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## "I Just Look at Books": Reading the Monetary Metareality of *Bleeding Edge*

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The essay analyzes *Bleeding Edge* for its pervasive representation of money, arguing that it operates as a metareality in the novel both on the levels of plot and style. Money is presented as a symbolic structure behind reality that is accessible to the initiated, the interpretation of which offers genuine insight about the world and its interrelations, in parallel to religious or scientific discourses. This does not simply mean that everything—politics, society, culture, technology, etc.—is ultimately determined by economic factors, but rather that money underlies the reality of these phenomena like a kind of source code, and that it is readable as such, for better or worse. In the novel, real and virtual money is heavily associated with moral values and their loss, although it is not at all only associated negatively with greed and the abuse of power. Money also harbors subversive potential in *Bleeding Edge*, as it can uncover corruption and fraud as much as other conspiratorial phenomena (especially in connection to 9/11). In particular, cash money can become an alternative medium of communication that combines the private and the public. Money does exhibit a tendency towards moral corruption in the novel, but at the same time it eludes any complete control and remains an economic as well as symbolic tool that can undermine the very capitalist system it seems to perpetuate.

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## 1. Pynchon's money

Thomas Pynchon's whole novelistic oeuvre, with its eight publications spanning fifty years (so far), is deeply concerned with economic issues in the widest sense of the term, as his texts critically engage with a vast variety of structures of producing, trading, and consuming goods and services that range from the global slave trade to the New Economy; from war as "a celebration of markets" (*GR* 105) to black markets of "thousands of arrangements, for warmth, love, food, simple movement" (*GR* 290) and a world "'gone insane, with information come to be the only real medium of exchange'" (*GR* 258); and from early Western Capitalism to "late fuckin capitalism" and even "Post-late capitalism" (*BE* 308), and a good number of alternative, non-capitalist economies. Critics have routinely pointed out this importance of economic issues in Pynchon's works for various argumentative purposes,<sup>1</sup> most often in connection with the thematic complex of capitalism, although the subject arguably remains somewhat underdeveloped in Pynchon criticism and is nowhere near the level of saturation, or some might say exhaustion, of topics such as paranoia or technology in Pynchon's works. There is no monograph yet that does for Pynchon and economics what Samuel Thomas did for Pynchon and politics or Martin Paul Eve did for Pynchon and philosophy, although such a project would certainly find ample material in all of Pynchon's novels. More importantly for the essay at hand, criticism on Pynchon and his various economies has so far neglected a particular motif that is obviously related to economics but not synonymous with it, although it is the medium of exchange par excellence: money. There are two notable exceptions, though: the first is Tiina Käkelä-Puumala's 2013 essay "'There Is Money Everywhere': Representation, Authority, and the Money Form in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*," in which she argues that the novel reveals an "inherent bond between money, representation, and social power" through "a certain representational crisis" that links the debate over the gold standard to the "questioning of realistic representation [. . .] and the crisis of political representation"

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. Clarke; Dufhuizen; Madsen; Ostrander; Thomas; Thoreen; Veggian.

(149) at around 1900. The second is Doug Haynes's 2014 essay "Under the Beach, the Paving-Stones! The Fate of Fordism in Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*," in which he argues that Pynchon's 2009 novel presents a historical turning point "in which a long period of cartel, or monopoly capitalism, came to an end and [. . .] the over-production crisis 'native' to capitalist cycles recurred" (2). Haynes also discusses the gold standard, but even more importantly, he interprets 'fiat' or paper money for its symbolic qualities, most notably in his reading of the fake dollar bill with Nixon's face on it "which pops out of the ocean like the return of the repressed" (8). Both authors explore the respective "money-driven world" (*IV* 129) of the novels they consider, and I will add my own exploration of Pynchon's latest novel to theirs in the following.

In analyzing *Bleeding Edge* for its pervasive representation of money, I argue that money operates as a metareality in the novel both on the levels of plot and style. Money is presented as a symbolic structure behind reality that is accessible to the initiated, the interpretation of which offers genuine insight about the world and its interrelations, indeed in parallel to religious or scientific discourses. This does not simply mean that everything—politics, society, culture, technology, etc.—is ultimately determined by economic factors, but rather that money underlies the reality of these phenomena like a kind of source code, and that it is readable as such, for better or worse. In the novel, real and virtual money is heavily associated with moral values and their loss, although it is not at all only associated negatively with greed and the abuse of power. Money also harbors subversive potential in *Bleeding Edge*, as it can uncover corruption and fraud as much as other conspiratorial phenomena (especially in connection to the events that the novel refers to as "11 September"). In particular, cash money can become an alternative medium of communication that combines the private and the public. Money does exhibit a tendency towards moral corruption in the novel, but at the same time it eludes any complete control and remains an economic as well as symbolic tool that can, in different hands, turn into a weapon against the very capitalist system it seems to perpetuate.

## 2. On the matter of money

If money in *Bleeding Edge* is versatile and elusive, then it is because these qualities are inherent to money itself, which is "diabolically hard to comprehend with words," and which is "of no particular substance and may be of no substance at all" (Buchan 17).<sup>2</sup> Nobody seems to be able to define what money actually *is*, but this "absence of a concise, practical definition" (Boesenberg 2) is an advantage rather than a disadvantage, and even economists seem to rather appreciate the conceptual openness of what is such a central term for their field. One might apply the famous notion of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein to both the term *money* and money itself: "the meaning of the word is its use in the language" (43), and the meaning of money is its use in the economy. Both words and money attain their meaning, their value, as they are being used and exchanged, but neither have meaning in and by themselves. This is especially important to remember when reading money in terms of value both in the economic and ethical sense, as I will do in the following; values can be inscribed on money, yet they are not to be found in it in any essential way.

Historically, money may once have been valuable because of its material rather than symbolic qualities, yet this merely speaks of other arbitrary attributions of value to materials such as gold that are not more essential just because they are somewhat more material. Modern paper money and coins retain mainly a symbolic materiality in their creation of value, whereas with "the advent of electronic fund-transfers the link between inscription and substance was broken. The matter of electric money does not matter" (Shell 1). Yet this does not mean that such money *has* no reality whatsoever. While it may no longer necessarily be tied to commodities and labor, as Marx had it in his theory of the money form (cf. section I.3 of *Das Kapital*), it has not become entirely abstract or immaterial. Even though the matter of Shell's "electric money" does not matter in terms of its value, the money itself certainly matters and has a profound effect on the world. As events such as the 2007–09 subprime mortgage crisis in the US have shown, the implosion of hyperreal 'financial products' can cause

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<sup>2</sup> James Buchan's *Frozen Desire* defines money as "incarnate desire," arguing that "there is no objective or invariable value in money" but that its value derives from the fact that it "takes wishes" (19).

a chain reaction that leads to very material effects such as foreclosures, homelessness, violence, and the structural demise of whole cities or regions. Furthermore, one should not forget that even the metamoney of hedge fund derivatives and other highly fictional 'financial products' still has a material dimension, not in the sense of any Marxian monetary 'substance,' but in that it is subject to material conditions that often only become visible as they fail; computer glitches may destroy hundreds of millions of dollars in assets within an hour (cf. Eha), and the Y2K bug that haunts *Bleeding Edge* may still serve as a reminder that a digital monetary economy is just as fragile as anything else that is digital.

