**“*Bleeding Edge*, Neoliberalism and the 9/11 Novel”**

This article argues that Thomas Pynchon’s novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013) can be read as part of the canon of “9/11 novels” in unexpected and productive ways. *Bleeding Edge* features clear links to the plots, themes and even in sections, styles, of early 9/11 novels by Don DeLillo as well as Claire Messud and Jay McInerney – authors who generally occupy different literary terrain. Pynchon adopts one of the key shared conceits of these early novels, the ambiguous post-9/11 return to normalcy, which as David Simpson has pointed out, gestures toward both “resilience” and “indifference” (206). *Bleeding Edge* brings this conceit into critical and historical focus and I argue that this is achieved through the novel’s intertwined historical narrative of 9/11 and the internet, a narrative which functions as a critique of neoliberal ideology. This is not to say that *Bleeding Edge* is, as Joseph Darlington argues, “the first attempt in Anglophone literature to open up and explore the events of over a decade earlier, September 11, 2001, as a historical event” (242). This assertion ignores important novels like Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* (2011) or Porochista Khakpour’s *The Last Illusion* (2014); though Darlington is certainly right to point out that Pynchon’s novel, like Waldman’s and Khakpour’s, operates as a corrective to the way 9/11 was “severed ideologically from both its causes and its effects” (242). Instead, it is my contention that *Bleeding Edge’s* unlikelylinks to early 9/11 novels, assist it in exploring and challenging this severing.

In addition to this return to normalcy, its depiction of trauma and romantic and parental relationships – also major preoccupations of the early 9/11 novel – draws attention to both a societal retreat from critical thinking and to literary complicity in this retreat. I am not suggesting that it is operating in a mode it ultimately aims to expose but that it uses the mode reflexively and alongside a rich historical narrative of the transformation of the internet. *Bleeding Edge* represents, then, a decisive turn in what David Cowart calls “the 9/11 mini genre,” but also occupies a unique place in Thomas Pynchon’s oeuvre in the specific way it references other contemporary novelists.

Readers of *Bleeding Edge* may have also recalled, in certain sections, Don DeLillo’s early essay response to 9/11, “In the Ruins of the Future,” first published in *Harper’s* in December 2001. DeLillo’s ranging discussion of “narratives” and “counter-narratives” argued that “the internet is a counter-narrative, shaped in part by rumour, fantasy, and mystical reverberation” (35). One passage in Pynchon’s novel is particularly similar; shortly after the attacks occur, the omniscient narrator identifies the internet as the locus of the many conspiracy theories surrounding 9/11: “Out in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace, among the billions of self-resonant fantasies, dark possibilities emerge” (327). Despite the interesting similarities, it is the use of “anarchism” which is important here, as *Bleeding Edge* builds a narrative of the internet into its story of 9/11: once anarchic (and with anarchic pockets persevering), briefly democratic, and soon after 9/11 occurs, almost entirely corporate.[[1]](#endnote-1) DeepArcher, the novel’s deep web interface, which, I will argue, represents a vital strand of its rhetoric, moves from utopian openness to a now familiar milieu: “Yuppified duty-free shops, some for offshore brands…Advertising everywhere” (354).

In *Bleeding Edge*, the before and after of 9/11 is precipitated by the bursting of the dot com bubble, and the traumatic aftermath of the attacks overlaps with this. This means that the novel’s depiction of the immediate post-9/11 period also foregrounds the irrevocable corruption of the internet by the superpowers of global capitalism – what several characters refer to as “late capitalism.”[[2]](#endnote-2) This rhetoric is neatly expressed by the disillusioned hacker, Eric Outfield: “keyboards and screens turning into nothin but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage… and it won’t end till the Internet—the real one, the dream, the promise—is destroyed” (432). This overlapping is typically Pynchonian in the sense that, as Cowart points out, he “favors indirect representation of events so immense or infamous as to have created their own mythology” (n.p.). The novel’s story of the internet is no less seismic than its story of 9/11, and these narratives are shown to be mutually distracting. The impact of 9/11 mutes a striking depiction of the internet as simultaneously characterized by utopian possibilities and extreme corporate greed. The milieus of the tech sector and various linked subcultures from gaming communities to hacking groups, ensures that, even after 9/11 occurs in the text and characters are dealing with its attendant traumas, the reader encounters a multi-faceted aftermath.

*Bleeding Edge* is a New York novel, but while the Manhattan settings of previous 9/11 novels have meant that characters have belonged exclusively to privileged parts of society, Pynchon’s New York is different. *Bleeding Edge* also explores the “Yupper Westside,” but its underworld and Silicon Alley settings create space for Pynchon to map out the neoliberal currents of private sector and state collusion that pulse in the historical backdrop to the attacks, and which are unseen in previous 9/11 novels. However, while *Bleeding Edge* charts new territory through this intertwined narrative, the way it adopts the dominant tropes of the “9/11 novel” is equally striking. Despite the strengths of its critique and despite the ways in which it functions as a “neoliberal novel,” as defined by Johansen and Karl, this article elucidates the benefits of locating it within the canon of 9/11 novels.[[3]](#endnote-3) By situating *Bleeding Edge* in this context we can trace a line of continuity in the literary response to 9/11 which amplifies and contextualises Pynchon’s critique of neoliberalism and emphasises his departures from the early texts while reminding us of their circumscribed approaches. The following analysis will begin the novel’s depiction neoliberalism and then outline the implications of its evocation of early 9/11 novels in this context.

