Consumerism and Mass Media in the Early Works of Thomas Pynchon

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Source / Izvornik: **Journal of the International Symposium of Students of English, Croatian and Italian Studies, 2018, 98 - 119**

Conference paper / Rad u zborniku

Publication status / Verzija rada: **Published version / Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:172:299356

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-03-28**

Repository / Repozitorij:

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DIGITALNI AKADEMSKI ARHIVI I REPOZITORIJI

FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET SVEUČILIŠTA U SPLITU

ZBORNIK RADOVA
MEĐUNARODNOG SIMPOZIJA MLADIH ANGLISTA, KROATISTA I TALIJANISTA





STUDENTSKI ZBOR
SVEUČILIŠTA U SPLITU



ZBORNIK RADOVA MEĐUNARODNOG SIMPOZIJA MLADIH ANGLISTA, KROATISTA I TALIJANISTA

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM OF STUDENTS OF ENGLISH, CROATIAN AND ITALIAN STUDIES

Izdavač/Publisher
Sveučilište u Splitu, Filozofski fakultet/
University of Split, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Poljička cesta 35, 21000 Split

Odgovorna urednica/Chief
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Naslovna slika/Cover photo
Dorotea Grgatović

Grafički dizajn/Graphic design
Neda Mandić

Lektura i korektura/Language editing and proofreading
Andrea Jović

Tisak/Print
Redak d. o. o.

Naklada/Edition
150 primjeraka/150 copies

Adresa Uredništva
Poljana kraljice Jelene 1, Split
itheom.split@gmail.com

ISBN: 978-953-352-026-1

Zbornik je objavljen prema odluci br. 003-08/18-06/0015 donesenoj na sjednici Fakultetskog vijeća Filozofskog fakulteta u Splitu dana 25. rujna 2018.

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original scientific paper

Consumerism and Mass Media in the Early Works of Thomas Pynchon

The aim of this paper is to provide insight into one of the most prominent topics in postmodern literature through the works of Thomas Pynchon, focusing on his famous short story "Entropy" (1960) and his second novel The Crying of Lot 49 *(1965). The issue of consumerism and media-saturated society is the primary concern of postmodern theory and it has been tackled by many authors in the last few decades. However, different authors provide different perspectives and Thomas Pynchon is known to be both innovative and unique in that respect. The concept of entropy, which was introduced in his early short story of the same name, develops further in his later novels, serving both as the connection between the theory of thermodynamics and information theory and as a metaphor for the chaos which never stops increasing in the postmodern consumer society. Analysing* The Crying of Lot 49 *in comparison to the ideas previously introduced in "Entropy", while referring to the postmodern theory is a new way to present the problem of consumerism and its influence on the lives of individuals in contemporary society.*

Key words: entropy, thermodynamics, communication theory, postmodernism, consumerism, media.

INTRODUCTION

"A genius lost and anonymous," as Richard Poirier called him, Thomas Pynchon is a writer whose distinctive literary style never stops inspiring and intriguing postmodern literary critics (2003: 55). Taking into consideration all the characteristics of postmodernism which can be found in his works, Pynchon is almost unanimously considered to be one of the central figures of the postmodern movement. Some authors, such as Brian McHale, even go so far as to say that not only does postmodern theory depend on Pynchon's fiction, but that, without Pynchon, "there might never have been such a pressing need to develop a theory of literary postmodernism in the first place" (2012: 97). When it comes to the diversity of topics that Pynchon covers, Poirier claims that he is perhaps the first writer to realize William Wordsworth's prediction that a poet (or today a novelist) should have the capacity to "incorporate into himself and into his work all forms of human enterprise" (2003: 50). But although "Pynchon's fiction displays difficulty and high-cultural allusiveness", as McHale puts it, "its high-cultural demands are counterbalanced by low-cultural entertainment value" (2012: 101). That is precisely why his works are labelled as postmodern – the notions of complex concepts like entropy are "counterbalanced" by the ubiquitous presence of the products of consumerism and mass media.

