

Narrative Schizophrenia in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

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Abstract

The novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, by Thomas Pynchon, allows a theoretical approach to spatial reconfigurations of identity through its narrative schizophrenia. In this study we explore the ramifications of this narrative, as well as its influence on the production of subjectivities, from the discursive pattern of the rhizome, whose *eccentric* nature favors the articulation of an identity fragmentation in Pynchon's novel. That new spatiality, divided and multiple, admits new readings of the main characters in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and enhances the role of entropy in the decentralization of identity proposed by the novel.

Key words: space, entropy, Thomas Pynchon, rhizome

Resumen

La novela *The Crying of Lot 49*, de Thomas Pynchon, permite una aproximación teórica a las reconfiguraciones espaciales de la identidad gracias a su esquizofrenia narrativa. En este estudio se exploran las ramificaciones de esa narrativa y su influencia sobre la producción de subjetividades, a partir del eje discursivo del rizoma, cuya condición de *excéntrico* favorece la articulación de la fragmentación identitaria en la novela de Pynchon. Esa nueva espacialidad dividida y múltiple admite nuevas lecturas de los personajes de *The Crying of Lot 49* y recupera el protagonismo de la entropía en la descentralización identitaria propuesta por la novela.

Palabras claves: espacio, entropía, Thomas Pynchon, rizoma

*“Entropy is a figure of speech, then,
...a metaphor...”*

(John Nefastis, chapter 5).

*“Schizoanalysis will work towards its complexification,
its processual enrichment, towards the consistency
of its virtual lines of bifurcation and differentiation,
in short towards its ontological heterogeneity.”*

(Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis* 61)

Most of the studies published until very recently on the short and controversial novel that Pynchon allegedly published as a “pot-boiler” in 1966 have focused on the postmodern features of both its structure and its narrative. Few, however, have paid attention to the problematic treatment of space that is presented in the pages of Pynchon’s second book, particularly if we look at space as it has been discussed by the geophilosophy of Gilles Deleuze and other important thinkers of the twentieth century (Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, David Harvey, etc).

Thanks to the contributions of these authors, Pynchon’s literature is susceptible to be read from quite different approaches related to space, in particular when referred to a terminology that endorses the complexity of Pynchon’s characters and their relations. For instance, the approach we address in this study roots from a close-reading of Deleuzean study of space, and looks at the different forms in which his neologisms—or rather, his resignification of certain terminology—affect our identifications of space and, consequently, our identifications of narrative (in this case, of Pynchon’s novel).

The concepts that are crucial for the discussion of space in *The Crying of Lot 49* are to be seen from a performative intervention. “Rhizome,” “spatiality,” or “narrative paranoia and/or schizophrenia,” for instance, open a dialogue in the text to scrutinize the scope of the main characters’ ambitions. Hume and McHale¹ are clear to explain that the deconstruction of space in Pynchon’s novels are intimately related to a reconfiguration of meanings, and that is precisely where theory allows us to read space as an inherently subjective discourse.

In addition, if the concept of rhizome favors the legitimation of alternative spatial relations in the novel—also represented in the concurrent yet asymmetrical spaces produced by the narrative schizophrenia—, the ubiquitous presence of labyrinths, as well as the apparent opposition between dynamism and statics in the case of entropy, have an imperative significance in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Following Vine, Walker, and Ravichandran², we argue that all of these concepts—and particularly entropy—are proper to identify and locate Pynchon’s positioning of spaces, but we take this discussion to the extreme to claim that the author also uses those terms to dislocate and disidentify his characters’ spatialities. Of course, we use Deleuze’s terminological contributions to discuss this approach, and both “multiplicity” and “de/reterritorialization” become crucial terms in our discussion³.