Not least due to these material effects, money is deeply *formative* of reality, and as such it is also deeply ideological, although it is not associated with a particular ideology but highly versatile in that respect. "Money is normative" (Buchan 34) in both senses of economic and moral value, and it is a medium of exchange, a "mediating device" (Tschachler 13), in more than one way. Yet since "value can only be a mental attitude, sometimes shared by people, sometimes not" (Buchan 18), it is always relative, contingent, and subject to various ideologies. If money is a "measure of value" (Tschachler 7), then this representation and measurement occurs according to dominant but not universal standards; rephrasing Marx and Engels, one might say that the values of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling values, monetary or ethical. "In reality, while money itself is neutral, the people who handle it are not" (Tschachler 14), and since money only really has any existence *as* money when it is handled and exchanged, its neutrality is necessarily lost, and it is always subject to ideological inscription. As Terry Eagleton puts it in describing the normativity and flexibility of money in the contemporary social order: "The norm now is money; but since money has absolutely no principles or identity of its own, it is no kind of norm at all. It is utterly promiscuous, and will happily tag along with the highest bidder" (16–17). Eagleton certainly has a point in speaking about money in such negative terms, yet the inherent amorality of money, its fundamental relativism, also indicates that it is an ideological weapon that not only belongs to the ruling class or any particular group with a particular morality, and one that may always slip from the hands of those who wield it for the moment. Money is *amoral* but not inherently *immoral*.

Its moral normativity is negotiable, and while it may be associated for a time with a particular dominant ideology, it can never be fully brought under control, and it can only be managed at best. This is true even in the very system of capitalism that is so deeply predicated on money, and even there can money be an element of disruption and subversion that is used *against* the very system that allegedly controls it.

The ideological inscription of money is nowhere more obvious than in the actual inscription of material money: bills and coins are not only symbolic representations of an alleged monetary value, but they are ideological representations of the economic and governmental framework that *gives* them their value. Without these institutional frameworks, bills and coins would have no value at all, like a fifty trillion mark bill from the Weimar Republic that is now worth only what someone will pay for it at a flea market. States necessarily inscribe their money ideologically along with its exchange value, if only in stating that it is *theirs*, but most often rather by symbolically proffering their values through representation. As Tschachler shows in his standard work on the US dollar, the bills' "large, rectangular spaces have made them ideal vehicles for advertisement and propaganda, for consciously chosen ideas as well as for unconscious assumptions, and thus for serving functions beyond the mere economic" (4), and he treats them as "vehicles of social and cultural values" (23)—values of the ruling class, one might add. The paper dollar is a crucial text in the nationalist canon of US literature, and one that is probably read more than any other; its words and images make it a complex symbol of nationality that tries to convey what defines this nation. The conflation of economic and ideological value with regard to the dollar is most evident in Title 18, Section 333 of the United States Code, which states that

Whoever mutilates, cuts, defaces, disfigures, or perforates, or unites or cements together, or does any other thing to any bank bill, draft, note, or other evidence of debt issued by any national banking association, or Federal Reserve bank, or the Federal Reserve System, with intent to render such bank bill, draft, note, or other evidence of debt unfit to be reissued, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than six months, or both.

One may interpret this only in economic terms as the unlawful destruction of legal tender, but one may also relate this to section 700 on the desecration of the flag of the United States and consider both together in terms of national symbolism. The ideological inscription of money and the potential subversion of said ideology *through* that very same money combine in this instant, and the moral blankness of money makes it a contested space where ideologies may be affirmed and challenged depending on how the money is used. This duality also deeply informs *Bleeding Edge*, which, in Pynchonian style, refuses to succumb to the temptations of binary categorizations and rather explores the excluded middles.

### 3. The world of money in *Bleeding Edge*

In *Bleeding Edge*, Pynchon retains the anti-capitalist outlook he has explored most fully through the subject of anarchism<sup>3</sup> in *Against the Day* (2006) and to differing extent in his prior novels, but he leaves no doubt that the twenty-first century world of *Bleeding Edge* is a thoroughly capitalist one in which no such large-scale alternatives to that system seem to remain. Yet rather than a grand counternarrative, the novel includes pockets of resistance within capitalism that may potentially subvert it but are at the same time in danger of being incorporated by the system, for example in the open-source ethic of some hackers that violates the capitalist principles of intellectual property and commercialization: "All for free. Hacker ethic. Each one doing their piece of it, then just vanishing uncredited" (BE 69). This goes back to Stray's epiphany in *Against the Day* "that as long as a person was willing to forgo credit, there were very few limits on the good it became possible to do" (AD 976), and it thus continues in the anarchist anti-capitalist tradition of that novel, but the situation of *Bleeding Edge* is no longer one where capitalism must actively fight anarchism on a broader scale to ensure its hegemony. Instead, it is rather busy managing its local outbreaks, which might nevertheless pose just as much of a structural problem as a single grand counternarrative.

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<sup>3</sup> Graham Benton has explored the subject of anarchism in Pynchon's novels most extensively in various essays and his 2012 monograph *Unruly Narratives: The Anarchist Dimension in the Novels of Thomas Pynchon*.

Whereas at least some characters in *Against the Day* may still serve as anti-capitalist countermodels even as they are being corrupted by capitalism, *Bleeding Edge* does not offer such personified alternatives. Even its most likely candidate for that role, the leftist March Kelleher, may on the one hand denounce late capitalism as "a pyramid racket on a global scale, the kind of pyramid you do human sacrifices up on top of, meantime getting the suckers to believe it's all gonna go on forever" (BE 163), but on the other hand does so just after quite happily "sitting there counting a lapful of greenbacks" (BE 162) as payment for a drug delivery to her ex-husband Sid. March is a genuine champion of the working class, but she is also the mother-in-law of Gabriel Ice, "[o]ne of the boy billionaires who walked away in one piece when the dotcom fever broke" (BE 10), and someone who is "practically synonymous with U.S. security arrangements" (BE 371). Much like Pierce Inverarity to the anarchist Jesús Arrabal in *The Crying of Lot 49*, he is to March "too exactly and without flaw the thing we fight" (COL 97). She may hate Ice with all her heart, but not her daughter Tallis and grandson Kennedy, and so her political agenda is complicated by personal involvement. Thus, her assessment of her relationship to Sid may also be one about her relation to money: "A complex situation" (BE 162).

Therefore, despite resistance from characters such as March Kelleher, capitalism reigns supreme in *Bleeding Edge*, as both tragedy and farce at the same time. Its fundamental problems and injustices—such as "U.S.-engineered regime changes, children with AKs, deforestation, storms, famines, and other late-capitalist planetary insults" (BE 378–79)—are not exposed through a juxtaposition with an alternative but are rather shown as internal contradictions, making it a global system whose demise, should it ever come, will be one of implosion rather than one brought about by any external counterforce. György Lukács's assessment that "capitalism is the first system of production to achieve a total economic penetration of society" (62) applies to the world of *Bleeding Edge*, and the novel highlights this totality in various ways. It is pervaded by money on the levels of style as well as content to an extent that is comparable to that of William Gaddis's novel *JR* (1975), so that money informs, structures, and determines both the world of the characters and how it is presented to the reader. Most evidently, the plot revolves around money: the main character, Maxine



Tarnow, is a decertified fraud examiner whose business it is, in the catchphrase from the movie *All the President's Men*, to follow the money. She is doing so to find out more about a global network of conspiratorial activity in which the economic and the political are basically indistinguishable, and which may or may not have orchestrated the attacks of 9/11 as but one of many strategies of exerting control over the world and its population. Yet money is also unavoidable in *Bleeding Edge* in terms of style, which is shot through with numerous monetary metaphors and references so that readers are not only told about a world in which money always matters but are also shown that world in such a way that the very perspective they necessarily assume is informed by a language of money. This may occur on a small semantic scale, for example when Maxine at one point finds herself "drifting into unprofitable thoughts" (BE 390), or when Tallis's involvement with Ice is described as having been "bought and sold into a world March will never give up her hatred of" (BE 119). Such monetary language is also used on a larger scale in constructing a setting, for example in the first scene in which Maxine, taking her two sons to school, encounters the following:

