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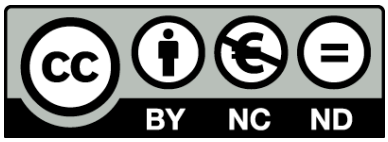
Katarzyna Komorowska



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ABSTRACT | English

This thesis examines paranoid perception as a tool for the emancipation of women in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*. Both the novel and the film are set in a California which creates favorable conditions for the development of various obsessions and conspiracy theories. These do not have a negative effect, however. Rather, they allow the female protagonists to "project a world" of their own, detached from the patriarchal narratives created to govern their lives and restrict their freedoms.

Paranoia as a mode of thinking, employed both as a means of self-protection against the unbearable notion of chaos governing peoples' lives, and as an instrument of control by the authorities and an assortment of powerful institutions and organizations, is one of the most important, controlling themes in the works of Pynchon and Lynch. Hence, the opening of the thesis includes a brief description of its clinical manifestations, before delving into an analysis of cultural paranoia throughout US history and politics and then through relevant instances of American literature and art.

What follows is an overview of the entire body of Pynchon's and Lynch's work, with a focus on the theme of paranoia as well as on the significance of California as a setting for each creator. The description of the dual nature of the Golden State —both bright and full of promise and dark and deceitful— is dealt with in both their "California trilogies" —comprised of *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* in the case of Pynchon and of *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* in the case of Lynch. Lynch's and Pynchon's characters deal with such duality by adopting paranoid perception, which does not improve

their lives significantly, but definitely affords them greater freedom. The mentioned trilogies are read through the lens of Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality —which the prominent sociologist puts forward in works such as *Simulacra and Simulation* or *America*— hypothesized to be one of the main factors contributing to the rise of paranoid perception in the US.

In order to provide a context for the detailed analysis of female paranoia in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Mulholland Drive* the relevant chapters include an outline of the most important aspects of the second, third, and fourth wave of feminism in the US, with focus on the most influential literature, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) or Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995). These chapters also contain an analysis of Pynchon's and Lynch's works in the feminist context and of the significance of the California setting for their female protagonists' —Oedipa Maas and Diane Selwyn/Betty Elms— paranoid quests for empowerment.

In light of this background information, the thesis examines the protagonists' path towards liberation from the patriarchal order in their respective time periods. Oedipa's drive towards it results in a gradual deconstruction of her identity as a conventional woman, in self-discovery that leads to greater agency but also possibly ends in a greater level of distress. Diane Selwyn on the other hand, a victim of sexual discrimination and abuse in Hollywood, employs paranoia as a defense mechanism helping her survive the hardships she has to endure and dismantle the Californian illusion of success by means of creating a fantasy of her own.

This thesis, in short, compares Pynchon's presentation of a woman's path to finding her identity in a "man's world," with the aid of paranoid perception, with Lynch's pessimistic vision of a woman's near failure to do so more than three decades later.

RESUMEN | Español

Las paranoias de un mundo de ensueño: Las búsquedas californianas del orden feminista en las obras de Thomas Pynchon y David Lynch

Esta tesis analiza la percepción paranoica como herramienta para la emancipación de las mujeres en *La subasta del lote 49* de Thomas Pynchon y *Mulholland Drive* de David Lynch. La novela y la película se desarrollan en California, escenario que crea condiciones específicas y favorables para el desarrollo de varias obsesiones y teorías de la conspiración. Sin embargo, en estos autores, la paranoia no tiene necesariamente una connotación negativa, sino que, más bien, permite a las protagonistas femeninas "proyectar un mundo" propio, desconectado de las narrativas patriarcales creadas para gobernar sus vidas y limitar sus libertades.

Estos autores presentan, pues, la paranoia como un modo de pensar y la utilizan como un medio de autoprotección contra la insoportable idea del caos que reina sobre las vidas de sus protagonistas y también como una herramienta de control por parte de las autoridades y las instituciones que ostentan poder.

Por lo tanto, esta tesis incluye una descripción de la paranoia cultural a través de la historia y política de los EE.UU. y a través de la literatura y el arte, especialmente de la época posmoderna. A esta contextualización le sigue el análisis en profundidad de la obra completa de Pynchon y Lynch, con el foco en su uso narrativo de la paranoia así como en el significado

de California como escenario de sus "trilogías californianas": *La subasta del lote 49, Vineland* y *Vicio propio* de Pynchon y *Carretera perdida*, *Mulholland Drive* e *Inland Empire* de Lynch.

Los dos últimos capítulos de la tesis están dedicados ya específicamente a *La subasta del lote 49* y *Mulholland Drive* y al análisis de la busca paranoica de la emancipación de sus protagonistas mujer —Oedipa Maas y Betty Elms/Diane Selwyn. Estos capítulos incluyen también una descripción de la segunda, tercera y cuarta ola del feminismo en los EE.UU., que enmarcan el desarrollo de estos personajes. La tesis cierra con una comparación de las dos maneras de presentar el paranoico camino a la emancipación de las mujeres americanas en las dos obras.

FORMATTING & STYLE

In my dissertation I have adhered to the MLA 8th Edition style sheet as far as general formatting, in-text citations, and the works cited page are concerned.

SELECTED WORKS FROM PYNCHON'S AND LYNCH'S *OEUVRE*

Thomas Pynchon

1963 *V.*

1965 *The Crying of Lot 49*

1966 "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts"

1973 *Gravity's Rainbow*

1984 *Slow Learner*

1990 *Vineland*

1997 *Mason & Dixon*

2006 *Against the Day*

2009 *Inherent Vice*

2013 *Bleeding Edge*

David Lynch

1977 *Eraserhead*

1980 *The Elephant Man*

1984 *Dune*

1986 *Blue Velvet*

1990 *Wild at Heart*

1990-1991 *Twin Peaks*

1992 *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*

1997 *Lost Highway*

1999 *The Straight Story*

2001 *Mulholland Drive*

2006 *Inland Empire*

2017 *Twin Peaks: The Return*

INTRODUCTION

"Sometimes paranoia's just having all the facts." —William S. Burroughs

Paranoia, which roughly one third of the world population will experience, to some extent, at some point in their life, is an exaggerated belief that one is being watched, manipulated or plotted against (*Mind: For Better Mental Health*). Not a mental health affliction in itself, it could be a symptom of a serious disease such as, for example, depression, psychosis or even schizophrenia. Very often, however, mild paranoia afflicts representatives of the so-called "normal population" —people who suffer from this "extension of social anxiety" (Kingdon 31) due to traumatic past experiences, sudden changes in their living or work conditions, excessive worry, lack of sleep or alcohol and drug use. Although paranoia, no matter whether acute or not, causes the sufferer distress to varying degrees, it has also been recognized as a "reasonable survival strategy" (Kingdon 31), a way to maintain mental stability in the face of a chaotic reality or to keep oneself out of harm's way. People living in urban environments, where unexpected threats are more common than in rural areas, are more prone to develop paranoid thoughts. The media have an increasingly active role in stirring up such fears by bombarding citizens with —often contradictory— information about crime, violence, terrorist attacks, government or corporate conspiracies. As it is at present almost impossible to verify these reports, individuals need to create their own systems of meaning and norms, according to which they try to navigate the stormy waters of the contemporary world.

In his influential work *United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (2013), Jessie Walker argues that this form of anxiety has accompanied Americans "from the colonial era to the present" with conspiracy theories playing "major roles in conflicts" and being "popular not just with dissenters and nonconformists but with individuals and institutions at the center of power." This omnipresence of paranoia in the life of US citizens, its adoption both as a tool for manipulation by the government and other bodies of power, and as a means of protection by ordinary people who feel they are discriminated against or persecuted, has become the topic of many literary and cinematic works created by American writers and film directors. Yet among the numerous depictions of founded or unfounded paranoid behavior, across a variety of genres including science fiction, historical fiction, thriller, romance, crime or horror, the work of two creators stands out, due to its complexity, depth and uniqueness. In my opinion, which I will substantiate in this PhD dissertation, writer Thomas Pynchon and filmmaker David Lynch shed an exceptional light on the significance of paranoia for a segment of American society that still struggles for equality: women. The interrelation between the works of these two artists has rarely been explored by scholars and critics and never in the context of how it reflects the feminism of their respective times, which, in my opinion, is a topic which deserves a closer analysis, as it is an important aspect of their *oeuvre*. I believe that there is generally a striking similarity in the way Pynchon and Lynch depict the twisted postmodern consciousness, the elusive contemporary threats that beset those who do not enjoy social privilege as much as others and the desperate ways in which they try to fight for themselves, or, at least, remain afloat. Pynchon's and Lynch's female characters belong to this group and the writer and the filmmaker devote quite a lot of attention to them, often making their plight the central theme of their works.

Both Pynchon and Lynch are known for their unique, inimitable style and a lack of interest in ingratiating themselves with readers and filmgoers. They do not shun

uncomfortable truths, which they often present in a brutally frank way, yet their aim is not to edify. Their works are as much an intellectual and aesthetic feast as an expression of their disagreement with the cruel way the world treats sensitive, maladjusted people, outcasts and idealists, while favoring conformists and careerists who are easier to control and most often not inclined to interfere with the existing power structures. My unceasing fascination with the complex social and mental universes created by Pynchon and Lynch in their works —disparate and yet complementing one another to create a continuing representation of the deeply flawed contemporary US society, of the skewed contemporary consciousness—, as well as a short conversation I was fortunate to have with the director during the 2006 Camerimage festival in Łódź, Poland —during which we discussed the concurrence between his and Pynchon's perception—, confirmed my belief that the works of these two most prominent, and at the same time most elusive and "untamed" living US creators in the field of literature and cinema, warranted a comparison. Pynchon's and Lynch's frequent depiction of paranoia as a means of resisting oppressive power structures, as a means of maintaining one's individuality and relative sanity in an increasingly turbulent and ambiguous reality, seemed to me the most interesting point of convergence between their works.

I decided, however, to narrow my analysis down to the "Californian" novels and films, as both creators have very strong ties with the state and, most importantly, it is the most frequently recurring setting of their works[1]. Furthermore, California is, in my opinion, one of the most deceptive places on Earth, one that can dazzle with its natural beauty, delude with promises of success, power, wealth and fame, seemingly available to anyone who dares to reach out for them, seeking their fortune in one of the thriving industries of the region —such as Hollywood, the most beguiling of them all—, only to mercilessly crush the majority of the hopefuls whose disappointment is proportional to their high level of expectations. Jean

[1] Incidentally, Pynchon and Lynch have both chosen California as the setting of three of their works each —with time the films and novels in question have earned the unofficial name of "California trilogies."

Baudrillard's description of one of the stunning Californian towns as "a paradisiac and inward-looking illusion" (*America* 45) could, in fact, be applied to the entire state. Both Pynchon and Lynch depict it as such —a fantasy land where those who seem to have made it actually never reach fulfillment and lose themselves in a chase after the phantoms of unattainable objects of desire, while those who are denied the luxury of participating in the world of the privileged either desperately hold on to the propitious illusion, or try to negotiate it by way of paranoid perception.

Even though I will be analyzing the two "California trilogies," I will devote particular attention to only one of Pynchon's novels, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and one of Lynch's films, *Mulholland Drive* (2001) —as each features a female protagonist who is confronted with the dark and ruthless aspect of the sunny and seemingly welcoming Golden State and who attempts to deal with the difficult situation she had found herself in by "projecting a world" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 56) of her own. Both the writer and the filmmaker belong to the most privileged group of people in the world, as they are white, wealthy men, but the way they present women in their works, and especially in the ones I have chosen to compare, cannot be labeled as examples of the traditional "male gaze" (837), a term coined by film critic Laura Mulvey to refer to the way women are frequently sexualized and objectified in literature and film in order to attract the heterosexual male audience. Pynchon's and Lynch's heroines are made to discover the painful truth about gender inequality as soon as they try to pursue an important goal of their own, yet they are not afraid of standing up to the dominant patriarchal order, of fighting for themselves despite the mounting difficulties. The comparison between Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* and Diane Selwyn, the protagonist of *Mulholland Drive*, merits attention also due to the fact that each of them is a representative of a different epoch of female emancipation, the second and the third wave of feminism in the US, respectively. While Pynchon's heroine is only just discovering the bitter

sweetness of life as an independent woman in the midst of a still strongly patriarchal culture, Lynch's dejected character testifies to an only superficial progress in the situation of women —specifically those employed in the film industry— thirty-six years after *The Crying of Lot 49* was published. Both Oedipa Maas and Diane Selwyn experience paranoid feelings that help them survive as they struggle to carve out a path for themselves through the male-shaped and male-controlled environment of the US in the 1960s and at the beginning of the 2000s. Paranoia is not an answer to their troubles but rather an anchor to reality, or a version of reality they can hold on to even in their darkest moments.

Therefore, the objective of my PhD dissertation is to analyze the interrelation between Thomas Pynchon's and David Lynch's representations of female paranoia in their selected works set in California. In the course of my work, I try to find answers to several questions. How does paranoia alter the way literary and film characters perceive the world, with an emphasis on female perception? How does the specific atmosphere of the Golden State relate to the development of paranoia and conspiracy theories and their embedding in the contemporary culture of the United States? Are Pynchon's and Lynch's visions of paranoia as a way to escape a reality of chaos and despair similar? What is the function of female paranoia in the *Crying of Lot 49* and *Mulholland Drive*? What is the connection between its representation in these two works?

The discussion in this thesis is principally informed by the work of Jean Baudrillard and his notion of "hyperreality" described in his 1981 treatise *Simulacres et simulation* (*Simulacra and Simulation*; English translation by Sheila Faria Glaser, 1994). The concept refers to the postmodern loss of spatial and cultural references against which people could interpret and explain the world they live in. According to the French sociologist and philosopher, the hyperreal is the "generation of models of a real without origin or reality" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1) which results in a permanent blurring of the line between reality

and its simulation. The inability to distinguish what is true from what is a false perception is the main reason for the dramatic increase in paranoid sentiments in contemporary society. This view has been promoted by such thinkers as Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Umberto Eco or Slavoj Žižek, who consider paranoia a tool of control and suppression employed by those in power, conscious that for many people fearing some kind of arbitrarily imposed truth, even if it limits their freedom and rights, is a better solution than living in permanent incertitude; simultaneously, they also read paranoia as a means of emancipation for those who refuse to take the easy, ready-made way out and decide to search for their own version of truth by themselves. In the latter case, paranoid obsessions of varying degrees can act as guiding beacons in the impenetrable informational chaos of today, by giving hope that the convenient, but restrictive narratives offered by various individuals and bodies of power are not necessarily true and that resistance and the push to find one's own "truth" is warranted. This is one of the most often explored topics by Pynchon in his novels and short stories as well as by Lynch in his films and in other forms of art he engages in. I also refer to Baudrillard's 1986 book *Amérique* (*America*; English translation by Chris Turner, 1988), in which he describes his philosophical and sociological impressions from a trip around the US, "the perfect simulacrum" (*America* 28), paying special attention to California and the greater Los Angeles region. While Baudrillard's ideas on simulated reality and his commentary on contemporary American society and culture serve as major points of reference throughout my entire thesis, in specific chapters I also turn to the relevant works of other postmodernist thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard's 1979 *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (*The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*; English translation by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, 1984), Jacques Lacan's 1981 *Les Psychoses* (*The Psychoses*; English translation by Russell Grigg, 1993), or Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 1972 *L'Anti-Oedipe* (*Anti-Oedipus*; English translation by Robert Hurley et al., 1984) in which they

explore paranoia, postmodern society, and systems of control, and whose theories, together with those of Baudrillard, serve as a philosophical and sociological framework for my own analysis.

Even though there are no critical publications comparing the way Pynchon and Lynch present women in their works, or juxtaposing the significance of California as a setting in Pynchon's novels and Lynch's films, there are, however, studies concentrating on these issues for each creator individually. In the case of the writer, scholars have more eagerly explored the topic of female characters and the manner in which their roles and presentation — although always quite progressive— changed throughout Pynchon's fiction. In my thesis, I quote Joanna Freer, an expert on Thomas Pynchon and author of *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* (2014) who is critical of what she perceives as Pynchon's dismissive approach to Oedipa Maas, the female protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in the article for the journal *Berfrois* "Is Pynchon a Feminist?" (2011) and in the collection of essays *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* (2018) which she co-authored. My analysis of Pynchon's work focusing on the narrative uses of female paranoia has led me to very different conclusions than those defended by Freer. I personally tend to agree more with other scholars who believe Oedipa was rather meant to be a symbol of an American woman's struggle for individuality and independence in the 1960s. This approach has been presented from various angles in such publications as: "Oedipa as Androgyne in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*" (1977) by Cathy N. Davidson, "The Birth of the Female Subject in *The Crying of Lot 49*" (1992) by Tracey Sherard, "The Escaping Presence of the Female in Thomas Pynchon's Novels" (1999) by Carmen Pérez-Llantada or "The Naming of Oedipa Maas: Feminizing the Divine Pursuit of Knowledge in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*" (2012) by Emma V. Miller. As for the significance of California as a setting in Pynchon's fiction, I refer mainly

to the collection of essays *Pynchon's California* (2014) edited by Scott McClintock and John Miller.

In the case of Lynch, the function of California and, specifically, of Los Angeles, as the setting of his films, has been widely explored both critically and journalistically and the director himself often spoke about his ties with the state and the City of Angels, which he infuses in his productions with qualities specific to classic *noir*. I have not found any monographs on the topic, however; therefore, I refer to parts of monographs, essays or articles on Lynch's work that deal with this issue, such as *Lynch on Lynch* (1997) by Chris Rodley, *David Lynch. Beautiful Dark* (2008) by Greg Olson, *David Lynch: Interviews* (2009), edited by Richard A. Barney, *The Impossible David Lynch* (2007) by Todd McGowan, *Mulholland Drive* (2013) edited by Zina Giannopulou, "Mulholland Drive (2001): A self-psychology perspective" (2007) by Joseph Barbera and Henry J. Moller or "Kiss Me Deadly: David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* Remembered" (2017) by Robert Bright. Lynch's treatment of women characters (who appear abundantly in his works, very often as protagonists) and their inclination towards paranoid behavior are two topics also discussed in the abovementioned monographs and collections of essays. I have also resorted to a collection of essays just published in 2019 by Scott Ryan and David Bushman and which focuses solely on the director's female characters as well as on his relation with his actresses. *The Women of David Lynch: A Collection of Essays* paints a rather positive picture of Lynch's works from the feminist perspective.

In order to provide a contextual frame for the issues I tackle in my dissertation, I devoted chapter 1, "Paranoia: The Unifying Fear, the American Folklore," to the significance of cultural paranoia[2] in the sociological and political history of the United States, as well as to

[2] The term was coined in 1968 by psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, who used it in their book *Black Rage* on the life of African Americans. The clinicians suggested that this form of paranoia is not a psychopathological disorder but rather an adaptive response to the continued racial discrimination African

its manifestations and function in American literature and film, with emphasis on the developments in the twentieth century. Despite the fact that, as I have already said above, I concentrate on the cultural manifestations of paranoia rather than on the clinical ones, it is inevitable to describe the way in which the mental health affliction has entered public consciousness —and has subsequently become a cultural trope, present in literature, art, film. To do so, one needs to refer back to Sigmund Freud's famous depiction of the case of German judge Daniel Paul Schreber's psychosis in the 1911 study *Psychoanalytische Bemerkungen über einen autobiographisch beschriebenen Fall von Paranoia (Dementia paranoides)* (*Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia [Dementia Paranoides]*; English translation by Alex and James Strachey, 1925). Only from an understanding of Freud's analysis, in which he attributed the judge's psychosis to repressed homosexual feelings, can one then appreciate the opinions of postmodernist thinkers and sociologists, such as Jacques Lacan or Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, on Freud's theories. They disagreed with the famous neurologist's conclusions, pointing out that he did not take a very important factor into consideration —the patient's real-world experiences and especially his childhood relations with his extremely strict and controlling father. Furthermore, crucial to my analysis of Pynchon and Lynch has been the work of Patrick O'Donnell who follows the lead of the already mentioned thinkers by postulating that paranoia, in its cultural manifestations, is an inherent quality of the increasingly chaotic contemporary life:

> If […] fear and panic are the most evident somatic responses to the fragmentations and decenterings of the so-called postmodern condition, then paranoia can be viewed as the reaction-formation par excellence to the schizophrenias of postmodern identity, economy, and aesthetics. (*Latent Destinies* 11)

Americans have had to endure in every aspect of their life in the US. It has since been adopted in discussions other than that on racial discrimination.

The second section of chapter 1 serves as a historical overview in which I retrace what has been described by many scholars, such as Sacvan Bercovitch or Stephen D. Want, as the paranoid origins of the New World. Upon disembarking on new land, Puritan settlers had to face previously unknown threats and they developed paranoid emotional and mental states as a means of psychological defense against the chaotic reality they found themselves in, a safeguard of sanity, by "projecting their own dark psychic shadows onto convenient scapegoats" (Olson 213). According to the scholars of the field, this way of dealing with the general unknown and with various unexpected threats has pervaded American public life ever since, with politicians apt at arousing paranoid sentiments in citizens in order to direct their aversion towards targets chosen by the authorities —as happened in the case of the vague "Communist threat" during the Cold War. People incited against a common enemy have been likely to follow orders, have been easier to influence and control. Paranoia, however, proved to be a double-edged sword, as some groups of people or individuals turned a suspicious eye on the authorities, themselves guilty of shady dealings, and developed their own theories, rising against those in power. For those dissenters, paranoia became a means of self-expression, of individuality bordering on egocentrism, as they simultaneously rejected the solutions and explanations offered to the general public, and, at the same time, placed themselves at the center of attention as targets of oppression. As Jacques Lacan states:

> The double reversal, I do not love him, I hate him, he hates me, undoubtedly gives us a clue to the mechanism of persecution. The problem is entirely one of this *he*. In effect, this he is multiplied, neutralized, emptied, or so it seems, of subjectivity. The persecutory phenomenon takes on the character of indefinitely repeated signs, and the persecutor, to the extent that he is its support, is no longer anything more than the shadow of the persecutory object. (*The Psychoses* 90)

Therefore, obsessions and conspiracy theories ultimately become a projection of the paranoid's own needs and desires. Paranoia allows them to create a whole new reality for themselves, shaped as they want to see it, theoretically without external influence, although that is the only kind of respite they can experience as a result.

Having dealt with the significance of paranoia in US history in some detail, I devote the third and last section of chapter 1 to the profuse representations of paranoia and conspiracy theories in US literature and film. I refer to authors who I believe paved the way for the "paranoid boom" in post-World War II US fiction, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Then, I turn to writers contemporary to Pynchon, whose views on conspiracies were shaped by the experiences of the Cold War and to new, satirical approaches, such as the one exhibited by the authors of the irreverent *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* (1975), in which they mix and mock various historical and imaginary conspiracy theories. US film also abounds in depictions of various paranoid characters and situations, especially when it comes to productions from the 1950s and the 1960s, when the elusive enemy could take the form of a Russian spy as well as a hostile Martian and when *film noir* crime dramas were at the height of their popularity. With time, the aesthetics of films dealing with the topic of paranoia and conspiracy theories changed, but the interest of filmmakers in the subject has never waned. By presenting this historical overview of US literature and film I provide the cultural context against which to analyze Pynchon's and Lynch's works.

I open chapter 2, "Paranoia Through the Eyes of Thomas Pynchon and David Lynch. Hyperreality West Coast Style," with an explanation of Baurdillard's hyperreality, the concept that, as I mentioned before, greatly informs the analysis I carry out in this dissertation, in relation to Pynchon's and Lynch's works. The fictitious worlds these two artists constructed are a medley of reality and illusion, and the characters populating these worlds are often

unable to discern one from the other and thus have to resort to paranoia as their life's compass. California as a setting of the works by Pynchon and Lynch I analyze in this dissertation seems to be almost naturally predisposed to the hyperreal condition. To substantiate this claim, I look at the history of the state in an attempt to emphasize its uniqueness in terms of its long-term appeal as a place where success is easy to achieve and where life is always glamorous and pleasant. This idealized picture is far from real however, as many people, who flocked to the Golden State lured by the prospects of a better, more exciting existence, experienced a grave disappointment on many levels, finding out that success is as difficult to attain there as anywhere else, or even more difficult, in fact; that only a chosen few can enjoy the enchanting Californian life; that the abundance of empty *simulacra*, in the form of famous movie landmarks, film stars who appear superhuman or chintzy theme parks, selling illusion to both children and adults, can lead an individual astray, making it easier for them to lose their grip on reality. The romanticized image of California, invariably fueled by the US film industry that has its home in the Los Angeles district of Hollywood, has been cultivated for such a long time now that it is difficult to separate it from reality. Therefore, the Golden State, with its ultra-hyperreal metropolis Los Angeles, is the perfect place for paranoia to flourish. Many writers and filmmakers discovered this quality early on, using the City of Angels as a setting for *noir* novels and films, playing with the notion of the contrast between the metropolis's dazzling external allure and its profoundly dark and gloomy underbelly, and depicting characters trying to, usually unsuccessfully, locate the dividing line between what is real and what is just an illusion —often by means of adopting a distrustful, paranoid perspective.

The description of the way in which the particularities of California, the *noir* genre and paranoid perception intertwine, lead to my analysis of the significance of paranoia in Thomas Pynchon's fiction in general in the third section of chapter 2. The writer is known for

the way his novels present the world as simultaneously meaningless and filled with unlimited meaning, proliferating with signs that suggest the existence of dizzyingly vast conspiracies, which, when investigated, result only in the characters' stumbling upon more questions and imponderables. Pynchon suggests that the possibility that human life is devoid of significance, that we are immersed in chaos and entropy, is too difficult to handle for human beings who prefer the idea of an organized and meaningful reality even if the perceived structures are sinister and threatening. People's attempts at generating those ordered structures, that allow them to infuse meaning in the world, promote in them a paranoid mode of perception. This mode of perception also gives the possibility for those excluded from systems of power, for the outcasts and the oppressed, to write their own history, without yielding to what they perceive —and, we could agree, is— the manipulated version created by politicians, "powerful but protected and secretive global tycoons, multinational corporations and military-industrial conglomerates" (Elias 126). Therefore, paranoia in Pynchon's works has a double function, that of a "hermeneutic that unmasks totalitarian control that wishes to remain invisible and box life into rigid, limiting, and controllable categories" and, on the other hand, of "an open, polyvocal approach to the world that allows one to see connections, associations and creative difference" (Elias 126). Before concentrating on *The Crying of Lot 49*, it became necessary to trace the development of the writer's approach to paranoia and conspiracy theories from his non-fiction piece about African-American riots in a Los Angeles neighborhood ("A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" [1966]) to his three novels set in California (*The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* [1990], *Inherent Vice* [2009]) and still, later on, to his remaining novels (*Gravity's Rainbow* [1973], *Against the Day* [2006], *V.* [1963], *Mason & Dixon* [1997], *Bleeding Edge* [2013]) and his collection of short stories (*Slow Learner* [1984]), highlighting, whenever relevant, the significance of the use of California as a setting.

Following my examination of Pynchon's use of paranoia and conspiracy theories in his writings I devote the last section of chapter 2 to an analogical analysis of David Lynch's films. The director is most apt at arousing feelings of paranoia in his characters by turning all that is stereotypically familiar and reassuring in American everyday life into ominous, dreamy landscapes filled with portentous, enigmatic figures and propelled by impenetrable conspiracy theories. The worlds he creates in his films follow their own, strange logic while the protagonists exhibit a "bizarre, paranoid and fallacious reasoning" although they "usually find a way to function within their illogical worlds" (Arp and Brace 10) often precisely thanks to their paranoid reasoning. Even though Lynch frequently sets his productions in seemingly charming small towns, he is also very much attracted to the dual nature of Los Angeles and its entertainment industry, which he depicts in his three latest feature films (*Lost Highway* [1997], *Mulholland Drive*, *Inland Empire* [2006]). As a big fan of classical Hollywood cinema, Lynch fills his "California trilogy" with allusions to the most famous *film noir* productions, infusing them with an atmosphere of suffocating mystery, sinister secrets and vast conspiracies. Like in the case of the section devoted to Pynchon, I begin my analysis of Lynch's works with the three films set in California, with a focus on the setting and on the significance and function of the depicted paranoia and conspiracy theories. Similarly to the writer, the director often presents the Golden State as a land of illusion and false promises which his characters need to navigate by means of paranoid perception in order not to lose their identity in this fantastic but dangerously deceptive environment. I also discuss the way in which the director structures his films —with their trademark non-linearity and dream logic making it difficult to tell whether something is real or if it is just an illusion. In order to reinforce my argument, I offer an outline of paranoid elements in Lynch's other feature films (*Eraserhead* [1977], *Elephant Man* [1980], *Dune* [1984], *Blue Velvet* [1986], *Wild at Heart* [1990], *The Straight Story* [1999]) and the *Twin Peaks* TV series (1990-). Having sketched

out the significance of paranoia in Pynchon's and Lynch's works I juxtapose their approaches at the end of chapter 2, to show how the creators coincide in presenting the condition as a last resort for those barely coping with the obscurity of the contemporary world, with its confusing hyperreal aspect, with the contradictory information overload. The overview I provide prepares the ground for the last and most important element of my analysis and point of comparison —paranoia in the specific environment of California as a means of women's emancipation and opposition against the patriarchal system in the US. From my perspective this is the controlling idea behind both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Mulholland Drive* and in the following chapters I detail what an uncommon amount of sympathy and understanding for the unequal position of women in contemporary America these two prominent male creators share.

My intention of scrutinizing the role of paranoia in the construction of Pynchon's female protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* made it necessary to delve into the developments of second-wave feminism which I summarize at the beginning of chapter 3, "The Everywoman's Travels Through America's America in *The Crying of Lot 49*," devoted entirely to Pynchon's second novel. Second-wave feminism has been dated roughly from the early 1960s until the beginning of the 1990s and is considered to have been sparked by the 1963 release of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (three years before Pynchon published *The Crying of Lot 49*), a groundbreaking book on the unequal position of women in the US, where society expected them to devote their lives only to caring for children and indulging their husbands, without having much possibility of fulfilling their own ambitions in other areas. Even though Friedan was fiercely criticized for her focus on white middle-class women and her silencing of other experiences of being a woman, *The Feminine Mystique* was still a best-seller and managed to galvanize a large segment of the female population in the

US. Oedipa represents this segment and that is why I consider Friedan's text particularly relevant for my reading of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

After sketching out the feminist context of the times in which the novel was written, I survey the critical works examining Pynchon's general approach to his female characters in his previous works and specifically those dealing with Oedipa. Joanna Freer describes the female characters in Pynchon's collection of short stories *Slow Learner* as "inferior actors" ("Is Pynchon a Feminist?") in a male-dominated world, while those depicted in the novel *V.* are, in the opinion of other scholars such as Mary Allen, Mark D. Hawthorne or Carmen Pérez-Llantada, just stereotypical fetishes of femininity. Pynchon does expose them as such, highlighting the continued discrimination of women in a patriarchal society, and it is not until *The Crying of Lot 49* that he offers an alternative, strong, and independent female protagonist —Oedipa Maas. Tracey Sherard, Emma V. Miller or Cathy N. Davidson consider her to be a character who becomes gradually emancipated, who defies 1960s gender stereotypes in the course of her quest. California, where the novel is set and through which Oedipa, the Everywoman and budding second wave feminist, is travelling, is the focus of the next segment of chapter 3. The illusory, paranoia-inducing nature of the Golden State becomes more and more evident with every step the protagonist takes, as Oedipa's California is very much one with the spirit of the vision Baudrillard advances in *America*. However, the realization that nothing is what it seems does not discourage the former housewife from pursuing her feminist quest, positively fueled by the woman's steadily increasing paranoia. The protagonist steps into an unusual role for a middle-class, white woman of her time —that of a *noir* detective, who instead of solving a crime mystery is, in fact, solving the case of her own identity formation. Oedipa is a woman initially presented as a stereotypical 1960s American white middle-class housewife who has already started voicing the complaints of feminists of the time. She leads a monotonous and unfulfilling, although rather comfortable

life, until she is named the executrix of her very wealthy ex-boyfriend's will. Initially reluctant to perform this arduous task, Oedipa embarks on a journey during which she attempts to catalogue the shady real estate mogul's assets. In the process, she leaves all the toxic men in her life behind and finds a sense of purpose when she encounters a series of clues leading to a postal system conspiracy dating back to the Middle Ages and apparently still active on American soil. Oedipa starts following the clues obsessively which forces her to "read the world that surrounds her anew"[3] (Dolińska 43, my translation) and "project a world" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 56) of her own. The heroine discovers that her place as a woman is in fact among society's outcasts of whose existence she was not really aware until she managed to leave the "golden cage" of an affluent housewife's dreary life. Therefore, her paranoia frees her from the conventions of the time, pushing her onto a path towards emancipation, however bitter it may be.

In order to tackle the issue of female paranoia in *Mulholland Drive,* it was necessary for me to begin the last chapter of this dissertation titled "A Woman's Path to Illusory Empowerment in Hollywood as a Vicious Circle of Love, Lust, Humiliation and Abuse in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*," with a presentation of the highlights of the American third wave feminism movement, that began in the mid-1990s and lasted roughly until the onset of the 2010s. By that time, women had already been theoretically freed from traditional gendered expectations and the feminists' focus shifted from promoting equal work opportunities for women or their reproductive rights to other areas such as stigmatizing sexual harassment, fighting sexism in popular culture, opposing gendered language and gender-based double standards in the workplace and elsewhere. With time, however, the movement became fragmented into smaller groups, each rallying around a different cause. This led to internal

[3] This quotation is my own translation from the original Polish: "Edypa Maas wydaje się panią Bovary *à rebours*: jej życie zyskuje treść w momencie podjęcia misji wykonania testament Pierce'a Inverarity'ego; zadanie to sprawi, że – zmuszona na nowo odczytywać otaczający ją świat – dostąpi 'wielu objawień', z których żadne nie będzie definitywne."

conflicts and weakened the movement's effectiveness, often making the promoted changes superficial, as they were not backed by enough organizational muscle. Still, some advances in the situation of women were made, especially when it comes to overturning gender-role stereotypes and stigmatizing sexual harassment. There was, however, a milieu which at that time seemed almost untouched by these advances —and in fact appears to be very reluctant to implement them until this day—, namely, Hollywood with its deeply ingrained patriarchal systems and structures and predatory culture. As the US motion picture industry plays an important role in *Mulholland Drive*, as well as in my analysis of female paranoia in the film, I devote the second part of the first section of the chapter to its backward practices and the predicament of women employed in it. I also describe the damaging stereotypical portrayal of women in Hollywood films and the cinematic "male gaze" —that is, the tendency to present female characters from a masculine perspective and for the pleasure of the male viewer— in order to lay the background for the subsequent analysis of Lynch's *Mulholland Drive.*

Following my examination of the third feminist wave and Hollywood's response to it —or the lack of it—, in the second segment of chapter 4 I look at the director's relationship with his female characters, who abound in his films, often in the role of protagonists. I review the diverse, often contradictory, opinions of critics on the matter: some, like Sue Lafky, Cynthia Fuchs or Jane Shattuc, believe that Lynch's presentation of women is misogynistic, due to the frequent depictions of violence against them; others, such as Martha Nochimson or Todd McGowan, suggest that the abuse scenes are so bizarre that their meaning becomes twisted, while Lynch's female characters usually come across as strong and emancipated. I stand in favor of the latter —in my opinion Lynch is a filmmaker with a unique understanding of women, who pictures them as complex, brave, and independent human beings. The female characters in his films have always been multidimensional, difficult to pigeonhole and never reduced to the sexist stereotypes so common in mainstream American cinema and also in

some productions by independent filmmakers. The protagonists of such films as *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart* or *Inland Empire*, as well as of the TV series *Twin Peaks* are proof of Lynch's fascination with the female psyche, especially a "broken" one, hence the recurring trope of the *noir femme fatale* in his *oeuvre*. Even though he often presents women in dire situations, making decisions with consequences tragic both for themselves and the people around them, he never seems to judge his heroines —he just presents the circumstances that led to their plight, in his unique, beautiful, and twisted way.

After scrutinizing the relationship between the filmmaker and his female characters I move on to describe Lynch's captivation with Los Angeles to prepare the ground for analyzing female paranoia in this specific setting. The director sees the city through the dichotomy of light and darkness, of great promise and terrible downfall. He also recognizes the illusory nature of the City of Angels, that can easily lead unsuspecting people astray and plunge them into a hellish nightmare of delusions, and he conjures "a shiver of menace in the wind, the sense of our bodies and minds being vulnerable to forces lurking just beyond our direct perception" (Olson 545). Lynch has set three of his films in Los Angeles, making the protagonists victims of the entertainment industry —initially enchanting but later on presented as malicious and inscrutable, governed by dark forces, and paranoia-inducing. Two of these films, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire,* feature women in main roles, but I have chosen the former as the point of comparison with *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Mulholland Drive*'s Diane Selwyn can be viewed as Oedipa's counterpart, grappling with the patriarchal world thirty-six years later with an even greater difficulty than the emancipated 1960s housewife. She is unfortunate enough to seek success in one of the most chauvinist and discriminating work environments there are in the post-second-wave feminist western world —the motion picture industry. I examine Diane's path towards self-destruction through hostile Hollywood, where her dreams of an acting career and a fulfilling relationship with another woman are quickly

and violently shattered, as she does not adhere to the patriarchal rules governing the world she had found herself in. In her paranoid vision, which lasts for the first two-thirds of the movie, the novice actress creates an alternative, happy reality for herself, in order to forget about the ghastly events that drove her to madness and which are depicted in the last half hour of the film. For Diane, paranoia is a means of preservation, of maintaining a sense of stability —and, as is the case for Oedipa, it does not bring her any tangible revelation.

Having outlined the significance of female paranoia in the specific setting of California in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, I carry out a final comparison between the authors' coincident presentation of the condition as a means of psychological defense for women against the patriarchal world. The fact that the writer describes the predicament of women during the second wave feminist movement, while the filmmaker pictures it during the third wave is especially interesting, as a continuity can be traced —and the conclusions are rather disheartening. The analyzed works of these two prominent and independent US creators, evidently fascinated by the female psyche and supportive of feminist action, clearly show that paranoia was and still is a valid way for women to cope with their inferior position —that it is a state of mind in which they can feel, at least for a while, that they are really in control of their destiny.

CHAPTER 1

Paranoia: The Unifying Fear, the American Folklore

"In America, it is always a paranoid time." —Jesse Walker, *The United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory*

1.1 Paranoia and Postmodernism

Paranoia, in its non-clinical manifestation, has accompanied those treading the US soil even before it became the US, and has become a vital mode of experience and perception for many contemporary Americans. Since paranoia is the overriding element linking all of the other themes in my thesis, it is crucial for me to begin with clearly establishing the difference between its clinical manifestation and the cultural one, from the perspective of which I will be analyzing Lynch's and Pynchon's selected works.

The term was first used in Ancient Greece to denote "madness," in the broad, contemporary sense of the word. Much later, in the second part of the eighteenth century, it was adopted by scientists and physicians to describe a wide range of mental disorders such as dementia, mania or melancholia (Ban). With the development of psychiatry, at the end of the nineteenth century, the term paranoia started to be used to denote delusional psychosis, which often manifests itself through chronic distrust and suspicion of others ("Paranoia"). The twentieth century saw the rise to prominence of Sigmund Freud, one of the most influential figures in the field of psychology and the father —however contested his theories have been

along the twentieth and twenty-first century— of modern psychoanalysis, who also tackled the issue of paranoia in his works. Over the years, Freud acquired a "prophet-like status" and his ideas, "albeit in a popularized form, have been disseminated in all kinds of areas —they have influenced painting, cinema, literature and other cultural forms" (Horrocks 5).

Therefore, while I will generally refrain from referring to medical publications on clinical paranoia and from bringing up specific case studies to illustrate my arguments, I find it necessary, nevertheless, to mention the case of Daniel Paul Schreber whose story of mental illness, comprised in his autobiographical *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (*Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* 1903; English translation by Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter, 1955), was made famous by Sigmund Freud's interpretation. Even though Freud's approach has been "subject to attack and criticism," it is also true that "a survey of the vast literature accumulated on the Schreber case can only impress one with the wisdom and insight revealed by Freud in his original formulation" (Niederland 159). Daniel Paul Schreber lived in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century and was a happily married man and a successful lawyer up until his forties when he began experiencing early symptoms of psychosis. After being appointed Senate President of Dresden, his mental health started rapidly deteriorating and Schreber was finally confined to an asylum where he spent eight years, during which he wrote the detailed account of his illness. The symptoms of his psychosis —hallucinations, persecutory delusions, morbid fantasies— did not hinder him from producing an incredibly insightful analysis of his own insanity, an ability which he believed was proof that he could be perfectly rehabilitated socially. In his memoirs, Schreber revealed that the delusions he suffered were mainly of a religious nature. During his fits, which took the form of Marian fantasies, he believed that he was destined to save the world but only under female form and after being impregnated by God in order to bring an entirely new population into existence. God communicated with him through the sun, into which

Schreber claimed he could stare without blinking and which he believed spoke to him in a human voice. Schreber was also convinced the doctors who took care of him at the asylum attempted to control his mind through hypnosis or telepathy. He accused Paul Flechsig, a professor of psychiatry at whose clinic he was treated, of being the real source of his problems and called him a "soul murderer." He also heard voices which told him that the world would end in some spectacular catastrophe. However, with his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness,* Schreber indeed succeeded in convincing the medical authorities to restore his freedom and he spent the next five years in relative peace until he was afflicted by another nervous breakdown, triggered by his mother's death. He spent the remaining years of his life in an asylum.

Sigmund Freud, who most probably never met Schreber in person, found Schreber's account of his own case worthy of a detailed analysis. He "saw cases of paranoia and DP as a practicing neurologist but never as patients in psychoanalysis" and "found in Schreber's memoirs a unique opportunity for applying his newly formed libido theory of the psychoneuroses to the psychotic disorders" (McGlashan). Basing himself only on his reading of the memoirs, the prominent psychoanalyst produced his *Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoids)* in which he suggested that Schreber's eagerness to become a woman stemmed from his repressed homosexual desire for his father and brother. Freud also believed that Schreber's distrust of professor Flechsig was simply a result of this desire being transferred to an object outside the family.

Not only Freud found Schreber's case worthy of scrutiny. Many scientists from various fields of research became fascinated by this man and the story of his mental illness, the incredible account of which he gave to society. Many strongly disagreed with Freud's interpretation —the most prominent attackers included psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques

Lacan (in *The Psychoses*), philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari (mainly in their work *Anti-Oedipus*), and writer Elias Canetti (in *Masse und Macht,* 1960; *Crowds and Power*, English translation by Carol Stewart, 1962). They criticized what they considered the overly simplistic analysis carried out by Freud, the fact that he failed to take into consideration "the roots of Schreber's fantasies and delusions in recent real-world experiences" (E.R. Wallace 49). Schreber's father, Moritz Schreber, was an extremely authoritarian man who devoted his professional career to disciplining young children, including his own son. The sadistic methods he employed at the Orthopaedic Institute he founded included strapping his young patients in corrective devices. Wanting to take care of both their bodies and souls, he even tried to design a machine which would prevent adolescents form masturbating —an activity Moritz Schreber held in particular disgust. Therefore, as Freud's critics put forward, Schreber's paranoia most probably did not stem from repressed homosexuality but rather from his traumatic childhood experiences, or ones he had later on in life, as a possibly power-hungry man climbing the political career ladder.

