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**Postmodernities in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49***

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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## Abstract

Thomas Pynchon is considered one of the key postmodern authors. This BA thesis aims to explore the way his novel *The Crying of Lot 49* reflects contemporary society by utilizing some of the “postmodernities”: the different aspects of postmodernism and key features of postmodern literature. A definitive definition which would explain postmodernism completely is not possible yet (and perhaps never will be) and so this thesis achieves its aim by studying multiple postmodern theories developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and applying them to the reading of this novel. The thesis draws primarily upon the work of some of the most important postmodern philosophers and theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon whose ideas about postmodernity correspond greatly with those employed in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The postmodern features which the thesis looks at are those such as the mistrust in metanarratives, ontological plurality and the related notions of conspiracy and paranoia, the simulacrum and the spectacle. The society portrayed in the novel represents a system of power structures and entangled orders of simulacra, driven by commodity fetishism and ruled by a flow of images and advertisements, breaking the boundaries between the real and the non-real. However, the thesis shows that the society depicted in the novel is a reflection of the society outside of the novel: the society that the reader themselves is part of. Oedipa, the protagonist of the novel, ceases to recognize the differences between the real and the non-real while she is trying to discover the legacy of her late ex-boyfriend in order to be able to execute his will. She must navigate her way through the labyrinthine nature of her reality and the present late capitalist society as she searches for coherence within them. The reader finds themselves in a similar position where they search for meaning and coherence within the novel. The inherently textual nature of the reality both inside and outside of the novel causes that the protagonist and the reader are both being tempted to automatically look for patterns in the complex system of signs with which they are being faced – be it the world of the novel, the text of the novel, or, the world of the reader – even though this system might be based on arbitrariness. The historical accuracy of the novel (and of the play within the novel) is itself questioned given the uncertainty of reality and truth, as it is clear that the author too is the projector of his universe. Thus, it is important not to overinterpret and overanalyze the signs pervading *The Crying of Lot 49* when dealing with this novel.

## Key Words

postmodernism, Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Francois Lyotard, incredulity towards metanarratives, grand narrative, little narrative, paranoia, reality, the real, truth, subjectivity, plurality, simulacrum, simulation, spectacle, communication, information, meaning, textuality, historicity, consumerism, capitalism, mass culture, commodity, contemporary society, myth

## Abstrakt

Thomas Pynchon je považován za jednoho z klíčových postmoderních spisovatelů. Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá jakým způsobem jeho román *The Crying of Lot 49* zobrazuje současnou společnost použitím některých „postmodernit“ – různých aspektů postmodernismu a klíčových konceptů postmoderní literatury. Dokonalá definice postmodernismu, která by ho celistvě vysvětlila není zatím možná (a možná nikdy nebude), a tak tato práce dosahuje svého cíle za pomoci několika postmoderních teorií vyvinutých v druhé polovině dvacátého století a jejich aplikování při čtení tohoto díla. Tato práce se zakládá promárně na dílech některých z nejdůležitějších postmoderních filozofů a teoretiků jako jsou Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Fredric Jameson a Linda Hutcheon, jejichž představy o postmodernitě značně odpovídají s těmi osazenými v *The Crying of Lot 49*. Postmoderní prvky, kterými se práce zabývá, jsou např. nedůvěra k metanarativům, ontologický pluralismus a s ním spojená konspirace a paranoia, simulakrum a spektakl. Společnost vyobrazená v knize představuje systém mocenských struktur a změř simulaker, hnané komoditním fetišismem a ovládané proudem obrazů a reklam, stírajících rozdíly mezi reálným a nereálným. Tato bakalářská práce nisméně dokazuje, že společnost vyobrazená v románu reflektuje vnější společnost mimo něj, tedy společnost, jejíž součástí je sám čtenář. Oedipa, hlavní postava románu, se snaží dohledat dědictví svého bývalého zesnulého přítele aby mohla vykonat jeho závěť a přitom přestává rozeznávat rozdíly mezi reálným a nereálným. Musí se zorientovat ve spleť realitě současné společnosti pozdního kapitalismu, ve které hledá souvislost, a čtenář se ocitá v podobné situaci, kdy hledá význam a souvislost v tomto románu. Díky přirozené textuálnosti uvnitř i mimo román jsou protagonistka i čtenář sváděni k automatickému hledání vzorců ve složitém systému znaků, kterému neustále čelí (ať už je to ve světě románu, textu románu či ve světě čtenáře), přestože je možná nahodilý. Historická přesnost románu i hry obsažené v něm je zpochybněna vzhledem k samotné nejistotě reality a pravdy, neboť je vřejmé, že i autor je tvůrcem svého vlastního vesmíru. Je tudíž důležité se vyvarovat nadměrné interpretaci znaků, které *The Crying of Lot 49* prostupují.

## Klíčová slova

postmodernismus, Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, Francois Lyotard, nedůvěra v metanarace, velké vyprávění, malý narativ, paranoia, realita, reálno, pravda, subjektivita, pluralita, simulakrum, simulace, spektakl, komunikace, informace, význam, textuálnita, historicita, konzumerismus, kapitalismus, masová kultura, komodita, současná společnost, mýtus

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Chapter 1 – Introduction .....                       | 1  |
| Chapter 2 – Incredulity towards Metanarratives ..... | 3  |
| Paranoia .....                                       | 10 |
| Chapter 3 – The Simulacrum .....                     | 18 |
| Communication, Information and Meaning .....         | 24 |
| Textuality .....                                     | 33 |
| Historicity .....                                    | 38 |
| Chapter 4 – Spectacle and Commodity Culture .....    | 45 |
| Chapter 5 – Conclusion .....                         | 51 |
| Bibliography .....                                   | 54 |

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Thomas Pynchon is regarded as one of the most important authors of post-war American literature and a major figure of postmodernism. His work is known for being very dense, complicated and difficult to read, containing vast numbers of allusions, references and concepts belonging to various fields of study, which make it hard to comprehend. He is the author of seven novels so far, most famous and acclaimed being *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), which have entered the (not only postmodern) literary canon in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> *Gravity's Rainbow* is acknowledged as a masterpiece of American literature and some compare its importance with that of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1918) or Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1850). Even though Pynchon might not be as well known to the public as these literary giants, he has become one of the most discussed literary figures in current academic discourse. He has been attracting the attention of critics with his arduous texts epitomizing the postmodern theories.

The concept of postmodernism remains to be vague and a complete definition cannot yet be achieved, as the period of postmodernism has not quite come to its conclusion yet. The term is applied in various fields of study, such as philosophy, literature and other arts, literary criticism and cultural theory. The concept has been characterized in multiple ways from multiple points of view. The short definition provided by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes the term as being

applied to a cultural condition prevailing in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, characterized by a superabundance of disconnected images and styles—most noticeably in television, advertising, commercial design, and pop video. In this sense, promoted by Jean Baudrillard and other commentators, postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra,

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<sup>1</sup> Inger H. Dalsgaard, et al., eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 3.

and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis will show that most of the concepts of postmodernism mentioned in this definition constitute the main themes of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and it will aim to explore the way in which the novel portrays contemporary society by studying multiple postmodern theories developed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and applying them to the reading of this novel. The features utilized in the novel and discussed here as focal points are those such as the mistrust in metanarratives, ontological plurality and the related notions of conspiracy and paranoia, the simulacrum and the spectacle. They constitute different aspects of postmodernism and are thus called "postmodernities" in this thesis, as they demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of postmodernism. The thesis will primarily draw upon the work of philosophers and theorists such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Guy Debord, Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon whose ideas about postmodernity correspond greatly with those employed in *The Crying of Lot 49*. As Brian McHale observes in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Pynchon*: "No matter how ['postmodernism'] is characterized, however, the fiction of Thomas Pynchon appears to be universally regarded as central to its canon."<sup>3</sup> As he points out, Fredric Jameson lists Thomas Pynchon as an exemplary postmodernist on the first page of his *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, a seminal text of postmodernism. Pynchon's novels have become representative of postmodernism and his role in shaping the concept has been so crucial, that McHale takes the praise even further by claiming that "without Pynchon's fiction, there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Postmodernism." Def. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Second ed. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Inger H. Dalsgaard, et al., eds. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Inger H. Dalsgaard, et al., eds. 97.

## Chapter 2 – Incredulity towards Metanarratives

One of the most important figures who have articulated the concepts of postmodernism was the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, who in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) defines “postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives.” Metanarrative, also referred to by Lyotard as master narrative, is a totalizing narrative which is supposed to offer legitimation of knowledge, for example, the Enlightenment metanarrative of history progressing towards emancipation, or, the metanarrative about knowledge progressing towards totalization.<sup>5</sup> The grand narrative, according to Lyotard, has lost its credibility, “regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation,” and “the question of the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms.”<sup>6</sup> Lyotard distinguishes two kinds of knowledge, one being the scientific knowledge, which “is a kind of discourse”<sup>7</sup> and “does not represent the totality of knowledge,” and the other, which he calls “narrative.”<sup>8</sup> Lyotard notes that these “narratives” are self-legitimizing, because they “define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Lyotard, the decline of the narrative “can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means.”<sup>10</sup> He further points out that “[i]t is, of course, understandable that both capitalist renewal and prosperity and the disorienting upsurge of

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991) vii-xxiv.

<sup>6</sup> Lyotard 37.

<sup>7</sup> Lyotard 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lyotard 7.

<sup>9</sup> Lyotard 23.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard 37.

technology would have an impact on the status of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> This incredulity towards metanarratives is, as he points out, “undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences” and of “the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it,” among other reasons. Lyotard believes that “the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and the cultures enter what is known as the postmodern age,”<sup>12</sup> and the “crisis” of scientific knowledge is “an effect of progress in technology and the expansion of capitalism.”<sup>13</sup> Lyotard claims that it is “widely accepted that knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades.”<sup>14</sup> As he puts it,

The relationship of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.<sup>15</sup>

Knowledge then takes the form of an “informational commodity” and becomes “a major – perhaps *the* major – stake in the worldwide competition for power.”<sup>16</sup>

Lyotard notes that today, there is no denying “the dominant existence of techno-science” and that “the objects and the thoughts which originate in scientific knowledge and the capitalist economy” convey a rule with them that “there is no reality unless testified by a consensus between partners over a certain knowledge and certain commitments.” Lyotard claims that this belief is based on “a kind of flight of reality out of the metaphysical, religious, and political certainties that the mind believed it held.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lyotard 38.

<sup>12</sup> Lyotard 3.

<sup>13</sup> Lyotard 39.

<sup>14</sup> Lyotard 5.

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard 4.

<sup>16</sup> Lyotard 5.

<sup>17</sup> Lyotard 76-7.

