

Presence and Embodiment in Thomas Pynchon's
Bleeding Edge

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Introduction

In the following paper I will argue that the bodies of Thomas Pynchon's characters, featured in his latest novel, *Bleeding Edge* (2013), function as nodes of information distribution in the mediatized cyber- and urban space of New York City during the 9/11 terror attacks. By claiming that Pynchon's employment of fictional characters occurs in the form of links and disembodied interactions, I intend to problematize the literary rendering of the relationship between technological extensions and virtual representations. In my analysis of the novel, I propose to view the mediatized nature of communication and perception in *Bleeding Edge* as a new form of the body's embeddedness, where the technologically saturated information society becomes its newly devised natural habitat.

Pynchon's most recent novel, a private-eye detective story, features both a physical urban landscape and a virtual (cyber-)space. The protagonist of the novel, along with a populous tableau of associated characters, navigates in both of the spaces to decipher, pass on, or erase certain clues to solve or reconstruct criminal activities leading up to 9/11. The clues themselves occur in various forms; they are found in "deep space," to which a virtual cybernetic application yields access (DeepArcher); they crop up in copied video footages devoid of context and metadata; and even become dematerialized during the destructions occurring on September 11. Pynchon balances his characters and clues on the thin seam that splits the domains of the virtual-textual and the bodily-physical. As a result, his characters become part of the continuum leading from the bodily to the virtual (and vice versa), encompassing their bodily presence as an interface between the two domains.

This paper will first assess relevant discourses in literary and cultural studies to establish a conceptual framework in which "body" and "embodiment," as well as "presence" and "immediacy," can be defined. Body studies and embodiment theory are still in their wake as crossover discourses. As a result various contesting theories put emphasis on different aspects of corporeality; they engender its bodily existence either as a basis for textual inscription within a socio-cultural—and increasingly mediatized—world, or as a functioning tool, the virtual extension of which into the technologies of the information society places it as the subject of investigation for cybernetics and the discourse on cyborgs. Consequently, the newly defined body poses various problems for perception and presence. In my

assessment, the body as interface undermines dichotomies such as immediacy and distance, culture and nature, as well as virtual and physical presence.

By elaborating the concepts of embodiment and presence, I argue that these features are key elements within the plot of the novel—a detective story—in relation to Pynchon’s depictions of millennial New York and the media-construction of the 9/11 events as a national narrative. The city of New York in its physical and mediatory characteristics—which I will define as the “media city”—mirrors the virtual environment of deep space: both are networks of clues and information, and both require a body (or, in the case of deep space, an embodied entity) to enter it and find its way through links and signs. However, the heterogeneous nature of the urban-virtual environment does not allow itself to be interpreted as purely semiotic and virtual; instead, it is the physical bodies as interfaces that must facilitate the production of meaning and the finding of the clues. I conclude my paper by contending that Pynchon’s characters are bodies of signification, and their presence—or absence—in a shared “mixed” space defines the way they communicate in the mediatized information society.

I.) Strategies of embodiment

The following section will address and identify humanist and social theories of the body in various interrelated contexts. “Embodiment” and “body” appear in a wide array of recent social discourses and, as a result, have become heavily saturated in their network of reference. My aim will be to situate the concept of “embodiment” in a techno-cultural social discourse, through which I intend to respond to Pynchon’s proposed literary problem of placing his characters in a technologically advanced world and guiding them by multi-layered mediatory interactions. Such a multi-faceted definition will necessarily invoke a collective set of related discussions and theories.

One of these will be the body conceptualized as a physical surface on which meaning is inscribed and decoded. Inscription and the textualization of the body are a common approach in many postmodernist social discourses, but my main focus throughout this paper will be aimed at the body’s relation to technology. Using media theorist Mark Hansen’s terminology, *technesis* will describe the textualization and epistemological criticism of the new ontology of the body and machine’s coexistence. Through the discussion on technesis, I

intend to elaborate on the results of adopting a representationalist discourse in theories of technology.

The coexistence of body and machine can be examined by an extensive group of interloping social studies from many different perspectives. In Pynchon's novel, however, media devices and the early form of the World Wide Web (cyberspace in particular) are the types of machines that involve and transform human interaction. Also, the set of *Bleeding Edge*, millennial New York, undergirds the closer scrutiny of information and narrative in a wider cultural context. In order to situate Pynchon's characters in the specific context of the mediatized millennial urban environment, I will invite Scott Lash's concept of the "information society". In his formulation, the technologically saturated society renders all social narratives, icons, and social criticism equal in the sense that all social interactions, and the media through which these interactions are facilitated, have become informational. In Lash's *Critique of Information*, society itself is information (Lash 41). What ties his investigations to mine is his (and Hansen's) response to sociologist Bruno Latour's examination of the modernist splitting of natural and cultural social constructs. A technology-based evaluation of bodies will require the criticism of the nature-culture dichotomy so as to argue for the fused existence of living organisms with technological artifacts as connected by extensions and mediatory utilities.

The fused existence of natural living things and artificially developed mechanisms will in turn serve the goal of arguing for a newly designed ontology of the interaction between body and machine. By returning to Hansen's concept, I will propose to revisit the introduced notion of technesis, and, following Hansen's line of thought, remodel it in favor of the "interface." This remodeling of the technesis implies its enactment of dissolving the very textual approach to the body, which the term attempts to incorporate. Instead, the cultural-informational environment, in which bodily presence, human communication, and organic interaction takes place will prove to be not an alienating surface on which interaction is compromised or decontextualized, but the very means of such communication. Consequently, bodies' relationship to their artificial extensions, such as machines, information networks, or biologically embedded prostheses, will be formulated along the lines of instrumentality, as I will explain in a chapter below on cybernetics.

1.) *Body as text—technesis and poststructuralism*

One key feature that body studies inherited from discourses on social class, gender, race, or colonial power is a focus on representationalism, argues Mark Hansen in his book *Embodying Technesis* (Hansen 12). He claims that this epistemologically motivated discourse has up to this day presented and judged the human body in terms of its capacity to fulfill the role of a surface of social inscriptions (*Embodying Technesis* 18). Regardless of its performative capabilities, the body enacts certain social scripts imposed upon it. The terminological framework of such discourses frequently invokes the concepts of “scripts,” “inscription,” and “ascribing.” Apart from gender, race, or power structures, technology and the artificially modified machines and prostheses surrounding human beings also become the target of debates. One of these is that nature and culture are intrinsically different (cf. Bruno Latour in the next section of this paper), describing science and its social products as an autonomous and monolithic force confronting traditional ways of social functioning. As I will address this problem during my elaboration of the cyberpunk literary genre, various moral, religious, and cultural arguments respond to the encroachment of technology upon the lives of human beings. A key aspect of such encroachment is the virtualization and interchangeability of the body, and the general sensation that the lack of ability to ground identity—or, in broader terms, referentiality—into the body endangers the biological, moral, and perceptual bases of human beings.