Due to it being so often quoted and widely discussed by such prominent names in various fields of research, as well as the multiplicity of interpretations it can be subject to, combined with its malleability to different theories, the Schreber case made its way into popular culture. According to Angela Woods the *Memoirs* have "become an intellectual Rorschach test giving rise to seemingly inexhaustible multi-disciplinary analysis." The rich variety of topics Schreber's writings embrace, encourages the exploration of "the connections between textuality, fantasy, eroticism, psychosis, sex and language" (Woods) and examining them through the lens of psychiatry, religion, law or education.

Over the years, Schreber's memoirs as well as Freud's interpretation of them have continued to be analyzed from a multitude of perspectives and the general interest in those works does not seem to wane. The heated polemic on the topic among well-known academics

just pushed the issue into the mainstream. It is unusual for a medical case to have so much impact on the non-medical world, not only on branches one could agree are related to psychology and psychoanalysis, such as philosophy or sociology, but also on literature, art and music[4]. The multifaceted nature of Schreber's condition, thanks to which so many people could grow an interest on it, and the appeal of his brilliant account of it, which could be viewed even as a literary piece, have attracted many people. The references to religious symbolism, the gender and political issues it raises, and the description of an individual's struggle against the system described in the *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* elevated Schreber's case to the realm of the symbolic. The first "celebrity" paranoid analyzed by the one and only celebrity psychoanalyst has become a cultural icon, a trope, therefore crossing the line between an ordinary medical case and an image, a many-faceted idea forged by the unbridled international collective consciousness.

Freud's ideas have survived into the contemporary era —criticized by some, as I have described in the preceding paragraphs, but also deemed relevant in some of their aspects, such as the "sense of fragmentation and dissimulation in Freud's model of the psyche" which implies that "the hypothesis of the unconscious suggests that we can never be sure about our motives" (Horrocks 4). Freud considers our mentality to be irrational, with an inclination towards the fantastic, which "seems to match the postmodern emphasis on the representation of things rather than things themselves" (Horrocks 4).

Postmodernism —of which Pynchon and Lynch are prominent representatives in American literature and film— is a very contested term in academic discourse, having been approached from multiple angles. It denotes an era and the broad range of social and cultural

[4] Many artists, writers, filmmakers and musicians have referred or alluded to the Schreber case in their works. For example, German artist Max Ernst's painting *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (1923) was most probably inspired by Freud's study of Schreber's delusions; British writer Alex Pheby devoted his 2015 book *Playthings* to the German judge; Kiefer Sutherland plays a character named Daniel Paul Schreber in the 1998 film *Dark City*; in 2014 the Australian rock band *Papa vs Pretty* recorded a song about Schreber called "Dementia Praecox."

movements it encompassed. It dates back to the mid-twentieth century and was first conceptualized as a reaction against modernism, its established structures and belief systems, the answer to which could only be a total lack of definite structures or ideologies. This incoherence, a multitude of often contradictory theories and views, seems to be one of the most marked characteristics of the postmodern era. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard suggested in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* that the main dichotomy between modernity and postmodernity was the latter's distrust and rejection of "grand narratives" or metanarratives, so characteristic of the preceding era:

> The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements—narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable. […] Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside? (72-73)

Another classical definition of postmodernism was formulated by Linda Hutcheon in her 1988 study *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* and in her 1989 work *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Hutcheon maps out the most important characteristics of the movement, that questions all ideological positions and takes an ironic stance towards any ultimate truth claim:

> In general terms it takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said. The effect is to highlight, or 'highlight,' and to subvert or 'subvert,' and the mode is therefore a 'knowing' and an

> ironic – or even 'ironic'– one. Postmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways it is an even-handed process because postmodernism ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to say that postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. (1-2)

Postmodern society has therefore been thrown in at the deep end, straight into the natural chaos and disorder of the universe, without the lifeline of hope previously provided by the modernist metanarratives, which suggested the existence of some underlying universal truth in everything that surrounds us. Faced with "the dissolution of the internal foundations of identity […] when the self is transformed into an empty screen of an exhausted, but hypertechnical culture" (Kroker et al. 18), people desperately needed to find their own way of navigating through this new, entirely unpredictable world, by creating an individual set of narratives, based on their own varied experiences, in order to have some fixed structure which they could grasp and not be consumed by the sea of informational chaos they found themselves in. The paranoid frame of mind, which sees connections everywhere, was the solution at hand —a means of regaining an illusion of understanding the mechanisms propelling the world system forward, an illusion of at least a partial control over their lives. In line with this, Patrick O'Donnell, expert on twentieth and twenty-first century British and American literature and author of *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative* (2000), offers a way of perceiving cultural paranoia which conforms with the

perspective from which I will be analyzing Pynchon's and Lynch's works set in California. In O'Donnell's words:

> The initial question, then, for the study of cultural paranoia is not "what is paranoia?" or "where is it?" but "who is paranoia for?" Framing it in this way allows us to view paranoia as mediated by postmodernist conceptions of history where "history" as understood under Jean-François Lyotard's "postmodern condition," rather than being seen as the grand narrative of major events or the national story, is an aggregate of minor narratives, each arising from an assemblage of perspectives, experiences and vested interests. This is to regard paranoia not as an episteme or a hermeneutic – simply one available way of seeing or organizing reality in a pluralistic menu of perspectives – but as a symptom of a detotalized postmodern culture, part and parcel of our suspicion of the overview, the national epic, the official history. (*Latent Destinies* 15-16)

As I have already pointed out, in times when rationality is called into question, people try to create systems of meaning of their own. Frequently, they suggest perceptible or suspected connections or controlling entities within the social structures; these new systems of meaning are often viewed as disturbing, restrictive or even hostile —but their existence is still preferable to the possibility of chaos that opens in their absence. In some cases, an attitude of this kind can evolve into a pathological condition, which, as Patrick O'Donnell puts forward, manifests itself through a host of characteristic symptoms such as:

> megalomania; a sense of impending, apocalyptic doom; racist, homophobic or gynophobic fear and hatred of those marked out as other deployed as means of externalizing certain internal conflicts and desires (the scapegoating of otherness thus is essential to the ongoing work of paranoia); delusions of persecution instigated by these others or their agents; feelings of being under constant observation; an

> obsession with order; and a fantasizing of the reviled, abjected self as the center of intersecting and historical plots. (*Latent Destinies* 13)

Patrick O'Donnell suggests that these can be symptoms exhibited by an individual or they could afflict, by way of contagion, an entire nation or a group of people. He nevertheless prefers to focus solely on cultural paranoia which he describes as a "symptom of postmodernity" or, more precisely as "a problem related to constructions of postmodern identity as symptomatic of late capitalism, its enjoyments and its discontents" (*Latent Destinies* 13). He also justifies the narrowing down of his research on the topic to the area of contemporary US culture by explaining that it is "the visible site where the incongruities of subjectival fluidity operating within the prefigurative historical order of a national destiny are negotiated in the epoch of late capitalism and the attendant phantasmic remapping of national onto global orders and agendas" (*Latent Destinies* 13).

1.2 The United States of Paranoia: A Historical Overview

The history of the United States has been imprinted with paranoia from its very beginning. It arrived with the first settlers from Europe who were escaping religious oppression and ready to project their fears on to the new environment and the native peoples. Indeed, their new surroundings seemed savage and hostile from the very moment the settlers' boats reached North American shores. Not anticipating such bitter winter weather, decimated by diseases and fearing Indian attacks, the Pilgrims realized their Promised Land was no friendlier than the one they were escaping. But this time the threats were unfamiliar and the immigrants were brutally thrown among "the mutable things of this unstable world" (119), as William Bradford, the founder and governor of the Plymouth Colony settlement wrote in his journals (1630-1651), later published under the title *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Furthermore, not

all of the people who embarked on the journey from the Old World to North America were fleeing religious persecution and saw the venture as a way to gain peace and freedom of worship; indentured servants and black slaves, used by the Puritans as cheap or free labor, were the ones most harshly uprooted from their homelands and thrown into the wilderness of an unknown land, without even the solace of the belief that their ordeal had some higher purpose. All of these newcomers, including the Pilgrims as well as their servants and slaves, who came from different backgrounds and possessed various levels of education and life experience, were unable to draw upon the wisdom of the elderly, upon customs and traditions, when it came to dealing with uncommon predicaments. They had to create a fresh system of values, a new, rather syncretic set of life guidelines: based on a mixture of their previous experiences, of what they had learnt during their short stay on new lands, of their religion and their beliefs in the supernatural. They had to treat everything with caution and extra suspicion, as anything could pose an unknown threat —which is an attitude conducive to the development of paranoia. As Sacvan Bercovitch, Harvard scholar and expert on Puritan New England, pointed out in his classic study *The American Jeremiad*[5]:

> The newness of New England becomes both literal and eschatological, and (in what was surely the most far-reaching of these rhetorical effects) the American wilderness takes on the double significance of secular and sacred place. If for the individual believer it remained part of the wilderness of the world, for God's "peculiar people" it was a territory endowed with special symbolic import, like the wilderness through which the Israelites passed to the promised land. (15)

The different groups of Puritans who colonized British North America were influenced by Calvinist theology. One of its main points is the doctrine of predestination, according to which man's fate is foreordained by God, and the function of the sermons

[5] The jeremiad, named after the lamentations of Biblical prophet Jeremiah, is a sermon "that evokes a past characterized by unity and piety as well as a future in which such unity and piety might be recaptured" (A. R. Murphy 38).

preached to the Puritan congregations "was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless 'progressivist' energies required for the success of the venture" (Bercovitch 23) — the mission to establish God's kingdom on earth. Therefore, as Bercovitch suggests, the clergy sought to inculcate crisis as social norm, seeing it as an engine of growth which, at the same time, assures people's piety and discipline. Later on,

> under the slogan of continuing revolution, the ritual of the jeremiad spawned an astonishing variety of official or self-appointed committees on un-American activities: "progressivist societies" for eradicating the Indians, "benevolent societies" for deporting the blacks, "Young Americans" for banning European culture, "populists" obsessed with the spectre of foreign conspiracy, voluntary associations for safeguarding the Revolutionary tradition, male and female "reform societies" for social regeneration through sexual purification. (Bercovitch 159)

Thus, the settlers were becoming used to the notion of the "common enemy," of danger lurking under the guise of various, more or less obscure individuals and groups of people, of natural disasters being attributed either to the wrath or to the wisdom of God. This way, life became easier for them to explain, their calamities acquired significance, instead of being just random events caused by phenomena they could not predict or control. It is also important to note that the first settlers were arriving from a world where the most prominent political theorists had already started pointing towards the significance of a strong organizing power, entitled to use deceit in order to keep the subjects feeling safe and satisfied. Italian historian, politician, and philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli lectured in his 1532 masterpiece *Il Principe* (*The Prince*; English translation by Edward Dacres, 1640) on the importance of strong rule and on how immoral behavior is justified when it is employed to preserve said rule and consequently the integrity of the nation itself. Another pioneer in the field of modern political science, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, said in his book *Leviathan* (1651) that "during

the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such as war, as is of every man, against every man" (Hobbes 74).

Therefore, amid constant uncertainty as to the native peoples' intentions and in fear of Old World countries' invasions, the settlers' paranoia relentlessly grew, finally reaching a point at which they started to look distrustfully at each other. Often those who failed to obey the New England strict religious rules were suspected of parleying with the devil and brought to "justice," such as it happened in the case of the infamous Salem witch trials. This led to everybody being constantly on a lookout for evil in other people's lives and also fearing that someone could detect evil in themselves, which created a vicious circle of paranoia. Fear was, as Stephen D. Want argues, the Puritans' daily bread,

> a fear simultaneously that the American utopian project may be missing the crucial elements assumed to be available to a committed nation in their ongoing experiment in libertarianism; and a retroactive fear that such a completion may have occurred and that the American dream had become the American nightmare of total control under the infiltration of a force of evil. (94)

The scholar also points out that Puritans often turned the inquisitive eye to the self as "a territory of infection and sinfulness," or as the ultimate enemy, "and consolidated the complex process of fears […] which has become the vital part of the American process of cultural identity known as individualism" (Want 87).

At the close of the eighteenth century a new wave of panic arrived with the news of the existence of alleged Illuminati and Masonic conspiracies aiming at "rooting out all religious establishments, and overturning all the existing governments of Europe," as physicist, mathematician and professor of philosophy at the University of Edinburgh John Robinson warned already in 1798 in his polemic *Proofs of a Conspiracy*. There have been several secret societies throughout history under the name of Illuminati, although the original

organization was created in Bavaria in 1779 and consisted of people who gathered to discuss ways of transforming society through the study of man in order to acquire "the art of influencing favorably the wills of one's fellows, thus making social reformation possible," (Stauffer) as well as to attain self-knowledge. The ultimate goal was to transform society morally and help people achieve the condition of "universal well-being" (Stauffer). The members of the Order of Illuminati also criticized the influence of the Jesuits on the state and the public sphere. The fact that the members of the order took secrecy vows whilst promoting ideas revolutionary for that time gave them an ominous air. The possibility that the Illuminati could plot or already were plotting against the United Sates, caused a wave of paranoia across the country which, in fact, has not completely died out and continues to flare up in different moments of history in the most diverse of circumstances, also finding a warm place for itself in American popular culture.

Following the emergence of the "Illuminati conspiracy," many other mysterious schemers have been denounced by preoccupied US citizens. Amongst those accused of plotting to undermine the stability of the country, there have been the Catholics, the slaves, right-wing extremists, left-wing extremists, Germans, Russians, Muslims or the US government itself. In the 1950s, the Cold War gave rise to numerous conspiracy theories eagerly supported or even fabricated by the US authorities themselves. Stephen J. Whitfield observes in his study *The Culture of the Cold War* that following the end of World War II American politicians considered for a few years the possibility of launching a nuclear war in order to liberate Eastern Europe from the Soviet yoke, before they realized that such a solution "collided with the dictates of sanity" (8) and could end tragically for all parties involved. Therefore,

> unable to strike directly at the Russians, the most vigilant patriots went after the scalps of their countrymen instead. Since Stalin and his successors were out of reach,

> making life difficult for Americans who admired them was more practicable. Since NATO would not come to the rescue of Eastern Europe, at least some politically suspect writers could be kept from travelling to Western Europe. Since breath could not be restored to all the victims whom the N.K.V.D. murdered, at least some Hollywood screenwriters could be sent to prison. Since the Korean War was a stalemate, perhaps the Cold War could be won at home. And also because few citizens could sustain a lively interest in foreign policy, anti-Communism was intensified on American soil. (Whitfield 9)

The second Red Scare —the first one, considerably less significant, took place between 1918 and 1920, following the Bolshevik Russian Revolution— sparked somber comparisons with the infamous Salem witch-hunt as it resulted in government persecution of many innocent people. By insinuating that anybody could be a Communist spy plotting to take control of the country and to destroy the ideals on which it had been founded and assisting Russia in its drive to become a nuclear power, the US authorities induced a snowballing paranoia among the American people. To stop Communist subversion in the country, the United States House of Representatives' "House Committee on Un-American Activities" (HUAC) —created in 1938 initially to track pro-fascist or pro-Nazi activity in the US— redirected its investigative gaze towards potential Communist sympathizers, mainly among people in the film industry. The HUAC tried to prove that some of them aimed at brainwashing US citizens through the movies they produced, by infusing the films with Communist propaganda. None of these charges were ever confirmed but many of the accused, forced to take part in show hearings, had their reputations stained forever and their professional careers ruined. Parallel to HUAC's investigations, the notorious Senator Joseph McCarthy embarked on an anti-Communist crusade wildly throwing around unsubstantiated

accusations which hit television and film personalities or businessmen, but also pointed to the members of the US federal government and the US army.

In 1954 the wild festival of blame-laying finally came to an end, as McCarthy's reputation suffered due to his overly aggressive investigations and the distortion of the facts and statistics he quoted to substantiate his claims, all of which was highlighted by the media. His attacks on the army and the federal government resulted in a waning support from those circles as well and culminated in the Senator being officially censured by the end 1954, thus losing all his previous power and authority. The second Red Scare, therefore, was a turning point in American history, during which the US administration's clumsy moves to handle the alleged Communist threat backfired in a growing distrust of the legitimacy of its own actions and of the ethics of its underlying motives. Meanwhile, 1963 brought one of the most belabored mysteries in the recent history of the US, unsolved until this day: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The tragic event gave rise to a whole host of conspiracy theories, more or less improbable —some of them also pointing at the involvement of the Illuminati. In the opinion of Patrick O'Donnell, the abundance of theories concerning the assassination stemmed from people's acute need to find the truth, any kind of truth, to patch up the hole this tragic event had torn in national history and identity. This kind of gap Americans "fill in with artifacts and narratives that both proffer historical revelation and conceal as mystery or conspiracy" an undesirable truth: "that this anchoring point of a country's destiny (and thus our identities as national subjects) is possibly founded on sheer contingency" (*Latent Destinies* 46).

In 1971 another revelation concerning the Vietnam War shook public opinion in the US. Daniel Ellsberg, an employee of the RAND Corporation, decided to disclose a bulky top-secret US government report on the country's involvement in the Vietnam War, which included controversial information previously concealed from the media. Ellsberg leaked the

Pentagon Papers to the *The New York Times* and other newspapers, and their publication further increased the public's skepticism about the veracity of the government's official announcements. "Credibility gap," the term we use today to describe this phenomenon, was coined at that time. Also, the Watergate scandal, which involved members of Richard Nixon's administration engaging in various activities of illegal surveillance of the Democratic party and which ultimately led to the president's resignation, was the highlight of the 1970s, further undermining the US government's trustworthiness and increasing the belief in the truth of the existence of conspiracies. That, combined with the country's continued military involvement in the Vietnam War, gradually considered a mistake by a growing number of citizens, resulted in a further deterioration of the authorities' credibility. Many people pictured the war as a manifestation of imperialistic inclinations, instead of a legitimate struggle to root out the Communist threat, as was hailed by the government and the media under its influence. To emphasize the erroneous way in which the war was waged, the term "quagmire" started to be widely used. It came from David Halberstam's book *The Making of a Quagmire* (1965) in which the journalist, who served as *The New York Times* correspondent in Saigon between 1962 and 1963, criticized the US authorities' decision to initiate the conflict and made them responsible for the diplomatic and military failures that ensued. He also pointed out how inaccurately the Vietnam War had been depicted by the media, which clouded the public's perception of the conflict:

> The split between the reporters and the mission was basic; it had foundered on the policy itself. It was not, as some were later to claim, the result of bad press policy, or poor handling of the press, or inept news management. News management cannot turn a bad government into a good one; from time to time it can hide the story of, say, one military defeat, but in the end it cannot conceal the fact that an enemy with superior drive and motivation is gaining ground. (Halberstam 7)

Meanwhile, anti-war activists started operating out in the open, so the US government no longer had to grope for subversive groups and individuals on domestic soil. Massive demonstrations were organized by the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, formed in 1967. At the same time the steadily declining morale of the disillusioned troops in Vietnam resulted in the rise of the GI anti-war movement and a disintegration of the army from within. Vietnam veterans, such as writer and activist Ron Kovic, began speaking out against the war, taking part in protests, organizing hunger strikes. College campuses also started to teem with students strongly opposed to war, who burned their draft cards and took part in various demonstrations. African Americans, who focused on the racial discrimination aspects of the conflict, formed their own anti-war organizations, with the Black Panther Party voicing their support for "a strong Vietnam which is not the puppet of international white supremacy" (Cleaver). Therefore, with the US government struggling to stifle the dissent of subversive groups in the country while waging an endless, and to a lot of people growingly senseless, war abroad, American people grew more and more disillusioned with its actions despite the omnipresent propaganda in their favor. Some embarked on a quest to cut through the thicket of false information and sometimes managed to prove —as in the case of Watergate and the Pentagon Papers— that the authorities were not playing fair with their own people. The growing distrust of US citizens towards the authorities and vice versa reached proportions unseen before and mutated into full-blown paranoia.

The collapse of pro-Soviet regimes in Eastern Europe in 1991 marked the end of the Cold War, but curiously the level of paranoia gripping US social structures showed no signs of subsiding. On the contrary, conspiracy theories flourished freely and, as information could be disseminated more quickly and widely thanks to technological advancements, more and more people could be drawn into the paranoid ideas and visions of individuals who made conjectures as to who or what was behind the existing threats. President George Bush called

the new geopolitical situation following the fall of the Iron Curtain the "New World Order," which he believed to mean an international cooperation to maintain world peace. The term, though, had until then been used by practitioners of conspiracy theories to indicate a push towards the creation of a totalitarian global government. Since the onset of the Red Scare and later throughout the 1960s and until the 1980s "New World Order" had been strongly associated with a Communist conspiracy led by members of the Illuminati, Freemasons and Jews, who were accused of forming an elite intending to destroy national governments and religious institutions[6]. When George Bush delivered his "Toward a New World Order" speech in 1990 he wanted to mark the beginning of "a world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations" (Bush 221). According to Eric L. Santner, President Bush's use of the phrase "signified, in other words, the end of an era of the extreme paranoia that had dominated the years of the cold war" (13). But the ambiguity surrounding the term had been so deeply rooted that, instead of having a reassuring effect, it brought another wave of obsessive tendencies which continued to rise contrary to Bush's vision. Santner considers this a paradox, as the paranoid attitudes spiked exactly the moment the "evil empire" was overpowered, which should have been, rather, a reassuring development. In Santner's opinion,

> it now appears that cold war paranoia may have actually played the role of a collective psychological defence mechanism against a far more disturbing pathology that is only now beginning to find public avenues of expression. Nostalgia for the more ordered world of cold war anxieties would appear to be a nostalgia for paranoia

[6] For more information on secret societies and conspiracies thought to put together an elaborate plot with the aim of creating an authoritarian world government see Arthur S. Goldwag's *Cults, Conspiracies, and Secret Societies: The Straight Scoop on Freemasons, the Illuminati, Skull & Bones, Black Helicopters, The New World Order, and Many, Many More* (2009) and *The New Hate: A History of Fear and Loathing on the Populist Right* (2012).

> in which the persecutor had a more or less recognizable face and a clear geographical location. (13)

Globalization and rapid technological advancement, as well as the development of international terrorist organizations post-1990, further increased the feeling of persecution that leads to paranoiac perception in those prone to suspicion. The legitimacy of such a perception has been further strengthened by actions aimed at revealing classified information about the secret proceedings of various governments, officials or multinational companies, carried out by whistleblowers such as Julian Assange, Edward Snowden or Bradley Manning. The increasing facility of communication, especially via Internet, gave conspiracy theorists the space and possibility to confront their ideas with each other's and, as a result, the theories expanded, mutated. Sometimes those seen as plotters were, as a result, depicted as being manipulated themselves, victims turned out to be conspirators, foreign agents exposed as domestic agents or members of a different conspiracy altogether. In the words of Jonathan Lethem "setting your open-ended conspiracy metaphors loose upon the world, they become (like anything) eligible for manifold repurposing. Free your mind and an ass may follow" (43). The new obsessions, feeding on the redefined concepts of the elusive "enemy" which have emerged over the last three decades, gripped US society which, regardless of the temporary easing of geopolitical tensions, never ceased to prepare itself for some imminent disaster.

Scholars started noting this phenomenon that has grown exponentially over the last two decades quite early on. Already in 1964, in his influential essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" Richard Hofstadter ironically painted quite an exhaustive picture of the mythical foe:

> He is a perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman—sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel, sensual, luxury-loving. Unlike the rest of us, the enemy is not caught

> in the toils of the vast mechanism of history, himself a victim of his past, his desires, his limitations. He wills, indeed he manufactures, the mechanism of history, or tries to deflect the normal course of history in an evil way. He makes crises, starts runs on banks, causes depressions, manufactures disasters, and then enjoys and profits from the misery he has produced. The paranoid's interpretation of history is distinctly personal: decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will. Very often the enemy is held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he has unlimited funds; he has a new secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional).

Hofstadter concludes that the described enemy is "on many counts the projection of the self; both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him." It seems therefore that the enemy is an inherent part of the American collective consciousness. Michael Herr states as much in *Dispatches,* when he tries to pinpoint the origin of the war in Vietnam and claims it should be blamed on "the proto-Gringos who found the New England woods too raw and empty for their peace" and "filled them up with their own imported devils" (51). Since then, other and new "devils" just kept on coming and mutated into unexpected forms when confronted, as all the immigrants contributed to the creation of this "mythology of fear" —flowing in from more and more countries and from different continents. People from all walks of life, all social classes, religions and convictions created an ethnic mixture with such different systems of values that it needed some binding material to keep it from collapsing. Because despite the idealistic attempts at presenting the US as a promised land, where "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement"[7] (J. T. Adams 16), it was clear that different people did not have equal

[7] This way writer and historian James Truslow Adams described the American Dream, a term he coined in 1931 and which, with time, has become a heavily overused cliché.

life prospects. Also, not everybody was willing or could blend in completely, share the positive aspects of their cultures with others, and people often socialized on the basis of race, ethnicity or religious preferences. It felt as if the only thing that could bring together people from such different backgrounds and world views was a common threat, something that did not give them a choice other than to join forces and fight in order to survive. According to prominent German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel, having a common enemy can considerably boost cooperation within a nation or any other group of people: "It is sociologically very significant that isolated elements are unified by their common relation to a phenomenon which lies outside them. This applies as much to the alliance between states for the purpose of defense against a common enemy as to the 'invisible church' which unifies all faithful in their equal relation to one God" (145). As US citizens lack a universally shared religious belief, what has always seemed to keep the country's fragmented reality together, was a suspicion of the existence of some vague, superior plot aimed at various people, regardless of their differences, or even at the entire nation.

In the opinion of Jesse Walker, by the end of the 1990s the five basic archetypes of the mysterious adversary, which still function in the American collective consciousness, had been fully formed:

> One is the Enemy Outside, who plots outside the community gates, and one is the Enemy Within, comprising villainous neighbours who can't easily be distinguished from friends. There is the Enemy Above, hiding at the top of the social pyramid, and there is the Enemy Below, lurking at the bottom. And then there is the Benevolent Conspiracy, which isn't an enemy at all: a secret force working behind the scenes to improve people's lives.

This is quite an exhaustive classification of different types of schemers and secret societies behind the various conspiracies which are believed to function on US soil. The "Enemy

Outside" category could be said to comprise all of the nations which the US fought major wars against, whether in the position of the attacked or of the attacker. Direct war or confrontation is however not tantamount to a secret plot, but, rather, to the possibility that the antagonist country tries to insidiously infiltrate the US. The "Enemy Outside" can also appear in the form of advocates of supranational ideologies or religions such as fascism, communism or fundamentalist Islam, who can penetrate American society becoming the "Enemy Within." However, not only "real" or "historical" enemies fall into the categories described by Walker —there are also the "cultural" or "imaginary" ones. Aliens, for example, not only portrayed as otherworldly creatures but also as parasites literally taking over the bodies of American citizens, fit the descriptions of both the "Enemy Outside" and the "Enemy Within." This second category also includes supernatural beings such as the witches, devils and demons in disguise of the early Puritan imagination, members of various sects operating on American soil throughout the ages (with the Manson Family of the late 1960s being one of the most notorious), or threats inspired by pop culture's horror stories, such as zombies. Returning to the "real" threats: the duality between the "Enemy Outside" and the "Enemy Within" is also evident in the way Communists were perceived during the Cold War —not only as inhabitants of dangerous but still distant countries but also as Americans secretly supporting the ideology— meaning that practically anybody could be a foe in disguise. As far as the list of "Enemies Above" is concerned, it would include various societies comprised of members from the highest socioeconomic bracket in the social hierarchy and often founded in other countries in a distant past. These include the Illuminati, Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, Opus Dei, the Priori of Sion, The Bilderberg Group or Skull and Bones, to name the most famous ones. The "Enemy Above" can also be the American government itself or organizations under its aegis such as the National Security Agency (NSA), which has gained notoriety after its global spying activity has been revealed. Even before the NSA scandal broke in 2013, the

9/11 Truth movement had already been considering the possibility that the US authorities or their agencies meddled with the attacks on the World Trade Center complex in 2001. The growing power and wealth of multinational corporations, often accused of gravely unethical conduct, has also placed them in the "Enemy Above" category. Meanwhile, in the case of the "Benevolent Conspiracy," we can see the boundaries between the categories blurring again, as the wealthy and powerful can also be perceived as working to the advantage of the ordinary man in the street, even though their actions are still associated with total control. Even so, the rich elites are not immune either to threats lurking in the shadows, posed by the "Enemy Below" which throughout the years took the form of black slaves, Indians, illegal immigrants from Mexico or other developing countries. The poor and uneducated masses, oppressed and exploited by those more privileged, had been and continue to be perceived as a ticking time bomb. Even though, in the eyes of the oppressors, they lack the astuteness to plan retaliation, their sheer numbers and supposed coarse brutality are a source of disquiet. These categories will be useful for me to describe the different approaches to conspiracy theories in American popular culture.

Even though many scholars claim that political turmoil, imminent threat of war or an economic downturn is fertile ground for conspiracy theories, those seem to have flourished equally when the US economy boomed and the specter of military conflict was insignificant. According to Jesse Walker:

> There are many reasons for this, including the not unsubstantial fact that even at its most peaceful, the United States is riven by conflicts. But there is also the possibility that peace breeds nightmares just as surely as strife does. The anthropologist David Graeber has argued that "it's the most peaceful societies which are also the most haunted, in their imaginative constructions of the cosmos, by constant specters of perennial war." The Piaroa Indians of Venezuela, he wrote, "are famous for their

> peaceableness," but "they inhabit a cosmos of endless invisible war, in which wizards are engaged in fending off the attacks of insane, predatory gods and all deaths are caused by spiritual murder and have to be avenged by the magical massacre of whole (distant, unknown) communities." Many middle-class bloggers leading comfortable lives spend their spare time in a similar subterranean universe.

This might explain the fact that during times of relative peace and prosperity paranoia still continues to thrive in the United States.

At a meeting with students via Skype which took place at the beginning of 2014, prominent philosopher, cognitive scientist and linguist Noam Chomsky was asked about the source of the recently renewed fascination with zombies and the recurring topic of the zombie apocalypse in US popular culture. The professor suggested that it was "a reflection of fear and desperation" (Chomsky 00:00:22 – 00:00:25) in the country. In his view "the United States is an unusually frightened country, and in such circumstances, people concoct, either for escape or maybe relief, [narratives] in which terrible things happen" (Chomsky 00:00:28 – 00:00:43).

Chomsky went on to outline the history of that fear, which has been gnawing at the United States since the colonial period. In the early years there were the Indians, later, there came the slaves, who could revolt and "rise up and kill all the men, rape all the women, destroy the country" (00:03:56 – 00:04:03). The dream of the annihilation of the enemy, of bringing them under control or "domesticating" them, did not eliminate the need for placing the blame for failures and various disasters on specific groups of people. The "fear of the moment," in Chomsky's words, is that "Hispanic narco-traffickers are going to come in and destroy the society" (00:04:11 – 00:04:15). The objects that galvanize this fear, periodically fueled by propaganda in the media, come and go with every changing political and social situation. Currently, the Mexican drug dealers or Islamic fundamentalists or Russians under Vladimir Putin are considered a threat; tomorrow it might be a completely different group.

Another interesting point made by Chomsky is that US citizens, even though their homeland is not among the least safe countries to live in, are excessively obsessed with firearms and they fiercely defend their right to hold them, as a means of protection. “From who?” Chomsky asks ironically:

> From the United Nations. Or from the federal government. From aliens. Maybe from zombies. Whoever it is. We just have to have guns to protect ourselves. That’s not known elsewhere in the world. Maybe in, say, Syria, a country that’s warring, you might find something like that. But in a country that’s not only at peace but has an unusual security and a great degree of freedom, that’s quite remarkable. […] Much of it is kind of just a recognition, at some level of the psyche, that if you’ve got your boot on somebody’s neck, there’s something wrong. And that the people you’re oppressing may rise up and defend themselves, and then you’re in trouble. And another is strange properties the country has always had of fear of invented dangers. There is a kind of a paranoid streak in the culture that’s pretty unusual. (00:04:44 – 00:05:59)

As I have explained at the beginning of this chapter, in analyzing that “paranoid streak,” weighing so heavily on the US social dynamics, the country’s culture and politics, I will generally refrain from using the term “paranoid” in the clinical sense. Similarly to Richard Hofstadter, “I have neither the competence nor the desire to classify any figures of the past or present as certifiable lunatics.” The US historian points out that “the idea of the paranoid style as a force in politics would have little contemporary relevance or historical value if it were applied only to men with profoundly disturbed minds. It is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant” (Hofstadter). Hofstadter published his essay as the post-World War II Red Scare had finally subsided, and specifically one year after John F. Kennedy’s assassination, one of the events in

American history generating the most conspiracy theories. But, as I have already sketched, much more fodder for paranoid minds was yet to come and the motif of the presence of ominous, dark forces controlling the lives of unaware citizens was increasingly gaining popularity not only among politicians, journalists or amateur conspiracy theorists, but also among fiction writers and filmmakers.

1.3 Paranoia in US Literature and Film

The "paranoid streak," to which Chomsky refers during his meeting with students, has become the topic of numerous American literary and cinematic works, documentary as well as fictional. Paranoid characters and attitudes appeared in text quite early on, beginning with Cotton Mather's accounts of the infamous Salem witch trials. The New England Puritan minister, who documented the events in his 1693 book *Wonders of the Invisible World,* was also a vigorous advocate of the trials and, despite his declarations of being just an impartial observer, his accounts are brimming with religious bias. Mather's writings and the issue of labeling all that is unknown and different from the generally accepted norms of "normalcy" as evil and threatening to the well-being of society have become a pet topic for American novelists, who have since approached them from many different angles. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was born in Salem, was one of the first celebrated US writers to identify and condemn, although indirectly, this worrying and intensifying social trait of the American people, and to describe the alienation into which such a stance pushes them. He depicted the paranoid atmosphere of seventeenth-century colonial Massachusetts most pointedly, for instance, in the short story "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), "one of the earliest examples of the paranoid conspiracy narrative manifesting itself in American popular culture" (B. M. Murphy). The story's protagonist's push for self-scrutiny leads him to exposing the hypocrisy

of all the people surrounding him, revealing that everybody has some dark secret to hide, which ultimately results in their loss of faith. The motifs of sinister temptations and of the fear of the Other ran through all of Hawthorne's later works, including his most famous one: *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). The insightful way Hawthorne, long before Freud formulated his theories, depicted the Puritans' obsession with sin and guilt and their voluntary turn to paranoia as a convenient means of handling all that is unknown and confusing seems to have influenced to a greater or lesser extent the bulk of the American literary output. As Samuel Chase Coale observes in his study *Paradigms of Paranoia: The Culture of Conspiracy in Contemporary American Fiction*, the fact that American identity is soaked in obsessions and in the fear of those behaving and living in a different manner than the general public stems from the abundance of apocalyptic Biblical narratives the Calvinist settlers, including the English Puritans, were constantly fed. Among these ominous visions American literature was born and, in fact, it has never ceased to draw inspiration from them.

Another crucial element in the development of paranoia, a part of its very foundation, is the fact that "conspiracy theory —the apprehension of conspiracy by those not involved in it— begins with individual self-protection, with an attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order" (Melley 61). Prominent American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, contemporary to Hawthorne, tackled the topic of selfhood as perceived by the inhabitants of the Western world in his 1841 essay "Self-Reliance":

> Society everywhere is in conspiracy against manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most requests is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

> Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself and you shall have the suffrage of the world. (1047)

The ideas put forward by the writer in one of his most famous essays —the need to defend one's individuality against the social order, the need to preserve one's uniqueness against the various totalizing forces one faces every day— are "essential to contemporary conspiracy theory" (Melley 61).

When analyzing the works of other great nineteenth-century American writers from the angle of paranoid themes, one might discover that the topic of individuality and the struggle to maintain it despite adverse pressure from various forces, the concept of evil lurking in the most unlikely places, ready to engulf you when you least expect it, or the description of feelings of persecution and the need to protect oneself by hiding one's real identity, were common subject matters in the literature and poetry of that time. One might find such themes in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855) in which he depicts a case of well-grounded but wrongly directed suspicions[8] (Davis 71) or in the novels of Mark Twain, who brought the element of amusement and entertainment into the hoaxes and conspiracy theories in his novels[9] (Davis 99). Edgar Allan Poe, on the other hand, one of the pioneers of the detective fiction genre and a master of the horror tale, dwelled on the macabre aspects of paranoia in such classic short stories as "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) or "The Black Cat"

[8] Melville's novella tells the story of a Spanish slave ship taken over by the slaves it carries. The ship's captain, Benito Cereno, is controlled by the leader of the revolt and does not reveal what is really happening when a seal-hunting ship captain visits them. The guest feels that something is amiss but, due to the instilled racial perceptions, suspects Benito Cereno of being a pirate, as he doesn't seem capable of envisioning the slaves' ability to revolt.

[9] In his novel *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), Twain satirizes the protagonist Hank Morgan's attitude towards a Christian conspiracy. Hank, on the one hand, criticizes Christianity for its manipulation, but on the other hand, he owes it the glory of someone who stigmatizes it. Characters with such an ambivalent stance towards conspiracies appear also in other Twain novels such as *The Gilded Age* (1873), *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916) or the unfinished *Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy* (ca. 1894–1898), in which "exploration of conspiracy thinking offers a searing critique of how American historical memory was becoming dangerously intertwined with the logic of popular entertainment" (Beringer 115).

(1843) in which murderous narrators, gripped by monomania, "the obsessive adherence to a person, an object, or an idea," took the fixation as "a token of tangible, lived experience" (*Social and Cultural Aspects of Madness in American Literature* 168). Henry James also offered his readers claustrophobic novels, such as *The Golden Bowl* (1904), in which he describes with detailed insight tangled webs of people's relations tainted with adultery, manipulation and suspicion bordering on paranoia (Artese 93). All these writers tackled the topic of paranoia in various degrees of profundity, approaching it from a variety of perspectives and setting the scene for a real paranoid boom in American literature to come.

In David Trotter's opinion, modernism is the period during which paranoia began taking over as the dominant disorder affecting the rising professional Western society of the time:

> During the nineteenth century, the status the upwardly mobile professional classes sought for their expertise was the status of "magical power": a status previously or otherwise afforded to qualities such as wealth or warlike valour. They did not always find it. Sometimes, when they did not find it, they made it up. Paranoia is a delusion of magical power. One of the curious side effects of the professionalization that transformed psychiatric theory and practice during the concluding decades of the nineteenth century was a systematic analysis of the ways in which professional people go mad. Paranoia, the psychiatrists maintained, was the professional person's madness of choice. (7)

Seeking a way to explain modernism's compulsion to experiment, the literary critic goes on to suggest that the writers struggling to gain recognition and to make a living in the fast-growing literary market of the time faced enormous pressure and their anxiety translated into "literary experimentation by means of which they hoped to achieve a degree of magical power [and that] can be understood as [the] psychopathy of expertise" (Trotter 8).

Paranoid overtones found in the works of many prominent American writers creating at the beginning of the twentieth century could be attributed to these changes that were radically transforming the entire Western society. F. Scott Fitzgerald struggled all of his adult life to support his and his wife Zelda Sayre's lavish lifestyle, which was not an easy task for a writer, but he considered this effort a precondition for success in the literary world. Later, he had to deal with medical expenses deriving from Zelda having been diagnosed with schizophrenia. The author of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) himself suffered from alcoholism, which greatly undermined his health and ultimately led to his death (Wagner-Martin 35). The recurrent themes in Fitzgerald's work largely reflected the problems he faced in the course of his own life. He dwelled on the collapse and corruption of the American Dream, on the blurred line dividing reality and illusion in the American vision of life, on the actual ugliness and rot concealed underneath wealth, glamour and splendour (Pelzer 33). H.P. Lovecraft, another author who was unable to support himself just by writing, and in fact gained fame only after his untimely death at the age of 46, approached the topic of paranoia from a different angle, moving it to the sphere of the unreal —the sphere of horror fiction. The themes he tackled were infused with paranoid perception —the cultured civilisation under threat from the plotting dregs of society, controlled by inhuman forces; guilt and responsibility for crimes passed down from generation to generation; the danger for humanity to be found in the uncontrolled development of science. As Roger Luckhurst points out in his introduction to a collection of Lovecraft's short stories: "Horror erupts from edges of the known frontier or else slithers from the recesses of the body, its borders breached from within and without by nasty things. Puritan paranoia persists, but Lovecraft's settings are modern and the terrors secular" (14).

In the years leading to the outbreak of World War II the themes of illusion, deceit, conspiracy were approached by American writers from various angles: William Faulkner

exposed racist paranoia in his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!*; Raymond Chandler wrote iconic hardboiled fiction that invariably hinted at the darkness lurking underneath the glitz of Los Angeles life; playwrights Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill dealt in their works with corruption and treachery concealed behind the facade of seemingly exemplary family relations, with masks people constantly put on to attain their ends.

With the world further spinning out of control during World War II, a world which got a glimpse of what chaos looked like, the need for answers, concrete and stable notions, clear points of reference, even if they meant a threat, was cogent. That was also fertile soil for postmodern literature which, at that time, had begun developing the stylistic devices that felt appropriate to deal with the crisis of identity experienced by people on many levels: moral, social, cultural, sexual and ethnic.

In his often quoted 1967 essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*, considered by some the foundational manifesto of literary postmodernism, American writer John Barth argues that the new trend stemmed from artists' immemorial need to defy tradition, and not necessarily from their distorted vision of humanity following the atrocities of World War II:

> By "exhaustion" I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence, only the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities – by no means necessarily a cause for despair. That a great many Western artists for a great many years have quarreled with received definitions of artistic media, genres, and forms goes without saying: pop art, dramatic and musical "happenings," the whole range of "intermedia" or "mixed-means" art, bear recentest witness to the romantic tradition of rebelling against Tradition. (64-65)

However, Joseph Heller, the author of the famous novel *Catch-22*, set during World War II and published in 1961, emphasized the importance of the recent dramatic events on the evolution of American literature:

> The antiwar and antigovernment feelings in the book belong to the period following World War II: the Korean War, the cold war of the Fifties. A general disintegration of belief took place then, and it affected *Catch-22* in that the form of the novel became almost disintegrated. *Catch-22* was a collage; if not in structure, then in the ideology of the novel itself. Without being aware of it, I was part of a near-movement in fiction. While I was writing *Catch-22*, J. P. Donleavy was writing *The Ginger Man*, Jack Kerouac was writing *On the Road*, Ken Kesey was writing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Thomas Pynchon was writing *V.*, and Kurt Vonnegut was writing *Cat's Cradle*. I don't think any one of us even knew any of the others. Certainly I didn't know them. Whatever forces were at work shaping a trend in art were affecting not just me, but all of us. The feelings of helplessness and persecution in *Catch-22* are very strong in *Cat's Cradle*. (314)

Disenchantment with authority in the post-war world and allusions to Cold War paranoia are perceptible in all of the novels Heller mentions, as well as in many other works published in the USA in the 1950s and 1960s. These include, among others, the writings of the rest of the Beat Generation authors —to whom Jack Kerouac belongs—, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) or Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (1968). In more or less oblique ways, the authors manifested their anxiety about a world where nothing is certain anymore and anybody can turn out to be a spy or an enemy, even those who we least suspect of being capable of deceitful deeds. They also denounced the politicians' use of paranoia as a tool for manipulation, for turning people into obedient puppets. Many also decided to contest the consumerist American way of life promoted by the authorities, industry, media and advertising agencies that wanted to cash in on the financial boom of America's post-war rapid economic expansion. Allen Ginsberg, William S. Borroughs, J.D. Salinger, Charles

Bukowski, Hunter S. Thompson or Don DeLillo were among the authors who rejected the materialistic ideals and prudish views of the time and searched for authenticity amidst the artificial world shaped by governments and corporations and for freedom from the controlling social system. The consumerist promise pushed American people into a new type of slavery, a vicious circle described by philosopher Brian Massumi as follows: "increase productivity in order to save time and thus earn more in order buy more objects with which to store the time saved by being more productive in order to buy more objects …" (16). The only way to break out from this predicament was to figure out the manipulation, this "continually deferred promise of enjoyment" (Massumi 16) various corporations and institutions instilled in people for their own gain. Constant suspicion and paranoia were well-tried ways to see through this and many other schemes directed against American people in the post-war world; therefore, as Tony Tanner observed in 1971, in recent American fiction

> narrative lines are full of hidden persuaders, hidden dimensions, plots, secret organizations, evil systems, all kinds of conspiracies against spontaneity of consciousness, even cosmic take-over. The possible nightmare of being totally controlled by unseen agencies and powers is never far away in contemporary American fiction. (16)

Sometimes, however, this serious topic has been approached from the same angle Mark Twain attempted to present it —that of humor and satire. *The Illuminatus! Trilogy,* written by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson in 1975, makes fun of a host of old and new historical conspiracy theories by misrepresenting their fundamentals, deliberately confusing their elements and adding some invented ones to the mix. The trilogy also makes reference to Discordianism, a "parody religion" created in the 1960s, and to Operation Mindfuck, a concept co-developed by Robert Anton Wilson and which was a "'Marx Brothers version of Zen,' a technique to mess with people's perceived realities (through civil disobedience,

culture jamming, vandalism and performance art, among other techniques) in order to bring about guerrilla enlightenment" (Cusack 35). The project has left a lasting imprint on the nation's collective consciousness, as many of the hoaxes planted by the operation's participants endured in one form or another (J. Walker), adding to the conspiracy mythology building up over the years. The authors of *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* played an important role in the development of the "ironic style in American conspiracism" (J. Walker). As Jesse Walker points out:

> From Swift to Orwell, dystopian writers have exaggerated social trends they dislike, forging those artful distortions into satires. Conspiracy folklore does the same thing for the same reason, except that most of those dystopians believe in the worlds they've invented. But the ironists don't necessarily believe them. In the ironic style, the most interesting thing about a conspiracy theory isn't that it might or might not be true; it's that it constructs a story out of the everyday truths we only hazily perceive.