As Lyotard puts it, “[i]t is recognized that the conditions of truth (...) can only be established within the bonds [sic bounds?] of a debate (...),” and “the sign of legitimacy is the people's consensus, and their mode of creating norms is deliberation.”<sup>18</sup> Lyotard explains the inadequacy of the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation by providing its two formulations:

In the first, consensus is an agreement between men, defined as knowing intellects and free wills, and is obtained through dialogue. (...) In the second, consensus is a component of the system, which manipulates it in order to maintain and improve its performance. (...) In this case, its only validity is as an instrument to be used toward achieving the real goal, which is what legitimates the system – power.<sup>19</sup>

To Lyotard, the incredulity towards metanarratives, or, absolute truth-claims, is based on their desire “for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality” and thus gain power and control.<sup>20</sup>

Linda Hutcheon agrees by pointing out, in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, that master narratives are “those systems by which we usually unify and order (and smooth over) any contradictions in order to make them fit.”<sup>21</sup>

Lyotard claims that “it is now dissension that must be emphasized. Consensus is a horizon that is never reached.”<sup>22</sup> He points out that “consensus is only a particular state of discussion, not its end. Its end, on the contrary, is paralogy.”<sup>23</sup> By this he means that consensus needs to be achieved on a local basis by the present players of the language games – a concept created by Ludwig Wittgenstein which Lyotard draws upon – rather than on a collective, common level, and “favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments,” meaning “argumentation

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<sup>18</sup> Lyotard 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard 60.

<sup>20</sup> Lyotard 82.

<sup>21</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1995) x.

<sup>22</sup> Lyotard 61.

<sup>23</sup> Lyotard 65-6.

that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, little narratives should aim for emancipation, not metanarratives.

In his essay “Conversations in Postmodern Hermeneutics,” Shaun Gallagher agrees that “[t]he postmodern situation is nothing other than a paralogical multiplicity of conversations.” He explains that the plural is important, as it “qualifies the type of universality that we can claim for conversation, a universality quite different from that claimed by the conversation of mankind.” As he puts it, the conversation of mankind would be a “*universal conversation* based on a presupposed (meta)consensus.” He further points out that conversing is something we can’t avoid and that wherever we find ourselves, we are always in a conversation, “and more precisely, in one conversation among others.” However, this universality “has nothing to do” with a universal conversation and does not include a metaconsensus. Gallagher also points out that among the plurality of conversations fusions may happen, leading to the creation of “new and different conversations linking one to another” and of new horizons.<sup>25</sup> Sezen Kayhan would add that “a single force can never encapsulate everybody’s vision of the good society,” and that “[p]luralism and diversity are necessary in terms of creating a free society,” as she puts it in her *Fragments of Tragedy in Postmodern Film*. She also mentions that it is accepted “that the attempts to reach agreement can only lead to dictatorship.”<sup>26</sup> However, as Lyotard states, “[p]ostmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.”<sup>27</sup>

Lyotard believes that the production of “little narratives” should replace the rejected “grand narratives” in the form of “allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Lyotard 66.

<sup>25</sup> Shaun Gallagher, “Conversations in Postmodern Hermeneutics,” *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh S. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2002) 55-6.

<sup>26</sup> Sezen Kayhan, *Fragments of Tragedy in Postmodern Film* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) 31.

<sup>27</sup> Lyotard xxv.

<sup>28</sup> Lyotard 81.

What he suggests is that grand narratives need to be challenged because the absolute truth is unattainable. There are many narratives that explain different aspects of the reality of the world, even though they cannot reach any ultimate truth, unlike the totalizing universal theories which have failed to legitimate science and knowledge.<sup>29</sup> McHale explains this “narrative turn” in *Constructing Postmodernism* as “one of the contemporary responses to the loss of metaphysical “grounding” or “foundations” for our theorizing. According to him,

We are no longer confident that we can build intellectual structures upward from firm epistemological and ontological foundations...while there may well be somewhere a “world” underlying all our disparate versions of it, that world is finally inaccessible, and all we have are the versions (...).<sup>30</sup>

This notion can be found in Oedipa’s futile quest to find the truth about the Tristero, which might be a nation-wide conspiracy, but it could also be only a product of her imagination. Another option is that it is all a joke left to her by her ex-boyfriend Pierce Inverarity. She does not find the truth and she encounters only multiple possibilities which do not lead to any conclusions. Not only that no closure is given when the novel ends, but it is even unsure if there is a possibility of a conclusion at all. Oedipa seems to be on the verge of a revelation which never comes and so the truth stays unattainable to her.

Oedipa realizes that she herself can become the director of her own narrative, same as Driblette is, in his words, “the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in the circle of that stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also,”<sup>31</sup> and she asks herself: “*Shall I project a world*” (82)? In Lyotard’s words, she would do so by “assigning [herself] the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator.”<sup>32</sup> This signalizes her recognition of the fact that the ultimate truth, or the world, is inaccessible and

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<sup>29</sup> Lyotard 29.

<sup>30</sup> Brian McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1992) 4-5.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) 79. All future number references will be to this edition and will be included in parenthesis in the text.

<sup>32</sup> Lyotard 23.

that she must create her own version of it, because “anything might help” (82). Lyotard observes that most people in the postmodern world “have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative,” and they know “that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction.”<sup>33</sup> He further stresses the importance of “the little narrative [petit récit],” which “remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention.”<sup>34</sup>

The task that sets all the happenings in motion in the novel is that Oedipa is supposed to sort out her ex-boyfriend’s estate. Grant notes that Pynchon “is acutely conscious of the fact that we live in an age of uncertainty, an age in which indeterminacy is a fundamental component of our understanding of matter. Sorting, therefore, is inevitably a problematic activity.”<sup>35</sup> The reason for it being problematic is that Oedipa finds out that Inverarity’s legacy is so extensive that she is not even sure what exactly *is* his legacy. At the end of the novel, Oedipa ponders that the legacy might be America. When she comes to a stage where she starts recognizing the “signals” which seem to point to the conspiracy machinery, she wonders whether,

at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with only compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (95)

Oedipa starts to recognize that she might not be ever able to uncover the “central truth” which would explain everything to her and answered her questions.

When Oedipa walks through the Berkeley campus, “wanting to feel relevant but knowing how much of a search among alternate universes it would take” (103), she feels like a stranger because she cannot relate to what she is seeing around her anymore. The university represents a place of knowledge, but Oedipa seems to be unable to perceive knowledge about

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<sup>33</sup> Lyotard 41.

<sup>34</sup> Lyotard 60.

<sup>35</sup> J. Kerry Grant, *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008) 9.

the world around her, or, some “central truth,” because she can no longer tell what is true and what is not, as she gets lost in the labyrinth of signs surrounding her. It is a representation of the crisis connected to the institutions of knowledge, which Lyotard speaks about.

The novel contains an abundance of allusions to the fact that the boundaries between the real and the non-real are indistinct. For example, when Metzger tells her a fact about the WW2 U-boat strategy and Oedipa asks “How do you know that?” and he replies, “Wasn’t I there?” (32). He was, though, only an actor in a film set during the WW2. Another example are the blurred lines between actors and judges when Metzger talks about himself and his friend changing professions back and forth, or the fact that The Paranoids sing with British accents is also a kind of a strange simulation. When Oedipa asks Miles why they do that, he replies that the band’s manager “says we should sing like that. We watch English movies a lot, for the accent” (27). The fact that they learn the accent mediated through TV shows how their reality is influenced by the media, and their accents are probably a mixture of different individual British accents and their own American accent. In a way, their presumably vague accent makes their identity more vague too.

As the story progresses, Oedipa begins to have doubts about her real name (being called Edna Mosh, Grace Bortz, Arnold Schnarb) and her identity seems to be plural, as well as those of some of the other characters, e.g. Pierce Inverarity who impersonates Lamont Cranston. After Driblette’s death, Oedipa wonders whether, “as Driblette had suggested that night from the shower, some version of herself hadn't vanished with him” (161). This indicates the degree to which Oedipa feels possessed by the Tristero. Mucho loses grasp of reality as well as his own identity:

“Frankly,” confided Punch, “since you left, Wendell hasn't been himself.”

“And who,” said Oedipa, working herself into a rage because Punch was right, “pray, has he been, Ringo Starr?” Punch cowered. “Chubby Checker?” she pursued him toward the lobby, “the Righteous Brothers? And why tell me?”

“All of the above,” said Punch, seeking to hide his head,  
“Mrs Maas.”

“Oh, call me Edna. What do you mean?”

“Behind his back,” Punch was whining, “they're calling him the Brothers N. He's losing his identity, Edna, how else can I put it? Day by day, Wendell is less himself and more generic. He enters a staff meeting and the room is suddenly full of people, you know? He's a walking assembly of man.” (140)

This schizophrenia does not possess only the characters in the novel, not only the counterculture, but also the whole of contemporary society. Erik S. Roraback quotes Mattessich in his *The Philosophical Baroque*, for whom “[t]o say that the counterculture is also already schizophrenic is only to situate it more completely in relation to a historical formation (late capitalism) for which, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, schizophrenia is a ‘characteristic malady’ (*Anti-Oedipus*, 34).”<sup>36</sup> The contemporary culture of late capitalism becomes schizophrenic due to the “loss of reality” and globalization. When everybody has access to the whole world through the means of media and travel, individual identities seem to become more general and less distinct.

## Paranoia

It should be no surprise that, together with an uncertainty of truth and multiple versions of the reality, conspiracy and paranoia constitute some of the main themes of the novel. As McHale observes in *Constructing Postmodernism*, “itself a form of ontological plurality,” conspiracy in postmodern fiction “appropriately co-occurs with other motifs and strategies of ontological plurality.”<sup>37</sup> According to ontological pluralism, “there are different ways, kinds, or

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<sup>36</sup> Stefan Mattessich, *Lines of Flight: Discursive Time and Countercultural Desire in the Work of Thomas Pynchon* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) 10, quoted in Erik S. Roraback, *The Philosophical Baroque: On Autopoietic Modernities* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2017) 174.

<sup>37</sup> McHale 180.

modes of being,”<sup>38</sup> as Jason Turner states in his essay “Ontological Pluralism.” This idea reflects the skeptical view towards metanarratives and their totalizing nature.

This plurality is an issue which Oedipa struggles with throughout her quest, as she becomes aware of the fact that there are multiple modes of truth and reality. She is forced to continually question her reality, as it is quite suspicious how everything fits together in the story. There are so many coincidences happening that it starts to be hard to believe that they are doing so accidentally. The point at which she begins to be skeptical towards reality is when Metzger tells her about his role in a film which then appears on the TV when they switch it on: “Either he made up the whole thing, Oedipa thought suddenly, or he bribed the engineer over at the local station to run this, it’s all part of a plot, an elaborate, seduction, *plot*” (31). It then further continues with the fact that there is a play on about Turn and Taxis in San Narciso and that it mentions the Trystero, and when Oedipa wants to ask Driblette about the fate of the bones and instead they talk about the Trystero she wonders how accidental it has been. Driblette tries to dissuade her by saying:

“You came to talk about the play,” he said. “Let me discourage you. It was written to entertain people. Like horror movies. It isn’t literature, it doesn’t mean anything. Wharfinger was no Shakespeare.”

“Who was he?” she said.

“Who was Shakespeare. It was a long time ago.”

