Day*. While the latter toys with the possibilities of a historical novel, *Inherent Vice* explores the confines of the detective genre. Indeed, *Inherent Vice* can be read as a historical novel too (or a piece of historical metafiction for that matter, as are to a certain degree all Pynchon’s novels) the underlying principle and narrative strategies are that of a detective story. Here, more than elsewhere, Pynchon structures his narrative into a coherent form and develops the story in a more or less straightforward manner. Pynchon has his protagonist take various drugs and make horrible decisions in a refusal to play by the rules of his chosen genre. All the usual tropes, such as an overtly intelligent detective with excellent deductive skills, do not apply here. Rather, Doc is a rather mediocre character who is clumsy and has drug problems. The story is thus focused around him in a central way, reminding one of the films of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton. This similarity is indeed on full view in Paul Thomas Anderson’s 2014 adaptation of *Inherent Vice*.

Yet, the two novels diverge from any previous work by Pynchon, especially in their narrative trajectories. In *Inherent Vice* the protagonist Doc Sportello begins a search for meaning, an authenticity at odds with the city and characters in it, only to gradually slip into his own character, to become his more authentic self. It is a classical journey in many ways. Pynchon reshapes his narrative structures, which usually end in the total dissolution of the plot and its characters (consider for a moment *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s

¹⁰⁸ Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, 349.

Slothrop and his dissolution or compare this to the total disarray of Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*) to portray a much more easily definable character, one that gains some logical ground in the otherwise paranoid and schizophrenic world he inhabits. In *Against the Day*, the multiplicities of various story-lines are focused on establishing domains of subjectivity – the novel aspires to strip the thin veil covering reality with fiction, only to discover that the two are one and the same thing. It is noted by Debord in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* that “Secrecy dominates this world, and first and foremost as the secret of domination.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, power, paranoia and authenticity over one’s own character play a crucial role in both novels.

In *Inherent Vice*, the emphasis of the narrative remains focused on a certain structural simplicity: where *Against the Day* explores possibilities for fragmentation, *Inherent Vice* seeks unity. However, in this struggle to achieve a unified narrative, Pynchon seeks to underline the inevitability of his own failure. In her review of *Inherent Vice*, Michiko Kakutani calls the novel “user-friendly” and explores its connection to the beat generation and some of the more formal aspects of contemporary American novel. She notes that unlike *Against the Day*, which she calls “bloated and pretentious,”¹¹⁰ *Inherent Vice* is a “cohesive performance.”¹¹¹ It is interesting to note that this inability to perceive Pynchon’s seriousness set on the backdrop of his often seemingly light-hearted humour goes back to the days of his earlier writing. Gore Vidal in an essay entitled ‘American Plastic: The Matter of Fiction’ berates the writing style of many of the newer generation writers, such as John Barth, Donald Bartheleme and Pynchon himself. What he sees as a problem is a certain circularity in their fiction, an academicism that according to him is unable to penetrate. For Vidal, Pynchon (especially his writing in *Gravity’s Rainbow*) is so disorganized that the “energy expended” in reading his novels is “far

¹⁰⁹ Debord, 60.

¹¹⁰ Kakutani, *Another Doorway to the Paranoid Pynchon Dimension*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

greater than that expended by Pynchon.”¹¹² The problem with such perception however, both Vidal’s and Kakutani’s, is that Pynchon’s objectives are not to make anything easier for his readers. Rather, even in *Inherent Vice*, the emphasis is always on the complexity of human experience, out of which only a partial interpretation can arise. It is an approach that can only be described as authentically poetic: much in the sense of a certain self-awareness of many poets of the inherent inability of poetry to capture the objective nature of things, a consciousness of its own failure. The poet and scholar of poetry Allen R. Grossman calls this inability the “bitter logic of poetry.”¹¹³ In *The Long Schoolroom*, particularly in his essay on the modernist poet Hart Crane, these potentialities distinguish poetry (and all art for that matter) from mere representation. Grossman is referencing to what has been voiced already by William Carlos Williams in *Spring and All*. This apparent self-awareness of the imminent failure of the poet/artist is what ultimately achieves its goals. He realizes that:

The manifest world (the only one there is) is subject to the logic of representation because it comes to mind only as a representation. And representation, our only access to the world, reproduces its hierarchical and exclusionary structures as social formations. The poem is the site on which originality is expressed as the attempt to discover alternative structures of intelligibility that do the work of representation in another way.¹¹⁴

In his notion of a “virtual poem” Grossman evokes a sharp distinction between the “actual poem.” What lies between the two is always a betrayal of its original impulse. Always an unbridgeable gap within the literary “product” and the idea behind it.

Both Pynchon’s works analyzed in this chapter are acutely aware of this. What the author realizes is a certain fundamental inability of any genre, or fiction itself, to achieve the potentiality of its medium. In acknowledging this, he creates authenticities aware of their own fictionality, their own constructed nature – mediated through their

¹¹² Gore Vidal, *The Selected Essays of Gore Vidal* (New York: Vintage, 2009) 98.

¹¹³ Allen R. Grossman, *The Long Schoolroom: Lessons in the Bitter Logic of the Poetic Principle* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000) 11.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

failure and entropic dissipation. Pulled apart by forces of chaos, these narratives are always more similar to potentialities, virtual ideas whose gaps give rise to multiple fictional possibilities within individual readers. A perplexity as a means to subjectivity.

Perhaps this narrative order perceived as its own unfulfilled potential is the key to decoding Pynchon's writing and its fundamental principles. All of his novels up until now are concerned with different modes of orders within society and the way individuals play a role in dismantling them. These entropic forces of history form the only objective reality amidst the background full of subjective noise. Molly Hite in her immensely important work for the understanding of Pynchon's writing entitled *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* explores various ideas of order within his work and "the implications these ideas have for the shape and substance of narratives. Narratives are orders, or orderly arrangements of signs."¹¹⁵ Pynchon is aware of this and according to Hite, he explores the fictional possibilities "embodying various assumptions about the nature and functions of form, structure, system, connection, relation, accretion, accumulation, unity, coherence, completion, close and plot."¹¹⁶ She argues Pynchon's "narratives are in addition about order: about its presence or absence; about order as object of desire, dread, fantasy, or hallucination; about what order means, how it is apprehended, and what it entails."¹¹⁷ *Vis á vis* this cruciality of order and its various forms, Pynchon's writing gains its strongest and most acute meaning. What he understands is that fiction serves a political and existential agenda, it is a statement of its time, not only capturing the historical moments, but also expressing what it means to exist within a certain framework of order, be it historical or philosophical.

In both novels, Pynchon explores the mechanisms that lead to the failure of both narrative and genre. He is fundamentally interested in the various modes such a failure can take on, how it influences our perception of such notions. Exploring how subjectivity and

¹¹⁵ Molly Hite, *Ideas of Order in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1983) 3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Hite, 4.

subsequently authenticity can be realized in an honest manner. These themes, as I argue in the following chapter, are thrown in together and explored in a much more complex way in his most recent novel: the 2013 *Bleeding Edge*.

Chapter IV: Textual Feedback and Authentic Loops – Bleeding Edge and Pynchon’s Fictional Truths

Within the matrix of cultural ideas, there are certain recurring motifs. Long circulating thoughts inevitably mutate into themes and leitmotifs; they are defining of particular eras. Karl Marx’s lyricism from his and Friedrich Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* “All that is solid melts into air”¹¹⁸ is one such recurring phrase; an idea that an increasing profanity, dissipation of knowledge and structures of certainties is taking hold of the moment. From its original form, the phrase reappeared numerous times as essays and exhibition titles. Marshall Berman, for example, used the phrase for his 1982 *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Worth considering, one of primary points of Berman is that the need for constant innovation (i.e. modernization), is in stark contrast to modernity as a cultural phenomenon. It results only in a tendency to abuse destruction for capital gains. Thus, our society possesses a “capacity to exploit crisis and chaos as a springboard for still more development, to feed itself on its own self-destruction.”¹¹⁹

Indeed, such trends are recurring motifs within fictional works. Contemporary society rests on the very promise of a constantly increasing wealth, innovation that is always going forward. As if we lived in constant apathy of the entropic forces of our own making. Thus – the absolute shock and despair when met with a sharp divergence from this linear path of our own progress. How is it that while notions of apocalypse, catastrophes and human tragedy are all constants within our culture, we always seem to live in ignorance of its own inevitability?

Often abundant in the work of Thomas Pynchon are themes and motifs of ends, approaching apocalypses, both personal and private. They are present in both *Against the Day* and *Inherent Vice*, his two works already analyzed in the previous chapter. While the mechanisms at work there may differ, Pynchon is always deeply involved with the discourse of the end, with its various possibilities and ominous presences. David Cowart

¹¹⁸ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Vintage Books, 2018) 27.