Walker also observes that during the 1960s and the 1970s a new trend, "a focus on conspiracy itself, an appetite for 'conspiracy research'," appeared. It was not necessarily connected with a general paranoid mode of perception, exhibited by people who think that almost everybody is "out to get them," but it was rather a preoccupation with the fact that some influential people or organizations are "out to get" everybody. This trend would, with time, transform into a full-blown subculture which "wouldn't be a mass phenomenon until the 1990s, but it was around as early as the 1970s, when it became possible to read publications with such names as *Conspiracies Unlimited* and *Conspiracy Digest*" (J. Walker).

Therefore, from the 1970s onwards paranoia became pervasive, with some taking conspiracy theories seriously, others with tongue in cheek, but everyone acknowledging their importance and impact on everyday life. While Don DeLillo and Kurt Vonnegut explored the

topic in depth in their continued work, paranoia steadily gained importance as a literary theme across a host of genres: psychological thriller and horror (Stephen King, Chuck Palahniuk), science fiction (Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Philip K. Dick), crime fiction (Paul Auster). It was embraced with particular eagerness by postmodernist writers in general and so, to the list above, we could add Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, James Ellroy, William Gaddis, David Foster Wallace and the ultimate expert on the topic and one of the subjects of this thesis —Thomas Pynchon. As Alan Nadel observes, "postmodernism scrutinizes authority in all its manifestations by making visible the implicit assumptions on which any form of authority must necessarily rely, although it cannot necessarily reveal all of the assumptions in any given form of authority" (53).

The relationship of US cinema and television with paranoia and conspiracy theories seems to be even stronger. Film can be a much more powerful medium of persuasion than literature. It has a greater scope of influence as it gets through to a larger number of people, across all social classes. US authorities realized this quite early on, after the success and the impact on public opinion of such productions as the *Birth of the Nation* (1915) or the rapidly rising popularity of the film celebrities of the time, about whose private lives newspapers wrote at length and whose lifestyles were admired by the mass audience. This information however, presented by the press or special fan magazines, was fabricated by the studios:

> The narratives told in these fan magazines echoed the very sort of melodramatic scenarios that prevailed in film studios at the time. The world is fraught with temptation, or so these magazines contended, and only the stars' virtue, beauty, and talent could enable them to endure, to, as if on screen, triumph in the final reel. The studios used this formative star discourse as means of regulating the industry's

> celebrity workforce and as a way of presenting an image of the film industry both on screen and off as conventional, stable, and normal. (Lewis 92)

This policy of the studios, exercised since the onset of the film celebrity culture, has promoted an air of unreality surrounding the cinema stars which has prevailed until today, blurring the lines between their private lives and the lives of the characters they play in various productions. Often the viewers, convinced by the power of the images on the scene, were unable to separate them from reality. Witnessing this phenomenon of almost subliminal persuasion, US authorities understood the potential of motion pictures as a tool of propaganda. It proved especially effective when it came to laying ground for war, as:

> more than mere words and pictures, film could heighten our responses by depicting the war situation in intense terms and images unfolding in a story. Film called people to support and action through inspiring them to become part of the war story. Finally, film could make audiences imagine the enemy as the demonic Other, as the personification of evil. This portrayal became especially powerful when presented in extremely polarized iconic frames, juxtaposed against depictions of Americans as the repository of virtue and the defender of right. (Combs and Combs 18)

Films such as *The Dawn Patrol* (1938), *Gone with the Wind* (1939) or *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) evoked previous wars and depicted leaders obsessed with power and in pursuit of a "holy cause," a pursuit which could involve senseless destruction and genocide. Throughout the 1940s, many films, both feature and documentary, were produced with the aim of informing the public about the ongoing war or for army recruitment or training purposes and they presented paranoia-inducing plots and conspiracy theories. Howard Hawks's *Sergeant York* (1941), John Huston's *Winning Your Wings* (1942), the series *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) directed by Frank Capra, John Ford's *They Were Expendable* (1945) or the animated short *Education for Death: The Making of the Nazi* (1943) produced by Walt Disney, among

many others, presented the war and the US involvement in it "advocating the allied and 'preparedness' side" (Combs and Combs 18). Yet alongside these productions, which had been concocted and supervised by various government organizations in order to generate a specific response from the audience to the war and to the US enemies of the time, there were also films which presented paranoia and conspiracy theories from a different angle and through much more subtle and artful means of cinematic expression, without explicit governmental influence. Alfred Hitchcock, who rose to prominence at that time, mastered and further developed the psychological thriller genre and employed many *film noir* techniques in his productions. He often tackled themes connected with the claustrophobic paranoia of individuals being harassed by their family members or other ordinary people surrounding them (e.g. *Shadow of a Doubt* [1943], *Dial M for Murder* [1954], *Psycho* [1960]), as well as topics concerned with wider conspiracies, international plots, and espionage operations (e.g. *Foreign Correspondent* [1940], *Notorious* [1946], *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], *North by Northwest* [1959]). Hitchcock used the uncertainty inherent to paranoid speculation as a means of building tension in the audience, heightening it further also through special camera movements suggesting voyeurism —such as in, for example, *Psycho* or *Rear Window* [1954]— or through using the dolly zoom to create an effect of disorientation —popularized in *Vertigo* [1958].

In the 1950s, motion pictures became a major form of popular entertainment in the US, which was experiencing its post-war economic boom. But the Cold War cast a shadow also on the cinematography of that time. Alfred Hitchcock himself alluded to the Red Scare in films such as *Strangers on a Train* (1951) or later on in *Torn Curtain* (1966). The theme of paranoia, induced by the underlying but constant menace of a Russian nuclear strike, combined with the motif of space exploration which had recently begun, brought an entire new dimension to the concept of "unknown threat." In the 1950s hundreds of productions

depicting aliens invading the Earth were made, with filmmakers fueling the audiences' imagination with various scenarios of humanity being destroyed by hostile extraterrestrials. According to Cyndy Hendershot:

> Science fiction is the genre most commonly invoked now to represent 1950s paranoia and within 1950s culture it stood as a genre conducive to expressions of fear and paranoia. Los Alamos and the development of the atomic bomb gave rise to numerous cultural texts which attempted to represent what was frequently perceived as the unrepresentable —atomic power. The prehistoric monsters, giant ants, pod people, and other horrors which people 1950s science fiction films attest to what had already been a strong interpenetration between physics and science fiction. The fact that science fiction and paranoiac discourse have affinities becomes manifest in 1950s popular science fiction. (7)

Sometimes the attackers roughly resembled humans and presented an outright threat (as, for example, in the case of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951] or *The War of the Worlds* [1953]), sometimes the alien appeared as a plant or shape-shifting substance (*The Thing from Another World* [1951], *The Day of the Triffids* [1962]), but the most frequently utilized paranoid concept was that of aliens taking over existing people's bodies and minds, or becoming their doubles (*Invaders from Mars* [1953], *It Came from Outer Space* [1953], *The Body Snatchers* [1955], *Omicron* [1963], *The Day Mars Invaded Earth* [1963], *No Survivors, Please* [1963]). Very often these plots were an excuse to indirectly refer to the ongoing Cold War, suggesting the possibility that a neighbor, a coworker or even a member of the family could be someone or something different than thought, evil and bent on destroying their victim and their entire world. Sometimes the plots alluded to specific elements of the post-World War II and Cold War reality, such as the conflict with the Russians, nuclear explosions, secret government facilities (*Invasion U.S.A.* [1952], *The Day the Earth Caught*

Fire [1961], *Panic in Year Zero!* [1962], *These Are the Damned* [1962]). These productions, however crude, were nevertheless subtle depictions of Cold War paranoia when compared to the regular anti-Communist, strongly ideological pictures which were made in bulk at the end of the 1940s, during the 1950s and the 1960s and which "were shot on the cheap and usually ended up as the second features on double bills" (Whitfield 133). Films such as *The Iron Curtain* (1948), *I Married a Communist* (1949), *The Red Menace* (1949), *The Girl in the Kremlin* (1957) or *Red Nightmare* (1962) used straightforward imagery leading the viewers on to reach ready-made conclusions about the evil intentions of the USSR, in particular, and the Communists, more generally, towards the US. Some of the productions targeted children and were shown at schools —such as the famous *Duck and Cover* (1952), with instructions on how to behave in the face of a nuclear attack—, conditioning the young American minds to process future events and perceive reality in a way conducive to the US government's intentions. Such propaganda pieces were considered a legitimate educational tool at the time, even though, from the contemporary vantage point, they could be said to employ "brainwashing" techniques. However, not all the filmmakers chose to follow the US government's line and many pictures were created, against great odds, carrying a more or less veiled criticism of the authorities' excessive obsession with the Communist issue. During McCarthy's years as Republican Senator, those filmmakers suffered persecution and even something so apparently innocent as a refusal to participate in making an ideological anti-Communist picture often resulted in the artists who refused being accused of working with the enemy and eventually being blacklisted by the entertainment industry. As Stephen J. Whitfield observes:

> Willingness to make these lurid and simplistic movies was not only a loyalty test for Hollywood, participation in these projects also became such a test *in* Hollywood. Actors, writers and directors would be asked to work on a film like *The Red Menace*,

> and their refusal to do so encouraged the inference of Party membership or sympathies. After Joseph Losey declined RKO's offer to direct *I Married A Communist,* he was blacklisted, and by 1951 he had gone into exile in England. (When the film was released, *Time* hailed it as "a celluloid bullet aimed at the U.S.S.R.") Even Kazan, perhaps the hottest director of the era, was invited to film Philbrick's *I Led Three Lives* because the president of the Twentieth Century-Fox doubted that the director's *Viva Zapata!* (1952) was "something definitely anti-Communist." (141)

But as soon as Senator McCarthy's influence started to wane, filmmakers became more audacious in their portrayals of pervasive surveillance constraining the lives of ordinary Americans, of Cold War espionage, paranoia and bureaucratic inertia. Satire came into play and such films as Stanley Kubrick's iconic *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) or Norman Jewison's *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming* (1966) attempted to expose the irrationality and perniciousness of the government's actions, which, in turn, were making US citizens paranoid, constantly watching over their shoulder either for signs of Communist threat or of government agents persecuting them. Another genre which flourished in the 1960s was *film noir*, in which the tensions of the time were reflected in the characteristic vague visual style of the genre with low-key lighting, a pervasive feeling of despair, hopelessness, mistrust and paranoia as well as the adoption of the cynical and disillusioned anti-hero, and the two-faced, manipulative femme fatale. *Underworld U.S.A.* (1961), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Shock Corridor* (1963) or *Mickey One* (1965) gave way to an entire host of masterful depictions of shady organizations, corrupt politicians and policemen, insecurity and lone detectives uncovering criminal schemes of unimaginable proportions.

Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s many prominent directors, nowadays considered iconic, rose to fame, shaping filmmaking as we know it today in terms of plot,

cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, sound, editing. The majority tackled the subject of conspiracies and, generally, of paranoia in their productions, by so doing recognizing the popularity and unchanging relevance of these themes. They presented ordinary citizens as well as public figures being controlled by powerful, hostile forces, the existence and influence of which are not immediately apparent —exploring this motif from a variety of points of view and employing it in different genres. The already mentioned Stanley Kubrick offered the audiences such cinematic gems as science fiction *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), or dystopian *A Clockwork Orange* (1971); Roman Polański depicted paranoid characters in the psychological horror *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *neo-noir Chinatown* (1974); Francis Ford Coppola showed people unable to trust anybody, lonely and clinging to their obsessions in the mafia film *The Godfather* (1972), spy thriller *The Conversation* (1974) and war drama *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Other renowned directors of paranoid movies who rose to prominence in the 1970s were: Alan J. Pakula with *Klute* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974) and *All the President's Men* (1976); Sidney Lumet with *Serpico* (1973); Ridley Scott with *Alien* (1979) and *Blade Runner* (1982) or Steven Spielberg with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1979). At the end of that decade, David Lynch —the film director whose productions are saturated with a more or less vague sense of paranoia, and on whom I will concentrate in the following chapters of this thesis, produced his first motion picture *Eraserhead* (1977). In the 1980s, many talents emerged in the horror movie genre, including John Carpenter, Wes Craven or Tim Burton, who dwell on the nature of reality in their productions and often depict the world as populated by aliens or monsters, controlling and exploiting people unaware of their existence. As the 1990s approached, directors shifted their focus to the interference of technology in our lives, the power of mass media and advertising agencies to bend reality to their needs, as well as to the shady proceedings of governments

and corporations. Timothy Melley argues that the popularity of conspiracy narratives which has been constantly increasing ever since:

> cannot be explained as a response to some particular political issue, social organization, or historical event, such as Watergate, or the Kennedy assassination, or even the cold war. […] It stems largely from a sense of *diminished human agency*, a feeling that individuals cannot effect meaningful social action and, in extreme cases, may not be able to control their own behavior. […] Sentiments like these are related to a widely circulated post-war narrative, a story about how the new "postindustrial" economy has made Americans more generic and less autonomous than their rugged forebears, and how social structures—especially government and corporate bureaucracies, control technologies, and "the media"—have become autonomous agents in their own right. (62)

Melley refers to this kind of sentiments, so deeply ingrained in contemporary American society, as "agency panic" which manifests itself in an "intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control—the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been 'constructed' by powerful external agents" (Melley 62). It seems that the infantilization of citizenship[10], which took place during the years of Ronald Reagan's presidency in the 1980s (Furedi 142) intensified the feelings of "agency panic" in Americans. The series of tragic events, such as the Ruby Ridge and Waco sieges, which ultimately led to the Oklahoma City terrorist bombings, further undermined people's trust in government agencies and gave rise to the US militia movement. The obsession with conspiracy theories and the paranoid feelings of US citizens reached their historical high just before becoming an inseparable aspect of life in the post-9/11 world. The popularization of

[10] Term coined by scholar Lauren Berlant in 1993. The process in which the citizen welcomes a greater state interference in their life, willingly submits to a security regime justified by the need to protect the nation from an imminent threat, such as war or terrorist action, due to a childlike "belief in the state's commitment to representing the best interests of ordinary people" (Berlant 27-28).

the Internet only made these moods more marked and infectious —inevitably turning them into an endless source of inspiration for film and television productions. The 1990s abounded with movies depicting individuals embroiled in government conspiracies (*The Pelican Brief* [1993], *Mission: Impossible* [1996], *Conspiracy Theory* [1997], *Arlington Road* [1999]); malevolent corporations (*The Firm* [1993], *The Fugitive* [1993]); historical plotters or plot victims (*JFK* [1991], *Hoffa* [1992], *Nixon* [1995]). Paranoid science fiction visions of the world were also a popular theme, especially towards the end of the decade when dystopian *Dark City* was released in 1998, followed by the iconic *The Matrix* and the TV series *The X-Files* in 1999. The Wachowski brothers'[11] blockbuster owed its success to the novel way in which it approached the recurrent science fiction theme of humanity being enslaved by artificial intelligence —"the very specific terror in *The Matrix* is deception. These machines enslave without their victims knowing that they have been enslaved" (Donovan 182). *The X-Files*, on the other hand, explored the world of paranormal conspiracy theorists, blending the commonly known stories of UFO sightings and theories about alien forces attempting to subdue mankind with a mythology of its own, which branched out over the years —eleven seasons have been made so far. According to Frank Palmeri both *The Matrix* and *The X-Files* are products of late postmodernism "in which paranoid visions are unrelieved by black humor, and hybrids invariably constitute threats." The scholar points out that "the freefloating temptation of paranoia of the earlier period has hardened into a requirement in these works, the autonomous individual re-emerges as a hero, and a greater and darker stylization based on *film noir* replaces grotesque surrealism as the mode in which the paranoid vision is typically elaborated" (Palmeri).

The September 11 attacks in 2001, the deadliest terrorist action in modern US history, plunged the already restless American society into unending speculation on the underlying

[11] Even though Larry and Andy Wachowski both underwent a gender transition and are now trans women —Lana and Lilly— I will refer to them as brothers in this dissertation, as at the time of making *The Matrix* they were still men.

cause of the tragedy and the agents responsible for it. The amount and the thematic span of the conspiracy theories which sprung up following the event could match the storm of speculations following John F. Kennedy's assassination. According to the most popular ones, the attacks were carried out independently or in cooperation with the Islamic extremist organization al-Quaeda by the US government itself, by the Saudi Royal Family or the Israeli government; the Twin Towers did not collapse after the planes struck them but rather due to controlled demolition; the planes were not hijacked commercial aircraft but fighter jets or remote-controlled drones[12]. With this fierce speculation, the old Enemy Below —with a new face— comprising both the Enemy Outside and the Enemy Within and aided by the Enemy Above returned with full force to stir American imaginations, becoming the freshly concocted —although with a very old recipe— stuff of their nightmares.

Films and TV series about paranoia and conspiracy theories retained their popularity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with creators inspired by the long-standing traditions connected with this cinematic trend. Many went back to the roots, depicting centuries-old conspiracies (*The Da Vinci Code* [2006], *Angels and Demons* [2009]), adapting the classics (*Sherlock Holmes* [2009], *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* [2011]) or making remakes of famous conspiracy films (*The Stepford Wives* [2004], *The Manchurian Candidate* [2004]). Due to the emergence of on-demand streaming media providers such as Netflix or HBO, the current decade has also seen a staggering rise in the popularity of TV series, the quality of which improved greatly as, thanks to bigger budgets, they started attracting the most talented directors, actors, and scriptwriters. The themes of paranoia and conspiracy theories have been tackled, from a variety of perspectives, by many of these American productions, such as *The Killing* (2011-2014), *Homeland* (2011-2020), *House of Cards* (2013-2018), *Fargo* (2014-), *True Detective* (2014-), *Westworld* (2016-) or *Stranger Things* (2016-).

[12] For more information on the conspiracy theories surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks see David Dunbar and Brad Reagan's *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts* (2006).

The origin of this unending popularity of paranoid themes might not be as somber as it initially seems, however. In a 2013 interview with Jesse Walker, the author of *The United States of Paranoia,* for *Vice*, journalist Harry Cheadle asked whether Americans were currently more paranoid than they used to be. Walker suggested that not necessarily, although it would be difficult to measure that as the "direction of the paranoia shifts" (Cheadle) constantly. During the Bush presidency right-wing conspiracy theories were aimed mostly at people outside the US, while during the Obama presidency they targeted the government —"a lot of discussions about the United States becoming more paranoid or less paranoid just has to do with what kind of paranoia people are paying attention to" (Cheadle). Jessie Walker also pointed out that many treat conspiracy theories in an ironic and playful way and that it is also important to "go beyond just accepting or debunking a conspiracy theory and see what we can learn about America by exploring the stories that caught on" (Cheadle).

In Jesse Walker's opinion, US citizens' paranoia does not necessarily need to be perceived as something inherently evil, as a means by which they are repressed and manipulated; it is "by no means necessarily a cause for despair" (Barth 64) as John Barth put it. "Many of those demons are imaginary, but all of them have truths to tell us," Walker suggests: "a conspiracy story that catches on becomes a form of folklore. It says something true about the anxieties and experiences of the people who believe and repeat it, even if it says nothing true about the objects of the theory itself" (J. Walker). Through the possibility of developing conspiracy theories, a country with such a limited history of folklore was given an instrument for contriving a whole new set of legends, stories and tall tales of their own. With time, paranoia had become an inherent element of American pop culture. During the Red Scare era and later, following the dissipation of the Communist threat, writers and filmmakers quickly recognized the potential of paranoia as a narrative device. As critic Michiko Kakutani asserts in an article for *The New York Times*, paranoia

> enables its practitioners to build suspense, to indulge in portentous foreshadowing and to tie together incongruous loose ends into something that can be called a story. It can be used to create thrill-a-minute action films in which every offhand remark has a frightening payoff and huge, sprawling epics in which plausible resolutions exist only as projections in the paranoid audience's mind. ("Bound by Suspicion")

The narratives, no matter how outlandish and frightening, in fact reassure the readers or the viewers in the belief that nothing happens without a reason and that human existence has significance, that any ominous force can be ultimately identified and fought against, with a higher or lower degree of effectiveness. Moreover, they give reality a context and suggest meaning, coherence: "Indeed, the art of paranoia turns out to be a profoundly traditional form, as reassuring, in its twisted way, as the old-fashioned detective story, which offers a similar Manichaean realm of clearly defined villains and innocents, victims and victimizers and readily decodable patterns," ("Bound by Suspicion") Kakutani argues. It is not surprising therefore that paranoia, also bearing in mind its offensive in US public life after World War II, has become such an appealing topic for various US writers, as well as filmmakers.

CHAPTER 2

Paranoia Through the Eyes of Thomas Pynchon and David Lynch. Hyperreality West Coast Style

"Everywhere one seeks to produce meaning, to make the world signify, to render it visible. We are not, however, in danger of lacking meaning; quite to the contrary, we are gorged with meaning and it is killing us." —Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*

2.1 Grasping for Light in a Void

Paranoia is a very frequently explored theme in American postmodernist fiction, as has been established in the previous chapter. Many US writers and film directors have tackled this topic, scrutinized it from a number of angles. Even though the list of artists who approach the matter in an exceptionally skillful and admirable way is very long, in my thesis I concentrate on two creators whose perception of paranoia is unique and presents surprising affinities which have not been explored before in an exhaustive way: writer Thomas Pynchon and film director David Lynch. The incessant human urge to create systems of order — unfortunately, often ending in a deadlock— and the disappearance of the boundary between reality and fiction are two of the controlling themes in most of their works. Their characters, primary, secondary and even those just flashing for a moment in the background, are continuously and desperately groping for some tangible proof of their own existence, of the reality of the world around them. On the other hand, those who seem to possess some secret wisdom about whatever is going on, or even a dark power to control and shape the events in

which others, not entirely willingly but inevitably, take part, are themselves elusive figures who always remain in the shadows. They appear, provide false hopes, leave an abundance of vague hints, lead their victims into blind alleys and disappear into thin air, which results in the confused wanderers' fall into the abyss, a complete disintegration of their identities.

Even though Pynchon's and Lynch's characters doubt the veracity of the information they obtain from these apparently commanding sources, they nevertheless follow the leads, trying to get to the bottom of the events unfolding around them, unmindful of the fact that the more they get involved in the situation, the less sense it makes. Clues lead to more clues, mysteries mount, grow out of proportion, seemingly meaningful signs multiply and it all gives the diligent investigator a sense that there is some monstrous organization or indefinite structure looming, controlling everything around them. A monster ready to swallow everything that is dear to them, unless they fight, try to do something about it. Which gives them a purpose, something to hold on to in this abyss. A light at the end of the tunnel. But is the light really there? Is the tunnel even really there? Neither the protagonists of Pynchon's novels and short stories nor those of Lynch's films ever get to learn the answer.

Hyperreality, a term coined by philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard in his 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation*, is the blurring of the line between reality and its representation in an age characterized by a ferocious development of sign systems (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). In fact, objective reality is no longer to be discerned from its multiple representations. All that is left are just various versions of it —the *simulacra*— all equally true, as there is no "standard of truth" to judge them against:

> No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: it is genetic miniaturization that is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control —and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times

> from these. It no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational. In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal: produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere. (*Simulacra and Simulation* 2)

As a consequence, people remain gasping for air, forced to accept some form of illusion as their reality in order not to "suffocate," not to become insane. However, some are more distrustful of this massive fantasy they are living in, more inquisitive. Instead of settling for the cheapest, readily available *simulacra* fashioned to keep the masses happy and in check, layer after layer they peel off the tissue of reality, ignoring the fact that instead of finding answers they just keep multiplying the questions. Pynchon's and Lynch's characters are just those people, at odds with the hyperreal.

2.2 California: Land of Opportunity, Land of Doom

The author and the director are themselves people who cannot be easily classified —to many they are a riddle, each in his own, very particular way. Their visions of the world, of human life, have different origins and Pynchon and Lynch use distinct means and methods to communicate them to their audiences. Nevertheless, after following the convoluted train of thought offered by a Pynchon novel or a Lynch film one might hypothesize they share similar conclusions as to the condition of the US society contemporary to their creative process —as to its desires, ambitions, fears and signs auguring its approaching demise. Another point of convergence would be the frequent use of California as a setting for their works —*The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice* in the case of Pynchon and *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* in the case of Lynch— one of the most hyperreal places on our

planet, “alienating” and “dystopian” as Rachel Adams suggests in her essay “The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism” (248). The Golden State, for reasons that have been widely theorized and that I will attempt to summarize here, is a perfect spot for incertitude, ambiguity, and confusion to thrive in and consequently for paranoia to flourish.

The roots of this phenomenon lie primarily in the way California’s history has been for many years idealized and mythologized, presented in a selective manner, from the angle of famous and powerful individuals, “usually white and male” (Rice et al. 3). As the authors of *The Elusive Eden* argue, the image of the Golden State has been distorted for years, depicted as the land of milk and honey where any enterprise can flourish and where successful pioneering steps have been made across a host of fields. During the 1950s’ and 1960s’ unprecedented mass economic migration to California from all over the US, politicians and journalists hailed the state an embodiment of the American Dream:

> There was no end of material to support the tone of gee-whiz: the citrus groves that were giving way, at a rate of hundreds of acres a day to the new housing tracts of Orange County; the beaches, the parks, the backyard swimming pools; the Nobel laureates at Berkeley and Stanford and Cal Tech; the deep thinkers assembled around the table at Robert Hutchins’s Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara; the great network of junior colleges “where you’re not just a name on an IBM card”; the huge water system that Governor Pat Brown was developing in the Central Valley; the Great California freeways he was building from one end of the state to the other. (Schrag 29)

The media concentrated, however, only on the young, well-educated white people who occupied the lucrative, prestigious positions at the universities, at the aerospace and electronics companies, and who could take advantage of the available luxurious leisure activities. Such issues as increasingly growing pollution and overcrowding or poverty among

minorities were largely omitted in these songs of praise, as was California's violent history "of conquest, exploitation and development" (Schrag 32). Not until the late 1960s and the 1970s, the focus started slowly shifting to the silent heroes without whose hard work and cultural contribution the Golden State would not be what it is today: "especially the poor, women, Indians, Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and more-recent European immigrants" (Rice et al. 3). The slow process of reintroducing them as vital elements in the shaping of the state from the social and the economic point of view, through critical historical works, exhibitions at museums and historical sites, continues until today. However, the illusory, selective image of life in the Golden State still remains fixed in the collective consciousness and can cause frustration in those who fail to curb their expectations.

Another reason for California turning out not to be as paradisiacal as advertised are the specific geological, hydrological, and climatic hazards regularly scourging the state and especially Los Angeles —California's iconic city and biggest urban center. As Mike Davies suggests in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, the constant threat of a natural disaster strike in the area has generated "paranoia about nature" (9) in Californians and especially in those living in Los Angeles. The scholar points out, however, that, in fact, the city "has deliberately put itself in harm's way," because "for generations, market driven urbanization has transgressed environmental common sense" (Davies 9). Furthermore, apart from being urbanistically impractical and not entirely prepared for the frequent manifestations of nature's wrath, Los Angeles, swarmed by homeless people, immersed in smog, congested, with high crime rates and running low on sources of supply, can hardly be called a friendly, welcoming city. In an essay called "Ghost Neighborhoods: Space Time and Alienation in Los Angeles" published in the collection *Looking for Los Angeles: Architecture, Film, Photography, and the Urban Landscape*, Philip J. Ethington emphasizes how L.A.'s downtown architecture transmits that sense of hostility:

> Giant obelisks rise like polished headstones over the burial plots of former communities. Most of us are unaware that downtown Los Angeles is a graveyard of social relations, let alone that the spirits of earlier residents walk among us, but we do sense that something is fundamentally out of joint. We may feel out of place, threatened and insecure, or simply bored by the absence of particulars in the unyielding sameness of the skyscraper landscape. Alienation is apparent at two contiguous modernist landmarks in downtown Los Angeles: the four-level interchange and Bunker Hill. […] Here the worlds of capitalist development, Hollywood science fiction, world war and cold war, international migration, and the family neighborhood are brought together. (29)

However, despite its hostile architecture and unfriendly hue, the city is considered by many a dream destination, a place where they can fulfill their artistic and professional ambitions, get a taste of fame and high life and rub shoulders with celebrities or even become one themselves. This is mostly due to the fact that Hollywood, with its major film studios — the heart of the American film industry, considered, by some, the entertainment capital of the world—, is located in Los Angeles. Furthermore, a significant number of famous people from all around the globe choose to settle in California and demonstrate their obscene riches by putting up flamboyant mansions. For those who are not members of this privileged group living among such abundance might prove dazzling, as they are led to believe that they can also have a share of the wealth, that they deserve it just by being there. In consequence, they might get easily caught in a web of delusions about themselves and the people surrounding them, despite the fact that "the glamor of the movies and the excesses of the star system stand in stark contrast to the daily lives and experiences of most residents whose access to Hollywood myths and celebrities is usually through channels— the mass media, the local cinema theatre, and the DVD— available to people elsewhere" (Dimendberg 347).

In California, illusion and reality clash every day, on many levels. The state is also home to the first theme park founded by Walt Disney —Disneyland, where visitors are supposed to feel as if they had stepped into fairytale land. Jean Baudrillard discussed the phenomenon extensively both in *Simulacra and Simulation* and in his travel diary *America*, as he considered Disneyland "a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12):

> Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America, that *is* Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle. (*Simulacra and Simulation* 12-13)

Since Disneyland is not an ordinary theme park but one belonging to an entertainment industry giant —the Walt Disney Company—, it is the most well-known Californian attraction for those (adults) who feel the need to immerse themselves in a fictional world of infantile magic, fun and illusion before they return to their everyday lives, their mundane routines. But Baudrillard points out that there are other such facilities in the area —or rather were, at the time of the sociologist's visit to the US preceding the publication of *Simulacra and Simulation*—, whose existence emphasizes the constant need of the residents to expose themselves to the allegedly "unreal":

> Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is surrounded by these imaginary stations that feed reality, the energy of the real to a city whose

> mystery is precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation —a city of incredible proportions, but without space, without dimensions. As much as electrical and atomic power stations, as much as cinema studios, this city, which is no longer anything but an immense script and a perpetual pan shot, needs this old imaginary like a sympathetic nervous system made up of childhood signals and faked phantasms. (*Simulacra and Simulation* 13)

Various sites in California, but especially Los Angeles, have been featured as a setting in numerous books, films or series. This makes it seem a familiar place to people around the world, even those who have never even visited the United States. It is, however, a simulacrum as none of these representations can actually convey the reality of living there. California is also home to some of the world's largest tech corporations: Google, Apple, Facebook or eBay, to name but a few, which were initially viewed as relatively politically neutral entities, working for the progress and the betterment of humankind, but gradually, as they gained power and leverage, they joined the ranks of shady multinational organizations geared towards profit maximization at any cost. These tech companies have more tools and possibilities for conducting total surveillance than any other organization has ever had before. David Streitfeld, who described this shift in an article for *The New York Times* says that:

> Tech companies have accrued a tremendous amount of power and influence. Amazon determines how people shop, Google how they acquire knowledge, Facebook how they communicate. All of them are making decisions about who gets a digital megaphone and who should be unplugged from the web. Their amount of concentrated authority resembles the divine right of kings, and is sparking a backlash that is still gathering force.

The abovementioned tech companies have developed over the last thirty years or so, with the rise of computers and the Internet, but California has always been considered a land of

opportunity, ever since the Gold Rush of 1849. As a result, the term "California Dream" was coined, denoting a rapid rise to wealth not necessarily through the hard work and disciplined lifestyle with which the American Dream was initially associated[13], but rather owing to "audacity and good luck" (Brands 458). After a severe drought at the beginning of the 1860s the price of land surrounding Los Angeles plummeted and wealthy investors connected to railroad construction started purchasing it in order to resell it at a much higher cost. They lured prospective buyers by aggressively promoting Southern California's pleasant climate, beautiful coastal landscapes and laid-back lifestyle. At the beginning of the twentieth century the business flourished, stimulated further by the oil boom. More and more migrants could find employment as companies started setting up manufacturing facilities in the area. During World War II, the defense and aircraft industries began developing quickly in California, attracting even more people from all over the country and stimulating the suburban housing boom, "contributing to hollowing out the urban core" (Dymski and Veitch 44). Property prices grew then steadily on, reaching a peak in the 1980s. Meanwhile, all kinds of companies providing services connected with real estate, especially mortgage lenders, went from strength to strength, also due to the fact that they "almost always operated under state law, with little regulation" (Doti 147). It was a golden era and as stakes were very high, malpractice, fraud and all kinds of shady dealings were unavoidable.

Nevertheless, California's history is not solely about the drive for wealth, fame, power or control. It has also been, particularly from the 1960s onwards, the stage of important movements —green, feminist, antiwar— going against the tide, advocating an alternative way of life, and fighting for peace, freedom, tolerance and equality. Even if they eventually became divided and set at variance, they have made a contribution of lasting value to American history, culture and collective consciousness. Many of these movements came into

[13] In the 1920s various authors, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald or Sinclair Lewis, started debunking the mythologized ethos of the American Dream, albeit with radically different strategies, in their works (Augustyn 14).

existence during the development of the hippie subculture, born in San Francisco as part of the countercultural phenomenon of the 1960s. Historian William Rorabaugh believes that hippies had a very significant influence on the shaping of American society as we know it today, for several reasons:

> First, this counterculture was a significant part of the massive upheavals of the 1960s, which included civil rights, Black Power, feminism and gay liberation, as well as looser sexual mores, the end of censorship, street protests, political radicalism, and environmentalism. Collectively, these movements profoundly changed the United States. Second, the hippie counterculture was large. Hundreds of thousands of young Americans were, at least for a time, hippies, and millions adopted some if not all hippie beliefs and practices. The numbers mattered. Third, hippie values represented a generational break with traditional middle-class culture. When hordes of people concentrated in a single youth generation simultaneously adopted new thoughts and behaviors, mainstream culture was forced to pay attention. (2)

Both Pynchon and Lynch could observe these revolutionary changes taking place in their home country during their formative years. The writer witnessed the rise of the counterculture movement firsthand, as after receiving his BA in 1959 from Cornell University and working for two years in Seattle as a technical writer for Boeing he moved to Manhattan Beach, California, where he stayed until the early 1970s, and where he wrote his acclaimed novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. As defended by Joanna Freer, author of the monograph *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture*, the resistance movements of the time considerably influenced his world view and consequently his work, which features various counterculture characters and an underlying political commentary revealing Pynchon's steadily growing "antipathy to capitalism" and his "relative sympathy for anarchist solutions" (2). All of

Pynchon's novels include anarchist characters, who are pictured sympathetically but never idealized, and various allusions to anarchy. Jesús Arrabal from the *Crying of Lot 49*, Francisco Squalidozzi from *Gravity's Rainbow*, the 24fps militant student collective from *Vineland*, or, most notably, the anarchist Traverse family from *Against the Day* —each in their own way stand up to oppressive authority, the corrupt institutions. Their attempts are often misdirected or futile and their ideas utopian, but nevertheless they come across as individuals brave enough to oppose forces of much greater power and influence, in the name of freedom and justice. Still, the writer, never one to settle for definitive ideas or points of view, irrespective of his personal sympathies, remained critical of the countercultural movements and the actions of their representatives. As Joanna Freer stresses, his "politics are subtle and complex, and he must not be aligned too readily with any established ideology" (*Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* 2).

David Lynch, on the other hand, was a younger observer of the social revolution taking place in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s and was also considerably affected by it, although in different ways than Pynchon. Most importantly, he was early on introduced to Transcendental Meditation, a movement initially associated on US soil with the hippie culture. Lynch's first encounter with the meditation technique, developed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and embraced by many American celebrities of the time, such as *The Beach Boys*, took place in 1973 in Los Angeles (*Catching the Big Fish* 4). It was a landmark in the director's life as Transcendental Meditation has accompanied him ever since. In his own words: "My thirty-three-year practice of the Transcendental Meditation program has been central to my work in film and painting and to all areas of my life. For me it has been the way to dive deeper in search of the big fish" (*Catching the Big Fish* 2). The countercultural movement, therefore, seems to have a different significance for the writer and for the film

director —it influenced the former mainly at a political and ideological level, while for the latter it was more of a personal, spiritual experience.

Before embarking on a more detailed analysis of Pynchon's and Lynch's ties with California and the influence of its spirit on their works, I wanted once again to emphasize the Golden State's uniqueness, stemming from its very specific combination of geographical, historical, and social features. Few can remain indifferent to it and highly polarized opinions are usually expressed about the individual Californian constructs. Such terms as "paradise," "Eden," "promised land," have often been applied to California and writing about it "leads one to hyperbole," as Mark Baldassare suggests in the foreword to his book *California in the New Millennium: The Changing Social and Political Landscape*. The scholar backs his words with a quote from an article included in the November 1991 special issue of *Time* magazine, devoted entirely to the Golden State:

> If America is the land where the world goes in search of miracles and redemption, California is the land where Americans go. It is America's America, the symbol of raw hope and brave (even foolish) invention, where ancient traditions and inhibitions are abandoned at the border. Its peculiar culture squirts out—on film and menus and pages and television beams—the trends and tastes that sweep the rest of the country, and then the rest of the world. If California broke off and dissolved in salt water, America would lose its seasoning. (Baldassare XI)

However, there are also those who register the emptiness concealed behind the superficial splendor. In an analogy to L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, political science professor Larry N. Gerston likens California to "the unpredictable and mysterious Emerald City, the over-the-top venue where Dorothy meets the almighty Wizard who seems to manipulate everything and everyone from behind the infamous green curtain while, in reality, owing only the empty power of illusion" (3). Such a state of affairs is never

sustainable in the long run and various academics have been sounding warnings for some time now that this incredible place is indeed starting to "dissolve," that its romanticized façade is crumbling, revealing that only a handful of chosen ones can participate in the splendor while others toil away in their shadow[14]. Still, California does not cease to fascinate, even when its identity is facing gradual disintegration. All of the previously discussed aspects —the history distortions, the frequent occurrence of natural disasters, the abundance of theme parks created to "foster illusions" of "real childishness" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 13), the ubiquitous presence of the film industry with its artificiality and false promises, and the choice of some of the most powerful and unscrupulous corporations in the world to set up their headquarters there, but also the beauty of its landscapes, the pleasantness of the climate and a record for harboring movements advocating positive change —make California a land of extremes: multifaceted, ambiguous and beguiling but never dull. This is why it has been chosen so often as a setting by writers and filmmakers, frequently becoming not only a background, but even one of the "protagonists" of the works in which it is featured. Pynchon and Lynch have also recognized its allure and each of them set three of their works in California —the state of illusion, unreality and consequently a hotbed of possible worlds.

In this chapter I would like to concentrate on the totality of Pynchon's and Lynch's output, in order to prove that almost all of their works are permeated with paranoia, various obsessions and conspiracy theories. I will particularly focus on Pynchon's and Lynch's respective "California trilogies." At this point in the text, I will only touch upon Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, which I will be discussing in detail in the next chapters. In order to prepare the ground for the abovementioned analyses, I will also

[14] For more information on the problems besetting contemporary California, see the previously quoted Peter Schrag, Mike Davis, Mark Baldassare, Larry N. Gerston as well as Manuel Pastor's *State of Resistance: What California's Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America's Future* (2018) and David Rieff's *Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World* (1991).

briefly present both creators' profiles with an emphasis on their connections to the Golden State.