“Could I see a script?” She didn’t know what she was looking for, exactly. Driblette motioned her over to a file cabinet next to the one shower. (77)

Oedipa’s paranoia is evident after he tells her that there are more copies of the script for the play, and she asks him whether he is putting her on. Driblette is confused why everyone is interested in the texts and Oedipa asks, too quickly, “Who else” (78)? She starts regarding moments like these as clues. Soon she notices that everything that happens around her is

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<sup>38</sup> Jason Turner, “Ontological Pluralism”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 107, no. 1 (2010): 5, *JSTOR* <[www.jstor.org/stable/25700478](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25700478)> 14 May 2019.

dubiously connected: the sign of the muted horn appears at every corner and after the play, Oedipa sees clues incessantly:

...revelations which now seemed to come crowding in exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero. (81)

The fact that everything Oedipa perceives becomes connected to the Tristero suggests that she herself creates illusions of these signs signaling a connected system working on a conspiracy around her, and as Leo Bersani points out: “What else could the truth of paranoia be than a replication, on a different discursive register, of the paranoid’s delusions?”<sup>39</sup> Later on in the novel, Oedipa reflects that “there was somehow always the post horn. She grew so to expect it that perhaps she did not see it quite as often as she later was to remember seeing it” (123-4). This replication of signals and delusions is an instance of ontological pluralism, and as Bersani points out, “[p]aranoia repeats phenomena as design.”<sup>40</sup>

Oedipa discovers what seems to be either an underground delivery system which connects members of some secret society or a web of actors playing out a joke plotted by Inverarity as a way of making sure he would be remembered. However, she is unable to see the connections clearly, uncertain whether they exist right in front of her eyes or not. As Bersani explains, “[p]aranoid thinking hesitates between the suspicion that the truth is wholly obscured by the visible and the equally disturbing sense that the truth may be a sinister, invisible design in the visible.”<sup>41</sup> He points out that even Pynchon defined paranoia in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as the “reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible.”<sup>42</sup> This is the reason why on one hand, Oedipa keeps distrusting the visible and keeps looking for connections, on the other hand, those signals which are visible and which she keeps seeing are the triggers of her suspicions. According to

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<sup>39</sup> Leo Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990) 180.

<sup>40</sup> Bersani 183.

<sup>41</sup> Bersani 183.

<sup>42</sup> Bersani 181.

Bersani, “[t]he paranoid sees the visible as a simulated double of the real; it deceptively repeats the real.”<sup>43</sup> This might suggest that Oedipa regards what she sees as a constructed, simulated reality and thus is trying to find what lies behind it. Everything that she encounters seems to be connected in some way, and she is trying to discover whether it is because of a conspiracy created by her late partner, or if she has stumbled upon an underground organization.

Oedipa’s paranoia is relatable to the contemporary reader because it reflects the state of the whole society. As Sezen Kayhan mentions, “it is a fact that we live in the age of ‘paranoia,’” and it is no surprise, since everything that one does and says can be surveyed and listened and controlled by one information system or another.<sup>44</sup> She then quotes from *Symbolic Exchange and Death* by Jean Baudrillard a passage in which he discusses anxiety and paranoia:

Our rationalist culture suffers from a collective paranoia. Something or someone must have been responsible for the least accident, the slightest irregularity, the least catastrophe, an earth tremor, a house in ruins, bad weather, everything is an assassination attempt. This paranoia is less interesting than the fact that what happens is interpreted this way.<sup>45</sup>

Kayhan notes that the literary history of paranoia goes back to Ancient Greece, but it did not take center stage in literature until the first half of the twentieth century, when it was exploited by authors like Kafka, Orwell and Lovecraft, and, she points out, “it is Thomas Pynchon who removed paranoia from elaborate scenarios of Kafka and Orwell, and inserted it into banalities of everyday suburban life.” She proposes that the postmodern paranoia can be seen as a special case that Jean Baudrillard has called “hypervisibility,” and she notes that it is “more of a social condition than a personal one.” She claims that the “results of changing social conditions, the Cold War, and the increasing awareness of espionage activities of the FBI, CIA and KGB supported this condition.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Bersani 189.

<sup>44</sup> Kayhan 53.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (London: Sage Publications, 2004) 161, quoted in Kayhan 53-4.

<sup>46</sup> Kayhan 54.

Paranoia is so symptomatic of our era also because it is related to technology, which, as Bersani puts it, “can collect the information necessary to draw connecting lines among the most disparate data,” and the drawing of those lines depends on “what might be called a conspiratorial interconnectedness among those interested in data collection.”<sup>47</sup> When Lyotard published *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979, he claimed in it that in the past forty years, the “leading” sciences and technologies “have had to do with language,” and among the fields he names are for example “problems of communication and cybernetics.” According to Lyotard, these “technological transformations can be expected to have a considerable impact on knowledge. Its two principal functions – research and the transmission of acquired learning – are already feeling the effect, or will in the future.”<sup>48</sup> He then stresses the influence of the “information-processing machines” on learning by comparing it with other influences:

It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media).<sup>49</sup>

The abundance of information sources is one of the reasons for the impossibility to escape paranoia and live without it. As Bersani puts it, “to escape from paranoia would be to escape from the movement that is life.” It is impossible to prevent things from connecting in our minds, “paranoia is necessary and desired structure of thought.”<sup>50</sup> This, in fact, is what the Rorschach test, which is alluded to when Oedipa visits Hilarius at the beginning of the story (18), is based on. It is a test which was used for diagnosing psychopathology and it is described in *Encyclopædia Britannica* as follows: “The Rorschach test is based on the human tendency to

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<sup>47</sup> Bersani 182.

<sup>48</sup> Lyotard 3-4.

<sup>49</sup> Lyotard 4.

<sup>50</sup> Bersani 183.

project interpretations and feelings onto ambiguous stimuli.”<sup>51</sup> In the case of the Rorschach test, it is the ink blots, in the case of Oedipa, it is the ever-present signs.

When she asks Driblette about the script for his play, he criticizes her for being “[s]o hung up with words, words” (79). Grant suggests that “Driblette appears to be arguing here against exegesis, and since we are always as readers implicitly involved in a quest parallel to Oedipa’s, we might be inclined to feel that Pynchon is speaking to us through him.”<sup>52</sup> He points out that the reader is encouraged to view Driblette with suspicion, same as Oedipa is. According to him, Driblette’s exchange with Oedipa serves as “a fine example of the novel’s ability to involve the reader in the uncertainties that beset its central character.”<sup>53</sup> As a result of the proliferation of signs in the novel, the reader is infected with Oedipa’s paranoid anxiety, searching for connections and the meaning behind them.

When Oedipa becomes a hostage to Dr. Hilarius after he’s gone crazy, he is surprised that it was her to whom he was talking behind the closed door, and he tells her that “with the LSD, we’re finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug, I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are” (136). Grant observes that it is rather paradoxical that Hilarius “claims a state of mind that, in terms of the extremes articulated by the novel, represents a relatively sane middle ground.” Hilarius might seem crazy to the other characters present, however, possessed “neither by a vision of total paranoia, in which the self would be seen as powerless, nor by one of a total absence of order, Hilarius maintains a healthy distinction between himself and the world outside himself.”<sup>54</sup> Oedipa advises him to “[a]ccept the reality principle” (136), which is paradoxical as well since she herself has been struggling with discovering “reality.”

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<sup>51</sup> “Hermann Rorschach,” Def. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019, <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hermann-Rorschach>> 25 May 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Grant 76.

<sup>53</sup> Grant 79.

<sup>54</sup> Grant 138.

The reason for which Oedipa went to see Hilarius is that she “wanted Hilarius to tell her she was some kind of a nut and needed a rest, and that there was no Trystero. She also wanted to know why the chance of its being real should menace her so” (132):

“I came,” she said, “hoping you could talk me out of a fantasy.”

“Cherish it!” cried Hilarius, fiercely. “What else do any of you have? Hold it tightly by its little tentacle, don't let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others. You begin to cease to be.” (138)

Hilarius tells Oedipa to cherish her fantasies because he knows that it is all that one has and that everyone shapes their own reality through their own mind. “As a psychoanalyst, however gone mad, he knows that reality is nothing but a fantasy that enough people believe or adhere to,” as Maurice Couturier puts it in his essay “The Death of the Real in *The Crying of Lot 49*.”<sup>55</sup> Towards the end of the novel, when Oedipa was already exhausted by the proliferation of signs and her trying to make sense of them, she “hoped she was mentally ill” (171). That would, to her, at least, be a clear explanation of what was happening around her.

Oedipa and Dr. Hilarius are not the only paranoid characters in the novel: there is the band called the Paranoids; Miles, one of the members is called paranoid by Oedipa when he assumes she hates him; Fallopian says “They accuse us of being paranoids” when Oedipa asks whether the Peter Pinguid society is “one of these right-wing nut outfits” (48); and when Manny Di Presso realizes that the Paranoids have been listening to him talking about the human bones, his reaction is comically exaggerated: “‘They've been listening,’ screamed Di Presso, ‘those kids. All the time, somebody listens in, snoops; they bug your apartment, they tap your phone— —’” (63).

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<sup>55</sup> Maurice Couturier, “The Death of the Real in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” Pynchon Notes 20–21 (Spring–Fall 1987): 28 <<https://pynchonnotes.openlibhums.org/articles/abstract/10.16995/pn.331/#>> 27 May 2019.

However, it might be possible that there really is a plot being organized against Oedipa, which would mean that her paranoid thinking would not be paranoid, after all, because it would be justified. Grant points out that “[i]f Pierce has indeed fabricated the whole Tristero as a plot against Oedipa, then who is being paranoid?” Maybe Inverarity was paranoid that he would be forgotten after his death, and so he made sure that he would survive in the form of Oedipa’s paranoia, but again, “one can scarcely be paranoid about a real conspiracy.”<sup>56</sup> However, Grant suggests that there is a possibility at the end of the novel that “Oedipa will remain trapped in a private, paranoid universe of her own fabrication,” because of the “exitlessness” of the circular nature of her quest.<sup>57</sup> She will continually be looking for connections and associations that will be building up around her in never-ending cycles. The exitlessness of her quest resembles the exitlessness of the postmodern, capitalist culture.

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<sup>56</sup> Grant 161.

<sup>57</sup> Grant 136.

## Chapter 3 – The Simulacrum

Another theorist who was concerned with different versions of truth, or rather, simulations of the real, was the postmodern thinker Jean Baudrillard. In his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), he describes the simulation today as being “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”<sup>58</sup> According to Baudrillard, the postmodern culture has become so obsessed with models, images and simulacra, that the reality becomes unattainable, or maybe rather it disappears completely. The postmodern era is the era of simulation and “is inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials.” As he puts it, the real

no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything than operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.<sup>59</sup>

The era of simulation is the one in which the map replaces the territory and begins to determine the territory itself, or, the reality. In Baudrillard’s words: “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”<sup>60</sup> However, we are unable to make a distinction between what is natural and what is artificial, or, as Baudrillard puts it, the hyperreal is sheltered from “any distinction between the real and the imaginary,”<sup>61</sup> and the reason for this loss of differentiation is precisely simulation.

Baudrillard describes the opposition between representation and simulation; representation, according to him, “stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and the real,” whereas “simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and

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<sup>58</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 1.

<sup>59</sup> Baudrillard 2.

<sup>60</sup> Baudrillard 2.

<sup>61</sup> Baudrillard 2-3.

death sentence of every reference.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, to simulate means to pretend to have something which, in fact, is missing.