Unsheltered people sleep in doorways, scavengers with huge plastic sacks full of empty beer and soda cans head for the markets to cash them in, work crews wait in front of buildings for the super to show up. Runners are bouncing up and down at the curb waiting for lights to change. (BE 2)

Those who must "cash in" on garbage are juxtaposed with manual laborers and runners who can afford to start their day that way, and so in setting a scene and creating a sense of place in reference to money, the text already indicates the class divisions that mark it. The novel often describes New York City in terms of real estate, not so much a city but a market, where dwelling is always connected to ideas of buying and selling, so that a building is routinely assessed for its value as it is being presented to the reader:

Thing is, is it's such a nice building, terra-cotta facing, not as ornate as commercial real estate could get a century ago when this unit was going

up, but tidy and strangely welcoming, as if the architects had actually given some thought to the people who'd be working there every day. But it's too nice, a sitting duck, asking to get torn down someday soon and the period detailing recycled into the decor of some yup's overpriced loft. (*BE* 42)

Even the attacks of 9/11 did nothing to alter the "[g]reed situation" in the city: "You'd think when the towers came down it would've been a reset button for the city, the real-estate business, Wall Street, a chance for it all to start over clean. Instead lookit them, worse than before" (*BE* 387). The aftermath attests to the claim in the novel that "There's always a way to monetize anything" (*BE* 349), since developers are immediately "thinking about all those buildable lots where the demolition's already been done" (*BE* 388), and later on visitors at Ground Zero are gazing "into what should be the aura surrounding a holy place but isn't," since the place is already commercialized, with "vendors selling T-shirts, paperweights, key chains, mouse pads, coffee mugs" (*BE* 446).

Such passages are explicitly critical of the capitalist drive to commodify everything, and they directly connect monetary value to moral values, or rather to their loss. This also occurs in stylistic terms when monetary metaphors are used to describe ethical issues: the ghost of murdered Lester Traipse is "doomed to wander those century-old corridors until accounts are balanced, or for eternity, whichever comes first" (*BE* 370); the sudden disappearance of hacker-turned-outlaw Eric Outfield is "leaving only an uneasy faith that he maybe still exists somewhere on the honorable side of the ledger" (*BE* 433); Igor describes the metaphysical move beyond "secular cause and effect" by saying that here "is where it all goes off books" (*BE* 376); and fate itself is alluded to in monetary terms when a film presents a "a close-up of [. . .] credit cards, all laid out like a fortune-teller's tableau" (*BE* 178).<sup>4</sup> Even when it is not as directly present, money is never far away from anything in *Bleeding Edge*, as the

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<sup>4</sup> This monetary language fits with the theme of obligation Ali Chetwynd—shortly before the publication of *Bleeding Edge*—has convincingly identified as characteristic of Pynchon's fiction after *Vineland*, in which money is often given "in order either to distort existing obligation or to extort future obligations," and where "patronage plots offer a clear condemnation of property, and a corresponding defence of the commons" (946).

novel can easily connect failing to build a desk with global economics and the power of the super-rich over everyone else within no more than a sentence or two:

Screaming. The default phrase being "Fucking IKEA." Like millions of other men around the world, Horst hates the Swedish DIY giant. He and Maxine once blew a weekend looking for the branch in Elizabeth, New Jersey, located next to the airport so the world's fourth-richest billionaire can save on landing costs while the rest of us spend the day getting lost on the New Jersey Turnpike. (*BE* 297–98)

Money is thus often associated with the corruption of moral values, in this case with the utter disregard of the majority in the egotistical pursuit of individual wealth. At the same time, monetary value itself is presented as something volatile and negotiable, and thus its negative association with a lack of moral values is not necessarily fixed. Monetary value in *Bleeding Edge* is not something stable or intrinsic to an object, but it is determined by how much someone is ready to pay for it, not because of any essential properties. For example, the narrator is unsure whether Felix Boingueaux is wearing "either a triple-digit power haircut, carefully designed to lull observers into false complacency with their own appearance till it's too late, or else he cut it himself and fucked up" (*BE* 151). Blatantly forged cigars, including "Christopher Columbus's first Cuban," are still "fetching their asking prices" because there is on "the yuppie collectors' market a credulity that may be limitless" (*BE* 262). Neither haircut nor cigar are worth anything in and by themselves, but only if and when a monetary price is being paid; the novel thus critiques the notion of inherent value (described by Marx as commodity fetishism) and at the same time shows how people subscribe to it.

Given the omnipresence of money, it is all the more remarkable that not everything has a price in *Bleeding Edge* and that the capitalist desire for universal commodification meets with resistance. The remark that silence is "one of the world's unpriceable commodities" (*BE* 30) is more a way of characterizing Maxine's ex-husband Horst and her emotherapist Shawn than a hint that commodification has its limits, especially as that silence is still called a commodity, priceable or not.

However, the text goes further than that in inquiring into the possibility or existence of a realm beyond commodification in the world it presents. In fact, the whole novel may be read as an exploration of what it means to sell out, a question that has been posed many a time in Pynchon's novels, for example concerning Kurt Mondaugen in *V.*, the counterforce in *Gravity's Rainbow*, Zoyd Wheeler in *Vineland*, the protagonists of *Mason & Dixon*, or Doc Sportello in *Inherent Vice*.<sup>5</sup> Moral virtue is often associated with those who resist money rather than embrace or seek it, although characters in any Pynchon novel hardly ever fall neatly into a binary of 'good' or 'bad.' First of all, it must be noted that the major characters in the novel are at least financially well-off, if not filthily rich. Maxine herself may be prone to an occasional "real-estate envy attack" that makes her wonder "maybe I'm in the wrong business?" and yet she can come up with "the tuition at Kugelblitz" (BE 4), her sons' expensive school, just as well. One might argue that Maxine can *afford* to not "mind working on spec" (BE 11) with no guarantee of payment, and yet it is important that she *does*, and that money—while not unimportant to her—is not her primary motivation. She is not an all-out idealist who works for free for the greater good; not even her surfer emotherapist Shawn, who of all people in the novel should probably resist providing his "ancient wisdom beyond earthly limits" for money, instead is able to "pay an exorbitant rent on this place and its closetful of twelve identical black Armani suits" due to "a gullibility, otherwise seldom observed, among New Yorkers able to afford his fees" (BE 30). Maxine works for money, but she is not morally corrupted by it. She was (and is) corrupt enough by the standards of the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners to pull her license, as her attitude towards issues of conflict of interest was that of a "no-brainer of a choice between friendship and super-picky guideline adherence," which ran her "gravely afoul of the ACFE Code of Conduct, which Maxine in fact had been skating up to and all along the posted edges of for years" (BE 17–18). Her professional corruption thus seems to be justified by the moral virtue of friendship, and yet Maxine is not simply someone who is too good for her own good: "'Friendship?' Reg is puzzled. 'You didn't even like him.' 'A technical term'" (BE 18).

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<sup>5</sup> On selling out in Pynchon, see Thomas, "Gaucho," and Twigg.