¹¹⁹ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988) 120.

in *Thomas Pynchon: The Dark Passages of History* notices that events in Pynchon's novels never simply resolve, they either end in "simple fulfillment of entropic drift (culminating in a triumph of the inanimate, of nothingness)."¹²⁰ Further, Cowart argues that Pynchon's visions of end are anti-climactic versions where "only secular apocalypse looms, an apocalypse of collapse or self-immolation, not biblical fulfillment."¹²¹ Another significant analysis of various notions of apocalypse has been done by Richard Olehla, who in his 2014 study of the American novel post-9/11 explores the various modes and instances of the contemporary novel and its representation of apocalypse. In *Perspektivy konce: Thomas Pynchon a americký román po 11. září* (Perspectives of End: Thomas Pynchon and the American Novel Post-9/11) Olehla argues that while Pynchon's characters often live in a constant sense of endangerment¹²² they are inhabiting subjective realities that are always present, even before being initiated into the conspiracies around them.¹²³ Thus, there is a sense of individuality when it comes to apocalypse. Olehla invokes Jacques Derrida who in his essay 'No Apocalypse, Not Now' speaks of the looming nuclear war. Derrida himself is interested in the etymology of apocalypse: "No truth, no apocalypse. (As you know. Apocalypse means Revelation, of Truth, Unveiling)."¹²⁴ What is perhaps most crucial for an analysis of Pynchon's portrayal of apocalypse and visions of end in Derrida's essay, is his awareness of the cultural portrayal of individual deaths "whose anticipation then is still woven out of fictionality, symbolism, or, if you prefer, literature."¹²⁵ What Pynchon is thus interested in, except for the way we

¹²⁰ David Cowart, *Thomas Pynchon and the Dark Passages of History* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011) 50.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Richard Olehla, *Perspektivy konce: Thomas Pynchon a americký román po 11. září* (Prague: Karolinum, 2014) 48.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Jacques Derrida, et al. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)," *Diacritics*, 14.2, 1984: 24.

¹²⁵ Derrida, 28.

ignore the factuality of death in our lives until confronted with it, through a series of fictionalizations, is the multiplication of endings – their individualization.

Bleeding Edge, published 2013, is Pynchon's most recent novel and simultaneously his long-awaited take on the cultural scarring that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 represent. In contrast to other writers who have dealt with this theme, Pynchon's approach is starkly different, both in terms of genre, its narrative tone and philosophy. *Bleeding Edge*, rather than being involved in either the actuality of the Event or its aftermath, sets 9/11 as a background, yet another conspiracy whose actuality threatens the sanity of our existence. Its presence is foreshadowed and mentioned *a posteriori*, yet never actually witnessed in a way disingenuous to the common New Yorker of that time. It is the backdrop, similar to the coinciding dot-com bubble of 2001, that evolves independently of the narrative.

The novel follows its protagonist, Maxine Tarnow, an ex-certified fraud examiner, who is hired to investigate a potential scam within the company of a certain Gabriel Ice, its CEO. *hashslingrz* is a tech company thriving in the after-math of dot-com bubble.¹²⁶ As the novel progresses, Maxine is enveloped in an ever increasing vortex of events, conspiracies and New York realia. Alien sightings, virtual ventures into the deep web and computer simulations – the whole of *Bleeding Edge* reads much like a nod to the cyber-punk genre and its father William Gibson, whose *Neuromancer* was indeed made possible through Pynchon's writing in the first place.¹²⁷ Maxine follows a similar path to her counterpart in *The Crying of Lot 49* (although there are even more parallels within the two novels) in that she begins as an innocent observer, only to be gradually sucked into the eventuality of ever multiplying information – Pynchon is replicating the feelings and processes that are common on the internet, especially those of hyperlinks, or when one browses for something specific and ends up spending hours reading about completely

¹²⁶ Dotcom Bubble was a speculative bubble that resulted in a brief inflation of U.S. internet tech market. Cf. Adam Hayes, "What Ever Happened to the Dotcom Bubble" *Investopedia*, Investopedia, 8 Apr. 2020, www.investopedia.com/terms/d/dotcom-bubble.asp.

¹²⁷ Gibson is cited in several interviews as having said that "Pynchon is a kind of mythic hero to me." See: Lisa Zeidner, "Netscape," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 19 Jan. 2003, www.nytimes.com/2003/01/19/books/netscape.html.

different and almost always unrelated things – the hyperlinks serving as a distraction. Indeed, this hyper-textuality has always been common in his writing. It is only here, however, that it can be directly appropriated into societal structures – it has never been easier to access information than now in the era of internet. One can truly trace back all the strangely named corporations that Pynchon is using and realize many often were real. In *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon, a life-long New Yorker, creates a fictional representation of the city. The tone of the book, its realia and *topos* are accurate to the very ads that were on TV at the time. The opening scene runs parallel to Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* – in both novels, the protagonists are walking through Big Apple's rush streets experiencing life as it is, with all its shabbiness and vigor.¹²⁸

In this chapter, I analyze the various aspects of *Bleeding Edge* and argue that it combines both poles at work in Pynchon's writing; the detective and the historical, the sacred and the profane. Furthermore, I explore the various ways conspiracy theories and notions of ends function as means towards the potentiality of authenticity. Pynchon is aware of the very inability of fiction to portray reality as an authentic presence; yet at the same time his involvement in the various modes of semantic satiation and narrative entropies simultaneously questions the very possibility of an authentic existence within the phenomenal world. In *Bleeding Edge*, a culmination of themes that have been present in Pynchon's writing since the very beginning form a question mark around the very nature of authenticity, both in the ways it can be captured, portrayed in fiction and its implications on our every day presence in the world.

¹²⁸ Cf. Michael Cunningham, *The Hours* (New York: Picador, 2000). One of the three protagonists in Cunningham's novel is Clarissa Vaughn, seen in the beginning of her section of the book walking through New York streets. The overall tone of the scene is much the same as in *Bleeding Edge*, with even a few parallel locations.

The End that did not Happen

As noted by some of the reviewers,¹²⁹ the novel occupies dimensions within the two poles Pynchon's novels inhabit, that is: historical metafiction and detective genres; *Bleeding Edge* also navigates the increasingly complicated web of interconnectedness. Certainly, such a feat is easier for Pynchon than any other writer; after all, he has been involved in experimenting with intertextuality and narrative noise longer than most writers. There is however a difference in both approach and aesthetics towards such semantic satiation in *Bleeding Edge*. While several reviewers took notice that *Bleeding Edge* is the second subsequent novel by Pynchon that bears the same "zippier"¹³⁰ tone such as *Inherent Vice* has, the novel takes its most interesting aspects from both *Inherent Vice* and *Against the Day*. Much like Auster's *4 3 2 1*, the novel melts together in a genre-bending composite (yet still visibly Pynchon's own) the tropes of a detective story together with a background of one of the most recent and painful collective memories in the recent American history. In contrast to *Against the Day*, Pynchon again opts for a more focused, central narrative, revolving around Maxine and her character, unlike other characters within the scope of his work. Yet, Maxine is enveloped simultaneously in a detective storyline and also operates on the background of a historical event – for no matter what our perception of time is, these are all immensely important historical events. Yet, Pynchon is aware of their fictionality, their mythological nature. Ever the conspiracy theorist, he problematises various notions of recent events. With the combination of the detective and the historical elements, Pynchon explores the very borders established by the points where the contemporary slips into historical. The lines between the historical and the fictional.

The strategies for setting up meeting points between these phenomena are yet again paranoia and information overload. Pynchon, the physicist of contemporary

¹²⁹ This has been noticed by reviewers, most notably by the novelist Jonathan Lethem in an article for New York Times Pynchonopolis. See: Jonathan Lethem, "Pynchonopolis," *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 12 Sept. 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/books/review/bleeding-edge-by-thomas-pynchon.html.

¹³⁰ Thomas Jones, "'Bleeding Edge' by Thomas Pynchon," *Financial Times*, Financial Times, 13 Sept. 2013, www.ft.com/content/dca001ac-16f2-11e3-9ec2-00144feabdc0.

American prose, connects different data points, different actualities into a complex web of interconnectedness. Indeed, many others have noticed this before. Erik Roraback in *The Philosophical Baroque: On Autopoietic Modernities* compares points of contact in *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Ulysses*. He argues that often in Pynchon's writing "one would still be hard put to pin these texts into any particular canonical narrative form or descriptive category."¹³¹ This is true not only for the parallel between the two writers, but also within the framework of Pynchon's novels. Thus, various point of reference inside the novel function in a way combining different genres – the detective is a means to the historical paranoia, the historical a path towards recreating crime scenes, towards a fictionalization of experience. He builds points of circumstance out of which characters assert their authenticities and make their way through the narrative mazes ahead of them. The novel is then translated into a series of binary codes – its virtuality is encoded within all the enmeshed different genres. Indeed, Pynchon's writing has always been about simulations, the aforementioned multiplicity of virtuality. In *Bleeding Edge*, the increasing implementation of technology within society is one of the factors behind our inability to perceive history as it unfolds, but rather fictionalize these experiences in time. Nevertheless, in combining both the detective and the historical, Pynchon is left with an anti-historicity. An awareness of the fundamental inability to decode information into coherent narratives. All that is solid suddenly melts into air.

In *Ideas of Order*, Hite already notices the tendency in Pynchon's narrative to appear to

exist for the purpose of negating the human world, pitting the multiple resonances that his language sets up against an overriding sense of an ending that promises to resolve diversity into a unitary Word, which articulates the absolute and final truth. The Word is withheld.¹³²

Much like in his earlier works, *Bleeding Edge* is an example of such overriding anticipation of an end. Yet, as Hite argues, such anticipation never results in climax. While

¹³¹ Erik S. Roraback, *The Philosophical Baroque: On Autopoietic Modernities* (Brill: Leiden, 2017) 127.