The question of reality is the one which Oedipa pursues on her quest – or, maybe, it is the question of reality that pursues her. She is trying to discover the truth, but it is impossible as she only keeps discovering more and more versions of it. Couturier explains that if Oedipa wants to stop the proliferation of the media and techniques of simulation, “she must first rediscover the authentic text hidden beneath the surface of everyday reality. This crusade lamentably fails, because she keeps unearthing more and more texts which duplicate reality and make the ‘real’ more elusive.” Couturier believes that the “real” that Oedipa is looking for is, in fact, her “elusive self.”<sup>63</sup>

Baudrillard distinguishes four successive phases of the image. The first phase is “the reflection of a profound reality.” This image is a “*good* appearance” and the representation is of the “sacramental order,” which means that it is a good, faithful copy, and one recognizes that it is a copy. The second phase “masks and denatures a profound reality,” it is an “evil appearance,” which is of the “order of maleficence.” The third phase “masks the *absence* of a profound reality,” and as Baudrillard describes it, “it plays at being an appearance – it is of the order of sorcery.” The fourth phase “has no relationship to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.” In this case, it is “no longer of the order or appearances, but of simulation.”<sup>64</sup>

An illustrative example which Baudrillard presents is that of Disneyland, which is supposed to be the “perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra.” He describes Disneyland as a “play of illusions and phantasms,” full of representations of things that are not real in the “real world” like the Disney characters and the Disney castle.<sup>65</sup> The castle is supposed to look like a European romantic castle, but it is not a real castle, and in reality, there does not

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<sup>62</sup> Baudrillard 6.

<sup>63</sup> Couturier 5.

<sup>64</sup> Baudrillard 6.

<sup>65</sup> Baudrillard 12.

exist anything like this castle, which makes it a fourth-stage simulacrum. Even more ironically, the inspiration for the Disney castle, the German Schloss Neuschwanstein, is a “medieval-inspired” castle, built in the neo-Gothic style. As described in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, it was “intended to be an even better reproduction of a medieval-style castle in line with his fairy-tale vision of monarchy.”<sup>66</sup> The Neuschwanstein Castle is thus itself already a copy of an ideal vision of what a medieval castle should look like.

The main issue with Disneyland, however, as Baudrillard demonstrates, is something else. What attracts the crowds the most is, according to him, “the social microcosm, the *religious*, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys.” In Disneyland, as he puts it, “the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and of the crowd, is drawn,” and all its values are exalted. However, Baudrillard believes that this “masks something else” and that

this “ideological” blanket functions as a cover for a *simulation of the third order*: Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the “real” country, all of “real” America that is Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.<sup>67</sup>

Baudrillard points out that Los Angeles is surrounded by theme parks such as Disneyland, which act as “imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation – a city of incredible proportions but without space, without dimension...no longer anything but an immense scenario and a perpetual pan shot.”<sup>68</sup> The imaginary world of Disneyland is

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<sup>66</sup> “Neuschwanstein Castle,” Def. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019, <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Neuschwanstein-Castle>> 26 May 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Baudrillard 12-13.

<sup>68</sup> Baudrillard 13.

supposed to make the world outside look real and rational, and thus hide the fact that there is no real world outside. In the novel, there is a similar example of Inverarity's new housing development called Fangoso Lagoons:

It was to be laced by canals with private landings for power boats, a floating social hall in the middle of an artificial lake, at the bottom of which lay restored galleons, imported from the Bahamas; Atlantean fragments of columns and friezes from the Canaries; real human skeletons from Italy; giant clamshells from Indonesia – all for the entertainment of Scuba enthusiasts. (31)

This project is supposed to look to like some other, ancient, exotic place, but the model is obviously non-existent because the combination of the borrowed artifacts is artificial. Not only that the place is not genuine but there is no reality which it is supposed to be a copy of. The place has the same function as Disneyland does, as described by Baudrillard, and that is to make the world outside seem less artificial in comparison to the Fangoso Lagoons than it actually is. There is also the “Art Nouveau reconstruction of some European pleasure-casino” (56), which stands by Lake Inverarity. Again, is not a copy of a particular casino, but of an ideal vision.

Baudrillard also compares Disneyland to waste-treatment plants, as they both, according to him, represent “a space of the regeneration of the imaginary.” As he puts it,

Everywhere today one must recycle waste, and the dreams, the phantasms, the historical, the fairy-like, legendary imaginary of children and adults is a waste product, the first great toxic excrement of a hyperreal civilization.<sup>69</sup>

Disneyland recycles, as well as all the “sexual, psychic, somatic recycling institutes which proliferate California”<sup>70</sup> do regenerate lost faculties, which could also be the case, metaphorically, with the WASTE system in *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is trying to substitute something which has been lost.

Baudrillard claims that “we are in a logic of simulation, which no longer has anything to do with the logic of facts and an order of reason. Simulation is characterized by a *precession*

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<sup>69</sup> Baudrillard 13.

<sup>70</sup> Baudrillard 13.

*of the model (...).*"<sup>71</sup> The obvious example which provides simulacra is the TV and media. Television presents a constant flow of commercials and programs, which are supposed to represent reality, but in fact, they simulate it. McHale points out that Boorstin

observed how certain categories of people ("celebrities") and events ("pseudo-events," he called them) exist only as a function of the communications media that supposedly "report" but actually generate them.<sup>72</sup>

The media provide the only way one receives information about events in the world, which means that the news that is delivered to the addressee should represent the real, but a person's knowledge is based (usually) only on the transmitted and interpreted, which of course is filtered and amended. These assertions become a different reality, a hyperreality, and they can even have an impact on the happenings that they refer to.

After Oedipa meets Metzger in the motel room for the first time, she thinks that he "turned out to be so good looking that Oedipa thought at first They, somebody up there, were putting her on. It had to be an actor" (28). Couturier states that "[r]eality has been so transformed by the cinema and television, by the many techniques of simulation, that Oedipa can't trust her own eyes." However, her hesitation is understandable since Metzger was an actor before he became a lawyer.<sup>73</sup> His story has been made into a film in which his character is played by a lawyer turned actor, Manny Di Presso:

"But our beauty lies," explained Metzger, "in this extended capacity for convolution. A lawyer in a courtroom, in front of any jury, becomes an actor, right? Raymond Burr is an actor, impersonating a lawyer, who in front of a jury becomes an actor. Me, I'm a former actor who became a lawyer. They 've done the pilot film of a TV series, in fact, based loosely on my career, starring my friend Manny Di Presso, a one-time lawyer who quit his firm to become an actor. Who in this pilot plays me, an actor become a lawyer reverting periodically to being an actor. The film is in an air-conditioned vault at one of the Hollywood studios, light can't fatigue it, it can be repeated endlessly." (33)

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<sup>71</sup> Baudrillard 16.

<sup>72</sup> McHale 127.

<sup>73</sup> Couturier 8.

This complicated description of actors turning lawyers and lawyers turning actors implicates the distinction of the real and the fictional fading into obscurity, and the fact that the film can be “repeated endlessly” only adds to its superficial nature, reminiscent of the exitless circle. Another way in which Oedipa is influenced by the media is the creation of her false assumption that a prince will come to free her from her tower, which is something that does not usually happen in real life. She realizes that “Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there’d been no escape” (21).

Another occurrence of the influence of media is seen when Mr. Toth tells Oedipa that he was dreaming about his grandfather, an “Indian killer,” he admits “[i]t was all mixed in with Porky Pig cartoon...It comes into your dreams, you know. Filthy machine” (91). Grant points out that according to Peter Abernethy,

we can see in Mr. Toth’s reaction the myths of America echoing themselves into nothingness. The medium is the message here—a passivity leading to stasis. Like generations of Americans raised on cowboy films, he can no longer separate the ‘real’ Indians killed by his grandfather (also fakes, agents of Tristero) from the cartoon Indians.<sup>74</sup>

Other characters are influenced by the media as well, for example, the Paranoids who copy the British accent from the TV or Mucho who impersonates media celebrities, as has been discussed already. As Baudrillard puts it, “[f]rom today, the only real cultural practice, that of the masses, ours (there is no longer a difference), is a manipulative, aleatory practice, a labyrinthine practice of signs, and one that no longer has any meaning.”<sup>75</sup>

The hypermarket is another example of a simulacrum in everyday life, which, according to Baudrillard, represents the “model of all future forms of controlled socialization,” including “retranscription of the contradictory fluxes in terms of integrated circuits; space-time of a whole

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<sup>74</sup> Peter Abernethy, “Entropy in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*,” *Critique* 14.2 (1972) 32, quoted in Grant 87-8.

<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard 65.

operational simulation of social life, of a whole structure of living and traffic.”<sup>76</sup> A hypermarket was originally based on the model of markets, but it does not have the quality of a market anymore and it has turned into something else. Oedipa goes to the supermarket “to buy ricotta and listen to the Muzak” (10). Grant observes that “Tyson suggests that this moment typifies Oedipa’s immersion in a world marked by “a profusion of empty commodity-signs, signs that mark an absence rather than a presence—an absence of art, of history, of myth—and therefore require no existential engagement.”<sup>77</sup> Grant also adds that Eklund points out that, “because it ‘is music designed to imitate other well-known tunes’ without explicitly calling for identification of the original, Muzak is an empty signifier.”<sup>78</sup>

The Tristero sign and stamps could also be viewed as signs hiding the absence of reality behind them, meaning that only the signs are left, and the underground postal system does not exist, or does not exist anymore, creating the atmosphere of confusion and deception for both Oedipa and the reader.

## **Communication, Information and Meaning**

Baudrillard states that “[e]verywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning homologous to the economic one that results from the accelerated rotation of capital.”<sup>79</sup> The parallel postal system which uses Yoyodyne’s inter-office delivery exists purely to beat the monopoly, the national postal system because he who owns the means of communication owns power. It represents a counterculture acting against the mass culture. It is a rebellious act, even though Mike Fallopian admits that it is “not

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<sup>76</sup> Baudrillard 76.

<sup>77</sup> Lois Tyson, “Existential Subjectivity on Trial: *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Politics of Despair,” *Pynchon Notes* 28–29 (Spring–Fall 1991) 8–9 quoted in Grant 14.

<sup>78</sup> Matthew Eklund, “*Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49*,” *Explicator* 59.4 (2001) 217, quoted in Grant 14.

<sup>79</sup> Baudrillard 80.

as rebellious as it looks” (52). It corresponds to McLuhan’s formula, “*the medium is the message*,” which, as Baudrillard puts it, is the “key formula of the era of simulation.”<sup>80</sup>

Couturier reports that “the postal monopoly enjoyed by the federal government is a foundation stone of the American way of life: it doesn’t only guarantee satisfactory communications among the members of the community; it also allows the government to censor offensive materials.”<sup>81</sup> He observes that there is an “indication that the WASTE system is being used to beat government-imposed censorship,” by those who want to “indulge in their ‘unspeakable practices and unnatural acts.’”<sup>82</sup> It is implied in the scene where Oedipa hears a mother telling her son to use the WASTE system and to “[I]ove the dolphins” (123), and by the fact that the other characters who might be using the WASTE system, such as Mucho, Metzger, Nefastis, Driblette, Arnold Schnarb, and the Inamorati Anonymous, “refuse to conform to the love code which is crammed with clichés.” Couturier claims that “[t]he members of the WASTE community inhabit another country: that of their uninhabited fantasies, desires, or dreams.”<sup>83</sup> They have also invented a “Shadow country as it were,” by having “drawn up a map where Federal post offices and the city names have been supplanted by numbers,”<sup>84</sup> thus creating another version of reality. Oedipa is, according to Couturier, “scared by the discovery of this shadow world which appears in filigree through her own world, of this other text described or pointed at in the underground letters traveling through WASTE.”<sup>85</sup>

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning,”<sup>86</sup> argues Baudrillard and proposes that information devours its own content, communication and the social. Information, according to him, “*exhausts itself in the act of*

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<sup>80</sup> Baudrillard 82.