Since "the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism" as Jameson puts it, the issue of consumerism and the way it shapes the lives of individuals is deemed to be one of the most dominant topics of postmodernist thought (1998: 20). However, the problems of consumer society are so interwoven with media saturation that the two cannot be observed separately. For that reason, the first part of this paper deals with both consumer society and media culture and the way they are presented in postmodern theory. After that, it is necessary to provide insight into Pynchon's usage of metaphors, most of which emerge from the world of thermodynamics. In Pynchon's works, the concept of entropy first extends from the Second Law of Thermodynamics to information theory and then gradually becomes a metaphor for constant failures to decrease chaos and increase order in the contemporary world. Thus both Pynchon's readers and critics

resemble Oedipa Mass, the paranoid protagonist of the novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, who is faced with "a metaphor of God knew how many parts" (Pynchon 1966: 63). The second part of the paper concerns Pynchon's short story "Entropy", where he first presents the idea of the above-mentioned extension of the given concept. However, in the words of David Seed, this story has double significance, "The story is not only important as an early treatment of subsequent themes in Pynchon's fiction; it stands in its own right as a dramatization of how the concept of entropy can be applied to human behaviour" (2003: 109). Therefore, both aspects of the story have to be taken into consideration. Finally, the third part of this paper deals with Pynchon's second novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, which opens new possibilities to further extend the concept of entropy and present its significance in the analysis of the postmodern world. In his essay "The Entropic End of the American Dream: Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*", Peter Freese enumerates multiple perspectives from which this novel can be read, one of which might assume the greatest heuristic importance. In this paper, to use Freese's words, Pynchon's infamous novel will be presented "as an exploration of the state of the world through the ingenious employment of the concept of thermodynamic and informational entropy" (1991: 60).

CONSUMERISM AND MASS MEDIA IN POSTMODERN THEORY

Postmodernism, as many critics agree, has never been clearly defined as a distinctive movement. However, what is certain is that the emergence of what we call postmodernism coincides with the increasing penetration of the consumer and media culture into people's everyday lives, to the point where they "provide materials out of which people forge their very identities" (Kellner 1995: 1). As Douglas Kellner explains, media culture shapes our perception of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, it shapes our sense of race, nationality, ethnicity and class, and finally, "it helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil" (1995: 1). Similarly, Marshall McLuhan states that "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (1964: 11). Since Kellner describes media culture as a form of

commercial culture whose commodities attempt to attract private profit produced by giant corporations, we can say that media saturation is also a form of consumerism (Kellner 1995: 2). Therefore, Kellner concludes that "media and consumer culture work hand in hand to generate thought and behaviour that conform to existing values, institutions, beliefs and practices" (1995: 3). In his famous essay "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", Jameson explains that "this new kind of society"[16] began to emerge at some point after the Second World War (1998: 19). Thus, for him, postmodernism is "a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order" (1998: 3). Finally, for Jameson, the features of this new society, mostly associated with new types of consumption and media penetration, mark "a radical break" from high modernism, dominant in the pre-war society (1998: 19-20).

Hot and Cold Media

An important perspective concerning media culture which exerted significant influence on Pynchon's works was the one expressed in the writings of Marshall McLuhan, especially in his book *Understanding Media*, where he develops the theory of "hot" and "cold" media. According to McLuhan, a "hot medium" is the one filled with information, i.e. the one which bears a lot of visual and auditory information and therefore does not require participation. Examples of hot media are radio, movies and photographs. On the other hand, a "cold medium" is the one which has to be filled in by the listener or the viewer and which thus requires a high level of participation. Therefore, cold media are telephone and television (McLuhan 1964: 30). As such, every new medium, for McLuhan, creates new social surroundings in which an individual lives, operating as an extension of one's central nervous system. In that sense, "cold media" are not easily accepted in "hot", predominantly "oral" cultures which are used to hot media like radio, and vice versa – "cold", "visual" cultures have difficulties accepting "hot media" (1964: 61). According to McLuhan,

[16] The "new kind of society" Jameson refers to is also described as postindustrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society, etc.

the introduction of cold media, such as telegraph, and later television contributed to the beginning of the process of "implosion", as opposed to the gradual process of "explosion" which had been dominant earlier (1964: 44) Thus the process of acceptance of any new medium leaves remarkable traces on different societies, since it leads to an entirely different social situation. It can either create stress and reluctance on the part of individuals, or it can, as it is the case with television, introduce "a kind of *rigor mortis*" into social life (1964: 341). In McLuhan's words, "The effect of electric technology had at first been anxiety. Now it appears to create boredom. We have been through the three stages of alarm, resistance, and exhaustion that occur in every disease or stress of life, whether individual, or collective" (1964: 35).

This situation, based on McLuhan's division between "hot" and "cold" media "finds expression in *The Crying of Lot 49*, generating both its comedy and its darker side" (Seed 2003: 17). But contrary to McLuhan's somewhat utopian view of media as a means for achieving "an end-point of totally shared knowing" (2003: 17), Pynchon shows how mass media, especially television, create individuals who can no longer take an original approach in perceiving reality, and thus are only passive consumers of what is served to them.