¹³² Hite, 89.

it can indeed be argued that Pynchon's work is almost always anti-climactic, it is true for *Bleeding Edge* more than other works. It is here where the much anticipated apocalypse that is usually hinted at or merely avoided, happens midway through the novel without much of the dramatization. The shockwaves of 9/11 are felt only in its minor, cascading tragedies, the various fissures and inconveniences – the strange and unreal feelings of inauthenticity that suddenly embalmed all of existence. Pynchon's objective is to deconstruct what truly happened and peak behind it, in order to analyze the mythos of this particular end.

This is revealed some time after the towers fall. Pynchon explores possibilities of the internet to broadcast conspiracy doubts. Thus, Maxine regularly reads a blog of one of the minor characters stating that: “ ‘After the 11 September attack,’ March editorializes one morning, ‘amid all that chaos and confusion, a hole quietly opened up in American history, a vacuum of accountability, into which assets human and financial begin to vanish.’ ”¹³³ Thus, the tragedy of 9/11 is put in question, morphed slowly into a conspiracy. The end is thus always the beginning for various forms of interpretation, questions abound around themes and motifs surrounding the attack. “But this new enemy, unnamable, locatable on no organization chart or budget line – who knows, maybe even the CIA's scared of them.”¹³⁴

Such an overshadowing presence of some abstract entity that directs every movement of the world towards greater disarray, a presence of some secretive organizing force shaping our reality that is evasive yet painfully felt throughout *Bleeding Edge*. Such a presence is also involved in the multiplication of ends as mere occurrences – points of reference that are used to manipulate our behavior. Christian Salmon's seminal work on the modern ways in which stories are used to influence people into various modes of obeying was already mentioned here. In *Storytelling*, Salmon also explores the difference between two modes of using such stories: namely narratives and storytelling. He writes that:

¹³³ Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (New York: Penguin, 2013) 316.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The great narratives that punctuate human history [...] told of universal myths and transmitted the lesson learned by past generations. [...] Storytelling goes the opposite direction: it tacks artificial narratives on to reality, blocks exchanges, and saturates symbolic space with its series and stories. It does not talk about past experience. It shapes behavior and channels flows of emotion.¹³⁵

Thus, storytelling is a fractured, localized narration; its function is that of influencing our perception of reality. Salmon lists examples of corporations and businesses using storytelling to influence consumer behavior, as well as the employment of storytelling in modern politics. Its all-pervasiveness makes use also of various modes of ending – a hybrid threat that can be morphed into serious issues moving society towards different point of need to those in power. In *Bleeding Edge*, these threats are seen for what they truly are – constructions, multiplied points of divergence where reality is nothing more but a reference to a world that is increasingly seen through optics of interpretations, subjectivities. This has been noted also by Frank Kermode in his *The Sense of an Ending*. Kermode states that the End is “happening at every moment when the modern concept of crisis was born [...]”¹³⁶ What both Kermode and Salmon express is the multiplication of the mythos of apocalypse into fragmented series of end-threats, possibilities that exploit human beings for the gains of those in power.

Michiko Kakutani writes in the review of *Bleeding Edge* for *New York Times* that Pynchon’s apocalyptic “sense of nightmarish modern world where we are left to deal with the ‘slow escalation of our helplessness and terror’ ”¹³⁷ In a different review, Thomas Jones writes for the *Financial Times* about the mingling of the detective and the historical. Like Kakutani, Jones notices that:

Pynchon’s plots are less like the kind you find in a police procedural, more like the kind imagined by paranoid conspiracy theorists; more about webs of

¹³⁵ Salmon, 10.

¹³⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 25.

¹³⁷ Michiko Kakutani, “Calamity Tailor-Made for Internet Conspiracy Theories,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 10 Sept. 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/books/bleeding-edge-a-9-11-novel-by-thomas-pynchon.html?searchResultPosition=2.

connections, seeing patterns in the chaos, than going from A to B to C until the mystery is solved.¹³⁸

Bleeding Edge portrays this very interconnectedness as a net of multiplicities – each conveying its own potential for a different kind of experience. Kakutani sees this fractured feature as a failure, an inability to capture life as a balanced and harmonious coherence. She perceives a failure that results in the incomprehensible reality that his characters feel as a certain randomness that rules over them.¹³⁹ Yet, to say that means to fundamentally misunderstand Pynchon and his work – such a fractured aesthetics is precisely what is needed to set forth an image of the contemporary. In *Bleeding Edge*, the awareness of virtuality of experience is constantly on the mind of the narrator. Within the frame of the novel, it is acknowledged that “There are time gaps when nothing much is happening.”¹⁴⁰ Pynchon aspires to construct a certain honesty of incompleteness, in admitting that entropy and information noise are leading factors at work in contemporary experience.

When it comes to information theory, all of Pynchon’s work stems from the ideas of Norbert Wiener, the so-called father of modern cybernetics. In an introduction to *Slow Learner*, the collection of his early stories, Pynchon acknowledges Wiener’s influence, citing *The Human Use of Human Beings* as a seminal work for his understanding of information theory.¹⁴¹ There, Wiener explores what are some of the underlying issues at work in all of Pynchon’s novels. Wiener employs ideas of order and a vision of the possibility of a society that overcomes the great tendency towards an ever increasing entropy¹⁴² and often talks of the inevitability of automation as only one of the

¹³⁸ Jones.

¹³⁹ Kakutani, *Calamity Tailor-Made for Internet Conspiracy Theories*.

¹⁴⁰ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 212.

¹⁴¹ In the introduction to *Slow Learner*, Pynchon states that “I happened to read Norbert Wiener’s *The Human Use of Human Beings* (a rewrite for the interested layman of his more technical *Cybernetics*) [...] and the ‘theme’ of the story [*Entropy*] is mostly derivative of what they [Wiener and Henry Adams] had to say.” Cf. Thomas Pynchon, *Slow Learner: Early Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984) 13.

¹⁴² Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: De Capo Press, 1988) 95.

elements forcing contemporary society towards a need for radical change.¹⁴³ Furthermore, Wiener expresses a certain understanding of the world's cruelty when he writes:

The sense of tragedy is that the world is not a pleasant little nest made for our protection, but a vast and largely hostile environment, in which we can achieve great things only by defying the god; and that this defiance inevitably brings its own punishment. It is a dangerous world, in which there is no security, save the somewhat negative one of humility and restrained ambitions.¹⁴⁴

Thus, both Wiener and Pynchon perceive the world as a certain threat to existence, the aforementioned possibilities of the End. In this way, the individual's existence is in defiance of the very laws of nature. Pynchon is aware of this and it is possible to trace Wiener's influence in the way Pynchon's characters, always starting with great ambition, gradually set them aside in exchange for sanity, a sense of comfort. Every time some of them continue in this defiance, they lose whatever authenticity they have left. Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow* is the obvious example – his total annihilation was caused not only by the historical currents of World War II, but also due to the totalitarian nature of all of human civilization. He is dissolved, yet achieves a sort of ascension, becomes an angel-like figure. In *Bleeding Edge*, Maxine does not have these luxuries in deciding whether to choose illumination or continue on with her life as if nothing truly happened. Her responsibilities towards others are what uproots her from the conspiracy of histories until: “ ‘It's all right, Mom. We're good.’ ”¹⁴⁵ Pynchon's ingeniousness here rests on the premise of Maxine's actuality in the world. She is after all a mother of two children and has only now begun the experience the world in a greater, more independent depth. This experience of life that is both depending and being depended upon, as Maxine's is, allows Pynchon to explore what technology does to human mind. Fundamentally, what *Bleeding Edge* results in, is a sort of anti-climax, neither an end nor a beginning. It is, much like in *Gravity's Rainbow* – a dash. And with this dash, Pynchon implies different, always renewing threats

¹⁴³ Wiener, 161.

¹⁴⁴ Wiener, 184.

¹⁴⁵ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 378.

of endings, dangers looming over life. Kermode feels it too when he states: “The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near.”¹⁴⁶ Thus, Maxine’s final words in *Bleeding Edge* are both a reaffirmation of the maternal belief in her off-springs, as well as an anxious realization of the impossibility of safety in an increasingly interconnected and complicated world. “ ‘I know you are, Zig, that’s the trouble.’ ”¹⁴⁷ she replies to her two sons in a confirmation of the unsaid dangers when they are about to depart to school on their own for the first time.

Looking for the Truth Beyond

Having destroyed the definitive ending, Pynchon’s work is thus always on the lookout for new instances of the total apocalypse. Already since his first novel *V.*, paranoia has been a constant threat within the *telos* of his work. Leo Bersani in the essay ‘Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature’ argues that for the author “paranoia is a necessary and desired structure of thought.”¹⁴⁸ With *Bleeding Edge* being simultaneously his most recent work and set during the time-scale of the most recent historical events, the novel explores much of the conspiracies that still resonate through our collective consciousness. With the advent of social media, this has since become a phenomenon unlike any other. Our fascination with myths, conspiracies and fabrications is, according to some, the result of information overload that is produced every day, of the deconstructed hierarchy of knowledge. In *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism*, Ursula K. Heise notices that paranoia in Pynchon’s works takes a role akin to a divine figure, it “allows for no accident.”¹⁴⁹ It is more than interesting that one of the best-known speechwriters for a

¹⁴⁶ Kermode, 8.

¹⁴⁷ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 378.

¹⁴⁸ Bersani, 103.