Being one of Thomas Pynchon's most controversial novels, thus, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), presents a set of characters doomed to a perpetual interconnection with each other, yet not through traditional means of communication. They rather see themselves as component parts of each other's rhizomatic—multiple and non-hierarchical—spatiality⁴, within a mutual and imagined construction of their respective subjectivities. In this essay, we look at the horizontal, and often bidirectional, manifestations of identity in that controversial structure of interdependent characters in *Lot 49*, which show a centripetal force attracting collateral identifications toward their subject, but also show the paradoxical movement of a centrifugal inertia within their spaces of identity. The combination of these drives results in a narrative schizophrenia that Pynchon establishes as natural and coherent in the development of his characters, and which is clearly perceptible in the character named Oedipa Maas.

Oedipa Mass' reflections at the end of the novel clearly show the presence of paranoia and imaginary conspiracies as a key element to understand the different discourses that are presented in Pynchon's narrative: "...she just didn't know. He might himself have discovered *The Tristero*, and encrypted that in the will, buying into just enough to be sure she'd find it. Or he might even have tried to survive death, as a paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved." (148) Schizophrenia, though, as a general continent of paranoia, is not directly addressed by either the text itself or the subsequent criticism (Duvall, O'Donnell), and although its study as a pure postmodern mechanism of intervention seems to have been applauded by recent criticism (Huyssen, Mattessich), there are yet many levels at questioning identity through schizophrenia that are in need of a critical approach in the study of *The Crying of Lot 49* (ontologically, epistemologically, and above all, ideologically).

One of these important levels in the investigation of schizophrenia in Pynchon's *Lot 49* is narrative⁵. In her existential solitude, Oedipa finds herself immersed in an epistemological labyrinth that takes her to a non-existing center; that is, she creates a path to represent her search for a truth that needs to be beyond the conventional truth in order to have a systemic functionality. However, despite Oedipa's efforts to provide an apparently logical reasoning for the acts of her chaotic self, what is left for the reader to witness is just a celebration of Pynchon's horror, represented by the struggle of a certain subject to articulate its identity with that of an other. Such a rhizomatic conception of the self is re-defined by the narrative of *The Crying of Lot 49* with a metonymic use of entropy (generally as a generator of other spatialities, but one that will only function through the schizophrenic destruction of the self).

Criticism on Pynchon's 1966 novel has been particularly prolific on the study of entropy (Freese, Hinds). The focus here will not be, however, on the discussion of entropy per se, but on the application of entropy to the establishment of reconfigured spatialities, as it is carried out by the main characters in *The Crying of Lot 49*. In "Entropy", a section from *Slow Learner* (1960), Pynchon offered his critically-acclaimed and well-known definition of entropy through the voice of Callisto, one of the characters from the story⁶:

“Nevertheless,” continued Callisto, “he found in entropy or the measure of disorganization for a closed system an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world. He saw, for example, the younger generation responding to Madison Avenue with the same spleen his own had once reserved for Wall Street: and in American ‘consumerism’ discovered a similar tendency from the least to the most probable, from differentiation to sameness, from ordered individuality to a kind of chaos. He found himself, in short, restating Gibbs’ prediction in social terms, and envisioned a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred, since each point in it would ultimately have the same quantity of energy; and intellectual motion would, accordingly, cease. (74)

Such refusal of a potential movement for knowledge anticipates the active—yet paralyzed—condition of identity configuration in *The Crying of Lot 49*. On the one hand, paranoid dynamics will emerge from such a radical position but, on the other hand, schizophrenic chaos will also impose a static transfer of multiplicities that will affect directly to spaces and spatialities. The equalization of the information energy would provide a transmission of knowledge between the different mechanisms of identification, which would ultimately result in null variations of identity. Space, as identity, could only be defined, thus, by its exposure to its contingent relations with active components, and its mass would be determined by the invisible yet essential particles of unstable existence present in the ubiquitous field of communication⁷.