Maxine, in fact, is as morally complex as any of Pynchon's protagonists—as befits the PI in a novel that both draws on and playfully subverts the generic conventions of noir detective fiction. While Maxine is struggling to do the right thing, it is not necessarily clear to her what that right thing is, and she is not always morally sound or consistent in achieving it. Similar to Doc Sportello, who arguably commits a rather cold-blooded murder at the end of *Inherent Vice*, Maxine may suddenly resort to violence that seems out of character, for example when losing her cool under fire and randomly sending “a couple of double taps at the window, screaming, ‘Motherfuckers!’,” so that even the text wonders in free indirect narrative, “Goodness, Maxine, where’d that come from?” (BE 392). Her attraction to Windust, “a murderous stooge for the IMF” (BE 244) who has spent “a long career doing his country’s shitwork” (BE 393) and accumulating “a portfolio of pain and damage applied to various human body parts that might have added up to hundreds—who knows, maybe thousands—of deaths on his karmic ticket” (BE 109), certainly adds to that moral complexity, much like Frenesi Gates’s attraction to the fascist Brock Vond in *Vineland*. Yet it matters in the text that Maxine, while far from morally pure, has never sold out; she may have “a halo of faded morality, a reliable readiness to step outside the law and share the trade secrets of auditors and tax men” (BE 17), and she may not live up to the CFE expectation of being “the one incorruptible still point in the whole jittery mess, the atomic clock everybody trusts” (BE 18), and yet her corruption seems to be limited enough so as not to put her beyond redemption. Her work is, as Shawn says, “all ethical tripwires” (BE 182), and in it she sees many “innocent people making these deals with the satanic forces, for money way out of scale to anything they’re used to, and there’s a point where it all rolls in on them and they go under, and sometimes they don’t come back up,” (BE 218), but at least she is not part of these forces that succumb to money, although she is certainly not among the innocent either. In her work, it is “Always a plus to find a moral dimension,” but it is not necessary; yet at the same time, “Maybe it’ll help you appreciate some funny numbers” (BE 63), and a perspective on the moral dimension of fraud is precisely what makes her a *better* fraud examiner than others. Yet Maxine will not divulge a clear-cut attitude towards the morality of her work and those under her scrutiny, and she is always elegantly

and humorously evasive when being confronted with the inequities of global capitalism. The most notable instance of such an evasion occurs when Horst wonders how his talent for economic prediction might have kept him away from his office in the Twin Towers on the morning of September 11, 2001:

"How could it be? How could predicting market behavior be the same as predicting a terrible disaster?"

"If the two were different forms of the same thing."

"Way too anticapitalist for me, babe." (BE 320)

Maxine's refusal to pursue that line of thought indicates that she is not motivated by anticapitalist sensibilities in her work, although she comes from a leftist family, despises capitalists like Gabriel Ice and eagerly sides with his enemy March Kelleher, whom she clearly admires because she "doesn't have a price" (BE 137). When Ice tries to get her to convince March to quit harassing him through her blog, she ironically phrases her rejection in no uncertain terms: "Tell you what, next time I see March, I'll ask her why she isn't speaking more highly of your company, and then when she spits in my face and calls me your bitch and a corporate sellout and so forth, I'll be able to ignore it 'cause down deep I'll know I'm doing a big favor for a swell guy" (BE 137). Maxine's morality may be ambiguous throughout the novel, and she may find herself "on moral pathways that would make a Grand Canyon burro think twice" (BE 6), but it is very clear when it comes to selling out and adhering to no values but monetary ones, as fuzzy as these other values may be at times. *Bleeding Edge* as a whole explores this tension, not just through Maxine who ultimately resists the temptation to sell out and lands "on the honorable side of the ledger" (BE 433), but also through characters such as Lester, who owes a debt that is not only payable "in U.S. dollars" (BE 175) and loses his life and potentially his "shy, wronged soul" (BE 259) as well.

Thus the characters' relation to money determines their karma, so to speak; while certain moral failings are considered to be negligible in the novel, selling out is comparatively unambiguously presented as a cardinal sin, but of course also as the

one that poses the biggest temptation. I would therefore risk the claim that money is the most decisive factor of morality in the novel, and that many or most ethical issues in the text relate to it one way or another, although there are certainly others such as Maxine's questionable relation to Windust in which money seems less relevant (but notably not irrelevant). Importantly, money *per se* is not good or bad in this structural function, and it is not normative in itself; yet such ethical normativity seems to come about only through an attitude towards money, and right or wrong are defined (and redefined) in relation to it. Ali Chetwynd convincingly argues that "the engagement with obligation in recent Pynchon constitutes an ethical system" (939), and often this obligation has a central monetary aspect. It is not an option for Pynchon's characters to find the good or right course of action *outside* that system of monetary ethics; such transcendence is granted only to very few characters in his novels, and perhaps only (and indeed arguably) to Tyrone Slothrop in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In other words, in a capitalist world, one cannot simply decide that morality has nothing to do with money, but instead must find a viable ethics within that system that is inherently nihilistic in being utterly disinterested "in any project other than its perpetuation" (Badiou 120). In other words, greed is not a sin, but "the perimeters of ordinary greed overstepped" (BE 90) is.

#### **4. Money as metareality**

This is merely one of many ways in which money provides the structure for other phenomena in *Bleeding Edge*. Money is not merely 'behind' morality itself—and it is important to note that there is only something metaphysical about that statement in the sense that money has come to occupy the place of metaphysics—but also more generally functions as a metareality. Horst's remark on prediction is telling in this regard: "predicting market behavior" in the novel is "the same as predicting a terrible disaster" (BE 320), and an insight into monetary flows provides an insight into the deep structure of reality itself to reveal a causality otherwise hidden. One may dismiss such a reading as the result of "a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia" (GR 188), although Pynchon's readers know well that just because you're paranoid doesn't mean you're wrong. Yet I would like to be

very clear that the monetary metareality that I describe in this essay is not metaphysical or transcendent in any way but is rather entirely immanent to the world it structures all the same. In *Bleeding Edge*, money offers no external framework or order for an internal reality in a clear-cut binary, but it is very much part of the world itself in both material and ideal terms.

Perhaps precisely because of its immanence, no other single element in the novel provides such an all-encompassing and fundamental access to the world as money; it affects and determines politics, society, culture, religion, technology, and anything else that might claim priority over the other aspects, and they all can only be understood in relation to money. The novel hardly considers it worth pointing out that politics is determined by money; Chandler Platt even openly mourns the good old days when "all "being Republican" meant really was a sort of principled greed" (*BE* 284) without any religious millennialism in the background. Culture is dismissed just as quickly early on by March: "Culture, I'm sorry, Hermann Göring was right, every time you hear the word, check your sidearm. Culture attracts the worst impulses of the moneyed, it has no honor, it begs to be suburbanized and corrupted" (*BE* 56). This applies to high culture and popular culture alike: Gabriel Ice and Tallis present the expensive works of art in their mansion "not coherently enough to suggest the passions of a collector, more like the need of an acquirer to exhibit them," and their Bösendorfer Imperial is used by hired pianists during fundraisers to play "Kander & Ebb, Rodgers & Hammerstein, Andrew Lloyd Webber medleys while Gabe and Tallis and assorted henchfolks work the room, gently thinning the checkbooks of East Side aristos on behalf of various causes" (*BE* 124).