**9/11 Conspiracies and Neoliberalism**

*Bleeding Edge* is ostensibly a story of conspiracy, though its conspiracy narrative is essentially a lens through which it examines neoliberal ideology. The overlapping conspiracy stories certainly move beyond the reductive “truther narratives” that, as Peter Knight has argued, are “often underpinned…by an ideology of American exceptionalism,” in the same ways that the official narratives are (167). The narrative begins when protagonist Maxine, a decertified fraud investigator, is approached by documentary filmmaker Reg Despard, who is making a corporate film for an IT security firm, Hashslingrz, headed by “boy billionaire,” Gabriel Ice (10). This opens up a web of connected plots that reveal connections between Hashlingrz, a mysterious Middle Eastern organization, and a video depicting training exercises for the planned launch of Stinger Missiles from a New York rooftop. The missile plot is somehow connected to Hashslingrz, and to the shadowy agent Nicholas Windust, who may be working for both Ice and the US government (or rogue elements within it). An adjacent conspiracy theory emerges when Maxine’s husband, a market trader, notices a “sudden abnormal surge of put options on United Airlines,” followed by a similar occurrence with American Airlines, on September 8 (315). When 9/11 happens in the text, the convoluted conspiracy plot is further complicated by theories introduced from various sources including Maxine’s father and brother, an ex-Mossad agent, and from her friends Heidi Czornak, a professor of popular culture and March Kelleher, a longtime political activist and “weblogger.” Maxine’s father ultimately takes a position on collusion that begins to represent the novel’s: “these guys are WASPs, Mormons, Skull and Bones, secretive by nature. Trained sometimes since birth, never to run off at the mouth. If discipline exists anywhere it’s among them. So of course it’s possible” (325). *Bleeding Edge* wants readers to register the possibility or even likelihood of conspiracy but also, to signal that there are underlying issues at play – specifically the structures of neoliberalism.

Of even greater importance to the novel’s movement beyond conspiracy, are the views of March and Heidi. They are Maxine’s closest friends though she is very competitive with them – an aspect of her character that is a product of neoliberal ideology. Their importance is evidenced by their prominence in Maxine’s internal world: the way she continually speculates as to their views and opinions during key episodes and imagines scenarios featuring them. They motivate Maxine and play a significant role in driving the narrative. In one passage, their voices converge when something March says evokes, in Maxine’s mind, something that Heidi had said recently. March is showing Maxine a dollar bill that she received in change, which has an inscription in the margins reading: “World Trade Center was destroyed by CIA – Bush Senior’s CIA is making Bush Jr. Prez for life and a hero” (322). This exchange with March triggers Maxine’s memory of a comment Heidi had made: “these are the places we should be looking, not in newspapers or television but at the margins, graffiti, uncontrolled utterances, bad dreamers who sleep in public and scream in their sleep” (322). This highlights the importance of Maxine’s friend’s views but also demonstrates her engagement with mainstream, subcultural and marginal views. Despite this, Maxine has been seen as one-dimensional. Michael Chabon argues that many characters in *Bleeding Edge* remain “deft caricatures,” a criticism that is regularly leveled at Pynchon’s recent post-9/11 novels (7). While Maxine is more than a stock, genre character, or “standard issue private eye,” she is undoubtedly richer when we account for her closeness and fixations with March and Heidi (7). She is a pragmatist and the more radical ideas of March and Heidi draw out her investigation. Heidi’s rhetoric is particularly politicized: “11 September infantilized this country. It had a chance to grow up, instead it chose to default back to childhood” (336).

Though *Bleeding Edge* does not subscribe to a particular conspiracy theory, Maxine’s, March’s and Heidi’s views and an array of voices from the margins articulating suspicion, suggest that some conspiring has occurred; and at the very least, that the “official narrative” is being used to advance an agenda. The novel’s depiction of conspiracy is most productively understood as a complex network of powers and interests converging vividly around the agendas of the Alden Pyle-esque Nicholas Windust (the novel’s symbol of neoliberalism. Knight’s discussion of more fruitful ways of theorizing conspiracy is usefully applied here. Knight argues that the primary 9/11 conspiracy narratives are not as subversive or “outrageous” as they may seem: “they share many of the same ideological underpinnings about causality, blame, and American exceptionalism that prop up the orthodox account,” and “often maintain an abiding faith in American innocence and the fundamental soundness of the system of government” (192). Knight goes on to show how these theories generally point to a singular dark force (often President G.W. Bush), and in doing so mirrored the Bush Administration’s own pattern of identifying singular antagonists in the War on Terror.