Space, therefore, is crucially significant in the chaotic redistribution of characters in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa, for example, is continuously haunted by the—deviant—leitmotif of spatial “paranoia”, and she inhabits an imagined space showing her lack of connection to reality. Of course, Pynchon’s disposition of contingent spaces around Oedipa responds to his willingness to perpetually discontinue the cicatrization process of the open wounds of her identity. Also, Oedipa becomes an “intruder in the dust” within the maze of subjective identifications with—possibly—non-existing corporations in the novel, which represent a diminishing force of gravity established between them. Oedipa’s rewriting of the Minotaur myth implies her self-identification with a de-gendered Theseus who continuously feels the threat of an imagined enemy within a space of rational inconsistency. Therefore, the labyrinth itself is re-evaluated as a metaphor of postmodern space, lacking any sort of centered structure and, therefore, disavowing space against any possible (re)olution of the narrative plot.

Oedipa’s body is depicted as a labyrinthine and impregnated-in-solitude space impassively leading to a center point that does not exist anymore. Her suicidal quest for a contingent truth needs to go beyond the real truth before her eyes and, for that purpose, a reconfiguration of herself as a spatial subject becomes one of the fundamental aims in Pynchon’s narrative strategy. Oedipa’s identity is inscribed in the novel as the result of a severely naïve narrative basis. As identifying features of her character, Oedipa’s mistakes are continuously forgiven by the reader through their condescending identification of her

as a deviant leitmotif of the narrative. Her multiple “paranoias” are introduced to the implied reader as enigmatic yet weak invaders of Oedipa’s rational spatialities. Her spaces, therefore are the result from the continuous and reciprocal persecutions between herself and the Minotaur, who appears disguised as an illicit, mute and inherently paradoxical postman.

Yet Oedipa is not only Oedipa, as it has been repeatedly argued⁸. Her name reveals her identity as one from a deceitful, fleeting fictional being. Oedipa’s character does not respond to the stereotype of a startled female model, frequent in the narratives of other contemporary novelists such as Charles Bukowski or Phillip Roth. Rather the contrary, Mrs. Maas- Metzger- Hilarius- Fallopian- Pynchon- etc, that is, the multiplicity of characters that converge in the subject called “Oedipa”, are presented as a regurgitation of identities from a narrator whose reading of female subjectivities is heterogeneous and decentered in essence (Vesterman 213). In this line, Nicholson (1984) argues that a similar pattern is also transferred into the spatialities of Pynchon’s readers: “Oedipa’s quest involves the reader in a similar scrutiny of the ways in which we interpret as we read; and in an analogous “deconditioning” of conventional assumptions about the relation between fiction and the wider world in which it is written and read” (298).

According to this hypothesis, which posits Oedipa as the central pivot to which all the characters in the novel converge—and also from which all the characters depart, the location of Mrs. Maas as the main narrator in the general diegesis is not only reasonable, but also necessary for the narrative to progress. The text itself is probably the best example of what the narrative pattern in this book is. The omnipresent image of entropy within the text denotes the inevitability of space mitigation and identity exponential multiplication. Entropy is fundamentally defined in the narrative in terms of thermodynamics or communication, but in both cases, though, it explains a movement into disorder. On the one hand, entropy is perceived as the disorder of a thermodynamic system. On the other hand, it is defined as “a measure of the amount of information in a message that is based on the logarithm of the number of possible equivalent messages” (Shannon 53). As it is eloquently explained in these two quotes, both definitions relate entropy to a state of unmanageable chaos. This disordered oscillation of coming to and going from a central point—which has also been endowed with inherent, yet unperceived movement—questions, at the same time, the centrality of that space (similarly to the essentially labyrinthine structure of the narrative maze posited in *The Crying of Lot 49*) and makes the character of Oedipa respond to the fragmentary nature of her identities.