<sup>81</sup> Couturier 10.

<sup>82</sup> Couturier 12.

<sup>83</sup> Couturier 12.

<sup>84</sup> Couturier 11.

<sup>85</sup> Couturier 19.

<sup>86</sup> Baudrillard 79.

*staging communication.*” What happens is that information simulates meaning, which, in fact, is lost. Baudrillard claims that

It is useless to ask if it is the loss of communication that produces this escalation in the simulacrum, or whether it is the simulacrum that is there first for dissuasive ends, to short-circuit in advance any possibility of communication (precession of the model that calls an end to the real).<sup>87</sup>

Baudrillard sees it as a circular process of simulation and of the hyperreal. It is the “hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished.”<sup>88</sup>

Couturier suggests that “Oedipa had never thought that stamps could be more than the price to be paid for a letter to be carried to its destination; their cancellation by the post office implied that the only thing of value left was the content of the letter.”<sup>89</sup> However, Oedipa recognizes that even the content of the letter does not have to be necessarily valuable:

It may have been the intuition that the letter would be newsless inside that made Oedipa look more closely at its outside, when it arrived. At first she didn’t see. It was an ordinary Muchoesque envelope, swiped from the station, ordinary airmail stamp, to the left of the cancellation a blurb put on by the government, REPORT ALL OBSCENE MAIL TO YOUR POTSMATER.  
(46)

The attention here is drawn rather to the means and act of communication rather than to the content, and the medium again becomes the message. Grant quotes Berressem who argues that “it indicates a shift in Oedipa’s attention from signified to signifier in a manner consistent with the novel’s overarching acknowledgment of the world’s textuality.”<sup>90</sup> The second reason which Baudrillard suggests is that “information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovations, but, on the contrary, to total entropy.”<sup>91</sup> Entropy is, of course, one of the central themes of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

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<sup>87</sup> Baudrillard 81.

<sup>88</sup> Baudrillard 81.

<sup>89</sup> Couturier 10.

<sup>90</sup> Hanjo Berressem, *Pynchon’s Poetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) 95, quoted in Grant 58.

<sup>91</sup> Baudrillard 81.

Communication is one of the problems which Oedipa has to deal with along the way, and she discovers how difficult it actually is. Couturier points out that the story takes place in the region which has become famous for “Silicon Valley with its computer labs and plants, and Bateson’s invisible college of Palo Alto specializing in communication and interaction. The novel ridicules Californians’ passionate desire for communication as a way to defeat the anxiety inherent in solitude.”<sup>92</sup> Couturier notices that there three different systems of communication evoked already on the first page of the novel. Oedipa has just arrived from the Tupperware party, where she went “above all to meet other lonesome women and have a good time with them,” when she arrives home she receives the letter informing her that she has been named the co-executer of Inverarity’s estate, and finally, “she casts a glance at the television’s dead screen and invokes the name of God as if help could only come from that quarter, that is to say, the media.”<sup>93</sup>

Telecommunication is another form of communication which plays a role in the novel. Oedipa remembers that the last time she spoke to Pierce was on the phone when he called her at three o’clock in the morning. He spoke to her in different voices and dialects and did not make any sense, so Oedipa hang up on him and thus ended their last communication. A reason why the phone call seemed ambiguous to Oedipa was also that the “phone line could have pointed in any direction, been any length” (11-12). Couturier explains that she “could not fully understand his message because she didn’t know all the deictic coordinates of his discourse (where he was, whom with...),” which would have had an influence on the meaning.<sup>94</sup> Berressem claims that “[t]his call already defines Pierce, the originator of Oedipa’s quest, as a mere compound and reflection of various cultural icons and a switchboard of various discursive frameworks. . . . Pierce is not an original person but a cultural simulacrum.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Couturier 5-6.

<sup>93</sup> Couturier 6.

<sup>94</sup> Couturier 6.

<sup>95</sup> Berressem 89, quoted in Grant 16.

The next phone call that Oedipa receives is from Dr. Hilarius, again at three o'clock in the morning. As Couturier notes, he "takes advantage of the fact that, with a telephone, you can drop in on anybody at any moment without any consideration for what the receiver is doing,"<sup>96</sup> and also the fact that the telephone line can point in both directions, because usually it is the patient who calls the doctor, not the other way round. Later their roles will switch again when Dr. Hilarius goes crazy and Oedipa has to calm him down and talk to him as if she were his psychiatrist. As Couturier puts it: "The multi-directionality of the telephone line has forced patient and doctor to change parts, as it were: the medium has manipulated those who wanted to use it."<sup>97</sup> This is a demonstration of another way in which media can have an influence on their users.

The communication on the phone fails again when Oedipa tries to call Driblette and his mother answers the phone with the words "I'm sorry, we've nothing to say" (148). Couturier proposes that "this deictic phrase could have two different referents, one for the lady and the other for Oedipa." He points out that the one responsible for this communication failure is death: "it has simply removed the expected receiver."<sup>98</sup> At this point in the novel, Oedipa is already aware of the fact that communication is obstructed, sometimes even by the media, which is the means that is supposed to make communication possible.

Later, one more telecommunication attempt fails when Oedipa calls the Inamorati Anonymous member she had talked to at the Greek Way, whose name she does not know. When Oedipa met the Inamorato for the first time, communication failed as well, because she wanted to contact the founder of the IA organization:

Oedipa, by now rather drunk, said, "Where is he now?"  
"He's anonymous," said the anonymous inamorato. "Why not write to him through your WASTE system? Say 'Founder, IA.'"  
"But I don't know how to use it," she said.

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<sup>96</sup> Couturier 6.

<sup>97</sup> Couturier 7.

<sup>98</sup> Couturier 7.

“Think of it,” he went on, also drunk. “A whole underworld of suicides who failed. All keeping in touch through that secret delivery system. What do they tell each other?” He shook his head, smiling, stumbled off his stool and headed off to take a leak, disappearing into the dense crowd. He didn't come back. (116)

She calls the Inamorato because she is trying to make contact with the Tristero and she asks him for help, but he hangs up on her. She is not able to make any more calls because she runs out of coins to feed the public phone, and so communication becomes impossible once again. “The medium,” as Couturier puts it, “is again imposing its law, its logic upon the ‘helpless’ user, firing her with desperate longing for communication which she can’t appease.” He states that “[t]he media’s chief function, therefore, is not so much to facilitate communication as to create an unfulfillable need for it,”<sup>99</sup> and demonstrates it on two scenes in the novel in which television played an important role.

First of those scenes is when Oedipa and Metzger are in the motel room, watching the war movie in which Metzger plays the character of Baby Igor. Couturier observes that “[t]heir relationship becomes more affectionate as the show develops, and as the various stories (the plot of the film, the shooting itself, and their own story) get confused,” and suggests that the game they start to play because they are stimulated by the show, “Strip Botticelli,” is a sort of a communication, as Oedipa asks Metzger questions to get “bits” of information.<sup>100</sup> In this instance, it is the media – the TV – which influences the way they communicate with each other.

Another character whose perception of reality is influenced by television is John Nefastis, who tells Oedipa that he likes to watch “young stuff” on the TV, and to whom she answers that she understands because so does her husband. As Couturier observes, he is interested “in children as sexual objects, the implication being, perhaps, that the media tend to have a debilitating influence on people and breed perversions of all kinds.”<sup>101</sup> Nefastis proceeds

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<sup>99</sup> Couturier 7.

<sup>100</sup> Couturier 8.

<sup>101</sup> Couturier 9.

to explain entropy and Maxwell's Demon to Oedipa, stressing that "[c]ommunication is the key," as the Demon collects data on each of the billions of molecules in the box (105). Then he lets Oedipa watch the picture of Clerk Maxwell, through which she should be able to receive a message from the Demon, while he goes back to watching the television. The piston does not move and thus communication fails again, as it seems that Oedipa is not a "sensitive." As Cyrus R. K. Patell puts it in his *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology*, this "serves only to reinforce the dubious status of communication in the novel: Oedipa can find no proof that its operations are anything but hallucination."<sup>102</sup> In other words, only a simulation of communication is offered. Couturier describes the situation as follows: "Oedipa is supposed to draw energy from an image and transform it into information; Nefastis, on the other hand, passively absorbs information and transforms it into sexual energy. However, there is no relevant information to be obtained either from the picture or from the television." He further points out that

In both scenes, Oedipa is manipulated by the media. Metzger and Nefastis are both artists: they can turn television to their advantage without sticking slavishly to the normal use that normal people make of it. For them, the medium is not the message; for Oedipa, it is.<sup>103</sup>

This, as Couturier sees it, is the weakness which "incapacitates her to deal with the chief medium in the story, the Tristero system."<sup>104</sup>

Communication in the novel seems to be difficult also on other levels and by other means. Oedipa and Mucho are not able to communicate with each other properly even though they are a married couple. When The Paranoids want to tell Oedipa that Metzger had left with a young girl, they sing a song about it instead, and only when she concludes they are "trying to tell [her] something," they give it to her "in prose." Metzger had left a note on top of the TV set

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<sup>102</sup> Cyrus R. Patell, *Negative Liberties: Morrison, Pynchon, and the Problem of Liberal Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) 150.

<sup>103</sup> Couturier 10.

<sup>104</sup> Couturier 10.

telling her not to worry about the estate, that he'd turned over his executorship to somebody at Warpe, Wistfull, Kubitschek and McMingus, and they should be in touch with her, and it was all squared with the probate court also. No word to recall that Oedipa and Metzger had ever been more than co-executors. (147-8)

Oedipa was surprised by this message as she had thought that they were something more than that. Another instance of bad communication in the novel is the communication within the Peter Pinguid Society. According to Lyotard's claim, "society exists and progresses only if the messages circulating within it are rich in information and easy to decode."<sup>105</sup> However, when Mike Fallopian receives the letter through Yoyodyne's inter-office delivery, used by the Peter Pinguid Society, he explains to Oedipa that "each member has to send at least one letter a week through the Yoyodyne system" (53), even if the message itself is empty of information. It is not clear whether this delivery system is part of the WASTE system, and as J. Kerry Grant points out in *A Companion to The Crying of Lot 49*, the letter Fallopian receives "lends itself to contradictory interpretations." One could argue, "focusing on the issue of monopolistic control over the means of communication and on the Tristero's centuries-long struggle against it, that the banality of the letter draws attention more to the medium than to the message."<sup>106</sup> This view regards the Yoyodyne delivery system as connected to the Tristero. The medium becomes the message, and thus the message of the protest against the monopoly. The other view, which supposes there are two secret communication systems, sees Fallopian's letter as evidence of the "society's failure to provide anything of substance for its members to communicate about; there is no 'sense of the numinous,' unlike what is at least hinted at in communications associated with the Tristero."<sup>107</sup> Manfred Puetz quotes a statement by Norbert Wiener in his essay "Thomas Pynchon's 'The Crying of Lot 49': The World Is a Tristero System":

Messages are themselves a form of pattern and organization. Indeed, it is possible to treat sets of messages as having an entropy like sets of states of the external world. Just as entropy is

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<sup>105</sup> Lyotard 5.

<sup>106</sup> Grant 64.