The significance of television in postmodern culture is also tackled by many other theorists, since the tremendous influence that media has on our perception of reality is most perfectly embodied in TV programs. In his essay "Postmodernism and Television", Mark O'Day says that television is "the postmodern medium par excellence", emphasizing its significance in the works of some of the most renowned postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson (1998: 112). The terms Baudrillard uses to describe the "mediatisation" of reality in contemporary society – "simulation" and "hyperreality" – are best applied to the concept of watching television (qtd. in O'Day 1998: 112). In his book *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard argues that the contemporary world is the world of simulations, where signs no longer differ from their representations, "It is no longer a question of substituting signs of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself…" (1983: 4) For O'Day, television is the medium which allows for signs and meanings to "float in a self-

referential hyperreality", the reality which is "literally 'hyped' by advertisers and others" (1998: 113). Therefore, apart from being held up as the epitome of hyperreality, television is also the medium which best represents the principles of consumerist ideology. Referring to Jameson's theory, O'Day says that television functions as "the social glue" in postmodern consumer culture (1998: 113). He further explains that, "The post-war growth of consumer society (…) was fuelled by the simultaneous expansion of the media, especially television, which promoted the desirability of commodities and reproduced a consumerist ideology" (O'Day 1998: 113). The function of TV programs tackled by both Baudrillard and McLuhan is one of the most prominent topics in Pynchon's novels. One of the main objectives in *The Crying of Lot 49* is the depiction of television as an extension of human perception which contributes to significant changes in human lives. The ubiquity of television in this novel has a fundamental role in shaping the characters' identities, to the point where their lives are nothing else but an imitation – or to use Baudrillard's term – a mere "simulation" of what they see on the screen.

"ENTROPY"

Of all Pynchon's short stories published in his collection *Slow Learner*, "Entropy" is by far the most notable one. The reason why it is deemed to be so important lies in the fact that it covers topics which would subsequently reach the highest prominence in Pynchon's novels. This thematic significance is also the reason why this story, for some critics "seems to be captured in a hermeneutic predicament", that is, its interpretation is largely based on its metaphorical functions (Heffernan 2011: 298). This, of course, does not mean that the story's function as some sort of Pynchon's manifesto should be neglected; it just means that the interpretation of the story shouldn't be limited to that function.

Set in early February of 1957, the story juxtaposes two apartments in Washington D.C. – Meatball Mulligan's apartment which is completely chaotic due to the "lease-breaking party" that lasts for more than forty hours and the apartment in which Callisto and Aubade are desperately trying to live in complete isolation (Pynchon

2000: 80). “Earthy and open to new-comers”, Mulligan’s apartment stands in stark contrast to Callisto’s “dream-like and enclosed hothouse” (Seed 2003: 111). As such, the former apartment succumbs to the natural law of increasing entropy due to the constant influx of new elements into the system, while the latter depicts Callisto’s attempts to achieve, as Seed puts it, “a perfectly self-contained ecological system” (2003: 110). In the end, the two parallel stories reach their culmination – since the party becomes more and more chaotic, Meatball is forced to impose order and decrease entropy by doing “useful work”, while Aubade breaks the window of her and Callisto’s hothouse with her bare hands, proving that such a system cannot exist (Pynchon 2000: 100).

In his essay “Order in Thomas Pynchon’s Entropy”, David Seed enumerates four definitions of entropy provided by *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, three of which are of great significance for the analysis of this story:

1. [in thermodynamics] A quantity that is the measure of the amount of energy in a system not available for doing work
2. [in communication theory] A measure of the efficiency of a system (as a code or a language) in transmitting information
3. The ultimate state reached in the degradation of the matter and energy of the universe: state of inert uniformity of component elements; absence of form, pattern, hierarchy of differentiation (2003: 110).

According to Seed, the parallel stories which take place in the two apartments “form a schematic analogue” to the three definitions of entropy – the third being analogous to Callisto’s preoccupation with the “heat-death” of the universe, the first one with Mulligan’s apathy which is an example of energy “not available for doing work”, while the second one is embodied in an argument about communication theory which one of the guests at Mulligans’ party, Saul, has with his wife (2003: 110). These definitions will also be used in this paper as three dimensions of entropy which permeate this story, extending to the point where the reader cannot help but wonder how much truth and how much irony Pynchon’s metaphors contain. Therefore, the feature which also stands as an important perspective on Pynchon’s aesthetics is the playfulness through which he successfully depicts the

postmodern condition which is characterised by the naïve oversimplification of the given concepts.