The filtered narrative of the story, nevertheless, allows for the reader to obtain only a selected portion of information. As Ana Rull argued:

This would suggest the idea of Oedipa watching the world mediated through television, that is to say, watching “reality” not as it is, but as a spectacle of images, as happens in fiction. Her perception has nothing to do with “reality” but it is her inner world that she actually perceives. The

“dark green” glasses she wears, remind us of the description Pynchon had previously made of the television set: “Oedipa stood in the living-room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (5). (58-59)

The narrator offers, thus, several hints for the reader to understand that the prism offered by the narrative is nothing but a subjective—and mass communication-mediated—vision of actual events. For instance, the reader learns about the definitions of entropy through what one of the characters believes to have understood about the concept from a dense lecture. An attempt to provide a definitive solution to the problem of entropy from that partial set of definitions becomes rather adventurous. There is, at least, one more meaning to the complexity of this concept, apart from the two that were introduced by Oedipa’s subjectivity: entropy can be interpreted as a degradation of the matter and energy to a state of inert uniformity. Berkeley-based John Nefastis provides several definitions of entropy in *The Crying of Lot 49*, so it is unobjectionable that he should also be part of Oedipa’s subjectivity. This edge is reinforced by the opening paragraph of the book, which speculates with the possibility that everything may be a function of Oedipa’s fragmented identity:

One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executor, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary. Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel as drunk as possible. But this did not work. She thought of a hotel room in Mazatlan whose door had just been slammed, it seemed forever, waking up two hundred birds down in the lobby; a sunrise over the library slope at Cornell University that nobody out on it had seen because the slope faces west; a dry, disconsolate tune from the fourth movement of the Bartok Concerto for Orchestra; a whitewashed bust of Jay Gould that Pierce kept over the bed on a shelf so narrow for it she’d always had the hovering fear it would someday topple on them. Was that how he’d died, she wondered, among dreams, crushed by the only ikon in the house? That only made her laugh, out loud and helpless: You’re so sick, Oedipa, she told herself, or the room, which knew.

Her mental journeys through stories of past plausible events reverts the possibility of a straightforward vision of Oedipa’s spatiality as a coherent and linear one. Rather, the opening lines of the book suggest that the pages that follow will describe an interior reverberation of certain events that could or could not have occurred.

Therefore, the latter definition of entropy follows the line of thought drawn by the former two, but it adds, at the same time, a new point of inflection. First,

these detours around the definition of entropy provide several hints to isolate the atmosphere of degradation and decrepitude that clothe the plot in uncertainty and conceal the supposed “evolution” of the characters. Second, they posit an approach to the paradoxical idea of moving into an inert state, which is in turn related to the myth of Ixion⁹.

From a close reading of the story, one cannot resist to reach the conclusion that the central unreality of the conclusions Oedipa is looking for—and finally finds—makes her (and the whole story) become absurd. If the story is to be identified with the different identity resolutions carried out by the main character (including her loneliness and her attempt to commit suicide), this is because the deep structure of the story is constructed to create links—rather than lines of flight—between its internal configuration and the superficial ramifications of its development. There are many instances from this narrative where both the power over the diegesis and the boundaries between the characters become blurred. In those moments the reader ignores not only who is performing his/her role as a narrator within the fictional level, but also who is doing so in a more general level, including the paratextual dimension. That is, in Oedipa’s talk, these two dimensions join together in the uncertainty of the narrative entropy: “Yeah, there was so much else she ought to be saying also, but this was what came out. It was true, anyway.” (4) The reader does not know whether it is Mucho, Oedipa or even the narrator the one that is voicing those words. All these sentences give the impression of being produced inside Oedipa’s mind, even if they come from Mucho’s own mind or even from the fictional narrator. This is because the whole narration is impregnated with features that suggest that it can be thought as an autodiegetic discourse, even if many times the voice seems to go beyond the subjectivity of Oedipa herself.

