

“The burgers that done the deed”: Hazardous food in Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*

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Abstract: Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009), recently adapted into film by Paul Thomas Anderson (2014), depicts “countercultural California [as] a lost continent of freedom and play, swallowed up by the faceless forces of co-optation and repression”, to use the words of Louis Menand in *The New Yorker* (2009). While tracking the meandering investigations of Larry “Doc” Sportello, a doped-up private detective, Pynchon composes an elegy for the dwindling late-1960s hippy utopia about to disappear in the wake of a general transformation of the US into an increasingly corporatized, surveyed, and normalised space. This essay explores the role of hazardous and unhealthy food in characterising the anarchic utopia of late-1960s Californian counterculture. Like its often explosive or toxic food, this counterculture suffers from a tendency to deteriorate due to the essential instability of its components, which is, in fact, the very definition of “inherent vice”. Yet, such references, though perhaps unappetising, contribute to an affirmative, if eulogistic portrayal of such a culture. In a contemporary context of increasing food and health regulation, often targeted at traditional and unusual forms of food, this essay aims to discuss the main, and frequently vivid, references to food and drink in Pynchon’s novel as signifiers of a larger tendency to escape restrictive social norms, as well as health inspections.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, counterculture, elegy, hazardous food, food and health regulation

Resumo: O romance *Inherent Vice* (2009), de Thomas Pynchon, recentemente adaptado para cinema por Paul Thomas Anderson (2014), representa “a contracultura californiana como um continente perdido de liberdade

e diversão, engolido pelas forças sem rosto da cooptação e da repressão”, nas palavras de Louis Menand em *The New Yorker* (2009). Enquanto acompanha as investigações labirínticas de Larry “Doc” Sportello, um detective privado sob o efeito de narcóticos, Pynchon compõe uma elegia da cultura “hippy” decadente de finais da década de 1960, prestes a desaparecer perante a transformação geral dos Estados Unidos num espaço crescentemente corporativo, vigiado e normalizado. Este ensaio explora o papel que a comida insalubre e prejudicial à saúde ocupa na caracterização da utopia anárquica da contracultura californiana de finais da década de 1960. Tal como a sua comida tantas vezes explosiva e tóxica, esta contracultura sofre de uma tendência para se deteriorar devido à essencial instabilidade dos seus componentes, o que é, na verdade, a definição exacta de “vício intrínseco”. Contudo, estas referências, podendo não despertar o apetite, contribuem para um retrato afirmativo, embora elegíaco, dessa cultura. Num contexto contemporâneo de crescente regulamentação alimentar e sanitária, tantas vezes dirigida a formas tradicionais e menos usuais de comida, este ensaio visa discutir as principais, e frequentemente expressivas, referências a comida e bebida no romance de Pynchon como significantes de uma tendência mais vasta para escapar a normas sociais restritivas, assim como a inspecções alimentares.

Palavras-chave: Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, contracultura, elegia, estudos de alimentação, comida insalubre, regulamentação alimentar e sanitária

“Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral”. So sings Macheath in Bertolt Brecht’s song “Denn wovon lebt der Mensch?”, whose title was translated by Ralph Manheim and John Willett as “What keeps mankind alive?”, from *The Threepenny Opera*. The aphorism is notoriously hard to translate. Manheim and Willett have translated it as “Food is the first thing, morals follow on”, thus maintaining the original parallel between the two nouns, “Fressen” and “Moral”. Yet, “Fressen” does not mean “food”. In a characteristically German construction, Brecht transforms the verb “fressen” (to devour) into a noun, “Fressen”, a more animalesque and arguably untranslatable variation of “Essen”, simply meaning food. A more literal translation might thus sound like “Forage/fodder is the first thing, morals follow on”, though even this version does not really capture the frenzy of devouring characteristic of animals, as suggested by “Fressen”. Be that

as it may, Brecht’s meta-moral maxim about the order in which food and morals are said to follow one another in human life, especially in its underbelly, neatly encapsulates, though in an admittedly oblique way, the historical narrative suggested by Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Inherent Vice* (2009): first one devours, then one moralises.

Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009), recently adapted into film by Paul Thomas Anderson (2014), takes place in 1970 and depicts “countercultural California [as] a lost continent of freedom and play, swallowed up by the faceless forces of cooptation and repression”, to use the words of Louis Menand in *The New Yorker* (2009). The novel has joined *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Vineland* (1990) as one of Pynchon’s three California novels, characterised also by their fixation with the period of the 1960s. Thomas Hill Shaub has argued that “Together they form a mini social and political history of the culture as it devolved from an era of myriad social changes and expanding opportunities to one of conservative reaction” (Shaub 2012: 30), in which, as David Cowart adds, Pynchon “expresses in numerous ways, a profound empathy with what he calls the preterite, the left out, the passed over in every form of election (spiritual, economic, racial, cultural)” (Cowart 2011: 84).¹ Indeed, while tracking the meandering investigations of Larry “Doc” Sportello, a doped-up private detective, Pynchon composes an elegy for the dwindling late-1960s hippy utopia about to disappear in the wake of a general transformation of the US into an increasingly corporatized, surveyed, and normalised space.

In this essay, I would like to specifically explore the role of hazardous and unhealthy food in characterising the anarchic utopia of late-1960s Californian counterculture. Like its often explosive or toxic food, this counterculture suffers from a tendency to deteriorate due to the essential instability of its components, which is, in fact, the very definition of “inherent vice”. Yet, such references, though perhaps unappetising for some, contribute to an affirmative, if eulogistic portrayal of this culture. In a contemporary context of increasing food and health regulation, often targeted at traditional and unusual forms of food, this paper aims to discuss the main, and frequently vivid, references to food in Pynchon’s novel as signifiers of a larger tendency to escape restrictive social norms, as well as health inspections.

Thomas Pynchon is known for including several references in his novels to outlandish or positively toxic food, besides references to traditional, though sometimes aggressive ethnic foods eaten throughout the United States. His equally recurrent allusions to drinks have, in fact, prompted the appearance of a blog dedicated to all the drinks in Pynchon's books. As the appropriately anonymous author behind *drunkpynchon.com* announces, "I'll be drinking my way through every beverage I find in the pages of Pynchon. This could take a while", followed by a quotation from *V.*, to the effect that "*Anything that can get drunk, he reasoned, must have some soul.*"² Indeed, the consumption of extreme food in *Inherent Vice* usually marks its eaters as part of a hippie utopian community doomed to disappear, as its geographical space, California, is aggressively colonised by real-estate developers, shady yet powerful businessmen, law enforcement agencies, and other obscure conspiratorial forces characteristic of Pynchon's novels. Its temporal demise, as the US enters the 1970s, is also repeatedly predicted by characters who announce the advent of more powerful computers and mass communication and surveillance devices. As a computer expert at one point explains, "someday everybody's gonna wake up to find they're under surveillance they can't escape. Skips won't be able to skip no more, maybe by then there'll be no place to skip to" (Pynchon 2015: 365). Doc Sportello himself, the hippie private eye who is also the book's protagonist, is sometimes aware of how fragile and fleeting his Californian utopia really is:

and here was Doc, on the natch, caught in a low-level bummer he couldn't find a way out of, about how the Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and all be lost, taken back into darkness... how a certain hand might reach terribly out of darkness and reclaim the time, easy as taking a joint from a dooper and stubbing it out for good. (*idem*: 254-5)

This act of stubbing the dooper's joint and ruining his pleasure is characteristic of the usually austere posture of oppressive government and business forces in the book. In fact, most of these joint-stubbing characters – such as Adrian Prussia and Crocker Fenway – are never really seen eating or showing appetite. The most notorious exception to this norm is the hippie-bashing police detective Christian F. "Bigfoot" Bjornsen, who reveals a telling

partiality towards chocolate-covered frozen bananas, which he keeps stashed by the hundreds in “a corpse-size professional pathologist’s” freezer stored in a utility room (*idem*: 139) and which he gets at “Kozmik Banana, a frozen-banana shop near the Gordita Beach pier”, also known for transforming banana peels into a product that, if smoked, allegedly causes hallucinations, thus giving rise to a myth about “psychedelic bananas” (*idem*: 140). Bigfoot, in fact, though passing off an image of straight, aggressively conservative, WASP normality, so often rubs shoulders with Doc that he too shows some unusual eating habits, although these tend to give away Bigfoot’s essentially neurotic and divided personality, as when he takes Doc to “a Japanese greasy spoon around the corner where the Swedish pancakes with lingonberries couldn’t be beat” (*idem*: 208). That pancakes with lingonberries are hardly toxic food, and that his choice of place is justified by the respect he is treated with, as well as by possibly ambiguous maternal memories (*idem*: 212), mark Bigfoot out as a troubled eater, in the same way that the phallic frozen bananas that become his trademark seem to be unconsciously associated with his dead partner.