Thermodynamics and Pynchon's Metaphors

The previously mentioned juxtaposition between the two apartments is based on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which is also called the Law of Increased Entropy due to its presupposition that entropy, i. e. the measure of disorder within a system, will always increase over time. In that sense, Mulligan's apartment represents the spontaneous, "natural" process – the propensity towards chaos which can be stopped only by doing useful work. The story begins with the following description, which depicts the current state of Mulligan's party-goers,

> Downstairs, Meatball Mulligan's lease-breaking party was moving into its fortieth hour. On the kitchen floor, amid the litter of empty champagne fifths, were Sandor Rojas and three friends, playing spit in the ocean and staying awake on Heidseck and benzedrine pills. … Several government girls, who worked for people like State Department and NSA, had passed out on couches, chairs, and in one case the bathroom sink (Pynchon 2000: 80).

As the story goes on, we witness the gradual increase of the initial chaos, since more and more people are coming to the party. Thus Mulligan's party conforms to the Second Law of Thermodynamics because, contrary to Tony Tanner's description of it as a closed system, the party "is surely not so" (Seed 2003: 121). If it were a "closed system", no new elements would be allowed to enter it and there would be no connection between the apartment and the outside world. The claim that Mulligan's apartment does not represent such a system can be proved by its comparison to Callisto's perfectly sealed hothouse,

> Hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder. Through trial and error Callisto had perfected its ecological balance, with the help of the girl its artistic harmony, so that the swayings of its plant life, the stirring of its birds and human

> inhabitants were all as integral as the rhythms of a perfectly executed mobile (Pynchon 2000: 83).

So, Callisto and Aubade neither go out nor let anybody in in an attempt to create a perfect system – where perpetual motion would be achieved without the waste of energy, resulting in the violation of the Second Law. Callisto is, as Seed puts it, a parody of Henry Adams[17], whose work he admires, because both of them "are attempting to articulate the cultural implications of modern scientific theory" (Seed 2003: 115). Therefore, he perfectly embodies Adams's statement that, "Chaos was the law of nature; Order was the dream of man"[18]. Callisto dreams about order, but paradoxically fails to achieve it because he takes the laws of physics too literally and tries to apply them to his own little world. His misinterpretation of those laws results in the death of the bird whose health he was trying to restore by giving it his warmth (not realizing that he was actually taking the warmth from the bird)[19]. That is why Callisto can be seen as the character who most perfectly represents Pynchon's irony when it comes to the postmodern tendency to oversimplify complex concepts which, as he shows, leads to logical fallacies. Through Callisto's distorted perception of reality, Pynchon shows how careful one has to be when applying metaphors to the real world, which is why Seed and Heffernan agree that Pynchon ironizes all the theories he proposes. Heffernan even goes as far as to say that "Pynchon's narratives are versions of the machines with the ironical Demon inside, using both worlds simultaneously, the literal and the figural, to the point of confusion and illegibility" (2011: 325). In that way, Pynchon offers his readers a variety of metaphors which sometimes lead to the oversimplified understanding of his works, as readers often tend to neglect his ironic narrative voice. Thus Pynchon both provides metaphors and alerts his readers to take a cautious approach while interpreting them.

[17] American historian famous for basing his claims of the demise of history on the scientific law of the dissipation of energy.
[18] A quote from Adams's book *The Education* (1907: 368)
[19] The bird's body temperature is higher than Callisto's.

Due to the previously mentioned distortion of the concepts he is trying to understand, Callisto fails to perceive their complexity. Therefore, his fears of the ultimate heat-death of the universe predicted by cosmologists, along with his desperate attempts to confront it, are based on mere presuppositions which he takes for granted and this sudden awareness of the irreversible process described in the Second Law leads him to total pessimism and despair,

> Callisto had learned a mnemonic device for remembering the Laws of Thermodynamics: you can't win, things are going to get worse before they get better, who says they're going to get better. … It was not, however, until Gibbs and Boltzmann brought to this principle the methods of statistical mechanics that the horrible significance of it dawned on him: only then did he realize that the isolated system – galaxy, engine, human being, culture, whatever – must evolve spontaneously toward the Condition of the More Probable. (Pynchon 2000: 87)