<sup>107</sup> Grant 64.

a measure of disorganization, the information carried by a set of messages is a measure of organization. In fact, it is possible to interpret the information carried by a message as essentially the negative of its entropy, and the negative logarithm of its probability. That is, the more probable the message, the less information it gives.<sup>108</sup>

This supports the view that the secret society, no matter which one it is, commands communication among its members in order to assert their existence, organization and power, no matter the content of the messages. The communication has failed even though the letters are circulating because they circulate no information.

Another instance of failed communication occurs when Oedipa heads to the ladies' room during the intermission in the theatre, and she expects to see some signs of communication there: "She looked idly around for the symbol she'd seen the other night in The Scope, but all the walls, surprisingly, were blank. She could not say why, exactly, but felt threatened by this absence of even the marginal try at communication latrines are known for" (70). At this stage, Oedipa is used to encountering the signs, and she feels anxious both in their presence and their absence, having no explanation for either.

One of the final moments in which Oedipa realizes the failure of communication is when she thinks about the members of the counterculture she had seen in the city, all sabotaging the mainstream means of communication in their own ways; some of them

spent the night up some pole in a lineman's tent like caterpillars, swung among a web of telephone wires, living in the very copper rigging and secular miracle of communication, untroubled by the dumb voltages flickering their miles, the night long, in the thousands of unheard messages. (180)

These underdogs of society do not yield to the rules it is trying to impose on its members, being unaffected by its message circulation and thus out of the system's power.

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<sup>108</sup> Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* (New York, 1967) 31, quoted in Manfred Puetz, "Thomas Pynchon's 'The Crying of Lot 49': The World Is a Tristero System," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1974): 132, *JSTOR* <[www.jstor.org/stable/24778373](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24778373)> 1 June 2019.

Couturier suggests that in the end, when the forged stamps are being sold at the auction, “[t]he market appears eventually as the grave of communication. It normalizes and digests something that could have constituted a threat, transforming the badge of a rival state into a collector’s item:”

The market, by assigning a money value to everything, normalizes the unknown; it is a device which abolishes the unpredictable and increases information entropy. It is the model of all the media, the telephone, television, the postal system, whose avowed goal is to improve communication: it precipitates an information haemorrhage.<sup>109</sup>

In the late capitalist society, information and communication become commodified by the media which enable them, because one has to pay for all of them. This way they create their monopoly on information and communication and assert their power.

## **Textuality**

Baudrillard’s “hyperreal” is a level of, or another name for, the textual reality that we live in, as Robert Scholes puts it in *The Crafty Reader*.<sup>110</sup> The world Baudrillard presents is “a world where everything is so textualized that there is no space left for the real, a world in which we encounter simulations and simulacra at every turn.”<sup>111</sup> Scholes believes that to “understand the craft of reading is to understand the world itself as a text and to be able to read it critically.”<sup>112</sup> This is an issue Oedipa encounters but is unable to understand.

Couturier demonstrates how “the real is gradually supplanted by the text” in *The Crying of Lot 49*. It begins when Inverarity’s will names Oedipa his executrix. She is supposed to sort out his property, and check that “reality (the wealth to be distributed) conforms with the description in the will.” Oedipa finds out that it does not conform and that there is, in fact, much

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<sup>109</sup> Couturier 13.

<sup>110</sup> Robert Scholes, *The Crafty Reader* (London: Yale University Press, 2001) 81-92.

<sup>111</sup> Scholes 83.

<sup>112</sup> Scholes 103.

more. Her investigation consists of deciphering both the will and the estate “to assess its true value or relevance.” In the end, she finds out that “the text (the prescription) won’t match the estate (the referent).” Oedipa is disturbed by this as she “insists on the perfect adequacy between the descriptive/prescriptive text and the referent.”<sup>113</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson observe in their essay “‘Words You Never Wanted to Hear’: Fiction, History and Narratology in *The Crying of Lot 49*” that

the reader shares Oedipa’s uncertain attempts first of all to construe the implications of the novel’s initial text, Inverarity’s will, then of the textual variants of “The Courier’s Tragedy,” and eventually of the whole bewildering miasma of cryptic signs, including acronyms and graffiti.<sup>114</sup>

The play, *The Courier’s Tragedy*, contains many references to Oedipa’s own reality and provides a textual reflection of her own plot: there is Saint Narcissus, with whom the city shares its name, “every one massacred by Angelo and thrown into the lake,” whose bones were later “fished up and made into charcoal” (74), mirroring what happened at Lago di Pieta from which the bones were taken to make cigarette filters and also used by Inverarity as decoration for his artificial lake. Couturier points out that in the novel, the play “reflects the main plot and contributes to quicken its pace. It also marks the beginning of Oedipa’s true investigation.”<sup>115</sup> Oedipa asks Driblette about the original script for the play, and eventually it turns out that in total, there are five possible versions of the play implied: Driblette’s production, the script, the paperback, the hardback and the pornographic version kept in the Vatican. When Oedipa shows her paperback copy of the script to Bortz, he calls it “corrupt” (151). Grant suggests that

Bortz has no patience with a text that does not conform to his idea of the “correct” version of the play. Oedipa can no longer afford the luxury of this bibliographic fastidiousness, since she has come to view the experience of the Tristero quest as a text (a

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<sup>113</sup> Couturier 14.

<sup>114</sup> C. E. Nicholson and R. W. Stevenson, “‘Words You Never Wanted to Hear’: Fiction, History and Narratology in *The Crying of Lot 49*,” *Pynchon Notes* 16 (1985): 92-3  
<<https://pynchonnotes.openlibhums.org/articles/abstract/10.16995/pn.331/#>> 30 May 2019.

<sup>115</sup> Couturier 17.

metaphor of God knew how many parts) with many possible variants.<sup>116</sup>

When Bortz tells Oedipa about the history of the struggles between Trystero and Thurn und Taxis, she realizes that he is making it up. As Couturier puts it: “History is nothing but a text, after all. She will never know the truth about Trystero but will continue to discover new texts referring directly or obliquely to it or him,” offering multiple versions of the story and of “reality,” which is unattainable, as well as the truth. Couturier concludes that the “Real Text as a mirage becomes ever more elusive, and the reality which was at the origin of it (...) fades into oblivion and is supplanted by all-out paranoia.”<sup>117</sup> Grant quotes Pellegrin who

points out that the effect of this proliferation of textual clues runs counter to its counterpart in the detective novel, in which such clues seem to assert the possibility of a reliable relationship between text and reality. In the case of Lot 49, the sheer number of texts “soon threatens to cloud or even to efface the legibility of the world, to hide it behind a barrage of scripts.”<sup>118</sup>

The plurality of the texts corresponds to the plurality of realities, and it becomes difficult for Oedipa and the reader to navigate their way through them, and thus they need to be able to read the signs critically.

Oedipa is trying to read Trystero and San Narciso, with its “hieroglyphic streets” (181), through the signs, but it is impossible. As Couturier sees it, “Oedipa belongs to the post-Saussurian and the post-Freudian world: her experience of reality has been undermined by the accumulation of grids, books, intellectual formulae. She is assailed by numberless representations which do not allow her access to the real.” At the end of the story, in Oedipa’s California, “everything is duplicated, represented, ‘textified.’ The real has vanished, and only paranoia endures.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Grant 145.

<sup>117</sup> Couturier 18.

<sup>118</sup> Jean-Yves Pellegrin, “A Thrust at Truth and a Lie: The Crying of Lot 49 ou le langage en quête de vérité.” In *Crime Fictions: Subverted Codes and New Structures*, ed. François Gallix and Vanessa Guignery, (Paris: Presses de l’université Paris—Sorbonne, 2004) 79, quoted in Grant 149.

<sup>119</sup> Couturier 20.

Couturier believes that the name of the city San Narciso, which is the “chief item on the list,” points to the fact that Inverarity “founded it, invented it, in his own image.”<sup>120</sup> All the commercials that follow one another on the TV and interrupt the film Oedipa and Metzger are watching in the motel room advertise his estate and thus creating a simulacrum of the city, replacing its “reality.” As Oedipa describes the city, it seems to be a “grouping of concepts” rather than a “real” city:

Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts – census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway. (24)

Couturier explains that the city is not real but textual: “everything has been meticulously planned, projected, in advance. The city existed on paper before it found its way onto an actual tract of land and eventually onto a map of California.” He points out that the new housing development called Fangoso Lagoons is a “model text” of San Narciso.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, the novel ends with its title. Grant reports that “Lord, citing Seed’s claim that the repetition of the title ‘throws the reader back into the text,’ acknowledges that this serves as a postmodern reminder of the textual nature of the real, the displacement of history by discourse.”<sup>122</sup> The textuality of history will be discussed in the following section of this chapter.

Nicholson and Stevenson point out the fact that among the subjects of the novel is also “the nature of criticism and of the interpretive act.”<sup>123</sup> Oedipa is trying to sort out not only Inverarity’s estate, but also the signs that she keeps witnessing around her, and the reader is interpreting the signs in the novel as well as the novel itself at the same time. Nicholson and Stevenson quote Frank Kermode in their essay: “Making sense of...somewhat arbitrary symbolic universes, understanding their construction, is an activity familiar to all critics...The

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<sup>120</sup> Couturier 14-5.

<sup>121</sup> Couturier 15.

<sup>122</sup> Geoffrey Lord, *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference: A Comparison of Postmodern Fiction in Britain and America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 70-1 quoted in Grant 167.

<sup>123</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 90.

activity of the critic...seeks order...What Oedipa is doing is very much like reading a book.”<sup>124</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson suggest that Oedipa is forced to become “a literary critic of a sort” when she’s concerned with “deducing the significance, even the textual accuracy” of *The Courier’s Tragedy*.<sup>125</sup> Randolph Driblette criticizes her for being “[s]o hung up with words, words” (79), and he reminds her that the play exists in his head, not in any paperback, and that if he were to “be washed down the drain into the Pacific, what [she] saw tonight would vanish too” (79), and the Thurn and Taxis mail system and the other, adversary system “would be traces, fossils. Dead, mineral, without value or potential” (80). Then he asks her whether she wants to fall in love with him and put a tape recorder in his room to see what he talks about from his sleep:

“You want to do that? You can put together clues, develop a thesis, or several, about why characters reacted to the Trystero possibility the way they did, why the assassins came on, why the black costumes. You could waste your life that way and never touch the truth. Wharfinger supplied words and a yarn. I gave them life. That’s it.” (80)

According to Nicholson and Stevenson, Driblette’s “dismissal of the possibility of any significance in the factual background to ‘The Courier’s Tragedy’ constitutes a kind of anti-historicism,”<sup>126</sup> which is seen again when Oedipa meets Emory Bortz, Wharfinger’s editor, and she wants to find out “something about the historical Wharfinger. Not so much the verbal one” (151).

“The historical Shakespeare,” growled one of the grad students through a full beard, uncapping another bottle. “The historical Marx. The historical Jesus.”

“He’s right,” shrugged Bortz, “they’re dead. What’s left?”

“Words.”

“Pick some words,” said Bortz. “Them, we can talk about.”

(151)

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<sup>124</sup> Frank Kermode, “Decoding the Trystero,” in *Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978) 163, quoted in C. E. Nicholson and R. W. Stevenson 91.

<sup>125</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 91.

<sup>126</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 91-2.

They remind her that she cannot attain the historical knowledge in any other way than through texts, and Oedipa realizes that she needs to know the wider historical context in order to be able to recognize the significance of facts.