If culture and politics are so thoroughly and evidently determined by money that the novel does not even bother to elaborate on the subject, then technology may remain as the most likely candidate to be more fundamental than that in a Pynchon novel. In 1973, *Gravity's Rainbow* explored the notion of technological determinism by wondering if politics and war were "being dictated instead by the needs of technology" (*GR* 521). Capitalism certainly has been a crucial part of that issue already, since readers are told not to forget that "the real business of the War is buying and



selling" (GR 105). Yet the "conspiracy between human beings and techniques" in *Bleeding Edge* can also no longer cry "'Money be damned'" (GR 521), and technology is no longer even suspected of being the singular determining factor from which others such as politics derive. The line "'We're beyond good and evil here, the technology, it's neutral, eh?'" (BE 89) sounds more like the farcical repetition of the more tragic and much more complex exploration of the morality of technology in *Gravity's Rainbow*, as if that claim to neutrality had already been dismissed in the earlier novel and is now only a lame excuse of those who want to cash in while denying all personal accountability. At best, technological development in the novel has opened up a sphere that is not yet entirely subjected to the logic of capitalism, one of those Pynchonian spaces of potential that are always under threat of being reduced to the actual, like the Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow* or pre-national America in *Mason & Dixon*. The Internet offers alternatives to capitalism while simultaneously being incorporated into its structure, as is exemplified best by the struggle over DeepArcher in the novel. As March has it: "These kids are out to change the world. 'Information has to be free'—they really mean it. At the same time, here's all these greedy fuckin dotcommers make real-estate developers look like Bambi and Thumper'" (BE 116). Ultimately, *Bleeding Edge* thoroughly dismisses any romanticized notions of the Internet as a place of freedom from capitalism or government. Maxine argues that "'the worst you can say is it's maybe getting a little commercialized,'" while her father simply replies "'Call it freedom, it's based on control'" (BE 420), and later on Eric complains that there are "'nothin but portals to Web sites for what the Management wants everybody addicted to, shopping, gaming, jerking off, streaming endless garbage—'" (BE 432). There is no technology without capitalism in the novel, and even the "bleeding-edge technology" that lends it its ambiguous title is described primarily in terms of its funding as the "'crazy shit VCs used to go for'" (BE 78). These venture capitalists (or "vulture capitalists" (BE 149), as Maxine also has it), are "always in the market for bright ideas from any source" (BE 150), and it is "seed and angel money" (BE 72) that drives technological innovation, which in turn changes and determines the world at large. If there is technological determinism in *Bleeding Edge*, then it is

secondary to a monetary determinism. The metaphysical terminology is entirely apt here: 'angel money' is the transcendent force that drives and structures the world both in its current state and its future potential states. Religion has been replaced by the market, as Maxine's angelical courier Marvin explains when he tells her about having sold his gear on eBay: "For more than you would ever dream. Nothing dies anymore, the collectors' market, it's the afterlife, and yups are its angels" (*BE* 435). Shawn explains it most forcefully when relating the destruction of the Twin Towers to that of the twin statues of the Buddha destroyed by the Taliban in Afghanistan:

"Twin Buddhas, twin towers, interesting coincidence, so what."

"The Trade Center towers were religious too. They stood for what this country worships above everything else, the market, always the holy fuckin market."

"A religious beef, you're saying?"

"It's not a religion? These are people who believe the Invisible Hand of the Market runs everything. They fight holy wars against competing religions like Marxism. Against all evidence that the world is finite, this blind faith that resources will never run out, profits will go on increasing forever, just like the world's population—more cheap labor, more addicted consumers."

(*BE* 338)

March Kelleher speaks in similar terms when discussing the theory that the attacks of 9/11 were orchestrated by the US government, and her response to the question "Forget doing it to your own people, why would anybody do this to their own economy?" is: "You never heard of 'You've got to spend money to make money'? Tithing back to the dark gods of capitalism" (*BE* 318). To be sure, religion offers no proper counternarrative or even alternative to the dominant dark religion of capitalism in the novel; the first direct statement we hear from a Christian cab driver is "Fucking Jews" (*BE* 122), and he then prepares for the Rapture. The monotheistic faiths are, notably, often discussed in their relation to money, for example with regard to sharia-compliant finance systems that do not charge interest (*BE* 82), to the Republican variety of Christianity in which "The Baby Jesus is managing the portfolio of earthly

affairs, and nobody begrudges Him the carried interest" (*BE* 285), or to no more than humorously exploited clichés about the bartering skills of different ethnicities, as when Maxine and her WASP friend Cornelia make plans for a shopping trip:

"You're on. Gotta warn you, though, I'm not much into shopping for recreation."

Cornelia puzzled, "But you. . . you are Jewish?"

"Oh, sure."

"Practicing?"

"Nah, I know how to do it pretty good by now."

"I suppose I meant a certain. . . gift for finding. . . bargains?"

"Should be written into my DNA, I know. But somehow I still forget to fondle material or study the tags, and sometimes," lowering her voice and pretending to look around for disapproval, "I have even. . . paid retail?"

Cornelia pretending to gasp, faux paranoid, "Please don't tell anyone, but I have actually now and then. . .discussed the price of an item in a shop. Yes, sometimes—incredibly—they've even brought it down. Ten percent. Nearly thirty once, but that was only the one time, at Bloomingdale's back in the eighties. Though the memory is still vivid."

"So. . . as long as we don't rat each other out to the ethnic police. . ."

(*BE* 152–53)

Like morality and technology, religion does not offer a fundamental ontological category in the novel that could be considered a primary cause of other effects; instead, they are all presented as subject to monetary concerns, and money has thoroughly appropriated the domain of metaphysics from religion and philosophy alike.

The 'religion' of capitalism that determines moral values along with monetary ones also has its clergy, preachers, scribes, and sages, and Maxine is one of them. Many religions employ a caste of clerics who claim to have special access to the metaphysical mysteries of the world—either because of a more direct spiritual access to supreme beings or because of an acquired learnedness with regard to sacred

texts—and capitalism is no different. Horst Loeffler's eerie gift of predicting market behavior "by ESP" (*BE* 417), which has resulted in "a nearly error-free history of knowing how certain commodities around the world will behave, long enough before they themselves do" (*BE* 21), may well be regarded as the capitalist equivalent of prophecy. Maxine, however, is not a future-oriented prophet but perhaps more of a mysticist who is able to access a reality behind reality and understand their causal relations. This is not actual mysticism, of course, but monetary literacy and interpretive prowess that solely relies on material evidence instead of extrasensory perception. Maxine is simply able to read money and interpret it, and thus she is able to understand her capitalist world on a different ontological level than most others.

Here, it is instructive to compare her to Pynchon's other female protagonist on a quest for knowledge, Oedipa Maas in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa may be "just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts" (*COL* 83), but her paranoia, her capacity to see (or imagine) patterns and draw connections does not extend to the symbolic realm that really matters, and she simply is not a whiz at reading money. Eva Boesenberg points out that this gendered incapacity is what may ultimately render her incapable of ever getting behind the mystery of Inverarity's estate and the Trystero: "due to her gender-specific 'ignorance of law, of investment, of real estate' (82), she remains barred from the locus of power within the novel's fictional universe, Inverarity's estate and the legal and financial apparatus of which it is part. Her exclusion from the male world of money is itself figured in monetary terms" (373–74). It thus takes the male lawyer Metzger to explain to the suburban housewife Oedipa where exactly Inverarity's money has gone. Since "Oedipa refuses to buy into her former lover's estate" (Boesenberg 376), since she cannot read it in monetary terms, its secrets must remain hidden to her and the reader who follows her in her quest. Maxine, however, is trained and gifted in the art of reading money, and the once "male world of money" is now either no longer all that male or at least now accessible to women. One can only speculate how Maxine might have acted as executrix of Inverarity's estate as a "defrocked CFE" (*BE* 17) whose professional "skill set" includes "a tendency to look for hidden patterns" (*BE* 22), and who considers paranoia "the garlic in life's kitchen, right, you can never have too much" (*BE* 11).

She only has a mock-Oedipal paranoid moment when she looks closely at the ACFE seal on her decertification letter:

Alarming, what Maxine noticed for the first time was the Association seal, which showed a torch burning violently in front of and slightly above an opened book. What's this? any minute the pages of this book, maybe allegorically The Law, are about to be set on fire by this burning torch, possibly the Light of Truth? Is somebody trying to say something, the Law in flames here, the terrible inflexible price of Truth. . . That's it! Secret anarchist code messages! (*BE* 18)

However, that (humorous) moment quickly passes, and Maxine's professional paranoia is never again directed at such ambiguous symbols in a desperate attempt to grab at floating signifiers. Instead, she does what she does best: "I just look at books" (*BE* 24). She finds in "normal company records-daybooks, ledgers, logs, tax sheets" (*BE* 10) the patterns and meanings that allow her to at least make educated guesses, if not rather solid deductions, about the world and its causal relations in past, present, and future. Since this world is so thoroughly permeated by money, anyone capable of accessing this monetary substructure will be able to understand it on a deeper level than those who cannot, and Maxine is one of those who may read the true text of the world by tracing "Something in the accounting" (10).