¹⁴⁹ Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative and Postmodernism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 206.

number of presidents, the Pulitzer Prize winning author William Safire, regarded conspiracy theories as a force to be reckoned with. He jokingly writes of the term in an article for the 1995 edition of *New York Times*: “That’s what you do when you call any expressed suspicion, especially a complicated one, a conspiracy theory: you dismiss it as nonsense, the product of an unduly suspicious or even paranoid mind.”¹⁵⁰ Safire is the author of Nixon’s infamous moon-landing speech ‘In Event of Moon Disaster,’ a relic from an era in history that gave rise to many conspiracy theories in and of itself. His disregard for those criticizing conspiracy theories is a point of convergence with Pynchon. Another interesting meeting point opens when we consider Linda Hutcheon’s *The Poetics of Postmodernity*. Hutcheon is aware of the very same notion that *Bleeding Edge* captures – the struggle to demarginalize various modes of interpretation. She argues for the “attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical,”¹⁵¹ and questions whether “truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction.”¹⁵² Pynchon’s approach is similar. His is not an endorsement of the various modes of conspiracies, rather, it is an opening for a point of divergence through which different interpretations can arise.

It comes as no surprise then, that *Bleeding Edge* takes place in the 2001, a year after yet another series of *fin de siècle* fears, it is a capsule in between one apocalypse that did not happen and a future, anticipated one. With fears revolving around the Y2K phenomenon gone¹⁵³ it is important to note that Pynchon sets events of the novel within the 2000s as a vision of the in-between, much of the novel revolves around the birth of new conspiracy theories. While old conspiracies echo throughout the text, such as the

¹⁵⁰ William Safire, “On Language: Conspiracy Theory,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 Nov. 1995, www.nytimes.com/1995/11/05/magazine/on-language-conspiracy-theory.html.

¹⁵¹ Hutcheon, 108.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Y2K refers to a number of fears before the advent of the 21st Century. Many have falsely believed that the binary computer systems will fall when forced to recalibrate from 1999 to 2000. The fears have proven largely false, as Lynn Ermann explores in a New York Times article from early January, 2000. Cf. Lynn Ermann, “For Doomsday Hoarders, What Now,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 Jan. 2000, archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/home/010600y2k-hoard.html.

aforementioned Y2K¹⁵⁴ and UFOs,¹⁵⁵ newer versions are traced from their very birth. Conspiracies surrounding the fall of the World Trade Center are after all one of the most spoken about even now. In *Bleeding Edge*, Maxine notices weird occurrences way before the September 11 attacks, there are people seen trying to shoot down an airplane, for example: “ ‘Somebody nearly shoots down an airplane, changes their mind at the last minute.’ [...] ‘Somebody planning to shoot down an airplane.’ ”¹⁵⁶

What is even more concerning is the increasing recurrence of various omens – signs that clearly something must be off, something is about to take place somewhere, eventually. It is the potentiality of an end that has been analyzed here before – a growing sense of dread overcomes the narrative. Maxine sees these signs first in the form of financial data. The process is similar to reading in a book, one that she opens and “any minute the pages of this book, maybe allegorically The Law, are about to be set on fire by this burning torch, possibly the Light of Truth?”¹⁵⁷ Indeed the realization of the decoded signs soon dawns upon her. They are “Secret anarchist code messages!”¹⁵⁸ What goes on is a process of identification – both on the reader and the character levels. Roraback puts forth an important point when he argues that Pynchon’s paranoias stem from a certain “enlightenment rationality” that works to strip down the illusions of capitalist society. He argues on the case of *Gravity’s Rainbow* that “such paranoia [...] is based on, and reproduces, identity thinking (identity as self).”¹⁵⁹ In *Bleeding Edge*, this self-identification with the paranoid opens a path towards interpretation – its subjectivities create pathways to entire worlds of alternative meanings. The whole “post-truth” phenomenon however, is not what Pynchon is concerned with. Rather, by accepting

¹⁵⁴ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 227.

¹⁵⁵ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 156.

¹⁵⁶ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 214.

¹⁵⁷ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 22.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Roraback, 205.

possibilities of different modes of organization of truth, he allows for a certain ‘back-door’ objectivity to creep in. He explores temporal stages of interpretation that are defined in *Bleeding Edge* as “the paranoia of middle age, the dementia of late life . . . all working up to death, which at last turns out to be ‘sanity.’”¹⁶⁰

When the actual event of the attacks transpires, it is yet again an anti-climax. The Towers fall, and there is a brief sense of heroic urgency in all the surrounding characters except in Maxine. It is from this sense of tragedy that ends in an unfulfilled dash, out of which the conspiracies start to emerge. Maxine notices that:

The atrocity site, which one would have expected to become sacred or at least inspire a little respect, swiftly becomes occasion instead for open-ended sagas of wheeling and dealing, bickering and badmouthing over its future as real estate, all dutifully celebrated as “news” in the Newspaper of Record.¹⁶¹

Thus, the tragedy is disturbed by a sense of inauthenticity. *Something is off*, hence interpretations, hearsay, arises. What Pynchon understands, is the infinite potential of conspiracy theories, the variability and openness towards different of representation and narrativity. His proclivity for paranoia is that of a storyteller, one interested in aspects of modern ‘collective’ consciousness – the cultural upheavals of our time. In this, Pynchon reclaims what Salmon in *Storytelling* identifies as the way for American literature to represent “much more than a destination on a map.” Much like many of the great American writers, Pynchon too opens up new versions of what Salmon calls “narrative horizons.”¹⁶² The very choice of his material, the *post-dot-com* bubble and the 9/11 terrorist attack are indicative of a deeper interest in a certain idea of authenticity – Pynchon in *Bleeding Edge* (as well as in his earlier works) is fundamentally concerned with the mythos of authenticity and truth and its wider implications on the American society. In *Bleeding Edge*, he is ever more interested in both deconstructing and delineating the fabric, the thin veil of the texture of reality behind modern-day capitalism,

¹⁶⁰ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 9.

¹⁶¹ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 261.

¹⁶² Salmon, 5.

how it sets apart individuals to only increase their precarious solitude. Molly Hite notices this when she argues that Pynchon's books are essentially about "communication with others, and communicating the fact of their solitude."¹⁶³

The Virtual is the Real

In *Storytelling*, Christian Salmon investigates not only the marketing and advertisement industries for their abuse of stories and narratives, even more so, he pays attention in his analysis to the use of virtual reality for purposes of storytelling within the military sector. Salmon quotes test subjects of a virtual reality simulation entitled *JFETS* and describes a sense of confusion that the subject experienced after the simulation ends:

"I notice an unexpected after effect of spending an hour in the holodeck. Glancing out a window, my brain no longer trusts that I am seeing the real world. The freeway traffic and trace houses of Marina del Rey seem virtual."¹⁶⁴

What the subject describes is a distortion in his perception of reality – a sense of invasive subjectivity that attacks his capability to differentiate between the authentic and the simulated. Such technologies have until recently, been exiled into the realms of science fiction, with perhaps the most prominent example being that of William Gibson's cyberspace Matrix from *Neuromancer*.¹⁶⁵

In *Bleeding Edge*, there are several different software capable of invading experience and meddling with human ability to interpret the world around them. Their *raison d'être* is often different than what they are used for. DeepArcher, an ominous program that the main antagonist of the novel seeks to acquire, is capable of deleting or re-shaping entire online presences, both personal and collective histories, even the traces of

¹⁶³ Hite, 91.

¹⁶⁴ Salmon, 104.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. William Gibson. *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1986). In *Neuromancer*, the protagonist Case connects to a cyber-space system called the Matrix and which is used for hacking and financial operations. The connection is made possible through neural links – thus a technology that is invasive of the human body.

its very presence. In an era where most of financial and business operations are conducted online, the implications of possessing such power are unimaginable.

As such DeepArcher, whose function is also that of simulated reality, together with the virtual city of Zigotisopolis, embody the liminal states of existence connected to the notion of being “online.” They are always on the move, reclaiming whatever possibilities of the real world remain left “still safe from the spiders and bots that one day too soon will be coming for it, to claim-jump it in the name of the indexed world.”¹⁶⁶ This notion of simulation however, of a construed and artificial world, dates back to Pynchon’s early years, especially to his 1965 novella *The Crying of Lot 49*. There, the protagonist Oedipa Maas experiences and describes a painting by Remedios Varo entitled *Bordando El Manto Terrestre*,¹⁶⁷ depicting women in a mysterious tower, embroidering “a kind of tapestry which spilled out the slit windows and into a void, seeking hopelessly to fill the void.”¹⁶⁸ The tapestry in this painting represents the world, construed by the many skilled hands of its creators, yet still artificial and virtual. Similarly, in *Bleeding Edge*, the conception of artificiality is felt through the encounter with systems that strip the thin veil of authenticity off of the character’s eyes. The word text itself is a nod towards artificiality, it originated from the latin *texere*, to weave.¹⁶⁹ Walter J. Ong in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* explores the implications of the transition from a society based on spoken language to a society whose frames of thinking are shaped by the structures of the written, woven word. Ong notices how the technology of writing influenced a transition in our perception of the world, arguing that “sparsely linear or analytic thought and speech are artificial creations, structured by the technology of writing.”¹⁷⁰ It is a surprising fact that modern society often fails to notice how newer

¹⁶⁶ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 377.

¹⁶⁷ *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle*

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006) 11.

¹⁶⁹ “Text,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, Accessed 13 June. 2020. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/text.