Knight posits a model of theorizing conspiracy that shows “power as decentered and dispersed into a vast network of interlocking vested interests within the wider process of globalization, a picture that cannot easily be pinned down to an evil cabal, even if at the surface level it is presented in those traditional terms” (193). This argument is twofold: firstly, conspiracy will inevitably be plural and divergent, involving networks of conspirers or perpetrators with different agendas, rather than an “evil cabal.” Secondly, neoliberal economic forces and systems of government are a much richer subject for scrutiny. In *Bleeding Edge*, the intertwined narratives of the internet and 9/11 elicit precisely this kind of scrutiny. This rhetoric is occasionally explicit; for example, Shawn, Maxine’s therapist rants against global capitalism in a conventional account of Chalmers Johnson’s “blowback theory”:

…that was the moment, Maxi. Not when everything changed. When everything was revealed…Showing us exactly what we’ve become, what we’ve been all the time…living on borrowed time. Getting away cheap. Never caring about who’s paying for it, who’s starving somewhere else all jammed together so we can have cheap food, a house, a yard in the burbs…planetwide more every day, the payback keeps gathering. (340)

While *Bleeding Edge* is less concerned with “blaming” globalization for 9/11 than providing a broad critique of neoliberalism, Shawn’s views are endorsed throughout the novel. For example, when Maxine meditates on the landscape from a boat in Fresh Kill, “toxicity central,” home to “everything the city has rejected so it can keep on pretending to be itself” (167): “for maybe a minute and a half she feels free – a least at the edge of possibilities, like whatever the Europeans who first sailed up the Passaic River must have felt, before the long parable of corporate sins and corruption that overtook it” (169). Here she reiterates Shawn’s views, begins to reflect on her complicity, and crucially, situates this rhetoric historically. These allusions to “getting away cheap,” “living on borrowed time,” “corporate sins” and “corruption” are a clear manifestation of Knight’s ideas about the systems that the network of conspiracies exist within, and this contributes to the numbness Maxine displays by the novel’s end. The post-9/11 lassitude that pervades the final third of *Bleeding Edge* is fundamentally located in Maxine’s and other characters’ affective responses to neoliberalism, rather than, strictly, post-9/11 trauma. Indeed, Maxine’s post-9/11 inwardness is particularly visible through her relationship to Nicholas Windust.

**9/11 and “Neolib Mischief”**

This section contextualizes and examines what I have called Maxine’s “post-9/11 lassitude” and I argue that the final third of the novel deals simultaneously with the aftermath of 9/11 and, through DeepArcher, the commercialization of the internet, narratives which cohere around the symbolic Nicholas Windust. Sascha Pöhlmann has pointed out, that “Maxine is as morally complex as any of Pynchon’s characters” (n.p.). Windust is the crucial factor in this complexity and Maxine’s attraction to him highlights her tacit approval of neoliberalism. Windust is possibly an FBI agent or CIA spook, though Maxine determines that he is “something worse, if possible”: “If there is a brother-or God forbid sisterhood of neoliberal terrorists, Windust has been there from the jump” (108). [[4]](#endnote-4) Maxine acquires a dossier on his career as a “field operative” which outlines his record of what she calls “neolib mischief” and reveal a catalogue of practices that exemplify neoliberalism:

Whenever a government at the behest of the IMF sold off an asset, he agreed either to go in for a percentage or, later on, with more leverage, to buy it outright…A power plant goes private for pennies on the dollar. Windust becomes silent partner. Wells that supply regional water systems, easements across tribal lands for power lines, clinics dedicated to tropical ailments unheard of in the developed world – Windust takes a modest position. If one day, untypically idle, he should pull out his portfolio to see what he’s got he’d find himself with controlling interests in an oil field, a refinery, an educational system, an airline, a power grid, each in in a different newly privatized part of the world. (109)

If Windust’s dossier alone characterizes him as a neoliberal archetype, then his charismatic personality makes him an embodiment of how neoliberalism is tacitly approved of by middle class, socially liberal citizens like Maxine. Maxine’s simultaneous attraction to and disgust at Windust reminds us of how neoliberalism is, as Johansen and Karl point out, “notoriously good at hiding behind a ‘common sense’ ethic of competition and individualism” – perhaps Maxine’s defining characteristics (204).

Maxine knows of Windust’s “portfolio of pain and damage” but is somehow drawn to him. Though she is characterized as an intelligent, self-aware feminist, in an unsettling sex scene she is deferential to his brutality. This reveals a conflictedness at the heart of her character relating to her simultaneous embrace and criticism of the social realities of neoliberalism. That Maxine thinks of Lester Traipse, a character who she suspects Windust has killed, while they are having sex, consolidates the symbolism of the scene as it is so starkly at odds with her tendency to generally, as Pöhlmann states, “do the right thing” (n.p.). When she leaves his flat she ruminates on the feeling that while she has no idea why she had sex with him, she wouldn’t hesitate to “ask to be brought back to the homicidal bagman in his dark savage squat, for more of the same” (261). That she is magnetically drawn to Windust while being simultaneously disgusted by him is repeated throughout the novel and effects a wider criticism of the way society is seduced by the neoliberal ideology he represents.

