

Inanimate Humans and Animate Things:

Reading Thomas Pynchon's "A Journey into the Mind of Watts."*

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Introduction

"A journey into the mind of Watts" (1966) written by Thomas Pynchon is his only journal text that is regarded as one of New Journalism works by some critics. Although some critics argue that this journalistic work is useful to understand Pynchon's fundamental stance to the society and community, many critics have not sufficiently shed light on this text. "Watts" is very important text because this work was published in 1966, the period between *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). Thus, it is not impossible for us to find Pynchon's transformation process between *Gravity's Rainbow* and *the Crying of Lot 49* in this reportage. More specifically, Pynchon brought out *The Crying of Lot 49* in May 1966, and three months later, did the excursion to Watts. He saw the real situation and how Watts people live under the situation, and finally published this essay on July. As the title implies, Pynchon tries to reveal what Watts people truly feel toward the riot from his traveler's point of view. In this paper, we will observe how the relationship between white people and black is expressed in this text, and also consider the black people's suppressed situation, and finally shed light on the rhetorical point of view, the anthropomorphic expressions of the city. Through these considerations, this paper will finally reveal that Pynchon tries to find a possibility of material things in order to resist against the inanimate world.

In the start of the essay, the narrator explains, in a cool tone, an event in which a black driver is killed by white police. This shooting event inevitably reminds us of the Watts riot. Later, the judge regards the white police as not guilty. Writing this event, Pynchon implies that Watts's power-relation, white and black, has not ever been improved and there still remains a flash point that may trigger the next catastrophic riot. Pynchon thinks of the fundamental cause of a set of riots as symmetric two cultures between the white and the black:

Whatever else may be wrong in a political way--like the inadequacy of the Great Depression techniques applied to a scene that has long outgrown them; like old-fashioned grafter's glee among the city fathers over the vast amounts of

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poverty-war bread that ¹Uncle is now making available to them--lying much closer to the heart of L.A.'s racial sickness is the co-existence of two very different cultures: one white and one black. While the white culture is concerned with various forms of systematized folly--the economy of the area in fact depending on it--the black culture is stuck pretty much with basic realities like disease, like failure, violence and death, which the whites have mostly chosen--and can afford--to ignore. The two cultures do understand each other, though white values are displayed without let-up on black people's TV screens, and through the panoramic sense of black. (35)

Although this is a long quotation, Pynchon here describes "L. A.'s racial sickness" as "the co-existence of two very different cultures: one white and one black." In Pynchon's other essay, "Is it OK to be Luddites?," he uses the words "two cultures" in order to explain the two different fields, those of science and humanity. It is not difficult for us to think of this phrase as Pynchon's arrangement. Pynchon emphasizes that black people living in Watts cannot ignore the factual situations such as sick, fail, violence and death. By contrast, white people are expressed as an existence who can ignore these real situations.

Pynchon's narrator, using driver's view-point from the top of highway, observes what is happening in Watts:

Somehow it occurs to very few of them to leave at the Imperial Highway exit for a change, go east instead of west only a few blocks, and take a look at Watts. A quick look. The simplest kind of beginning. But Watts is country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel. (78)

The phrases, "A quick look. The simplest kind of beginning," makes readers, as white people, think that "look" is quite convenient way to recognize and understand others as a first step. Furthermore, looking, recognizing, and knowing cause us to reconstruct an alternative world which is intentionally excluded by white and civilization community. Furthermore, through the whole of this essay, the narrator speaks of Watts as if he is physically standing on the street. Due to this narrative way, the narrator as a traveler moving among the city makes the readers feel as if they are standing in the city on his or her feet; in other words, this text gives the readers a simulated experience of Watts traveling. In this regard, it is reasonable for us to regard this text itself as a practical way to look and know real Watts.

However, Pynchon expresses this “look” as a kind of ambivalent approach; can we easily accomplish looking or knowing real Watts only through reading this text? Probably, Pynchon would answer half is Yes, and half is No. The author writes not only about the constructive way of look, but also invisibility of Watts. In the next section, we will observe the impossibility of looking at black people in Watts and how the look is prevented by white culture.