¹⁷⁰ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Routledge, 2002) 39.

forms of technology are becoming increasingly interwoven into the fabric of our everyday reality, even shaping it. For Pynchon it is one of the focal points in *Bleeding Edge*, the novel explores transformative experiences shaped by the virtual. Maxine herself begins to notice:

this strange thing has begun to happen. Increasingly she's finding it harder to tell "real" NYC from translations like Zigotisopolis . . . as if she keeps getting caught in a vortex taking her farther each time into the virtual world. Certainly unforeseen in the original business plan, there arises now a possibility that DeepArcher is about to overflow out into the perilous gulf between screen and face. Out of the ashes and oxidation of this postmagical winter.¹⁷¹

DeepArcher is thus an instrument for reinforcing the experience of virtual reality translating into the everyday – it builds authenticities in forms of pools of experience that mirror reality, reference back to it. It is a dream-like logic that Pynchon builds in *Bleeding Edge*, one that stresses the urgency of acknowledging the influence of technology before it claims us too. Paranoia then is a defence mechanism, much like in Gibson's *Neuromancer*, *Bleeding Edge* does not see cyber-space as an inevitably good thing.

The factuality of the early state of internet technology only helps to broadcast its omnipotence, allowing the narrator to show how easy it is to sway human mind to believe in something. Thus, virtuality is yet another instance of the capability of human brain for conspiracy, for claiming multiple interpretation. Theodor W. Adorno in *Minima Moralia* argues that: "[Quality] is decided by the depth at which the work incorporates the alternatives within itself, and so masters them."¹⁷² Indeed, cyber-space allows for infinite alternatives, within it are encoded possibilities that allow dreams to be experienced as reality. In *Bleeding Edge*, gaming is an important part of this. Maxine's two sons are seen several times testing this or that new game. They are:

[...] intensely attending to a screen on which is unfolding a first-person shooter, with a generous range of weaponry in a cityscape that looks a lot like New

¹⁷¹ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 341.

¹⁷² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 142.

York. “You guys? What have I been saying about violence?” “We disabled the splatter options, Mom. It’s all good, watch.” Tapping some keys.¹⁷³

Thus, within the code of the game, it is allowed to influence and modify its very reality – it is a dream that allows its subject to make decisions regarding its own form. However, its addictive influence is admitted by Maxine when she tries it and agrees it is “ ‘Actually, sort of fun.’ ”¹⁷⁴ In *Bleeding Edge*, the virtual feelings in gaming are yet another possibility for technology to influence both human behavior and their perception of reality. It is a subversive way of reshaping subjectivities into something different. Here, *Bleeding Edge* questions Adorno’s belief of “the word that is intended to impress on the audience the character of the speaker or even the meaning of the whole, sounds, compared to the literal fidelity of its reproduction, ‘unnatural.’ ”¹⁷⁵ The reality of simulation is that it grows increasingly ever more realistic, adapting to referentiality in a way that reinforces its dominance over the real.

In this dream world that one enters on the internet – with limitless possibilities and endless limitations – one cannot do completely what one wishes; yet, it is always a promise of something more, a certain desire, an unfulfilled anticipation of things to come. Thus, a convergence point between all three aspects: notions of apocalypse, paranoia and the virtual joined together in an anticipation – much like in Grossman’s “bitter logic of the poetic principle,” reality in *Bleeding Edge* is always an attempt to construct an authentic system, which inherently fails. It is an attempt to make amends with what Grossman in *The Long Schoolroom* calls “the implicit promise” that is always renegotiating violence within a discourse, the way external influence threatens to colonize bodies, and help in “renegotiation of the relation between the individual and the collective.”¹⁷⁶ Pynchon is aware of this, he has been from the very first novels he produced. In *Bleeding Edge*, this “implicit promise” is yet again a certain textuality, a possibility of creation that remains

¹⁷³ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 32.

¹⁷⁴ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 34.

¹⁷⁵ Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 142.

¹⁷⁶ Grossman, 12.

polluted by violently competing forces of technicity and idiocy: “The Internet has erupted into a Mardi Gras for paranoids and trolls, a pandemonium of commentary there may not be time in the projected age of the universe to read all the way through, even with deletions for violating protocol.”¹⁷⁷ *Bleeding Edge* is reviewing such notion and sets its protagonist as a sort of an antidote to this perceived polarity. If nothing else, Pynchon’s writing is at his most acute and critical when he presents a certain awareness of the contemporary. In *Bleeding Edge* everything happens with a mixture of profound seriousness and a humorous farce. Nothing truly matters anymore, nothing is serious enough to be left unmoved by the forces of irony, not even the great tragedy of 9/11. Indeed, one can see this on the internet even now: There are comments under any possible article or post that make light of various topics: deaths, tragedies, human rights infringements. *Bleeding Edge* is far from a single thing and its narrative folds and twists ask for an analysis of its own. However, it is here too that Pynchon’s writing grows increasingly tired and depressed, disillusioned with society as such, the possibilities of human transcendence are destroyed by forces of capital and stupidity. Thus, Maxine the protagonist chooses the only logical conclusion – to enclose herself in a safe-house of her own making, shield herself and her family against the entropic forces constantly at work to tear apart any ideas of order there is.

Thus, what *Bleeding Edge* and to a greater degree all texts analyzed in this work, explore, are states of being that try to make sense of the role of an individual within the framework of contemporary world. While Pynchon’s historical metafiction may appear to deal with different topics, their acute awareness of the contemporary has been argued in Chapter III. In *Bleeding Edge*, it is not only the contemporary that becomes the historical, this parallel works even in reverse and the historical is present as an ominous warning against the totalizing tendencies of our time. As argued in the following and final chapter, *Bleeding Edge*, and the rest of the works covered here, aspire to create absolute subjectivity, forms of existence and narratives that question authenticity, both of the texts and their characters.

¹⁷⁷ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 308.

Chapter V: Objectivity Disguised – Towards Virtual Authenticities in Recent Works of Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon

In *The Kingfishers*, Charles Olson, one of the leading poets of Black Mountain School, starts with what is seemingly a simple verse, divided with a slash: “What does not change / is the will to change.”¹⁷⁸ In this line, Olson opens wide spaces for interpretation, with the usage of the slash or the virgule, he makes unstable the true nature of his sentence: is it a poem or a citation of a poem; a verse or two verses; two poems or no poem at all? Olson creates a semantic ambiguity, the meaning of his usage of the virgule corresponds with the meaning of the two sentences. Everything changes, except for the fact of constant change. However, Olson’s opening of *The Kingfishers* is nothing new in poetry – it changed too, echoes similar phrases, similar uses of the virgule as an indicator of new possibilities, alterations. Think Ezra Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* (LXXIV): “That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock”.¹⁷⁹ In *Projective Verse*, Olson talks of the virgule as a ready-at-hand “pause so light, it hardly separates the word.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, the virgule’s subversive nature, when used in poetry (and fiction), is that of variation, of defying the hierarchical and exclusionary powers of interpretation: it refuses to contain its meaning; rather than division, it is a unity of signification.

What does not change is indeed the will to change – such notion of the Heraclitean flux is the ultimate truth of all philosophy. There are no constants, everything is flowing. In ‘Notes From a Composition Book’ Paul Auster takes this into account when he says that “The eye sees the world in flux.” Indeed, in all of his books, there is this tangible endeavor to capture these processes of change. He continues: “The word is an attempt to arrest the flow, to stabilize it.”¹⁸¹ The futility of such an attempt is one of the

¹⁷⁸ Charles Olson, “The Kingfishers,” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 1 January 2010, www.poetry-foundation.org/poems/54310/the-kingfishers-56d234829d88a.

¹⁷⁹ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975) 425.

¹⁸⁰ Charles Olson, “Projective Verse by Charles Olson,” *Poetry Foundation*, 13 Oct. 2009, www.poetry-foundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse.

¹⁸¹ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 4.

driving points of many of his books. If change is the omnipresent fact, the ultimate objectivity, then to attempt to capture its processes is fundamentally an attempt at failure. If “All that is solid melts into air” as Marx says, and as Ezra Pound notes in his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* when he writes “All things are flowing, / Saint Heraclitus [sic] says,”¹⁸² means that to try and capture these changes is to possess “the faith that prevents universal despair – and also causes it,”¹⁸³ as Auster puts it.

Having analyzed three most recent works of both Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon, the preceding chapters explored the individual instances of these failures – in particular how an impossibility to represent compact and universalizable narrative truths. It argued that in this failure, the individual works find their meaning: via different tactics, different modes of existence, they establish a composite of fractures, thus completing the fundamentally American notion of *E Pluribus Unum*, out of many – one. I argue on the example of Auster’s latest novel *4 3 2 1* and Pynchon’s 2013 *Bleeding Edge*, that their ideas of authenticity in the world and their notion of an individual, evolved into what is ultimately the subject of this chapter.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the strategies of individual novels are fused together in order to argue that within the body of Auster’s and Pynchon’s writing, there is a common theme, a notion of authenticity and mimesis that works simultaneously with notions of both the subjective *and* the objective. Or rather, that *neither* subjectivity *nor* objectivity plays a viable role anymore – in their most recent works, both authors build on notions at work within their earlier works, to create a totality of fractured authenticities; in that they achieve a certain refusal of the singular “truths” present in most of contemporary fiction, the mythos of its inner mechanisms.

¹⁸² Ezra Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley [Part I] by Ezra Pound,” *Poetry Foundation*, 1 Jan. 2011, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44915/hugh-selwyn-mauberley-part-i.