Windust’s magnetism is further elucidated in a meeting between Maxine and Xiomara, Windust’s first wife, near the end of the novel. Maxine learns about Xiomara’s time with Windust in her native Guatemala, where they lived until Windust fled the country after being betrayed by the “neoliberal scum he’d oozed into town with” (444). Xiomara’s account presents the young Windust as an Alden Pyle innocent, acting on misguided ideological convictions. Like Graham Greene’s famous character, Windust has elements of national allegory: Xiomara describes him as a young “entry level kid who didn’t know how much trouble his soul was in” (442). Additionally, Maxine’s investigation and her interest in Windust reveal other curious aspects of his life that reinforce his symbolism: we learn for example, that he has a long professional history of giving visiting lectures, and that he has been motivated by “raw ideology” more than greed.

After the meeting with Xiomara, Maxine meditates on Windust and all that he represents which leads, on the next page, to a scene where she is fatigued and disturbed by the world she inhabits, a feeling that is linked to observing and reflecting on ordinary aspects of her life in the neoliberal present. Precipitously, her competitiveness and materialism gives way to disillusionment. Maxine describes the scene at the gym she has recently joined, where she witnesses the “nightly spectacle of yups on treadmills, plodding to nowhere while watching CNN or the sports channels” (448). This is reminiscent of Maxine’s response to Windust’s death a few pages earlier, where she is unusually contemplative and maudlin:

Yet here, turning into some version of herself she doesn’t recognize without deliberation she watches her own hand drift out into the wind off the river, and tries from the absence of hope, the failure of redemption, to summon a magical escape…what she ends up doing is somehow passing through the shadowy copless cross streets to Tenth Avenue and finding headed uptown a curb to curb abundance of lighted alphanumerics on cheerful yellow rooftops, travelling the darkening hour as if the pavement like a black river is itself flowing away forever uptown, and all the taxis and trucks and suburbanite cars only being carried along…. (412-13)

Maxine “doesn’t recognize” herself, as she moves “without deliberation,” without “hope,” observing the uncontrollable river of traffic flowing uptown. Both of these scenes see Maxine reflecting on a world that she enthusiastically participates in, but which is, she feels, beyond her control and deeply problematic. This is also a New York that is quickly returning to its normal rhythms after 9/11 and these passages implicitly ask the question posed by Simpson about whether this “is a tribute to the resilience of ordinary life or a more damning indictment of the sheer indifference and self-centeredness of the homeland mainstream” (206). However, where *The Good Life, The Emperor’s Children* and *Falling Man* were singularly focussed on the domestic circumstances of their protagonists, making this question difficult answer, *Bleeding Edge* asks this question in the context of Maxine’s intense preoccupation with Windust and his “neolib mischief.”

**DeepArcher and the Corruption of the Internet**

My analysis of the connections between *Bleeding Edge* and these early 9/11 novels will cohere in the final two sections of this article but I turn now to the internet and particularly to Maxine’s immersion into DeepArcher, the immersive Second Life-style online world that is initially untarnished by advertising or online markets. Maxine becomes a regular user of DeepArcher and the novel tracks the way it evolves (it occupies all of chapters 7 and 33 and other sections in between) through her experiences. This is vital to my wider arguments in the sense that *Bleeding Edge* asks this question about the post-9/11 return to normality in the context of the novel’s ongoing discussion of the corporatization of the internet, something that connects nearly every character. As Jonathan Lethem points out, “Pynchon is interested in the mystery of wide and abiding complicity, not some abruptly punctured innocence,” and it is the internet, in *Bleeding Edge,* that rather than being, simply, the locus of myriad conspiracy theories, becomes the heart of the post-9/11 malaise that is so acutely felt by Maxine. The internet is both a symbol and tool of this “wide and abiding complicity,” and it is presented in *Bleeding Edge* as particularly American in the way its democratic possibilities are corrupted by capital. This trope of shattered possibility fuses the novel’s story of the internet to its story of 9/11.

Mitchum Huehls argues that: “*Bleeding Edge* is a novel in which technological innovation crests, crashes, and leaves a different world in its wake. Everything changes not so much because of 9/11 but because of the Internet” (866). However, while Huehls suggests that *Bleeding Edge* shows how the internet makes the machinations of global capitalism visible to those who wish to understand them, it is my contention that Pynchon is historicizing the way the internet has been shaped by capital. *Bleeding Edge* dramatizes significant aspects of research by scholars such as Guy Aitchison, Tim Wu, and Robert McChesney – particularly in *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (2013). This work moves away from a paradigm that has dominated internet scholarship, what Aitchison calls the “stale debate between celebrants and sceptics.” McChesney argues that this debate has been characterized by tendencies to favour “micro issues,” to “avoid making any larger claims about the broad role of the internet in society,” and crucially, doesn’t directly engage with the corporatization of the internet (4). McChesney cites “ignorance about really existing capitalism and an underappreciation of how capitalism dominates social life” as the central flaw in both sides of the “celebrant / sceptic” debate.