1. Looking at Black People in Watts

It is not impossible for us to think of one of the most characteristic features of Thomas Pynchon’s works as sympathy with “preterite” people who are abandoned by American society, capitalism, and God. Pynchon often sheds light on the abandoned people, detecting an alternative America as an ideal country where everyone can live happily. We can also confirm Pynchon’s this strategy in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In the climax scenes, Oedipa Maas, the main character, “looks” of preterite people with her eyes and now “the real America.” Therefore, Pynchon discovers a possibility in looking others and constructing the sympathy. However, it is extremely difficult to regard Pynchon’s this manifesto as his optimistic vision. He also writes about impossibility of “looking.” As Brian Mchale’s postmodern view reveals, “looking” (or paranoia view) can lead the character to epistemological impossibility. Mchale also points out that Pynchon’s 1960-70s works, such as *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, show us the transition from epistemological view to ontological one (7).

As we previously have confirmed, “A journey of mind of Watts” also focuses on “look.” However, what matters in this article is that Pynchon’s narrator turns his eyes on—look at—black people. As David Witzling points out, while this reportage can be evaluated because Pynchon seriously takes racial issues as the principal topic, his narrative is limited within white man’s perspective. Witzling considers his limited view as Pynchon’s “double consciousness” inherited from Norman Mailer (201). So, the narrator’s gazing at black people may mean his ambivalent attitude toward the black communities. As we have previously known, in Watts “reality” which dominates black people’s view is created by an artificial “ghetto” constructed by white culture. After all, black subject is excluded from the white community.

Pynchon’s ambivalent view can be confirmed in 1964’s short story, “The Secret Integration,” which referred to the racial problem between white and black cultures. In the conversation of white boys, we can find the racial dichotomy:

A week or so later Grover learned the other meaning for integration, from watching Huntley and Brinkley, the only television show he ever looked at. "It means white kids and colored kids in the same school," Grover said. "Then we're integrated," Tim said. (191)

In this Grover and Tim's conversation, a mathematics word "integration" is applied to blur the difference between the white and the black. In other words, it seems that the separation between racial differences is "integrated." However, to complicate matters, the word of integration is originally including the knowledge of western civilization. Thus, it is unavoidable to think that this ideal "integration" between the white and the black is created by white boy's point of view. Although Pynchon makes innocent white boys say this statement, we cannot deny his limited attitude toward black people. However, Pynchon continues to try to explain the real situation of Watts in the essay. In the next section, we will consider what is white "ghetto" in Watts. Pynchon particularly says the mass-media in Los Angeles which is represented as a kind of symbol of white culture.

2. How Mass-media in Watts Distorts People's "Look"

Pynchon says "much of white culture surrounds Watts," and the narrator looks at the skies, and finds out jets. He also says that its culture "looks like jets." More importantly, Pynchon expresses that those jets are "a little unreal," and "a little less than substantial" (78). In other words, Pynchon confesses that the jets, as a kind of symbol of white culture, dematerialize Watts. Furthermore, Pynchon depicts Watts as following:

For Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass-media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks. (78)

Pynchon here detects that the "less substantial" senses are created by "the mass media" such as "TV tube," "magazine photos," "radio jokes" and so on. Pynchon represents Watts controlled by mass media as a kind of "ghetto." Furthermore, he states that these mass culture "transmogrify" the reality of Watts into completely different something else (78). These sentences make it possible for us to think that mass media in L. A. has potential to distort human's gaze. So, visual things such as "color," "photos," and "TV" in L. A. can lead us not to correctly look at things. From the start of this reportage Pynchon consistently represents the city Watts with visual words; "white," "black," "dark" and so on. However, as we have

previously confirmed, “look” is an impossible way to know Watts because of mass media. Furthermore, transmogrified Watts is also abstracted from “substantiality.” At this point, it is not impossible to say that Pynchon apparently warns against this immaterialized situation.

The essay ends with the festival in order to celebrate Simon Rodia who this paper will mention later:

Along with theatrical and symphonic events, the festival also featured a roomful of sculptures fashioned entirely from found objects--found, symbolically enough, and in the Simon Rodia tradition, among the wreckage of the rioting had left. Exploiting textures of charred wood, twisted metal, fused glass, many of the works were all right, honest rebirths. In one corner, was this old, busted, hollow TV set with a rabbit-ears antenna on top; inside where its picture tube should have been, gazing out with scorched wiring threaded like electronic ivy among its crevices and sockets, was a human skull. The name of the piece was "The Late, Late, Late Show" (84).