Mark Hansen in a later book of his, *Bodies in Code*, introduces the concept of the “interface” between the human body and different products of media. Before delving into this topic, I propose to briefly cite Donna Haraway’s seminal essay on cyborgs (Haraway, 2004), in which a proposition similar to Hansen’s take place, albeit addressing a different discourse. Nonetheless, due to its potential analogies and its capacity of being a well-known reference, the cyborg-image constructed by Haraway can be viewed as a first step in dismantling the nature-culture opposition; since what Haraway does is argue for a hybrid form for humans through the conceptual eradication of the culturally imposed boundaries segregating humans and machines, humans and animals, or the physical and the non-physical (11-13). Underscored by the explicit tones of postgenderism, Haraway deconstructs the essentialized female reader and actor, and instead promotes the cyborg, the hybrid socio-political personality who may effectively confront control strategies—such as the scientifically, economically, and medically verified and supported strategies of birth and population control—, which form a self-affirming and monolithic political discourse over the individual.

While Haraway's principle of hybridity dons the armor of politically motivated intellectual resistance, Hansen focuses less on power relations and instead foregrounds the body as a particular domain encompassing "practices," and engendering the "body schema as potentiality" (*Bodies in Code* 38). Hansen's argument borrows much from phenomenology and Merleau-Ponty's concept of spatiality (40) when he says the body constitutes a domain from which (potential) interactions against the material world originate, and thus grounds the intentionality of material interaction in the body's enactment of potential practices. For Hansen, the question of embodiment verges between psychology and phenomenology, linking the two through the argument that intentionality is the performative side of connecting the "motor and the perception" (44). Technology comes into the picture when this approach faces the decision as to whether include the different kinds of prostheses (either physical or virtual extensions of the potential practices of the body) into the body schema. In *Bodies in Code*, Hansen examines artworks of contemporary new-media art, in which digital, mechanical, and biological extensions problematize the question of embodiment as well as the axioms of traditional aesthetics. In his conclusion, Hansen highlights the importance of transition between the body and its surroundings; the gap between the body and technology has been—since the early years of civilizations—bridged by artificial equipment, such as tools and other aids to help humans in their work and survival. Today, such technologies enter the body's sensory system and go beyond the surface of the skin. The body schema is increasingly perforated by the technologies that appropriate the capacity of intentionality engendered by the body. This transformation situates the body along the continuum spanning two domains: the corporeal and the technological. In conclusion, corporeality's connection to technological means can be best described by the image of the interface, the invisible and ever-shifting seam that marks the convergence of the two domains.

2.) *Information society—The possibility of criticism*

Our previous discussion on embodiment needs further elaboration in order to provide a social context to what I have so far only vaguely referred to as "technological" and "technological means." My hypothesis regarding Pynchon's novel is that the fictional urban and technological environment depicted in it is—most importantly—an information society. As I will elaborate later in this paper, *Bleeding Edge*'s detective plot is characteristically clue-driven in its rendition of the backdrop of Manhattan and the structuring of its fictional

cyberspace-application, “DeepArcher”. What is at stake for the protagonist of the novel is to reconstruct a criminal activity, find the traces leading back to it, and navigate along contradictory “bites” (and bytes) of information. The main factor that leads astray her investigation on several occasions is the mediated nature of the clues, where mediation includes video footages, blogs, the Internet, and a series of chronological events, which all are displaced by the fragmented access to certain databases containing information about them.

Scott Lash in *Critique of Information* proposes a revised concept and methodology of cultural theory, whereby he claims that the main structuring element of society and culture is information. Lash concludes that the emergence of this element has also caused the decline of the social structure: “postmodernization means the replacement of social structures by information and communication structures” (28). Through the lens of a sociologist, he enumerates the ways in which “postmodernization” occurs on a global level, claiming that contemporary social tendencies transfer the emphasis from the national to the global; from the “logic of manufacturing” to the “logic of information;” and from organization to disorganization (26-32). Ultimately, he contends that due to the nature of the flow of information, which compresses, neutralizes, speeds up, and “stretches out” (make discontinuous) social communication, there remains no further critical vantage point or transcendental argument from which neutral reflections could be made over culture or society. Information society encroaches upon the critical standpoint by way of its never-ending temporal presence, its inclination to commodify information, and its neutralization of oppositions (18-9).

Lash continues his discussion on the dissimulation of culture in terms of the receding image of the nature-culture duality, as developed by his sociologist predecessor, Bruno Latour in his book *We Have Never been Modern*. Latour’s idea was that while nature is “transcendental,” culture is “artificial.” One has to discover the previous and construct the latter. Culture consists of not merely pieces of art but of social and political institutions, such as the government, science departments, or urban infrastructure. Lash points out that in the information society such distinction is untenable due to the mediated way humans as social beings encounter their environment. While Latour could say that the rise of modernism can be attributed to the “bracketing of nature” (Latour 29), the information society goes beyond this structural dichotomy and once more foreground up nature. The technological environment, in turn, will qualify as the new nature, and culture will lose its essence. Lash, furthermore, argues that no critical or artificial construction can be made in a world which

we interpret as being intrinsically mediated. This argument rhymes well with bio-hybrids of the technologized bodies in Hansen's argument. In short, the same way the body can be described as the medium between potential practices and the available extensions, so is technology "discovered"—not constructed—as the new nature of the information society. While I do not defy the artificiality of technology, I do argue that the mediatory nature of the body with relation to its technological extensions avoids bracketing nature, and follows the path of extending the body schema into the technological realm.

In terms of a criminal investigation, where both the criminal and the set of victims need to be determined, such critical vantage point is inevitable and necessary. Pynchon's millennial world, similarly to works of utopian science fiction, could have suggested a society dominated by excessive surveillance and transparency, especially through its description of the aftermath of 9/11. While thematically secret agency monitoring and the "colonization" of the Internet (Pynchon 135, 354-6) do appear in *Bleeding Edge*, much of the plot is complicated by the disorganization and the contradictory as well as redundantly cross-referential nature of information. Such disorganization originates from the overlaps of various mediatory sources, which produce a sense of interference ("crosstalk") between two related domains; the most dramatic example to this last scenario will be the blurred boundaries of life and death, as well as the depiction of cyberspace as the "sanctuary" for the dead.

A final argument that I wish to adopt from Lash's theory is the McLuhanite idea of the medium losing its instrumental quality and become an end in itself, that is, a finality (Lash 73). Lash dates this duality back to Kant and the early modern thinking about culture, but concludes that the trends and directions of the information society have collapsed this duality. Interestingly, instrumentalization appears in Hansen's book on new media art, where he argues that the continuum stretching from the body to technological extensions instrumentalize the body, or in other words: foreground its technological nature. Regarding corporeality as a means of something—or a technical capacity—is yet another critical response to the representationalist approach of the body. Replacing signification, embodiment emerges as a technologically motivated process.

3.) *Bodies in cyberspace*

i.) Defining cyberspace

Various definitions coexist in circumscribing the discursive domain in which the concept of cyberspace can be articulated. Such variety of definitions result in a broad term that refers to electrically mediated communications systems, and, more specifically, the space in which electronic communication can occur. In a more concrete fashion, this space emerges as a virtual environment for interaction via the Internet, such as in chat rooms, over social media, or through Internet-based multimedia communication (Schilling 178). These are examples of mostly private interactions but further instances come to mind, like surveillance technologies, online business transactions, and various kinds of control mechanisms conducted over the World Wide Web.

ii.) Good information, bad information. Cyberpunk.

