

A Proliferation of Bad Shit: Informational Entropy, Politics and *The Crying of Lot 49*

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As things developed, she was to have all manner of revelations. Hardly about Pierce Inverarity, or herself; but about what remained yet had somehow, before this, stayed away.

—Thomas Pynchon (CL 20)

Many reviewers of *The Crying of Lot 49* in 1966 found in it a timely satire of American society. Stanley Trachtenberg noted a debunking of “such communal myths as the development of the west, the Hollywood scenario, the manipulation of the corporate structure, the hypocrisy of bohemian retreat, and the complementary inanity of super-patriotic organizations” (133). Erik Wensberg saw “an exuberant ribbing of all the California manias, of pop culture gone to rock and ruin, of the wreckage of taste that our machinery produces in abundance” (446). But if Pynchon’s novel merely satirized mid-sixties California life, wouldn’t it have lost its political and pedagogic significance as the historical and theoretical distance from its first publication increased? The economic, cultural and political reality of California, as well as the rest of the world, has changed greatly since the mid-sixties. That time was the golden age of an economic system in which centralized “mass production was coupled with mass consumption in a virtuous circle of growth.” Now we inhabit an age of decentralized globalization integrating the world “into one economic space via increased international trade, the internationalization of production and financial markets, and the internationalization of a commodity culture promoted by an increasingly networked global telecommunications system” (Gibson-Graham 150, 120).

Yet the novel survives this shift quite well, primarily because of its prescient use of a communication-based metaphor to describe society—for example, San Narciso’s resemblance to the circuitry of a transistor radio. Pynchon anticipated the emergence of a society dependent on global communications, and created a fictive landscape from which to critique it. As Fredric Jameson has observed, such metaphorical representations of the technology of contemporary society now have much affective power because these technologies are

mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in [their] own right but because [they seem] to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself. (37–38)

Texts like *The Crying of Lot 49* reflect capitalism's new global realities, so powerful precisely because decentralized, everywhere and nowhere. Pynchon's metaphors tap into a collective fascination with the changes in society that globalized, decentralized capitalism has wrought. Furthermore, such metaphors suggest that by remaking the world into the one economic space of a highly unified, though physically decentered, commodity culture by means of a global telecommunications system, postmodern capitalism turns the world into a place very much like Pierce Inverarity's San Narciso.

But *The Crying of Lot 49* does not escape becoming an increasingly dated cultural artifact merely because it anticipates the fictive geography of postmodern texts and thus continues to allow readers the pleasure of timely satire. Instead, Pynchon's heroine actually shows readers a way to generate opposition to those responsible for creating postmodern capitalist culture. Oedipa discovers that people like Inverarity have attempted to remake reality into a superefficient machine that seeks to replace all difference and diversity with a useful sameness, but she also finds a way to disrupt that machine by creating diversity. As Oedipa gradually realizes that Inverarity's America, a forerunner of our new global society, depends on information to function, her actions show that the best way to fight a system dependent on efficiency is through inefficiency. Her multiplying formulations of Tristero represent the kind of thinking that can ultimately resist postmodern capitalism's coercive tendency toward sameness while maintaining postmodern culture's promise of diversity.

Many political readings have already explored Oedipa's gradual exposure of the dark side of postmodern American capitalism. Yet these readings either argue that the problems Oedipa discovers will be easily ameliorated or suggest that a horrified or ironic aporia is the best reaction to late capitalism. One positive reading sees Oedipa as an exemplary "citizen-reader," who exposes the corruption of an America made in the image of arch libertarian Inverarity (Varsava 94). Another argues that for "the reconstruction of America's legal, social, and economic structure, Oedipa ha[s] only to wait" until members of marginalized groups begin to agitate for their inclusion in American life (Hansen 607). The pessimistic readings tend to offer formulations of a totalizing despair. One sees Oedipa learning nothing other than "to

formulate an ironic, streetwise attitude toward” the culture generating her paranoia (O’Donnell 190). Another asserts that the existential subjectivity Oedipa develops merely allows her to practice a vaguely defined “politics of despair” that seems to foreclose any possibility of broader action (Tyson). Indeed, most of these readings foreclose the development of a postmodern political praxis because they see it as either already in place or impossible.¹