Callisto is, of course, right when it comes to the fact that everything moves towards the "More Probable", but what he fails to understand is the fact that a human being is not an isolated system. Contrary to his beliefs, our existence, in fact, depends on our interaction with our environment. Aware of the fact that human beings cannot endure in a hermetically closed system, Aubade smashes the window glass "with two exquisite hands" (Pynchon 2000: 100) and thus establishes the final equilibrium. On the other hand, Mulligan's party ends with his decision to use energy in order to decrease entropy in the system,

> Meatball stood and watched, scratching his stomach lazily. There were only about two ways he could cope: (a) lock himself in the closet and maybe eventually they would go away, or (b) try to calm everybody down, one by one; (a) was certainly the more attractive alternative. But then he started thinking about that closet. It was dark and stuffy and he would be alone. He did not feature being alone. … So he decided to try and keep his lease-breaking party from deteriorating into total chaos… (Pynchon 2000: 99)

Therefore, the ends of both of the subplots show that equilibrium can be reached only in accordance with the postulates of the Second Law.

Another situation in which Pynchon both creates a metaphor and ironizes its applicability in the real world is presented through Callisto's observation of how the postmodern condition bears resemblance to the thermodynamic process of entropy,

> …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 … 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. (Pynchon 2000: 89)

However, despite the fact that Callisto takes such metaphors too literally and ironically fails to understand the complex thermodynamic processes, the analogy he makes between the thermodynamic entropy and the propensity from individuality to chaos which permeates the contemporary world is not unsubstantiated. The vision of the "heat-death" of the postmodern culture due to an ever increasing amount of noise generated by the omnipresence of consumerism and media, which make individuals passive consumers, certainly is the kind of future one might expect.

Communication Theory

Another important aspect of entropy is its role in communication theory, where it represents "a measure of efficiency of a system in transmitting information" (Seed 2003: 110). The function of entropy in the transmission of information is another topic Pynchon tackles both in this short story and in his novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. In "Entropy", the failure to achieve successful communication due to one's inability to transmit and receive information is described in Meatball's dialogue with Saul, who had an argument with his wife. Ironically enough, they argued about communication theory,

> "What it was about," Saul said, "was communication theory. Which of course makes it very hilarious."
> "I don't know anything about communication theory."
> "Neither does my wife. Come right down to it, who does? That's the joke." (Pynchon 2000: 90)

Their preposterous argument ends with Saul's wife Miriam throwing a *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* at him, which adds another dimension to the already hilarious situation. Therefore, Saul's and Miriam's inability to achieve successful communication can be seen as reminiscent of Callisto's and Aubade's failure to develop a perfect system which would contradict the natural laws of physics. In this way, Mulligan's party again succumbs to the increasing entropy, since all dialogues inevitably end with noise,

> 'All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit.' Meatball shuffled around. 'Well now, Saul', he muttered, 'you're sort of, I don't know, expecting a lot from people. I mean, you know. What it is, is, most of the things we say, I guess, are mostly noise'" (Pynchon 2000: 92).

Therefore, "the more noise, or the less coherence speech-acts contain, the more entropy will increase" (Seed 2003: 123-124). This, however, does not mean that noise decreases transmission of information – quite oppositely, chaotic signal transmits more information. In Shannon and Weaver's *Mathematical Theory of Information*, analysed by Peter Schweighauser in the chapter on information theory of the *Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, information is "associated with the amount of freedom of choice we have in constructing messages" (Schweighauser 2011: 147). Hence, Shannon does not consider messages in isolation, but in the context of the number of possible messages from which the message has been selected (2011: 147). "The larger the set of possible messages", Schweighauser explains, "the greater the freedom of choice a sender has in choosing a specific message, the greater the uncertainty on the part of the receiver as to what specific message the sender has actually chosen, and the greater the amount of information received" (2011: 147). However, this is where a new problem arises, because Shannon's theory refers only to information as such, not to its semantic content. Therefore, the conversations which superficially contain a large amount of data are

not necessarily meaningful, especially in Pynchon's fiction. In "Entropy", all dialogues are devoid of any deeper meaning and are therefore finished abruptly and unexpectedly, as is the case with Saul and Meatball, whose conversation ends with Saul's, "The hell with it" (Pynchon 2000: 92). In Pynchon's portrayal of America, consumerism and media significantly contribute to such failure of communication, since they constantly bombard people with large amounts of data from which they cannot elicit information. Thus consumer and media culture fill the contemporary world with the hitherto non-existent noise which leads to misunderstanding and the accumulation of informational entropy.