While *Bleeding Edge* may not qualify as a full-fledged cyberpunk novel, my previous reference to its contents and peculiarities may have evoked the sensation that the novel does, in fact, feature a number of traits that would place it into this science-fiction subgenre. My reason for briefly elaborating cyberpunk in this section is that I view this genre as the literary tradition that comes closest to *Bleeding Edge* in terms of its scope and relevance in problematizing the technological world. Cyberpunk cannot be mentioned without referring to its representative figure, Canadian writer William Gibson, whose novels such as *Neuromancer* and *Pattern Recognition* have set the standards for the genre (Cavallaro x), and whose most notable work deal with cyberspace, virtual realities, and disembodied protagonists. While I believe that Pynchon consciously employs themes of this genre, the reason I refer to it here is not to explore the ways *Bleeding Edge* is thematically indebted to cyberpunk. Rather, I want to briefly examine how this recent literary tradition addresses problems of information society and information protocol.

Dani Cavallaro on his comprehensive monograph *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture*, traces cyberpunk's origins back to the heyday of American detective stories from the 20s as well as to the emerging technological sensation of the 60s and 70s, when "the virtual interchangeability of human bodies and machines becomes a recurring theme" (Cavallaro 12). Furthermore, the second part of the compound term "punk" refers to the frequently

adopted characters of this genre: people on the fringe of society, social outcasts, and criminals. *Bleeding Edge* features many of these in the form of young Silicon Valley hackers, Brooklyn hipsters, and illegal immigrants occupying Manhattan, and whose counterculture demarcates the territorial boundaries of the “yuppified” (Pynchon 266-7) uptown areas of the city, east and west of Central Park.

Cavallaro enumerates a set of features that define the genre: the instability of reality and identity; the commodification of identity in logos, signs, slogans, celebrities and so on; and finally the philosophical and moral issue of people changing their identities through virtual representations and thus disembodiment of their existence in a network of interconnected communications (14-22). The narratives of cyberpunk novels depict a chaotic world in which avatars pose as living persons, where history and culture are faked by the mythologies undergirding brand identities of multinational corporations, and where order and communication become intrinsic adversaries. All these features crop up in one way or another in Pynchon’s novel, which I will elaborate in the third large section of this paper (III.).

iii.) Bodies of cyberspace

Cyberspace is often defined as virtual realm in which one can be present without having to be physically there. Instead, avatars and nicknames substitute the corporeal presence by rendering the body a mere representational entity (Cavallaro 29). Representation occurs in various forms and, in this case, seems to uphold the general assumption of postmodernism that the body is indeed a sign, which encompasses a textual inscription, albeit a sign that is visual in its manifestation (Palatinus 129). I will refer to this problem in my discussion on presence.

The idea of representationalism in postmodernist discourses corresponds to the avatar-body polarity of virtual presence. This analogy is not a coincidence. What supports such correspondence is the fact that the way discourses in the humanities or social sciences analyze, for instance, culture, gender, class, race, history, and so on, is precisely by reading them, in a textual way, as if decoding constellations of society. Similarly, the virtual environment produced by cyberspace is based on codes: on the flow of information between senders and receivers and voluntary or involuntary decoders, whereby a virtual constellation of space, that is, a non-linear arrangement of information, is generated. Today our experience of digital media technologies, video games, modeling tools, and communication interfaces

generally enforces the attitude that visual instances (images, logos, avatars etc.), along with their spatial nature, are indeed the par excellence form of technological reality.

4.) *The body as function—Cybernetics*

To define the body not in such classical terms as agency or being a surface of social inscriptions (like a piece of paper or a slate on which texts are inscribed), but by technological terms, a short etymological analysis of the word “cybernetics” can help. Originally referring to the ancient Greek “steeringsman” of warships, the expression was coined during the Second World War by military technology developers of air defense. Cybernetics was the technology designed to calculate the motion and trajectory of military aircrafts, and shoot a missile ahead of the plane (Mindell 21). Experts based their calculations on the motoric motions of the pilot, reasoning that under stress certain corporally programmed protocols begin to work in the body and produce a repetitive and calculable choreography. Such reasoning, by the way, is self-reflexive in that it is based on the disciplining pedagogy of the military, which enforces precisely the repetitive and ordered motion-protocols in the body. Cybernetics thus assumes that the body is a functioning entity, and that the motions it produces is an extension of its corporeal entity into the domain of certain technologies, such as the military (Schilling 185). Physical movements imply control, and control enforces governed practices (praxis as *techne*), which in turn renders the body a functioning technological tool.

Cybernetics and, subsequently, cyberspace are rooted in military technology, a feature that is also invoked in *Bleeding Edge* to contest the pop-cultural narrative which identifies cyberspace as free and not yet colonized land for the “nerd cowboys” (Pynchon 157) to roam on. Historically speaking, the same way the predecessor of the Internet had been a Cold War artifact, constructed in order to decentralize the chain of command in case of a nuclear emergency scenario by way of imposing specific and multi-nodal algorithms enabling counteraction initiated by a network of computers, cyberspace and cybernetics have been first and foremost a technology of control.

The body of the cyberspace emerges not simply as a virtual representation of something but as a controlling element of information and data flow. Pynchon’s novel digresses from the trends of portraying cyberspace as a domain of the information society based on (visual) representation and instead features an artificial reality in which the body,

albeit not physically present, controls and molds its environment. As we will see through examples, characters of the novel who descend into “deep space” have to command, pixel by pixel, the visual format of the virtual world. What is more, in Pynchon’s “deep space” the avatars, too, remain malleable and must with constant effort establish themselves as stable entities.

5.) Cyberidentity vs. the body as interface

Commanding the virtual space of communication through the technologies of the extended body puts certain concepts, such as identity, at risk. Is the virtual self constructed through the assemblage of immaterial data, producing a reader’s identity, or does a link still exist between avatar and body? Cybernetics so far has not fully opposed our notion of the textually identified body; it only asserted that bodies are technologies, and that the representationalist virtual space of the Internet and digital interaction can be substituted by the affinity of control expressed by its inhabitants. We have, so far, implied a discourse in which cyberspace is defined as an extension of the functions of the body and not the extension of its senses. We discarded cyberspace as sensory prosthesis in favor of an extension of the body as apparatus.

To surpass the trap of mutually exclusive discourses entrenched by such dichotomies, I have argued by conceptualizing the body as interface. Interfaces are a point of transgression: bodies become functions via technological extensions while extensions and prostheses enter the body to replace or extend its functions. The interface implies that the body does not end in its physical extension at the surface of the skin. Rather, it may permeate a virtual space in which its motions and bodily functions convert to parcels of information: bits and bytes functioning as utterances, shrugs, and jerks. The physical body escapes the instrumentalization—and hence, reduction of its agency—of the encoded avatar. Instead, the interfaces grounds “artificial” into the “natural.” Bodily perception is aligned with proprioception.