The narrative voice of the main character appears, consequently, as the recipient of other characters’ idiosyncrasies (including, above all, spaces and spatialities), and is represented in many passages of the text (79, 93, 117) as a rhizomatic structure whose function is, primarily, to serve as the catalyst of all heterotopic spaces and spatial voices. This sort of “narrative schizophrenia” performed by Oedipa behaves as a machinery of chaotic control—and identity reorganization—of many characters within the text. Examples of this within the narrative are frequent, but the cases of Pierce, the ghost character, of Mucho, and of Metzger are particularly relevant. The first one, who is presented as a permanent shadow behind the lines of the text, also amalgamates in his own referentiality a series of—fictional?—characters (Lamont Cranston, who is described as just a voice (2-3), as *The Shadow*). These characters make Pierce—and Oedipa—adopt not only different personalities, but also different voices (which holds an essential role as a metaphor of the rhizomatic confluences of identities in the general narrative).

The second example is Mucho. Mucho performs his reality from the previous mental state to the process of identity loss that precedes the schizophrenic delusion. His jobs (as a used-cars salesman and as a disc-jockey), as well as his sexual attitude, are clearly significant. The function of Mucho in the rhizomatic

(de)structure posited by Oedipa is that of a mere pawn, alienated from his possibilities of identity agency, and whose contradictory drives problematize the very functionality of his condition as a used-cars salesman or as a disc jockey. The constant questioning of his jobs and his self-consciousness as a marginal item in the equation of identity production proposed by Oedipa leads him to assume that a rupture of his integrity is the only viable way out. As his name reveals, several processes of identification occur simultaneously in Mucho's mental procedures. On the one hand, his nickname, "Mucho", denotes something that is directly related (if the probable English pronunciation is followed) to the male, chauvinist condition of the person who receives that nickname. In some instances of the text, the behavior of this character corresponds to the attitude that is expected from him due to his name:

"Mucho, baby," she cried, in an access of helplessness. Mucho Maas, home, bounded through the screen door. "Today was another defeat," he began. "Let me tell you," she also began. But let Mucho go first. He was a disk jockey who worked further along the Peninsula and suffered regular crises of conscience out his profession. "I don't believe in any of it, Oed," he could usually get out. "I try, I truly can't," way down there, further down perhaps than she could reach, so that such times often brought her near panic. It might have been the sight of her so about to lose control that seemed to bring him back up (3-4).

However, in many other cases, his actions mislead the reader from conceiving "Mucho" as a chauvinist character and refer them to the idea that he is significantly away from the semantic inertias of the term "macho". Moreover, he is more likely to be positioned on the opposite side. Particularly in what refers to his sexual conduct, he seems openly unconcerned about his wife's tendency to multiply her sexual experiences. He gives the impression of being an enfeebled person, a man not able to satisfy his wife's (or anybody else's) needs, but it is significant that Oedipa denounces the relationships that Mucho seems to have—at least as distant relationships—with adolescents. On the other hand, his surname, Maas, is the African word for "maze" and the Dutch word for loophole, both referring to the perpetual condemnation of this character as a paralyzed subjectivity within a space of contingent motion. The union of both words—Mucho and Maas—results in the Spanish sound "much more", which clearly implies an ironic sense of the dubitable capabilities of this character as a functional subject in the spatial territory generated by Oedipa's identifications. He is, therefore, described to be quite an unstable person who (unconsciously?) adopts different personalities to fit in the moment he is living, which conveniently coincides with Oedipa's desires and manifestations from her conscious voice.

The last character that is particularly representative—besides, of course, Oedipa—of the paranoia in the text, both in its narrative and thematically, is Metzger. This is noticeable presented in many of their conversations: "You one of these right-wing nut outfits?" inquired the diplomatic Metzger. Fallopian

twinkled. ‘They accuse us of being paranoids.’ ‘They?’ inquired Metzger, twinkling also. ‘Us?’ asked Oedipa.” (34-35) Metzger is a good example of the multiplicity of voices that define the main characters in *The Crying of Lot 49*. His frequent occupation as an actor enhances both his willingness and his capability to cause the confusion of personalities within—and among—the characters that is essential to the development of Pynchon’s narrative. Being an actor makes everything easier for Metzger, who quite often is not able to distinguish (consciously and unconsciously) between his performing of a role and him performing his role. This is particularly evident in the scene in which Metzger and Oedipa watch that old movie of Metzger’s on TV:

“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.” (21-22)

Metzger explains, very explicitly, the process of identity formation as one of a perpetual palimpsest. What becomes clear is the necessity of new conditions of spatiality that foster the reconfigured identities, and such new forms of space are found in the rhizomatic structures confined to Oedipa’s use of entropy as a narrative device.