¹⁸³ Auster, *Talking to Strangers*, 4.

Tightening Temporality: Against the Confines of Histories

Contrary to much of the contemporary media imagery involved with ideas of apocalypse, or visions of Ends, the word itself does not denote the finite, a full stop.¹⁸⁴ Rather, and that is especially true of the works analyzed here, visions of ends are always multiplied and fractured breaking points, divergences within the liminal existence of its subjects. Their meaning is always interpreted, rethought. The recurrence of motifs of ends in the consciousness of literature results from the fact that the various temporalities of a novel are almost always headed towards the historical. Thus, apocalypse becomes the ultimate mythos of a final act that is always evasive, as Derrida already noticed. Yet, as Michel Foucault establishes in the beginning to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,

The problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations.¹⁸⁵

Thus, what Foucault voices is the basis for a concern of the decomposition of categories once taken for granted. Similar to the concept of late modernity (or liquid modernity) best exemplified in Zygmunt Bauman's thought, such transformative elements can be traced in both Auster's and Pynchon's works. While often described as post-modernist writers, they are aware of the incompetence of this category to pose a substantive critique of the current forms of society. Rather, theirs is a style in the spirit of Foucault, that is always undergoing transformations, creating new foundations on the framework of history.

It is in these Heraclitean transformations that both writers find an invitation for a new sense of authenticity. In Pynchon's body of work, the flux of the historical moment, and history itself, is a perfect mechanism for portraying the omnipresence of constant change. For Pynchon, the historical moment is always just a setting point for another one, which is always already followed by yet another and another one in a line of endless

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Derrida, 24.

¹⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) 6.

points of departures. Indeed, such departures are signs of a greater concern to Pynchon – they imply that time is always retreating within the scope of the novel and that its linearity works always against itself, against any recursive and critical instruments the author and their narratives can have. Such an awareness of the historical forces is used on several levels within Pynchon’s narratives. In *Against the Day*, Pynchon puts forth a counter-argument against the linear perception of this phenomenon. Bounce Roswell captures this sentiment when he speaks to Merle:

This irrational worship of the Geneva moment, and the whole idea of a movie projector being built like a clock – as if there could be no other way. Watches and clocks are fine, don’t mistake my meaning, but they are a sort of acknowledgement of failure, they’re there to glorify and celebrate one particular sort of time, the tickwise passage of time in one direction only and no going back.¹⁸⁶

It is this suspicion against the “tickwise passage of time” that is further explored in *Bleeding Edge*. While in the whole of *Against the Day*, Pynchon captures the human fascination with progress, even when it goes against the very principles our society is based upon, this technicity is always involved in acts of reproductive innovation. Yet, in *Bleeding Edge*, this perception of time as a constantly upgrading race towards some abstract End, some future finish line, is fragmented, disrupted by the virtuality of the web. While in *Against the Day*, the notion of a linear passage of time is only criticized, *Bleeding Edge* tears down any discourse regarding time as a possibility of future. This is realized via the paranoid timelessness that already foresaw whatever possibility of interconnection there was. Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* talks of this anticipation as taking the form of “being-towards-death,”¹⁸⁷ an apprehension of one’s own temporality and mortality. In Pynchon’s case all three novels are a simultaneous refusal of this notion and its reaffirmation. While characters can be perceived as “always running towards” their own demise, the narrative curvatures are more complex, always aware of the potential

¹⁸⁶ Pynchon, *Against the Day*, 514.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

threats. Time is not linear, never simple, Pynchon's *niche* for information theory – in *Inherent Vice* as well as in *Against the Day* and *Bleeding Edge* – is best explained in terms referencing the fleeting nature of things. Data degrades, and time is merely an idea, a sensation, never a consistent thing. Rather, it is subject to interpretation, information multiply and all dissolves into potentiality. Just like the ever renewing technology that always already makes itself obsolete. With this, Pynchon establishes a certain absence of the boundary between notions of subjective and objective categories. The liquidity of such a perception of time creates an acceptance of the impossibility to ever know anything.

Thus, Pynchon's approach towards authenticity is through a series of deconstructions of various distinctions of historical truths and myths. Paranoia, information overload, the historical re-imaginings, all that takes part in the "fictionalizing" of history. What Pynchon captures is the construed nature of the historical; something that Zygmunt Bauman in *Liquid Modernity* already perceived in his argument that:

Human cultural history is subject to continuous recycling and needs to be periodically brought back to human attention on the occasion of anniversaries or by the hype preceding and accompanying retrospective exhibitions.¹⁸⁸

Our notion of history is thus but a series of great acts, performances reasserted time and time again through various processes. In his novels, Pynchon works with the notion of having such narratives fractured, admitting the very fictionality embedded within them. There is no real historical objective truth in Pynchon's novels, apart from the omnipresent chaos of change. To further use Bauman's logic, there is indeed an inherent failure at the heart of such distinction between the objective and the subjective that brought so many issues "of the 'phenomenon vs. essence' kind."¹⁸⁹ The real is only ever the unrealized, the potential idea. Roraback in *The Philosophical Baroque* notices this, when he describes the aesthetic coldness in Pynchon's narratives:

There is here moreover a certain aesthetic coldness in Pynchon; or, as Adorno puts it: "Art takes on expression through frigidity", which exactly accords to

¹⁸⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000) 27.

¹⁸⁹ Bauman, 17.

Pynchon's aesthetics and so may replicate the coldness of a molar baroque world, so as to spur it on to a more molecular, convivial, and hospitable one outside of the reading process itself.¹⁹⁰

With this coldness, Pynchon's writing opens spaces for interpretative possibilities, a result of an ongoing experiment in the potential of paranoia and his use of notions of entropy. Here, everything is interconnected in a poetics of fractured possibilities. What creates the illusions of truth and thus an authenticity is the fact that history operating in these narratives within an admission of a certain artificiality of distinctions between the objective and the subjective. Rather – everything is merely interpretation. While his approach may differ in strategies from that of Auster's, it is fundamentally the same in its aims to establish narratives that are both true and critical of the contemporary society. This is visible especially in *Bleeding Edge*, with its protagonist always trying to peak through the fabric of lies that the "truth" of fiction is always covered with. When Maxine realizes that she suddenly:

[...] understands that this place is a holding pen between freedom in the wild and some other unimagined environment into which, one by one, each of them will be released, and that this can only be analogous to death and afterdeath. And wants desperately to wake up.¹⁹¹

Thus, the fictional world Pynchon builds for his characters falls apart piece by piece in a realization of its very fictionality. Time and time again, there are instances where the protagonist briefly sees through this fabricated textuality. Yet, as with Maxine, this vision of the real state of things is allowed only for a brief time. And when it ends: "She gets out of bed, sweating, looks in to find the boys."¹⁹² In this refusal to be subject to what Katrin Amian in *Rethinking Postmodernism(s)* describes as "the epistemic regime of science and technologies shown to reduce bodies to objects, people to things, turning them into

¹⁹⁰ Roraback, 17.

¹⁹¹ Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 254.

¹⁹² Ibid.

anatomical pawns,”¹⁹³ Pynchon’s characters reassert their lost authenticity, they find a sense of a blissful ignorance, allowing them to process the world through frameworks existing apart of the ever increasing amount of information.

Pynchon’s strategy rests on the premise of the historical. Its various representations: through the method of the character as in *Inherent Vice* that is always moved by forces bigger than themselves, or as in *Against the Day*, where the absolute chaos of modern history leads to deaths and dissolutions of traditional bonds. In *Bleeding Edge* then, these two approaches are combined to portray the internet as a uniting field, the absolute subjectivity. *Bleeding Edge*, above all other novels analyzed here, provides the most coherent exploration of the way notions of history are involved in creating individual authenticities.

Reinventing the Self

In his satirical *Essay on Virginia* William Carlos Williams proclaims that “Not only is it necessary to prove the crystal but the crystal must prove permanent by fracture.”¹⁹⁴ It is the myth of the permanent fracture as a means to authenticity that is of interest to this work; authenticity is often built by creating chaos and seemingly imitating the imperfect real world. As in renaissance paintings where flies used to be painted in order to create *trompe l’oeil* – an illusion of reality.¹⁹⁵ What Williams criticizes is a tendency amongst academics and historians to always annihilate any aesthetic pleasure in uncertainty and deception. In Pynchon’s novels, this is precisely what goes on – a series of attempts to capture the fractured nature history, historical truths. It is the same coldness, that is noticed by Roraback, a calculated illusion of the real. What Pynchon appears to be doing is an

¹⁹³ Katrin Amian, *Rethinking Postmodernism(s): Charles S. Peirce and the Pragmatist Negotiations of Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Jonathan Safran Foer*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008) 102.

¹⁹⁴ William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions Books, 1971) 297.

¹⁹⁵ Encyclopaedia Britannica describes *trompe l’oeil* as “the representation of an object with such verisimilitude as to deceive the viewer concerning the material reality of the object.” Cf. “Trompe l’oeil | Painting,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Accessed 5 June 2020, www.britannica.com/art/trompe-loeil.

opposite of what Mieke Bal describes in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Bal speaks of Emil Zola's desire for the novel to be inherently objective, yet failing in opening by the very same narrative, an abundance of subjectivities. Bal writes that: "This so-called objectivity is, in fact, a form of subjectivity in disguise. This is most conspicuous when the meaning of the narrative resides in the reader's identification with the psychology of a character."¹⁹⁶ In Pynchon's writing, the opposite is true; while his aspirations are to open the ultimate subjective, the fractured nature of his narratives always construes a certain sense of objectivity – by accepting the inability of singular representation, through creating individual authenticities within the novel, Pynchon assimilates all fractured "truths" to have the same truth value. All lies, all constructions and paranoias are set on the same level.