6.) Cyberspace versus hypertext. MUDs

The Internet, through a code-based approach, is often described as a hypertextual network, and as a database. The coding protocol by which much of the data on the Internet is still accessed today is the “hypertext transfer protocol,” the http, a networking model based on

nodes serving as centers of multiple connections and making up endless open-ended communication systems. While hypertext systems are primarily text-based, the visual rendition of cyberspace—both in cyberpunk novels and in *Bleeding Edge*—also retains the open-ended quality of the hypertextual system in form of the Mutual User Dungeons (MUD). MUDs were the early multiuser web-platforms for businessmen, academicians, and gamers, and became widespread during the second half of the nineties. MUDs allowed real-time interaction among their users, who communicated or competed against each other by following a set of rules applied in the MUD.

In Pynchon's novel, the depiction of cyberspace is similar: space itself is constantly formed by its users through codes or re-written links, and users identify themselves through avatars. Users use and reuse the available material of codes and scripts; within the MUD, too, the primary form of transportation (or: communication) is through selection and disposal. Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* coins the concept of the "database" in which he argues for a revised way of approaching textuality (Manovich, 2001). Hypertext systems can be imagined as databases, featuring multiple entry-ports and elements available for construction, such as words, sentences, scripts, links, or codes. The main approach to a text transforms the reader and perceiver into an author and user. The concept of the user, furthermore, ties back to our discussion on the instrumentalization of the body. Instrumentalization substitutes the representational approach of corporeal reality, and, consequentially, affects the epistemological grounds which structure the representationalist agenda. The question of body as technique and reading as construction replaces the question of body as a perceived surface of inscriptions. Reading as construction is embodied by its active participation in sorting out and assembling the elements of the database. Here the methodology of selection entails a special kind of thinking, which can be best described as the binary (yes-no) approach found in basic algorithms. The database does not offer an internal hierarchy, although we may argue that through their limited content, databases perform a sort of selection. As we will see in the novel, the way the DeepArcher application renders cyberspace accessible to users, it foregrounds the database-nature of virtual reality.

II. Strategies of Presence

Shifting to my second focal point of analysis, discourse on presence may even span a greater range than the one on embodiment; it can evoke the terminological apparatus of

phenomenology and its founder thinker, Husserl, and can reach as far as contemporary hermeneutics; the philosophy on spatiality of artworks (Tanner, 2002); and McLuhanite media theory. I will, however, treat presence strictly in coordination with my theorization on embodiment. Even so, presence is challenging to grasp, because it may vary according to the different paths which the conclusions brought about by the embodiment-discourse can offer.

John Tomlinson coins the term “telepresence” to denote interactions in which subjects are present in a way that they are not present (Tomlinson 110). How can that occur? Tomlinson cites Marshall McLuhan’s famous slogan describing media platforms and utensils as the “extensions of man,” and foregrounds the etymological essence of the word “media,” which “mediates” through evoking a notion of “im-mediacy.” (108). Telepresence bridges distance (“tele”) but also separates by way of presenting the non-present as if it were present. I do not intend to play with puns; instead, the reason to highlight the common thread weaving physical/bodily presence and the mediated presentation of the body together is to underline the inherent contradiction of immediacy produced by the bridging of the distance with a medium.

I will combine the concept of telepresence with Hansen’s phenomenology-imbued concept of the body schema and interface to reflect on the spatial groundedness of corporeality. Following the line of thought of Hansen, I will argue in accordance with sociologist Christopher Schilling that spatial and temporal presence can be viewed as the node through which control (political, biological, or social) is imposed on the corporeal subject. In turn, virtuality may offer the required “sanctuary” for the subject, whose disembodiedness alleviates its corporeal subjugation to the “then” and “there.” The idea of the “sanctuary” emerges in *Bleeding Edge* with an ironically negative overtone: it depicts the futile attempt to bring back the victims of 9/11. Furthermore, the investigation by the detective protagonist suffers—in a variety of instances—from her clues being displaced by different forces preventing them from becoming traces. Finally, through the trace-clue pair I intend to highlight the problem of embodiment in terms of the space of criticism.

1.) Immediacy

The notion of telepresence turns problematic when advanced technologies produce instances in which mediation occurs through the disembodied representation of a person, such as in the forms of “avatars” used by entities in cyberspace. Dani Cavallaro and Deborah Lupton grasp

“avatars” as the disembodied and constructed representations of users in cyberspace (Cavallaro 2000, Lupton 2004). The reader may notice how I am using the term representation here right after disposing it in the previous paragraphs in favor of the instrumentalized body. I now want to cut through the polysemy of the term to avoid its limitations: representation invokes an epistemological discourse, while re-presentation assumes something that is already there but which needs to be discovered. “Discovery” reminds us of Latour’s argument that “nature” opposes construction (“culture”) due to its quality of already being there. I have argued that technology can function as the new nature precisely because through extensions into technology, body discovers its own functionality along the continuum that ties it to its technological externalities. Latour’s dichotomy collapses once more because it is through construction (“acculturation”) that embodiment “discovers” its own technological nature.

How does this tie back to the question of avatars? While avatars are commonly referred to as forms of representation, in the light of my claim that MUDs facilitate a constructive participation, I argue that avatars are not representations but extensions of users in the cybernetic world. Mixing up the two leads to deadly misunderstandings, as I will point out in examples found in *Bleeding Edge*. However, avatars also indicate the disembodiment of the body, which implies the freedom of not being confined to a specific location physically. As a result, orientation, movement, and in general: spatiality, gains a new context. Spatiality, in a sociologically equipped view, implies the field of control, as Chris Schilling writes: “while cyber-technologies clearly acquire meaning from narratives of those who invent and use them, the suggestion here is that they also possess a material presence which can ‘fix’ social relationships and people’s identities in place” (Schilling 175). Schilling’s phrasing includes the verb “use” and the noun “presence,” and argues that virtual presence (as opposed to “material presence”) avoids the “frail bodies being subjected to governmental control” (174). Political and power control, as we have seen in the case of Haraway, is indeed a thematically present issue in Pynchon’s text, and virtual reality can offer an alternative. Schilling, furthermore, taps into the debate on what attributive features define cyberpunk, and points out that the representation of virtual reality in this particular literary genre points to two directions: on the one hand, the “free highways” of information become available to those social outcasts who are otherwise disenfranchised in their social relations, and on the other hand, cyberspace can inherit—and as a consequence: mirror—the materialized social and cultural framework of physical reality, resulting in the colonization of cyberspace (Schilling 174, Pynchon 135, 354-6).

Immediacy, by its etymology, implies the lack of mediation. Looking at it the other way, mediatory techniques overwrite the distance-presence conflict, substituting it with the concept of “telepresence,” which could be rephrased as presence-at-a-distance (cf. Schilling, Cavallaro). As in the case of avatars, disembodiment functions as a liberating transformation. But perhaps transformation is a wrong phrase to use here, since it implies an altered version of the embodied presence (the body schema grounded into its physical and temporal presence). I do not view avatars as representations but as extensions: extensions through mediation. As soon as we dispose of “representation,” we end up with presentation, a way of existence—virtual or not—which avoids its representational doubling. In *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon depicts cyberspace as purely technical, and even rejects the protagonist’s explicit question whether “avatars” bear any metaphysical significance (Pynchon 70). While avatars facilitate mediation, at the same time they constitute the nature of the bodily extension: the algorithmic thinker and the sign-generator thinker that can, as we will see in the novel, even fake its own image. This malleability makes avatars end in themselves: not the medium and the message, separately, but a medium that is an extension of the intentional body schema.