At the heart of McChesney’s rhetoric is a deceptively simplistic narrative of innovation to corporatization that reaches its climax in 2000-2001: he cites the merger between Time Warner-AOL of January 2000 as the “nadir” of this corporatization (122). This narrative begins in the 1990s when there was, as Aitchison notes, a widespread belief that the internet could be a “utopian space that would usher in an age of democracy, open culture and participation” (n.p.). However, as McChesney points out, this period was simultaneously characterized by corporate growth: the “1990s were a giddy moment…Capitalism and the Internet seemed a marriage made in heaven” (108). The quasi-dialectical narrative of innovation and incorporation, which one *Bleeding Edge* character, discussing the hard choice between “selling out” or being a credible innovator calls the “classic dotcom dilemma,” has ultimately meant that the democratic ideal has been quashed by corporate agendas (33). This is what Eric Outfield is dismayed at in his rant about the death of the internet.

The prevalence of this narrative is neatly summarised in Tim Wu’s *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (2011): “from somebody's hobby to somebody's industry; from jury-rigged contraption to slick production marvel; from a freely accessible channel to one strictly controlled by a single corporation or cartel – from open to closed system” (6). This is the allegorical story of DeepArcher in *Bleeding Edge*. There are numerous minor characters like Outfield, who express dismay at the corporatization of the internet, but DeepArcher provides a narrative account. It is a carefully plotted narrative that sees Maxine become steadily more and more intoxicated by the possibilities it raises and, simultaneously, increasingly aware of its transformation. When we are first introduced to DeepArcher it evokes the utopian space the internet was often seen as in its infancy: “the visuals you think you’re seeing are being contributed by users all over the world. All for free. Hacker ethic. Each one doing their piece of it, then just vanishing uncredited” (69). We also are reminded that “it is not as if it has a conscience, DeepArcher, it’s just there, users can be anybody, no moral questionnaire,” an allusion, perhaps to the darker sides of this anarchic vision (218). Crucially, though, DeepArcher is hacked into and is slowly “colonized” by corporations seeking to profit from it. By chapter 33 this process is complete and Maxine notices the “Advertising everywhere. On walls, on the clothing and skin of crowd extras”; she even describes “pop ups out of the invisible and into your face” (354). We also learn that the corporatization of DeepArcher has been perpetrated by the novel’s villains: “Gabriel Ice, the feds, fed sympathizers, other forces unknown who’ve had their eye on the site” (355). *Bleeding Edge* places great emphasis on this narrative which is even reiterated as a “nerds vs. jocks” story where the democratic nerds are beaten by the corporate jocks: “the nerds lost out once again and the jocks won…with that ol’ Wall Street stupidity, which in the end is unbeatable… they’re synced in to them deep market rhythms” (48). The story of DeepArcher is a powerful allegory for the history of the internet as Pynchon explicitly connects it to private sector and state collusion; what Aitchison calls the “tech-state nexus” (n.p.).

But what does this mean for *Bleeding Edge* as a 9/11 novel? Can we productively compare the aftermath(s) in Pynchon’s novel to the aftermath in other 9/11 novels? For Pynchon, whose characters were never likely to have post-9/11 epiphanies, the return to normalcy is also the acceptance of complicity in the neoliberal present. I’d like to suggest that the intertwined befores and afters of *Bleeding Edge* are shown to be mutually distracting or blinding, an aspect of the text that goes some way toward explaining Maxine’s complicity. This notion of “abruptly punctured innocence,” which catalyzed the “everything’s changed” narrative of 9/11, captured the world’s attention at a moment in the history of the internet, when its full potential in global markets was being harnessed.[[5]](#endnote-5) Conversely, as dramatized in *Bleeding Edge*, the internet was a numbing refuge where people could “lose themselves,” in the traumatic aftermath of 9/11.

**Returns to Normality**

One of the first things that links *Bleeding Edge* to McInerney’s *The Good Life* (2005) and Messud’s *The Emperor’s* *Children* (2006) is dramatic irony. All three texts are “countdown narratives” and this particular kind of irony represents new territory for Pynchon. It emphasises the before and after, encouraging the reader to consider post-event change. The reader anticipates the event and is poised to discover its effects. Another thing that *Bleeding Edge* shares with these novels, and with DeLillo’s *Falling Man* (2007) is that it operates a relationship narrative as a kind of barometer to measure change. This has been noted by Cowart, who states that: “Pynchon foregrounds a dysfunctional or faltering marriage, perhaps because husband and wife are themselves twin towers that marital discord threatens to bring down” (n.p.). However, Pynchon’s relationship narrative includes important departures and moves away from aspects of those novels that evinced substantial criticism from commentators like Pankaj Mishra who, writing specifically about *The Good Life*, *The Emperor’s Children* and *Falling Man* in an early survey of 9/11 fiction asked: “are we meant to think of marital discord…as a metaphor for post-9/11 America?” (6). Mishra’s critique was echoed in an article by Richard Gray, who argued that these same early novels: “simply assimilate the unfamiliar into familiar structures. The crisis is in every sense of the word, domesticated” (30).[[6]](#endnote-6)