2.3 The Journey Without: Thomas Pynchon

Thomas Pynchon's life and writing have always been inextricably linked with paranoia. The novelist is known for his reclusive behavior, as he has evaded journalists and photographers ever since the onset of his writing career, and has communicated his presence and expressed his opinions publicly very few times until today. In contrast to other celebrated writers, not many facts are known about Pynchon's life. He was born in 1937 in Glen Cove, Long Island, served two years in the Navy, graduated from Cornell University, where he studied engineering physics and English, worked as technical writer at Boeing, published his first novel, *V.*, in 1963 and immediately gained wide recognition. Legend has it that *Time* magazine sent a photographer to meet the successful author, who lived in Mexico City at that time, but Pynchon jumped out of the window of his apartment as soon as he saw the journalist coming, and ran away (Poole). His aversion to the media, public appearances and all kinds of ceremonies has never waned —he has never given an interview or let himself be photographed, he has never showed up in person for any official event, not even when he received prestigious literary awards, such as the National Book Award for *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1974. Comedian Irwin Corey accepted it on the writer's behalf, delivering a speech abounding in bad jokes and malapropisms and accompanied by a brief appearance of a nude man. Pynchon's publisher at the time asked Corey for this favor and the comedian accepted, thrilled with the absurdity of the whole situation:

> Pynchon didn't know me, I didn't know Pynchon, so since we didn't know each other there could be no responsibility as to the identity of the guy who was accepting

> the award. Because they didn't know Pynchon, I didn't know Pynchon —Pynchon, I wonder if he knows himself? […] It was a very, very interesting assignment. But the fact is that everybody thought I was Pynchon there. And I was beginning to think that maybe I've been reincarnated. ("THOMAS PYNCHON National Book Award 1973" 00:04:59 – 00:05:41)

Therefore, not only does Pynchon shun public appearances and media attention, he has also deliberately built a wall of illusion around himself, fabricated a crazy false persona, making it even more difficult for his trackers to unearth facts about him. But, at the same time, this atmosphere of mystery has turned "finding Thomas Pynchon" into more of an exciting challenge. Along with the author's rising status in the literary world, speculations about Pynchon's closely guarded private life flourished. The wildest stories have been conceived by inquisitive journalists in search of sensation, by literary critics or fans:

> People have said that Thomas Pynchon is "really" J. D. Salinger; that he travels around by bus, crisscrossing the country and leaving little clues as to his identity; that he's posed as a literary-minded bag lady who writes letters to an obscure Northern California newspaper (there's a new book out about that, *The Letters of Wanda Tinasky*). There was even a rumor, hotly debated on the Pynchon Websites on the Internet, that Thomas Pynchon was the Unabomber. Pynchon showed up at an apple-picking fest in Northern California, calling himself Tom Pinecone; Pynchon was walking the Mason-Dixon line, researching his next book, said to be a "big one." (Sales)

The "conspiracy theory-esque" speculation on Pynchon being the Unabomber gave way to other, equally wild conjectures —he was for example suspected of speaking to Lee Harvey Oswald on a bus to Mexico City, just before the John F. Kennedy assassination (Dubini and Dubini 00:05:33 – 00:06:21). Some people spread false rumors on purpose,

teasingly trying to disrupt reality even further. The New York rock band *Lotion* revealed in a 1996 interview for *The New Yorker* that Pynchon had appeared backstage after their concert, "wearing a Godzilla T-shirt," (Glazek) claiming to be their fan and offering some random facts about himself and his strange habits. Thirteen years later they admitted to have been providing false information, "designed to be 'as Pynchonesque as possible'" (Glazek). They, in fact, had met the writer, although in quite different circumstances and just wanted to stir a bit of excitement, to which Pynchon "raised no public objections" (Glazek). In fact, bits and pieces of information about his life have been contributed by various people throughout the years —ex-girlfriends, friends and colleagues— which has allowed for constructing a skeleton outline of the novelist's biography (such as the one written by Nancy Jo Sales in the article for *New York Magazine* quoted above). Based on the existing fact-checked information, Pynchon does not seem to be such a paranoid hermit with a shady past, as some people tend to believe. He lives in New York, with his wife who is also his literary agent, and his son Jackson. He is not as withdrawn from public life anymore —a few years ago he agreed to write a couple of reviews for *The New York Times*, he met personally with other prominent novelists such as Don DeLillo or Salman Rushdie (Sales), and even playfully appeared on two episodes of *The Simpsons*, voicing himself —although with a paper bag on his head as, apparently, Pynchon is still adamant about showing his face, even a cartoon version of it. There are various theories as to why the novelist has been behaving in an apparently paranoid way all his life and why he has currently relaxed his stance a bit. According to librarian and Pynchon historian Stephen Tomaske, who was interviewed by Nancy Jo Sales: "There's some circumstantial evidence that Pynchon felt a growing dissatisfaction with the idea of the writer as celebrity. If Norman Mailer or Truman Capote picked up a pen, it had become news. And it struck Pynchon as unseemly" (Sales). Still, there are other hypothesis to explain his behavior which take into account that the writer, in his

youth, witnessed McCarthy's anti-Communist investigations and later the assassination of president Kennedy. In the opinion of Charles Hollander, an independent Pynchon scholar: "Pynchon writes in a kind of code about the increasing role of government in subjugating the individual to the state. He and his writing are both camouflaged because he fears the power of the state" (Sales). This fear has been waning in recent years however, because "Pynchon has grown powerful. Now that he benefits from mainstream fame, his self-protection feels less political, more psychological" (Kachka).

Regardless of this shift in the writer's personal life, paranoia remains one of the most important themes in his works. It is "not just an identifying characteristic; it is the driving force," as Charles Hollander points out in his essay "Pynchon's Inferno." Thomas Pynchon has always been considered one of the most important creators of postmodern paranoid fiction. In line with Noam Chomsky's beliefs, quoted in the previous chapter, the writer considers paranoia to be the US national disease. In a country where information is produced at such speed and in such quantities that it cannot be absorbed, effective communication, in fact, becomes problematic. By paying attention just to certain details out of the plethora of unrelated inputs surrounding us, a paranoiac manages to produce personal structures of meaning, thus creating a space for themselves in which they can function according to their own rules. Obsessions and conspiracy theories ultimately become the projection of the paranoid's own needs and desires. "For Pynchon paranoia is part of a process," Hollander observes adding that in the writer's works "paranoia usually evolves out of a sense of being disinherited and evolves into a need for apocalypse." Whatever the reasons for Pynchon's characters' feelings of helplessness, confusion, injustice, threat or persecution, their ultimate solution is to face their fears headlong, to jump into the darkness of the unknown, even if they suspect it might end badly —and it always does, one way or another. This is the repeated pattern according to which events unfold in Pynchon's works: "paranoia, rage, and eventual

conflagration" (Hollander). On the other hand, however, by going against the current, living on the fringes of society, outside of the omnipresent, generally accepted power structures, the characters gain a specific form of freedom, albeit a bitter one. Pynchon's heroes are losers, the disinherited and the dispossessed, the pariahs and the fugitives whose invisibility, by some considered a curse, can also be viewed as a kind of blessing. The writer takes the Calvinist doctrine of preterition —which puts forward the idea that God left some people out of their will, not choosing them to be saved nor damned, just passing them over, which is in itself another form of punishment— and turns it around, by suggesting that those who have been forsaken are in fact the only ones to enjoy real freedom. Those who are saved —the elect— and those who are damned —the reprobate— enjoy God's attention but have absolutely no control over their destiny either way; those who were left unpredestined, the preterites, can, on the one hand, be considered as outcasts, the "untouchables," but, on the other hand, they are the only ones who can escape the all-seeing eye and forge their fates by themselves, however unalluring they may be:

> Note the irony: through God's abandonment, the preterites are the only people given the gift of freedom. While the elect and reprobate have sealed fates, the preterite can take pleasure in uncertain futures. For a thinker like Pynchon, who places a great premium on freedom, preterition rates much higher than the other two conditions. In embracing preterition, Pynchon stands Calvinism on its head. In his view, predestination of any kind—whether for heaven, hell, or anything in between—makes life rather pointless. It lacks drama and moral gravity. One would be hard-pressed to consider it even human. (Lacey)

This freedom however does not equal happiness or fulfillment for Pynchon's characters and only some know how to derive satisfaction from it. For the majority, it is just a moral victory, the only thing they can find comfort in while they slowly drown in a sea of injustice. In

Pynchon's works, the preterite is the underdog, deprived of equal opportunities or even hounded —due to gender, like Oedipa Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49*, race, like the Herero people pictured in *V.* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, social status, like Zoyd Wheeler from *Vineland*, place of birth, like the Majistral family from *V.*— and often acting as the dogsbody for the elect —the ruling class.

In one of the very few pieces of non-fiction ever written by Pynchon, and his only public social statement —the 1966 article for *The New York Times*, "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts"— the preterite defended by the author, the pariahs, are the inhabitants of Watts, a neighborhood in southern Los Angeles. At that time, it was a crime-ridden area, populated by economically underprivileged African Americans, unable to improve their situation due to a wall of prejudice, racism and hypocrisy built around them by the Los Angeles authorities and other Caucasian "little men," as Pynchon calls them. In 1965, unjustified police brutality against an African American family resulted in several days of violent riots in the neighborhood and a general, lasting distrust of the Watts inhabitants towards the white community. In his article Pynchon suggested that, since then, African Americans became paranoid and regarded all actions taken by the Caucasians, even those of social workers trying to help them, as treacherous and aimed at eliminating them from the "white fantasy" world of Los Angeles, in which Watts was "a pocket of bitter reality" ("A Journey Into the Mind of Watts").

The article is also the only text in which Pynchon describes Los Angeles, passing an opinion on the city, not through the mouth of one of his characters but under his own name, in his own voice. For him, the City of Angels in the 1960s was already the kingdom of the hyperreal, especially when juxtaposed against the Watts landscape:

> Overhead, big jets now and then come vacuum-cleanering in to land; the wind is westerly, and Watts lies under the approaches to L.A. International. The jets hang

> what seems only a couple of hundred feet up in the air; through the smog they show up more white than silver, highlighted by the sun, hardly solid; only the ghosts, or possibilities, of airplanes.
>
> Much of the white culture that surrounds Watts – and, in a curious way, besieges it – looks like those jets: a little unreal, a little less than substantial. For Los Angeles, more than any other city, belongs to the mass media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, as old radio jokes, as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks. It is basically a white Scene, and illusion is everywhere in it, from the giant aerospace firms that flourish or retrench at the whims of Robert McNamara, to the "action" everybody mills long the Strip on weekends looking for, unaware that they, and their search which will end, usually, unfulfilled, are the only action in town. ("A Journey Into the Mind of Watts")

Pynchon submitted the article to *The New York Times* a year after he published his second novel: *The Crying of Lot 49*. The latter is set in the fictional town of San Narciso, California, between Los Angeles and Berkeley and Pynchon's descriptions of these locations also emphasize their unreal, dreamy quality, their artificiality and the resulting false promises of wealth, success, and a better life that could also be extended to the preterite. *The Crying of Lot 49* is chronologically the first title in the "California trilogy"[15] which also includes *Vineland* and *Inherent Vice*. The books were published in quite long time intervals —1965, 1990 and 2009, respectively— and do not feature the same Californian locations. Yet the way Pynchon depicts the state and its very specific atmosphere remains quite consistent from

[15] This term has been used by various scholars researching the works of Thomas Pynchon following the publication of *Inherent Vice*, such as Hanjo Berressem in the essay "Life on the Beach: The Natural Elements in Thomas Pynchon's California Trilogy" and Scott McClintock in the essay "The Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State of California in Pynchon's Fiction," both included in the collection *Pynchon's California* (2014), or Diana Benea in her study "Thomas Pynchon's Hybrid California(s): In Search of Spatial/Social Justice in *Inherent Vice*" included in *A Dark California: Essays on Dystopian Depictions in Popular Culture* (2017).

novel to novel and is significant for the way feelings of paranoia and persecution are produced in the protagonists.

Despite its relative shortness, *The Crying of Lot 49*, which I have chosen as the point of comparison with David Lynch's works and will discuss extensively in the next chapter, is in fact very complex and touches upon all the recurrent topics in Pynchon's entire body of work, such as paranoia, conspiracy theories, the quest for identity, the inevitability of entropy and the futility of resistance to power structures. *The Crying of Lot 49* offers a vast amount of material for interpretation, as each of its sentences is "full of hermeneutic potential," "replete with interpretive seductions," as Patrick O'Donnell puts it in his work *Latent Destinies. Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*, where he claims that one can repeatedly return to the novel "seeking the revelation —epiphany, message, cry— as to what lies at the bottom of the novel's furious textual activity, even if there is no bottom" (82). Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, is a Californian housewife who, while performing her duties as executor of her deceased ex-boyfriend's will, stumbles upon pieces of evidence suggesting the existence of a worldwide conspiracy, rooted deeply in history and mysteriously revealing more and more connections with her own life. She embarks on a quest which will lead her to even more unknowns than she was facing at the starting point, which seriously undermines her sanity.

Oedipa can be perceived as a flat character, defined mainly by her pursuit, her part in the conspiracy, some superior structure without which she wouldn't exist. According to John McMichaels this "comic book quality" of Pynchon's characters "reflects the cartoon emptiness of the world we live in," and the fact that "people are not quite human any more (or that we have become inhuman in a new way)."

> Pynchon's characters look around for someone to blame. It becomes the good guys versus the bad guys. Pynchon creates tension when, on the one hand, he shows that

> characters' conspiracy theories are merely delusions while, on the other hand, he gives historical details that are really true, daring the reader to believe. If we do go along with the plot, we become like the characters —Herbert Stencil, Oedipa Maas, Tyrone Slothrop (as well as Greta Erdmann, when paranoid meets paranoid in *Gravity's Rainbow*). They interpret these facts, or random events, that Pynchon provides, by incorporating them into their own paranoid delusional structure. (McMichaels)

On the other hand, Oedipa can also be seen as a rather strong female character. As a 1960s housewife she is the preterite in the novel —often marginalized, objectified and treated condescendingly. But when she is given the opportunity to change her life, she bravely takes up the challenge and starts plowing her way through the man's world of the time. Despite her growing paranoia and suspicions that she is dealing with some very powerful forces she most probably has no possibility to oppose, she continues her quest, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, even if it means learning a horrible truth. This is her journey without —an insatiable curiosity pushing her to abandon the comfort and safety of her suburban life. Oedipa is aware that she might not get all the answers but at least she can feel that she is not living a lie.

Vineland is Pynchon's second novel set in California, but this time during Reagan's 1980s, with many flashbacks to the period of Nixon's presidency. The novel tells the story of Zoyd Wheeler, a hippie and a single father who supports himself and his daughter Prairie on state mental disability checks he receives thanks to doing "something publicly crazy" (*Vineland* 3) which can be broadcast live on television once a year. Their relatively uneventful life in the fictional town of Vineland is disrupted, however, by the reappearance of an FBI agent, Brock Vond, for whom Prairie's mother, Frenesi, left Zoyd in the 1960s. At that time, Frenesi was taking part in a hippie revolution at the College of the Surf —also fictional—, but

her attraction to Vond pushed her to betray the rebels and eventually go into a witness protection program. The novel jumps between the 1960s and the 1980s as teenage Prairie discovers more and more about the mother she had never seen and former participants in the revolution reveal what is left of the ideals they subscribed to twenty years back.

The comparison of these two time periods in American history serves to show, among other things, the way governing and law enforcement bodies in the US have tended to use the tactic of keeping the nation in check and united around the fight against a common threat by pursuing some public enemy, a scapegoat, to mount a "strategy for forgoing political consensus" (Malpas and Taylor 126). In *Vineland,* Pynchon "is most explicitly concerned with twentieth-century US history, specifically the transition from the left-wing political radicalism of the 1960s to the repressions of the Reaganite 1980s, dual moments in which the production of paranoia in friend and foe alike works to support an authoritarian body politic" (Malpas and Taylor 126). The writer emphasizes the way in which the government's strategy has been taking its toll on the nation by insidiously and imperceptibly changing the US citizens' mind frame. As Salman Rushdie observes in a review of *Vineland* for *The New York Times*: "There is a marvelously telling moment when Brock Vond's brainchild, his school for subversion in which lefties are re-educated and turned into tools of the state, is closed down because in Reagan's America the young think like that to begin with, they don't need re-education" (Rushdie). It is important to note, however, that some academics believe that the beginning of this political transition was already depicted by Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49*. As Casey Shoop points out in his essay "Thomas Pynchon, Postmodernism, and the Rise of the New Right in California," the novel was published the same year Ronald Reagan was elected governor of the state —something *The New York Times* hoped, in an editorial printed a month before the election, would not happen, trusting that the Californians would "surely tell the difference between a career politician with a substantial record and a former

Hollywood actor performing in the role of a politician" (51). Shoop believes that Oedipa's quest for truth could represent her generation's uncertainty in the times of political transition, the "mourning […] for precisely those verities that no longer keep her world on the side of the real" (52).

California, and specifically the northern town of Vineland also play an important role in the 1990 novel by being a reminder of the myth of the Californian rural retreat where outsiders and underdogs can find peace. What Pynchon suggests, however, is that contrary to popular belief and the protagonists' hopes, small Californian towns do not offer a safe haven for those trying to hide from their past mistakes and shameful deeds. They will carry their bitter baggage right into the idyllic landscapes and will be constantly reminded of what they did and saw —by their own memories or sometimes even by agents of the government. This is what happens most explicitly in the case of Zoyd, Frenesi and their friends, who are unable to free themselves from the memories of the more carefree time in their lives and of the string of humiliations they had to endure or the disgraceful acts they committed against their loved ones, once the government stepped in to take down the utopian community. "Vineland is a haunted space, gradually revealing the traces of denied and officially negated violence, the dismantling of democracy as well as class inequality and social injustice,"[16] ("Kryptomimesis" 119, my translation) as Zofia Kolbuszewska aptly puts it. The cozy atmosphere of Vineland —a small town where everybody knows each other— and its charming landscapes, do not mean that it is too insignificant for government agents to pay attention to or too idyllic to prevent evil from entering it. It might just offer a temporary respite from paranoia, a fleeting illusion of safety and peace, but the ghosts of everyone's turbulent past will inevitably arrive to haunt them one way or another.

[16] This quotation is my own translation from the original Polish: "Vineland to przestrzeń nawiedzona, stopniowo odsłaniająca ślady wypartej i oficjalnie zanegowanej przemocy, demontażu demokracji oraz klasowej nierówności i społecznej niesprawiedliwości."

Another important theme in *Vineland* is the ubiquity of television —the Tube in Pynchon's nomenclature— in the 1980s and the enormous influence it had on shaping the nation's convictions and shared imaginary at that time. In this novel, Pynchon "reinforces a paranoid suspicion —shared with postmodern theorists like Baudrillard, Jameson and Lyotard— of the new hypermedia" (Cornis-Pope 108). The author sees the Tube as a tool for twisting history to align it with the ideology of the Establishment; it is an accessible, appealing media which requires no effort to be used. It offers hyperreal simulations of real life, through the feature films, sitcoms, cartoons, advertisements and other programs it broadcasts. Their attractiveness is such that for many the Tube becomes a highly addictive drug[17], much preferable to everyday humdrum. Therefore, it is the perfect tool for manipulation employed by powerful individuals and institutions that control the media, as they can bias the communication in an almost imperceptible way. In order to break through the informational noise the Tube creates, one must search for other sources of data. That is exactly what Prairie Wheeler, a "younger counterpart of Oedipa Maas" (Cornis-Pope 109) does when gathering information about her estranged mother —from written documents, film reels, digital files and conversations with people who knew her. This way she manages to reconstruct a portrait of Frenesi and of the 1960s counterculture movement her mother took part in untainted by tendentious Tubal representations, one that she can relate to:

> The web of images and stories that Prairie weaves together creates inroads into the "Tube maddened" world of 1984, disturbing its manipulative diegesis. The role of this multimedia reconstruction is twofold: It frees Frenesi's generation of some of its

[17] Writer David Foster Wallace, whose work has often been compared with Pynchon's, provided a similar vision of how the television of the future would affect people in his novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) —centering the plot on the case of a missing videotape called "The Entertainment" containing a film so absorbing that whoever watched it lost interest in their basic needs, starting to resemble an utterly demented person, and continued re-watching the tape until they died. The tape was even sought by a terrorist organization that wanted to use it as a weapon of mass destruction.

> guilt and misconceptions; it also gives Prarie, the disinherited progeny of the Tubal Age, a sense of familiar and cultural belonging. (Cornis-Pope 109)

The ending of *Vineland* is ambiguous. Although it might be interpreted as a happy one, with the protagonists remaining safely out of the reach of the crazed FBI agent who had been pursuing them, it also leaves a bitter aftertaste, suggesting that even the seemingly most idyllic places are rife with corruption and abuse.

The last novel in Pynchon's "California trilogy," *Inherent Vice*, was published in 2009 and is considered to be the most accessible and laid-back in the writer's *oeuvre* to date. Nevertheless, it is not free from paranoid undertones, which, this time, are presented through the classic aesthetics of a *neo-noir* detective story. The novel is set in Los Angeles, at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. The protagonist, Larry "Doc" Sportello, an easy-going private detective investigating the disappearance of his ex-girlfriend, finds the trace of an obscure but clearly very powerful organization, which seems to control many shady businesses all over the city. To unearth the truth about it he often follows his own paranoid premonitions, because, as he explains, "in the business, paranoia was the tool of the trade, it pointed you in directions you might not have seen to go" (*Inherent Vice* 116). In pursuit of increasingly vague clues, he is witness to the twilight of the hippie revolution embodied by the overshadowing of the free love era by the Manson murders. In Michiko Kakutani's opinion, the novel is just "a simple shaggy-dog detective story that pits likable dopers against the Los Angeles Police Department and its 'countersubversive' agents, a novel in which paranoia is less a political or metaphysical state than a byproduct of smoking too much weed" ("Another Doorway to the Paranoid Pynchon Dimension"). However, Kakutani's judgment of the novel feels rash as I believe *Inherent Vice* still features many of the disturbing Pynchonian themes such as obsession with conspiracy theories, manipulation through the media, the hyperreality of life in the United States, and, definitely, the novel's aim is larger than simply

the presentation of a nostalgic, postcard-like landscape of 1970s California. Doc Sportello is, rather than a mere detective, an observer of the decline of a country which served as a haven for all kinds of outcasts, freaks and free spirits. *Inherent Vice* is somewhat nostalgic of the appealing Californian lifestyle of the 1960s and 1970s, complete with the rock music, and the drug and surfer culture —that is why it "would seem like a cartoon of those Times" (Freeman); still, as I have tried to argue and as John Freeman phrases so precisely, it is, at the same time, "all so true":

> Indeed, southern California has become a developer's paradise. Orange County is one of the most conservative parts of the United States. It's impossible to tune in, turn on and drop out, because even on the beach —which is now as polluted as ever— people are plugged in to the mainframe. Amusingly, wistfully, *Inherent Vice* reminds us it wasn't always so.

Between the familiar, cozy allusions to popular culture, danger lurks. In Doc Sportello's and other characters' budding addiction to television, *Inherent Vice* alludes to the fears explicitly presented in *Vineland* (and, to a lesser extent, in *The Crying of Lot 49*) —that whatever is shown on the Tube and voraciously consumed by the viewers affects the way they perceive the world around them, it affects reality itself, as it merges with the onscreen fiction. The threat is explicit even in the telling name of a housing development built by a real-estate mogul, whose disappearance Doc is also investigating —Channel View Estates— "a future homesite where elements of some wholesome family will quite soon be gathering night after night, to gaze tubeward" (*Inherent Vice* 22). The theme of the Los Angeles housing development and land speculation is present throughout the book and is linked to various conspiracies. It also constitutes an indication of an aggressive promotion of the suburban, consumerist lifestyle in the USA, carried out by the people in power for whom the masses subscribing to such a lifestyle represent a sustained source of income. Pynchon also touches

upon the issue of paranoia stemming from the development of information technology when describing Doc's first encounter with ARPAnet, the precursor of the Internet: "Remember how they outlawed acid as soon as they found out it was a channel to something they didn't want us to see. Why should information be any different?" (*Inherent Vice* 195). In 2009, when *Inherent Vice* was published, Internet celebrated its fortieth anniversary. Search engine Google —eleven years old at the time— and social networking service Facebook —five years old at the time—, initially viewed as companies working for the betterment of human life through promoting technological progress, were already gaining strength at incredible speed, relentlessly marching towards the near-monopolist status they currently hold in their respective areas of Internet activity. When Pynchon was writing *Vineland*, it was already clear for him that the information made available to the people via Tube was produced in excessive amounts and was easily manipulated by whomever had the adequate power and pull. Information technology, which seemed to give more freedom to ordinary users, eventually became corrupted as well —transforming into an incredibly efficient surveillance tool used by government agencies aided by the abovementioned tech giants. In *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon once again argues that no matter how promising and open the new technology is, there will always be someone who will perceive the freedom it gives to the general public as a threat.

The relative simplicity of the novel's narrative, when compared to Pynchon's other works, as well as the cinematic quality the *neo-noir* aesthetics provides, resulted in *Inherent Vice* being Pynchon's first work to be adapted to the screen. Paul Thomas Anderson's homonymous film attempts quite successfully at conveying the hazy atmosphere of the book and outlining its main themes. Pynchon's dense net of allusions to many classic detective films such as Roman Polański's *Chinatown* (1974) or Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), as well as to iconic characters from a much later time period such as laid-back slacker Jeff Lebowski from the Coen brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (1998) or drug-gobbling Raoul

Duke from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) offers a treat for reference spotters. Paul Thomas Anderson eagerly pursues this path in the film, making the references even clearer in the visual layer of the film as well as through the soundtrack which mainly includes songs from the 1960s and the 1970s but also pieces created in the 2000s. This intertextuality serves as a subtle reminder that *Inherent Vice* is not exactly a nostalgic look at the past, but it rather provides a context for the social, political and technological changes which took place in the decades leading up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. Paul Thomas Anderson is also known for a deft depiction of the rise and fall of the pre-VHS pornographic film industry in the Los Angeles of the 1970s and the 1980s in *Boogie Nights* (1997), in which he tackles some of the themes also present in *Inherent Vice*.

Even though my dissertation focuses on California as the setting of Pynchon's novels, and specifically as the setting of *The Crying of Lot 49*, which I will analyze in depth in the next chapter, the themes of paranoia and conspiracy theories run through all of his works. Therefore, I consider it relevant to provide an overview of these works as well, paying special attention to the abovementioned themes as well as to other elements which connect Pynchon's writings —recurring characters, places, institutions and organizations, etc.—, which could be viewed as a playfully constructed "scheme" in itself.

I would like to present these works ordering them according to their relevance to the topic of my dissertation. Therefore, I would like to begin with the description of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) —an extremely complex and dense novel set during World War II in Europe. The narrative focuses on the deterioration of a paranoid's mind as his obsession progresses. The main character, US Army lieutenant Tyrone Slothrop, whose amorous conquests in London seem to be connected with the V-2 rocket hit sites in the city, learns that he might have been conditioned as an infant to react to the missiles by being sexually aroused. When on furlough in post-war France at Casino Hermann Göring, he learns about the existence of a

mysterious rocket with the serial number 00000 and about its component, called the S-Gerät, which contains a new plastic, Imipolex G. It is suggested that Laszlo Jamf, the creator of Imipolex, was involved in Slothrop's conditioning. The plot becomes more and more complicated as it develops, numerous characters surrounding Slothrop appear and disappear, sometimes never to return again, while he embarks on a quixotic quest to find the 00000 rocket and to learn more about his past. During his travels he stumbles upon various indications of the existence of an international corporate conspiracy involved in the development of the V-2 rocket —possibly including such companies as IG Farben, Shell, ICI, GE, Du Pont—, playing a double game as "the true war is a celebration of the markets" (*Gravity's Rainbow* 107). The story abounds in alternate threads, which are intertwined fragmentarily with the main story line concerning Slothrop, whose real identity, at the same time, becomes blurred under the pressure of unanswered questions and the abundance of possible but never definite answers. At some point during his adventures, well before the end of the novel, the US Army lieutenant takes on various disguises when travelling across Europe, becoming Rocketman or the pig-hero Plechazunga, among others, and, as he fully identifies with whichever incarnation he chooses, Slothrop's own personality disintegrates completely[18]. Deborah L. Madsen, Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Geneva, suggests that:

> these putative disparate selves have no awareness of each other and so do not represent any kind of unifying convergence of identities into a singular and authoritative "Slothrop." […] The recurring albatross metaphor, which alludes intertextually to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), […] is used

[18] The concept of a fragmented personality that manifests itself through the protagonist's enacting a number of different roles appears also in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Oedipa Maas reminisces at the beginning of the novel about her late ex-boyfriend, who had called her once in the middle of the night to impersonate various characters over the phone ─such as a "secretary at the Transylvanian Consulate, looking for an escaped bat" (6), a Gestapo officer or the narrator of a popular radio drama *Detective Story Hour*, The Shadow─ using different voices and accents. In this case it could also mean a need to annihilate one's own identity, which is becoming too much of a burden and an attempt to hide among widely recognized "symbols" that are ultimately devoid of meaning.

> pejoratively to evoke the image of self-hood as a source of anxiety, a burden of responsibility and also a liability. ("Alterity" 148)

Therefore, even though Pynchon condemns Slothrop to the seemingly grim fate of being a forever-insatiable and always frustrated seeker, finally devoured by his own quest for truth, the writer, in fact, puts him on the path to salvation, by injecting meaning or even a multiplicity of meanings into his life and sparing him the anxiety and "burden of responsibility" connected with maintaining a consistent identity.

The void created by the horrors of World War II in people's lives and in their system of values, could be alleviated by faith that an underlying structure still exists and everyone is linked to it, controlled by it. "If there is something comforting—religious, if you want—about paranoia, there is still also anti-paranoia, where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long," (441) Pynchon suggests in the novel. As Alan J. Friedman and Manfred Puetz point out in their article "Science as Metaphor: Thomas Pynchon and *Gravity's Rainbow*" the writer presents these two types of delusions as not entirely opposed but rather constituting a dichotomy —they complement each other and even cannot exist without one another: "If there is any single message cutting loud and clear through the infernal din of *Gravity's Rainbow*, it is the message that order and chaos (and hence paranoia and antiparanoia) should not be seen as antagonists of the either/or type but as elements of one and the same universal movement" (358-59).

Gravity's Rainbow also features an important "California moment" —in three of the final sections of the last chapter, in the midst of preparations for the launch of the rocket in Germany, the reader is suddenly transported to contemporary Los Angeles. At the beginning of the first of these sections, entitled "COUNTDOWN," it is not yet made clear that it is the City of Angels, although it is suggested through the descriptions of the characteristic surroundings and "suntanned" people. Pynchon confuses the American reader on purpose,

creating in them[19] a feeling of disorientation after being abruptly transported from postwar Germany to a place and a time which are, in fact, much more familiar to them. The protagonist of the section, the "Kabbalist spokesman Steve Edelman" (768), who is paranoid and addicted to tranquilizing drugs, discloses the origin of the Tree of Life[20]:

> Edelman does not seem the most reliable source for such an improbable promise of redemption (in the form of a symbol clearly opposed to the meanings of the Rocket); he appears a contemporary incarnation of the Kabbalists and theosophists who seek futile escape from the inevitable in wartime London earlier in the novel. The section invokes the stereotype of California as a mecca for such desperate or insincere promises of redemption and positions the reader as a skeptical outsider in that setting. (J. Miller 185)

Once again California is presented as a place where illusion and false hopes are easier to believe in, due to the ever-present indications of economic success, technological progress and the optimism-boosting sunlight. It is also a place where those illusions are as likely to fail as everywhere else. Pynchon alternates the final sections of *Gravity's Rainbow* set in contemporary Los Angeles with those set in postwar Germany, just before the rocket launch. But the very last section takes place in a Californian cinema, where the screening of a film is interrupted and the audience starts singing, metaphorically facing "the last moment" or in other words "death" by joining together in an act of "creativity and community" (J. Miller 188). Therefore, by closing the novel with a scene set in contemporary United States Pynchon suggests two things: that following the horrors of World War II "sunny Southern California is no less shadowed by the Rocket and all it represents than Peenemunde or South West Africa,"

[19] In order to avoid using gender specific pronouns for gender-neutral third person, I will use singular "they" throughout the dissertation.

[20] Tree of Life —one of the central concepts in Jewish Kabbalah; it is a diagram which combines the ten emanations (or sefirot) of God's "light" through which they interact with the material world.

but also that despite the feeling of impending doom we are still here, alive, reading the book, enjoying our "freedom and faint hope" (J. Miller 189).

California as a setting appears briefly in one more of Thomas Pynchon's works: *Against the Day* (2007). This extremely complex historical novel takes place approximately between 1893 and 1920, and according to the description posted for some time on Amazon.com and allegedly written by Pynchon himself,

> moves from the labor troubles in Colorado to turn-of-the-century New York, to London and Gottingen, Venice and Vienna, the Balkans, Central Asia, Siberia at the time of the mysterious Tunguska Event, Mexico during the Revolution, postwar Paris, silent-era Hollywood, and one or two places not strictly speaking on the map at all. With a worldwide disaster looming just a few years ahead, it is a time of unrestrained corporate greed, false religiosity, moronic fecklessness, and evil intent in high places. ("Against the Day")

California plays a small part in the book —as the capital of cinema in the making, as a place attracting entrepreneurs, artists and all kinds of free spirits, with hopes of a new, better life, of better opportunities. But this promise of success, bathed in sunlight, already at that time reeks of decay. One of the characters, Roswell Bounce, who is fascinated with the early Hollywood productions and decides to move to California where "the future of light is, in particular the moving pictures," recognizes the industry's potential for darkness: "the public loves those movies, can't get enough of 'em, maybe that's another disease of the mind" (*Against the Day* 456). Just as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, after its plot has gone around the world several times, *Against the Day*'s ending is set in California, and, similarly to *Inherent Vice,* it centers around a *noir*-esque sleuth, Lew Basnight, desperately trying to solve a murder case in Los Angeles. John Miller points out that "as the name implies, noir works by revealing the darknesses that lurk underneath the surfaces or around the corners of the daylit landscape that symbolizes the

hopes and possibilities for the far Western shore" (J. Miller 192). Yet, at the very end of *Against the Day*, Pynchon twists the *noir* convention. Instead of showing the corruption which undermines the paradisiacal façade of the City of Angels and which is too powerful and deep-rooted to eradicate, he closes the novel on a more ambiguous note. The characters, although living tragic, unfulfilling lives, do not seem to be doomed to failure, but are rather suspended in a dreamlike state, unable to move forward, but also protected from hitting rock bottom, once again bringing the preterite to mind. In the opinion of John Miller, this shift in how Los Angeles —"the city of climax"— is presented by Pynchon at the end of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Against the Day* was included by the author to hint at possibilities of "resistance to the forces of determinism" (J. Miller 184). Even though both of these mammoth novels are set in a historical past, which makes the outcome of the events they present known to the reader —suggesting that the chaos reigning the turbulent times they depict ultimately yields to the conspiracy of science, technology and socio-political structures of order— Pynchon seems to change his mind at the very end and injects a dose of hope that there still might be a way of escaping the seemingly inevitable fate.

Pynchon's remaining works, which I have not discussed in this chapter: *V.* (1963), the short story collection *Slow Learner* (1984), *Mason & Dixon* (1997) and *Bleeding Edge* (2013), do not contain Californian episodes, although all of them include paranoid characters, intricate conspiracy theories and hints at the hyperreal aspects of life in the United States and life in general.

In his debut novel, *V.*, Pynchon depicts a paranoid quest in search for meaning, symbolized by the mysterious title. The main character, traveler Herbert Stencil, sets out on a trip to decode and find V., an enigmatic entity described by his late father, a British diplomat and spy, in his diaries. Clues pointing to the existence of V., the incarnations of which include various women, places and animals, abound but ultimately lead nowhere, creating only noise

that fuels Stencil's mania. The obsessed protagonist attempts to act in accordance to this multiplicity —he always refers to himself in the third person in order to create multiple personalities and be able to "assume the roles of observers of history," therefore he loses his own identity in the process, becoming "someone quite inhuman"[21] ("Obsesja sprawczości i siła niezamierzonego oporu" 26, my translation). The continuous intricacies of Stencil's quest suggest that the overwhelming amount of information, which at first creates the sensation of an elaborate plot about to be exposed at any moment if one diligently pursues the available evidence, only conceals a sea of oblivion and chaos. The longer we follow Stencil in his journey, the clearer it becomes that the search for V. is just a way for him to invest his own existence with significance and purpose, without which he would just disappear, dissolve into nothingness. Stencil, who finally begins to see this truth, cannot handle it and as entropy[22] begins to consume the past he tries to map so meticulously, we start to doubt the objectivity of his stories, suspecting they might be a product of his obsession, the only buffer remaining between him and the incomprehensible, destructive void.

Mason & Dixon, Pynchon's fifth novel, attempts at presenting the informational chaos in which we live currently from a historical perspective, suggesting that our knowledge of the world is based on facts and details which we are unable to verify, but we cling on to them, desperate for structuring our lives. The plot of *Mason & Dixon* centers around a story told by Reverend Wicks Cherrycoke to entertain his family on an evening in 1786. The cleric claims

[21] This quotation is my own translation from the original Polish: "Multiplikacja tożsamości, pozwalająca Stencilowi wcielać się w role obserwatorów historii, pokazuje go jako kogoś zgoła nieludzkiego, w odróżnieniu od Benny'ego, o którego człowieczeństwie dużo mówią jego ułomności."

[22] Entropy is one of the most often recurring motifs in Pynchon's work. The writer deals with the two main scientific concepts of entropy —that of thermodynamics and that of information theory. The former assumes that entropy is "the measure of a system's thermal energy per unit temperature that is unavailable for doing useful work" and "because work is obtained from ordered molecular motion, the amount of entropy is also a measure of the molecular disorder, or randomness, of a system" (Drake); the latter is defined as a "measure of the efficiency of a system (such as a code or a language) in transmitting information" ("Entropy"). Ever since the publishing of his short story "Entropy" in which he depicts a party slowly plunging into chaos —where the participants are simultaneously becoming alienated from each other and from the outside world— Pynchon has been using the principles of entropy to illustrate the tendencies in the development of the US society and culture. The increasing overabundance of information being made available to people makes it almost impossible for them to discern important and truthful information from information that is redundant or deceptive, thus giving governments, corporations or other institutions powerful means of manipulation.

to have accompanied astronomers and surveyors Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon during their journey, between 1763 and 1768, to establish the boundary between Pennsylvania and Maryland, which later on became the border between the US Southern slave states and the free North. Cherrycoke's account of this historical event is full of inconsistencies, fragments of legends and fabricated interpolations, aimed at making it more interesting for the audience. The cleric also changes the tone of his story depending on who is listening to him at the given moment —for example, adding some erotic details only when mature listeners remain in the room. This way Pynchon demonstrates how inaccurate historical accounts can be.

Despite the absence of a Californian episode in *Mason & Dixon*, Stephen Hock notices, in his essay included in *Pynchon's California,* that the use of the Mason-Dixon line in the novel is analogous to that of the Golden State's freeways, so often referred to by Pynchon in the novels set there. Both boundaries "serve […] as a marker of the routinization and standardization that modernity brings, a process that, in Pynchon's work, always necessarily also brings the destructions and depredations of power and capital" (Hock 206). This routinization and standardization connected with cartography or transportation planning aims, in its core, at bringing people together, connecting them by means of equal standards and opportunities. Yet Pynchon's novels show the darker side of the coin of these processes, which are inherently artificial: the damage caused to the people and culture standing in the way of the changes —e.g. Native Americans' rights trampled in *Mason & Dixon*—, the widening of social inequalities as only some can take advantage of the new facilities adapted to the needs of the wealthy and powerful —like the roads and highways in *The Crying of Lot 49* which, instead of connecting communities, serve mainly commercial purposes.

Bleeding Edge, Pynchon latest novel published in 2013, takes place in New York in 2001, in the months surrounding the September 11 terrorist attacks, and concentrates on the way the Internet has altered the contemporary world. The novel, which could be roughly

classified as a postmodern science-fiction detective story, teems with conspiracy theories, some brand new and some old urban legends such as the Montauk Project —a covert US government operation involving time travel and psychological warfare, stories about which have been circulating since the 1980s. The Internet just facilitates the spreading, obtaining, and manipulating of information, this time not only by powerful, shady organizations but by practically anyone with access to the World Wide Web and the ability to take advantage of what it offers. The Internet blends the real with the virtual to such a degree that they, in fact, almost do become one and, in *Bleeding Edge*, "Pynchon figures electronic environments as narrative projections that are virtually equivalent to urban cityscapes" (St. Clair 100). The writer treats the virtual with as much distrust as the real, reminding us in *Bleeding Edge* that the Internet has its roots in a military networking project commissioned by the US Department of Defense in the 1960s. As Ernie, the elderly father of the novel's protagonist Maxine, says:

> Yep, and your Internet was their invention, this magical convenience that creeps now like a smell through the smallest details of our lives, the shopping, the housework, the homework, the taxes, absorbing our energy, eating up our precious time. And there's no innocence. Anywhere. Never was. It was conceived in sin, the worst possible. As it kept growing, it never stopped carrying in its heart a bitter-cold death wish for the planet, and don't think anything has changed, kid. (*Bleeding Edge* 420)

Significantly, a few months before *Bleeding Edge* was published, whistleblower Edward Snowden leaked thousands of classified US National Security Agency documents with information on a worldwide surveillance program and long-standing mass collection of private data from such Internet giants as Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, Apple, Facebook, YouTube or Skype. As for the novel's connections with California, *Bleeding Edge* does not leave New York State but the reader can feel the tentacles of the powerful, scheming Silicon

Valley high-tech companies reaching out through their Silicon Alley branches and counterparts.

Pynchon's only work of fiction not discussed here yet —five short stories, gathered into the collection *Slow Learner* in 1984, but which in fact appeared in various sources before *V.* was published— are also completely devoid of Californian "moments." They, however, touch upon most of the motifs recurring in Pynchon's writing, such as paranoia, entropy, isolation, camaraderie or informational noise; they take place in a handful of settings the author returned to in his novels, and even introduce some characters and organizations which reappear later on. This "reusing" of protagonists is one of the techniques Pynchon uses in order to suggest the possibility of everything being connected through some obscure all-encompassing scheme. To name only some examples: one of the central characters in *Gravity's Rainbow*, German Lieutenant Weissmann, appears briefly in *V.*; some of the minor characters of the former, Seaman 'Pig' Bodine —introduced for the first time in the short story "Low-lands," included in *Slow Learner*—, Kurt Mondaugen and Clayton 'Bloody' Chicklitz, also appear in the latter, together with almost all of the characters from the short story "Under the Rose" —Victoria and Mildred Wren, Bongo-Shaftesbury, Goodfellow and the spy Propentine; Chicklitz, along with Herbert Stencil, also play a role in *The Crying of Lot 49;* the concept of V. itself, the elusive goal, something to be incessantly pursued but never attained, materializes in *Gravity's Rainbow*'s V-2 rocket; the company Yoyodyne, a defense contractor featured in *V.*, later appears in *The Crying of Lot 49* as an enormous dehumanizing corporation. This net of connections among Pynchon's works, even if seemingly casual and insignificant, might point to an additional effort made by the author, a special treat for the most faithful readers, for whom he has been creating a simulation of a vague, superior plot, spanning many years and novels.

2.4 The Journey Within: David Lynch

Film director David Lynch, whose ties to the Golden State are even tighter than Pynchon's, as he has lived and worked there since the early 1970s, is also much more of a public person than the writer. He does not shun interviews and engages in a variety of social actions and events not connected directly with filmmaking. During one such events — Camerimage, a film festival in Łódź, Poland (the festival is currently held in Toruń, Poland) devoted to the art of cinematography and at which Lynch is a regular guest— I had an opportunity to speak with the director about his literary influences. It was 2006 and David Lynch told me that his biggest inspiration so far had been Franz Kafka's works and that he had never read Pynchon's novels, although, he admitted, many people had suggested that he should and pointed out to him that there were many affinities between his own work and that of the writer.

The film director, despite being a frank and direct person and leading a fairly transparent, harmonious life —judging from the information made available by the media or himself throughout the years— is the author of some very dark and haunting pictures. He depicts a twisted modern consciousness, a nightmarish world of extreme violence, although he weakens the impact of these terrifying images by employing surrealist aesthetics, grotesque or absurd humor and by including scenes of an odd, mysterious beauty. Apart from regular appearances in the media, there are several books and documentary films available with interviews in which Lynch talks about himself and his art. He is even the author of a quasi-autobiographical book —*Catching the Big Fish: Meditation, Consciousness, and Creativity* (2006)— which, apart from the narration of facts from his life, contains reflections on how to stimulate creativity and on the benefits of Transcendental Meditation, which the director has been practicing since 1973. Despite all this straightforwardness, Lynch is still not exactly

eager to analyze his own films for the audience. He often enthusiastically goes into technical details over how a film was made but usually evades questions regarding his own interpretation of the production's various elements, or answers them in his characteristically vague, enigmatic style, developed over the years (Barney VIII). As Richard A. Barney notes in the introduction to the collection of interviews with David Lynch —spanning almost his entire career in the movie industry— which he published in 2009, the director is so reluctant to impose his own interpretation of his work on the audience because "he has been committed from the very beginning of his career to a cinematic aesthetic that is based on the essential value of the unidentified and unsaid" (VIII). Lynch believes that the abstract elements in his movies most often cannot be framed in words at all and that each viewer should have the opportunity to experience them by themselves:

> I should know the meaning for me. But when things get abstract, it does me no good to say what it is. […] All viewers, on the surface, we're all different. And we see something —and that's another place where intuition kicks in. […] You see the thing, you think about it, you feel it. And you go and you sort of know something inside. And you can bring your light on that. ("David Lynch explains ideas and *Mulholland Drive*" 00:02:42 – 00:03:52)

The director takes his viewers on a rollercoaster ride through the surreal landscapes of his movies which lack strong, linear narratives and include disturbing, strange protagonists who often change their identities mid-story. The air of paranoia hangs thick over the shady occurrences, often bearing a resemblance to events featured in *noir* detective stories, which initially seem as if they might lead to some shocking denouement —but never do. The plot as well as the characters' identities at some point start to progressively fall apart, in ways similar to Pynchon's handling of the narrative and the main character in *Gravity's Rainbow* or *V.*, and resembling the deterioration of a paranoid's mind. In Lynch's films, the audience is also

encouraged to come up with their own interpretations, based on their individual experiences and impromptu emotions.