In these sentences, Pynchon intends to picture how human is captured in the mass media world. For instance, there is “a human skull” inside the “picture tube.” And “scorched wiring threaded like electronic ivy” is twining around “eye sockets of the human skull.” These pictorial expressions show that humans are transformed into the object/human skull by these media technologies and, as the result of the objectification, human’s ability to look is distorted and invalidated. Therefore, in these sentences Pynchon implies that the objectified human cannot correctly see the real Watts with his eyes. However, on the other hand, we cannot fail to find that Pynchon depicts “the TV set” with an antenna like “a rabbit-ears.” For this animalized expression, the TV is transformed from an inanimate object to something like an animated one. That is to say, in the last parts of “A Journey into the Mind of Watts,” while persons are to be inanimate things, things are to be animate ones. Furthermore, through the representation of the relationship between humans and technology. Pynchon creates a mysterious world where things and persons are blended together.

3. Inanimate human and Animate Things

While Pynchon realistically represents an inanimate person, he paradoxically tries to show “animated” non-human at the same time. David Seed argues that in this reportage Pynchon depicts human’s mental and the city in a contrasting manner (198). Although Seed’s statement is very plausible, he regards human’s mental expressions and objective ones as the “contrast.” However, it is quite hard to think of the relation between human and things as a

type of the binary model. Because, as we have previously observed, Pynchon represents that human and things are blended together through this article. Instead of seeing the relation between human and thing as the dualistic opposition, it may be more persuasive to argue that the difference is to be erased on the rhetorical level.

In this reportage, Pynchon describes “Watts tower” as a kind of ideal art object. This tower had been created by Simon Rodia, who is an Italian immigrant in the period from 1921 to 1955. It is said that Rodia made this tower to put together waste and scrap such as irons and woods. As Mike Davis points out, Rodia calls this tower “Nestro Pueblo” which means “our home” in English. Pynchon’s writing about this tower is quite positive:

An Italian immigrant named Simon Rodia spent 30 years gathering some of it up and converting a little piece of the neighborhood along 107th Street into the famous Watts Towers, perhaps his own dream of how things should have been: a fantasy of fountains, boats, tall openwork spires, encrusted with a dazzling mosaic of Watts debris (78).

Pynchon here regards “a dazzling mosaic of Watts debris” as “how things should have been.” In this regard, he thinks Watts Towers have an ideal union between things and also function as a kind of “renaissance art” which transforms inanimate things into animate ones. As Joseph Slade observes, this tower also symbolizes abandoned people who are excluded by American society. At this point, Watts towers represent not only waste things, but also excluded people, the preterite. Therefore, it seems not impossible for us to think that human and things are also blended together.

Pynchon also depicts technological things as if they are also excluded and ignored. Pynchon’s narrator says that: “next to the Towers, along the old Pacific Electric tracks, kids are busy every day busting more bottles on the street rails. But Simon Rodia is dead, and now the junk just accumulates.”(78) In this quote, Pynchon refers to “Pacific Electric tracks” which had been depicted as monstrous things by Frank Norris’s *Octopus* in the turn of the century. Norris’s characters fear these rails track to eat up their job. Pynchon’s this essay, however, regards the trails as excluded things. It does not seem impossible to guess that Pynchon here detects the connection between things and human: Pynchon thinks both of the ignored person and abandoned things as if they have a companion.

From the start of this reportage, Pynchon places sympathy and connection as the significant theme. For instance, the narrator says that:

The killing of Leonard Deadwyler has once again brought it all into sharp focus; brought back longstanding pain, reminded everybody of how very often the cop does approach you with his revolver ready, so that nothing he does with it can then really be accidental; of how, especially, at night, everything can suddenly reduce to a matter of reflexes: your life trembling in the crook of a cop's finger because it is dark, and Watts, and the history of this place and these times makes it impossible for the cop to come on any different, or for you to hate him any less. Both of you are caught in something neither of you wants, and yet night after night, with casualties or without, these traditional scenes continue to be played out all over the south-central part of this city (35).

In these sentences, Pynchon uses the words such as "everybody" and "you." The rhetoric makes readers, white persons, feel as if they are walking on Watts's streets. To construct reader's connection, this rhetoric functions as the very significant means. And its connection creates a kind of collectivism.