Such praxis, however, is neither already in place nor impossible to create. Nor is it merely a matter of waiting for American democracy finally to work. Instead, it involves finding ways to fight the increasing sameness of globalized postmodern capitalism with more and more information about what gets left out of our efficient post-Fordist society. To understand the useful sameness people like Inverarity seek and the disruptive diversity Oedipa generates, we must understand informational entropy and the cybernetic theory that followed from the investigation of informational entropy, and also the nonscientific critiques of these concepts. After all, not only do information theory and cybernetics play an essential metaphorical role in Pynchon’s novel; they also have played and continue to play an essential role in the development of a global capitalism dependent on a sophisticated communications network.

Previous investigators of informational entropy in *The Crying of Lot 49* have shown a curious reverence for the science behind Pynchon’s metaphor, working hard to show that Pynchon understands the equations to which he alludes.² But these scholars have not asked what social impact communication theory and its practical cousin, cybernetics, have had even though one of the pioneers of these disciplines, Norbert Wiener, worried very much about just that issue. Looking at the societal implications of the equations gives us much insight into Oedipa’s political praxis.

The three scientists who did the most to articulate communication theory and cybernetics were Claude Shannon, Warren Weaver and Norbert Wiener. During the 1940s, Shannon and Weaver developed the initial theories about informational entropy. Well aware that in the physical sciences entropy was defined as “the tendency of physical systems to become less and less organized” (12), they theorized that an increase in informational diversity would result in a loss of efficiency in a closed communication system. Unsurprisingly, they called this concept informational entropy. In the final formulation of their investigations, they concluded that an informational system has zero entropy—and by extension very little information—when a message can mean only one thing. If a message has an infinite number of possible meanings, the system has extremely high informational entropy and

cannot reliably transmit information, although the information itself is infinitely abundant (13). In other words, information flows more freely when there is very little information to transmit.

Wiener built on Shannon and Weaver's work and created the applied discipline of cybernetics to facilitate communication between machines and human beings. He accepted the fundamental dictum of thermodynamic entropy: the universe is gradually becoming more and more disorganized and will eventually reach a paralyzing equilibrium. But he also believed humanity could fight this tendency toward disorganization and create areas of negentropic activity. Cybernetics would play a role in this battle because this set of theoretical and technical practices, "though it itself has a certain contingency, strives to hold back nature's tendency toward disorder by adjusting its parts to various purposive ends" (27). Believing that the fight against entropy through the application of cybernetics would serve the greater good of humanity, Wiener equated creating efficient communication with beneficent social control (16). Thus the reorganization of society around cybernetic efficiencies became the most important element in what he called the "battle between progress and increasing entropy in the world immediately about us" (37).

Wiener was fully aware of some totalitarian implications of his theoretical position and urged caution in applying cybernetics to society lest cybernetics undermine American democracy. Aware of the perniciousness of white supremacy, he nevertheless believed America's civil society had many admirable qualities that might be lost if too much emphasis were placed on social-communicational efficiency. He worried that American "democracy is too anarchic for many of those who make efficiency their first ideal" in their attempts to battle entropy (50). He further warned that because of the possibility of totalitarian abuses, the application of cybernetics to society was "a two-edged sword. It may be used for the benefit of humanity. . . . [But i]t may also be used to destroy humanity, and if it is not used intelligently it can go very far in that direction" (162).

Judging by *The Crying of Lot 49*, however, the new technology did go far in the direction Wiener feared. Inverarity's greed combined with the over-idealization of efficiency, as we will see, to create a very undemocratic America. Yet Oedipa can nevertheless produce a critique of Inverarity's America, one best understood in the light of Jean-François Lyotard's discussion of the social pathologies attendant on the use of cybernetics, and of the human desire for an explanatory narrative that validates existence.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard observes that scientific investigations have led to the demise of metanarratives and the creation

of localized narratives—or “language clouds”—that claim a much more limited explanatory power. This could be understood as the positive side of postmodern culture: in global political terms, the end of the Western imperial narrative and the growing awareness of the value of local cultures and political systems. Despite this emergence of localized concerns, those in power

attempt to manage these clouds of sociality according to input/output matrices, following a logic which implies that their elements are commensurable and that the whole is determinable. They allocate our lives for the growth of power. In matters of social justice and of scientific truth alike, the legitimation of that power is based on its optimizing the system’s performance—efficiency. The application of this criterion to all of our games necessarily entails a certain level of terror, whether soft or hard: be operational (that is, commensurable) or disappear. (PC xxiv)