Notably, anyone can acquire the skills to do so, and they are not due to intrinsic talent or a particular metaphysical disposition. Maxine's secretary Daytona does so by going to night school studying to become a Certified Public Accountant. Yet insight into the monetary metareality is nevertheless often presented in a language of revelation, while at the same time the text emphasizes that there is really nothing metaphysical about reading the "spreadsheets of secret cash flow" (*BE* 460). For example, Daytona is able to crack a case by finding something "they were hiding [. . .] in the spreadsheets," and she does so by gaining a fresh perspective on an Excel file: "It was luck, really, I happened to take my reading glasses off, and suddenly, blurry but there it was, the pattern. Just way too many them damn empty cells" (*BE* 401). A similar epiphany occurs when Maxine looks into the money

transfers between two of Ice's companies that serve as a front to move money "into jihadist operating accounts," with the twist that "it's really the CIA, pretending to be jihadist" (BE 344):

Something today strikes her as odd. One of those nagging patterns that's not always welcome because it means uncompensated overtime, but what else is new. She puts on some coffee, has another look at the trail between hwgaahwgh and hashslingrz's account in the Emirates, and after a while sees what it is. A persistent shortfall, and of some size. (BE 172)

Yet Maxine does have an advantage over Daytona in reading this metatext, and she is able to see more because she has "acquired a number of software kits, courtesy of certain less reputable clients, which have bestowed on her superpowers not exactly falling within Generally Accepted Accounting Practices, such as thou shalt not hack into anybody's bank account, thou shalt leave that sort of thing for the FBI" (BE 172–73). Once again this ability to access the monetary metareality is described in the quasi-metaphysical language of "superpowers," and at the same time it is made clear that this is simply hacking, a technological but not spiritual way of looking into what truly moves and constitutes the world of the novel.

At times, Maxine's techniques of pattern recognition and interpretation almost seem like common sense, only that she sees precisely what nobody else can see, or more notably *wants* to see because of their greed. For example, Igor asks her about Bernie Madoff's investment scheme that turned out to be the biggest financial fraud in history, and she almost instantly recognizes what is wrong with it:

"Madoff Securities. Hmm, maybe some industry scuttlebutt. Bernie Madoff, a legend on the street. Said to do quite well, I recall."

"One to two percent per month."

"Nice average return, so what's the problem?"

"Not average. Same every month."

"Uh-oh." She flips pages, has a look at the graph. "What the fuck. It's a perfect straight line, slanting up forever?"

"Seem a little abnormal to you?"

"In this economy? Look at this—even last year, when the tech market went belly-up? No, it's got to be a Ponzi scheme, and from the scale of these investments he could be front-running also." (*BE* 140)

Igor interprets Maxine's insights in metaphysical terms as a "gift," but she only responds that "Any idiot, nothing personal, could see this" (*BE* 140). At other times it takes more than common sense to read the monetary metatext in such a way as to allow for at least an educated guess regarding the reality it represents or seeks to misrepresent, and Maxine needs to employ certain interpretive tools to detect such inconsistencies that are not readily available to the uninitiated. There is a constant struggle in the novel between those who try to move funds "without leaving a trail" and with a general "cover-your-tracks attitude" (*BE* 38) and those who try to follow their trail anyway. Importantly, it seems to be impossible in the novel *not* to leave a trail, and the monetary metareality that can be accessed through the text of the transfer of funds and goods seems unavoidable. In other words, *any* of the politically and economically relevant acts and events in the novel leave a monetary trace, and thus the complicated global conspiracy may at least in significant part be reconstructed by accessing this metareality instead of following other leads. Maxine takes her CFE toolbox to the various elements that gradually build to form a vast network of connections, for example wanting to "run a Beneish model on hashslingrz, just to see how ritually slaughtered the public numbers are" (*BE* 38), or using Benford's law to find out whether "somebody [who] wants to phony up a list of numbers [. . .] gets too cute about randomizing it" (*BE* 41), and then discovers more inconsistent data:

Soon enough, drilling down, she begins to pick up other tells. Consecutive invoice numbers. Hash totals that don't add up. Credit-card numbers failing their Luhn checks. It becomes dismayingly clear that somebody's taking money out of hashslingrz and starbursting it out again all over the place to different mysterious contractors, some of whom are almost certainly ghosts, running at a rough total to maybe as high as the high sixes, even lower sevens. (*BE* 42)

Gabriel Ice also uses such analytical tools in trying to cover up his tracks, for example using "start-ups he knows from running Altman-Z's on them are gonna fail within a short-term horizon [. . .] as shells for funds he wants to move around inconspicuously" (BE 63). Furthermore, he even tries to circumvent documentation of his monetary transfers entirely by employing the *hawala* system,<sup>6</sup> which Reg describes as

"a way to move money around the world without SWIFT numbers or bank fees or any of the hassle you'd get from Chase and them. A hundred percent reliable, eight hours max. No paper trail, no regulation, no surveillance."

"How is this possible?"

"Mysteries of the Third World. Family-type operations usually. All depending on trust and personal honor."

"Gee, I wonder why I never ran across this in New York."

"Hawaladars around here tend to be in import-export, they take their fees in the form of discounts on prices and stuff. They're like good bookies, keep it all in their heads, something Westerners can't seem to do, so at hashslingrz somebody has been hiding a lot of major transaction history down behind multiple passwords and unlinked directories and so forth." (BE 81)

The *hawala* system of exchange is based entirely on networks of trust, and especially after 9/11 it has gained a reputation of operating without any records and thus facilitating transactions that relate to illegal activities—be it money laundering or funding terrorism. In *Bleeding Edge*, it thus potentially represents a loophole in the monetary metareality I have identified so far, an exempt economic space that remains inaccessible even to those who may read the scripture of money as long as it is exchanged according to Western standards. Roger Ballard describes the fear after 9/11 that *hawala* "operations appear to be un-auditable, at least by conventional standards: hence in the moral panic which followed 9/11, *Hawala* was routinely described as 'a system without records'" ("Hawala" 2). Yet Ballard also adds that "much of this was

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<sup>6</sup> On the *hawala* system in general, and particularly in the context of post-9/11 US antiterrorism measures, see Ballard, "Background" and "Hawala."



empty hype" ("Hawala" 2) and that hawaladars do keep records; indeed, "no hawala system can operate in the absence of extensive records" ("Background" 16), but it simply has no central filing system "*because its records are as distributed as the system itself*" ("Background" 33). In other words, there is still an audit trail, even when goods instead of money are exchanged, only that it takes a different set of tools to find and trace it, as is evident when Maxine reads a dossier Nicholas Windust gave her, which includes

a dozen pages on attempts to follow the money through the hawala setup Eric discovered, beginning with Bilhana Wa-ashifa Import-Export in Bay Ridge, thence via the re-invoicing of shipments into the U.S. of halvah, pistachios, geranium essence, chickpeas, several kinds of ras el hanout, and shipments outbound of mobile telephones, MP3 players, and other light electronics, DVDs, old Baywatch episodes in particular—these data, assembled by some committee of the clue-challenged, alarmingly unacquainted even with GAAP, all thrown together so haphazardly that after half an hour Maxine's eyeballs are rotating in opposite directions and she has no idea if the document is meant as self-congratulation or some thickly disguised confession of failure. (BE 261)

The data are there, but the "committee of the clue-challenged" are unable to understand and interpret them as they lack any knowledge of generally accepted accounting principles, not to mention the analytical tools available to a trained CFE. Maxine, however, is once more one of the initiated who may access that which others cannot, and Windust claims that this is the very reason why he showed her the folder:

"We know how much money Ice has been diverting, where it's going, we're almost sure of who it's going to. But so far we still only have the separate threads. You've read those pages, you see how scattered it all is. We need somebody with fraud-investigating skills to weave it together into some shape we can take upstairs." (BE 263–64)

Maxine cannot believe Windust's organization has nobody with these skills amongst their number: "nowhere in your own vast database can you find contact information for even one professional liar?" (*BE* 264). Yet regardless of Windust's actual reasons for getting Maxine involved, the dossier is represented in such a way as to indicate once more that there is a monetary metareality that is accessible to those who may properly read its text. The hawala system is no exemption but only another facet of it, and Maxine has no trouble integrating hawala transactions into her overall theory of what Gabriel Ice and his business partners may have been up to.

