

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*: The Hegemony of Hyperreality

Sima Farshid,

Assistant Professor,
Islamic Azad University,
Karaj Branch,
Alborz, Iran

And

Hanieh Mehr Motlagh,

MA-holder,
Islamic Azad University,
Karaj Branch,
Alborz,
Iran.

hanieh_motlagh@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract: *In The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), Pynchon depicts a society where the proliferation of signs is continuously increasing via simulators and simulations, and huge amounts of messages and meanings are constantly produced. Consequently the original aims of production gradually disappear. As the protagonist of the novel is bombarded by the excess of information, her life circumstances become more and more chaotic. Consequently the more she struggles to find the answer to the puzzling questions, the more she gets lost in the confusing world of unrelated data. Suffering from uncertainty and confusion, she becomes mentally disordered, and gradually reaches a state of indifference which is regarded as one of the main effects of the hegemony of hyperreality in the contemporary society in the present article. These points are discussed in this article with regard to Baudrillard's theory of "Simulacra and Simulation" to verify the role of the mass media in The Crying of Lot 49.*

Keywords: Simulation, Simulacra, Hyper-real, Entropy.

In many postmodern literary works, the mass media has taken its own place and its controlling powers demonstrate its influence on the society's life and mind. Regarding Baudrillardian notions of "Simulacra and Simulation", this paper considers the domination of hyperreal in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) whose character is caught up in chaotic confusing states. Thus analyzing hyperreality, the paper examines the influence of the media and simulacra on the lives of characters which results in the loss of the original purpose of some of the long-held concepts in history and culture, consequently uncertainty would be the outcome of the

excess of information in the postmodern era. The next points discussed here are entropy¹ and its effects on the life of the protagonist.

Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr. (b. 1937) who was awarded the US National Book Award for Fiction in 1974 for his most renowned novel *Gravity Rainbow* (1973) is mostly famous for such complicated novels as *V* (1963), *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and *Mason & Dixon* (1977) which are “deliberately unstable”, fragmented and baffling due to various shifts from one metaphor to another in them and also their mathematical, scientific, and historical allusions, as Levine states (61-62). While writing *The Crying of Lot 49*, he was deeply distressed by the irreversible losses of World War II, the probability of nuclear explosions, and role of the mass media; consequently he repeatedly presents the motifs of loss, chaos, and entropy in his novel.

The Crying of Lot 49 relates the story of a woman named Oedipa who is chosen by her ex-lover Pierce Inverarity to execute his will. Neither her husband Mucho nor her psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius can help her carry out the assignment. Thus she tries to gather information about Pierces’s business and possessions by the help of his attorney Metzger. In doing so, she undergoes several adventures, and encounters loads of fragmented information about different postal systems such as Tristero, Turn & Taxis, and WAST. These apparently seem to be related to Pierces’s occupation, while finally such a thing is not proved. Oedipa comes across several signs of these systems in different places with various significations that are irrelevant to each other, and thus she reaches to no conclusions either about Pierces’s occupation or about those systems. Consequently she gets desperately confused about the borderline between the real and the imaginary, and presumes that all those things might have been a mere hallucination engendered by her perplexed mind. Pynchon’s novel ends abruptly by eventually reaching the “crying of lot 49” of the title which does not, however, signify anything for Oedipa or the readers of the novel.

The French thinker Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) refers to four kinds of representation in works of art in his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994). The first kind of images created in those works, he states, is the “reflection” of reality, while the second and third ones go further than merely imitating reality; they “mask and pervert” reality or its “absence”, and the fourth kind does not have any references in reality; it is “pure simulacrum” – hence called hyper-real by him (*Simulacra and Simulation* 121). He then argues that a nostalgic feeling is discernible in modern-day people, because they are surrounded by the wide-spread, simulated webs of signs that are engendered by technology and spread via mass media – the simulated webs in which people do not observe any real referents (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6).

The Crying of Lot 49 assembles all images discussed by Baudrillard. Concerning the first sort that reflects reality, several instances can be referred to, namely Oedipa’s recollection of talking to Pierce on the phone for the last time, when he imitates a variety of accents ranging from “heavy Slavic tones ... comic-Negro ... hostile Pachuco dialect ... a Gestapo officer [to] Lamont Cranston voice” (*The Crying of Lot 49* 6). Her comparison of San Narciso where most of the incidents of the novel take place to a circuit card (*The Crying of Lot 49* 14) is another instance of the first image Baudrillard refers to. The “Paranoid” group, a band of young singers, imitates the

¹ Valerie P. Zimbaro defines the term as being “related to the level of randomness or chaos in a physical or informational system.” This term was first coined by a physicist. Later, the writers became interested in entropy and its relation to human life (97).

language and clothes used and worn by The Beatles, the renowned British band of the 1960s (*The Crying of Lot 49* 16-17).