Though Lyotard’s critique of postmodern society sounds much like Wiener’s earlier warning, Lyotard is by no means as committed to social efficiency. Indeed, for him postmodern thought creates a beneficial narrative inefficiency that would be seen as informational entropy if society were approached as a total system. Postmodern capitalism, which does approach society as a total system, attempts to erase that inefficiency and lower the informational entropy of the network it seeks to create, maintaining a metanarrative in the name of performance.

One postmodern cybernetic technology that exemplifies this paradox is the World Wide Web. Outwardly, the Web connects an extremely diverse array of information on almost every subject—and from every perspective—imaginable. Yet the Web is also highly dependent on efficiency and sameness. All the data that make up the webpages are transmitted in a standard binary code. Anyone with access to a net-capable computer and server space can put up a webpage. But to ensure ready access to that page by anyone other than its creator, it must be submitted to a search engine, accepted, and matched to one of the categories that search engine uses in an attempt to bring some narrative order to the web.

Writing before the military-industrial complex began to construct the internet, however, Pynchon used a different metaphor for this paradox. He presents a parody of the postmodern power elite’s desire for efficiency in the Nefastis machine. This machine is a satirical realization of the “demons” James Clerk Maxwell theorized could fight thermodynamic entropy, the tendency of a closed system to lose heat energy. As Wiener explains, in Maxwell’s hypothetical device, two demons sit at two gateways in a box divided in half. “The demon at the first door

opens it only for highspeed molecules and closes it in the face of low-speed molecules." The demon at the second door opens it "only for low-speed molecules." Consequently, the temperature always "goes up at one end and down at the other thus creating a perpetual motion" (28–29).

Pynchon's eccentric inventor, Nefastis, attempts to overcome the limitations of Maxwell's demon by connecting "the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow" (106). Aware that the demon will increase the entropy of the system—the energy used to determine if the molecule is hot or cold (Wiener 29–30)—Nefastis claims that in conditions of low informational entropy, a demon can transmit the entropy-producing information to an external "sensitive." This sensitive can then sort the molecules and produce power from outside the system (CL 104–06). Thus, low informational entropy allows for the defeat of high thermodynamic entropy and the creation of useable power. Nefastis's desire to create a machine capable of altering the natural tendencies of an isolated group of elements in order to produce energy by means of a reliance on communication and metaphor, then, represents the postmodern desire to reconfigure local realities in the name of a power-generating efficiency. It also reflects the language games employed in the creation of the metanarratives that make this postmodern project possible.

Though the Nefastis machine provides insight into the postmodern desire for efficiency, it is by no means an isolated instance in Pynchon's text. Much of *The Crying of Lot 49* is set in San Narciso, Inverarity's "domicile, and headquarters" (24), a fully realized monument to postmodern capitalist culture. Inverarity, a real estate speculator and investor in defense contractors, represents those who make efficiency their ideal—those Wiener warned against. His worship of efficiency is enhanced by a "need to possess, to alter the land, to bring new skylines, personal antagonisms, growth rates into being" (178). In only ten years Inverarity created a municipality that, in keeping with the postmodern urge to impose order on local realities, "was less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts." As Oedipa looks down on San Narciso for the first time, she observes:

a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. (24)

Oedipa's comparison of the city to a radio's transistor circuit, a device that channels energy to enable efficient communication, supports Lyotard's contention that the power elite's concern with efficiency permeates every aspect of our lives. Furthermore, San Narciso, a deliberate grouping of concepts and not the haphazard result of the intersections of numberless lives, generates a mode of living that serves the ambitions of its founder. Thus this mid-sixties postmodern American city, organized, well tended and obviously designed for optimal performance, foreshadows postmodern cultural technology (the internet, for example) and the global economy, and warns of the antidemocratic tendencies of an overemphasis on efficiency.