The relationship between Maxine and her estranged husband Horst is similar to the story of DeLillo’s protagonists, Keith and Lianne. In *Falling Man*, the estranged couple re-unite after the attacks, with Keith literally walking out of the burning tower and back into Lianne’s apartment. In *Bleeding Edge*, after the attacks Horst moves his “sleeping arrangements into Maxine’s room, to the inconvenience of neither” (332). However, the difference between Pynchon’s relationship narrative and those in *Falling Man, The Good Life* and *The Emperor’s Children*, is the way the period of post 9/11 re-evaluation and reflection unfolds. The latter three, in different ways set up periods of intense re-evaluation and change only to revert back to pre-9/11 normality, restoring equilibrium. In *Falling Man* Keith describes “what he’d lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls” (137). Similarly, Lianne “listened to what he said and let him know she was listening, mind and body, because listening is what would save them this time” (104). In *The Good Life* Corrine and Luke begin an affair, searching for meaningful love after years of domestic stagnation. However, after a short period of intense re-evaluation and reflection, both texts show the couples to revert back to the way they were before 9/11. These relationships, set up as measurements of change after 9/11, return to their starting points. In *Falling Man,* Keith leaves again and Lianne is “ready to be alone, in reliable calm, she and the kid, the way they were before the planes appeared” (236). In *The Good Life*, following the collapse of the affairs and return to pre-9/11 normality, the narrator states: “The satori flash of acute wakefulness and connectedness that followed the initial confrontation with mortality in September was already fading behind them” (353). This return to normalcy is even more marked in *The Emperor’s Children* as 9/11 happens late in the novel after episodes of significant domestic upheaval in the lives of its characters. Not only do we see a restoration of equilibrium in their relationships after various affairs and deceptions, which culminate simultaneously with 9/11, but we can see this in spite of the attacks. Things return to normal despite major disruptions and the ostensible new seriousness of life after 9/11 doesn’t shed any light on these disruptions either. It is this restoration of equilibrium that, again, prompted Simpson’s question of: “whether this response (or lack of it) is a tribute to the resilience of ordinary life or a more damning indictment of the sheer indifference and self-centeredness of the homeland mainstream” (216).That Simpson is unable to conclusively state, here, how these novelsactually position themselves in response to this question is because of their lack of explicit politics.

While *Bleeding Edge* clearly participates in the relationship or marriage trope that has been so prevalent in the 9/11 novel, it is not, strictly, a “domestic” novel. And while it contains a similar restoration of equilibrium, the ambiguities about whether this is linked to “indifference” or “resilience,” in previous novels tilt markedly toward “indifference” here. Maxine does feel “discombobulated,” and this is explicitly tied to feelings of complicity with the forces of neoliberalism that the novel’s network of conspiring reveals. Her subsequent return to domestic norms, therefore, is damning. Crucially, the link between her domestic sphere and the novel’s politics is made through her relationship with Nicholas Windust. That the impact of the trauma of 9/11 is measured in the domestic sphere is a familiar conceit and again it is striking how clearly this aspect of Pynchon’s narrative deploys the established conventions of the 9/11 novel. However, Windust’s intrusion into Maxine’s domestic (and professional) worlds represents the entrance of the discourse of neoliberalism into *Bleeding Edge* and to the 9/11 novel canon.

**Before and After Irony**

Like all of Pynchon’s novels, *Bleeding Edge* is humorous and playful, and includes puns, odd character and place names, song lyrics and other references to popular and unpopular culture. Consequently the compatibility of the novel’s subjects and tone has been questioned. For example in the *New York Times* review, Lethem expresses concern that “his slippery insouciance,” and “relentless japery, risk being tonally at odds with the subject” (n.p.). Though recent major works of Pynchon scholarship, such as Samuel Thomas’s *Pynchon and the Political* (2007) have moved away from a focus solely on Pynchon’s postmodernist aesthetics, in order to emphasize the coexistence of an ethics and politics with “play and textual hijinks,” it is necessary to address style here in order to consolidate my argument about the novel’s critique of neoliberalism (12). Of equal importance, though, is the fact that irony and the alleged “death of irony” after 9/11, is a prominent theme in *Bleeding Edge*. This is a significant point in establishing the idea that *Bleeding Edge* both assumes some of the dominant tropes of the 9/11 novel, and pushes the “mini-genre” into new territory. A key part of this is the way it addresses ideas of a new, post-9/11 seriousness central themes in *The Good Life*, *The Emperor’s Children* and *Falling Man*.

The post-9/11 death of irony was most visibly proffered by Roger Rosenblatt in an article in *Time* which first appeared on September 24, 2001. Rosenblatt saw the death of irony as a positive outcome of 9/11 stating that: “For some 30 years…the good folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing was to be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real” (n.p.). While this view was widely contested there is no doubt that American writers, in particular, were compelled to use more serious tones and realist aesthetics in the wake of 9/11. McInerney noted in *The Observer*, on the fifth anniversary of the attacks, that “for a while the idea of invented characters and alternate realities seemed trivial and frivolous and suddenly, horribly outdated” (n.p.). Re-evaluation of the “important things in life” became the central theme in *The Good Life* and features in most early 9/11 novels. Messud’s characters in *The Emperor’s Children* also go through this period of re-evaluation and the literary world they inhabit means that this notion of a new seriousness is directly explored. One character on the verge of launching a new satirical magazine abandons the project because “nobody wanted such a thing in this new world, a frivolous, satirical thing” (542).