Other representations of reality observed in the novel are Inamorati Anonymous, WAST, and Nefastis Machine. Inamorati Anonymous or “IA” is an institution that prevents people from falling in love by arranging accidental meetings for them (*The Crying of Lot 49* 77-78), thereby imitating the operation of such American organizations as Alcoholic Anonymous² or “AA”. The WAST, an abbreviation for “WE AWAIT SILENT TRISTERO’S EMPIRE”, postal system (*The Crying of Lot 49* 116) can be regarded as the “simulacrum of the real US postal service,” as Palimario confirms (20). Nefastis Machine is also a replica of Maxwell’s Demon invented by James Clerk Maxwell. Finally the story of *The Courier’s Tragedy* written by the fictional Richard Wharfinger draws on the awful event of taking out the bones of killed American soldiers in World War II, buried in Lago di Pieta in Italy, to turn them into a kind of charcoal by an American company (*The Crying of Lot 49* 42).

Many of these issues, however, cannot be discerned by readers thanks to their allusions to the above-mentioned institutions and events that might be unknown for them. In addition to these allusions, there are cases in the novel that intensify the bewilderment of the readers, in view of the fact that it is not clear whether they are associated with “external reality or [are] a closed and self referential system of images” (48), as Morgan has pointed out. Tristero and Turn & Taxis are among those issues; Oedipa desperately tries to find out their mysteries as well as their signification in Pierce’s life and business, but fails to do so, and hence Pynchon’s novel becomes a travesty of detective stories.

The second and third kinds of simulacra are mostly observed in *The Crying of Lot 49* in the repetition of signs and in the functioning of media. Referring to photography as a means of replication in “Symbolic Exchange and Death”, Baudrillard points to the generation of reality by photos (144). But in Pynchon’s novel it is television that mostly generates and “perverts” reality, and this reveals Pynchon’s obsession with the distorting role of that medium in the contemporary world. When Oedipa meets Metzger for the first time, to talk about Inverarity’s will, she cannot get ascertained that he is a real lawyer or an actor, because simultaneously a soap opera is shown on TV in which he had performed a role when he was a child (*The Crying of Lot 49* 17). Likewise Metzger is uncertain whether what is happening in front of him is real or “on camera?” in another scene of the novel (*The Crying of Lot 49* 38-39).

Poring over simulation, Baudrillard argues that “to dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 3). When this feigning happens, the distinction between the real and the fake becomes difficult first for the observers and then for the one who feigns, like the case of the soldier who pretends to be sick in the army, as Baudrillard refers to. Similarly some of the characters of Pynchon’s novel so much pretend to be what they are not that gradually they cannot distinguish their real identities from the simulated ones, as Metzger once says that he has so much lived inside his looks that he is not sure which one is the real one (*The Crying of Lot 49* 18). These fluctuations also make it difficult for the reader to distinguish reality from counterfeit in the novel, seeing that due to the

²Alcoholics Anonymous arranges gatherings in which people share their experiences with each other to cure their alcoholism (“Information on AA” 2012, 1). See also: <http://www.aa.org/>.

blurring of the borderline between reality and its simulacrum in several cases, Oedipa gets confused and conveys that confusion to the reader.

The fourth kind of simulacra according to Baudrillard does not reflect reality at all – hence being called hyper-real by him, since it is a copy without any origins (*Simulacra and Simulation* 2) which “dissimulates that there is nothing” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6). In *The Crying of Lot 49*, two issues obsess Oedipa’s mind in her quest to discover Pierces’s real identity and business – Tristero and *The Courier’s Tragedy*, neither of which eventually illustrates anything about him. She goes through the bewildering process of gathering information about them to find out who Pierces has actually been, but all her attempts remain in vain. The gained information does not demystify Tristero and its relation to Pierces’s interests. The story of that Jacobean revenge tragedy, that replicates the event of taking out the bones of American soldiers, who died during World War II, to produce a kind of charcoal by the Beaconsfield (*The Crying of Lot 49* 42), can also be considered a mere simulation, because Oedipa’s investigations to find the original script of the play comes to nothing due to its various editions.