Pynchon's analysis of the effects of the postmodern desire for efficiency narratives is not limited to gases and cities. The plot of the novel is motivated by Oedipa's being named to execute Inverarity's will. This precarious positioning puts Oedipa in both an active and a passive role, since she must act in carrying out the decree of the dead man. Yet by putting her in the same situation as her namesake, Oedipus, who found himself executing the will of the oracle, Pynchon opens the same opportunity for growth that Oedipus experienced. In *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, Lyotard discusses the effect on Oedipus of executing the will of the oracle:

Holderlin suggests that the real drama enacted by Oedipus does not consist in accomplishing the destiny prescribed to him by the Oracle of Apollo, it consists in surviving this accomplishment, in outliving the completion of the notion of his life as Leibniz would have said. With the end of the plot ascribed to Oedipus a beginning becomes possible for a form of thinking that is in accordance with the essence of time. (8)

Time, Lyotard explains earlier, is "what blows a cloud [a language game or metanarrative] away after we believed it was correctly known and compels thinking to start again on a new enquiry" (7). Oedipus, because of his very human desire to live in an explained and explainable world, believed he fully understood his lived experience. He realized, however, that he was simply executing the will of the oracle, and this realization led him to new thinking and new formulations that provide an example for others. As E. F. Watling observes, the Oedipus that emerges in *Oedipus at Colonus* is "a person set apart, a sufferer in whom others may find redemption" (16) because of the wisdom gained through his ordeal.

At the beginning of Pynchon's novel, Oedipa also believes she fully comprehends her life, though she would probably not say it was as dramatic as Oedipus's. She represents her life as "a fat deckful of days

which seemed (wouldn't she be first to admit it?) more or less identical" (11) because to her everything knowable seems already known. Little information and few choices relieve the low informational entropy of cybernetic suburbia, But her grudging acceptance of her lived experience and her reluctance to examine her assumptions hide the true nature of American society from her. Oedipa had even seen Inverarity during their liaison as a "knight of deliverance" (22) from the mindlessness of suburban Kinneret, curiously mistaking one of the creators of postmodern capitalist culture for its cure.

Of course, Oedipa is not to blame for her blindness. Her condition represents that of those who lived through the fifties. Indeed, Young Republican (76) Oedipa, twenty-eight in the mid-sixties:

had undergone her own educating at a time of nerves, blandness, and retreat among not only her fellow students but also most of the visible structure around and ahead of them, this having been a national reflex to certain pathologies in high places only death had had the power to cure. . . . Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear, daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth . . . [had made her] unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts. (103-04)³

In other words, she was unfit for political action because she, like a New Critic, could not take her eyes off the text and look at the context. Oedipa must learn that true politics lies beneath the surface, in the murky depths. The surface reflects our image back to ourselves, but that image has been constructed by the cultural and corporate and political forces obsessed with an efficient sameness.

Consequently, Oedipa requires an ordeal to help her begin a new way of thinking and overcome the numbing education which also facilitated the transformation of America into an efficient, postmodern machine. Executing Inverarity's will takes her on a journey of discovery that on the surface seems to be a hunt for the identity of the elusive Trystero. But beyond this surface, where Oedipa can reformulate the way she looks at the world, the search is much more important than what is sought. For example, when Oedipa asks Randolph Driblette why he brings the Trystero assassins onstage in his production of *The Courier's Tragedy*, the director tries to help her see the possibility of multiple, local versions of the play and, by extension, multiple, local versions of reality. "'You know where that play exists,'" Driblette posits rhetorically, "'not in that file cabinet, not in any paperback you're looking for, but . . . in here. . . . [T]he reality is in *this* head. Mine. I'm the projector at the planetarium'" (79). At this point in the novel,

however, Oedipa has not yet learned a new way of thinking, and instead of fully appreciating Driblette's insight, she simply adds the Trystero to her list of things to account for.