2.) *Distance of criticism*

So far, I have addressed the problem of immediacy through its special relationship to embodiment: as soon as the instrumentalizing quality of embodiment finds its form in its virtual extension, immediacy collapses. Virtual extensions will manifest themselves as obstacles for Pynchon’s protagonist, while the author himself will rely on them to spin a playful plot. From the detective’s point of view, however, the question emerges as to how criticism can be directed at anything in the information society, where information—which compresses time and space—eliminates the basis for criticism (Lash 28)? Or, to put the question into a form that Manovich would formulate, how does the algorithmic, selective, and constructive investigation operate in a case of multiple entries? Lash argues that any media in the information society eliminates distance because they themselves become a finality. Media do not represent, that is, do not double by way of creating an image of something which already exists, but stand in themselves as the original image (71). In terms of the plot of a detective story, what this implies is that clues, references, and traces do not reproduce an event or activity that preceded them—but construct them. Temporal or spatial

immediacy thus loses its cohesive force and instead yields to the narrative temporal plane of the investigation, which constructs itself along its gradual involvement with the criminal case.

III. *Bleeding Edge*

1.) Bodies in Bleeding Edge

i.) “Deep space” & “meat space”

Pynchon introduces a particular version of cyberspace in the seventh chapter of his novel. The access tool to this space, dubbed as the “DeepArcher” application, is revealed to Maxine, the protagonist detective, by Lucas and his partner, Justin, two former Stanford-student hackers residing in Brooklyn. Both being in the midst of developing DeepArcher’s visual interface, they offer their application to Maxine to dig into the undisclosed realms of the Internet, which is still in its early version regarding its visual interface and networking capabilities. Maxine’s fraud investigation at this point immerses into the electronic and virtual world of online financing. The antagonist she is after, Gabriel Ice, specializes in fraud cover-websites through which he launders illegal transactions to the Middle-East, at the same time gaining increasing leverage in the optic-fiber cable business, which is the essential firmware market for data transactions.

Pynchon’s elaboration of the cyberspace is based on the stratification of the World Wide Web: there exists a surface level characterized by appropriated domains and websites in the possession of corporations, which yields an electronic interface to the everyday consumer who shops, socializes, publishes, and surfs on the Internet. In contrast, the deep level (Pynchon’s “deep space”) of the web can be best described as a free and uncolonized territory, appearing only to professional hackers in forms of codes, open source links, non-visual signs, and requiring the user to “process” his or her way through this virtual jungle. DeepArcher is the tool whereby deep space is rendered visual. Moreover, it is designed in such a way that it resembles video games: it features a first-person character, disguised by an avatar. At first, Maxine is confused whether DeepArcher is actually a video game, “Should warn you, I’m not too good at these things, drives my kids crazy, we play Super Mario and

the little goombas jump up and stomp on me,”” (Pynchon 71) she says, to which Lucas abruptly replies, ““It’s not a game.”” (71).

ii.) Maxine, Horst, and the “technologically saturated world”

Maxine’s own work as a fraud examiner runs parallel to how Lucas and Justin approach the world in that it remains within the virtual and the purely informational. Pynchon presents instances of Maxine’s experience in scattered anecdotic snippets of flashbacks into her previous cases and also through short allusions by occasional characters conversing with her. Pynchon also employs various puns to highlight her conflicting attitude to being a detective in a world where traditionally physical clues are relegated to the obscure realms of the Internet, and in which news and reports become ambiguous. For instance, she concludes that recent news on the destruction of the two Buddha-statues in Afghanistan have invoked in her the notion that “Islam” and “I slam” is only a space-bar hit away (Pynchon 31), and that President George W. Bush’s meddling with the Middle East is but “shooting fish in an (oil-)barrel” (48). She also sees the emerging phenomenon on pop-up windows on Java-driven websites to be the “Goombas of Web-design,” referring to the popular video game Super Mario (45). In her work, however, Maxine is strictly methodological, often relying abstract calculations rather than doing fieldwork. The reader learns that one way of easily identifying fraud activities, such as embezzlement or money laundering, is by looking at a company’s officially disclosed finance sheets and applying “Benford’s Law” to them, which detects whether selected variables in statistics are too consistent or straight (41-2). By implying that statistics that are too neat or logical to be true are clear signs of (illegal) human intervention, Pynchon playfully invokes one of his frequently employed topoi, “entropy.” Without further elaborating the idea here, it is important to mention that the vaguely implied concept of “entropy” in *Bleeding Edge* classifies the flows of human interaction—whether these occur in the form of virtual transactions, virtual messages, or video footages—as inherently natural and prone to an ever increasing level of disorder. As I will come to examine other manifestations of order and disorder in the information society as described by Pynchon, I will tie these exemplary instances into the discussion on the nature-culture debate by way of presenting how *Bleeding Edge* may argue in favor of considering technology (pertaining to the domain of culture) as the new nature.

Beyond Maxine’s methodology of her profession, her ex-husband, Horst Loeffler, and her two sons, Ziggy and Otis, are all affiliated with some form of technological activities.

Horst is a broker who possesses an unusual instinct to foresee stock prices rise or fall. He is a former worker of the Chicago Stock Exchange, and in the narrative regularly visits the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan. It is through his view that Pynchon repeatedly hints at the emerging event of 9/11 (93-4, 293, 315-6), since Horst also predicts the abnormal price drop of the stocks of the two airline companies that will ultimately loose their aircrafts in the terrorist assault on the WTC towers. However, while Maxine bases her methodology of investigation on mathematical rules and other clues, Horst's capacity is ironic in the sense that it merits from an unexplained and irrational source of power, which enables him to bypass the struggling search for clues and resources within the information society. Nonetheless, Pynchon ascribes him the similarly ironic role of the anachronistic party-man in his mid-thirties: "a fourth generation product of the U.S. Midwest, emotional as a grain elevator [...] struggling to remain true to some oath he apparently took at thirty, to spend it as fast as it comes in and keep partying for as long as he can hold out" (21). Maxine maintains an ambivalent relationship with her ex-husband; furthermore, she allows him to introduce their sons to the decaying culture of arcade games popular in the nineties, which later proves to be essential in the two boy's socialization as well as approach to their limited vision of the world. Horst only narrowly escapes 9/11 and in general avoids his ex-wife's criminal investigation, interpreting it as yet another low-impact case. The duo of Maxine and Horst thus represent two satirized roles of adults acquainting themselves with a new ecology of information distribution too late in their lives.