As the result of the fabrication of simulacra which are continuously made in our times without having any references to reality, Baudrillard argues, a sense of nostalgia is created among modern people owing to the fact that the real is not what it used to be formerly (*Simulacra and Simulation* 6). In Pynchon’s novel, since Oedipa’s efforts to find the truth behind the signs she faces reaches to no conclusions, a nostalgic feeling for the past and returning to it is observed in her near the end of the novel. Thinking about what she has gone through, she wonders if “some version of herself hadn’t vanished” (*The Crying of Lot 49* 111) in the attempt to decipher the mysteries she has encountered. Thus she knows that something is lost she cannot gain again.

Simulation and proliferation of signs, Baudrillard affirms in “After the Orgy”, result in the loss of original essence, purpose and meaning as the consequence of continuous production of signs and the increasing amount of messages which lead to uncertainty followed by indifference (6). Many replicated cases in *The Crying of Lot 49* have lost their original aim and meaning through repeated reproductions. For instance the post horn sign which was used in the past to announce the arrival of a herald, and thus symbolized the trumpet of the Judgment Day, is muted in this novel, despite being repeatedly seen on walls (*The Crying of Lot 49* 34), on a paper (58), on a ring (64), on a stamp (66), on a lapel pin (76), in children’s game (82), in the Negro neighborhood (84), in an advertisement (84), and tattooed on someone’s hand (86), signifying in each case something different from other inferences – hence resulting in Oedipa’s utter confusion and later indifference.

Out of several issues Baudrillard discerns in “The Masses” as the generators of postmodern uncertainty is the contemporary excess of information. He argues that unlike traditional doubt which came out of lack of enough information, the postmodern haziness is the outcome of constant reproduction of signs and meanings by the media (213). In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa’s repeated encounter with various replications of Tristero sign and her inability to solve its mystery eventually results in such a perplexity that she doubts all of them might be the mere protrusion of her confused mind: “either Tristero did exist, in its own right, or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasized by Oedipa” (*The Crying of Lot 49* 75). Her mental state is like what Baudrillard calls in “Superconductive Events” the condition of “radical uncertainty” formed by “endless simulation” (45). The prevailing uncertainty of Pynchon’s novel is not merely observed

in Oedipa; its narrator seems to be doubtful as well – visible in the repeated use of “adverbs of uncertainty” such as maybe, perhaps, possibly, as Harper has noticed (168). The uncertainties of both the narrator and the major character of the novel subsequently entangle the readers in a web of doubts.

The constant doubts and uncertainty resulted from the chaotic circumstances situates Oedipa in an entropic state. In this novel, Pynchon has depicted a microcosm to demonstrate that based on the law of entropy which represents the level of chaos in a system, the created chaotic circumstances progressively move toward a heat death and extinction at the end which is regarded as a state of indifference in here. Based on what Seigneuret believes, in this world there is a process in which energy and the movements of molecules are gradually “leveling” until there is a “heat death” at the end³ (96). In such a situation no energy is transformed and consequently no useful work is done. As Oedipa can neither solve the mysteries nor can do anything useful, she reaches a state of indifference that is considered entropic, since it brings her quest to a standstill.

The Crying of Lot 49 as a postmodern novel embodies many factors which demonstrate the dominance of the mass media in the society. In her quest to discover the truth about her ex-lover’s real identity and vocation, the major character of the novel is so much bombarded by different replications of a lost origin and excessive information presented by various media that she finally reaches a state of total confusion. The result of her vain endeavours to find out the truth deteriorates her mental health, and she becomes paranoid and suspicious of her sanity, since it seems to her that all those things might have been generated by her restless, hyperactive mind. Lost in the chaotic web of information, she finally reaches the state of utter indifference which keeps her in a mesmerizing situation.

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³ James Gleick believes that “everything tends toward disorder. Any process that converts energy from one form to another must lose some as heat. Perfect efficiency is impossible” (308). Thus no real heat transfer can be a hundred percent efficient. According to Hayles, if some of energy is used in every heat exchange for a specific function, gradually there will be “no heat reservoir” in the world (39). Consequently the world reaches the state of equilibrium and heat death. The third law is concerned with entropy and its measurements, as McCarthy states (5).

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