Having discovered some evidence of Trystero and the WASTE postal system, along with slight evidence of some underground movements, Oedipa believes she may be on the trail of a conspiracy and so begins to neglect the conventional execution of Inverarity's will in an attempt to break the code the will seems to have led her to. But while wandering the Bay Area in the hope of finding some epiphanic piece of evidence, she once again has an opportunity to reformulate her mode of thinking. And this time she begins to see through the metanarrative of postmodern America. Assessing her adventure, Oedipa reflects:

Last night, she might have wondered what undergrounds apart from the couple she knew of communicated by WASTE system. By sunrise she could legitimately ask what undergrounds didn't. . . . [H]ere were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail. It was not an act of treason, nor possibly even of defiance. But it was a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery. Whatever else was being denied them out of hate, indifference to the power of their vote, loopholes, simple ignorance, this withdrawal was their own, unpublicized, private. (124)

Here Oedipa realizes two important things. First, she begins to perceive the existence of a multitude of undergrounds, all of which represent what Lyotard would call clouds or language games, alternative readings of reality that counter the master narrative of efficiency that has created postmodern America—and, somewhat ironically, the United States Postal Service. Second, and perhaps more important, Oedipa sees resistance to that master narrative in the form of a parallel communications network that secretly ensures that less efficient messages find a venue, that what is not operational does not have to disappear.⁴

Such less efficient but still present narratives are exemplified by Jesús Arrabal's receiving a "copy of the anarcho-syndicalist paper *Regeneración*" dated 1904 via the WASTE postal system (121). Though at first glance the title, political philosophy and date of Arrabal's mail might seem merely a haphazard jest on Pynchon's part, the survival of anarcho-syndicalism in postmodern times indicates the survival of a voice for local realities in an era of global efficiency. As Henry William Spiegel reminds us, anarcho-syndicalism was a hybrid: both anarchists and syndicalists "rejected organized government and the coercion of the

state"; but syndicalists considered "as focuses of the society to come not the local communities but the labor unions" (482). So anarcho-syndicalism is a site of beneficent informational entropy, its dissident position noisy with much conflicting information that nevertheless preserves a healthy democratic diversity.

Though the discoveries she makes because of the WASTE postal system represent an important step in Oedipa's withdrawal from postmodern capitalist culture, she has not yet completed her ordeal and so has not yet wholly divorced herself from her earlier training and assumptions. She spends a great deal of time with Professor Emory Bortz constructing a credible history of the Trystero and the WASTE postal network. Oedipa's narrative, which runs off and on for some sixteen pages of the novel, is erudite, plausible, polished, and thoroughly unconvincing. Oedipa realizes that the Trystero may be a hallucination, a fantasy, a real historical phenomenon or an elaborate plot mounted by Inverarity, but she also realizes that she cannot decide which alternative represents the truth. Although this discovery may seem like a moment of immobilizing aporia, it is actually the point at which Oedipa can begin thinking more in accord with what Lyotard would call the operation of time.

To understand how Oedipa's seeming confusion helps her see more clearly, we must remember that her journey leads her from the low informational entropy of her life in Kinneret-Among-the-Pines to the high informational entropy of her unsuccessful search for the Trystero. "Pynchon indicates maximizing information-entropy . . . [by] not only Oedipa's sense of an 'endless' number of alternatives but also her vision of the alternatives as being equally probable" (Ward 28). But Oedipa has not simply seen different amounts of informational entropy; she has also realized the value of more entropy. Indeed, in rejecting her efficient metanarrative of the development of the Trystero and its low level of informational entropy for the high informational entropy of her list of equally probable alternatives, Oedipa demonstrates that she has discovered how to sweep away the postmodern capitalist metanarrative of optimization. She does so by retreating into the equally postmodern but much less capitalist paradigm of multiple narratives, with its increased informational entropy and putative inefficiency.