*Bleeding Edge* explores the ideas of a new seriousness and the death of irony in a range of situations. When Maxine meets Driscoll Padget after 9/11, she initially suspects her change of hairstyle is a result of this: “‘Driscoll. Your hair. What happened to Jennifer Anniston?’ Expecting yet another 11 September story about frivolities of youth, newfound seriousness. Instead, ‘The Maintenance was more than I could afford. I figure a Rachel wig’s only $29.95, and you can’t tell it from the real thing” (332). Pynchon here is gently mocking this notion, and when Heidi discusses an upcoming article for the “Journal of Memespace Cartography,” relating to the same subject, this mockery is extended to the academic debates that followed and to the anti-irony stance of David Foster Wallace’s 1993 essay, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction.” Heidi’s article, “Heteronormative Rising Star, Homophobic Dark Companion,” argues that irony:

assumed to be a key element of urban gay humor and popular through the nineties, has now become another collateral casualty of 11 September because somehow it did not keep the tragedy from happening. ‘As if somehow irony,’ she recaps for Maxine, ‘as practiced by a giggling mincing fifth column, actually brought on the events of 11 September, by keeping the country insufficiently serious - weakening its grip on reality. So all kinds of make-believe – forget the delusional state the country’s in already – must suffer as well. Everything has to be literal now.” (335)

This encapsulates *Bleeding Edge*’s position on irony, as it simultaneously mocks Heidi’s scholarly pursuit, whilst also using it to make an important point about the emerging official narrative of 9/11, which is reinforced elsewhere in the novel. That is that narratives like, “the end of irony” are harnessed and used in service of the “official narrative.” Simultaneously absurd and astutely observant, this passage expresses the possibility of self-reflexivity, playfulness and humour coexisting with serious political points.[[7]](#endnote-7)

But just as this scene critiques ideas like the end of irony, it also expresses some discomfort with what Just St. Clair refers to as the “legacy of postmodern fiction” in the depiction of Heidi’s article (98). This discomfort is linked to the novel’s more sombre or serious moments. Indeed, *Bleeding Edge* actually includes an earnest passage of reflective, journalistic narration just after the attacks occur in the novel. This section, which covers about three pages could be, as St. Clair suggests, “a 9/11 version of ‘A Journey to the Mind of watts’ (1966),” Pynchon’s *New York Times* account of the Watts Riots which is markedly different in tone to his fiction (98). Though this is the only section of this kind in the novel it is stylistically echoed in Maxine’s sombre post-9/11 reflections discussed previously. So the death of irony or realist turn or rise of the “New Sincerity” after 9/11 is something that Pynchon sends up but also, in areas of *Bleeding Edge*, adopts.

**“innocent pure or innocent stupid?”**

There is a final aspect of *Bleeding Edge* that again both links it to the early 9/11 novels and challenges some of the ideological assumptions that those novels reinforce – it’s representation of children. Children have been a key feature of the 9/11 novel and particularly in the early phase; from Oskar the child narrator of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) or Justin who searches the skies for “Bill Lawton” in *Falling Man* to the adult children of *The Emperor’s Children.* The importance of children, in these novels is often linked to ideas of lost American innocence, though David Holloway’s allegorical reading of the parent/child relationship offers a compelling alternative. Holloway argues that the repeated stories of parents struggling to care for children, in these novels, represents the struggles of the American government to care for its citizen, identifying them as “citizens divested from the state” (110). In either case, the prominence of parents trying to care for children has been linked to the insular turn.

Michael Maguire argues that the *Bleeding Edge*’s “emphasis on family” does not amount to a “shift toward insularity” (101). However, while Maguire rightly suggests that this emphasis actually demonstrates a concern for a generation that has “become heir to environmental crises, economic disparity, and immense structures of power,” in ways the early 9/11 novels do not, there are unavoidable links to what was a major preoccupation of those novels. In fact, Holloway’s allegorical reading could be retrofitted for *Bleeding Edge* as there is no doubt that Maxine conveys real anxiety about how to protect her children’s “innocence”. Pynchon is attuned to this though and it is especially revealing that Maxine makes a distinction between “innocent pure” and “innocent stupid” in relation to March’s daughter, Tallis (216). Ziggy and Otis are certainly not stupid but have frequently been seen, in reviews and criticism, as the emotional core of the novel or as symbols of hope as the children in the early 9/11 novels often were. They are depicted as bright, creative, savvy kids who are emotionally intelligent and, in an adolescent way, attuned to the powers of capital. From the opening pages they are repeatedly shown to have disdain for the “Yups” who populate the “Yupper West Side,” and play videogames that involve eliminating Yuppies and saving children. They are confident and engaged and they repeatedly identify as “nerds” in opposition to the “Yups” with no concern with social standing. Ziggy and Otis’s most conspicuous characteristic is actually their avoidance or disavowal of what Monbiot identifies as neoliberalism’s most damaging human manifestation: “competition” (n.p.). While Cowart and other commentators have located the novel’s sense of hope in family – “Maxine and Horst edge toward conciliation. They provide for their children…Humane values prove resilient” – the hope located in the characterization of Ziggy and Otis is at least partly located in their differences from Maxine and Horst. *Bleeding Edge* is bookended by Maxine walking them to school in the first chapter, and returning home to “see them to school” as they are now fully independent and the novel’s final line sees them head out on their own: “Neither looks back” (477). Ziggy and Otis’s critical eyes are not oblivious to their own parents, whose full participation and complicity in the neoliberal present is undoubted. As Rolls notes they “do not need to be guided…and we may find encouragement in the prospect that they don’t want to be” (n.p.).