While certainly consisting of an instrumental critique of the in-authenticities at work in our times, Pynchon's writing falls apart, focuses primarily on the pathological elements within our cultures and histories. Much like in Vidal's critique of Pynchon, in his later work, there too is a sense of disillusionment with the way society progresses, a refusal of one's ability to perceive the individual as capable of leading a content and happy life within these forces, even amidst extreme odds, is shown in the way Pynchon's characters often dissolve, fall apart through the most unlikely processes. In her essay 'Construction of Identity in Post-1970 Experimental Fiction,' Kathleen M. Wheeler notices that Pynchon's characters "struggle to find out the meaning of situations, to interpret the actions and thoughts of the characters, to determine the action, to get to the end of something." According to Wheeler, "Reading is shown to be an allegory of perception too, an example of our processes of ordering and stabilizing experience."¹⁹⁷

Yet such mimetic mirage does not correspond to any slight reflection of the real. Because what Pynchon seems to misunderstand is that art continues to be made even

¹⁹⁶ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017) 27.

¹⁹⁷ Kathleen M. Wheeler, "Construction of Identity in Post-1970 Experimental Fiction," *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction: International Writing in English since 1970*, by Rod Mengham (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1999), 20.

against the forces of entropy; that literature is still being written and that lives are still lived fully and not merely falling apart. Human capability for adapting to new modes of living is the ultimate authenticity. The individual's role in the world may not be as authentic as the mythos of American individualism may wish for, but still – Pynchon seems to be more interested in what the world does to the body of an individual, rather than the ways the individual adapts to the tumultuous time. The object in his work is often more than the subject, theory more than practice, paranoia more than actuality. While indeed truth is never singular and never fully possible, Pynchon's all-pervasive paranoia deconstructs the very subjectivity it seeks to describe. If everything is connected, if everything is and simultaneously is not, then there really is no escape from the cataclysmic heat death of our society. For Pynchon, the Heraclitean flux is articulated in the Yeatsian destruction – everything not only changes, but also falls apart.

A point of divergence: Auster is also aware of this inability to capture the singular truth, but instead denouncing it all together, similar Pynchon, he takes notice of something already present in Ludwig Wittgenstein's thought – "Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning."¹⁹⁸ Against the background of the inexpressible, Auster sets a notion of authenticity that relies precisely on the subjective, on admitting its own imperfect virtuality. For where Pynchon fails, Auster, especially in his *4 3 2 1*, achieves a series of individualities, the inexpressible truth is conveyed through his fractured *bildungsroman* of multiplicities. Auster is aware of these sentiments, and while he often employed them in earlier writings, in *4 3 2 1* he decides to go in a different direction. Rather than creating multiplicities of an end (both in time and space), the subjective that is fractured and unable to come back to a holistic perception of the world, Auster seeks to destroy the need for such things. While *Invisible* and *Sunset Park* are works that are deeply involved with these liminal notions of fragmented selves, shattered authenticities, the characters are never really seeing an end to the constant flow of change within them. In place of the Pynchonian temporal chaos, Auster strives to portray the

¹⁹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 16.

universality of hope in the human spirit, its unbreakable stamina. Not some kind of hope for better tomorrows, a romantic notion, but rather a hope for the mere continuation, a certainty of life in its various forms.

Auster's characters are broken, decomposed, much like Pynchon's they lack motivation, yet they always continue on. Indeed, such a state of existence can hardly be described as authentic or true to itself and Auster's characters become empty vessels at times, unable to fulfil the potential they set out for themselves. Yet, this is all a construct of their own making, caused by the very process of their self-awareness. Rather than the historical, in Auster's writing, the moment of difference is always a mere chance encounter with the potentiality previously unthought. The difference between Pynchon and Auster however, rests on this very distinction. While Pynchon's narratives end structurally unresolved, often in an ellipsis, they are never open to new possibilities outside the narrative, there is always a resolution in that they refuse any mode of organizational variety – Pynchon closes any space for virtual continuation, rather, he directs attention to the world beyond sentences, off into the external world of continuous interpretation (thus the reader knows well enough how the story continues – ever into a deeper disarray and chaos). Auster, on the other hand, almost never ends with anything else but a period. Yet, his narrative ends are full of the potential, unlike Pynchon's virtual chaos, Auster's is an ever-changing uncertainty, a precariousness of existence that always continues to develop. Rather than hinting at the world in disarray, Auster argues that the world does not end, it merely continues in different forms, still offering space for life, pools where the individual can briefly find authenticity of the self.

Thus, for Auster, the authentic is never merely the final form of perceiving the world. Rather, it is the momentous state of mind. It is, as George Oppen would have called it, the being numerous in a character.¹⁹⁹ In this sense, Auster, especially in *4 3 2 1*, is fundamentally aware of the fractured mythical I, the individuality that is always escaping – human body is, much like in Judith Butler's thinking, boundless and limitless in its possibilities. Where Pynchon fundamentally fails in opening a space through the historical

¹⁹⁹ Cf. George Oppen, *Of Being Numerous* (New York: New Directions Books, 1968).

to show the divide of the contemporary mythos of the individual, Auster's much more modest ambition is successful. While *4 3 2 1* is fundamentally conceptualized around the idea of the narrator of its four versions fictionalizing the events, the reason behind this is an understanding of the multitudes within a single person. Thus:

Only one thing was certain. One by one, the imaginary Fergusons would die, just as Artie Federman had died, but only after he had learned to love them as if they were real, only after the thought of seeing them die had become unbearable to him, and then he would be alone with himself again, the last man standing.²⁰⁰

It is here that Auster's notion of authenticity within *4 3 2 1* becomes clear. Its potential is akin to the process of reading – the narrator creates possibilities, versions of himself in order to accept the multitudes within him, as Whitman would have said.

The self is the Argo, the ship with its part continuously exchanged. A vessel in which the only constant is the continuity of the self. Judith Butler in *Frames of War* writes that:

We can think about demarcating the human body through identifying its boundary, or in what form it is bound, but that is to miss the crucial fact that the body is, in certain ways and even inevitably, unbound-in its acting, its receptivity, in its speech, desire, and mobility. It is outside itself, in the world of others, in a space and time it does not control, and it not only exists in the vector of these relations, but as this very vector. 11 In this sense, the body does not belong to itself.²⁰¹

Thus, the human body and its selves are limitless. It contains possibilities for different and ever newer versions of the self. Nothing is permanent and everything is changing. Auster sees that in *4 3 2 1* too, where he creates a self in four parts, an exploration of identity and what it can become. The self is thus immeasurable in its potentialities, its virtual capability for achieving authenticity. Adorno in *Minima Moralia* confirms the same is valid for writing too: "Quality is decided by the depth at which the work incorporates the

²⁰⁰ Auster, *4 3 2 1*, 1067.

²⁰¹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009) 53.

alternatives within itself, and so masters them.”²⁰² Auster is not as much concerned with temporality in its historical aesthetics, as a medium of storytelling, rather he perceives the temporal being as the metaphorical Argo that in time will be subject to change too. In *Winter Journal*, Auster denotes the whole work for this sense of constant change. “A door has closed. Another door opened.”²⁰³ It is the Heideggerian ‘being-towards-death’ rethought, reassembled in order to capture the fluid existence of our time. Yet, Auster is aware of life’s intricacies in this regard. His is a poetics aware of its own bitter logic – the inability to capture the moment as it is – it will always be subjective.

Thus, the same leitmotif as in Pynchon’s writing: the objective acknowledgement of the fractured nature of the society that is realized through subjectivities. It is akin to what Paul de Man talks in his *Blindness and Insight* when he describes the empirical self that “exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity.”²⁰⁴ Yet, in Auster’s case, the acceptance of its role within language, the knowledge of its construed nature, results in a deeper understanding of how such identities can operate. Yet again, it is a certain objectivity, disguised as subjectivity – by acknowledging the fluidity of the I, the self we cannot fully reach, such self inherently becomes an authenticity of its own. Auster is going against such notions reinforced by Giorgio Agamben in *Infancy and History*, when he notes in his discussion of some elements of Kantian philosophy that “the substantialization of the subject in a single psychic I” leads to a distinction between the psychological and empirical consciousness.²⁰⁵ For Auster, there is no such thing as a single psychic I, rather, there is a series of the selves, waiting to be realized through potential occurrences, connected through a given set of externalities, one’s ancestors, the basic

²⁰² Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 142.

²⁰³ Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (New York: Picador, 2012) 230.

²⁰⁴ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 214.

²⁰⁵ Agamben, 35.

matrix of an individual life – it is life waiting to happen. Always waiting for another door to be closed and yet another to be opened again.

This virtual assurance of the possibilities within oneself is present in the works of both Auster and Pynchon. What differs is their emphasis on particular elements of narrative, a way of construction of various notions of the self. Suffice to say that it is through these implications, this openness within their work towards reinterpretations and possibilities that a certain kind of inner objectivity is achieved. Authenticity is hidden within the fluidity of the self, as the ultimate matrix through which to perceive the deep fracturing divergence within contemporary ways of existence.