THE CRYING OF LOT 49

All the above-mentioned aspects of thermodynamic and information entropy, as well as the problems of consumerism and media saturation, are raised to a higher level in Pynchon's complex, many-layered novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. Set in California – "a wasteland reminiscent of Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes" – *Lot 49* provides a picture of America as a whole, where dreams have been turned into a nightmare of failure and betrayal once conjured up by "the New World" (Freese 1995: 172). The main character Oedipa Mass, "a parodic everywoman of 1960s middle class America" (Duyfhuisen 2003: 236) suddenly given the role of the "executrix" of her ex-lover's will, sets off on a journey which inevitably leads her to fear and paranoia (Pynchon 1966: 2). In Seed's words, "It is appropriate that the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* should be a figure with a minimal past and social context since the narrative takes her through an extended present where she is constantly trying to decipher the cultural signs which bombard her" (2003: 19). Therefore, this novel is usually seen as a parody of a detective novel, where the main character is doomed to fail in her attempts to solve the given enigma, because the enigma keeps growing and the metaphors attached to it keep extending to the point of madness. Thus, the problems which were previously introduced in "Entropy" grow in proportion in order to illustrate "the transformation of the once-so-promising America into a waste-land filled with the industrial detritus and suffused with the noise of mass media" (Freese 1991: 185).

Consumerism, Media and Individuals

One of the main topics in this novel is undoubtedly the detrimental influence of the new technologies on human lives and consciousness. Turbulent changes and technological advances which emerged after the Second World War led to the penetration of mass media and products of consumer society into all spheres of life, due to which all the characters in this novel are presented as "fake imitations of figures disseminated by the ubiquitous mass media" (Freese 1991: 78). They are either frustrated like Oedipa, or they simply give in and let the products of consumer and media culture shape their very identities. Oedipa's husband Wendell "Mucho" Mass, a disk jockey and a former car salesman who "suffered regular crises of conscience out of his profession" is described as "too sensitive" and "hyperaware" of everything that happens around him and thus was unable to endure "the endless rituals of trade in",

> Even if enough exposure to the unvarying gray sickness had somehow managed to immunize him, he could still never accept the way each owner, each shadow, filed only to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, an automotive projection of somebody else's life (Pynchon 1966: 5).

Refusing to accept this new consumer society and dissatisfied with his new position of a disk jockey where he becomes some sort of a disembodied voice, Mucho finds ostensible salvation in consuming the hallucinogenic drug LSD, due to which he starts losing the ability to determine the limits of his own and other people's identities. Apart from the substantial effect of consumerism on his perception of reality, Mucho's character has also been shaped under the influence of radio – the medium which, in McLuhan's words, "created the disk jockey" (1964: 335). In that way, Mucho embodies McLuhan's theory of the influence of media, where he states that, "Radio is not only a mighty awakener of archaic memories, forces, and animosities, but a decentralizing, pluralistic force, as is really the case with all electric power and media" (1964: 338). Therefore, radio significantly contributes to Mucho's dissociative personality, since it contributes to the absence of individuality. Similarly, Metzger, Pierce Inverarity's lawyer, whom Oedipa meets after being named executrix of

Inverarity's estate, completely succumbs to the influence of another medium – television. A child movie star who performed under the name of Baby Igor, Metzger became a mere simulation of the person on the screen. Smiling in the same way as his movie character and speaking "in his Baby Igor voice" (Pynchon 1966: 19), Metzger has completely moved to the zone of Baudrillard's hyperreality. Devoid of his own identity, he finds satisfaction in the act of pretending to be someone else,

> "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 an 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 to become a lawyer, reverting periodically to being an actor" (Pynchon 1966: 16).

This attitude towards a face on the screen was also tackled by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media*, where he states that, due to the intimate character of the TV screen, the role of a TV star seems much more attractive than their personal, real life. That is why Metzger has lost the ability to make a division between his real life and his life as an actor. Therefore, television is presented as the medium of innumerable possibilities and a powerful means which leaves indelible traces on human identities. All the conversations in the novel, mainly those between Oedipa and various other characters, are carried out in front of the TV screen and the characters' behavior is mostly an imitation of what they see on it. The enormous influence of television is also humorously described in Oedipa's conversation with Mr Thoth, who had a dream about his grandfather which was all mixed up with a Porky Pig cartoon. "It comes into your dreams, you know", Mr Thoth concludes, "Filthy machine" (Pynchon 1966: 53). Hence, with his characteristic irony, Pynchon shows how the media pervades both reality and dreams in postmodern society. Finally, the power of a medium to create a world of simulations is shown in the case of Pierce Inverarity, who used to imitate different voices while talking on the phone. In that way, "we have the case of Pierce simulating an artist of simulations" who, therefore, has no identity of

his own and after his death remains an enigma for Oedipa, acting from the other side of life, also a zone which can be defined as the one of hyperreality. (Seed 2003: 22)