iii.) Zigotisopolis

The novel introduces the new generation in the characters of Ziggy and Otis in Chapter 4 as they are beta-testing Lucas's latest computer game, a "Mom-approved first-person shooter" (Pynchon 33-4), an application set in New York in which contestants are required to detect and counter unusual or criminal activities in the city; such activities include middle-aged and middle class women stealing from a fruit stand; a young mother leaving her child unattended; an adult male shouting at a crying child. Shooters must eliminate these targets to gather points, but must avoid pets, old people, and the homeless ("We're out after yup, basically" [34]). The "mom-approved" qualification of the game stems from its "splatter-free" option, which pixelates the spasms of blood resulting from shooting the targets. Ziggy and Otis's engagement with computer games recurs in Chapter 27, where they travel to Chicago with Horst and play "Time Crisis 2" in an arcade hall, a game similarly set in New York City, but

this time with a post-apocalyptic theme: the town is flooded due to rising sea levels. In both cases, Ziggy and Otis excel in playing the games and achieving points. In the Chicago hall, local children approach them and ask whether they are “nerds” (291). By “nerds” they mean those who are visibly capable of navigating along the rules and traps of a game. Ziggy and Otis recognize these rules as “real” by employing an algorithmic way of thinking, an approach based on choosing a specific option from a set of choices. I have delved into this issue in a previous section of this paper when I discussed Lev Manovich and the rules of the database. Here, the boys undergo a specific ritual of socialization whereby they treat the algorithmic and user-oriented approach to decision-making as inherently natural and which they automatically impose on their “real” life. In the NY-based first person shooter game, Pynchon vaguely alludes to the reevaluated and increasingly rigorous security measures in town after 9/11. Not only the NYPD or the Port Authority implemented a tighter grip on public security during the fall of 2001, but new campaigns, public signs, and extracurricular school classes appeared in New York and throughout the United States to educate citizens on counterterrorism. One effect of such widespread campaigns was the reconfigured attention devoted to and the altered perception focusing on incidents that seemed “out of the ordinary.” Ziggy and Otis follow a similar path of appropriating a normalizing perception, in which the pick-and-choose algorithm engenders the constitution of perceived order. Referring back to Scott Lash’s argument that in the information society everything is information, and that a critical position becomes obsolete, we can say that Ziggy and Otis embody in their emerging generation the shift from epistemological criticism to a user-based ontology.

One later example to this in the novel is that as soon as they return to New York, they ask Maxine if they could relocate to a higher apartment, which would not fall prey to a possible flood. For Ziggy and Otis, the virtual world and the real become conflated due to both the realistic imagery as well as to the trend in which the thematic elements of video games feed off reality. More importantly, however, the way Ziggy and Otis treat the physical reality and their virtual presence in cyberspace as practically equivalent informs us that the two domains do not necessarily differ instrumentally. Another instance in which Pynchon depicts the intertwined nature of artificial graphics, cyberspace, and reality is in the very last chapter of the book, where he coins the city name “Zigotisopolis,” (476), referring to a virtually established fantasy city enacted by Ziggy and Otis’s perception of New York. Previously, while Maxine visits DeepArcher for the last time after 9/11—when deep web opens up to governmental surveillance mechanisms, online stores, and amateur tourists—, she catches her sons wandering around in a pre-9/11 version of New York, a graphic scenery

which the boys had created after finding a graphic software extension by which they were able to visually render the videogame model of the city into their desired form of manifestation (428-9). In the last scene, Maxine catches a glimpse of the sunrise reflected into her eyes from a skyscraper window, and reflects that this “precarious light” (476) reminds her of the color emitted by the “old school graphic light generator” (428), which the boys used to light Zigotisopolis. Pynchon’s conclusion of the plot resonates with an affirmative attitude of acknowledgment, which perceives Zigotisopolis a creation and a reality just as relevant as real-life New York itself.

2.) Interactions embodied and virtual

i.) Shared nature

I have come across in some of my examples instances of transactions, such as the information distributed by hackers and cyberspace professionals in deep web. Pynchon features a variety of such transactions in his plot, where money, information, and conversations travel in their disembodied, virtual form. The novel, however, does not present a fully immaterialized world; instead, parallels and analogies between virtual and physical transactions highlight common features of real-life human interactions, data encryption, data flow, and various forms of media structures. I view these analogies as implied arguments for the shared nature of “meat space” and “deep space,” using Pynchon’s satirical expression for the distinction between the physical and the virtual. The novel elaborates the ways through which the two domains can overlap. These overlaps sometimes result in a clash, such as in situations where a person’s life or death is uncertain or when visual sensations in both domains resemble the counter domain; but in the majority of the instances they amplify the similarities between the two realms. Below, I will focus on examples which foreground such analogies.

One prevalent feature of the plot is the aforementioned DeepArcher, which yields access to the visually unstructured world of the code-based deep web. I have described Maxine’s first encounter with the application—which occurs in Chapter 7—, but the heroine returns to the deep web in chapters 22, 36, and 38, as well, and keeps contact with Eric, a self-referred “geek” and hacker (Pynchon 145), who’s passion for Maxine keeps him working to unearth important material obtained from cyberspace. The visual representation of strings of codes and hypertextual communication is often presented as analogous to the way a city-

dweller lives her life. As I have described Ziggy and Otis's epistemological unification of the arcade-game rendition of post-apocalyptic New York and the millennial form of the physical city, it is recurring feature of the novel to highlight similar instances. In the tenth chapter of the book, Maxine experiences an unusual sensation when she stares at the undulating crowd of pedestrians near a subway entrance: "The traffic noise gets liquefied. Reflections from the street into the windows of city buses fill the bus interiors with unreadable 3-D images, as surface unaccountably transforms to volume." (102). Maxine witnesses visual rendition in action, the same way she had previously seen the process of pixilation during her travels with DeepArcher, at times when the graphic generator lagged to keep up with her pace: "a splash screen comes on, in shadow-modulated 256-color daylight [...] The rest of the screen is claimed by the abyss—far from an absence, it is a darkness pulsing with whatever light was before light was invented" (74-5). In a similar example, Maxine's conversation partner leans out of the window of an office building while Maxine envisions a DeepArcher image of late night New York City: "looking, *sighting*, down fifty stories into New York, down into that specific abyss, with an intensity she recognizes from the DeepArcher splash screen" (285). Finally, Pynchon exploits the idea that pixels function as atomic particles of the visually rendered code-reality, and equates pixilation to the destruction of the twin towers and its victims: "it was never a Beloved American Landmark, but it was pure geometry. Points for that. And then they blew it to pixels" (446).