David Foster Wallace, considered to be one of the greatest American postmodern writers and whose work was heavily influenced by both Pynchon and Lynch, had the opportunity to spend some time in 1996 on the set of *Lost Highway* about which experience he published a very interesting article in *Premiere* magazine. Foster Wallace observed that the director's aim is not really to entertain his audience and produce a box office hit. That is why it is much more difficult to find a way to approach his films, as:

> you don't feel like you're entering into any of the standard unspoken and/or unconscious contracts you normally enter into with other kinds of movies. This is unsettling because in the absence of such an unconscious contract we lose some of the psychic protections we normally (and necessarily) bring to bear on a medium as powerful as film. That is, if we know on some level what a movie wants from us, we can erect certain internal defenses that let us choose how much of ourselves we give away to it. The absence of point or recognizable agenda in Lynch's films, though, strips these subliminal defenses and lets Lynch get inside your head in a way movies normally don't. This is why his best films' effects are often so emotional and nightmarish. (We're defenseless in our dreams too.) (D.F. Wallace)

Foster Wallace goes on to emphasize that, despite the fact that Lynch "gets inside your head," he does not manipulate the viewer as other directors tend to do, to make them reach the desired conclusions:

> something in Lynch's own clinically detached filmmaking is not only refreshing but redemptive. It's not that Lynch is somehow "above" being manipulative; it's more like he's just not interested. Lynch's movies are about images and stories that are in

his head and that he wants to see made external and complexly "real." His loyalties are fierce and passionate and entirely to himself.

David Foster Wallace, who described himself as a "fanatical Lynch fan," also offers a rather hilarious description of the two days he spent on the set of *Lost Highway*, during which he never had an opportunity to interview the director or even talk to him at all. He could observe him working, though, and his descriptions of the filmmaker are in fact very telling. On the set, Lynch seems to be the busiest person around, wearing a nerdy outfit, behaving respectfully towards the crew members and not having "the beady or glassy look one associates with obsessive voyeurism or OCD or degeneracy-grade mental trouble" that some people might suspect Lynch suffers from, judging from the type of films he makes. Nevertheless, Foster Wallace adds that "he looks both very alert and very calm" which, to him, is also somewhat disturbing and reminiscent of "really high-end maniacs being oddly calm, e.g. the way Hannibal Lecter's pulse rate stays under 80 as he bites somebody's tongue out."

Indeed, the sinister style of Lynch's films, the violent behavior and deranged characters he depicts, if read from a biographist critical perspective, might suggest the director had gone through some very painful phases in his life or survived a troubled childhood. For many critics it is very tempting to try to find parallels between his life and that of the protagonists of his films. This seems to be a fruitless approach to his work —and a pretty obsolete methodological approach, to boot—, as in the interviews he has given, as well as in his own book, Lynch paints quite an idyllic picture of his youth. Almost ten years a senior to Pynchon, David Lynch was born in 1946 in Missoula, Montana, and spent his childhood travelling with his family around the Northwest, mostly staying in small towns where his father, a US Department of Agriculture research scientist, was working. The director has very fond memories of that period, during which he had a lot of contact with "magical" nature and

a lot of "time available to dream and be with friends" (*Catching the Big Fish* 9). When interviewed by Chris Rodley for the book *Lynch on Lynch* however, the director hinted at why his artistic visions tend to be so dark:

> My childhood was elegant homes, tree-lined streets, the milkman, building backyard forts, droning airplanes, blue skies, picket fences, green grass, cherry trees. Middle America as it's supposed to be. But on the cherry tree there's this pitch oozing out – some black, some yellow —and millions of red ants crawling all over it. I discovered that if one looks a little closer at this beautiful world, there are always red ants underneath. (10-11)

Lynch discovered his passion for art quite early on and received a lot of support from his mother and father in pursuing it, although they did not always understand the almost fanatic intensity of his commitment (Nguyen 00:07:20 – 00:07:54, 00:30:12 – 00:32:00). In 1963, he enrolled in the Corcoran School of the Arts and Design in Washington, DC, before moving to Philadelphia to study painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1966. Philadelphia at that time, with its derelict industrial buildings and high crime rate, was not the most pleasant city to settle in. Living there was a brutal experience for Lynch, who considers it to be the "turning point" (Breskin 69) in his career, the moment when he clearly started seeing beauty in ugliness and decay: "Philadelphia, more than any filmmaker, influenced me. It's the sickest, most corrupt, decaying, fear-ridden city imaginable. I was very poor and living in bad areas. I felt like I was constantly in danger. But it was so fantastic at the same time" (Zoglin).

In Philadelphia, Lynch became fascinated with film —the "moving painting but with sound" (Nguyen 00:55:13 – 00:55:17) and started shooting short experimental films. He also got married for the first time and had his first child —Jennifer, who was born with severely clubbed feet. Lynch struggled to maintain his family while pursuing his career as an artist,

which almost drove him to despair. After graduating, he moved to Los Angeles, a city with which he fell in love instantly —especially with the incredible sunlight which was "pulling fear out" (Nguyen 01:19:10 – 01:19:14) of him. In *Catching the Big Fish,* Lynch vividly describes his fascination with the city:

> The golden age of cinema is still alive there, in the smell of jasmine at night and the beautiful weather. And the light is inspiring and energizing. Even with smog, there's something about that light that's not harsh, but bright and smooth. It fills me with the feeling that all possibilities are available. I don't know why. It's different from the light in other places. The light in Philadelphia, even in the summer, is not nearly as bright. It was the light that brought everybody to L.A. to make films in early days. It's still a beautiful place. (*Catching the Big Fish* 31)

In California, Lynch went on to making his first feature film, the surrealist, dark, and nightmarish *Eraserhead* (1997). Fear of fatherhood and the need to take care of a disabled child became the main themes of the movie. Ever since, characters impaired in one way or another have continued to appear in Lynch's works. After the enormous success of *Eraserhead,* which earned Lynch the attention of Hollywood producers, the director could finally stop worrying about finances and devote himself entirely to filmmaking. His next production, *The Elephant Man* (1980), gained worldwide recognition and Lynch's career took off for good. Since then, he has been nominated for and received numerous awards, although he has always enjoyed much more popularity in Europe, especially in France, than in the US. He is considered to be the only really independent American filmmaker to gain such fame and to be given such artistic freedom by producers. Lynch is currently still living in Los Angeles, concentrating more on painting and photography as well as propagating Transcendental Meditation through the David Lynch Foundation, established by the filmmaker to that end. Since *Eraserhead,* he has chosen Los Angeles as the filming location for five more of his

productions: *Wild at Heart* (1990), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *Inland Empire* (2006) and *Twin Peaks* (1990).

Despite the admiration he expresses for the city, David Lynch is perfectly aware of its magnetic charm and the destructive force to which the more fragile souls, who flock in search of success and happiness, usually succumb. Of the five abovementioned productions, filmed entirely or partly in Los Angeles, only three are set in the City of Angels: *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. They are often referred to as the "unofficial Los Angeles trilogy" (Nordine) and they all depict intensely paranoid situations. The protagonists of the films —which frequently display *film noir* aesthetics: ambivalence, mystery, oneiric components— become involved in suspicious situations while in pursuit of a dream, a glittering promise of success, a better life. The first time they stumble is their last moment of freedom and with every step they become more and more entangled in a web woven by some ominous force.

Mulholland Drive, which I have selected as the point of comparison to Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and to which I will devote an entire chapter, is full of dark and disturbing imagery, dream sequences and characters whose lives disintegrate as a result of their struggle to uncover some meaning and provide coherence to the events which unfold around them. But, unlike in the case of the other two films set in Los Angeles, the plot of *Mulholland Drive* takes place entirely in the City of Angels and the movie is even named after one of its most iconic sites —the famous, scenic road, lined with Hollywood stars' residences. David Lynch juxtaposes scenes flooded with rich Californian sunlight with very dark and dim ones, to emphasize the dual nature of the city and the life there. The protagonist —Betty Elms, played by Naomi Watts— arrives in Los Angeles dreaming of an acting career. She appears to be unseasoned and naive, unaware of the dangers she might encounter as a novice at Hollywood. She takes everything she sees at face value, apparently oblivious of the dual nature of

everything and everyone in the City of Angels, of the abundance of illusion and artificiality seeping through common life. This becomes evident in one of the film's opening scenes in which we see the face of the young, beginning actress and those of an elderly couple smiling unnaturally and for a long time which makes them look as if they were wearing masks and leaves a disquieting impression. This can be taken as the first hint for the audience to not suspend disbelief. The following scenes, during which the novice actress helps an amnesiac girl to discover her identity, seem to develop in a fairly coherent way. However, the narrative order suddenly takes a sharp turn and some of the protagonists swap identities while others take on new ones. Betty turns out to be the *alter ego* of failed actress Diane Selwyn. Various film critics, such as Jean Tang, Jonathan Ross or Todd McGowan, as well as Naomi Watts herself suggested that the first part of the film was just Diane's dream, her fantasy, a projection of her desire. All that takes place after the sharp turn of events appears to be a matter of coincidence; nothing ever meets the protagonist's expectations, which, at some point or another, become shattered by some bizarre, unforeseen occurrence. The character's "making of plans and the pursuit of goals are, at best, exercises in futility and, at worst, an unwitting conspiracy with forces which we do not understand and are helpless to control" (Denham and Worrell 9). Despite the fact that throughout the film the audience receives hints about powerful shady organizations or dangerous individuals who might have been the perpetrators of the protagonist's misfortunes, it is ultimately unclear whether they are real or just figments of an ailing mind, trying to clear itself of all wrongdoing. The "monsters" in *Mulholland Drive* could simply be projections of the subjective, personal evil the characters are desperately trying to free themselves from. The demons that haunt Diane, her *alter ego*, or the other protagonists, might be just coming from within them and it is their responsibility to deal with them:

> […] the principal characters of *Mulholland Drive* repeatedly find their agency undermined […]: external powers manipulate, coerce, and destroy them, just as the gods destroy the tragic Greek protagonists. Yet Lynch allows suspicions to linger about the characters' accountability for the outcomes in which they play a role; they are not granted the luxury of moral innocence. They do not plan, and do not intend those outcomes; yet they are instrumental in bringing them about, unwittingly conspiring with daemonic fate. (Denham and Worrell 12)

In *Mulholland Drive* paranoia is omnipresent and well-grounded, yet the protagonists are unaware, up to a point, that they should search for its source inside themselves. Once — and if— they become aware of that fact, it is already too late to stop the disaster they caused. In *Lost Highway*, chronologically the first of the "Los Angeles trilogy," the sense of paranoia is unrelenting throughout its entire duration. The very first scenes, in which the audience gets to know saxophonist Fred Madison and his beautiful wife Renée, are pervaded by feelings of uneasiness and anxiety, compounded by the fact that the vestigial action evolves at an extremely slow pace and there are long moments of silence and almost complete lack of movement. Just as in the case of the painfully long shot showing the unnaturally smiling faces at the beginning of *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch uses static frames and immobility here as a figurative device meant to "signify something dangerous, disruptive, alien, confused, or empty" (O'Rawe). The tension present from the very first scene of *Lost Highway* is connected with Fred's suspicion that his wife is being unfaithful. Simultaneously, bizarre things start happening: Fred receives a phone call from a stranger who tells him about the death of another unknown man, Dick Laurent, and the couple starts finding on their doorstep videotapes with footage of their own house and even of themselves, sleeping. This Lynchean mystery uses clichés from the traditional *noir*: the *femme fatale*; the haunted, deceived

protagonist; the brutal, powerful gangster; the eeriness and darkness of the scenes[23] —which function as a framework for the director's surrealist visions. The director himself, when asked, in an interview by Chris Rodley for the book *Lynch on Lynch,* about the dense first part of the film, does not really give any clues on the plot but rather hints at the general feeling he aimed to evoke:

> It's about a couple who feel that somewhere, just on the border of consciousness — or on the other side of that border— are bad, bad problems. But they can't bring them into the real world and deal with them. So this bad feeling is just hovering there, and the problems abstract themselves and become other things. It just becomes like a bad dream. There are unfortunate things that happen to people, and this story is about that. It depicts an unfortunate occurrence, and gives you the feeling of a man in trouble. A thinking man in trouble. (225)

At some point, Fred Madison is accused of killing Renée —although we never witness the act— and while waiting on death row he transforms into a completely different person — and this time we do witness it. The viewer can only wonder whether the prisoner has been swapped in some miraculous way for someone else when his story, after he is sentenced to death, suddenly mutates into that of Pete Dayton, an auto mechanic, or whether the transformation is just a figment of Fred's own paranoid imagination. Brunette Renée also appears in Pete Dayton's world, this time as a blond, predatory Alice. Unlike in the case of the two men, both women are played by the same actress, Patricia Arquette. Alice is the lover of crime boss Mr. Eddy and the cause of Pete's downfall, due to the passionate relationship the couple strike up. In the end Pete transforms back into Fred and kills Mr. Eddy who is

[23] *Film noir* emerged in American cinema in the 1940s and was first defined as such in 1946 by French critic Nino Frank in his essay "A New Type of Detective Story" in which he drew parallelisms between this more mature trend in American filmmaking and the US hard-boiled crime novel which became popular in the 1920s. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton expanded on the topic in their book *Panorama du film noir americain, 1941–1953* published in 1955. American and British film theorists took up the subject much later, in the 1970s. The most prominent theorists to lay groundwork for describing the new genre were Raymond Durgnat, Janey Place and Lowell Peterson, John Calweti, and Paul Schrader.

revealed to be a pornographic film producer called Dick Laurent. Fred then returns to his own house to whisper the message about Dick Laurent's death into the intercom. The interaction between these key characters, the network of connections between them and the order in which these interactions take place can be construed in various ways and Lynch himself discourages viewers from trying to force a linear perspective on the slashed-up plot as it appears on screen. Instead, as was suggested in the press release, the audience should rather concentrate on the "mood, tone, feelings" the film conveys, as "the only certainty is uncertainty" (October Films) here. Martha Nochimson, for example, detects a loop in the narrative, and suggests that

> the adventures of Fred Madison lead in a circular path from the announcement of the death of Dick Laurent to the same announcement in a way that suggests, paradoxically, that the future was already there before Fred began his story, as if a full understanding of the "here" would involve the scraping away of the surface of the now to arrive at the future, rather than a linear progression toward it. (*David Lynch Swerves*)

The actors from the cast generally refused to interpret *Lost Highway* for the media, apart from Patricia Arquette who summarized the plot as follows: "unable to cope with guilt at having killed his wife, Fred Madison psychically projects himself on Pete Dayton" (Hainge 141). Slavoj Žižek applauds this interpretation in his essay on the film, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime*, adding that "perhaps it is precisely this senseless complexity, this impression that we are drawn into a schizophrenic nightmarish delirium with no logic or rules […] that is the film's ultimate lure to be resisted" (18). The non-linearity, therefore, might mean we're seeing the world through the eyes of a person tormented by paranoia and obsessions, who is trying to deal with demons, which he subconsciously realizes are coming from within him and are changing the reality around him. The reality of the people who

surround him, however, remains the same and the consequences of his actions are tangible. Therefore, no matter what fantasy he creates to escape the burden of guilt, it will always have a disappointing outcome for him.

It is never really revealed —although always assumed— that *Lost Highway* is set in Los Angeles, as none of the characteristic landmarks are shown and the film industry appears only in the form of adult entertainment. It is as if the director was flatly stripping the iconic city of its superficial, illusory charm and presenting only its sinister, chaotic nature, as a parallel to what is going on in the protagonists' mind. The majority of the scenes take place either in dim, gloomy interiors or, at night, in vast, open spaces which seem infinite with all the surrounding darkness. When the characters are driving through these spaces, the viewer can feel how directionless their motion is. In her essay "Beyond Boundaries: David Lynch's *Lost Highway*," Anne Jerslev evokes Baudrillard's *America* in which the sociologist and philosopher often recalls the endless American highways and suggests that speeding along them "is a dramatic form of amnesia. Everything comes into sight, everything disappears …" (158). In Lynch's film the lost highway of the title also symbolizes the protagonist's escape into the unknown —an escape from himself.

In the third "Los Angeles trilogy" film, *Inland Empire*, which is also Lynch's latest feature, the director returns to the topic of the corrupt and destructive Hollywood film industry. The protagonist, Nikki Grace, is an actress who is given a comeback role in the film *On High in Blue Tomorrows*. Before she hears the good news, however, she is visited by an elderly woman who claims to be her new neighbor. The woman says a few things which sound bizarre and threatening, and scares Nikki, immediately inducing an incipient atmosphere of anxiety and paranoia which grows as the story unfolds. Soon, it turns out that *On High in Blue Tomorrows* is a remake of a German film which was never released as the lead actor and actress were murdered. Meanwhile, Nikki begins a love affair with co-star and

famous womanizer Devon Berk, despite being warned against it by various people. Once these facts have been presented, the initially fairly coherent plot starts disintegrating —Nikki's romance becomes entangled with the one which develops in the film-within-the-film. At some point, the actress becomes sucked into the production she is starring in and is unable to return to real life which she can see continuing without her, as if from inside the set she cannot leave. All remnants of linear narrative disappear and various seemingly unrelated plotlines are introduced, with either alternative versions of Nikki as protagonist or with completely different characters. The pace at which it all develops and the fact that the plot is just carried further and further away from the logic of the opening scenes adds up to the final confusion.

Even though *Inland Empire* is the most chaotic and difficult to follow of Lynch's feature films, its plot is centered on a motif recurring throughout the director's work —that of personality disintegration as a result of the inability to cope with one's problems and the subsequent plunge into anxiety and paranoia. This process is presented in *Inland Empire* in a much harsher way than in the previous two productions set in Los Angeles —through a host of horror film techniques "in the form of portentous tracking shots, shock cuts, and loud noises" (Lim 176). Nevertheless, the ending of *Inland Empire* is much more hopeful than those of the other two films, or in fact, of any of Lynch's productions for that matter. In the final scene, Nikki appears in a room full of characters from Lynch's other films —smiling, dancing, singing. *Mulholland Drive,* for example, might be easier to follow but "its reality is crueler: a dream overlaid on a nightmare," while *Inland Empire* "is almost all nightmare, and yet, through considerable exertions, it blinks itself awake, and into a state of grace" (Lim 176). This might mean that the protagonists of the first two films in the trilogy, characterized by the use of the multiple identity trope, are unable to deal with their paranoia and the fear they live in due to the fact that they are incapable of separating illusion from reality.

Meanwhile, Nikki Grace "who experiences emancipation from constructed subjective coherence and from linear time as the film progresses, becomes free" (Lovat).

All three of Lynch's California films address the topic of illusion and reality as forms of interweaving dimensions which everyone experiences to some extent although not everyone knows how to balance well. Fantasies as an alternative to the drudgery of real life can be addictive and prone to ultimately mutate into nightmares from which it is very difficult to break free. While the protagonists of *Mulholland Drive* and *Lost Highway* become trapped among the demons engendered by their failed fantasies, Nikki Grace's final fate leaves the audience with a much more hopeful image.

Mulholland Drive, *Lost Highway* and *Inland Empire* are Lynch's only films set in California, but the theme of paranoia pervades the entirety of his *oeuvre* (with one exception). The director had approached the topic from a variety of angles. His first two feature-length productions, *Eraserhead* (1977) and *Elephant Man* (1980) revolve around the themes of deformity, strangeness, alienation and the grotesque, and both include paranoid characters. The former tells the story of Henry Spencer, who leads a dreadful existence in an industrial, hostile city. His life seems to be controlled by the mysterious Man in the Planet who observes him from a window and pulls mechanical levers. At the beginning of the film, Henry is invited by his girlfriend's parents to dinner, where, in a gruesome atmosphere, he learns that she is going to have his baby. The inhuman creature which is born causes so much distress to the mother that she abandons him, and Henry needs to take care of him on his own. Henry starts having visions in which he sees other otherworldly characters, together with his deformed child. Sometimes he fantasizes about killing him, or a being resembling him, and sometimes it is the child that kills its father. Finally, Henry cuts the creature's internal organs with a pair of scissors while the Man in the Planet struggles to control his levers, which results in a "cosmic catastrophe" (*Lynch on Lynch* 247). One of the interpretations of

Eraserhead is that it is a study of paranoia affecting a first-time parent, afraid that their life will be changed forever and for the worse. For Henry, the birth of his child is also a death experience. As Todd McGowan hypothesizes in *The Impossible David Lynch,* this is what Henry's fantasy sequence conveys:

> Loss constitutes the subject as subject; to narrate this loss is to imagine a subject prior to loss —or a subject existing prior to becoming a subject. In doing so, fantasy creates a sense of paranoia in the subject: rather than seeing its loss as constitutive, the subject identifies an agent responsible for the loss— in Henry's case, the baby. Clearly, Henry lived in a desolate world barren of enjoyment before the arrival of the baby, but the fantasy locates the theft of Henry's enjoyment in this figure. (41)

Lynch's second feature, *The Elephant Man*, also approaches deformity and its reception/perception by other, "normal" people, although in a way accessible to a wider audience, due to the fact that it is it based on the life of a historical figure, who was already the subject of various studies and dramatic works, as well as through evoking comparison to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The film tells the story of John Merrick, a heavily disfigured man living in nineteenth-century London, who arouses unhealthy curiosity and dread due to his unusual appearance. Merrick, who turns out to be an intelligent, sensitive person, is finally taken in by a group of friendly and caring people who try to help him, but he still has to deal with the paranoid fear of the general public who never cease to see him as a freak and consequently as a threat. *The Elephant Man* is one of Lynch's few films with a linear, coherent narrative. It won critical acclaim around the world and was a commercial success, which led to Lynch being offered the direction of *Dune* (1984), adapted from Frank Herbert's homonymous novel. This one-off attempt at a science-fiction movie is considered by many to be the director's least successful production, one "about which there is a valid general agreement that it doesn't work" (*The Passion of David Lynch* 123), although it has

nevertheless gained a cult following with time. The initial criticism could have been caused by the inevitable comparisons to the first three films from the incredibly successful *Star Wars* saga —released between 1977 and 1983— which, unlike Lynch's *Dune*, were much more accessible, with a straightforward narrative, full of clear-cut characters and lively action. *Dune*, on the other hand, was based on an extremely complex, lengthy, and multi-layered book series, which tackled a myriad of interweaving subjects such as politics, ecology, philosophy, psychology or interplanetary travel. Unable to condense all the details of this immensely elaborate universe into a film of less than three hours, Lynch focused rather on its visual side, creating baroque scenes of *noir* aesthetics[24]. Unfortunately, the director did not have complete creative control over the film, which made him feel he "had sold out" and the final production was a "huge failure" (*Catching the Big Fish* 59) for him. Nevertheless, many people have appreciated the striking visual effects the adaptation offered. Even Frank Herbert himself assured: "I enjoyed the film even as a cut and I told it as I saw it: What reached the screen is a visual feast that begins as *Dune* begins and you hear my dialogue all through it" (12).

Following this disappointing experience with directing a high-budget Hollywood film, David Lynch convinced producer Dino De Laurentiis, for whose company the filmmaker was contractually obligated to create two more works —although the plans for *Dune*'s sequel were dropped for obvious reasons— to give him more artistic freedom with his next project. This time Lynch turned his focus to what he knew best from his childhood —suburban America, with its proverbial white picket fences and lush green lawns, tended to by their smiling owners. But, as the director himself stated, these sights appear blissful only from a distance, but if you move closer "there are always red ants" (*Lynch on Lynch* 11) swarming all over the

[24] *Dune* includes many of the visual elements which characterize *film noir*, as put forward by the pioneering *noir* theorists Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in the already mentioned *Panorama du film noir americain*: low-key lighting and chiaroscuro effects, tilted camera angles, characters presented in vast, empty spaces which evoke a feeling of alienation.

idyllic objects. *Blue Velvet*, the film following *Dune*, even includes the ants in its opening scene —the camera passes along the sunlit small-town street, showing the pretty houses with their spruce gardens and the friendly-looking inhabitants but then registers a man having a heart attack outside his house— which is the first jarring note; then the camera goes down into the grass and zooms in on a swarm of ants and other insects possibly feeding on something in a frenzy. As Brian Jarvis observes, the idealized domestic idyll from the opening sequences is too unnatural and surrealistic to allow the audience to just enjoy it, as it is "an image of the suburb as simulacrum, foregrounding geographical unreality through the use of color filter and self-reflexive camera rhetoric" (177). Therefore, in slightly over two minutes and even before we learn anything about the film's plot, the images already make us uncomfortable and alert to the fact that darkness lurks even in the most beautiful and seemingly peaceful places and aware that nothing should be taken at face value. *Blue Velvet* goes on to tell the story of young Jeffrey Beaumont who comes to visit his hometown and accidentally finds a severed human ear in the grass. He starts his own investigation, in the course of which he finds out that a singer at the local nightclub, Dorothy Vallens, is being sexually abused and tortured by psychopath Frank Booth who had kidnapped her husband and son to have leverage over her. Trying to help Dorothy, Jeffrey becomes entangled in this dangerous situation, which leads to a bloody denouement, although the young man himself gets out unscathed. In the course of events, however, the well-meaning and honest —and very curious— Jeffrey becomes tainted with the darkness and evil he witnesses. For him, the story seemingly does have a happy ending, as he remains alive and finds love, but we realize that he will never go back to being his former self and that a pretty girlfriend in a pretty house surrounded by a pretty garden can be a mere façade behind which tensions might start festering unnoticed. *Blue Velvet* skillfully sows the seeds of paranoid suspicion about the

serenity of life in suburban America and the validity of "traditional family values" promoted during Ronald Reagan's presidency —during which the film was released.

Lynch continued exploring this topic even more in depth in the television series *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) and the feature film *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992), which is a prequel to the series. Due to declining ratings, the series was cancelled after the second season, but in 2017 Lynch returned with a follow-up of 18 episodes, starring many of the actors from the original cast. *Twin Peaks* resembles a classical detective story, but with elements of horror, the supernatural, the uncanny, and soap opera. It centers on a murder investigation led by FBI Special Agent Dale Cooper in the provincial town of Twin Peaks, Washington. Trying to solve the mystery of the murder of local teenage beauty Laura Palmer, Cooper discovers that this seemingly sleepy, uneventful place holds more grisly secrets than imagined. Instead of getting closer to revealing the truth, he stumbles upon more questions than answers, discovering that even the most innocent looking inhabitants of Twin Peaks have something to hide. As instances of the supernatural keep steadily multiplying in the most unexpected places and moments, the line between reality and fantasy —or dream— becomes blurred. Nobody and nothing can be trusted anymore. The characters cannot even really trust themselves either, as they can be possessed by evil, otherworldly beings; therefore, they become more and more paranoid about the situation unfolding in Twin Peaks. In the prequel *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, which tells the story of Laura Palmer's last days leading to her murder, another FBI agent, Philip Jeffries —played by David Bowie—, suggests for the first time that they might be living "inside a dream" (*Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* 00:29:33 – 00:29:36) —which could be someone's fantasy or an obsessive hallucination. The most recent season, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, jumps headlong into the world of alternative realities, multiplying personalities, uncanny phenomena, and enigmatic symbolism, leaving the audience unsure of what they have seen and needing to devise numerous theories in their

attempts to find an explanation for them. Yet, this explanation might be concealed in one of the most often repeated and discussed phrases from the series —"the owls are not what they seem" ("May the Giant Be with You" 00:36:19 – 00:36:22)— which echoes Baudrillard's conception of the hyperreal. Laura Palmer herself is the series' central simulacrum —her murder seems to be the main topic, with the case constantly discussed, and various people offering their subjective, distorted memories of the girl. With time, however, she becomes less and less of a real person and starts resembling an incoherent blend of loose images. The identity of her killer is revealed in the seventh episode of the second season, which, regardless of the disclosure, carries on for another sixteen episodes and later, after 25 years, for another entire season, which makes clear that the solving of the detective mystery was never the core of the story told. Besides, the fact that the killer is Laura's father Leland, once again reminds the audience how deceptive appearances can be and that the enemy often lurks in our closest vicinity, unsuspected. In a way, both in *Twin Peaks* and in *Blue Velvet* Lynch echoes the horror films of the 1960s —which I have discussed in the previous chapter— in which suburban families are possessed by vicious aliens, becoming the most deceitful Enemy Within.

Twin Peaks premiered at a time when American television was dominated by soap operas —such as *Santa Barbara*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Dallas*, *Falcon Crest*—, sitcoms —such as *Seinfeld*, *Married… with Children*, *Family Ties*, *ALF*, *The Cosby Show*, *The Wonder Years*—, and crime drama series —such as *21 Jump Street*, *Miami Vice*, *Columbo*, *Jake and the Fatman*, *Moonlighting*. These shows employed multiple genres, followed a variety of plotlines and portrayed a wide array of characters from various social backgrounds. Lynch's proposition, which was both a homage to and a parody of many of these long-running series, perplexing and bizarre in comparison, was received as something refreshing, fascinating and was an instant success:

> In the cable-TV and home-video era in which the Big Three networks[25] were losing more of their audience every year, more than one-third of America's viewers were glued to the *Twin Peaks* debut. The show obliterated everything else in its time slot and was the highest-rated TV movie of the year. Overnight, *Twin Peaks* had become the hot topic at work and school discussions. (Olson 270)

Over time however, "many average *Twin Peaks* viewers, as opposed to the core fans who would happily follow whatever convoluted, esoteric path Lynch and Frost presented, began to grow impatient with the unsolved status of the Laura Palmer case" (Olson 293). But by 2017 all of Lynch's work, including the first two seasons of *Twin Peaks*, had earned legions of devoted fans who knew what to expect from the director and accepted that "the owls are not what they seem."

The third season of *Twin Peaks* is Lynch's latest directing effort. However, between it and the release of *Blue Velvet* in 1986, he directed two more feature films I have not discussed yet: *Wild at Heart* (1990) and *The Straight Story* (1999). Both are road movies, very different ones, but possibly conveying the most positive message in all of Lynch's *oeuvre*. *Blue Velvet,* despite its violent and explicit sexual content, was a huge success, earning Lynch an Oscar nomination for Best Director, awards at film festivals in the US and around the world, as well as a multitude of admirers. As an established director, he was free to pursue his artistic vision almost without restrictions. In 1989, Lynch stumbled upon Barry Gifford's novel *Wild at Heart: The Story of Sailor and Lula*, which enraptured him with its "crazy world, and in the middle, this love story, these people you can't imagine being tender, loving, and at peace" (Ciment and Niogret 106). Lynch wrote the adaptation himself, focusing more on the action than on the development of the characters, and rearranging the flashbacks through which the

[25] The Big Three networks Olson refers to are the three major national broadcast television networks which dominated US television between 1948 and the late 1980s: ABC (the American Broadcasting Company), CBS (name derived from an abbreviation of its former legal name – the Columbia Broadcasting System) and NBC (the National Broadcasting Company). *Twin Peaks* premiered on ABC.

story was told in the novel. The script he initially presented to the production studios included a “depressing ending,” (Ciment and Niogret 106) but he changed it to a happy one. The element of paranoia is also present in the film, as Sailor and Lula are running from Lula’s manipulative, controlling mother whose tentacles seem to reach far and wide across the country. The couple never knows who, out of the people they meet on their way, might have been sent by her to prevent their escape. Nevertheless, after avoiding the clutches of mysterious gangsters and hired killers who chase the lovers through dreamy and sinister small-town North Carolina and Texas, finally Sailor and Lula manage to overcome all obstacles and start a new life together. *Wild at Heart*, which premiered in 1990, won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, solidifying Lynch’s reputation as an independent director with a very characteristic, unconventional storytelling style.

The Straight Story, the second of Lynch’s road movies, is the only instance in his directing career of a truly linear tale, coherent, and devoid of supernatural elements. The film is based on the true story of an elderly man, Alvin Straight, travelling across Iowa and Wisconsin on a lawnmower to visit his estranged brother who had suffered a stroke. The film is very slow-paced and has a nostalgic feel and it managed to “silence those hip Lynch appreciators who always assumed that the director was being subversive and mockingly ironic when, in the context of his darker works, he sang praises of good-hearted common folk and sweetly innocent sentiments” (Olson 487). *The Straight Story*, Lynch’s least surreal work, won universal acclaim and nominations for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, for the Golden Frog at the Camerimage Festival and for the Best Actor Academy Award for Richard Farnsworth who played Alvin Straight.

2.5 The American Paranoid: A Complete Image

When scrutinizing the bulk of Pynchon's and Lynch's work for instances of paranoid characters or situations, we can definitely observe that this is one of their most often recurring themes, although approached from a different angle by each creator. Pynchon, nine years a senior to Lynch and from a different background —a childhood spent in close proximity to the bustling city of New York, with military experience and working for some time for a multinational corporation also involved in the "business of war"— focuses more on paranoia stemming from the individual being secretly exploited by shady organizations or being the victim of systemic, institutionalized oppression, often without a definite, perceptible source. Lynch, on the other hand —a small-town child and a sworn visual artist, bent on pursuing this career path from a very early age, reacting with distress to any form of limitation of his artistic freedom (as happened in the case of *Dune*)— delves deeper into the psyche of his characters, who are also paranoid about plotting individuals, obscure, dubious groups of people, and even hostile, supernatural beings, but ultimately all the trails seem to be leading back to the paranoid characters themselves, and the source of the threat as well as the key to neutralizing it seems to be their own minds. Both the writer and the film director, however, hint at the possibility that paranoia might offer its sufferer access to freedom, by leading to the creation of an alternative reality, which might be chaotic, but which, at least, cannot be infiltrated by mundane oppression or bound by conventions.

Pynchon and Lynch are both representatives of postmodernism[26], although each of them has carved his own niche within the boundaries of the movement. Frank Palmeri, who counts *V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49* among instances of what he calls "high postmodernism"[27] believes that "in works by Pynchon, Mailer, and others in the sixties

[26] I discuss various approaches to postmodernism in chapter 1, pages 25 to 28.

[27] Mode of postmodernism dominant in the 1960s, 1970s and the 1980s. According to Frank Palmeri, works created at that time "reveal both an anxious apprehension of a newly realized and effective system of power and knowledge (beyond traditional religions or nation-states), impossible even to comprehend in its totality, but also a subversive, even parodic skepticism about such phenomena —both a fascination with and a satiric skepticism of paranoia." (Palmeri)

and seventies, a paranoid vision associated with an urge to order, with science, technology, and bureaucracy stands at one pole in opposition to a tendency toward disorder and an ability to tolerate uncertainty" (Palmeri). The harshness of the suspected conspiracies —such as the secret postal system called Tristero in *The Crying of Lost 49* or the international corporate conspiracy surrounding the V-2 rocket in *Gravity's Rainbow*— is usually relieved by black humor and the possibility of anarchy, which provides an alternative to the rigid plot, a promise of a final escape even if it means plunging into entropy and chaos. Palmeri also suggests that, in the 1990s, postmodernism evolved into its "late" form, such as it is manifested in the TV series *The X-Files*, Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991), or Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999), which are characterized by a "a darkly paranoid vision of government conspiracies and threatening human hybrids[28], the exposure of which often leads to an absolute truth or religious salvation." Even though Lynch's Californian works belong to the period Palimeri associates with late postmodernism and a specific mode of paranoia, *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire* offer a unique approach to the representation of obsessions and conspiracy theories. They are more inward-looking, linked to the individual's struggle with the demons within, the oppressive society and the uniform, aggressive popular culture which attempts to cancel one's individuality.

I believe that the way paranoia is depicted in Lynch's Californian films is an interesting complement to Pynchon's aesthetics of obsession in his works set in that state, a development of the writer's ideas on contemporary consciousness. Lynch, through his works, seems to provide a continuation, an extension of Pynchon's thoughts on the subject, by delving deeper into the psyche of the tormented paranoia sufferer, by trying to find the causes of their condition predominantly in their inability to regain self-control in the face of extreme pressure to attain fulfillment, examples of which they believe they see every day in their

[28] I discuss this issue in chapter 1, page 63.

surroundings. Despite the disparate means of presentation they have at their disposal as a writer and a filmmaker, the juxtaposition of Pynchon's and Lynch's works creates a compelling picture of how the changing political landscape and the all-encompassing and all-consuming popular culture has been shaping American identity and mentality since the 1960s, creating a web of *simulacra* very few can see through, and those who manage, do so due to their paranoid perception —although their attempts are never entirely successful and always come at a price. Through analyzing Pynchon's and Lynch's works set in the Golden State one can see that one of their claims is that US paranoia never subsides but rather adapts to the new circumstances.

Both the writer and the filmmaker present paranoia as the eternal lining of American society, something ominous and disturbing but at the same time essential for the nation's survival. It is as if the menacing wilderness of the Puritan times, when anything in this unknown land could be a threat to the first settlers and therefore everything had to be treated with suspicion, has never been tamed but simply endured in different forms until today. In Lynch's and Pynchon's works, paranoia is an inseparable and fundamental element of life in the US, simultaneously an instrument of terror ─when intentionally stirred up by individuals, organizations and institutions to manipulate people─ and a path to unlimited freedom ─when employed by people to organize their chaotic reality or retaliate against the manipulation and deception imposed by those wielding power─ as I will try to establish in the last two chapters of this thesis. In them, I will focus on the segment of American society that has been and is still being discriminated against —women. They are the protagonists of both *The Crying of Lot 49* as well as of *Mulholland Drive* and each of them suffers from a form of paranoia that has a positive influence over their lives, as it allows them to break free from patriarchal constrictions. These depictions of female paranoia as a means of emancipation, as a path toward freedom, however illusory it may be, are very characteristic of the writer and the

filmmaker and their comparison can, in my opinion, contribute greatly to the analysis of feminist thought in the works of two rare US male creators with well-established positions and who approach the topic from a very uncommon angle.

CHAPTER 3

Away from the "Kitchen Conspiracy of Denial" and Towards Oppositional Conspiracy Culture. Everywoman's Travels Through America's America in *The Crying of Lot 49*

"Who knows what women can be when they are finally free to be themselves."
—Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

"There is something less than fully human in those who have never known a commitment to an idea, who have never risked an exploration of the unknown, who have never attempted the kind of creativity of which men and women are potentially capable."
—Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

3.1 The American Feminist Revolution of the 1960s

During World War II American women were given an unprecedented amount of freedom and responsibility. With more and more men called out and shipped out to fight battles in different parts of the world, many previously unemployed women bridged the workforce gap by taking up jobs in offices, hospitals, the railway. They also took control of farms, filling in for their mobilized husbands, brothers or sons. Even though this is what happened in most wars, during World War II for the first time American women were also employed in heavy industries on a great scale —by 1944 they held roughly one third of all manufacturing jobs both in the military and non-military sectors (M. Miller 42). Furthermore, many women set off to war themselves, either as army members —e.g. as civilian pilots, spies, codebreakers— or as Red Cross workers. With jobs and paychecks came independence. Women acquired new

skills in areas previously reserved for men, gaining financial freedom and confidence. However, when the war ended, the majority of women hired to fill in for the absent men were laid off, despite the fact that many were eager to remain in the workforce. They returned to their roles as homemakers or to "pink-collar" jobs as underpaid secretaries or receptionists. Yet this liberating experience of earning a salary which enabled them to provide for themselves and for their family, of being able to successfully help their country in a time of crisis was a truly empowering experience, laying ground for future feminist action[29].

Nevertheless, the onset of the Cold War, paired with the postwar economic boom, temporarily inhibited women's drive for independence. The US media, which at that time was shifting from print and radio to television as the principal source of home entertainment and information, bore much of the responsibility for this state of affairs. The networks needed government support to produce their early programs so they agreed on a collaboration with federal information bureaus to disseminate Cold War propaganda among the American public (Bernhard 2). One of its elements was emphasizing traditional family values and stigmatizing women who did not comply with the stereotypical gender representations of the time. For instance, the media stirred anxiety about the possibility of nuclear attack and suggested that threat in the form of Communist spies could be lurking in the guise of ordinary citizens, such as single, seductive women who could lead "decent men" astray. As a result, American "popular culture gave full play to the fears of sex and communism running amok" (E. T. May 94). Preserving family values, obedience, and conformism were presented as a form of protection against those threats. Secondly, on the one hand, media pictured women as highly idealized beings —elegant, tactful, and efficient housewives, living luxurious lives thanks to their hardworking husbands—, and, on the other hand, as silly and inept at anything not

[29] For more information on working American women during World War II see *Beyond Rosie: A Documentary History of Women and World War II* (Brock et. al, 2015), Emily Yellin's *Our Mothers' War: American Women at Home and at the Front During World War II* (2004), and Doris Weatherford's *American Women During World War II: An Encyclopedia* (2009).

connected with homemaking, such as, for example, economy or politics. Women were portrayed this way in very popular and influential TV shows of the time —*Ozzie and Harriet* (1952) or *Leave It to Beaver* (1957) (Coontz 23)— as well as in the numerous sexist advertisements, which focused on the return to "traditional family values" and tapped into the Americans' newfound affluence[30].

Many yielded to the vision of this illusive harmony and idyll, lured by promises of a secure and prosperous life, free from the hardships of the past. As Elaine Tyler May remarks in her study *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, "vast numbers of American women and men during the early years of the cold war —more than ever before or since— got married, moved to the suburbs, and had babies" (E.T. May 16). Yet the dream visions skillfully marketed to them by the rapidly developing US advertising industry, serving also as a concealed promotion of the conservative national agenda, were just an idealized image of a perfect family, an unattainable ideal. American journalist Vance Packard exposed the ruthless psychological manipulation perpetrated by the corporations and media in his 1957 book *The Hidden Persuaders*. He described the way these "persuaders" tried to convince consumers that certain products would make them feel happier, more powerful, beautiful, sophisticated; this way ordinary things became status symbols aimed at satisfying people's dreams and desires, instead of just fulfilling their basic functions. More and more working men, who were unable to provide their families with the high standard of living presented by the print ads and TV commercials, sought comfort in more work, extramarital affairs or the consumption of alcohol. Meanwhile, the unemployed women, expected to live up to the image of the perfect housewife and unable to do so, had much less possibilities of giving vent to their frustration. The only field at which they could prove themselves worthy was their household and any friction or failure —such as parenting problems, husbands seeking comfort

[30]A selection of 1950s and 1960s American print advertisements objectifying women is to be found here: www.businessinsider.com/26-sexist-ads-of-the-mad-men-era-2014-5?IR=T#1951-show-her-its-a-mans-world-2.

in the arms of other women, or the inability to keep up with the housework— made them question their competence as mothers, wives, housekeepers. Even using the time-saving appliances, such as washing machines, dishwashers or electric ovens, which made their life easier, could provoke feelings of guilt in the housewives who thought they might not be working hard enough for the wellbeing of their families (Packard 41). In fact, these new devices only eliminated the need for hired help, so popular before World War II even among "working class" families, without reducing the workload burden for the homemaker. The postwar improvement of hygiene standards resulted in an increase in the volume of housework to be carried out: "sheets and underwear were changed more frequently, so there was more laundry to be done; diets became more varied, so cooking was more complex; houses grew larger, so there were more surfaces to be cleaned" (Schwartz Cowan 99). However, those —mainly middle-class— women who did have less tasks to occupy them at home or when their children went off to school and required less attention, tended to feel increasingly superfluous: "Repeatedly the memories, diaries, and letters of white housewives in the 1950s returned to this revelation of dissatisfaction. While many women described the importance of friendships with other women, or closeness with their husbands, they also mentioned a lingering sense of emptiness, boredom, and loneliness" (M. May 48). The fact that these were "white housewives," usually middle-class, is an important thing to note. They were the subject of the 1950s advertisements, the epitome of the American female of the time, as portrayed by the media. However, one must not forget that the spectrum was much wider —women of color and working-class women, those shunned by the spotlight— could in fact lead much more active and independent lives, albeit much less comfortable and secure ones. Somewhat paradoxically they "underscored the peculiar limitations of privilege that characterized white, middle-class women trapped" in their vacuous existence, although these 1950s female workers harbored no illusions about paid labor which they realized "was as

likely to create a double burden for women as it was to provide a means of liberation from gender-based inequality" (Buechler 152).