## Historicity

History becomes a simulacrum in its own way. We are alienated from the events of the past which we have not witnessed ourselves, and our knowledge of them depends on their image which was created by media; we receive them only as text. The perceived truth is a version of reality that was agreed upon, but of course, there are always many angles one story can be told from. Baudrillard describes this issue as follows: “The great event of this period, the great trauma, is the decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation.”<sup>127</sup> Baudrillard implies that “history has retreated,” leaving behind a void into which

the phantasms of a past history recede, the panoply of events, ideologies, retro fashions – no longer so much because people believe in them or still place some hope in them, but simply to resurrect the period when *at least* there was history, at least there was violence (albeit fascist), when at least life and death were at stake.<sup>128</sup>

As Baudrillard puts it, history is being resurrected on the screen, “according to the same process that used to make lost myths live again.”<sup>129</sup> He argues that “[h]istory is our lost referential, that is to say our myth,” which is the reason for it taking the “place of myths on the screen.”<sup>130</sup> Today, our conception of past events is created also by movies, which correspond to “reality” even less than other kinds of media. As Baudrillard puts it: “In a violent and contemporary period of history (let’s say between the two world wars and the cold war), it is myth that invades

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<sup>127</sup> Baudrillard 43.

<sup>128</sup> Baudrillard 43-4.

<sup>129</sup> Baudrillard 43.

<sup>130</sup> Baudrillard 43.

cinema as imaginary content.”<sup>131</sup> Movies create a false image of history by their portrayal of historical events, blending the facts with fictional scenarios and visual representations.

Baudrillard observes that the immediately preceding era – including fascism, the war and the period immediately following the war – is being privileged in the resurrection of history, and as he describes it, “the innumerable films that play on these themes for us have a closer, more perverse, denser, more confused essence.” Recalling Freud, Baudrillard concludes that “the fetishized history will preferably be the one immediately preceding our ‘irreferential era.’” As he puts it, history has made a “triumphal entry into cinema, posthumously...Its reinjection has no value as conscious awareness but only as nostalgia for a lost referential.”<sup>132</sup> This history has no more of a relation to a “historical real,” because it is an “*invocation* of resemblance,” which is proof of the disappearance of what it is supposed to represent, and thus it becomes an “empty form of representation.”<sup>133</sup> The “historical real” is unattainable because one will always experience it indirectly in a mediated form, which offers only a representation.

Roland Barthes illustrates the way history is mythologized in films in his *Mythologies*. He comments on the use of fringes in the portrayal of Romans in Mankiewicz’s *Julius Caesar*, and he notes that for us, they are “simply the label of Roman-ness. We therefore see here the mainspring of the Spectacle – the *sign* – operating in the open.” It seems that the fringe gives the Romans their “historical plausibility,”<sup>134</sup> and thus the essence of Romans is reduced to the hair on their forehead. This fringe as a sign

reveals a degraded spectacle, which is equally afraid of simple reality and of total artifice. For although it is a good thing if a spectacle is created to make the world more explicit, it is both reprehensible and deceitful to confuse the sign with that signified. And it is a duplicity which is peculiar to bourgeois art: between the intellectual and the visceral sign is hypocritically

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<sup>131</sup> Baudrillard 43.

<sup>132</sup> Baudrillard 44.

<sup>133</sup> Baudrillard 45.

<sup>134</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 26.

inserted a hybrid, at once elliptical and pretentious, which is pompously christened “nature.”<sup>135</sup>

The representation of history is diminished into signs, which become perceived as the nature of history itself. These signs are used in movies to make them seem believable, but in fact, they reduce history into myths that everyone perceives as the truth and thus create a metanarrative.

Linda Hutcheon observes that both literature and history

derive their force more from verisimilitude than from objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality.<sup>136</sup>

She develops the concept of historiographic metafiction, which “problematizes the very possibility of historical knowledge,”<sup>137</sup> as it is aware of the plurality and textuality of reality, which means that if history is written, it can also be rewritten. As Hutcheon puts it, historiographic metafiction “suggests that the truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction,” for “there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just other’s truths.”<sup>138</sup> She suggests a distinction between “events,” which “have no meaning in themselves,” and “facts,” which “are given meaning” by historians.<sup>139</sup> When we learn about history, we are given the facts, which had already been subjectively interpreted, and the real events stay out of reach for everyone who was not present at their time.

Hutcheon observes that postmodern novels “raise a number of specific issues regarding the interaction of historiography and fiction,” such as “issues surrounding the nature of identity and subjectivity; the question of reference and representation; the intertextual nature of the past;

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<sup>135</sup> Barthes 28.

<sup>136</sup> Hutcheon 105.

<sup>137</sup> Hutcheon 106.

<sup>138</sup> Hutcheon 109.

<sup>139</sup> Hutcheon 122.

and the ideological implications of writing about history.”<sup>140</sup> Historiographic metafiction is not concerned with history and its discourse only in its content, but also in its form: it becomes intertextual by incorporating different historical forms of text. Hutcheon states that

In particular *The Crying of Lot 49* has been seen as directly linking the literary parody of Jacobean drama with the selectivity and subjectivity of what we deem historical ‘fact.’ Here the postmodern parody operates in much the same way as it did in the literature of the seventeenth century, and in both Pynchon’s novel and the plays he parodies (Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, Webster’s *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, among others), the intertextual ‘received discourse’ is firmly embedded in a social commentary about the loss of relevance of traditional values in contemporary life.<sup>141</sup>

Oedipa comes across the issue of historicity, or, the historical accuracy, of the novel’s references. As Nicholson and Stevenson point out, we as readers are aware of the “historical actuality of some of the novel’s references in a way that Oedipa, part of the texture of the fiction, cannot be.”<sup>142</sup> Oedipa, however, becomes aware, at least, of the fact that she doesn’t know the past with certainty, and that history is subjective. The reader realizes this together with Oedipa, as they might get lost among the many historical references the author makes, and they start losing track of what is a historical “fact” and what is already the author’s imagination. As Nicholson and Stevenson put it, “Oedipa’s unnerving descent into the historical penumbra of the Trystero closely parallels our own detection of a hidden history of actuality.” Many residues of truth can be found in the novel, and they are, in fact, Nicholson and Stevenson point out, “vital clues for the ways in which we interpret *our* text.” These residues derive from the “real world beyond the fiction” and that is why the reader is able to understand what is happening to Oedipa and what it might signify better than she does.<sup>143</sup> They are “small but suggestive historical or etymological clues” that are incorporated in the novel, creating a “complex system

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<sup>140</sup> Hutcheon 117.

<sup>141</sup> Hutcheon 130.

<sup>142</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 93.

<sup>143</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 93-4.

of reference to historical actuality beyond the fiction.”<sup>144</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson note that “besides their particular historical character, the sheer profusion of these actuality references also begins to blur and dissolve the boundaries between what is real in the novel and what is not.” When the reader realizes “the historical accuracy of the established dominance of the Thurn and Taxis mail system between the years 1290 and 1806,” they “begin to wonder with increasing unease about the possible actuality of Wharfinger and even of the Trystero itself.”<sup>145</sup>

The reader is sorting, as well as Oedipa is, what is real and what is imagined:

In the attempt to establish which of these multifarious references to what appear to be real history are in fact that, and which belong to some other realm in the author’s imagination, the reader becomes a demon in Pynchon’s world, struggling to sort the facts.”<sup>146</sup>

Oedipa is directly affected by history as she collects the historical clues which offer the belief in “the possibility of a subterranean organization, the Trystero system, which may have played a significant part both within and as an alternative to the historical development of the world she inhabits.”<sup>147</sup> Marina MacKay observes, in *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel*, the contrast in that “Oedipa may have stumbled upon an ancient postal conspiracy stretching across two continents, from dynastic medieval Europe through seemingly historyless modern California.”<sup>148</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson also point out that the further possibility “of rival, opposing and subterranean histories both increases her paranoid doubts while contributing to her partial enlightenment.”<sup>149</sup> Oedipa feels threatened not only by multiple versions of the present but also by multiple versions of history.

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<sup>144</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 95.

<sup>145</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 96.

<sup>146</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 97.

<sup>147</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 93.

<sup>148</sup> Marina MacKay, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 159.

<sup>149</sup> Nicholson and Stevenson 92.

Some of the historical references, apart from Thurn and Taxis, are William Shakespeare, William Orange or James Clerk Maxwell. The inclusion of historical figures in postmodernist fictional stories is one way of addressing the borderline between the real and the fictional. They are “people who really lived and yet whom we can access only through their media representations, their textual selves,” as MacKay mentions.<sup>150</sup> The presence of historical figures in the novel reminds of their textuality and the fact that their history is written in the same as the novel, and that reality and truths are relative terms because the author can write whatever he pleases in his fictional story. When Bortz is telling Oedipa the history of Thurn and Taxis, he explains that

with the end of the Holy Roman Empire, the fountainhead of Thurn and Taxis legitimacy is lost forever among the other splendid delusions. Possibilities for paranoia become abundant (...) But over the next century and a half the paranoia recedes, as they come to discover the secular Tristero. Power, omniscience, implacable malice, attributes of what they'd thought to be a historical principle, a Zeitgeist, are carried over to the now human enemy. So much that, by 1795, it is even suggested that Tristero has staged the entire French Revolution, just for an excuse to issue the Proclamation of 9th Frimaire, An III, ratifying the end of the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly in France and the Lowlands. (165)

The Tristero is set into the well-known historical context here so specifically that it might really sound real to Oedipa as well as to the reader. The fact that the attributes which were thought to be the historical principle were then re-attributed to the human enemy corresponds with Baudrillard's claim that the collective paranoia of the culture supposes that there always has to be someone responsible.

There are more instances in which the novel questions historical accuracy. When Mike Fallopian tells Oedipa about the history of the Petr Pinguid Society, he says: “What happened on the 9th March, 1864, a day now held sacred by all Peter Pinguid Society members, is not too

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<sup>150</sup> MacKay 157.

clear” (49). This is a comical allusion to the mythologization of history. Another mythologization of history is seen in the stamp collection by Robert J. Hansen, who is quoted by Grant:

Reading the collection as a representation of “the grand narrative of American destiny,” Hansen argues that the stamps “reflect the conventional iconography of an heroic American past,” thus setting up a “totalizing cultural logic” that the novel works to deconstruct via the modified stamps, which are “recast as if from the perspective of those who were [the] . . . victims” of that logic.<sup>151</sup>

The stamps represent a metanarrative about the great American past and the mythologized spectacle that it is made into, and they are the stamps used by the government postal monopoly. The forged stamps may be used as a manifestation of the opposition of the counterculture, which wants to go against the metanarratives imposed by the mass culture.

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<sup>151</sup> Robert J. Hansen, “Law, History and the Subversion of Postwar America in *Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49*,” *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 24.3 (1999) 595-7, quoted in Grant 57.

## Chapter 4 – Spectacle and Commodity Culture

Postmodernists, according to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “insist that all, or nearly all, aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined,” which opposes the Enlightenment idea that there is a human nature which consists of faculties and dispositions that are present in human beings at birth.<sup>152</sup> This is the reason for the dissolution of individual identity because it is society-fostered. One of the theorists who elaborated upon this idea that one’s surroundings shape them was Guy Debord, another French philosopher, who claimed that people consume images so much that it changes their perception of the world.