In one of the later chapters, when Maxine ever more frequently reenters deep space after 9/11, the main body of graphics is in the form of a desert, as if to resemble the total desolation of Ground Zero and the substitution of downtown Manhattan with a clichéd version of a Middle-Eastern landscape. At this point in the novel, dialogues between characters and Pynchon's short interludes often refer to Afghanistan, the destruction of the two Buddha statues ("Twin Buddha's, twin towers, interesting coincidence" [338]), and the cash-flow of the new boom in oil business originating from local Arabic countries. The description of DeepArcher's new design passes without elaboration (354), and the virtual sky is described as "blackier than anything seen on a screen before" (355). Maxine needs to remind herself that everything is "only code" and that the stars—each featured by a single pixel—can lead to lucky links (355-6). In this example, DeepArcher represents a rendition of a post-9/11 world, in which the desolation of Ground Zero, the frequent emergence of the Middle-Eastern region in media during the "War on Terror" campaign, and a general atmosphere of mourning, transform into deep web's desert-image. Maxine, furthermore, realizes that tourists and "cyberflaneurs" increase in number; millions of photos of the

deceased on 11 September float around; and GIF-candles (“cyclical as karma” [358]) occupy much of the space; she concludes that cyberspace has become a sanctuary for the dead, and serves as a space for the embodiment of memories—the same way Ground Zero will become a space of embodied memories in form of its memorial park and yearly rituals of remembrance.

Finally, a third example of the overlap between cyberspace and “meat space” is when Maxine experiences the reversed version of the sanctuary witnessed in deep space: she sees the image of a dead character on the streets of New York (199). The deceased, Lester Traipse, was a former employee of Gabriel Ice, but after finding out about the obscure financial transactions connecting Ice’s company “hashslingrz” and Middle-Eastern companies, he decides to tap into the money flow. Consequently, he is murdered; incidentally, the murder takes place shortly after his first encounter with Maxine. The chronology of Lester’s apparition contradicts the forensic report of Lester’s corpse: Lester’s body is found in a building a day after Maxine sees him on the street (205), but the decay of the body indicates a death older than one day.

So far, I have focused on examples where the two domains, “deep space” and “meat space” interacted in blurring sensations. Much of the confusion in these scenes is due to the disembodied nature of visual sensations and death. These are one form of presenting the dichotomy of nature and culture as a potentially unified domain. Through apparitions, image-replicas, and ways of visual rendition, Pynchon equates the epistemologies of the deep space and meat space. In other instances, Pynchon foregrounds the physicality of technological development through highlighting the analogies between pre-technological human structures and modern—Internet-based—interactions.

Such foregrounding mechanism is the network of “hawaladars” (81), a system of cash transaction, which originates from Arabic countries. Customers can send money home from abroad by giving cash to a hawaladar representative, who then calls and asks another representative in the target country to disburse the same amount of cash to the asset’s recipient. Pynchon describes this process as something “[w]esterners can’t seem to do” (81), although such mechanism structurally copies the rules constituting DeepArcher. During Maxine’s first ascent into deep web, Lucas explains the idea behind the application: “What remailers do is pass data packets on from one node to the next with only enough information to tell each link in the chain where the next one is, no more” (78). In DeepArcher’s rendition of the deep web, links monitor each other separately and immediately disappear once their established connection has been used to make contact. When Maxine asks how she might

retrace her path if it became necessary, Lucas replies with a World-of-Oz reference: “Click your heels three times [...] and... no wait, that’s something else...” (79). The system of the hawaladars, through which hashslingrz obtains untraceable fund from the Middle East, mirrors the way DeepArcher works in a non-hypertextual framework.

ii.) Disembodied clues

After examining a set of scenes in which the boundaries of cyberspace and physical reality became blurred. I now want to investigate how such blurs, as well as the mediated nature of perception, affect the plot and, more specifically, Maxine’s investigation. My previous elaborations reflected on the fact that much of Maxine’s clues and traces emerge from deep web, which is a code-based virtual reality; furthermore, her own original methodology of fraud examination is also exclusively dependent on statistical tools and certain assumptions about the entropic nature of financial development. Invoking Lash’s thesis, in which critical judgment is deemed impossible in the information society due to the lack of distance between subject and object of criticism, we find that detective work in general, and Maxine’s investigation in particular, becomes an impossible effort. I will elaborate on the structural impossibility of this effort in the next section of the paper; for now, I intend to examine a couple of examples in which disembodied (that is, image-based) clues both help and hinder the heroine’s quest.

In Chapter 16 and 25, Maxine receives a videocassette (Pynchon 176) and a DVD disc (265), respectively, both posted by an unknown sender. The cassette showcases a homemade porn scene in a Long Island family house, which turns out to be a property owned by Gabriel Ice. Once Maxine heads out of New York to investigate (187), she only finds burned rubbles in place of the building. Similarly, the DVD disc contains a short footage showing a small group of people standing on a Manhattan rooftop, aiming rocket launchers at airplanes arriving to New York from the south. In short, the disc contains the reified version of a possible scenario behind the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a narrative which emerged as one example of a multitude of conspiracy theories following the 11 September incident. When Maxine finally locates the rooftop (271), she finds a shrapnel from a military missile, which confirms the terrorists’ presence at that particular location. With regards to its evidence-value, however, the video footage leads Maxine nowhere—except in the case of the disc, through which she locates Igor, an ex-freedom fighter of Chechnya, who may have supplied the weapons to American terrorists, but who also seems to be siding against Ice. The

particularity of these footages is that both are devoid of any metadata, which would hint at their origin or intended purpose. Maxine is unable to decide whether these clues are helpful or not; nonetheless, she shares the DVD with a friend, March Kelleher, who she knows would release the footage on her popular blog. When Kelleher does so, incurring a huge wave of Internet visitors, the only effect of the video is to add yet another layer of conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11.

The way these “clues” displace the investigation is through deferment. As Maxine approaches these traces, the only thing she can verify is an extra scenario or narrative to the case formed by previous hints. Without the clues being rooted into firm spatial and temporal coordinates, however, their displaced and virtual nature defies concrete reference. Pynchon thus displaces the epistemological activity of the detective, and as a result, the “private-eye” detective is forced to merely follow a private eye: a solipsistic theorizing, which is unable to root its clues into a referential framework.

3.) Presence

i.) Avatars, sanctuaries

Many of our examples up to this point have hinted—albeit circumferentially—at the problem of missing presences, both in the form of physically or temporally displaced bodies. In this section, I will now more closely examine how Pynchon’s cyberspace doubles reality by mirroring social stratification as well as in what way this mirroring is presented by the avatars in *DeepArcher*. This mirroring in turn will highlight a key problem of the crushed duality of immediacy and distance; avatars, as virtual extensions of the body, do accelerate information distribution, as well as liberate the senses, but at the same time generate an oppositional drive to re-embody the personality of the avatar. The term “sanctuary” has also emerged in this paper along with the character of Lester Traipse; below, I will take the example of another deceased character, Windust.