Nevertheless, in my dissertation I focus on white, middle-class women, as they are the protagonists of the works I chose to discuss and it is their path to enlightenment and freedom from social constraints —whether attained or not— that I am analyzing.

Journalist and writer Betty Friedan was the first person to conduct research on the 1950s middle-class homemakers' so shyly expressed feeling of discomfort, and presented it as a nationwide predicament and a dangerous affliction many American women were suffering from. She called it "the problem that has no name" (Friedan 11) and analyzed its roots and implications in a highly influential and very popular book called *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan suggested that the idealized image of the American woman, expected to devote her life entirely to her family, was the main reason for this encroached female unhappiness. Unable to look for personal fulfillment in any other way than by adhering to what was hegemonically considered their sexual biological roles —that is, taking care of their children and their husband— women grew increasingly frustrated. Most pulled out of education and married early —in the 1950s the median age for a woman's first marriage was just over twenty (twenty-three for men)— as those who waited longer could have more problems to find a husband later on. As former *The New York Times* editorial board member, journalist, and novelist Mary Cantwell wrote in her memoir: "Marrying young […] was like getting to a sale on the first day. God knows what, if anything, would be left if you waited till you were twenty-five or -six" (37). Those who managed to finish their studies usually did not pursue their careers further. Despite the fact that many women in the 1950s felt uncomfortable in the role imposed on them by society, it was very difficult for them to speak against this state of affairs —due to feelings of guilt, fear of rejection and peer criticism, or simply lack of education, when that was the case. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan advocated giving

women the same opportunities as men, granting them the right to find their own identity and become fully formed human beings. She argued that young girls should be allowed to explore the world freely, as boys are, instead of being prepared from a very early age solely for the role of a homemaker. In the words of Friedan:

> In almost every professional field, in business and in the arts and sciences, women are still treated as second-class citizens. It would be a great service to tell girls who plan to work in society to expect this subtle, uncomfortable discrimination —tell them not to be quiet, and hope it will go away, but fight it. A girl should not expect special privileges because of her sex, but neither should she "adjust" to prejudice and discrimination. (361)

Therefore, young girls, who were not given an equal start, grew up to become women with only one "career path" ahead of them —that of housewives— and with everyone around them trying to convince them that that was the best they could expect from life, their duty towards their country, and their ultimate destiny (the "feminine mystique" of the title). As I have already pointed out, the scholarly consensus is that the media and advertisers of the day were responsible for this state of affairs to a considerable extent. Friedan pointed out that women's magazines repeatedly insisted that the only form of creation a woman can engage in is procreation and that "women can know fulfillment only at the moment of giving birth to a child" (55). She also suggested that housewives were seen as "chief customers of American business" (197) who would appease their lack of personal accomplishment by buying various products, created specifically for them, for the households they were in charge of[31]. Therefore, it was in the best interest of various businesses and industries to retain this image

[31] The connection between female sexuality and consumption was conceptually established already at the turn of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, when such thinkers as Darwin, Freud or Havelock Ellis started associating "consumption and spending with a feminized notion of desire" (145), as Honor McKitrick Wallace points out in her article "'An Orgy of Acquisition': The Female Consumer, Infidelity, and Commodity Culture in *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House*". Already in the 1920s, the US advertising industry recognized the potential of connecting eroticism with consumption and "began to create a discourse that implicitly acknowledged female sexuality —legitimate or otherwise— and tied it to what was represented as a wholly legitimate desire for commodities" (McKitrick 146).

of the devoted homemaker as the only role a woman could wish for —and they did that through targeted, manipulative newspaper ads and TV commercials. As Friedan observed:

> If they are not solely responsible for sending women home, they are surely responsible for keeping them there. Their unremitting harangue is hard to escape in this day of mass communications; they have seared the feminine mystique deep into every woman's mind, and into the minds of her husband, her children, her neighbors. They have made it part of the fabric of her everyday life, taunting her because she is not a better housewife, does not love her family enough, is growing old. (219)

This informational noise, surrounding and attacking middle-class American women in the 1950s from every possible direction, from every possible source, made many of them think that there was really no other option, no other path to fulfillment. Those struggling with "the problem that has no name," but surrounded by all of the conveniences a woman supposedly craved at that time, considered themselves isolated cases, and feared rejection and contempt should they communicate their complaints to anybody. This lack of support resulted in many women suffering from depression. In an introduction to the 2001 edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, journalist and writer Anna Quindlen described the situation of women at that time as very difficult to stand up against for them:

> The advances of science, the development of labor-saving appliances, the development of the suburbs: all had come together to offer women in the 1950s a life their mothers had scarcely dreamed of, free from rampant disease, onerous drudgery, noxious city streets. But the green lawns and big corner lots were isolating, the housework seemed to expand to fit the time available, and polio and smallpox were replaced by depression and alcoholism. All that was covered up in a kitchen conspiracy of denial. (13)

Friedan's book, however, opened the door to criticism of this state of affairs, made many American women aware that they were not alone in feeling deprived of their identities, that they had a right to demand more from life. *The Feminine Mystique* became a national bestseller and its publishing "was one of those events which seem, in retrospect, to have divided the sixties from the fifties as the day from the night" (Menand). Friedan went on to founding and presiding over various women's organizations such as the National Organization for Women, the National Women's Political Caucus or the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws and in 1970 she organized the highly successful Women's Strike for Equality. Many scholars consider *The Feminine Mystique* and Friedan's subsequent activism as milestones which gave rise to the second wave of feminism is the US[32].

Second-wave feminism began in the US in the 1960s and differed from first-wave feminism —which took place at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century— in the issues it raised. First-wave feminists focused primarily on the fight for women's right to vote and for equal property rights to men; they also fought against general societal inequalities such as the substandard working and living conditions women were subjected to. Meanwhile, second-wave feminists tackled women's position in the family, their sexuality, employment rights and generally they worked for the inclusion of women in areas traditionally dominated by men. Second-wave feminism in the US is believed to have been sparked by two important events which took place in 1963 —the publishing of *The Feminine Mystique* and the passing of the Equal Pay Act by Congress, which made sex-based pay discrimination illegal. Then, in 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act —aimed at preventing discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex and national origin— was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. It was another milestone for feminism as the new law provided women with better

[32] For more information on the second wave of feminism in the US and Friedan's contribution to it, see: Jenny Reese's *Leaders of Second-Wave Feminism: Betty Friedan, Helen Gurley Brown, Simone de Beauvoir Et. Al*. (2010), Jane Gerhard's *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought 1920 to 1980* (2001), and Daniel Horowitz's *Betty Friedan and the Making of* The Feminine Mystique*: The American Left, the Cold War and Modern Feminism* (1998).

educational and employment opportunities. The main feminist thinkers of the second wave movement include, apart from Betty Friedan: French writer, philosopher and activist Simone de Beauvoir, whose 1949 book *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*; English translation by Howard M. Parshley, 1953), describing and analyzing the inferior treatment of women in almost all aspects of social life throughout history, is considered to be a pioneering work which laid foundations for the global movement; American writer, artist and radical feminist Kate Millet, who in her 1970 book *Sexual Politics* established that the patriarchal power men maintained over women is not biological or innate but rather socially imposed; Australian journalist and writer Germaine Greer, best known for her international bestseller *The Female Eunuch* (1970), in which she argued that women have always been taught to be submissive and to hate themselves by men who hate them, that women have been repressed sexually, and that this state of affairs can only be changed by way of revolution and not evolution; Canadian radical feminist Shulamith Firestone whose most influential book was *The Dialectic of Sex: A Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) in which she applied Marxist historical materialism to gender and suggested that the main driver of history has been the division into genders and reproductive relations; radical feminist Andrea Dworkin who in her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) spoke against pornography which she believed promoted violence against women. The most prominent English-language fiction writers, who popularized second-wave feminist ideas in their works, include: Susan Sontag (*The Benefactor* [1963], *Death Kit* [1967]), Angela Carter (*The Magic Toyshop* [1967], *Heroes and Villains* [1969], *The Bloody Chamber* [1979], *Love* [1971]), Margaret Atwood (*The Edible Woman* [1969], *Lady Oracle* [1976], *Bodily Harm* [1981], *The Handmaid's Tale* [1985]), Doris Lessing (*Children of Violence* [1952-1969], *The Golden Notebook* [1962], *The Good Terrorist* [1985]).

3.2 Oedipa Maas and Pynchon's Works in the Feminist Context

Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, published in 1965, coincided with the onset of the second wave feminist movement. The novel appeared in bookstores two years after *The Feminine Mystique* was published, at a time in which women's legal rights were being expanded and society started to see the situation of women under a different light. One could therefore pronounce them the "preterite" of the moment, hovering between the state of "elect" and "reprobate"[33], trying to fight their way out from under oppression, to begin constructing a new image of womanhood —one not filtered through society's patriarchal lens. The protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas, can thus be perceived literally as a representative of a specific, subdued social group, trying to steer her way through new territory, which attracts her with a promise of unprecedented freedom while, at the same time, it arouses anxiety in her about the unknown and possibly dark consequences of this freedom. Oedipa can be seen as the embodiment of an American outcast, a general representative of "the alternative, underground nation of the left and leftover" as opposed to "the mainstream nation defined through consumer culture as 'the American way of life'" (Dussere 567).

However, critics reviewing *The Crying of Lot 49* just after it had been published did not view the female heroine with a favorable eye, or consider her an appropriate character to carry through any kind of serious message. Richard Poirier commented in an article for *The New York Times* that the role of protagonist given to Oedipa by Pynchon "makes it impossible to divorce from her limitations the large rhetoric about America at the end of the novel" because she "has not been given character enough to bear the weight of this rhetoric" (Poirier). The general opinion that an ordinary housewife could not function as a credible bearer of illuminating truths convinced an assortment of critics such as Rose Remington or

[33] I discuss the issue of predestination in Calvinism, a theme frequently appearing in Pynchon's writings, in chapter 2, pages 84-85.

Jonathan Rosenbaum who dismissed the novel as trivial, especially in comparison with Pynchon's previous work *V.*, or even disdainfully labelled it as "pornographic" (Rosenbaum).

Yet the female characters in *V.* are much more one-dimensional than Oedipa, each of them playing a different, symbolic role. In *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties* (1976), Mary Allen suggests that "the variety of women in *V.* results from the various fantasies of men" therefore they come across as "blank" (qtd. in M. D. Hawthorne 66). The title, *V.*, could be perceived as a combination of a succession of women, or rather stereotypical fetishes of femininity, merged in the obsessive mind of the protagonist Herbert Stencil. The most notable manifestations of V. Stencil reads or hears about during his ultimately futile pursuit are: Victoria Wren, young, innocent, naive, and surrounded by men she is dependent upon; decadent Vera Meroving, sporting an artificial eye and indulging in sadomasochistic sex acts with a German officer; V. herself, a lesbian fetishizing a young ballerina in 1913 Paris, whom she treats as a "an object of pleasure" (*V.* 404) and whose tragic death pushes V. to ultimately objectify herself as well; finally, much older V. disguised as the genderless Bad Priest and dehumanized as, at the end of her life, she is almost entirely made of artificial parts. Throughout the novel, it is suggested that V. could also refer to such feminine symbols or concepts as the Virgin —the immaculate mother—, the goddess Venus or even the mythical land of Vheissu (Pérez-Llantada 240*)*. Moreover, other female characters in the book, contemporary to Herbert Stencil, behave in ways that only emphasize the continued objectification of women by patriarchal society. The women in the novel can be seen as various projections of male desire —an unattainable goddess, a mother, a mistress, a whore— a litany of clichéd roles that "disperse rather than converge in an ultimate or absolute signification" (Pérez-Llantada 240). In *V.*, Pynchon clearly alludes to the inferior position of women in the male-dominated culture and his stance could be seen as critical of this state of the affairs. However, he does not venture to defy the stereotypes by creating a

more rounded, emancipated female character, whose identity would not be tied to some man's notion of womanhood. Not until *The Crying of Lot 49*, that is, and the novel's adventurous protagonist Oedipa[34], who attempts to forge her own way through the increasingly mad world surrounding her, and who, with each step, moves further away from the men she was previously dependent on. It is also significant that Pynchon chooses to present the American social and political landscape in the tumultuous 1960s from a female point of view. Contrary to Richard Poirier's opinion, I believe that a less biased reading of the novel reveals an Oedipa who does manage to "bear the weight of this rhetoric," offering remarkably insightful observations on the dark underbelly of life in the US, on its most neglected citizens to whom, she slowly realizes, she herself belongs.

Given what has been said so far, it becomes legitimate to wonder whether Pynchon could be considered a feminist. What induced him to choose a woman to be the protagonist of his second novel? Joanna Freer attempts to answer these questions in her 2011 article for the literary magazine *Berfrois*. She reminds the readers that the author himself admitted to being guilty of "adolescent" sexism, manifested in his early short story "Low-Lands," later published as part of the collection *Slow Learner*. Freer suggests that also in other stories in the collection Pynchon depicts women characters as "inferior actors in an essentially male sphere" ("Is Pynchon a Feminist?"). In her opinion, *The Crying of Lot 49* can indeed be seen as the writer's attempt to make amends, albeit not a very successful one. It is highly likely that he was aware of the discussion around Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in the media[35] and took the book's revelations into account, as a keen observer of the developments

[34] I will not be discussing female characters appearing in Pynchon's later novels, as I would like to narrow my analysis down to the condition of American women in the 1960s. It is worth noting, however, that the writer created Oedipa's contemporary incarnation in his latest work *Bleeding Edge* —Maxine Tarnow, who is the owner of a New York detective agency specializing in fraud investigations and an "intelligent, diligent and determined" woman who also attempts to "make sense of a world that is obdurately senseless" (Grattan 94).

[35] Even though *The Feminine Mystique* first appeared in bookstores during a 114 day strike of New York City newspaper workers, after which it got a short and "rather skeptical" review in *The New York Times*, it was nevertheless "excerpted in *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal*, magazines whose combined readership was a staggering thirty-six million." After the publisher, W. W. Norton, had "hired a publicist who arranged a book

in the feminist movement taking place at the beginning of the 1960s. Freer, however, argues that

> although the intertextual presence of *The Feminine Mystique* leads the reader to expect a parallel criticism of the lot of women from Pynchon, his novel in fact rejects the logic of Friedan's gender-specific critique, suggesting that Oedipa's problem — her sense of emptiness, of meaninglessness, of a void at the centre of things— is universal within American society. *Lot 49* thus seems to reflect the contemporary attitudes of a majority of males within the New Left who were denying the urgency of the "woman question" amid what they considered the greater exigencies of society-wide revolution.[36] ("Is Pynchon a Feminist?")

Freer considers this approach to the female protagonist of the novel to be dismissive, as Pynchon does not focus enough on the material and social conditions of existence for women as such, does not single out the specific problems pertaining to this social group. Despite the relevance of Freer's approach to Pynchon's work for feminist readings of US literature and the insightfulness of her conclusions, I personally have a different take on both the role of literature and Pynchon's literary project. I believe it is not the fiction writer's duty to faithfully portray reality —which, moreover, is created by human perception, therefore it is relative and exists in many versions— but rather to present an unscientific account of it, leaving room for the reader's free interpretation[37]. I also read Oedipa's journey to self-

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tour, then an unusual promotional tool," Friedan's book "ended up spending six weeks on the *Times* best-seller list" and "the first paperback printing sold 1.4 million copies" (Menand).

[36] A lot of the feminist agenda in the New Left, the radical political movement active in the US mainly during the 1960s and the 1970s, got diluted because of this universalizing stance. Initially, the women who saw their participation in the New Left as a path to liberation were, after a few years, disillusioned by the dismissive attitude towards their cause exhibited by their male colleagues. The widespread sexism the female members faced in the movement's male-dominated structures, the oppression and exploitation they had to endure, ultimately resulted in the feminists' break with the New Left. For more information see Sara Evans's *Personal Politics. The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (1979).

[37] As sociologist and literary theorist Pierre Bourdieu argues in his 1992 book *Les règles de l'art* (*Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*; English translation by Susan Emanuel, 1996): "the literary work can sometimes say more, even about the social realm, than many writings with scientific pretensions […]. But it says it only in a mode such that it does not truly say it. […] The 'reality effect' is that very particular form of belief that literary fiction produces, through a disclaimed reference to the reality designated, which allows us to know

discovery as indeed a very vivid description of how the life of a 1960s housewife could change during the second feminist revolution in the making, of the revelations she could have, the hurdles she would have to clear and the dilemmas she could face. She may not be an especially complex character, but neither are the male protagonists in Pynchon's novels. Moreover, presenting a woman as a symbol of a condition "universal within American society," as a symbol of all the oppressed and of a budding revolt, can hardly be considered dismissive. I must agree with Emma V. Miller however, that we cannot be entirely sure what effect exactly Pynchon wanted to achieve by making a woman the protagonist of the novel, apart from the fact that the move is "evidently intentionally provocative considering the contemporary cultural changes that were occurring regarding the role of women in the USA in the 1960s" (17).

The Crying of Lot 49 was greeted with mixed press reviews —generally unfavorable in those which compared the novel to Pynchon's previous work *V.*—, which widely downplayed the significance of the female protagonist. It was followed by the masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow* and then by *Vineland,* which resulted in the scholars publishing their first studies on Pynchon with a focus mainly on these three larger novels. Critics such as Molly Hite or Marjorie Kaufman, who analyzed Pynchon's fiction from a feminist angle, mentioned *The Crying of Lot 49* only perfunctorily in their early research. Later on, however, the character of Oedipa Maas gained more recognition and her role has been scrutinized in many studies by, among others, Joanna Freer, Tracey Sherard, Emma V. Miller, Cathy N. Davidson. One of the most widely discussed issues regarding the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49* is her first name. From all the theories in circulation in the academic circles, I am personally

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everything by refusing to know what really is. A sociological reading breaks the spell. By interrupting the complicity that unites author and reader in the same relation of denegation of the reality expressed by the text, it reveals the truth that the text enunciates but in such a way that it does not say it; moreover, sociological reading *a contrario* brings to light the truth of the text itself, whose specificity is defined precisely by the fact that it does not say what it says in the same way as the sociological reading does. […] The charm of the literary work lies largely in the way it speaks of the most serious things without insisting, unlike science according to Searle, on being taken completely seriously" (32).

inclined to believe that it derives from the name of the protagonist of *Oedipus the King*, the tragedy by the ancient Greek playwright Sophocles, retold, to some extent, by Homer in *The Odyssey*. In one of the most well-known stories from Greek mythology, Oedipus unwittingly fulfills a prophecy made by the Delphic Oracle, by killing his father, the king of Thebes, and marrying his mother —the parents who abandoned him right after his birth and left him to die. Oedipus, who had spent most of his adult life trying to find his real parents to, thus, prevent the prophecy from coming true, blinds himself in an act of repentance but also in order to cure himself from the figurative blindness he had experienced until that moment. Similarly to Oedipus, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* is on a quest for identity, trying to navigate a deceitful reality she understands less and less, as her search progresses. Her "blindness" to whatever is happening around her manifests itself through frequent sight disorder references: she "is having a hallucination" (10), she feels like "watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix" (12), she sees "the world refracted through […] tears" (13), she needs to "squint for the sunlight" (14) when looking at San Narciso. It is as if some filter was applied over the everyday, common sights, making them different, obscure, sometimes even hostile for Oedipa. Similarly to blind people, who compensate for their loss of vision by making stronger use of other senses, such as hearing or the sense of smell, Oedipa starts paying more attention to elements of her surroundings she had previously ignored, e.g. she becomes a sharp spotter of the muted post horn —the symbol of the mysterious Tristero organization she involuntarily starts to investigate and which starts popping up in the most unlikely places on Oedipa's path. She gropes her way through the suddenly unfamiliar yet somehow terribly real (under-)world, hoping for an answer to the situation she finds herself in, waiting for a revelation. Neither Oedipa nor the reader is given the opportunity of witnessing it, as the novel ends just before it happens —if it indeed does happen.

Among other, alternative readings, which I do not consider equally valid but nevertheless worth mentioning, is the association of Oedipa's name with Freud's Oedipus complex. This psychoanalytic concept, linked to the theory of psychosexual stages of development, describes a child's unconscious feelings of desire for their opposite-sex parent and hostility towards the same-sex parent. This association has been discarded by many critics, such as Edward Mendelson, who rejected its relevance "since the novel contains no information about Oedipa's relationship with her parents" (Hurley 95), and others, such as Emma V. Miller, who believe that Pynchon's use of the name Oedipa rather "echoes Lacan's 'name-of-the-father', a theory encapsulating and developed from Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex" (E. V. Miller 6). The Lacanian concept goes beyond Freud's considerations on the topic by suggesting that in the process of maturing the child loses its desire for the parent but experiences, as Rosalind Minsky puts it, "the Oedipal crisis through cultural substitutions, that is primarily language and other systems of representation" (qtd. in E. V. Miller 7), which in Oedipa's case means an unquenchable desire for "knowledge and 'truth' which categorise language and reason" (qtd. in E. V. Miller 7). Finally, the third option one might consider when interpreting the origins and meaning of Oedipa's name is simply that it has no significance whatsoever and that it is just another prank played by Pynchon on his readers.

The significance of Oedipa's surname has been approached from a wider variety of angles than her given name. The interpretations point to, among others, Newton's Second Law, where mass means inertia —a reluctance to face or bring about change; the word *maas* in Afrikaans, which means "net" or "web" and suggests that Oedipa is able to link diverse pieces of information in order to derive some coherent meaning out of them; the Dutch word *maaswerk* which means the background threads of a tapestry; or simply to the expression "my ass" pointing to the fact that Pynchon is just winking at his readers and critics (Hurley 96).

Oedipa took the surname Maas upon marrying Wendell "Mucho" Maas, in whose case Pynchon seems to be playing with the Spanish "mucho más" —meaning that Wendell, deeply dissatisfied with his life, expects much more from it, while neglecting his own wife who, in turn, expects much more from him. Each of these interpretations can be given credit for touching just one aspect of Oedipa's journey towards the supposed revelation; all in all, the surname Maas, seems to be, interpretation-wise, only a complement to her first name — endowed with much deeper meaning regarding her path as a female heroine. Yet it is also likely that by giving such an "impossible" name to his protagonist, with so many immediate associations that can be interpreted in different ways, Pynchon aimed at referencing the "ecstasy of communication" that was gaining momentum at the time, with the multiplicity of ultimately empty meanings, intended to playfully lead the reader astray.

3.3 Pynchon's California as America's America

The choice of California as the setting for Pynchon's second novel appears to be obvious. The author had been residing in Manhattan Beach for the greater part of the 1960s —also while writing *The Crying of Lot 49*— and experienced life in the Golden State firsthand. His article on the Watts riots[38] only proves that he took a lively interest in the ongoing local events. But California, as I detailed in previous chapters of this thesis, has always been viewed as "a microcosm of American culture, as expressed in its most extreme as well as in its most ordinary manifestations" (Colvile 58). By placing Oedipa, the "Everywoman of the Atomic Age" (Wald 451) in the heart of this "west of the West," as Theodore Roosevelt had once famously called it, Pynchon was able to paint a wider picture of the cultural and political developments in the US of the time. Whatever happened in the

[38] I discuss this article extensively in chapter 2 of this dissertation, pages 85-86.

forward-looking California, in terms of social, political or technological changes, was bound to spill over into the other states with time. Therefore, the fact that Oedipa is disoriented during her bizarre journey through different Californian towns, noticing people and behavior patterns she had never witnessed before and constantly questioning her sanity and her ability to carry on —is not a sign of weakness as many critics suggest. Her disorientation can be interpreted as a national phenomenon, not necessarily to be read negatively, as she can also be perceived as the representative of those in the vanguard of the second-wave feminist movement, a harbinger of change in the condition of the American "dispossessed" women — even if she feels increasingly paranoid, claustrophobic and unhappy as the plot develops.

California, in *The Crying of Lot 49,* is, at first glance, presented rather superficially — real cities (Los Angeles, Berkeley) are mixed with fictional ones (San Narciso, Kinneret-Among-The-Pines) and none of them are described in a way meant to infuse them with life, make them seem like existent places. The case of San Francisco, "the infected city" (*Crying of Lot 49* 80) which Oedipa also visits in search for clues to the Tristero organization, is somewhat different —the reader can trace the protagonist's progress through it as Pynchon mentions several existing addresses and landmarks, describing them mostly through a lot of vivid social detail. Yet, in each of the places something dreamlike —or rather "nightmare-like"—, surreal happens, people say outrageous things and Oedipa sees evidence of the conspiracy she is trying to figure out everywhere. Generally, the imagery Pynchon uses in the novel when referring to the places Oedipa visits is rather aimed at creating a deeper sensation of her detachment from her surroundings and suggesting that they have some hidden, obscure meaning. It seems that California's social and economic infrastructure, as it is presented in *The Crying of Lot 49,* has been created with some other purpose —a dark, devious and somewhat vague one— than just that of serving people. Especially the highly organized, artificially planned neighborhoods of Orange County, with "hieroglyphic streets" (*Crying of*

Lot 49 125) forming elaborate patters which might —or might not— carry hidden meaning only a skilled, enlightened investigator can discover. When Oedipa leaves her hometown Kinneret-Among-The-Pines for San Narciso where she is to execute her late ex-boyfriend's will, she admires the view of the city from above, marveling at it being simultaneously well-ordered, like a printed circuit —by whose hypnotic intricacy she was first fascinated when, as a child, she saw it inside a transistor radio—, and incredibly complicated and replete with mysterious significance:

> 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. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern California, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seem no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (*The Crying of Lot 49* 15)

Also the Californian freeways Oedipa navigates while pursuing her duties as executrix, and later during her chase after the elusive Tristero, appear to her not just as a convenient and quick means of moving from one place to another or, as they are often presented in American culture, symbols of freedom and independence, but rather as obsequious conveyor belts, delivering people to various places for various, murky reasons. By and large, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon seems to suggest that the roads built to facilitate intercity or intracity movement do not serve their common user but rather those who aim at profiting from them, such as corporations, property developers, car dealers, criminals: "What the road really was, she fancied, was this hypodermic needle, inserted somewhere ahead into the vein of a freeway, a vein nourishing the mainliner LA, keeping it happy, coherent, protected from pain, or whatever passes, with a city, for pain" (*Crying of Lot 49* 16). This

passage most explicitly refers to the infamous drug culture of the time and place and particularly to rampant heroin use —especially among hippies, Vietnam war veterans and minority communities— fueled by improvements in smuggling methods which resulted in increased availability of the opioid (Schneider 106). Pynchon reverts the positive image of cars zooming along the freeway, often seen as the embodiment of liberty in the US, and makes it negative by juxtaposing it with the image of drug-taking. The writer seems to suggest that the inhabitants of the city are addicts, dependent on, bound to a system of consumption, which provides them with only a temporary, illusory pleasure. In the opinion of Stephen Hock, contributor to the collection of essays *Pynchon's California*, the twisting tentacles of the Californian freeways create a vertiginous, numbing experience their users need and expect: "The freeway incarnates the condition of American modernity —or, perhaps, postmodernity— that finds its ultimate expression in California, and the freeway consequently serves in Pynchon's California novels as an emblem of the dizzying whirl that California offers as the distillation of American modernity" (205).

The *Crying of Lot 49*'s fictional town of San Narciso is the epitome of an artificially planned, Californian automobilecentric urban space. An environment constructed this way is not exactly aimed at improving the quality of its inhabitants' lives but rather at benefitting those with capital and power: "Like many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a group of concepts –census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 14). Pynchon accurately pinpoints the problem posed by urban sprawl, so harmful for human connectedness and civic engagement. California, due to its pleasant, Mediterranean climate in its coastal and Southern parts and a wide range of employment opportunities across various sectors, has always attracted people from all over the US as well as from abroad. The trend begun with the Gold Rush of 1848-1855 with a great influx of people and the ensuing frantic

infrastructural and economic growth, funded with the mined gold. The miners and those who came with them needed food, so farms were set up; they also needed entertainment so saloons, gambling houses and brothels were created; gold had to be transported so a network including roads, bridges and ports expanded steadily; gold also generated revenue so a suitable banking system had to be established. Existing towns grew rapidly and new ones proliferated at an incredible rate. As a result, California started being perceived as the land of opportunity, which attracted even more people, hungry for wealth and success. Yet this unnaturally quick rate of expansion turned out to be harmful in a number of ways. The early mining methods were detrimental for the environment, the increasing demand for livestock products resulted in a gradual destruction of grasslands, the need for more housing brought about the thinning out of forests. California's climate, prone to draughts, exacerbated the situation (Dasmann 121). Notwithstanding that, in the following decades more people flooded in and cities continued growing. The mining companies played an important role in spurring "the development of the modern corporate economy" (Jung 52). In Southern California, business ventures flourished and so did urbanization.

However, not everybody could enjoy the fruit of this stunning economic growth equally. At the beginning of the twentieth century the process of white suburbanization intensified and the low-income communities of people of color were pushed to the more industrialized, polluted areas of the cities (Pulido 85). The federal government's policies in the 1950s such as the "support for interstate construction and Federal Housing Administration (FHA) housing loans" influenced "housing market forces to exacerbate the racial separation, income segmentation and urban sprawl that have come to define this region's growth" (Aldana and Dymski 99). By the time Oedipa set out in pursuit of Tristero, Southern California's cities and their infrastructure were already tailored to the needs of powerful companies, property dealers and affluent, white middle-class communities. This resulted in a

double bind situation, with California becoming nothing more than a conglomerate of corporations feeding on the wealthy consumers addicted to the provided goods, services and real estate, and creating a constant demand for them. Meanwhile, in between and beyond the artificially created "printed circuit" neighborhoods and twisting, intersecting freeway "veins" there were calm majestic deserts, beautiful beaches and the ocean, in such sharp contrast with the polluted, overcrowded urban agglomerations that they seemed unreal and brought to mind man-made film sets.

Before leaving Kinneret, Oedipa naively "had believed […] in some principle of the sea as redemption for Southern California," that "no matter what you did to its edges, the Pacific stayed inviolate and unintegrated or assumed the ugliness at any edge into some more general truth" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 37). The comfort of her sheltered life rendered Oedipa unrealistically idealistic, making her even think that "her own section of the state," meaning San Francisco, needed no such "redemption," while in fact this city "provides the most dispiriting episode in the entire novel" (Merrill 67). However, as Ian D. Copestake rightly argues "the change of tense here, the fact that she 'had believed' in the sea as an embodiment of redemptive hope, suggests that her idealism belongs to a time before her quest began" (Copestake 173), that Oedipa had already begun to challenge her previously narrow perspective on life and started to undergo a "sea-change" as the critic aptly puts it. The protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, prompted by her budding paranoia, slowly realizes that the natural beauty of California's landscape, seemingly equally available to all, can be fully enjoyed only by the chosen few —those with privilege, power, and access to resources. Jean Baudrillard addressed the issue of Southern California's illusory "staying power," its alleged ability to cleanse itself of any impurity in his 1989 *America*, attributing it to the power of the sterile "desert form" (125) reigning in the region, present both in the "pure open space" of the

landscape as well as in the regular "erasure […] of the signified of signs in the cities," historical and cultural, as if they were tracks in sand. The philosopher suggested that

> Nowhere else does there exist such a stunning fusion of a radical lack of culture and natural beauty, of the wonder of nature and the absolute simulacrum: just in this mixture of extreme irreferentiality and deconnection overall, but embedded in most primeval and great-featured natural scenery of deserts and ocean and sun —nowhere else is this antagonistic climax to be found. (*America* 126)

Such a constant elimination of meaning in an unvaried landscape might give a false impression of purification, of infinite possibilities of starting anew.

At the time of *America*'s publication monotonous, banal, and alienating suburban landscapes designed around freeway systems had already expanded further, plunging Californians even deeper into chaos and insatiable emptiness. In *The Crying of Lot 49* Pynchon had foreseen this happening and shown two paths one might take in such circumstances: either accepting the hyperreal[39] but also the "readily available surface assurances" (Prince 83) or, like Oedipa, plunging headlong into the "orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 126). The protagonist of the novel, whom we first see depending on those "readily available surface assurances" —engaging in routine activities characteristic of 1960s white middle-class housewives, such as taking part in a Tupperware parties or attending group therapy sessions— is suddenly charged with a highly unusual task, the execution of her millionaire ex-boyfriend's will. Undertaking this unexpected mission forces her to break out of her routine and thrusts her into unknown territory, opening her eyes to aspects of Californian life she had not previously pondered, making her feel "alienated from the America she has known so far" and giving her a sense of "a supernatural presence beneath the surface of everyday life" (*The Poetics of Chronotope in the Novels of Thomas*

[39] For more information on the concept of the hyperreal see chapter 2, pages 68-69.

Pynchon 104). When travelling between the various SoCal cities and looking at them with a new sense of suspicion, through a filter of growing paranoia, Oedipa discovers that "her own section of the state," as well as its surroundings, do not seem to be what she always assumed them to be and that the sunny landscape has a very dark lining indeed.

3.4 Paranoid Female *Noir* Detective Solving the Case of Her Own Identity

Hollywood *noir* and *neo-noir* films —made after the late 1950s—, as well as *noir* crime fiction very often used California and specifically Los Angeles as a setting. The protagonists of these works are usually gritty, hard-heartened, cynical private detectives, functioning in the dark underbelly of the City of Angels, who uncover the dirty secrets of seemingly irreproachable characters in exquisite, sunlit surroundings, which conceal the most heinous of crimes. Pynchon parodies the genre in *Inherent Vice*, where sloppy sleuth Larry "Doc" Sportello roams around Los Angeles trying to crack an increasingly vague case. In this novel, California represents "what it so often represents in popular culture: 'postmodern America,' a place of sleek beauty manufactured to mask inescapable corruption, disillusionment, or mere emptiness" (McClintock and Miller 2). The same could be said about *The Crying of Lot 49*, but here Pynchon twists the principles of the *noir* genre even more —he substitutes the typical, tough and brusque male private eye with a housewife, who "identifies herself as a Young Republican exactly at the time when, in the mid-sixties, the counterculture was already gaining some significant political headway"[40] (Collado-Rodríguez 85, my translation) and who only just discovers that the world around her is not as inoffensive, unambiguous and safe as it appears. Furthermore, it seems that Oedipa does not manage to

[40] This quotation is my own translation from the original Spanish: "La protagonista de la segunda novela de Pynchon es, por el contrario, definida pronto como una típica esposa californiana, que vive en una pequeña comunidad al norte del estado, y que se presenta a sí misma como una joven republicana precisamente en un momento, mediados de los años sesenta, cuando la contracultura está ya consiguiendo algunos avances políticos significativos."

solve the mystery she is investigating —or at least the reader is not given the opportunity to find out the straightforward answer—, contrary to what traditionally happens at the end of *noir* films and novels (Collado-Rodríguez 85).

However, Oedipa's entire quest for Tristero —an underground postal conspiracy dating back to eighteenth-century Europe, which may or may not have something to do with Pierce's estate and whose signs of existence, mainly in the form of the "muted post horn" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 75) symbol or the acronym W.A.S.T.E., she starts seeing everywhere she goes—, could be perceived as the "solution" in the form of a new beginning, the unclouding of her perception as an independent woman and possibly a budding feminist. In this case, Oedipa's paranoia, her increasing obsession with Tristero, introduces her to a mode of critical thinking about contemporary society and about her own position within it, which gives her simultaneously a sense of newfound freedom and despair. She might have led the life of a typical 1960s American housewife, but she had exhibited signs of disillusionment with her existence even before she received the news about Pierce Inverarity's death and had already demonstrated that she had all the makings of a "detective" who would pursue any available clue to change her situation. In a flashback at the beginning of the novel, Oedipa remembers a trip she took with her ex-boyfriend to Mexico City where they attended a Remedios Varo exhibition. One of the paintings made a powerful impression on Oedipa — *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* (1961) which depicts a group of women in a tower knitting a tapestry which spills out of the tower's windows and with which they are trying "hopelessly to fill the void: for all the other buildings and creatures, all the waves, ships and forests of the earth were contained in this tapestry and the tapestry was the world" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 13). Upon seeing the painting, Oedipa starts to cry as she identifies with these women — trapped and isolated from all that surrounds them. In the words of Deborah L. Madsen, *The Crying of Lot 49*'s heroine is

> distressed less by this image of the subjective creation of the world than she is by the prospect that the web of embroidered threads itself creates the human figures. The suggestion that the self is constituted by the world, with its powerful cultural/ideological determinants, evokes her sense of "magic, anonymous and malignant" that "keeps her where she is." (*The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* 54)

Oedipa feels that the "tapestry" she herself has been weaving is a construct forced on her from the outside and that she should act, take matters into her own hands to assume control over her life, but she still does not know how to proceed and silently weighs the options that first come to her mind:

> Having no apparatus except gut fear and female cunning to examine this formless magic, to understand how it works, how to measure its field strength, count its lines of force, she may fall back on superstition, or take up a useful hobby like embroidery, or go mad, or marry a disc jockey. If the tower is everywhere and the knight of deliverance no proof against its magic, what else? (*The Crying of Lot 49* 13)

Before Oedipa reaches, much later on, the conclusion that she should "project a world" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 56) of her own, by giving in to the overwhelming and yet liberating paranoia, she still clings for a while to the notion she had been fed all her life —that of a "knight of deliverance" being a woman's only means of being rescued. Therefore, after breaking up with Pierce, she indeed marries a disc jockey —Wendell "Mucho" Maas. With him, she briefly settles for the stereotypical life of a suburban homemaker of the time, complete with five o'clock cocktails, shopping at Muzak-filled malls, regular visits to a psychiatrist and tolerating her husband's weakness for underage girls. However, as soon as she is tasked with dealing with Pierce's legacy, dormant feelings of the unfulfillment that had

been stirred for the first time during the Mexico trip, awaken in Oedipa. Although her first reaction is that of helplessness and an automatic need to seek a man's aid and advice, she soon learns that she will get none. Her husband immediately tells her that he is "not capable" *(The Crying of Lot 49* 10) of lending her a hand in that matter, her lawyer, Roseman, does not treat her seriously but rather concentrates on her as a sexual object and tries to "play footsie with her under the table" *(The Crying of Lot 49* 12) when she shows him Pierce's will, while her psychiatrist, Dr Hilarious, fails to offer her emotional support as he is having mental problems of his own. As Cathy N. Davidson notes, Oedipa's men, "those upon whom she might depend, are all shown to be pathetically inadequate" (44). Those to whom Oedipa turns for advice later on, in the course of her investigation, prove to be equally unreliable, unequivocally sexist, condescending, or emotionally weak, although they all make a contribution to her quest —by providing some details about Pierce's ventures or about the Tristero conspiracy. Metzger, the handsome co-executor of Pierce's estate and child actor who became a lawyer, is supposed to guide Oedipa through her complicated task, but he mainly focuses on seducing her and later just passively follows her to various places where she continues her investigation, and finally escapes with a young rock band groupie. Thoroughly smug, Metzger fails to see his own incompetence, dismissively calling Oedipa one of "these lib, overeducated broads with soft heads and bleeding hearts" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 51) when she asks him to accompany her to a meeting with Randolph Driblette — director of a Jacobean revenge play, *The Courier's Tragedy*, which she senses carries some information about the Tristero conspiracy. The lawyer's role in the novel is quite important though, in a subordinate way, since he acts as a facilitator of the protagonist's development — the first night they spend together could be seen as Oedipa's breakthrough moment on her path towards becoming an independent, self-determined woman. In the scene in which drunk Metzger passes out on the floor before anything physical takes place between the two, Oedipa

abandons the stereotypical gender role of a passive maiden and rushes to him and starts "kissing him to wake him up" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 23), which is "an interesting reversal of the myth of Sleeping Beauty and all it implies about subjectivity" (Sherard 70). Oedipa, who through her failed relationship with Pierce had already debunked the myth of Rapunzel and realized nobody would come to rescue her from her "tower" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 23), took another step away from normativity with Metzger by beginning to "act on her desire" (Sherard 70).

The heroine's paranoia about the Tristero conspiracy, her growing urge to pursue the mystery that constantly manifests itself in the strangest ways on her path, can also be regarded as an indication of Oedipa's subconscious longing for independence and agency, even at the cost of a comfortable life and mental stability. In the course of her all-consuming quest, during which "everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 56) she does not seem to realize or fully admit to herself yet how improperly the men that surround her behave towards her, but, focused on her own goal, she starts taking advantage of their stereotypical and limited views of women. The heroine gets in contact with a succession of men who provide her with pieces of information necessary to push the Tristero investigation forward, yet their attitude towards her usually resembles that of Metzger's. Berkeley scientist John Nefastis, who shows Oedipa a machine he built based on Clerk Maxwell's thought experiment[41], at the end of her visit directly proposes sex; theater director Randolph Driblette, whom Oedipa questions about the references to Tristero in his play, suggests that Oedipa "could fall in love" with him and looks at her spider-like, with his eyes waiting, "at the centres of their webs" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 54); Mike Fallopian, president of the right-wing Peter Pinguid Society and an employee of the

[41] Maxwell's demon is a thought experiment created in 1867 by Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell. According to the definition found in Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary it is "a hypothetical agent or device of arbitrarily small mass that is considered selectively to admit or block the passage of individual molecules from one compartment to another according to their speed, constituting a violation of the second law of thermodynamics" ("Maxwell's demon" 886).

murky aerospace industry corporation Yoyodyne, whom Oedipa questions about the company's alternative mail system shrugs her off, dismissively saying "Women. […] Who can tell what goes on with them?" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 65). All these men fail to realize, however, that Oedipa is consciously performing the roles they immediately ascribe her, uses her femininity against them, in order to extract the information she needs and, consequently, paves her way to emancipation. She gets into character to manipulate her male interlocutors: when preparing to visit English professor Emory Bortz about the play directed by Driblette she "put on a sweater, skirt and sneakers, wrapped her hair in a studentlike twist, went easy on the makeup" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 102) in an attempt to look younger and occupy a subject position a university lecturer can read; when trying to get an explanation on what the muted post horn might mean from Yoyodyne engineer Stanley Koteks, she "rested her shades on her nose and batted her eyelashes" like a "coquette" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 60); Oedipa is also trying to charm Mr Thoth, an old man at a nursery home whose grandfather was a rider for the Pony Express, by smiling at him "as granddaughterly as she knew how" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 63). Her attempts prove to be successful and each of the meetings brings her some kind of snippet about Tristero. As Kostas Kaltsas observes, "as a woman, she is not considered a threat, so the men she 'interrogates' are willing to give her information, at least up to a point" (38). By deliberately taking on the patriarchal stereotypes on women's social roles this way, encouraged by her paranoid curiosity, Oedipa cunningly undermines patriarchy itself.