*Bleeding Edge* offers a critique of neoliberalism, draws attention to the problems of ascribing singular importance to 9/11, and crucially, aids our understanding of the continually evolving literary response to 9/11. By looking at lines of continuity between the earlier “domestic novels” that articulated ambiguous returns to normalcy, we are afforded in depth understanding of the implications of the way literature reinforced an ideologically driven narrative of 9/11 as a moment that singularly changed everything.

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1. “Anarchism” is one of the most constant but ambiguous and contested threads in Pynchon’s oeuvre. Recent monographs by Samuel Thomas, Martin Eve, Joanna Freer and Simon Malpas and Andrew Taylor suggest that Pynchon’s fullest expression of anarchism as a political philosophy is in *Against the Day* (2006) but that while Pynchon often sympathizes with various iterations of anarchism, it is morally ambiguous. Freer argues that anarchism is also a “structural principle in his narratives” mainly because of this openness; “Pynchon’s commentaries have an open-ended quality” (7).

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The most interesting example of this is one characters assertion that “late capitalism is a pyramid scheme on a global scale” (163). However, the novel’s repeated use of the term might also be a wry reference to Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). The novel’s repeated use of the terms “late capitalism” and “neoliberalism” is interesting in relation to its historical narrative. “Late capitalism” was popularized in the 1990s and its use by characters such as Maxine, March and Heidi would be normal. “Neoliberalism” has gained much more currency in recent years and its use perhaps signals the novel’s prescience to the current global economic landscape. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. While critical debates on the merits of the literary response to 9/11 are polarized, there is a significant degree of consensus regarding the “canon” of 9/11 novels, which has been established in monograph’s by Kristiaan Versluys (*Out of the Blue*, 2009), Richard Gray (*After the Fall*, 2011), Arin Keeble (*The 9/11 Novel*, 2014) and a number of excellent articles such as Catherine Morley’s (2011). David Cowart’s recent article on *Bleeding Edge* (2013) also contributes to this listing texts by Art Spiegelman, Jonathan Safran Foer, Ken Kalfus, Claire Messud, Don DeLillo, Mohsin Hamid and Amy Waldman. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Neoliberalism is outlined in a special issue of *Textual Practice* on “Neoliberalism and the Novel” edited by Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl: “…an economic dogma and political rationale that holds that free markets and competition will produce the best outcomes for the most people… ‘Neoliberalism’ also often refers to specific state policy intervention in the economy such as the privatisation of state or public resources, the curtailment of state welfare provisions, deregulation of trade and labour markets, and state initiatives to weaken organised labour. Such state sponsored measures are also enforced around the world via international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. (203) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. David Holloway describes how the narrative of “9/11 as the moment when everything changed became the ideological lynchpin for the war on terror” (4). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These critiques of the early 9/11 novel have been robustly responded to by John Duvall, Robert P. Marzec and Catherine Morley, who questions the notion that fiction “is no more than a political tool, through which writers can understand (and educate readers about) the United States’ place in the world” (720). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Bleeding Edge*’s discussion of irony begins before 9/11 occurs in the novel. At an extravagant tech industry party themed “1999,” (a reference to pre-crash optimism) the narrator notes that the bar was stocked with a range of quality liquors and “PBRs…for those who cannot easily deal with the prospect of an irony free evening” (287). Here, Pynchon is criticizing the over-reliance on irony that people like Foster Wallace identified as endemic in popular and literary culture. This episode occurs in a scene that is vital to Pynchon’s discussion of the before and after of the dot com bubble. In fact, the party’s theme of 90s nostalgia is generally characterized by the indulgence, smugness and shallowness that anti-ironists are so critical of. This reversal (pre-9/11 anti-irony and post 9/11 pro-irony) reminds us that this debate was established before 9/11 and again raises questions about how post-9/11 cultural trends worked in service of the official narrative or the “everything’s changed” narrative. Where previous 9/11 novels have cursorily evoked this debate and occasionally questioned the premise, it is central to *Bleeding Edge*’s disavowal of the official narrative. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)