Apart from the negative effects of the media, Pynchon also deals with the "dark side" of late capitalism and consumer society. In *Lot 49*, it is presented through the character of Pierce Inverarity, "an embodiment of the American entrepreneur" and his estate (Freese 1995: 172). According to Freese, Inverarity represents "the Puritan work ethic … but he and his like have left a legacy that is destructive and constructive" (1995: 172). However, the destructive effects of his estate largely outnumber the constructive ones, reaching bizarre proportions in the case of Beaconsfield Cigarettes. "Their attractiveness", as Metzger explains, "lay in their filter's use of bone charcoal, the very best kind" (Pynchon 1966: 17). Later in the novel, Oedipa is horrified to find out that the bones used for that charcoal are human. "Old cemeteries have to be ripped up", states Metzger, ready to acquiesce to the logic of late capitalism which states that nothing is more important than profit, and thus creates a society devoid of any sympathy and humanity (Pynchon 1966: 34).

Maxwell's Demon and the Metaphorical Function of Entropy in the Novel

In *Lot* 49, there are multiple perspectives from which the motif of entropy can be observed. Basically, the concept serves to depict the constant striving of contemporary society towards chaos, which is true, but to emphasize that function as the only one would be an oversimplified interpretation of such a phenomenon. As it was the case in the short story, entropy connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of communication, which is shown by the so called "Nefastis Machine". The Machine is also used to describe the nature of individuals and societies as closed systems, and finally, it brings into question the nature of all metaphors. According to Freese, "the metaphoric linkage can either be wholesome, helpful and sense-making, providing the connections one needs to relate self and world," or, as it is the case with Oedipa and John Nefastis, "unwholesome, delusive and dangerous, releasing the obsessions which plague one with paranoic fear of plots and conspiracies" (Freese 1991: 84).

"A centrally important ingredient of Pynchon's metaphoric deep structure," (Freese 1991: 65) the Nefastis Machine was created by the character John Nefastis as a result of his obsession with the concept of entropy. His Machine is based on the thought experiment by the Scottish scientist James Clerk Maxwell, who postulated an overly intelligent being called Maxwell's Demon. The Demon's task is to sit and sort out fast molecules from slow ones in a closed system and this difference in temperature can be used to drive a heat engine. Since the Demon would be able to cause perpetual motion without doing any real, "thermodynamic" work, this experiment would result in the violation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Nefastis adds another dimension into this system, stating that, "Entropy is a figure of speech, … a metaphor. It connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow. The Machine uses both. The Demon makes the metaphor not only verbally graceful, but also objectively true" (Pynchon 1966: 61). According to Nefastis, in order for the experiment to be successful, the Demon must get information from the outside. Therefore, Nefastis draws "parallels between Boltzmann's definition of thermodynamic and Shannon's definition of informational entropy" (Freese 1995: 173). Starting from the untenable presumption that "a sensitive person" can bring new information into the system and thus combine the two worlds, Nefastis concludes that "communication is the key", (Pynchon 1966: 61) but, as it was the case in "Entropy", communication fails because there is almost nothing left worth communicating (1995: 173). Hence, the Nefastis Machine alerts us to two situations, "the high degree of thermodynamic entropy in the closed system of a wasteland characterized by an ever-growing amount of junk and the high degree of informational entropy caused by a failure to communicate" (1995: 173-174). As Freese explains in his essay "The Entropic End of the American Dream", the failure in communication results in both societies and individuals operating as closed systems in which entropy gradually increases (1991: 69) In groups such as Inverarity's Yoyodyne Corporation, or NADA (National Automobile Dealers' Association) where Mucho used to work, energy is wasted on activities which produce meaningless work, and they are therefore examples of closed systems with increasing amounts of entropy (1991: 69). This also happens on the individual level. Although surrounded by people, Oedipa feels completely isolated, and since she

is unable to use information about the secret organisation Tristero she is so obsessed with, it is clear that she, like Meatball Mulligan in "Entropy", represents "energy not available for doing work" (Seed 2003: 110). Similarly, Metzger, with his multiple identities created due to the influence of mass media, represents a closed system in which entropy increases. Mucho Mass is also an example of the same phenomenon, but his "madness" is drug-induced and therefore a negative consequence of consumerism. As he explains to Oedipa,

> "Oed, … you don't get addicted. It's like you're some hophead. You take it because it's good. Because you hear and see things, even smell them, taste like you never could. Because the world is so abundant. No end to it, baby. You're an antenna, sending your pattern out across a million lives a night and they're your lives, too" (Pynchon 1966: 86).