I have referred to the levels of “deep space” and surface space and the fear that deep space will eventually be colonized and commodified in the same way, for instance, as Times Square in Manhattan is “Disneyfied” (Pynchon 51). Avatars function as extensions, and their visual presentations are molded after the physical actors who use them. For instance, one of Maxine’s hacker friends’, Eric’s avatar is in the form of the generalized representation of the

“geek” (145). While in terms of code-reading and code-generating visual appearance is redundant for all participators of DeepArcher, avatars are used for the sake of self-identification. However, as with other immaterial entities in cyberspace, this mask—constituted by the avatar—can be faked and altered in different ways. In Chapter 33, when Maxine travels through DeepArcher with its new desert-design, she meets a mysterious, hooded figure, whom she identifies as either the Archer or an obscure hacker who coordinates the majority of deep web’s traffic. The figure denies to reveal its identity and instead leads Maxine to Windust’s avatar. Windust is a mysterious figure, whose secret agent identity is only gradually revealed by Maxine’s investigation in deep space. She obtains encrypted and undisclosed government files on Windust, who turns out to be anybody working for the FBI or the CIA: a performer of coup d’états in third world countries, marine of the U.S. Navy, and double agent. Pynchon humorously presents Windust’s secret agent identity in the form of a “Facemask”-profile, which is an electronic file constantly re-edited by mysterious forces on the internet, in a way that resembles commenting on the pages of students in a college yearbook (108). Pynchon’s allusion to Facebook highlights the process of constructing an virtual personality, which may or may not represent a true identity of a person. In the case of Windust, his avatar in the desert turns out to be fake after Maxine finds his corpse which is, similarly to Lester’s, way older than what the elapsed time between their cyberspace-encounter and Maxine’s discovery of the body would allow. Consequentially, Maxine is shocked by the fact that her travels in cyberspace can be so easily manipulated. She suspects the mysterious figure of the Archer, but is unable to identify the owner of the avatar. The reader at this point realizes that the algorithmic construction of the cybernetic voyage is malleable to the extent that the agency of the user becomes compromised. Pynchon plays this out in the scene where Maxine is still under the spell of the authenticity of Windust’s avatar: “I didn’t come looking for you. You clicked on me” (407), says Windust, although it is evident from the circumstances that given Maxine’s viewpoint it was Windust who approached her first.

ii.) Traces—Media and the city

In the theoretical part of this paper on presence I briefly elaborated the way clues and traces lose their referential quality. Traces, instead, turn into patterns of investigation, where the reader remains unsure as to whether Maxine is following a trail or only making one up. The open-endedness of the plot seems to confirm the latter. Gabriel Ice cannot be caught or

indicted, and the theories of 9/11 remain unsolved—and eventually yield to the grand national narrative of the War on Terror. I also have defined Maxine’s urban milieu as an information society. In the followings, I want to conclude the discussion on presence by examining how the city of New York—beyond the 9/11 thread—contributes to the plot in terms of its spatiality. In particular, I want to borrow Scott McQuire’s concept of the “media city,” which I view as the concretized elaboration of Lash’s information society.

Before discussing “media city,” I wish to quote the motto preceding the first chapter of *Bleeding Edge*: “New York as a character in a mystery would not be the detective, would not be the murderer. It would be the enigmatic suspect who knows the real story but isn’t going to tell it.—Donald E. Westlake.” In Pynchon’s story, New York serves as the basis for the information society and provides its unique microcosm. And it is through the reproduction of the 9/11 events that Pynchon is able to lock New York’s role in the novel as the “media city.” As Laura Tanner explains, 9/11 was a war of icons and images (Tanner 71). Pynchon plays out the iconicity engendered by the televised news of the event when he describes Ziggy and Otis watching the events unfolding in downtown Manhattan from their bedroom: “the boys stay in their room watching the single constant telephoto shot of the smoking towers, already too distant” (Pynchon 317). New York is not simply America’s hub of media, but in itself enacts the role of protagonist by being an iconic backdrop to fictional or “real” events. I bracket “real” in quotation marks because, as I have argued, mediated content loses its representational quality and becomes the presented thing. Tanner in her essay notes that during the breaking news hours of 9/11, real-life witnesses could not believe their eyes and consequentially thought that what they saw was part of film production (Tanner 73). The “distance” quoted in Pynchon’s line can be interpreted that while the image of the televised scene of the twin towers is right there in Ziggy and Otis’s bedroom, producing the same sense of presence as in any other place on Earth watching the news in real life, it is still distant due to the conflated sensation of distance and immediacy.

Conceptualizing the media city, McQuire writes: “this new conjunction of media and architecture has been variously described as ‘augmented reality,’ ‘mixed reality,’ [...] descriptions which all seek to emphasize the heterogeneous spatial regimes of what I call the media city” (McQuire 21). By regimes, McQuire refers to the rapid production of communication, and the way communication can serve a multitude of things such as capital transfer or class representation through fashion codes; but most importantly, through its connectedness the media city produces a reflexivity which the “subject cannot refuse to choose”—and cannot escape (22). According to this line of thought, media city is an

architectural and image-based hybrid space where referentiality cannot function due to the lost immediacy connecting the reference and the referent. In effect, New York cannot escape its own meaning.

In *Bleeding Edge*, Maxine travels through Manhattan the same way she navigates in DeepArcher, unsure of the control she can impose on the directions she takes. The traces she follows are unstable in their temporal logic: often these clues reverse causality and precede the thing they should lead to after an event. The same way Windust's avatar seemingly knows before Maxine what she wants (Pynchon 406), Maxine commutes on the streets of Manhattan unsure whether her random encounters with people, family, and friends occur along her own algorithmic logic of selection or if it is the intrinsic nature of her investigation that it seeks "a search result with no instructions on how to look for it" (312). She might as well conclude—along with the mysterious dialogue-box, which pops up in DeepArcher, and assures her to continue her journey—that "it's part of the experience, part of getting constructively lost" (76).

Conclusions

In my analysis, I have assessed Pynchon's detective story along the lines of a two-tiered discourse. My chosen focal points were embodiment and presence, by which I claimed that the characters of the novel function as nodes of information distribution in a technologically saturated social milieu. Following Lash, I described this milieu as the information society. In *Bleeding Edge*, I explored the manifestations of the information society through the various levels of mediation that affected the detective protagonist's investigation, such as the television and the Internet (cyberspace), and argued that the destabilized quality of material or immaterial bodies and traces was the key catalyst of the story's development. Taking Hansen's argument, I transferred the discourse on embodiment from the epistemologically driven approach, which focused on the body as a platform for social inscriptions, to the ontological approach, where I argued that technology is the natural extension of the body, and where the two connect through an interface. The interface is not fixed, however, and may move from below the skin (biological prostheses) to disembodied virtual extensions (cybernetic avatars). These virtual extensions, in turn, motivated me to debate the problem of presence, as articulated by the collapsed dichotomy of immediacy and distance. In the information society, where information structures eliminate the representationalist forms of media, there remains no vantage point for a critical stance as well as no culture which criticism could address.

This conclusion helped me discuss Maxine's maze through contradictory evidence and clues, much of which she accessed through cyberspace and in the form of mediatory artifacts. The micro-stories of her technology-imbued family provided instances where physical and virtual reality have become blurred, as in the imaginary New York of Ziggy and Otis, but also in the figures of Lester and Windust, whose existence was sustained by the sanctuary of deep space. The immateriality of the clues and traces offered an alternative way of approaching them: I argued that their selection as meaningful signs was, in fact, Maxine's construction during her investigation. I defined New York as the "media city," where the tragedy of 9/11 produced disembodied victims as well as traces which preceded their reference. In sum, I interpreted *Bleeding Edge* as the narrative of a thematically exposed critical inquiry which found its catalysts and obstacles in the mediatory complex of the information society, where technological extensions proved to be the new natural environment for the body.

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