Other than Bigfoot, who is not a character with any real power anyway, those in the novel who are well-off and exercise their power tend to chastise others for indulging in excessive appetites, rather than being more austere. Nevertheless, these are not traditional misers, as the misers one would find in Dickens, for instance. These Theodor Adorno called the “archaic type” of avarice: “the passion that spares oneself and others nothing; its physiognomic traits have been immortalised by Molière, and explained as the anal character by Freud. It is consummated in the miser, the beggar with secret millions” (Adorno 2005: 35). The powerful characters of *Inherent Vice* are entrepreneurs and businessmen, used to certain standards of life, but obviously unwilling to share them with others. As Adorno puts it, “The miser of our time is the man who considers nothing too expensive for himself, and everything for others” (*ibidem*). Or, as the cynical lawyer Crocker Fenway puts in the novel,

“We’ve been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor—all of that’s ours, it’s always been ours. And you, at the end of the day what are you? one more unit in this swarm of transients who come and go without pause here in the sunny Southland, eager to be bought off with

a car of a certain make, model, and year, a blonde in a bikini, thirty seconds on some excuse for a wave—a chili dog, for Christ’s sake.” He shrugged. “We will never run out of you people. The supply is inexhaustible.” (Pynchon 2015: 347)

It is revealing, I would point out, that Fenway only finally shows annoyance at the simple satisfaction to be had from “a chili dog, for Christ’s sake”. The demise of the Californian hippie utopia is not, however, solely due to the pressure and opposition of external forces. Its main weakness, as the novel’s title informs us, is inherent. According to the novel’s marine lawyer Sauncho, inherent vice is “what you can’t avoid, (...) stuff marine policies don’t like to cover. Usually applies to cargo—like eggs break” (*idem*: 351). More accurately, according to the Glossary of the Society of American Archivists, inherent vice is “The tendency of material to deteriorate due to the essential instability of the components or interaction among components”, a definition that is followed by a note explaining that “Nitrate film and highly acidic paper suffer inherent vice because they are chemically unstable. An object made of metal and leather suffers inherent vice because the leather causes the metal to corrode” (Pearce-Moses 2005: 207). The concept is of importance in the context of insurance policies which will tend not to cover such unstable products or combinations of components. This is clearly made to apply to the loose and unhinged community of “dopers”, as the narrator calls them, peopling the Western Coast of the US. Theirs is not so much an “intentional community”, to use the expression normally applied to actually existing utopian communities, as it is an “unintentional community”. The expression “inherent vice” applies especially, as a synecdochal element of a greater whole, to the food consumed, pursued or dreamt of by Doc Sportello and his friends. The remainder of this essay is therefore dedicated to exploring such references.

As several characters never cease to point out, dopers are constantly hungry and their meals reflect that ravenous desire that I find addressed in Brecht’s choice of word, “Fressen”. As Denis says to Doc, “Hey, like Godzilla always sez to Mothra—why don’t we go eat some place?” (Pynchon 2015: 10). His solution is a pizza, the ingredients of which, in a case of doper’s memory, he has characteristically forgotten by the time he arrives home, but

which seems to contain “a papaya chunk”, “pork rinds”, “boysenberry yogurt”, and a “marshmallow” initially mistaken for a “piece of tofu” (*idem*: 11-2).

Most meals, however, come with vivid health warnings which are dutifully ignored by Doc and his associates. At the Belaying Pin, a fish restaurant, Sauncho first considers the “Admiral’s Luau”, then settles for “the house anchovy loaf to start and, um, the devil-ray filet, can I get that deep-fried in beer batter?”, to which the waitress replies “Your stomach isn’t it”, compounding it with a further warning: “If my husband dared to eat any of this shit, I’d throw him out on his ass and drop all his Iron Butterfly records out the window after him.” Undaunted, Doc asks for the “jellyfish teriyaki croquettes” and “the Eel Trovatore”, to which the waitress recommends that “You’ll want to be good and fucked up by the time this arrives. I’d recommend Tequila Zombies, they work pretty quick.” (*idem*: 91-2). As is often the case with Pynchon, Mexican food also periodically appears on the menu. In one instance, Doc and Trillium order “a lengthy combination of enchiladas, tacos, burritos, tostadas, and tamales for two called El Atomico, whose entry on the menu carried a footnote disclaiming legal responsibility” (*idem*: 222). Later on, Doc appears to choose, for breakfast or brunch, “a specialty of the house known as Shoot the Pier, basically avocados, sprouts, jalapeños, pickled artichoke hearts, Monterey jack cheese, and Green Goddess dressing on a sourdough loaf that had first been sliced lengthwise, spread with garlic butter, and toasted, seventy-nine cents and a bargain at half the price” (*idem*: 261). Since “Shoot the Pier” is the name of a dangerous surfing stunt that consists in surfing between the pilings of a pier, the intestinal implications of the name, as well as the meal’s components, cannot be ignored, as is also the case with the “atomic” properties of the previously mentioned meal. And the novel itself reminds the reader of this from time to time, as when it mentions Coy Harlingen’s “gringo digestion” (*idem*: 37-8).