Therefore, having lost awareness of the limits of human identity, Mucho finds himself in some kind of delirium which makes his mind completely chaotic. This was also the case with American housewives – the first victims of the experiment conducted by Oedipa's insane psychotherapist Dr. Hilarious. Through such examples, Pynchon depicts a complex process in which consumer and media society lead to the failure in communication, which further leads to self-isolation of the characters, and thus finally cause the society's irreversible movement towards entropy.

However, as it was the case with Callisto in "Entropy", the literal interpretation of metaphors exercised by Oedipa and Nefastis is also presented as highly delusional. Therefore, along with the clear analogy between the world of thermodynamics and the contemporary world dominated by consumerism and media, Pynchon also ironically alerts us to the fact that such one-dimensional, point-for-point metaphors also generate paranoia and contribute to the ever increasing chaos and utter distortion of human identities.

PYNCHON AND "NEW MEDIA"

In the end, what remains to be explored is Pynchon's relevance in today's world dominated by the new omnipresent medium – the Internet. Since *The Crying of Lot 49* depicts how human

consciousness underwent significant changes under the influence of the then popular media such as radio and television, it leaves an open question about what the future holds. Starting from McLuhan's assumption that every new medium creates different social surroundings, it can be concluded that the emergence of the Internet as the medium which envelops the characteristics of both hot and cold media stands as the beginning of a new era in the development of media culture. More importantly, the big social changes following the introduction of new media into different cultures are "likely to be much more extensive, and to happen much faster, than any in the past, because the technologies driving them are continuing to develop at a breakneck pace" (Manasian 2003: 4). Such changes will, therefore, keep exerting substantial influence on human lives at an even faster pace and some aspects of it can already be noticed. As it was the case with radio and television, the Internet also created fear and reluctance at first, only to become the medium which most perfectly represents the power of new technologies as the extensions of the human CNS described by McLuhan. Similarly to the representation of television in *The Crying of Lot 49* as a ubiquitous medium which haunts the characters' lives and dreams, today we witness the ever increasing influence of the Internet on our social reality to the point where little can be done without the assistance of that medium. More importantly, one of the most popular kinds of entertainment nowadays, social media, represents the postmodern world of simulacra raised on a higher level than it has ever been the case in the television era. Social networks offer a variety of opportunities for creating alternate realities and multiple identities, which can be seen as an extension of what Pynchon alerts us to by describing the postmodern condition as a tendency from individualism to collectivism. In that way, we can hardly obtain an optimistic view of the future when it comes to the influence of the new media and it is certain that the society will keep moving towards chaos unless some significant changes are made.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis of Pynchon's early fiction, it is clear that the cultural context of his works is completely permeated by consumerism and media. The products of consumer and media culture are presented as an inevitable and powerful means which shape the characters'

identities both in the short story "Entropy" and in the novel *The Crying of Lot 49*. Although some of the characters of both analysed works succumb to the newly established state of affairs, while others desperately attempt to resist it, everything boils down to the fact that the world they live in moves irreversibly towards chaos.

The propensity towards disorder emerging simultaneously with the expansion of the products of mass media and consumer culture can be seen as a real-life representation of Callisto's statement that all things move towards the "More Probable". No matter how ironic Pynchon might be, especially while parodying Callisto's attempts to apply metaphors to the real world, it is clear that there is an analogy between the concept of entropy in the laws of thermodynamics and information theory and the tendency towards chaos in contemporary society. In "Entropy", the juxtaposition between the two apartments is based both on the postulates of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and on the cultural background in which the characters live. Although Callisto tends to misinterpret the laws of physics, he certainly makes a good observation when it comes to the fact that both the world of thermodynamics and the real world dominated by consumerism naturally move from the least to the most probable, from individuality to chaos. This idea is further expanded in the novel, where characters are presented as closed systems in which entropy increases, due to the extensive amount of information they are constantly receiving. In all that noise, they completely lose control over their lives.

Taking into account the above-mentioned parallels between the worlds dominated by entropy, it can be concluded that no matter how hard Pynchon's characters try to draw conclusions and elicit meaning from the world around them, they fail to do so. Their efforts to impose order are as unachievable as the creation of a perfect system in thermodynamics.

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