In his *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), he argues that “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation”<sup>153</sup> and that “*being*” declined into “*having*” and “*having*” declined into merely “*appearing*.”<sup>154</sup> This means that commodity takes over everyone’s lives and that people have relationships with objects, rather than other people. In his work, Debord argues that the spectacle is everything in one’s surrounding. People believe in and act upon illusions and behave in order to appeal to others.

The critique of materialism in *The Crying of Lot 49* can be observed in the description of Mucho’s feelings about working as a used-car salesman:

seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, cracker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most god-awful trade-ins: motorized metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at. (13)

Then he continues with listing all the particular objects that he finds in the cars and “all the bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a grey dressing of ash, condensed

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<sup>152</sup> Brian Duignan, “Postmodernism,” Def. *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 25 Oct 2018 < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy> > 1 Feb 2019.

<sup>153</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 2017) 12.

<sup>154</sup> Debord 16.

exhaust, dust body wastes – it made him sick to look, but he had to look.” (14) As Patell puts it:

This alignment with the inanimate (...) serves (...) as a metaphor for the unnaturalness of modern American life. (...) It testifies to the appalling tendency in a modern culture of possessive individualism to view human lives metonymically, as if they were embodied and encompassed by the things that they possess.<sup>155</sup>

Here the replacement of authenticity with superficiality and commodity fetishism of the society can be clearly observed. Mucho then claims he could “never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed in only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody else’s life. As if it were the most natural thing” (14). It is evident that Mucho himself belongs to this society as he dehumanizes people by the belief that the cars and the objects in them summarize the owner’s life.

Barthes comments on the role and value of cars in contemporary society in *Mythologies*.

He thinks that

cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: (...) the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object.<sup>156</sup>

He notes that “we must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life).”<sup>157</sup>

There are several instances in the novel where it is pointed out that the postmodern consumer society is dependent on commodities, and the reason for it is that people believe the false assumption that possession brings them happiness. Couturier explains that at the Tupperware party, it is not really the airtight containers which are for sale but “a little share of

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<sup>155</sup> Patell 95.

<sup>156</sup> Barthes 88.

<sup>157</sup> Barthes 88.

conviviality.” The only medium being used here is money, and it is what “prevents genuine exchange between the guests at such parties” and so the hostess gets everyone drunk on kirsch to make them feel more relaxed and buy the goods. Therefore, it is not a real party, but a “simulacrum of a party,”<sup>158</sup> and thus simulacrum of happiness.

Fredric Jameson proposes in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, that a fundamental feature of postmodernism is the effacement of the frontier between “high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture”, and newly emerging texts are “infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by all the ideologues of the modern.”<sup>159</sup> MacKay comments on the novel’s merging of “high” and “low” culture: “Pynchon’s rewriting of a populist form, the detective novel, is an exemplarily postmodernist strategy, bridging the divide between high and low art.”<sup>160</sup> Another merging of high and low culture happens in the hypermarket in which Oedipa goes shopping and recognizes that the muzak playing is the “Vivaldi Kazoo Concerto.”

Oedipa is portrayed on the first page of the novel as a typical member of this commercial culture, being “stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (9) after she had come home from a Tupperware party. According to Jameson,

The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole “degraded” landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader’s Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport paperback categories of the gothic and the romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel (...).<sup>161</sup>

The landscape which Oedipa encounters during her quest seems to be invariable, with every town looking the same and stagnant, and later on in the motel room she watches what could be

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<sup>158</sup> Couturier 13.

<sup>159</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 2.

<sup>160</sup> MacKay 159.

<sup>161</sup> Jameson 2-3.

regarded as a “grade-B Hollywood film” which is constantly interrupted by advertisements. The novel features elements of the romance through Oedipa’s relationship with Metzger and of the murder mystery due to the fact that Oedipa isn’t able to explain what is happening around her and the whole Tristero is a mystery. Randolph Driblette, the director of *The Courtier’s Tragedy*, reportedly commits suicide but Oedipa suspects that it is the result of the doings of the Tristero. As Jameson notes, postmodern novels “no longer simply ‘quote’” the materials mentioned above, “but incorporate into their very substance.”<sup>162</sup>

The novel also alludes to the consumerist society’s obsession with images and the spectacle, for example with Mucho working as a disk jockey and complaining to Oedipa that his boss wants to censor his broadcasting because he does not like Mucho’s “image” (15). Towards the end of the novel, after Hilarius had gone crazy and Oedipa is at his office, the police hammer on the door:

“He has a gun,” Oedipa called, “and I’m in here.”  
“Who are you, lady?” She told him. “How do you spell that first name?” He also took down her address, age, phone number, next of kin, husband’s occupation, for the news media. Hilarius all the while was rummaging in his desk for more ammo.  
“Can you talk him out of it?” the cop wanted to know.  
“TV folks would like to get some footage through the window. Could you keep him occupied?” (137)

Even the police, instead of taking care of Oedipa’s and Hilarius’ safety, are concerned primarily with the media coverage of the situation and ask for Oedipa’s cooperation in ensuring it. This is comically extreme, but it comments ironically on the fascination by media and the visual. Oedipa mentions this preoccupation as well earlier on when she describes her perception of the city: “The city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars)” (117).

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<sup>162</sup> Jameson 3.

Marianne Dekoven notes in her essay “History, the Twentieth Century, and a Contemporary Novel,” that “[w]hether or not ours is a new historical moment, globalization is its dominant feature.”<sup>163</sup> According to MacKay, *The Crying of Lot 49* is a “novel in which globalization is both the inevitable outcome of postmodern American capitalism and the challenge to its otherwise deleterious effects of atomization and ahistoricism.” She notes that “[c]ashing in on the Beatles’ success, the novel’s fake British band (...) are the comic face of globalization.”<sup>164</sup> The less comic face of globalization and consumerism of the society is evident from the way they treat human remains, which is portrayed in the novel. First, Inverarity takes supplies of human bones, drawn out of a lake where a WW2 battle took place, to make them a decoration of an artificial lake and to turn the bone charcoal into cigarette filters, and second, cemeteries are destroyed to make place for the construction of freeways:

“How,” inquired Oedipa, “are road builders in any position to sell bones, pray?”

“Old cemeteries have to be ripped up,” Metzger explained. “Lake in the path of the East San Narciso Freeway, it had no right to be there, so we just barrelled on through, no sweat.”

“No bribes, no freeways,” Di Presso shaking his head. “These bones came from Italy. A straight sale. Some of them,” waving out at the lake, “are down there, to decorate the bottom for the Scuba nuts. That's what I've been doing today, examining the goods in dispute. Till Tony started chasing, anyway. The rest of the bones were used in the R&D phase of the filter program, back around the early '50s, way before cancer. Tony Jaguar says he harvested them all from the bottom of Lago di Pieta.” (61)

The commodification of human bones, however, is not the only atrocious trade in the novel. When Oedipa walks into the government surplus store next to the destroyed Zapf’s Used Books, the owner tells her about his trade with SS uniforms, which are being turned even into children’s school uniforms:

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<sup>163</sup> Marianne Dekoven, “History, the Twentieth Century, and a Contemporary Novel,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 42, No. 2, *Theories of the Novel Now, Part I* (2009): 155, *JSTOR* <[www.jstor.org/stable/27764324](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27764324)> 1 June 2019.

<sup>164</sup> MacKay 161.

“Listen, now we're getting up an arrangement with one of the big ready-to-wear outfits in L.A. to see how SS uniforms go for the fall. We're working it in with the back-to-school campaign, lot of 37 longs, you know, teenage kid sizes. Next season we may go all the way and get out a modified version for the ladies. How would that strike you?” (149)

In the world of *The Crying of Lot 49*, there seem to be no limits as to what is acceptable in the pursuit of commercial profit. However, the point is that this world is a reflection of the one outside of the novel.

## Chapter 5 – Conclusion

This thesis has sought to explore and demonstrate the ways in which Thomas Pynchon's novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, which is regarded as one of the most important works of postmodern literature, reflects the contemporary society through the use of some postmodern concepts, or, postmodernities.

The novel shows the postmodern America which represents a system of power structures and entangled orders of simulacra, driven by commodity fetishism and ruled by a flow of images and advertisements, breaking the boundaries between the real and the non-real, and Oedipa's quest for truth about the Tristero acts as a metaphor of the search for reliable information, sense and coherence within the world (or the situation of America) and of the postmodern commercial society in which she is trapped.

Her quest starts after she is named the executrix of her ex-boyfriend's will, and as she proceeds, she encounters the plurality and textuality of both the present reality and history. The novel demonstrates that there are different narratives and "texts" that constitute reality and thus adhere to the postmodern incredulity towards metanarratives. Oedipa must navigate her way through the labyrinthine nature of reality, trying to read it through the signs and clues that seem to be appearing everywhere. However, it becomes clear that Oedipa cannot discover the truth as there is no attainable "central truth," there are always multiple truths, multiple versions of reality, which are all true at the same time. This leads to Oedipa's incessant paranoia, which makes her notice and maybe even fabricate the signs of the underground organization. The paranoia and schizophrenia are the states in which the whole society finds itself due to the abundance of information sources and the unreliability of their knowledge of reality.

"The real" becomes unattainable as well because in today's culture it is replaced by models and simulations of the real which have no origin. The postmodern culture has become so obsessed with models, images and simulacra, mostly due to mass media, that they have

changed people's perception of reality, causing people to act upon false assumptions that the media have created by false representations. In the age of the hyperreal, it has become difficult to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary, between the natural and the artificial. The reader finds themselves in a similar position as Oedipa, trying to recognize what is real and what is imagined, and searching for meaning and coherence. Oedipa is interpreting her reality and the reader interprets it as well as the novel itself. They are both being tempted to automatically look for patterns in the complex system of signs they are faced with, even though this system might be based on arbitrariness. Thus, it is important not to overinterpret and overanalyze the signs pervading *The Crying of Lot 49* when dealing with this novel.

Despite his growing fame, or maybe because of it, Pynchon avoids media publicity and so little is still known about the author's personal life. He also avoids giving interviews and discussing his work, providing free space for interpretations of his novels and stories. It is this aloofness which also adds to the attractiveness of Pynchon's work to so many scholars. Roraback points out that reclusiveness may be hypothesized as a "fantastic source of energy"<sup>165</sup> given Maurice Blanchot's estimation:

All that is crude in the crudely repeated affirmation by which the anonymous tries to reach us, there where we would be placed outside of the game by the relation of inaccessibility that the morcellating demand of writing, like the fiction of this badly, seems to hold by default, takes on all its caricatural strength when a writer receives from his disappearance a new energy and the glamour of reknown.<sup>166</sup>

At the end of the novel, no resolution is given either to Oedipa or to the reader and so the truth remains unknown. If Pynchon offered an explanation for his novel, he would impose a "metanarrative" about it, which would imply that there is one correct reading of the novel and one truth, and would restrict the various readings and interpretations which can be created

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<sup>165</sup> Erik S. Roraback, *The Philosophical Baroque: On Autopoietic Modernities* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2017) 173.

<sup>166</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, trans. with an intro. Lycette Nelson (Albany: SUNY P, 1992) e. 87-88. Originally published as *Le pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) f. 121-22, quoted in Roraback 173.

thanks to the plurality of truth and reality, and to the fact that every single thing and every single story can be seen from different points of view. After all, it is also the case of this thesis, which offers only one of the possible readings of the novel and which is not the “correct” reading, as it exists among a plurality of interpretations.

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