Conclusions

Entropy and schizophrenia are to be redefined as the main leitmotifs in *The Crying of Lot 49*. The former functions as a goal; the latter is presented as a medium. The schizophrenic devices are the common ground to define all of the characters, and that factor is reflected through the inherent multiplicity of the narrative style, which does not present a leading voice that could be automatically associated to a leading character. Only Oedipa, a natural recipient of the fusion of several narrative identities, can be interpreted as being a diegetic multiple deity. Entropy, in turn, is understood as a progressive path to the inertia that Oedipa tries to avoid in her labyrinthine spatiality. The inertia that she intends to eradicate with her search of the “Demon” machine can only be reached through a paradoxical use of entropy, with which chaos acquires total meaning as a (re/de)organized machinery of identity production. That demon, however, turns out to be simulated, making Oedipa fall prey—through movement—to a continuous paralysis, much like Ixion with his fire ring, or Sisifo with the stone

on his hands. Entropy is part of Oedipa's view of her own realities, and, as such, is essential to the production of the necessary spatialities that will serve as the foundation of all characters within Oedipa's mind.

Notes

- 1 Brian McHale. "Mason & Dixon in the Zone, or, a Brief Poetics of Pynchon-Space." Horvath and Malin 43 (2000): 61-90.
Kathryn Hume. "Attenuated Realities: Pynchon's Trajectory from *V.* to *Inherent Vice*." *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon* 2.1 (2013): n. pag.
- 2 Steve Vine. "The Entropic Sublime in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* (2011): 160-177.
Ira A. Walker. *Principles of Thomas Pynchon's literary realities*. The University of Texas at El Paso, 2012.
T. Ravichandran. "Disordered Reality, Diseased Cities and Desperate Detectives in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Inherent Vice*." *East-West Cultural Passage* 1 (2011): 26-35.
- 3 Bill Solomon and Steven Weisenburger have already mentioned the similarities between Deleuze's and Pynchon's approaches to subjective spaces.
- 4 Deleuze's and Guattari's seminal works *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* and *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* provide clear definitions and information on rhizome and its actual and potential applications on *schizoanalyses*. As Felicity Colman explains, "in Deleuze and Guattari's use of the term, the rhizome is a concept that 'maps' a process of networked, relational and transversal thought, and a way of being without 'tracing' the construction of that map as a fixed entity" (Parr 233).
- 5 Nicholson and Stevenson's narratological study of *The Crying of Lot 49* in 1984—together with Seed's contribution on entropy—might be a convincing start point for a narrative approach.
- 6 Two relevant studies on the literary pieces that influenced Pynchon's "Entropy" are Peter L. Hays and Robert Redfield, "Pynchon's Spanish Source for Entropy," *Studies in Short Fiction* 16 (1979): 327-334, and Carole A. Holdsworth, "Celestina Times Two and Entropy," *Celestinesca* 13.2 (1989): 53-58.
- 7 Current revelations on the existence of an unrecognizable space (Higgs Field) where apparently inexistent particles (Higgs Bosons) provide mass to all elementary particles also give a new spectrum of theorizations to research on space within Cultural Studies. Further information on the specifics of the Standard Model in Physics can be found in David John Baker, "Against Field Interpretations of Quantum Field Theory," *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 60.3 (Sep., 2009): 585-609.
- 8 Levi 6.
- 9 In Greek mythology, Ixion is punished by Zeus to be bound with snakes to a winged burning wheel that was always spinning. Ixion is, thus, condemned to be attached to a burning solar wheel for all eternity in the territory of Tartarus. His constant movement is inherently sterile, as it cannot be detached from an inescapable inertia.

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