Food appears in the strangest places, as when Doc listens to a casino band called “Carmine & the Cal-Zones”, who perform “their latest release, JUST THE LASAGNA (semi-bossa nova)” (*idem*: 228-9). A break-in at Denis’ home also takes a culinary twist when the invaders decide to vengefully make smoothies out of the contents of Denis’ fridge, namely his stash of Chinese food: “Once a month he ordered thirty meals from South Bay Cantonese

out on Sepulveda and kept them in the freezer to thaw out one by one for meals over the next month” (*idem*: 196-7). And, as might be expected, there is even at least one case of hallucinated attempted food poisoning, when Dr Blatnoyd convinces himself that a cyborg version of a character called Japonica “had somehow malfunctioned and gone skipping into the kitchen and done something gross to the Soup of the Day, and now they would have to pour it all down the sink. Actually, it was the Soup of the Night, a sinister indigo liquid which probably didn’t deserve much respect” (*idem*: 173).

Finally, and perhaps setting aside other types of eating, such as that announced in the Chick Planet establishment, where Jade asks Doc to “please take note of today’s Pussy-Eater’s Special, which is good all day till closing time” (*idem*: 20), one may turn to a truly hazardous meal, the burgers in my title:

Penny looked up at the flickering red neon sign and frowned. “Ruby’s Lounge, uh-huh, I remember it well, it used to be good for at least one felony arrest per week.”

“Groovy cheeseburgers as I recall.”

“Voted unanimously by local food critics the Southland’s Most Toxic.”

“Sure, but it kept down the health-code violations, all those mice and roaches every morning with their li’l feet in the air, stone dead next to the burgers that done the deed?”

“Getting hungrier by the minute.” (*idem*: 276)

The “burgers that done the deed”, toxic for mice and roaches but “groovy” for dopers, much like natural or artificial poisons can produce psychedelic effects in small, non-lethal doses, may well be an acquired taste, the result of persistent, though hazardous tests to the resistance of dopers, a literal “plat de résistance”. Nevertheless, their toxicity, though paradoxically keeping down health-code violations by eliminating pests, suggests again that tendency to deteriorate due to an essential instability of components which is known as “inherent vice”. Both the doomed utopia of 1960s Californian counterculture in *Inherent Vice* and the food which characterises it come with an expiration date, beyond which point they may no longer be consumed. To carry on with the metaphor, what the novel seems to suggest, with its intimations of food gone foul or of coming innovations set to regulate the

life of Doc and his friends is that both this anarchic utopia and its food have passed their best before date and have hence lost their freshness. Their decline is depicted by Pynchon as a eulogistic lament for an age when restrictive social norms could still be easily evaded and health-code violations solved through original means. Considering the alternatives, between this temporal island of free play and a coming corporatized regulation, it is worth returning to the title of Brecht’s song and again ask: “What keeps mankind alive?” Maybe what does not kill me makes me stronger. Or, alluding to *The Dark Knight’s* twist on Nietzsche’s inspirational quote, maybe it just makes me stranger.

Notes

¹ For a less romantic portrait of Pynchon’s Southern Californian settings, see Bill Millard’s “*Inherent Vice* and the Twilight of the Spatially Specific”, in which Millard, referring to the Situationist slogan “Under the paving stones, the beach!” which is quoted as the novel’s epigraph, argues that “the beaches of Southern California were never quite what the French Situationists had in mind, and the America with which Pynchon’s fiction relentlessly grapples remains resolutely un-French in more aspects than its cuisine, its music and its puzzling refusal (at this writing, at least) to institute credible universal health insurance” (Millard 2014: 65). However, as the editors of *Pynchon’s California* (2014), in which Millard’s essay is included, also put it, “Yet this is still a place, on the final western edge of the expansion of European civilization, where the cops still do chase the hippies, where the determined historical endings of the larger novels have not yet been written, and where an alternative outcome, against all the odds, is still at least imaginable” (McClintock and Miller 2014: 6).

² See <https://drunkpynchon.com/about/>. The blog is called “Tom Pynchon’s Liquor Cabinet: Every Drink in Every Pynchon Novel” and its author’s meritorious combination of textual exegesis and empirical research has not gone unnoticed in the press. See Flood 2014. Several blog posts and entertainment items concerning food in Pynchon’s novels can be also be found in various online magazines, though none displays the extravagant perseverance patent in the above mentioned blog.

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