This way, step by step, the "heroine named after the first detective of them all" (Mendelson 123), slowly uncovers more and more information about the ancient postal organization and evidence of its continued operation on American soil in the 1960s. Still, she never manages to obtain any tangible proof or assurance from any of the people involved in the alleged conspiracy, that Tristero really exists. The snippets of information about the underground mail distribution company, which towards the end of Oedipa's quest —or at

least towards the end of the novel— start flooding her from every possible direction, seem to be connected, but at the same time do not lead her towards any elucidation. Oedipa frequently doubts her own sanity, but also understands that there is no turning back from the path she had chosen so unconsciously and which, with time, has become the essence of her existence:

> Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (*The Crying of Lot 49* 126)

Oedipa's search for "a real Tristero," even if theoretically unsuccessful, changed her completely, opened her eyes to a world she had not known before, when trapped in her "tower" of suburban life —the world of outcasts, of people discriminated against and with very limited means of making themselves heard. It also made her realize that she had been coerced by society into playing a role that only gave her an illusion of happiness and safety, based mostly on consumerism and materialism, and for which she had to pay by giving up her chance to construct and modify her temporary identity or identities, by conforming to the social rules imposed on women of the time. In fact, this consumer culture manipulation could be seen as a kind of conspiracy against women[42]. Thanks to Tristero, Oedipa found a way of breaking free from that constraining influence, realized that there was "a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 118).

In his book *Conspiracy Culture,* Peter Knight argues that with the emergence of the 1960s movements promoting women's liberation, black rights, gay rights or opposing the war

[42] Even though Betty Friedan in the *Feminine Mystique* dismisses the possibility of US businesses and advertising agencies conspiring against women, she nevertheless confirms their being exploited by them by quoting an advertising executive she interviewed for the book, who showed her "the function served by keeping American women housewives—the reservoir that their lack of identity, lack of purpose, creates, to be manipulated into dollars at the point of purchase" (Friedan 199).

in Vietnam, the concept of conspiracy underwent a radical change in the US. Previously it usually "posited a threat to the American way of life and politics by subversive minorities" while later on "these new forms of oppositional conspiracy culture have been based on the assumption that the American way of life is itself a threat to those marginalized by it" (34). Therefore, in the words of Erik Dussere:

> The post-sixties version of conspiracy, then, is not really continuous with the earlier conspiracy form; instead, it is a further development of the crime or detective form in which the category "crime" is enlarged so that it encompasses the abuses perpetrated by government, industry, technocracy, and global capitalism. (571)

Oedipa's paranoid investigation of Tristero is in fact her unveiling of a conspiracy against American women, condemned by male-dominated industries to leading empty, submissive lives. Although the protagonist of Pynchon's novel is not part of any movement and just concentrates on her own position and perspectives in a world the existence of which she has only recently discovered, she does seem to have potential to become an example of a growing self-awareness among American women. The readiness with which she decides to abandon her old life completely in search for truth, the compassion she has for all the broken, neglected outcasts she meets during her quest, the quickness with which she realizes that the idealized world of Californian housewives is a construct, a "tower" meant to keep them under control, suggest that she is capable of recognizing the plight of the "disinherited" and especially women, of giving a name to the "problem that has no name." The progressiveness of the Golden State, which has functioned as a magnet for all socially unadjusted individuals, works to Oedipa's advantage, allowing her to witness the budding US counterculture movement of the 1960s[43] firsthand and to understand that she was not alone in her disenchantment with life as she knew it. When looking for professor Emory Bortz, she visits

[43] I discuss the counterculture movement in 1960s California in chapter 2, pages 75-78.

the place considered to be the counterculture hotbed —the University of California campus at Berkeley. It is still an early phase of her quest so she is surprised by the atmosphere of the campus and feels like she is from a different world when she enters a "plaza teeming with corduroy, denim, bare leg, blonde hair, hornrims, bicycle spokes in the sun, bookbags, swaying card tables, long paper petitions dangling to earth, posters for undecipherable FSMs, YAFs, VDCs, suds in the fountain, students in nose-to-nose dialogue"[44] (*The Crying of Lot 49* 71). Oedipa realizes that a lot has changed since her own college days in the 1950s and that she is out of touch with the new reality of these young people but she senses the winds of change and has an urge to be part of what is going on, to "feel relevant":

> this Berkeley was like no somnolent Siwash out of her own past at all, but more akin to those Far Eastern or Latin American universities you read about, those autonomous culture media where the most beloved of folklores may be brought in doubt, cataclysmic of dissents voiced, suicidal of commitments chosen —the sort that bring governments down. But it was English she was hearing as she crossed Bancroft Way among the blonde children and the muttering Hondas and Suzukis; American English. Where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph[45], those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth? In another world. (*The Crying of Lot 49* 71)

In *Thomas Pynchon and American Counterculture* Joanna Freer suggests, however, that what Oedipa sees at Berkeley is not a norm for the entire country, that "the university campus is an isolated idyll amid a wider world which is reined over still by the somnolence of the 1950s and held tightly in the exploitative grip of capitalist ideology" (42). Yet this short glimpse of the new dynamics among those who will shape —at least partly— the future of

[44] The acronyms which are "undecipherable" for Oedipa stand for the Free Speech Movement (FSM), Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and Vietnam Day Committee (VDC) —1960s activist organizations in the US.
[45] "Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph" refer to James Forrestal, John Foster Dulles and Joseph McCarthy.

America gives Oedipa a hint that she is not alone in her attempts at going against the tide. Even though she is disoriented and doubts her own sanity from time to time as her quest for Tristero progresses, she becomes more and more confident that there is no way she could return to her old life. Paradoxically, her paranoid pursuit makes her transform into a different, independent person, capable of doing things a white, suburban 1960s housewife would never do, such as roaming around San Francisco at night, drunk, among delinquents "smoking, snuffing or injecting something" (84), visiting a "Negro neighborhood" (84) by bus, nursing a stranger —an old sailor suffering from *delirium tremens* and ending up "among the sunless, concrete underpinnings of the freeway, finding drunks, bums, pedestrians, pederasts, hookers" (89). Somehow, Oedipa senses that her pursuit after the elusive underground mail distribution company gives her immunity, that this is her element now, that she belongs among the outcasts and that something "would protect her," that "the city was hers, as, made up and sleeked so with the customary words and images (cosmopolitan, culture, cable cars) it had not been before: she had safe-passage tonight" (81). Oedipa rejects the role forced on her by society, refuses to conform to the idealized picture of a submissive, tactful, naive, always elegant and attentive homemaker created by the advertising industry. Her paranoia functions as a beacon, helping her choose her own path and not be afraid anymore to take risks and behave "unnaturally" as she finds out that this is what gives her satisfaction and a purpose in life. Cathy N. Davidson suggests that Oedipa undergoes a transformation into an androgyne, by starting to manifest both male and female characteristics, by finding a golden mean between them —without falling into the extremes of the traditional, mainstream definitions of womanliness as passive and weak and masculinity as outgoing and strong[46]. She is both compassionate and determined, sensible and adventurous. Oedipa does not "become a being who is biologically part male" —in her case androgyny "means finally refusing to be

[46] According to Susan Visvanathan "androgyny expresses a conscious interplay of masculine and feminine aspects of the individual psyche" (3015).

fractured by societal definitions of what she, as a woman, should or should not be" (Davidson 39). As the scholar points out, Oedipa is "only by gender a heroine" (41), because in the traditional sense heroines are usually damsels in distress, waiting to be saved by a male hero. Yet Oedipa learns that it is futile to wait to be saved by someone, so "she must save herself — and by becoming her own hero, she becomes an androgyne" (Davidson 41). Her decision has implications for other women in her position, as Oedipa paves the way for them, charting a "psychological path" (Davidson 49) towards independence and empowerment.

For the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* paranoia is a means of regaining control over her own life, becoming who she really wants to be. It opens her eyes to aspects she was not aware of before, to the fact that she is capable of things she thought only men were able or allowed to do and that engaging in these activities brings her satisfaction, even if it entails some kind of risk. Fear connected with uncertainty, with stepping into unknown territory, is offset by the excitement stemming from exploration and discovery. Paranoia entails questioning one's reality, not taking the generally available solutions and dogmas at face value. Even though not all of the suspicions might turn out to be well-founded, the urge to search for truth, the need to get to the bottom of things can be a driving force and can lead to many unexpected revelations —like Oedipa's realization that the dull existence she was leading and the passive role she was playing was imposed on her by the patriarchal society she lives in and that she was perfectly capable of taking matters into her own hands, of making her own decisions. Even if it finally turned out that Tristero did not exist, Oedipa's efforts to find it would not have been wasted —they would just lead her to a different conclusion and provided her with an invaluable life-changing experience.

CHAPTER 4

A Woman's Path to Illusory Empowerment in Hollywood as a Vicious Circle of Love, Lust, Humiliation, and Abuse in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*

"Rebel girl, rebel girl
Rebel girl you are the queen of my world
Rebel girl, rebel girl
I think I wanna take you home
I wanna try on your clothes, uh."
—*Bikini Kill*, "Rebel Girl"

"Hollywood's a place where they'll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss, and fifty cents for your soul." —Marilyn Monroe, *My Story*

4.1 Third and Fourth Wave Feminism in the US. Hollywood Depravity

Second wave feminism brought about huge changes in the lives of American women, both in the political and social sphere. Activists' efforts resulted in securing women's basic workplace rights, reproductive rights, abortion rights, equal educational opportunities, tax deductions for child care expenses, pushed forward the liberalization of divorce laws, and stirred the national debate on unequal gender power relations, sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence. The majority of these developments took place in the 1960s and the 1970s, but already by the mid-1980s the impact of feminist advocacy for women's rights started to wane (Burkett). It was mostly due to ideological differences that beset the various organizations and movements and that eroded them from within. Younger feminists

considered the older feminists' actions not radical enough while women of color (Breines) and lesbians (Lamphier and Welch 166) argued that their role in the movement and their postulates were marginalized by white, middle-class, heterosexual women. The internal conflicts, the continued opposition and mockery of feminists' actions in male-controlled mainstream media[47] only aggravated the situation and made many women feel disillusioned with the movement, despite the evident, abovementioned benefits it had brought them. The authority of the activists gradually weakened and it proved increasingly difficult for them to convince women that financial independence, among other things, was crucial for advancing their empowerment. Therefore, the rapid growth of labor force participation among women, boosted by the latest measures aimed at ensuring women's equality, slowed down considerably in the 1990s ("Women in the labor force: a databook"). Nevertheless, one cannot underestimate the accomplishments of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s and it is important to look at the movement in the context of a very specific socio-political environment. As scholar Winifred Breines points out, second wave feminist activists

> no longer looked to those in power to facilitate change. The government's inertia in response to the civil rights movement, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and the repression of their movements educated them about how power works. It was no longer easy to be idealistic or hopeful, particularly about peaceful change. Optimism evaporated as frustration and anger grew. Furthermore, ideas of difference meant that solidarity between and within movements could no longer be assumed. In striving to

[47] In her article "Talking About a Revolution: New Approaches to Writing the History of Second Wave Feminism," Louise M. Newman describes the way second wave feminists were presented by the media which aimed at disparaging their movement: "In the 1960s and even more so during the 1970s, the media used the label 'feminist' to mock, criticize, belittle, and antagonize women who were challenging sexist and heterosexist norms. In common parlance, a feminist connoted a man-hating, angry, ugly, aggressive woman. It was not unusual to hear that feminists despised men so much that they chose to become lesbians. In a phrase, feminists were constructed as selfish, castrating bitches –selfish for making their own rights and wellbeing their first priority, castrating for insisting that men respect and satisfy women's sexual desires; bitches because they would not massage male egos, instead challenging men for access to arenas from which women had previously been excluded" (220).

> cooperate politically, groups could no longer take for granted that they shared similar worldviews or agreed on strategies. (23)

Still, even the rifts and conflicts turned out to be a valuable lesson for future generations of feminists who were made aware that "difference in movements must be recognized and respected" and that "power differentials based on race and ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality brutally divide society and divide movements; activists must be prepared for this" (Breines 23).

The beginning of the 1990s marked a visible shift in the feminist movement's agenda and activist methods. African American law professor Anita Hill's televised testimony, before the all-male US Senate Judiciary Committee, on the sexual harassment she experienced from Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas —also African American—, is considered by many the turning point event that led to the emergence of third wave feminism. Thomas's nomination was ultimately confirmed by the Senate by a narrow margin, but Hill's courage to speak up against a powerful man resonated with many women who felt inspired to share their own stories of sexual harassment. Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker —activist and National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize winner for the 1982 novel *The Color Purple*— and already a well-known feminist at the young age of 22, decided to express her support and admiration for Hill who "spoke up and revealed the ongoing discrimination, the still-yawning chasm between powerful and powerless" (R. Walker). In an article she wrote for *Ms.* magazine in 1992, in which she praised Hill and put forward a "manifesto for a new generation of activists," Walker coined the term "third wave feminism." In 1995 the writer also published a collection of essays, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, which she edited, and in which the contributing activists —both women and men— explored the new face of the feminist movement more in depth, described its characteristics and its stance on the politics of the previous two waves, based on their own

experiences. They discussed the multifaceted nature and diversity of contemporary feminism; the necessity to reject the lingering image of an "ideal," unwavering feminist for whom activism was a religion and any attempt to stray from its strict rules caused intense feelings of guilt and inadequacy; the complicated nature of being a lesbian or African American feminist; the need to fight gendered language, which was presented in the volume as one of the tools that advances the patriarchal agenda. Several essays focused on sexism in popular culture, in art, and on the Internet.

In fact, one of the most important features of third wave feminism is its development in the context of online technology. The advent of the World Wide Web in 1989 and its being made available for public use gave a host of activist groups and movements, including the feminist movement, means to disseminate their beliefs and ideologies freely, among an infinitely larger audience than they had within reach before. This way to connect with other, likeminded women, to share knowledge and resources, was embraced, above all, by the youngest generation of feminists, born in the 1960s and 1970s and raised in a fast-paced media-saturated culture. Those female members of Gen X[48] who called themselves cyberfeminists, geekgirls, surfergrrrls, or netchicks (Hawthorne and Klein 6) used the newly available technologies to spread the word about fresh possibilities of women's empowerment with the onset of the digital age. The term "cyberfeminism" was used for the first time by the members of the Australian artist collective "VNS Matrix" and popularized in 1994 by Sadie Plant, British cultural theorist and philosopher, who argued in her work that the nature of the Internet is similar to that of women, as they both are "non-linear, self-replicating systems

[48] Generation X or Gen X —term popularized by Douglas Coupland in his 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*— were people born in the US between 1961 and 1981, following the post-World War II baby boomer generation. They are commonly characterized as "a well-educated population stuck in low-paying noncareer jobs where they feel alienated and dissatisfied" (Green 286). Their experience of Cold War, the Watergate Scandal, the Iran hostage crisis, the severe economic recession at the beginning of the 1980s, among others, resulted in Gen X's distrust of "the government, large corporations, media outlets, and religious groups" (Green 287). Their disdain for their parents' beliefs and way of life was even evident in the music they created as "they transformed rock n'roll from cutesy swinging to angry screaming and brought punk, metal and grunge into the world" (Halsall). Yet many of these disillusioned, angry young people often went on to becoming pragmatic entrepreneurs and played a crucial role in creating and popularizing many modern Internet technologies.

concerned with making connections" (Consalvo 108) and thus women should be naturally in control of this technology, even though it is not yet the case. Another British scholar, Melanie Stewart Millar, who specializes in political science, stressed in her 1998 book *Cracking the Gender Code: Who Rules the Wired World?* that women should put a lot of effort into developing a successful web presence, as men already dominate this sphere and will do everything to maintain their influence in it. Stewart Millar was, therefore, critical of the cyberfeminist movement which she described as:

> a women-centered perspective that advocates women's use of new information and communications technologies for empowerment. Some cyberfeminists see these technologies as inherently liberatory and argue that their development will lead to an end to male superiority because women are uniquely suited to life in the digital age. (200)

In the scholar's opinion, the difficulty with controlling information technologies, their intrinsic indeterminacy and instability, means that instead of being a tool of significant social change, they might as well be employed to maintain or even solidify the existing gender relations of power. At the beginning, cyberfeminism was popular mostly among white, middle-class young women who had access to these cutting-edge technologies. The same can be said for another important manifestation of third wave feminism —the underground feminist punk scene Riot Grrrl, whose representatives were also very active on the Internet. The term "grrrl" was first used in the US by female-only punk rock bands *Bikini Kill*, *Heavens to Betsy*, or *Bratmobile*, among others, who presented themselves as an alternative to the ubiquitous "boy bands" and aimed at introducing mediums created specifically for women. The alternate spelling was used in order to "attract another generation, while engaging in a new, more self-assertive —even aggressive— but also more playful and less pompous kind of feminism" (Krolokke and Sorensen 15). Riot Grrrls were "deploying a kind

of linguistic jiujitsu against their enemies" (Krolokke and Sorensen 16), reclaiming derogatory terms used to refer to women such as "bitch," "slut," "cunt," or "dyke" and using them in a positive context, for example writing them on their own skin during concerts. This way, the young feminists "instead of condemning the stereotypes used against them, […] exaggerated them, beginning with the very word girl" (Krolokke and Sorensen 16).

Punk rock bands as well as other members of the Riot Grrrl movement disseminated their feminist message, externalized the patriarchal oppression they felt in printed fanzines or in e-zines and blogs on the Internet. They tackled such topics as empowerment, sexuality, body image, sexism, objectification, rape, racism, homophobia, and the "bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things" (Hanna). These young women were at the core of the third wave feminist movement, but it is important to point out that scholars and activists who emerged during the previous wave continued publishing significant works on female empowerment, inspiring another generation of advocates for women's rights, such as the abovementioned Rebecca Walker. Other prominent third wave feminists and writers include Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth* (1991), *Fire with Fire* (1933), *Promiscuities* (1997), where she discusses such issues as the exploitation of women by the fashion and beauty industries and the need to renounce "victim feminism" —blaming men for everything bad that happens to women, or for misogyny in literature; Barbara Findlen who edited *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, a 1995 collection of essays by young feminists who talk about sex, abortion, AIDS, rape, shame or self-hate; Eve Ensler, author of the influential play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), based on interviews with over 200 women, which tackles a wide variety of topics including sexual relations, rape, childbirth, body image, masturbation, female genital mutilation or sex work; Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, activists and writers who published two books together —*Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (2000) and *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist*

Activism (2004)— in which they argue that contemporary feminists should concentrate more on political activism instead of "personal empowerment" and offer advice on how to be an effective activist in any life circumstances; Elizabeth Wurtzel who, in her collection of essays *Bitch: In Praise of Difficult Women* (1998), looks at the complicated lives of empowered, manipulative, and widely misunderstood women such as Yoko Ono, Hillary Clinton, Courtney Love or the "Long Island Lolita," teenage would-be murderer Amy Fisher; Jessica Valenti, who began by writing a feminist blog —*Feministing* (2004-2011)— and went on to publishing several books —*Full Frontal Feminism* (2007), *He's a Stud, She's a Slut* (2008), *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (2009)— on such topics as the benefits of being a feminist, on gender-based double standards or on the negative effects of imposing chastity on young women; Jaclyn Friedman who co-authored, with Jessica Valenti, the book *Yes Means Yes: Visions of Sexual Power and a World Without Rape* (2008) in which they suggest that once female sexual pleasure is understood by society, rape will disappear, and wrote *What You Really Really Want: The Smart Girl's Shame-Free Guide to Sex and Safety* (2011) aimed at helping young women in search of their sexual identity safely navigate the stormy seas of a world steeped in rape culture[49].

Third wave feminism was much more multifaceted and diverse than the second wave had been, sensitive to the needs of multiracial or LGBTQ individuals, with the activists embracing "Third World feminisms, women of color feminisms, working-class feminisms and queer feminisms" (Stasia 246). They also focused on the concept of "intersectionality"[50], understood as the way in which different forms of discrimination —based on gender, race, class, sexual orientation, descent, faith or disability— interconnect, overlap with one another. Despite the richness and the complexity that the intersectional paradigm brought into the movement, it is also true that the activists were not united around one main objective but

[49] Term coined by US feminists in the 1970s, used to describe the way society normalizes and trivializes sexual violence, blaming the victims for provoking the aggression.
[50] Term coined by black feminist lawyer and scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989.

rather divided into smaller groups, each pushing their own cause. Third wave feminists were criticized from a variety of perspectives by people such as writer and feminist activist Krista Jacob, conservative journalist and cultural commentator Daisy Cousens, controversial men's rights spokesperson Karen Straughan or a number of men active in the men's rights movement, such as William Farrell. Objections raised by them included the suggestion that changes which took place as a consequence of third-wave feminist activism were not as "revolutionary" as the ones brought about by the first and second waves, that they were more derivative, with third wave feminists just breaking down the previously highlighted ideas; that the feminist activists often concentrated on unimportant manifestations of discrimination in everyday life instead of tackling such urgent problems as female genital mutilation (FGM); that third wave feminists appeared politically inactive due to being overly fragmented in their views; that women did not recognize the problems men had to deal with as a result of the functioning prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes regarding their gender. In my opinion, however, third wave feminists were, rather, building upon their predecessors' achievements, trying to further improve the situation instead of settling for whatever had been handed to them by the previous generation of feminist activists. The world evolved and so did the needs of women who thanks to the successes of the second wave movement could take on new roles in the social, political, and economic spheres of life, which consequently entailed new problems and challenges for them. As scholar Imelda Whelehan puts it in the introduction to *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration*: "The third wavers, as I understand them in all their contradictory multiplicity, have reinvented the wheel, but at the same time they have added new features and specifications which are designed to challenge those who thought they knew what feminism was" (XV).

Yet one of the harshest criticisms to third wave feminism concerned its being responsible for the raise of the so-called "raunch culture." It started out from the idea,

promoted by some third wave feminists, such as the members of the Riot Grrrl movement, that women could dress in whichever way they wanted and behave any way they wanted without being told that their conduct is "unbecoming of a woman." This tendency evolved into a form of sexualization of women and adolescent girls in everyday life, with women deciding it was empowering to wear the shortest of miniskirts and thong underwear, take interest in female porn stars or visit strip clubs, in an attempt to avoid being called "prissy" and to experience the kind of freedom and entertainment reserved before for men only —at least officially. This manifestation of feminism was obviously greeted with delight by men and vigorously promoted by the music, film, and advertising industries and generally the media. Women were encouraged to behave in exceedingly sexualized ways, to try to outdo one another in "hotness" contests and objectify themselves and each other. *The New Yorker* journalist Ariel Levy argues that society conned women into believing that this is an expression of progressive feminism. In her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, she critically analyses the phenomenon, which she considers an entirely commercial affair. She argues that in the early 2000s

> a tawdry, cartoonlike version of female sexuality has become so ubiquitous, it no longer seems particular. What we once regarded as a kind of sexual expression we now view as sexuality. As former adult film star Traci Lords put it to a reporter a few days before her memoir hit the bestseller list in 2003, "When I was in porn, it was like a back alley thing. Now it's everywhere." Spectacles of naked ladies have moved from seedy side streets to center stage, where everyone —men and women— can watch them in broad daylight. Playboy and its ilk are being "embraced by young women in a curious way in a postfeminist world," to borrow the words of Hugh Hefner. (Levy 5)

The raunch culture phenomenon became widespread in the US due to the promotion of "kitschy, slutty stereotypes of female sexuality" (Levy 34) by popular pop stars such as Britney Spears or Christina Aguilera, actresses like Jennifer Lopez or socialites like Paris Hilton. TV shows such as *Girls Gone Wild* (1997-2011), *The Man Show* (1999-2004), reality series such as *Can You Be a Porn Star?* (2004) —hosted by professional adult film actresses— or *The Swan* (2004) —in which "ugly" contestants were subjected to cosmetic surgery— normalized the objectification of women, body modification in pursuit of a hyper-sexualized aesthetic ideal, and exhibitionism. Even though many feminists considered this trend as empowering and sexually liberating, it also sent a message to women about their appearance being more important than any other accomplishments. The rift between the two competing feminist camps —raunch and anti-raunch— is also evident in the way the extremely popular series *Sex and the City*, aired between 1998 and 2004, was perceived. The "sex-positive" feminists consider it the most iconic third-wave TV show while the anti-raunch feminists regard it as the "death of feminism." The former argue that it presented female sexuality and sexual pleasure in an unprecedented, liberating way, and that it was the first instance of friendship among a group of women being depicted on mainstream television "as these characters' primary community and family, their source of love and care and […] their economic support" (Henry 67). The latter, on the other hand, point to the fact that the protagonists' main concern in life seems to be finding and keeping a man, even though they are all highly intelligent and successful professionals; another objection raised was that by making all four female characters white, heterosexual, affluent, attractive, and upper-class, the creators of the show suggested that "the solipsism of the main characters —the hours spent examining their sex lives— is a privilege of their race and class positions" and that they "seem to have very little else to worry about" (70) as Astrid Henry puts it in her essay included in the collection *Reading* Sex and the City. The scholar also adds that "more

importantly, the feminism offered by *Sex and the City* suggests white, upper-class, straight women have the luxury narrowly to define liberation in terms of their sexual freedom" (70). Regardless of the controversies surrounding the TV series, it undeniably did stir a debate on the empowerment of women, on their changing role in society, on the direction feminism was taking and on what problems still remained to be addressed. The impact of the show can still be felt today, as it continues to be discussed in the media for a variety of reasons, among others its contribution, or lack thereof, to third wave feminism.

The beginning of the 2010s saw a rapid rise in the use of social media, which are much more accessible and widespread tools for communication and exchanging ideas than the digital technologies available to the early third wave feminists. Platforms such as Facebook or Twitter have been increasingly used to carry out activist initiatives. In 2012 British writer Laura Bates launched the *Everyday Sexism Project*, a website where women could post personal accounts of sexism via tweets or emails and which gained a massive following in social media. This campaign, along with several other highly publicized online feminist initiatives, was recognized by *The Guardian* journalist Kira Cochrane as the beginning of a new feminist wave, characterized by the women "taking the struggle to the web —and the streets" (Cochrane). For the first time, the women's movement had an unrestricted communication channel at their disposition, which allowed the "feminists in the fourth wave to take up the micropolitics of the third wave while situating their individual lived experiences within broader global discourses" and which resulted in "a rise in the number of collective movements based on social, economic and political agendas (e.g. sexual violence, equal pay, and reproductive rights)" (Parry). Ever since, social media platforms have been filling with manifestations of the so-called "hashtag feminism" —campaigns raising awareness about different forms of abuse against women and girls around the world— through the use of

galvanizing slogans, preceded by the # symbol, which makes it easier to find and disseminate specific posts.

One of the most significant "hashtag feminism" campaigns is the Me Too —or #MeToo— movement, which gained traction in 2017[51] after the breakout of the scandal surrounding disgraced Hollywood film producer Harvey Weinstein[52] and as a result went viral on social media. Even though the movement concerns women of all professions and walks of life, who experienced some form of sexual abuse, it initially put the spotlight mainly on women working in the motion picture industry and especially in Hollywood. The founding of the movement and Harvey Weinstein's trial took place several years after the premiere of Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, but I believe that mentioning these events here is crucial for my analysis of a film that tackled the issue of mistreatment of women employed in the US film industry long before these despicable practices were exposed with such ferocity in the traditional and social media.

Hollywood has been rife with cases of gender discrimination and sexual harassment ever since it became the capital of the US motion picture industry in the 1910s. The abuse against women has been carried out on two levels: in the workplace and in the plots of sexist or even openly misogynistic films. Stars such as Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, Marilyn Monroe, Natalie Wood or Maria Schneider suffered documented gender discrimination or outright molestation with which they complied to save their careers. Just to emphasize the scale of the problem today, I will quote a passage from a *USA Today* 2018 article, based on a survey conducted with 843 women employed in the entertainment industry in various roles: "Nearly all of the women who responded to the survey (94%) say they have experienced some form of harassment or assault, often by an older individual in a position of power over the

[51] Although the slogan was first used in 2007 on the social networking website Myspace by activist Tarana Burke, who wanted to give a voice to victims of sexual assault and abuse.

[52] Formerly a high-profile film producer at Miramax Films and The Weinstein Company, who since 2017 has been accused by numerous women, mostly employed in the film industry, of sexual harassment, assault, and rape. In February 2020 he was sentenced to 23 years in prison for his crimes.

accuser" (Puente and Kelley). This demonstrates how unbalanced the power relations in Hollywood still are and how confident —at least until very recently— the perpetrators have been that they can continue abusing women with impunity.

Throughout the duration of the feminist third wave various actresses, activists and journalists tried to publicize the plight of female film workers —the sexual harassment they had to endure, the discrimination, or the huge gender pay gap they faced— but without much success. Also, very few mainstream Hollywood feature films, created during roughly the same time period, could be said to somewhat reflect the developments in the feminist movement and, even when they did, they reflected them in a distorting mirror. I will give a representative example of one of such productions, which was questionably hailed as a turning point in the way women were pictured in mainstream cinema: Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004). On the one hand, the double feature could be perceived as directed to the satisfaction of certain voyeuristic, scopophilic, mainly male audiences, as it includes lots of violence and displaying of attractive, often scantily clad women. At the level of plot, however, the female protagonists take matters into their own hands, know how to be independent, how to effectively —and impressively— protect themselves and exact revenge for any wrongdoing committed against them. However, also in this case opinions are divided on whether *Kill Bill* has made a positive contribution to the feminist movement. The main heroine of the film, Beatrix Kiddo or The Bride —played by Uma Thurman—, who takes a bloody revenge on the man who had ruined her life and who, at the same time, manages to embrace motherhood, has become a role model for many young women fed up with being perceived as frail and innocent, as victims, always requiring the assistance of men in order to navigate the brutal reality of the contemporary world. In a chapter written for the study *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, Lisa Coulthard argues that the violence of The Bride is justified, as it "is exceptional, personally motivated,

and purposefully aimed at the reestablishment of family unity" (170). The film is an obvious tribute to the exploitation genre[53] in cinema; therefore, its audience is "fully aware" that its purpose is to depict "excessive violence" (Coulthard 169). However, only infusing a female character with qualities traditionally ascribed to men does not result in the film being feminist, therefore *Kill Bill* cannot be labeled as feminist "just because its protagonist seeks revenge on men who wronged her" (qtd. in Rosewarne 58). The film also relies "heavily on the excessive display of female bodies" and subjugates women "to the male camera and spectator gaze" (Platz). Tarantino's inclination to advance the feminist agenda in his films has also been put into question since, in 2018, Uma Thurman revealed in an interview for *The New York Times* that she was forced by the director to perform a dangerous stunt on the set of the film, which led to her suffering from permanent injuries. The actress also said that she was sexually assaulted by Harvey Weinstein, who was one of the producers of *Kill Bill* and suggested that he would give Thurman the footage of the accident in exchange for her silence.

The analysis of *Mulholland Drive* in the context of the most recent information about the widespread discrimination and sexual exploitation of women in Hollywood in the 1990s and the 2000s casts a new light on the plight of Lynch's female characters and the possible feminist overtones of the film. *Mulholland Drive* was made in Hollywood at the height of Harvey Weinstein's dominance and at a time when many other powerful, influential men in the motion picture industry took advantage of their position to abuse women emotionally, physically, and sexually —as many emboldened victims revealed in the wake of the disgraced producer's downfall. From my standpoint, David Lynch is one of the first contemporary US male film directors who pictured the patriarchal Hollywood machinations concentrating

[53] Exploitation films are usually low budget productions that refer to or "exploit" contemporary cultural trends or controversies, such as "drug use, nudity and striptease, sexual deviance, rebellious youths or gangs, violence in society, xenophobia, and fear of terrorism or alien invasions" (Mathijs). The roots of this genre can be traced back to the 1920s. It rose to its height during the late 1960s and 1970s and it is still employed today, but with "a higher degree of explicit material in the films, as well as a larger sense of self-awareness in its presentation to viewers, meaning that exploitation films knowingly place themselves in an existing tradition, commenting on the very notion of 'exploitation' and catering to audiences who know what they will be accessing" (Mathijs).

almost solely on the women trapped in them and without resorting to the "male gaze"[54] approach in order to attract the male audience.

4.2 Lynch: A Feminist, a Misogynist, or Something Different Altogether? Lynch's Female Characters

Lynch's films abound in psychologically multifaceted female characters, very often in leading parts, who are portrayed as "complex and infuriating, strange and bewildering, difficult to pin down, and impossible to dismiss," in other words "created just like male characters" (Ryan). The director is also known for frequently casting older actresses —for whom there is usually scarce work in Hollywood— in interesting, unconventional roles. The question of the way the director presents women in his films has been discussed by various critics and scholars and their opinions on the issue differ wildly. What raises controversy is the fact that many of Lynch's female characters suffer abuse at the hands of the male protagonists. Various critics approaching his films from a feminist angle, such as Sue Lafky, Cynthia Fuchs or Jane Shattuc, believe that the graphic violence against women depicted in them, most notably in *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, but also, to a lesser extent, in *Wild at Heart*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, points to the director's inclinations towards misogyny and patriarchal representations of gender, by presenting "the female body as the target of male Oedipal sadistic impulses" (Del Río 178) and recurrently reverting to the

[54] Term coined by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, denoting the sexual objectification of women in the media. In her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in 1975, the scholar argues that classic Hollywood films place the viewer always in the heterosexual male subject position, while the woman on the screen plays the role of a passive object of masculine desire. Mulvey suggests that in the cinema —"a world ordered by sexual imbalance"— the voyeuristic fantasy of the spectators "has been split between active/male and passive/female" (837). She explains that: "the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (837). Mulvey also comments on the woman's function in the film's storyline: "The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (837).

fetishizing and voyeuristic "male gaze" fantasy. Other academics and experts on Lynch's *oeuvre*, such as Martha Nochimson or Todd McGowan, have a diametrically different view of the roles the director assigns to women and men in his films. These critics believe that the utterly bizarre context in which the abuse and violence are presented deterritoralises them, twists their conventional meaning by "provocatively refiguring gender and sexuality in ways useful for feminist or queer thought" (Braziel 108). I personally agree with this hypothesis as, in my opinion, Lynch's female protagonists exhibit great strength and empowered behavior, twisting the patriarchal canons and stripping their male counterparts of their defenses and exposing their greatest weaknesses and embarrassing secrets. Characters such as Dorothy Valens (*Blue Velvet*), Lula Fortune (*Wild at Heart*), Laura Palmer (*Twin Peaks*), Renee Madison/Alice Wakefield (*Lost Highway*), Diane Selwyn/Betty Elms (*Mulholland Drive*) or Nikki Grace (*Inland Empire*) find themselves in all kinds of situations, ranging from disturbing or dangerous to utterly horrific, brought about by the men whom they encounter, but none of them simply gives in —they all stand up for themselves with varying degrees of success, they make their own decisions and take the consequences head on. Even though some of them ultimately suffer great misfortune, they turn their "female gaze" on the men responsible for it, drawing them into their hardship and leaving a permanent burning mark on their minds and souls. The "female gaze," a general feminist film theory term without a clear definition, often used as an opposite of Mulvey's "male gaze," in this case would mean turning the male protagonists' fantasies against them, exposing them as delusions — unattainable and deranged. This, of course, does not cancel the issue of Lynch's female characters being perceived fetishistically by the male audience. It is however more important that the female audience is given the possibility to enjoy films that do not merely present women from a man's perspective and with the aim of giving men pleasure but rather celebrate the richness and multidimensionality of the female psyche.

Like in the case of Thomas Pynchon, Lynch often establishes intertextual games with *film noir* in his works, sometimes placing the male and sometimes the female protagonist in the role of the detective investigating a grisly crime. He first overtly flirted with the genre and its conventions in *Blue Velvet*, where both young and initially innocent characters Jeffrey Beaumont and Sandy become sleuths trying to solve the dark mystery haunting the suburban town of Lumberton. With time, however, it becomes evident that it is easier for Jeffrey to carry out the investigation, as "he has the access to the public world and the confidence of invincibility that are afforded to white men, especially young white men in suburban America" (Kellman Kolb). Still, by including a scene depicting the boy's mother and aunt watching violent crime shows on television, Lynch "shows that women aren't in the field not because of fear or lack of interest, but because of social norms and lack of access" (Kellman Kolb). In my opinion, Sandy could be seen as a young Oedipa Maas, full of energy and curiosity that will soon be stifled by marriage and the resulting responsibilities that the abovementioned social norms impose on women. She also seems to be a character with the potential to have a similar epiphany about her life to the one the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49* had, which could lead her to emancipation later on. Nevertheless, neither in the case of Pynchon's Oedipa nor in the case of Lynch's female characters does emancipation equal happiness, and they do not seem to expect to find it either, as they start probing the reality around them. They are rather looking for the source of their discomfort, of whatever causes them pain. What emancipation finally means for them is a hard-won freedom to make one's own decisions, but, as the failure to adhere to patriarchal conventions is frowned upon by society, liberated women struggle with a general lack of acceptance or even ostracism and suffer from various mental disorders as a result. This is what happens to the protagonist of *Mulholland Drive*, played by Naomi Watts, who turns her life into a paranoid detective fantasy in order to protect herself from the pain of reality, as well as to the protagonist of

Inland Empire, played by Laura Dern, whose mind disintegrates as she pursues the mystery surrounding the movie she had been cast in, in an attempt not to surrender control of her professional and personal life to the men trying to use her one way or another.

The *femme fatale* is another recurrent *noir* trope in Lynch's *oeuvre*, although equally twisted and replete with hidden meanings, as any other cinematic cliché the director decides to include in his films. Lynch's *femmes fatales* usually possess the qualities of the archetype: they are mysterious, seductive, promiscuous, and they lead men into dangerous, life-threatening situations. This is who Dorothy Vallens (*Blue Velvet*), Laura Palmer (*Twin Peaks*), Renee Madison/Alice Wakefield (*Lost Highway*) or Rita/Camilla Rhodes (*Mulholland Drive*) seem to be at first glance —in other words, if looked at from the stereotypical "male gaze." Lynch, however, intertwines with this appreciation of the female characters another radically different one, his own version of the "female gaze" on the *femme fatale* cliché by emphasizing the complexity of these women and making them characters impossible to pigeonhole. Mädchen Amick, the actress portraying Shelley Johnson in *Twin Peaks*, comments on the unusual, in terms of Hollywood, multifaceted nature of female roles in Lynch's films:

> The biggest challenge for any actress in Hollywood is that you've got your few little boxes that you are allowed to fit into. You've got your femme fatale. You are there to eat men, devour them, and spit them out. Or you are the bland dumb girlfriend, or you're the mom. David writes really interesting characters, and maybe they are nodding towards one of those stereotypes, like with Laura Dern in *Blue Velvet* as the girl next door, or the femme fatale with Laura Harring in *Mulholland Dr*. He winks at that, but then makes them incredibly complex and seems to go against that stereotype. He always shows the underbelly of any character, but it's nice to see that with women, you get to explore so many more nuances with the character. (Bowden)

What Lynch seems to suggest by adding this complexity to the *femmes fatales* and generally to all his female characters, is that once we stop seeing them through the eyes of men, through the prism of male anxieties and insecurities, they emerge as women with fully-rounded personalities, multifaceted, profound, and fascinating. Consequently, attentive viewers of Lynch's films might notice the drama underpinning the seemingly cold and calculated actions of the alleged *femmes fatales*, the strength and agency of women typically destined to become merely obedient wives and devoted mothers, the wisdom and cunning of naive and innocent schoolgirls. *Blue Velvet*'s Dorothy Valens, for example, is introduced as a typical *femme fatale*, a sensual nightclub singer and uninhibited woman who is eager to play sex games with the young boy she finds hiding in her apartment. A moment later, however, Lynch shatters this initial impression and exposes the stereotype —viewers learn that Dorothy is being blackmailed by a psychopath who has abducted her husband and her son and forced her into sex slavery. Dorothy's desperate struggle to keep her family alive gives her an unsuspected depth, while the sudden plot twist proves how easy it is to pigeonhole women based on their looks and convenient clichés. Sandy, who appears in the same film, could be perceived as an innocent schoolgirl, but she proves to be a valiant investigator and a loyal companion to her onscreen partner Jeffrey, even when he seems to be having some kind of illicit relationship with Dorothy. The *Twin Peaks* protagonist Laura Palmer is an even better example of Lynch's skill in showing how multifaceted and mysterious women really are and how people insistently try to fit them into some stereotypical, patriarchal notion of femininity. Laura appears on screen for the first time as a drowned corpse and the viewers get to know her mainly through the reminiscences of others. The information is highly contradictory, as for some Laura was a joyful beauty, the high school homecoming queen, an obliging daughter, a pillar of the community, while others saw her as a merciless heart- and friendship breaker, a reckless and wild girl with no consideration for others or a lascivious drug addict.

Laura turns out to be a bit of all of these things, a woman absolutely impossible to pigeonhole, and remains one of Lynch's most psychologically complex characters.

As Leigh Kellman Kolb suggests in her essay "The Uncanny Electricity of Women in David Lynch's Worlds" the director, who "operates so much from the subconscious" and is famous for his reluctance to analyze his own films, most probably does not read "critical feminist theory to help inform his work." But I agree with the scholar that "the depth and breadth of the women in Lynch's filmography clearly show how drawn he is to women" (Kellman Kolb). In my opinion, he definitely cannot be called a misogynist but, instead, he represents a peculiar variety of feminism —filtered through his very own, unique sensitivity.

4.3 Burning Light vs. Profound Darkness: Lynch's Paranoid Los Angeles

As I have pointed out in chapter 2[55], David Lynch has been fascinated with Los Angeles ever since he set foot in the City of Angels. In fact, it was the first big city that instantly appealed to Lynch —a person with very fond memories of his idyllic small-town childhood and with somewhat traumatic recollections of his previous encounters with bustling urban centers. As a child, he often traveled to visit his maternal grandparents in Brooklyn, New York, where he "had lots of tiny tastes of horror" (Olson 4), connected with aspects of city life he did not experience back home, such as riding the subway. This anxiety diminished with time but did not completely disappear and continued in a "form of sensory panic that has survived beyond childhood" ("The *Icon* Profile: David Lynch" 186). His stint in Philadelphia, a city he described as "filled with violence, hate, and filth" ("The *Icon* Profile: David Lynch" 186), was also rather unpleasant for Lynch but, later on, it turned out to be one of his biggest inspirations, as it made him appreciate the dark aspects of life and that resulted in his

[55] Pages 110-111.

fascination with the "idea of going beneath the surface" (Dollin 27), which, when applied to Philadelphia, meant seeking glimmers of beauty in all its decrepitude. It was at that time that the future director developed this "central conceptual metaphor of his worldview" (Olson 26) —a conviction that even the most hideous of things have some kind of hidden allure.

Yet Lynch realized that this paradox is also true in reverse, as with time he began to portray decay and corruption consuming seemingly idyllic places, model communities, and individuals with allegedly impeccable reputations. His first films —*Eraserhead*, *Elephant Man* and also, to some extent, *Dune*— seem to be inspired by Lynch's Philadelphia days in the way they explore the aesthetics of ugliness and horror and try to reveal the appeal of the grotesque, its uncanny magnetism. Starting with *Blue Velvet*, however, Lynch began focusing on the reverse of this phenomenon —on the evil concealed underneath the external appearance of tranquility and virtue. He took on the myth of the blissful American small town —a subject he was fond of due to his own childhood experiences— and dissected it, showing that even such ostensibly safe and snug places like Lumberton or Twin Peaks can hold the most horrible, dark secrets. In these productions, he included imagery associated with the nostalgia for 1950s small town life, such as white picket fences or cozy diners where clients are served delicious coffee and cherry pie by beautiful, smiling women. *Blue Velvet* was made during the time of the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who "often harked back to the 1950s as a golden age for America" but "while Reagan looked back to the 1950s unironically, in Lynch's films this nostalgia is subverted and its dark side revealed" (Hallam).