This rejection of efficient narrative should not surprise readers. Pynchon hints at the ultimate revelation of the value of inefficiency earlier in the narrative when Oedipa drives into San Francisco after seeing the Nefastis machine. Trapped in the hurly-burly of rush hour traffic:

Amid the exhaust, sweat, glare and ill-humor of a summer evening on an American freeway, Oedipa Maas pondered her Trystero problem. All the silence of San Narciso—the calm surface of the motel pool, the contemplative contours of residential streets like rakings in the sand of a Japanese garden—had not allowed her to think as leisurely as this freeway madness. (108)

The setting of this epiphany is significant, since a freeway exemplifies postmodern cybernetic technology designed to smooth the flow of people, commodities and information—as well as troops and materiel. Indeed, the transportational efficiencies of freeways are in large part responsible for the geographical form of postmodern America. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Oedipa's ability to think freely comes when this transportation machine clogs, when chaotically increasing information disrupts orderly movement.

Understanding the value of generating multiple alternatives, of creating rather than eliminating informational entropy, and aware that "[s]he had dedicated herself . . . to making sense of what Inverarity had left behind, never suspecting that the legacy was America" (178), Oedipa comes in the final pages of the novel to several realizations about American culture. Most important, her inefficient speculating leads her to conclusions Wiener as well as Lyotard would approve of. She realizes that the narrative created by Inverarity and those like him had hidden the people who were incommensurable with that narrative's premises. Previously aware of these "excluded middles" but under the impression "they were bad shit, to be avoided" (181), Oedipa now realizes that those excluded middles represent an infinitely preferable America. This alternative America, capable of Lyotard's forms of thinking in accordance with time, could generate a limitless number of possibilities and not be tied to the grim narrative of performativity or exclusion.

This awareness crystallizes for Oedipa when she thinks of the countless drifters who inhabit the crannies of American life. Her epiphany comes when she thinks of those who spend "the night up some pole in a lineman's tent like caterpillars, swung among a web of telephone wires, living in the very copper rigging and secular miracle of communication" (180), picturing the local realities that "miraculous" postmodern communications cover over as, ironically, in a parasite-host relation with that technology. Faced with this realization, Oedipa wonders:

how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital

computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless. Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth. (181)

Oedipa thus sees Inverarity's America clearly, realizing that it has been organized like some great machine for optimal efficiency and hoping that the alternative narratives—the transcendent meaning(s), the innumerable localized narratives—are alive and well behind the foreboding facade of even the "smiling billboards" (180).

Having seen through the efficiency narrative that has constructed Inverarity's America, having armed herself with a heuristic capable of jamming that efficient construct, Oedipa, at novel's end, does not launch an assault on postmodern capitalist culture, but instead still seems to chase the Trystero. However, she attempts to learn the identity of the mysterious stamp bidder and possible Trystero representative "with the courage you find you have when there is nothing more to lose" (182). Oedipa has nothing to lose, not because she is desperate, but because the education her quest has given her has taught her not to look for the easy, efficient answer. She knows that the identity of the bidder would be only one more piece of information. Not determining that identity, then, would truly be no significant loss. Consequently, Oedipa has "only some vague idea about causing a scene violent enough to bring the cops into it and find out that way who the man really was" (183). But because of her rapidly ebbing commitment to metanarratives in general and the Trystero metanarrative in particular, this vague idea disappears among the "brilliant rising and falling points of dust" (183)—an apt visual metaphor for Lyotard's language games—and Oedipa eventually settles calmly back to await the crying of lot 49.

Because the tale ends here, Oedipa's quest does not collapse into a neat narrative with a fully developed sense of closure. *The Crying of Lot 49* ultimately does not concern itself with revealing who or what the Trystero is. Rather, it teaches its readers, through the ordeal of Oedipa Maas, how postmodern capitalist culture works and how to disrupt it. By demonstrating how a proliferation of informational entropy—of bad shit—can lead to a new way of thinking, the novel holds out the hope of transformative political thought that can lead to transformative political action.