Horst contributes to this theory by using his own access to the metareality of money when he identifies irregularities in stock market behavior just before the attacks of 9/11:

The screen is full of numbers. "This is the Chicago Exchange, toward the end of last week, see? there was a sudden abnormal surge of put options on United Airlines. Thousands of puts, not a heck of a lot of calls. Now, today, the same thing happens for American Airlines."

"A put," Ziggy sez, "that's like selling short?"

"Yeah, when you're expecting the stock price to go down. And trading volume meanwhile is way, way up—six times normal."

"Just those two airlines?"

"Yep. Weird, huh?"

"Insider trading," it seems to Ziggy. (*BE* 315)

In describing this activity as insider trading, Ziggy reframes the terrorist attacks so that it is no longer understood as an act of politically motivated violence but rather as an economic event from which certain people have made a profit. The question of who was responsible for the attacks can thus be paraphrased in the words of Maxine: "Who was doing all this trading?" (*BE* 324). The detective work necessary to answer that question is neither historical nor political in *Bleeding Edge*, but it is mostly financial, as this is the most decisive factor that allows for insight into history and politics.

Maxine never finds the Truth, but all the truths she finds are related to money, and she finds them because she is good at following it.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while the novel routinely associates money with moral corruption, it also presents it as a potential epistemological weapon against those who allegedly control it. Gabriel Ice may be a billionaire, but his money turns against him because it reveals what he is up to, and the combination of the neutrality and irreducibility of money works in favor of those who seek to expose the turpitude of those who are usually too rich to be persecuted, or in a notorious phrase, 'too big to fail.' Money not only works for the rich but also against them, and while it grants them a considerable position of entitlement and exemption, it also potentially serves the many in at least finding out about what the few are up to, and may as a consequence also serve to remove them from their positions of power, even though the latter does not happen in *Bleeding Edge*—Gabriel Ice certainly is not a happy billionaire by the end of the novel, but he is still a billionaire.

The novel appropriately remains ambiguous in its attitude towards the monetary metareality that informs it. This ambiguity can be illustrated by juxtaposing a blog entry by March Kelleher with a dictum of one "Professor Lavoof, generally acknowledged godfather of Disgruntlement Theory and developer of the influential Disgruntled Employee Simulation Program for Audit Information and Review, aka DESPAIR" (BE 87). Lavoof states that "there has to be a world off the books" (BE 179), which can be taken to express a normative desire for a reality that is not affected by monetary exchange, a plea for a world in which things can still happen and be done without a monetary trace or even a financial element to them. Yet this implied anticapitalist sentiment of a world off the books is turned on its head when March describes the danger of such a world: "Back in the days of hippie simplicity, people liked to blame 'the CIA' or 'a secret rogue operation.'" But this is a new enemy,

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<sup>7</sup> *The 9/11 Commission Report* finds that "the trading had no connection with 9/11" and that "the apparently suspicious consistently proved innocuous." Notably, the report does so based on its own reading of the monetary metatext, finding that a "single U.S.-based institutional investor with no conceivable ties to al Qaeda purchased 95 percent of the UAL puts on September 6 as part of a trading strategy that also included buying 115,000 shares of American on September 10" (499).

unnamable, locatable on no organization chart or budget line—who knows, maybe even the CIA's scared of them" (BE 399). The scariest aspect of her paranoid speculation is that this new enemy is indeed off the books, with no budget line anyone could trace in order to identify and locate power structures, an entity that transcends even the monetary metareality that may serve as an element of control in both senses of the term, and for better or worse.

### **5. God forbid there should be real cash on a real table**

This possibility of transcending or evading the monetary metareality remains speculative in *Bleeding Edge*, since it is closely tied to March's personal views that at this point oscillate between "going crazy" and "prophecy" (BE 399). Yet there is another aspect to the use of money that indicates its subversive potential *within* the larger monetary metareality, and it occurs not among an elite but rather among the people. That subversive element is cash money. On the one hand, it is surely used for immoral purposes like any other money in the novel, for example when Tallis states that "the appearance of \$100 bills in quantity" would allow Ice to gain access to March's apartment even past the staff who are "sort of emeritus members of the Mara Salvatrucha" (BE 473). On the other hand, money potentially provides a formative element of community in which the public aspect of money intersects with its private aspect. One brief example of this is the role of money in reuniting March and Tallis over lunch; Maxine gets them to talk to each other by discussing how to split the check: "Degenerating, as Maxine hoped it might, into the old bookkeepers-at-lunch exercise, God forbid there should be real cash on a real table, which, while consuming energy useful elsewhere, is still worth it if it keeps everybody grounded, somehow, in reality" (BE 470). The turn of phrase is crucial here: it is real cash on a real table that keeps them "grounded, somehow, in reality," as if the monetary metareality provides their world with exactly the stability they need. March even changes her anti-capitalist mindset somewhat when given the chance to eat with her estranged daughter. She had declared earlier, "smiling" but still serious enough: "I don't do lunch. Corrupt artifact of late capitalism. Breakfast maybe?" (BE 115). Over lunch, Maxine reminds her of that, asking "What happened to 'corrupt artifact

of. . . ' whatever it was?" (BE 470), and March's response of "'Yaycchhh gwaahhihuc-chihnggg'" (BE 471) only proves how hard it is to denounce "late capitalism" with your mouth full. Money and what it buys is a source of community here, small-scale and local as it may be, but it is no less constitutive of a connection that had been lost before.

More importantly, however, cash money in *Bleeding Edge* also fulfills a larger function of communication (and by extension community-building) after 9/11, and this is where the public and private aspects of cash money intersect most clearly. This is only mentioned once in a passage no less crucial for it:

"Check this out." March hands over a dollar bill, around the margins of whose obverse somebody has written in ballpoint, "World Trade Center was destroyed by CIA—Bush Senior's CIA is making Bush Jr. Prez for life & a hero." "I got this in change at the corner grocery this morning. That's well within a week of the attack. Call it what you like, but a historical document whatever." Maxine recalls that Heidi has a collection of decorated dollar bills, which she regards as the public toilet wall of the U.S. monetary system, carrying jokes, insults, slogans, phone numbers, George Washington in blackface, strange hats, Afros and dreadlocks and Marge Simpson hair, lit joints in his mouth, and speech-balloon remarks ranging from witty to stupid. "No matter how the official narrative of this turns out," it seemed to Heidi, "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." "This message on this bill doesn't surprise me so much as how promptly it showed up," March sez now. "How fast the analysis has been." (BE 322–23)