Conclusion

Thus, within the novels analyzed in this thesis, authenticity as an element implemented in the mechanisms of the six novels acquires a way of existing inside their fictional worlds, reasserting a belief system in one's own integrity. It is realized through a series of subjective interpretations, deep fractures within any possibility of a totalitarian truth. Both Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon refuse the totalities of the universal – through a multiplication of the very modes of existence and an acceptance of the fluidity of identity, they achieve authenticity that is both evasive and deconstructed.

What does it mean then to talk of these notions within the scope of contemporary fiction? Often, authenticity is thought of as merely a notion of originality. Jean Baudrillard writes in *The System of Objects* that “Authenticity always stems from the Father: the Father is the source value here.”²⁰⁶ Thus, authenticity itself could be thought of through the optics of the totalitarian hierarchical system of its own – as that which has a traceable origin, a story to tell and that in itself is worthy through individual histories. It is a belief system refusing any copy as inauthentic to its creator – the Father.

The totalitarian dominance of such an aura of the authentic, the original, is in this sense an effect of the traditional hierarchy of consumerism. It is what Henri Lefebvre in his *Metaphilosophy* describes as the individual who “has survived as value, as abstract individual.”²⁰⁷ Thus, Lefebvre articulates a certain alienation of the individual and the authentic, a departure from its original sense. The individual is thus a mere monetized asset of the society of capital:

Individualism presides over mass society, over-organized society, as a value. When philosophy (Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*, then existentialism) started speaking of authenticity, there no longer was authenticity, except perhaps in the will for nothingness and rejection.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Baudrillard, 81.

²⁰⁷ Lefebvre, 201.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

Yet, Lefebvre's pessimism resides in an inability to perceive change in the motions of history, to understand that what is human is fundamentally always subject to change. Charles Olson's mantra from the beginning of *The Kingfishers* is only one such example of its articulation. The will to change, the constant reimagining of the self and its place within the world is only briefly confined into the prison of totality.

Fiction is one such means of escape – much of contemporary writing deals with notions of identity and the way it poses a means to escape whatever confines one is born into. Indeed, the recent *niche* for auto-fiction, or the increasing market for representation is a phenomenon demanding a work of its own. It would be perhaps more readily possible to analyze texts concerned with explicit notions of the authorial self, of the self existing against the hierarchical normative regimes within our society. Works such as Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* or Ben Lerner's *10:04* are exemplary in their exploration of the possibility of fiction to capture the self in the process of constant flux: in time, in space and in its own, weird and increasingly interconnected mechanisms of identification. They provide a sense of authenticity more complex than what either Auster or Pynchon are concerned with. This thesis, however, works with texts from two authors that today can be thought of as canonical, not only for the specific and often perplexing ways in which authenticity operates within their narratives, but also for a specific awareness of its own privilege and the way their work directly influenced the more contemporary forms of the novel. In a way, Auster and Pynchon are typical of their generation, often seemingly unaware of much of the problems with power structures within modern fiction. Yet, Pynchon's use of multi-layered female protagonists and queer characters, as well as Auster's openness to new ways of such aspects of identity as sexuality, the bodily and various forms of relationships mark a sharp divergence from their traditional aesthetics as well as other writers of their generation, an aspect that is worth exploring. In their recent work, there is a certain increased awareness of a change in perception. An attention to the fluctuating categories – the wave like structures of the self. The selection of the texts here reflects that. In a way,

the structure of this thesis sought to trace the development of the idea of authenticity within Auster's and Pynchon's respective three most recent works.

Thomas Pynchon's narratives are concerned with the fundamental forces through which various totalities within our society operate. Through his awareness of the constantly increasing complexity of our fractured society, Pynchon makes possible a new sense of its perception. *Bleeding Edge*, in particular, apart from paying homage to much of the recent fiction his earlier works inspired, also marks a sharp divergence from works such as *Against the Day* and *Inherent Vice*, in that it portrays a state of society and the individual's role as evasive and fractured through processes other than the singular paranoid. Pynchon is fundamentally interested in what Linda Hutcheon describes in *Poetics of Postmodernism* as:

The interaction of the historiographic and the metafictional foregrounds the rejection of the claims of both "authentic" representation and "inauthentic" copy alike, and the very meaning of artistic originality is as forcefully challenged as is the transparency of historical referentiality.²⁰⁹

Thus, his fictions are interested in exploring notions of authenticity of the individual's place in history, exploring the ways in which history becomes intertwined with hearsay, with fiction itself. It is the fictionalizing of authenticity that allows Pynchon to deconstruct any distinction between the subjective and the objective.

Auster on the other hand focuses on the liminal states where the individual becomes uprooted from their authentic selves – in *Invisible* and *Sunset Park* in particular, he explores what is left of the self when it is stripped of the illusion of its originality. Such a loss of authenticity is then further elaborated in *4 3 2 1*. Auster's latest novel is a series of re-imaginings. It explores what the very word fiction signifies: a certain impossibility of truth, as the act of writing is inherently an exercise at failure – writing as a need to capture a moment in time, or states of existence. Auster's novel is aware of such inability to represent reality and rather, it aspires for its creation – the failure of representation results in its fracture, in an openness to virtuality. Similar to Allen R. Grossman's idea of

²⁰⁹ Hutcheon, 101.

“the bitter logic of the poetic principle,” *4 3 2 1* captures a certain bitterness in the aesthetics of contemporary fiction. The virtual, or the idea that always precedes the actual occasion of writing, to borrow Grossman’s terminology, is always at odds with the process of its translation into language. Auster’s *4 3 2 1* is an exercise in such potentiality, exploring the very limits of our self, as well as the way change operates in creation of subjective authenticities.

Thus, there are two approaches towards capturing the authentic. While Auster is fundamentally more interested in the individual, the character, Pynchon focuses on historical processes that often go against notions of the authentic within individual characters. However, both authors use authenticity within their work as both simultaneously real and fictional. Indeed, it is present in the form of various multiplicities, rather than a singular instance of the self, it exists in ever repeating waves. Such notions of authenticity as a fluid category, subject to changes in time and space, are instrumental for a better understanding of the ways contemporary fiction operates, how it captures reality, or even refuses it. This thesis has shown on the example of the works by two of the most established American novelists that there is no singular way in representing authenticity; rather, it is achieved through acknowledging this impossibility and thus its ultimate subjectivity. A certain objective way of representation is thus achieved only through such refusal of mimetic representation – a paradox that is hiding at the heart of the works analyzed here.

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Abstract

This thesis deals with six texts by two of the best-known contemporary American novelists, namely Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon. The thesis analyzes three most recent novels by each writer: *Invisible*, *Sunset Park* and *4 3 2 1* by Paul Auster and *Against the Day*, *Inherent Vice* and *Bleeding Edge* by Thomas Pynchon. All six novels explore various modes of authenticity – a notion which in each author’s work adopts specific mechanisms of establishing ways of existing within the world that are directed towards a critique of the forms of society that try to limit individuals, confine them to prescribed objective categories. Chapters I to IV establish one by one the primary approaches to understanding how authenticity works within individual novels. First two chapters explore Paul Auster’s works, and emphasize their portrayal of change as an organizing leitmotif. Chapters III and IV deal with selected works by Thomas Pynchon and analyze their use of entropy and information overload within individual narratives. The final chapter then combines all these notions and provides a comparative analysis and a critical interpretation of all six works against a theoretical and critical framework. The thesis explores the differences between Auster’s and Pynchon’s approach to authenticity, notions of the subjective or the complex systems of change within the flux of modern existence. It further uses a variety of critical texts to argue that the Heraclitean change is at the very heart of these attempts. What is fundamentally the source code of the six novels is a way of accepting subjectivity which in effect, to paraphrase Mieke Bal, achieves a certain fragile objectivity within the fictional.

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá šest primárních textů od dvou z nejnámějších spisovatelů současné americké literatury, jmenovitě Paula Austera a Thomase Pynchona; analyzuje vždy tři nejnovější romány každého autora a mapuje tak vývoj představ autenticity v jejich tvorbě. *Invisible*, *Sunset Park* a *4 3 2 1* Paula Austera a *Against the Day*, *Inherent Vice* a *Bleeding Edge* Thomase Pynchona skrze různé strategie pracují k představě autenticity jako fenoménu vycházejícího navzdory současné roztržité společnosti z jednotlivých subjektivit – jedná se o fragmentární kategorii, ke které každý z autorů přistupuje specifickým způsobem. První čtyři kapitoly pojednávají o individuálních dílech obou autorů ve snaze identifikovat a zmapovat teritorium ve kterém se představy autenticity manifestují v díle daného autora. Kapitoly I a II se věnují románům Paula Austera, zatímco Kapitoly III a IV analyzují knihy Thomase Pynchona. V poslední kapitole tato práce rozebírá a porovnává jednotlivé přístupy obou autorů a kontrastuje je s teoreticko-kritickým rámcem, na autenticitu je nahlíženo z různých úhlů, podobně jako s ní pracují i samotné romány. Tato práce také využívá řady kriticko-filosofických knih, kterými podkládá argument, že autenticita v rámci Austerovy a Pynchonovy tvorby tvoří neustále se měnící obraz současné doby, snaží se zachytit smysl a místo jedince v ní. Podobně jako Mieke Bal vidí v realistické tvorbě Emila Zoly jakousi skrytou subjektivitu, je zde možno uprostřed přiznání absolutní subjektivity mapovat onu naznačovanou a křehkou objektivitu.