

PARANOIA IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND IN AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION
IN THE CRYING OF LOT 49

1. **Thomas Pynchon (b 1937)** –postmodernist author →National Book Award for Gravity’s Rainbow -1974; famous for his seclusion and for his teasing the media about his identity (he appeared as a mystery guest in a Simpsons episode).
2. **The Crying of Lot 49** (1965)--a pastiche of the discourse of conspiracy under the guise of a detective story: Oedipa Maas uncovers and becomes obsessed with a hidden mail system whose symbols and traces invade her world, and threaten to throw it into chaos.
 - **The universe of the novel:** besides the common ingredients of the detective genre the novel →a collage of the 60s pop culture → numerous allusions to the object-world of the consumerist society, to the media, comic strips, TV shows, films, commercials, popular icons, political figures, bands, songs etc
3. **Paranoia and conspiracy in the novel:**
 - **Dictionary Definition of Paranoia:** psychology, a term denoting persistent, unalterable, systematized, logically reasoned delusions, or false beliefs, usually of persecution or grandeur. In the former case the paranoid creates a complex delusional system that purports to show that people want to hurt him; in the latter, he sees himself as an exalted person with a mission of great importance. (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia)
4. **Paranoia as a cultural phenomenon**
 - **The context:** Postwar America – the culture of conspiracy and of suspicion :
 - ❖ The assassination of political figures and the conspiracy explanations they gave rise to: J.F K etc
 - ❖ Cold War (1946-1991)–the military tension between the Soviet Union and the US; nuclear arm races;
 - ❖ The 1950s- McChartyism (The Second Red Scare)- the anxiety over the communist threat-accusations of espionage and communist support and collaboration

- ❖ Two bestsellers : Vance Packard –The Hidden Persuaders (1957) about media manipulation- the conspiracy of science and J. Hoover: Masters of Deceit (1958)-the guide to anti-communism –the conspiracy of political groups → they put forward a certain type of rhetoric .
 - **Paranoia as an “interpretative disorder”** –Oedipa trying to solve the mystery of the mail system, uncovering a larger plot → tells of a the desire to make sense of an ever-increasing secular and perplexing world; looking for a pattern//looking for a meaning//inscribing a pattern → a hermeneutical endeavor.
 - **Paranoia as a means to fight entropy** –Oedipa, struggling with her “legacy”, over-interprets reality → uncontrolled proliferation of clues → the more Oedipa knows, the more does she become threatened by chaos--each additional piece of information –only expands the secrecy → entropy → the measure of the incertitude in a system//the tendency of things to disorder themselves.
 - **Paranoia as a symptom of postmodernism**—J. F. Lyotard-the postmodern condition--a distrust//a rejection of grand narratives///the death of the hero//of the great adventure// of a great design → a dissemination of narrative into linguistic elements//language games → Oedipa – is no longer a hero in the classical sense of the world; her quest has lost its grandeur and its meaning; the hunted refuses to be “read”, to be tracked down—a constant annulment of gestures → what remains: the infinite possibilities of accidental language combinations and the life//the plots they built from their arrangements.

Suggested Reading

- ❖ Baudriallard, Jean : *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Sage, London, 1998.
- ❖ Debord, Guy: *The Society of spectacle*. Zone Books, NY 1994.
- ❖ Jameson, Frederic: *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. London. Indiana University Press, 1995 (Part one: Totality as Conspiracy).
- ❖ Lyotard, J.F.: *The Posmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press 1984.
- ❖ Melley, Timothy : *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Cornell University Press, NY 2000.