Heidi's collection indicates that the phenomenon of defaced currency is not limited to the aftermath of 9/11, although it may gain new significance in that context. She has "recently been given tenure at City College in the pop-culture department" (BE 27) and accordingly offers an interpretation of these bills as examples of a truly

popular culture that offers a variety of subversive counternarratives to the dominant "official narrative," not just that of 9/11 but of American culture in general. To her, money is a marginal textual and visual medium that stands in opposition to other media such as newspapers and TV, and yet it is only marginal in the sense that it is hardly recognized as a medium while at the same time it has a much wider distribution than any newspaper could dream of. Like a "toilet wall" that offers an anonymity that "allows the opportunity to use language and express opinions and attitudes that are taboo in ordinary social life" (Trahan 2),<sup>8</sup> money also presents a medium that is free from social constraints, while at the same time it is just as diffuse, as neither are able to address a particular recipient but can do no more than get a message 'out there'—sending a private message out in public. Like a bathroom stall, money is "a battleground on which to express [one's] ideology" (Trahan 8), but it is not bound to a particular one; Heidi accordingly interprets it (notably like graffiti) rather as a communicative space where different narratives can be brought forward to clash and compete. Due to the relative freedom from the social conventions of communication, writing on money offers a way of speaking one's mind, if not necessarily of speaking the truth; it is a space of potential much like the Deep Web in *Bleeding Edge*, and just as morally ambiguous.

This is yet another aspect of the monetary metareality in the novel: cash money serves as a medium of exchange in terms of information, not only of value, and numerous individuals use money as an alternative system of communication somewhat like the W.A.S.T.E. system in *The Crying of Lot 49*. As with W.A.S.T.E., the content of the messages matters much less than the fact that they are being sent; the writing on money may range from paranoid fantasies to phone numbers, but importantly all are *uses* of money that appropriate it for a purpose other than the one intended by the state that issues these bills. Writing on money is represented as inherently subversive in this passage, not because it is punishable under Title 18, Section 333 of the United States Code, but because it turns money into something other than it

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<sup>8</sup> Trahan's recommendable recent analysis of latrinalia contains a useful review of the groundbreaking literature on the subject.

is, because it gives it a communicative function beyond its purely economic purpose. In other words, this use of money is an abuse of money, and as such presents a challenge to the primacy of the financial over the social. Furthermore, defacing currency can be seen as a challenge to the nationalist symbolic order it perpetuates.<sup>9</sup> In the passage quoted above, changing the image of George Washington may be connected to a critique of American racism, drug policy, or more generally of a nationalist narrative that venerates him as a founding father; this may incite the satirical laughter of the powerless at those in power in order to create a community other than the national one that claims hegemony over the notion of community itself.

The most important aspect about such defacement, however, is that it draws attention to the conflict between the private and the public with regard to money, and to the conflict of values inherent in this opposition. The monetary metareality in the novel is virtually devoid of any privacy, and all transactions leave a trace that can potentially be accessed by anyone with the right training or sensibilities, a text anyone can read. Depending on the values one chooses to inscribe onto money in this case, this may be seen as positive when it comes to tracking immoral and illegal activities of antagonists such as Gabriel Ice or a corrupt government and its agencies, but it seems more negative when it is used as a means of public surveillance that may not only tell the government or companies what everyone is buying and selling, but also where and when they do it. This is part of the "continuing assault against the once-reliable refuge of the cash or non-plastic economy" (xii) Pynchon writes about in his introduction to *Stone Junction*. Cash money is the last remnant of the private in a public system, as its transactions and accumulation are harder to trace; it is clearly easier to keep secret how much money is in your mattress than in your bank account. While Ice could in theory have made use of this privacy for his transactions, cash seems to be too impractical for that purpose, and he rather went through the hawala system to transfer funds. The inherent unreliability of cash that

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<sup>9</sup> The artistic works of J.S.G. Boggs, Mark Wagner, or Micah Spear are examples of how the defacement, destruction, or forgery of money may serve to explore and challenge the meanings and values that are inscribed on it by dominant narratives in society.

may have prevented him from doing so is exemplified by a story that is being told about Maxine's exploits as a CFE, that she "went down to Grand Cayman disguised as a reggae backup singer, firebombed ten and a half billion in physical Swiss francs, and exfiltrated in the perps' own Gulfstream jet" (*BE* 252). Because of how it is used, cash money seems to belong to the preterite rather than to the elect in the novel, and to them it is both a potential niche of privacy and a constant reminder of their public existence within the state that issued it. Even the subversion of money by defacing it still relies on its ubiquity and its value, otherwise writing on money would be no different from leaving notes to strangers on pieces of paper, and it is clearly more meaningful than that. Nowhere is the inherent neutrality of money and its inscription with competing ideologies more evident than in the defaced dollar bill, and *Bleeding Edge* uses this motif in order to present yet another facet of its monetary metareality that is neither inherently positive nor negative but rather can be put to use in various ways, even to challenge the very economic value of money by investing it with other value and values.

What, then, is the value of money in *Bleeding Edge*? Or rather, what *values* are associated with it and inscribed on it? The presence of a monetary metareality is as pervasive in the novel as money itself is, and it informs its world to such an extent that it seems to have no outside. While the novel is certainly critical of this universality and its apparent inevitability in a world so thoroughly capitalist that no alternatives to it may even be imagined, it is also using the ubiquity of money against that very system of capitalism itself. It depicts the neutrality of money as an element of irreducible instability, a weapon that may at any point explode in the hands of those who wield it for whatever purpose. It is, ultimately, money that brings about the downfall of the arch-capitalist Gabriel Ice, if one may call it that, since Maxine has drawn on the monetary metatext to uncover—at least to a certain extent—his illegal activities and the extent of the conspiracy he was involved in. In the end, while still being rich, he is physically not "looking too fit [. . .], his face all red and swollen, some trembling he can't control," but he also defiantly insists (in one of the few instances of direct speech he is granted in the novel) that "I don't die. There's



no scenario where I die" (*BE* 473). His arrogance seems particularly unjustified as Maxine is pointing a gun at him at the time, and yet he seems to have a point. Reading him as an allegorical figure, his physical, mental, and moral state at the end implies that capitalism is sick and corrupted but still will not just go away, and there is no "scenario" where its disappearance could be imagined. Maxine's victory, if it can be called that, is not one of defeating an enemy but of identifying him in the first place; the blurb for *Bleeding Edge* accordingly asks the question of "Will perpetrators be revealed, forget about brought to justice?" Maxine manages to gain insight and information, and she ensures that Ice knows she knows, and that she will always be able to know.

Remarkably, Maxine finds the opposition to Ice's capitalism in the institutions of the state that also read the monetary metatext for any illegal activity, arguing that Ice may "find that there's too many people coming at him from too many different directions, the SEC, the IRS, the Justice Department" (*BE* 475). Yet she cannot really consider the state a benevolent corrective of the detrimental excesses of capitalism, as that statement would imply; earlier, she wondered aloud to Igor why the Security and Exchange Commission or the "DA, somebody" are not "taking action" against Madoff and his Ponzi scheme, and Igor laconically enlightens her as to the complicity of state and capitalism: "A shrug, eloquent eyebrows, thumb rubbing fingers. 'Well yes, that's certainly a thought'" (*BE* 140). *Bleeding Edge* thus ends ambiguously with capitalism still at large but at the same time under threat not by the state, society, religion, politics, technology, or any such thing, but only by the very thing that seems to define it: money. The novel offers no sense of an outside to capitalism, and yet it identifies within that system an element that it both at its very heart but at the same time never fully under its control. Ultimately, this means that all value in the novel must be, in a certain precise sense, monetary value—not in the sense that everything must have a price, but in that all morality and all values must be defined in relation to money, and being good means doing the right thing with regard to money. It may be the most striking utopian feature of *Bleeding Edge* that the novel still allows for that possibility in the world it presents.

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