In this work, the attitude toward "connection" does not have nothing to do with the 1960s political movement. For example, Pynchon here expresses "boys wearing Malcom's hats." This writing implies the radical atmosphere of the 1960s civil right movements. Newton, a main member of the Black Panther Party, argues that: "there is an old African saying, "I am We." If you met an African in ancient times and asked him who he was, he would reply, "I am We." This is revolutionary suicide: we, all of us are the one and the multitude." (359) Needless to say, Newton's sentences emphasize the collectives, "We." And this collectivism has something to do with Pynchon's transformation from *The Crying of Lot 49* to *Gravity's Rainbow*.

In the last scene of *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon chooses Los Angeles as the site into which a V2 rocket, a nuclear weapon, fires. And in the scene Zapp, a parody character of the President Nixon, drives on the highway road:

The Santa Monica Freeway is traditionally the scene of every form of automotive folly known to man. It is not white and well-bred like the San Diego, nor as treacherously engineered as the Pasadena, nor quite as ghetto-suicidal as the Harbor. No, one hesitates to say it, but the Santa Monica is a freeway for freaks, and they are all out today, making it difficult for you to follow the Manager's entertaining story. You cannot repress a certain shudder of distaste, almost reflexive Consciousness of Kind, in their presence (755).

Pynchon's narrator here calls the city along the Harbor Freeway "ghetto-suicidal" which can be identified as Watts district. In addition to it, as David Seed observes, Pynchon emphasizes "Consciousness of Kind" which is an essential part of social union.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, there is a significant model: We system and They system. This model is very helpful to understand Pynchon's works. The relation between We system and They system can be placed as the Puritan divisions, the Pterite and the Elect. And also, in *V.*, Pynchon thinks of "inanimate world" as "Them" (345). He here argues that "They" includes something to transform animate things into inanimate ones. And yet, as we have previously observed, in the discourse of "A Journey into the Mind of Watts," Pynchon intends to argue that human and things are blended together. If so, can we distinguish the animated from the inanimate? Although Edward Mendelson defines *Gravity's Rainbow* as "encyclopedic novel," he also argues "an encyclopedist redefines a culture's sense of what it means to be human." Furthermore, Takayoshi Ishiwari argues that in *Gravity's Rainbow*, a paranoia subject cannot "look" at something hidden within World War II, and Pynchon strategically uses many paranoia subjects in order to construct the collective consciousness. And "A Journey into the Mind of Watts" also uses the collective narrative. Through the reportage, Pynchon uses many people's angles: "kids," "girls," "boys," "office worker" and so on. With their narratives, the real situation of Watts starts to be revealed. The collective narrative, including many people, functions as the means to get to know the real Watts. As Watts Towers are depicted as "how things should have been," this reportage itself is a kind of collage constructed by the fragmentary people's narratives.

As Watts Towers symbolizes "the renaissance of the waste," this essay itself also transforms inanimate into animate with anthropomorphism. As with anthropomorphism, Barbara Johnson argues that: "The parallel processes of turning persons into things does not offer itself in the form of a figure, but suggests that figures that increase humanness are by nature working against a decline of humanness and a thingification that go on all the time and have only accelerated with commodity capitalism" (23). Pynchon also depicts Watts as if the city is a human. For instance, "Watts is tough; has been able to resist the unreal. If there is any drift away from reality, it is by way of mythmaking. As this summer warms up, last August's riot is being remembered less as chaos and more as art" (84). And, more importantly, Pynchon's narrator says that "it is next to impossible to understand how Watts may truly feel about violence"(84). Imagining not what Watts appears to be, but "how Watts truly feel,"

Pynchon tries to know the mind of Watts. And also, needless to say, the title itself, “A Journey on into the Mind of Watts,” is a type of anthropomorphic expression.

Conclusion

As this paper have proved, Pynchon’s this reportage implies that the binary relation between human and non-human starts to be erased in the anthropomorphic way. Furthermore, in the work the symbolical art-objects, “Watts Towers,” extremely summarize the deconstructed relationship between humans and things. And also, we cannot overlook the fact that Pynchon optimistically evaluates Watts Towers, the material objects. Through this essay, he depicts that white people in Watts cannot look at the truth. And humans is expressed like a thing. However, when persons are dehumanized, things start to be a kind of human: Watts start to be animate things. In Pynchon’s this text, things and persons are blended together. Therefore, it is possible for us to consider that in the reportage Thomas Pynchon paradoxically finds the possibilities in the materiality in order to resist against inanimate worlds.

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