The delineation of Oedipa's political praxis brings us back to the question that opens this essay: Does Oedipa's approach work nearly four decades after the publication of the novel? After all, much ground has been lost. Globalization has validated much of Wiener's and

Lyotard's dystopian critique. Yet the most advanced new communications technology, the internet, functions, as Wiener predicted, as a two-edged sword. With its capacity for an almost boundless diversity, the net has the potential to serve as the home for all the excluded middles, as an electronic WASTE postal system. Indeed, it does so to a great extent today. However, more and more, instead of functioning as a truly diverse marketplace of ideas, the net becomes the site of an e-commerce that merely makes the distribution and consumption of the products of multinational capitalism more efficient.

Nevertheless, the chance for excluded middles is greater now than when Oedipa sat and awaited the crying of lot 49. The internet is not necessarily lost; it can and does serve as a medium for the exchange of many incommensurable ideas. Even corporate diversity initiatives at least pay lip service to the value of difference. But to fight the network of power and control that threatens to force all of us to be commensurable or disappear, to foil the tendency Lyotard discusses to optimize efficiency through sameness, we need to learn to think like Oedipa, thereby increasing the informational entropy of a system whose goodness is directly proportional to its inefficiency.

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Notes

¹Jerry A. Varsava does not offer a means for the "citizen reader" actually to change reality. Robert J. Hansen, while correctly arguing that Oedipa's discovery of the Trystero reveals "an implicit need for critical histories that challenge the grand narrative of American history and thus destabilize the postwar order it helps buttress" (602), places too much faith in identity politics as a means of destabilizing America's postwar power structure. By urging Oedipa to stand patiently by while representatives of minorities and other excluded groups work to change the system, Hansen implies that white middle-class heterosexual America either should not or cannot do anything to bring the oppressive power structure down. Furthermore, while inclusion of marginalized groups could change some aspects of American culture, it is difficult to see how having an oppressive power structure share power with some of those it formerly excluded would necessarily make fundamental changes in that power structure. Legalizing gay marriages would bring about social changes in America, but increasing the number of gay capitalists would probably not alter the way capitalism works in America. Both O'Donnell's paralyzed and paranoid Cold War subject and Lois Tyson's existentially aware truth seeker can only observe the postmodern horror America has become and feel bad about it. And while these more pessimistic readings avoid the self-congratulatory, feel-good

tone of Varsava and Hansen, they may participate in the maintenance of the very postmodern culture they attempt to critique. The retreat into streetwise irony or despair because one cannot act against a decentralized power that is everywhere and nowhere only furthers that power because such irony or despair merely highlights the existence of power and implies that it is unchallengeable. Thus those who would prefer to hide the true nature of postmodern political power have put this representation of society as an inscrutable monolith to good use. According to Jameson, “the need to avoid evaluations of the system as a whole is now an integral part of its own internal organization as well as its various ideologies” (350).

²Frank Osterhaus provides a detailed explanation of the science behind Pynchon’s use of entropy and Maxwell’s Demon, documenting Pynchon’s scientific capabilities. Peter Freese delineates Pynchon’s knowledge of thermodynamic and informational entropy, though he also argues that Pynchon’s description of entropic America is “therapeutic” for his readers (85). In addition to describing the science behind *The Crying of Lot 49*, Dean A. Ward argues that Oedipa’s inability to determine the identity of the Trystero represents a metaphorical condition of informational entropy that signals her own death. Anne Mangel posits that Oedipa discovers a society sinking into cultural heat-death (201). In Pynchon’s short story “Entropy,” Callisto foresees in American consumerism “a heat-death for his culture in which ideas, like heat-energy, would no longer be transferred” (SL 88). While Mangel and others have used this short story to attempt to explicate Pynchon’s later novel, it was written more than five years before *The Crying of Lot 49*, when the cultural effects of the application of communication theory were not as apparent.

³This description of Oedipa resonates with Pynchon’s description of himself as “an unpolitical ‘50’s student” (SL 6).

⁴Ironically, in 1965, when Pynchon was formulating his beneficially inefficient alternative to the U.S. Post Office, Fred Smith, the founder of Federal Express, was writing a paper for an economics class at Yale that forecasted the hub-and-spoke routing system his superefficient alternative to the mail would pioneer. Fittingly, Smith developed this concept while contemplating how a telephone switchboard works (Trimble 80–82).

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