Lynch's unorthodox approach to the topic of provincial America brings to mind the novel *Vineland* and Pynchon's depiction of the delusional Reagan Era[56] as well as the writer's efforts to debunk the myth of small Californian towns as idyllic places where one may hide and bury all one's dirty secrets with impunity. Both Lynch and Pynchon attempted at stirring

[56] Period in American history spanning from 1981 to 1989 —the years of Ronald Reagan's conservative administration.

paranoid thoughts in their audiences, by suggesting that nothing is really what it seems and that one should be constantly vigilant, on the lookout for the unexpected. Still, the former focused mostly on the dark recesses of the human psyche while the latter concentrated on people's shady past in the political and social context.

By the time of the premiere of *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*, Lynch had already been living in Los Angeles for 21 years, during which time he had had the opportunity to get to know the city and its dynamics well. The director has always been fascinated by Old Hollywood[57] —"the glimmers and echoes of landscape, architecture, and community that evoke the romantic tradition of making movies, crafting dreams, in an earthly paradise" (Olson 528). As Los Angeles provided the setting for many of these Classical Hollywood productions Lynch enjoyed its atmosphere greatly, often driving around in search of film landmarks, especially from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), which inspired *Mulholland Drive* in many ways. Yet the director could not be entirely deluded by the city's fabulous countenance. Being involved in the film industry from the very beginning of his stay in the City of Angels, Lynch also got a lot of insight into its convoluted machinations and has been conscious of the ongoing corruption, the greed, the exploitation, and abuse perpetrated by its more powerful participants on those less powerful. This sharp contrast between the glamorous, welcomingly warm, and sunlit face of Los Angeles and its cruel and somber *alter ego*, fed Lynch's unceasing fascination with light and darkness, black-and-white dualism — the dichotomy of good and evil. The cinematic attractiveness of the landscape was paired with an emanation of doom, which Paul Schimmel, former chief curator of L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) described as follows:

> Despite the hedonistic overlay, the cumulative image of L.A. that is repeated over and over again … is that of a sprawling, empty wasteland—an endless vista of

[57] Film criticism term used to describe the narrative and visual style of films made in Hollywood between the 1910s and the 1960s; also called the Golden Age of Hollywood or Classical Hollywood.

> suburban subdivisions identified only by freeway exits. It is the perfect setting for a murder, or mass murder, or better yet, apocalypse. (Cozzolino 36)

After spending over two decades in these inspiring surroundings, Lynch finally got down to transferring his impressions of them onto film. *Lost Highway*, which premiered in 1997, was his first take on the dark side of the City of Angels, on the tainted beauty of its landscapes, architecture and, most of all, on the illusion of the perfect, fulfilled life that the wealthy L.A. entertainers were supposed to lead. *Mulholland Drive*, released four years later, turns an even sharper focus on Lynch's adoptive hometown. It features a great number of iconic, easily recognizable locations: the title's Mulholland Drive, Sunset Boulevard, Sunset Ranch —situated right below the famous "Hollywood" sign—, Paramount Studios, the Snow White Cottages apartment complex on Sierra Bonita Avenue or the L.A. airport. These places had gained fame and become tourist attractions much earlier, because they appeared in other films, many of them made during the Golden Age of Hollywood, such as one of Lynch's favorites, the already mentioned *Sunset Boulevard*. *Mulholland Drive* is similar to Billy Wilder's picture on many levels: the title —both are names of actual streets in L.A., lined with mansions of wealthy people connected with the film industry—, the genre —*film noir*—, the metacinematic overtones —in the words of Robert Sinnerbrink, both films depict "the crisis of cinema itself" and "the destructive side of Hollywood" (76). These immediate associations that even a person not necessarily familiar with the history of cinema can make are just one facet of the film which distorts the classic genre "by incorporating surrealist imagery and vignettes that disrupt the continuity of the narrative" (McMahon 113).

The stylistic devices Lynch employs in *Mulholland Drive* bring to mind Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, as they transform the quintessential features of Hollywood into *simulacra*[58], empty symbols only meant to automatically provoke certain

[58] I explore Baudrillard's concept of *simulacra* more in depth in chapter 2, pages 68-69 and 73-74.

emotions and reactions in people familiar with them, as they are already forged in the minds of cinemagoers all over the world. But the filmmaker warps the narrative of the film to expose the *simulacra* and deliberately pulls the familiar ground from beneath the viewers' feet. By embedding these fixed, familiar representations in a plot that becomes increasingly surreal, Lynch spotlights the important topic of the "growing blurring between the real and virtual" that has become "the obsession of our age" (qtd. in Coulter 10), as Baudrillard himself commented on several films made around the year 2000, including *Mulholland Drive*.

As I have already pointed out in chapters 2 and 3, the French philosopher considered various places in California as perfect examples of *simulacra* —Los Angeles and its abundance of famous landmarks being one of them. In fact, in *America*, Baudrillard includes a description of the breathtaking view of nighttime Los Angeles from Mulholland Drive, which seems to be an exact description of one of the film's opening scenes and summarizes the simultaneous beauty and dread the sight evokes:

> A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymus Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect […] This one condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity. Mulholland Drive by night is an extraterrestrial's vantage-point on earth, or conversely, an earth-dweller's vantage-point on the Galactic metropolis. (51-52)

The famous winding thirty-four-kilometer-long scenic road which runs along the ridgeline of the eastern Santa Monica Mountains and the Hollywood Hills is situated four hundred meters above sea level. The night view of the illuminated Los Angeles from Mulholland Drive, enjoyed by Baudrillard or one of the film's protagonists, Rita, has been very often associated in fiction with the feeling of looking towards a promise of incredible opportunity, excitement,

success —the American Dream— although reaching for it may seem overwhelming and daunting. To reach for it, however, one must leave the darkness of Mulholland Drive, which means losing the perspective the distance affords and plunging headlong into the gaudy *simulacra* stretching out below. Even though *Mulholland Drive* is set entirely in the Los Angeles metropolitan area and does not depict any other places in California, like in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, in the film, the City of Angels can be seen as the epitome of the entire country, where California plays the role of America's America[59].

A woman's thorny journey towards accomplishment through an illusory promised land, which is, in fact, a hostile man's world, is without a doubt a theme linking both works, which are the object of comparison in my thesis. The brave female protagonists of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Mulholland Drive* must navigate California's geometrical network of city streets or endless, twisted routes forming beautiful, fascinating patterns that seem to convey a promise of some revelation, but never reveal anything that might lead somewhere, but just lead straight into a void.

4.4 Female *Noir* Detective's Attempt to Lose Her Identity in a Fantastic Paranoid Maze

Similarly to the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, the woman whose story we follow from the opening scenes of *Mulholland Drive*, and roughly throughout two-thirds of the film, embarks on an investigation aimed at solving the case not of her own identity, as the audience is initially made to believe, but apparently that of an amnesiac car accident victim, Rita —who takes her name from a movie poster of Rita Hayworth in classic *noir* film *Gilda* (1946). Pynchon substitutes the traditional male sleuth with a 1960s housewife to parody the *noir* genre, while Lynch chooses a bright-eyed novice actress for this role. The quests of both

[59] I explain the idea of California as America's America in detail in chapter 3, subchapter 3.

women involve paranoid revelations which guide them away from the oppressive patriarchal structures they have been trapped in. But each quest runs a different course and brings a different kind of "relief" to the inquisitive investigators. This disparity, I believe, is connected with the different time periods in which the novel and the film were created and set —the 1960s in case of *The Crying of Lot 49* and the beginning of the 2000s in case of *Mulholland Drive*— but it also emphasizes a continuity, an evolution of the status of a certain segment of American women over the last forty years.

Betty Elms, a Canadian jitterbug contest winner, has come to Los Angeles full of hope for a bright future in Hollywood. She takes a taxi in the dazzling sunshine to a lush apartment which belongs to her aunt Ruth, who is also an actress, currently away on a film shoot in Canada. The aunt not only provides her niece with lavish accommodation but also arranges an audition for her. It seems that things could not go better for Betty, who takes in her surroundings with delight and interacts with the first people she meets in L.A. with such naive, perky enthusiasm, that, after a short while, it becomes obvious that her behavior is not entirely natural and that it is "clearly a directorial choice on Lynch's part" (Denham and Worrell 21). Another early sign of some unspecified menace stirring below the surface of the excessively optimistic opening scenes of the film is the behavior of the elderly couple Betty meets on her way to Hollywood. Initially, they come across as "almost absurdly affectionate" towards their young companion, but once they part with her, the man and woman exchange "sinister and conspirational grins, casting into doubt the benign profile of moments earlier" (Denham and Worrell 29). These disturbing signs, suggesting that "millions of red ants" representing the harsh reality are "crawling all over"[60] this image of happiness and success, can be detected by a connoisseur of Lynch's imagery quite early on.

[60] I quote Lynch talking about this image in the book *Lynch on Lynch* by Chris Rodley in chapter 2, page 109. He uses it as a metaphor for the darkness concealed beneath everything that looks innocent on the outside.

But the ensuing flashes of suspicion might, at most, concern the honesty of the characters' intentions and not yet the credibility of the world unfolding on the screen, which will start crumbling slowly as the action progresses. Initially, the engrossing plot is linear and relatively adheres to the familiar rules of a crime/detective/*noir* film. The characteristic elements of the genre in *Mulholland Drive* include: the *femme fatale* in distress with a mysterious past —Rita with a purse full of money, suffering from amnesia after surviving a car crash on Mulholland Drive; an "investigator," Betty, who tries to help her and ultimately falls in love with her; a shady mob-like organization, who seem to have a hand in Rita's predicament and who, for some unknown reason, hold dictatorial power over Hollywood executives and creators; the city of Los Angeles as a two-faced character, sometimes friendly and welcoming, at other times inscrutable and intimidating[61]; the constant feeling of underlying paranoia[62], which grows progressively as Betty and her amnesiac friend make successive alarming discoveries during the course of their investigation. Nevertheless, Betty remains cheerful and oddly unaffected by the ominous signs of something amiss and behaves as if the search for the mysterious woman's identity was a fun game. "Come on, it'll be just like in the movies," (*Mulholland Drive* 00:48:14 – 00:48:15) she encourages Rita, who is reluctant to call the police and ask about the accident on Mulholland Drive. "We'll pretend to be someone else," (*Mulholland Drive* 00:48:16) Betty adds, once again spotlighting certain narrative devices Lynch uses to emphasize the importance of the theme of illusion and pretense in the film. Even when a strange old woman, who later turns out to be aunt Ruth's

[61] Although not an indispensable characteristic of *film noir*, Los Angeles has very often been used as a setting in this genre and presented as "two-faced" or, as Raymond Chandler puts it in *The Long Goodbye* "a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness" (274). In the opinion of Alain Silver and James Ursini, authors of *L.A. Noir: The City as Character*, L.A. is a crucial element of *film noir* history and they stress that "while various oft-cited film and literary movements, from German Expressionist cinema to homegrown detective fiction, may have helped" shape the genre, "it slouched toward Los Angeles to be born."

[62] Paranoid characters and situations have been portrayed in many classic *noir* films, which is primarily connected with the socio-political climate of the historical period in which they were created —the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. For more information on the specific films and the function of paranoia in them see: *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (2007) edited by Mark T. Conrad, Wheeler W. Dixon's *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations* (2006) and *Film Noir and the Cinema of Paranoia* (2009), or *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* (2001) by Ray Pratt.

friend, Louise Bonner, comes by the apartment exhibiting "a preternatural degree of emotional agitation" (Olson 539) and offering chilling words of caution: "Someone is in trouble! Something bad is happening!" (*Mulholland Drive* 01:03:30 – 01:03:33) the only person affected by them is Rita, who is watching from a distance. When Betty introduces herself politely to Louise saying "My name's Betty," (*Mulholland Drive* 01:03:20) her aunt's friend replies "No, it's not," (*Mulholland Drive* 01:03:24) which is "a fleeting, disquieting moment that will ultimately resonate at the core of" the *Mulholland Drive* story (Olson 539).

With more and more manifestations of the uncanny being slipped into the progressing narrative of the film, Lynch slowly prepares his audience for the sudden plot twist, a deconstruction of the traditional *noir* genre, which takes place roughly two thirds into the movie and reiterates the incredibility of all that has come before in the film. After a session of tender lovemaking, Rita wakes Betty in the middle of the night with cryptic Spanish utterances: "*Silencio*," "*No hay banda*," "*No hay orquestra*," (*Mulholland Drive* 01:42:38 – 01:43:01) and takes her to Club Silencio —a traditional, classical theatre with trademark Lynchian red curtains and an eerie atmosphere. The magician on stage repeats the phrases Rita intoned earlier in her sleep, explaining to the audience that what they are about to experience is just an illusion, that the music they are about to hear is just a recording. He serves as an intermediary between the fantasy and the "real" world —or rather the world in which events have been developing so far. The magician demonstrates how easy it is to succumb to an illusion, especially one imbued with awe-inspiring beauty or with the promise of a revelation. Betty and Rita are moved to tears by the performance of the singer who appears next on stage —Rebekah Del Rio, who beautifully sings a Spanish version of Roy Orbison's "Crying." When she collapses unconscious in mid-song and is being carried away while her voice is still singing, the lovers start to feel anxious. A.E. Denham and F.D. Worrell argue that the performance, and what comes next, serve to emphasize that people only delude

themselves that they have any control over their lives, but are in fact puppets in the hands of "alien influences":

> Rita and Betty are overwhelmed; they weep together and hold one another in a moment of intense intimacy, hands clasped, tears mingling. It is unimaginable that Del Rio is not feeling and singing with every fiber of her soul. But there is no soul, no song, no Del Rio: she collapses, and the music carries on, exposing this climactic expression of humanity as an exercise in lip-sync and slick deception. The singer invoking such passionate response is not the charlatan on stage —Del Rio is not the singer; she is not even necessary for the song to continue; she is a shell without substance. (31)

Betty, who until this moment has been ignoring all the warning signs that came her way, starts shaking uncontrollably, this time more frightened than Rita. Her carefree cheerfulness is gone, as if she sensed that she was losing control of the perfect life she was leading in Los Angeles so far —or that she was never in full control of it.

Betty and Rita return to the apartment where the illusion governing the first segment of the film finally falls apart. The women vanish into thin air one after the other and aunt Ruth enters the empty bedroom, which she eyes with suspicion. In the next scene we see a woman lying in a different bedroom —it is the corpse Betty and Rita had found previously when looking for the enigmatic Diane Selwyn, whose name was one of the few things Rita could remember. But the dark blotches disappear from the corpse's skin and the woman rises from bed. She looks like a downbeat version of Betty —and is also played by Naomi Watts—, "the antithesis of the pink-cheeked, bouncy, chipper, optimistic" (Olson 564) girl who came to Hollywood to fulfill her dreams. We learn that she was the lover of accomplished actress Camilla Rhodes —a predatory version of Rita— who left her for Adam Kesher, the director of a film in which they were both starring. Diane failed to carve a career for herself in

Hollywood, getting only minor parts with the help of Camilla, she never got to live in an elegant courtyard apartment and was finally cruelly rejected by her lover. In the last thirty minutes of the film we see the broken woman witness Camilla and Adam announce their engagement during a party at the director's luxurious Mulholland Drive mansion. Devastated, Diane hires a hit man to kill Camilla who, when the deed is done, informs Diane about it by leaving her a blue key —which previously had appeared in a much more "designer" form in Rita's purse, together with the money. In the penultimate scene of the film Diane ostensibly commits suicide in her bedroom after being chased by the elderly couple from the airport, who crawl out from under her door and hound her to death (or so it seems). In the last scene of the film a blue-haired lady, who previously appeared in the Club Silencio sequence, utters the word "*Silencio*" (*Mulholland Drive* 02:22:34).

The consensus among critics is that the first, longer part of *Mulholland Drive* is an idealizing fantasy or a waking dream conceived by Diane —who is neither in control of her life, nor, as it ultimately turns out, of the beautiful illusion she creates— as a result of her psychotic breakdown after Camilla, the object of her sexual desire and her only remaining link to Hollywood, abandons her. But, as Joseph Barbera and Henry J. Moller point out, this only "helps solve the 'mystery' established by the film's narrative" without really providing anything more than "a superficial understanding of the film or rather the film's central story, namely the psychological conflict of its central character" (Barbera and Moller 515). At this point the analysis of the film forks into different directions, with critics' views varying considerably. Many, however, agree with Jennifer McMahon, who argues in the essay "City of Dreams: Bad Faith in *Mulholland Dr.*" that the film

> illustrates that, when confronted with unsavory aspects of existence, individuals often opt to disguise these truths by creating self-consoling, but also self-deceptive narratives. These narratives are the lies we tell to make existence "bearable for us."

> *Mulholland Dr.* reveals the human tendency to create such fictions as well as what follows from their fragility. (113)

In McMahon's opinion, the conclusion is that Lynch wants to show his audience that "not only truths, but also lies, can be fatal" (124)[63], making Diane's story a cautionary tale. The previously mentioned Joseph Barbera and Henry J. Moller offer a roughly similar view of the film's "deeper meaning," by focusing on the "rich illustration of themes of [the] narcissism" (515) from which Diane suffers and for which she pays with losing her "psychic equilibrium" (525) and with the ensuing suicide. Greg Olsen is less harsh in his criticism of Diane, whom he believes is an "immensely sympathetic and affecting character" (579) who "has been wronged" but who still "must pay the price" (580) for killing Camilla.

Todd McGowan, who analyses the film from Lacan's perspective on desire[64], on the other hand, sees the illusion created by Diane in the first part of the film as the one that seems more real, more in line with what we expect reality to be like. The critic believes that Diane creates the fantasy trying to put her real, chaotic and dismal life in order —not a natural one but an order characteristic of a coherent, linear Hollywood *film noir* plot, in which a mystery is being solved, the villains are exposed and the hero (heroine) gets the beautiful girl. The second part of the film is Diane's world of unfulfilled desire, incoherent and distorted, "which lacks even a sense of temporality" and where events occur "in a random order, without a clear narrative logic" (McGowan 201). Matthew Campora, who analyses McGowan's interpretation, believes that, for the critic, meaning in *Mulholland Drive* "is generated not by a priori frameworks that exist independently of experience but by narratives, mythologies, or

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[63] When referring to truths and lies in *Mulholland Drive*, McMahon refers to the two different parts of the film —the first one considered to be an illusion created by Diane and thus containing "lies" about her real life, ones she devises to deceive herself, to appease the unbearable pain caused by the "truth" of her dismal real life revealed in the second part of the film.

[64] Jacques Lacan tackles the question of unconscious desire in his seminar *Le séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1973) in which he states that "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* 235). In other words, humans unconsciously desire recognition from the "Other," but they also desire for what they believe the "Other" desires —which is what the "Other" lacks.

fantasies that actually structure experience of reality and provide tools for interpreting it" (82). He also emphasizes that for McGowan the film industry is responsible for Diane's hardship, as she "is a victim of Hollywood on both levels of the narrative (in her waking life, her Hollywood fantasy of stardom has come to naught, and in her dream, it proves unsustainable)" (Campora 83). The fantasy however is a necessary stage through which Diane must go through to have a "revelation" about her existence:

> The film's final word is not Lynch's warning to the spectator to abandon the illusions of fantasy. It is not a call for quiet after all the rumblings of Diane's fantasy. On the contrary, *Mulholland Drive* makes clear that it is only by insisting on fantasy to the end that one arrives at the experience of silence. This is the silence that exists between fantasy and desire—the traumatic silence of the real that the noise of everyday life always obscures. (McGowan 218)

The "silence" McGowan refers to is a kind of "clean slate" for Diane, the moment, when neither the illusion woven by her tormented brain nor the pain of unfulfilled desire cloud her perception anymore, thereby she can free herself of both and choose a different path if she so wishes. I am much more inclined towards the interpretation offered by Todd McGowan, than those provided by the previously mentioned critics. I would even go further in the direction set by him by entertaining the possibility that the traumatic events following the protagonists' visit to Club Silencio were not devoid of fantasy elements and that the last scene in Diane's apartment had a purifying effect on her troubled psyche. There are various indications of that part of the plot being twisted as well, which is emphasized by oneiric intrusions into the downbeat woman's grim reality, such as the final, surreal nightmare visions involving people she previously met in completely different circumstances.

The entire film's narrative is incoherent and interspersed with "mini-narratives" seemingly unconnected with Diane's story. There is a section about a mysterious bum living

behind a diner, who gives one of the restaurant's clients a heart attack, or a section about the director Adam Kesher being blackmailed by sinister mobsters into casting a leading actress of their choice in his movie. Even if these sections are convincingly weaved into the plot, which supposedly consists of dream and real-life sequences —with the latter containing elements that could have been distorted and incorporated into the illusion— it still means that nothing can be taken at face value when it comes to Lynch's films. Therefore, in my opinion, Diane's suicide never happened, she just reached the definite end of her consoling paranoid fantasy, in which she could picture herself as a *film noir* heroine bravely standing up to an unknown threat, and "arriv[ing] at the experience of silence." A.E. Denham and F.D. Worrell also suspect that she could "have been spared this end" as "in the first narrative, the mirror image of her body in bed shows no obvious cause of death" and, in addition, "she is driven to suicide by what seems to be an hallucination" (28). Therefore, in the end, Diane's world turns phantasmagoric again, and the theatrical smoke that rises around her, as well as the lack of any visible signs of her shooting herself in the head, might suggest that the suicide was only a metaphorical one —marking the death of her idealizing fantasy and the rise of "silence," in the midst of which she can start building a new life for herself. Diane recovers consciousness again in Los Angeles, a place rife with Baudrillard's *simulacra* —even her dramatic, cinematic "suicide" scene could be qualified as such; therefore, the material which she has at her disposal to construct her new reality is also not really authentic and solid, because, as Baudrillard points out, the City of Angels is characterized by a "superficial neutrality, a challenge to meaning and profundity, a challenge to nature and culture, an outer hyperspace, with no origin, no reference-points" (*America* 124). If Diane realizes the potential of the vacuum —or "silence," in the words of Todd McGowan— she had found herself in and seizes the opportunity to "design" her own life in whichever way she pleases, she can become an empowered woman, in control of her own simulation. Still, there is also a possibility that she

returns to worshipping the same *simulacra*, without realizing that they are nothing more than empty signs.

This conclusion might be a hint at Oedipa's "revelation" which Pynchon refuses the reader at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*: that we never really get to know the truth about anything, because in a world of *simulacra*, truth, as a point of reference, is inexistent. What is left are just empty signs which, if treated with enough suspicion, can be exposed as meaningless and consciously used as a tool for the betterment of one's life. In the final scene of the novel, Oedipa is facing the great unknown and waiting for some kind of epiphany that will either validate her paranoia or prove to her that she is losing her mind. If she does not begin to realize that she is simply suspended in hyperspace and that with enough determination she can start shaping and molding the reality around her, she will succumb again to the veiled forms of oppression against women. The suspended ending of *The Crying of Lot 49*, with Oedipa standing alone among a crowd of hostile men, seems to be leaning slightly towards the latter resolution. Diane's fate appears to be even bleaker. Therefore, what both the writer and the director might be suggesting is that a woman's path to emancipation is just a vicious circle in a patriarchal society that will always find means of gaining the upper hand. In a recent article on the latest developments in the area of female empowerment, philosopher Slavoj Žižek supports this theory, by writing that "the establishment tries to redirect this awakening in such a direction that it will not really change power relations. We will get a quota for women, women will be presented in the media more respectfully. But the same power relations will persist in our society" ("For-show female empowerment & gender fluidity").

The protagonist of *Mulholland Drive* is the victim of the social and historical times in which she is trying to carve a decent life for herself, in which she dares to dream. Third wave feminism theoretically empowered women even more than the second wave —by being more

inclusive and by giving activists more possibilities to showcase their cause, to fight everyday misogyny and exchange their ideas and beliefs on an unprecedented scale. The movement challenged the binary stereotypes of femininity (passive virgin vs. domineering slut), that the cultural constructs and the patriarchal power structures and fantasies tried to impose on women, and showed them that there was nothing wrong with being ambitious, self-confident, and articulate. Nevertheless, it seems that Hollywood continued to follow its own rules as regards the treatment of women, not even attempting to make concessions seen in other industries or media in the Western world —even if the latter made them only as an act of "a kind of false openness which also functions as a way to avoid radical mobilization and radical solutions" ("For-show female empowerment & gender fluidity"). Hollywood just blatantly carried on with the ghastly "casting couch"[65] practices and other forms of abuse and sexist behavior. Many of those young, hopeful women, encouraged to be ambitious go-getters, who came to Los Angeles to start their adventure in this, as Betty puts it, "dream place," (*Mulholland Drive* 00:26:42) were quickly cut down to size by the predatory men dominating the film industry[66].

Diane's dreams of success in Hollywood are shattered very early on as we learn from the second, "real" part of the film, and she needs to depend on her lover's willingness to fix her up with small parts. Some critics even believe that the circumstances could have compelled Diane to find work "north of Mulholland Drive rather than south of it, incorporated into the San Fernando Valley's thriving pornographic industry," as Robert Bright implies in his article "Kiss Me Deadly: David Lynch's Mulholland Drive Remembered." The critic refers to the scene that takes place roughly 45 minutes into the film, when the director Adam

[65] A euphemism used to describe the practices of some casting directors or film producers who demand sexual favors from aspiring actresses or actors in exchange for a role in a film or a play.

[66] According to data provided by the "Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film" at San Diego State University, by 2017 gender inequality in employment in the US film industry was still very pronounced: "Of the top 100 grossing films of 2017, women represented 8% of directors; 10% of writers; 2% of cinematographers; 24% of producers and 14% of editors" (Morris).

Kesher, who has just had his first scuffle with the mob, who want to take control of his film, returns home where he finds his wife in bed with a swimming pool service technician. The whole situation is highly clichéd and does not seem serious or dramatic at all, but rather provokes a comic effect. The characters provide some "leaden dialogue" (Bright), with the couple in bed immediately turning against Adam and condescendingly telling him off for disturbing them, and the tanned and muscular "pool man" advising him calmly to: "Just forget you ever saw it. It's better that way" (*Mulholland Drive* 00:50:10 – 00:50:12). Badalamenti's "cheesy soundtrack" (Bright) emphasizes the banality of the scene. All these narrative devices, characteristic of pornographic films, stand in stark contrast to the mood of the entire film, and could point to the imprint of the pornographic industry on Diane's life.

But even Camilla, who is already a sought-after actress, seems to need to secure her position by striking up a relationship with a male director —whom she might just be using for that end, as even during her engagement party she is openly flirting with another woman. In the fantasy part of the film, Diane/Betty does very well during the audition aunt Ruth arranged for her, mainly due to her overly sexualized interpretation of the scene performed with lascivious older actor Woody Katz. Later on, it is revealed that it was Camilla who got the part in real life, most probably for exhibiting similar behavior during her audition. Even in the "fantasy" segment Woody suggests to "play this one nice and close like we did with that other girl, what's her name, the one with the black hair," (*Mulholland Drive* 01:15:56 – 01:16:02) which is one of the subtle hints at Diane's incorporation of real-life people and events into her fantasy in order to mold them according to her desires. In this case, she pictures herself as a promising novice actress whom everyone wants to hire, while Camilla is a nameless, rejected "woman with black hair." Yet, in the second segment of the film, we learn that, in fact, during this audition the director "didn't think so much" (*Mulholland Drive* 02:14:03) of Diane who wanted the role "so bad" (*Mulholland Drive* 02:13:43). This was a

lesson for her that "success in Hollywood may have little or nothing to do with actual talent" (Giannopoulou 58), especially in the case of women.

When fused, the Diane/Betty character is David Lynch's homage to the most iconic Hollywood actress Marilyn Monroe[67] (Lynch and McKenna), whose life and death fascinated him (Breskin 86). Monroe was "a woman exploited for her beauty" as "few admired her acting or cared about her personal feelings" (Krum) and whose role was that of a sex object, while she was "torn apart by the greed, lust and coercion of the men in her life" (Krum). Her death of barbiturate overdose in 1962, although ruled as suicide by the police, remains a mystery to this day and an object of conspiracy theories. Lynch's fascination with Monroe led to his interest in, as he himself puts it, a "woman actress that was *falling*" and the fact that you "can't figure out even now what's real and what's a story" (Breskin 86).

Diane's raunchy romance with Camilla seems to be the epitome of fulfilling a third wave feminist dream —the two attractive women openly engage in a passionate lesbian relationship, without regard for patriarchal social norms. But the affair ends as soon as the dark-haired actress works her way up in Hollywood, because the cruel, calculating woman prefers to devote her time to people who can help advance her career. Still, even though Diane cannot help her with that anymore, she cannot resist showing off her latest achievement, her engagement to a well-known director —hence the invitation to the party sent to her ex-lover. It is a moment of utter humiliation for the "falling" woman, who is made to talk about her failure as an actress while watching Camilla exchange endearments with Adam. Unable to bear the situation any longer, Diane hires a hit man to kill her former lover; however, upon seeing the confirmation of her death, she is so overcome with guilt, that her tortured mind protects itself by projecting an alternative reality —a paranoid fantasy reminiscent of classical

[67] Marilyn Monroe inspired other Lynchean female characters such as *Wild at Heart*'s Lula Fortune (Olson 265) or *Twin Peaks*'s Laura Palmer (Lynch and McKenna). Lynch even wrote a script about the last months of Monroe's life, called *Venus Descending*, in which he "followed the conjectural romantic linkage of Monroe with John and Robert Kennedy, and posited that a conspirational assassination had snuffed out her life" (Olson 265). The film was never made as "the studio bailed out real quick" for "political reasons" (Breskin 86).

noir films. Like in the case of Oedipa, who "projects a world" of her own, paranoia functions as a defense system for Diane, a way out of the depressing reality, as it gives her a purpose, a direction she can pursue with hope for some interesting revelation. She is an actress, so she easily puts on a new persona, a fresh, unblemished version of herself, who is only just beginning her adventure in the film industry. Los Angeles, which has undergone so many transformations in the different pictures it "starred" in over the years, is like a film set, that Diane can adapt to her needs —restoring its innocence and attractiveness from before the time her life started to go downhill. Like a film director, Diane assigns different roles to the people she had met during her stay in the City of Angels, making them either more manageable or mysterious, by turning them into *film noir* clichés, *simulacra* —and she is the detective in charge to find out their secrets. She even ascribes the feelings of paranoia to Rita, who is in constant fear after the car accident, and is suspicious of everything and everyone, as she believes someone might be after her and the money she had found in her purse. Only at the very end of the fantasy does Diane start feeling equally lost and threatened by ominous, unknown forces —she is losing control of it, like she lost control of her life. Her real-life paranoia about her lover's infidelities starts to seep through the dense illusion, and the memory of her having ordered a hit on Camilla starts coming back to her.

As Todd McGowan argues, the Silencio Club sequence intrudes into Diane's fantasy, which should run its course in order to free her from her futile desire —her toxic attachment to a woman who takes advantage of her and to Hollywood, that mercilessly exploits her. But instead, she still has to experience some excruciating feelings of paranoid despair and remorse, laced with terrifying hallucinatory visions, before reaching the temporary solace of the "*silencio*." *Mulholland Drive* generates the feeling of constant repetition in an endless loop of fantasy which is disrupted by the violent return of repressed reality. Even though it seems like the building up tension of the latter segment will and does end in a tragedy, the

protagonist, in fact, experiences a kind of cathartic climax that allows her to start all over again. Afterwards, she can come back to the world with a clean slate, but most probably only to build up a new paranoid illusion for herself, which will help her survive in an environment that invariably preys on women's weaknesses.

CONCLUSION

"Men often ask me, 'Why are your female characters so paranoid?' It's not paranoia. It's recognition of their situation." —Margaret Atwood

"Is not this whole world an illusion? And yet it fools everybody." —Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*

Paranoia has always been a very important organizing element in the elaborate universes created by Thomas Pynchon in his prose and by David Lynch in his films. The author and the filmmaker, both uncompromising in terms of their artistic vision, are known for tackling uncomfortable truths in their works, which, apart from enrapturing the audiences with their beauty, wit, and intricate, multi-layered structures, often conjure up the disquieting impression of their offering a glimpse of the underlying chaos of human existence —their only certainty that of the lack of anything "real" or "true" that would constitute a fixed point of reference against which people could make sound decisions about their lives. Pynchon and Lynch send their characters on journeys, both physical and mental, in the course of which they experience this grim revelation —and it is usually the only revelation they have, as the readers and viewers are never decisively shown whether the characters finally manage to make their peace with the hostile, unpredictable world. The landscapes created by the writer and the director are teeming with Jean Baudrillard's *simulacra* —"models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1)— created either by shady, omnipotent individuals or organizations (which might or might not exist) to control and exploit ordinary people or by the characters' own tormented minds as a means of protection against emotional pain, against the feeling of being lost and confused. Creating paranoid systems of order seems to be the only way of regaining a more or less stable footing in this

chaotic world, recapturing a tiny part of it for oneself, even if it is possibly just a fabrication of the mind, just another construct.

At first glance, however, Pynchon's and Lynch's approach to paranoia seems to stem from different perspectives, worldviews, and motives. The writer concentrates on power structures that oppress ordinary citizens without the means of standing up to them or even finding out who is really responsible for the everyday manipulation —the furtive instilling of certain behaviours and beliefs that make it easier for various authorities, organizations or corporations to push their own, often highly unethical agenda— and inequality —racial, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic— they are subject to. In the case of the novels set in California from the 1960s to the 1980s, and specifically in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49*, on which I focus in my dissertation, the manipulation and abuse are more difficult to detect, as opposed to those carried out during more turbulent times in the history of the United States or in the history of other parts of the world (*V.*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Mason & Dixon*, *Against the Day*). The characters in *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Vineland* or *Inherent Vice* are not the wealthiest and the most privileged people, but they live in beautiful, warm, and sunny California —America's America, the promised land where dreams come true— ostensibly untouched by the atrocities of World War I and II. What Pynchon seems to suggest in these novels, however, is that a different kind of war is being fought there, one that is not immediately apparent to the manipulated masses on whose shoulders those in power build their own shady empires. Most of those ordinary citizens are unaware of their situation, as their basic needs are satisfied with cheap entertainment such as the unending and highly addictive brainless TV shows or aggressively marketed junk food —consuming all of which is absorbing enough to render them blind to the intricate schemes of those in power. However, those who start indulging in a bit of paranoia, who begin to suspect that something is not entirely right with the apparently pleasant world they are living in, that their actions and life

choices are, in fact, not exactly their own, realize that leaving the beaten track and going against the common societal standards —which have, in great part, been formed to keep societies docile, under control— might be a road to great suffering, as they lose all the defences that conformism affords them —acceptance of the peer group, lack of trouble with the law, a ready-made and officially sanctioned worldview. Nonetheless, at the same time, paranoid perception can be a path to empowerment.

In his films David Lynch also often concentrates on the struggle with unknown forces, with mysterious, powerful entities that, for vague reasons, toy with the lives of people who are generally unaware of being manipulated by external influences. One might argue that these forces appear to have a different source that those in Pynchon's works —instead of relating to real-world public authority bodies, institutions, corporations, legal and illegal organizations, they are much more obscure and often embody the deep-rooted fears of the characters, who fabricate them to project their own chagrin and guilt onto them, as means of psychological defence. Unlike Pynchon, Lynch seldom sets his films in locations other than the United States and one of the themes he has most often explored in his works is the deceptive appearances of life, in an initial stage in his career, in romanticized, idyllic, small-town America and, later on, in the mythicized Los Angeles —the illusory gateway to success and fame. Lynch's characters, deluded by the false promises that appertain to the stereotypical portrayal of these places, try to live up to the expectations they set for themselves and those that the people around them set for them and fail and suffer greatly as a consequence. In *Blue Velvet* or the series *Twin Peaks*, Lynch presents the audience with tangible villains, perpetrators of crimes that shake the pictured small-town communities, even if the director never suggests that naming the evildoers solves the communities' problems or allows the protagonists to resume their lives in peace. In the "California trilogy," *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, he, on the contrary, does not give any straight answers

as to who the malefactor is. The protagonists of these films become entangled in paranoid schemes that resemble *film noir* intrigues, but at some point, when the events unfolding on the screen become increasingly dramatic and seemingly approaching a denouement, each of these plots falls apart. The protagonists change identities, become different people who live different lives that mesh with the ones previously led. I concur with scholars who believe that this narrative device, repeatedly employed by Lynch, is meant to turn our attention to the fact that it is very easy to succumb to an illusion, especially one that is pleasant and offers respite in a dire situation that is spinning out of control. The director stresses "the futility of human action" (Denham and Worrell 31) by making his characters bury themselves in their paranoid fantasies, as nothing they do in "real" life can offer them redemption. The delusions ultimately do not serve this purpose either, they are rather a defense mechanism, making life bearable for those who, in moments of clarity, recognize its aimlessness and futility.

One might reason that in Lynch's works paranoia is a tool for the characters to battle their own anxieties —demons coming from within themselves— instead of it being a means of standing up to unscrupulous organizations or sinister figures who attempt to manipulate people for their own murky ends. The conspiracies and supernaturally omnipotent individuals that Lynch portrays in his films would in this case be only figments of the protagonists' ailing minds, overridden by guilt and fear. However, I believe this is only partly true, especially in the case of two of the "California trilogy" films —*Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*. Their protagonists are women, whose need to escape into a paranoid fantasy indeed stems from their futile pursuit of desire, but who, at the same time, have been caught up in and damaged by Hollywood machinations, by the motion picture industry's unwavering predatory patriarchal culture. This is where I see the point of convergence between Lynch's and Pynchon's presentation of personal paranoia as an act of defiance against omnipresent oppressive structures —in the way their female characters, representatives of the consecutive

waves of feminism in the United States —starting with the second wave in the 1960s—, stand up to the continuing, albeit in increasingly veiled forms, manifestations of discrimination against women in such a seemingly progressive place as California.

I have chosen *Mulholland Drive* as the point of comparison with *The Crying of Lot 49*, since both female protagonists of these works are young, still without significant achievements in their lives, on the threshold of which they are standing. Oedipa Maas and Diane Selwyn dwell in California —the ultimate promised land where, according to popular belief, dreams come true and life is pleasant and trouble-free. Oedipa is a stereotypical 1960s housewife, who takes part in Tupperware parties, shops at Muzak-filled malls and waits with a whisky sour in hand for her husband, Mucho, to come back from work. She has a college degree but does not work and the men in her life —her husband, her psychoanalyst and her lawyer— treat her condescendingly even though they are, as it turns out, much inepter at dealing with their own weaknesses than she is. Oedipa herself views her life as a "fat deckful of days" that seem "more or less identical" (*The Crying of Lot 49* 6) until an unusual event shakes it to the core —she is named the executrix of her deceased ex-boyfriend's will. It is not an easy task as the man in question, Pierce Inverarity, was a real estate mogul whose property holdings seem to be too vast to be ever fully catalogued. While trying to carry out the task, Oedipa —the female version of Oedipus, or a *film noir* detective— stumbles upon evidence of the existence of a postal conspiracy, Tristero, dating back to eighteenth-century Europe and which appears to be active in 1960s United States. She becomes more and more obsessed with finding out who is behind the secret organization, whose symbol, the muted post horn, she finds everywhere she goes. Oedipa's paranoid quest becomes both her deliverance —she breaks free from the restrictive life of a middle-class American housewife, leaves the toxic men behind, becomes self-reliant and empowered— and her curse —she pursues an elusive goal without success and, as a result, begins doubting her sanity; her "secret" knowledge

alienates her from most people around her, driving her into loneliness, leaving her on shaky ground. The heroine learns that she had been living in a "golden cage" —which she has been suspecting for a while already, although she never managed before to muster enough conviction to do something about it. She took the superficial, materialistic pleasures that life in California offered her at face value, failing to acknowledge that it was just an illusion of fulfillment and control, fabricated for people of her social standing, aimed at keeping them satisfied and unwilling to change the *status quo*. The paranoid quest for Tristero made Oedipa cast off her apathy and allowed her to see much more than ever, to name the "problem that has no name" (Friedan 15), and to acknowledge the social constraints imposed on middle-class, white women of that time, which deprived them of their right to pursue their careers, lead their own, independent lives, choose to do anything apart from taking care of their family, in exchange for financial stability and a consolidated position in society.

California plays a double role here, as even though this land of opulent *simulacra* facilitates the creation of "golden cages" for women, it is, at the same time, one of the most forward-looking of US states on many levels, including social change —which is emphasized in the scene in which Oedipa crosses the University of California campus at Berkeley where she sees manifestations of the budding counterculture movement. Therefore, once her paranoid pursuit pushes her out of the restrictive but safe and cozy sphere of suburban wifehood, she sees social change taking place right before her eyes, even if she does not understand it well yet. By going against the tide, Oedipa joins the ranks of America's "dispossessed" —the poor, marginalized, discriminated against— and starts "searching for truth, community, significance in the interconnected realms of the phallocratic military-industrial complex and the narcissistic leisure world of southern California" (*New Essays on* The Crying of Lot 49 9). The quest indeed allows her to descend into an underworld of outcasts who introduce her to a host of ideas, conspiracy theories, and lifestyles she had never

heard of or thought about before and makes her aware that she is perfectly capable of fending for herself in this volatile environment, without the assistance of men who, one by one, reveal themselves to be immature nuisances, self-absorbed, and hindering her personal development. The further Oedipa investigates the mysterious Tristero organization, the more information she gathers, the vaster and more incomprehensible the conspiracy seems, making the protagonist's paranoia grow. Even though her discoveries are generally rather unsettling, such as the realization that nothing is what it seems and that everyone and everything appears to conceal some gruesome secret, Oedipa understands that there is no possibility for her to return to her sheltered life as a homemaker. She embraces the freedom her paranoid quest affords her and appreciates the disillusioning glimpse behind the hyperreal, mesmerizing landscape of California, even if it means more difficulties and sorrow ahead for her.

That said, Pynchon never reveals to the reader whether the heroine finally finds some tangible evidence of Tristero's existence or whether she continues on her path towards emancipation. The novel ends just before the potential moment of "revelation," as Oedipa is waiting for a likely key player in the conspiracy to disclose his identity. This way the writer only emphasizes that maybe finding the "truth" is not necessarily the most important issue, as it is an impossible feat in the postmodern world. The inquisitiveness, however, fueled by paranoia, leads Oedipa to the discovery of the multidimensionality of the world surrounding her, and of the fact that she can play a much more active role in it than she had been allowed to believe by the people close to her, and especially by the men in her life.

In my opinion, the story of Diane Selwyn, the protagonist of *Mulholland Drive*, could be viewed as a continuation of the commentary on the situation of women in the US, on the benefits of the second wave feminist movement —or the lack of them— thirty-six years after Oedipa's paranoid quest that set her on the path to empowerment. The heroine of the film lives at a time when the third wave has already started and its focus is mainly on the further

elimination of gender-based double standards and stereotypes, on fighting gendered language and everyday sexism, on guaranteeing equal opportunities for women in the workplace, and on preventing sexual harassment. The forward-looking California, the home of the counterculture movement in the 1960s, would appear to be a perfect place for such ideas to take hold earlier than elsewhere in the US —but it is also the home of Hollywood, where sexist behavior continues unabated. In *Mulholland Drive*, Los Angeles also plays the role of a double-faced character —beguiling with its uncanny atmosphere of glamour, dream fulfillment, and success only to cruelly disillusion the hopeful protagonist who refuses to play by Hollywood rules that seem not to have taken the feminist movement accomplishments to date into account. Diane Selwyn is introduced to the audience through the idealized version of herself, the novice actress Betty Elms, who apart from promisingly kicking off her film career tries to solve a paranoid mystery in Los Angeles. She seems to be a third wave feminist dream come true —she is an independent, ambitious woman, entering a lesbian relationship without any unease— although, as in case of the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, she is white and middle-class which affords her a degree of innate privilege non-white and/or poor women are deprived of. Like Oedipa, Betty sets out on a *film noir*-esque quest, taking upon her the non-stereotypical gender role not only of a tough and daring detective but also of the protector of a woman in distress. Rita, an amnesiac car crash survivor with a purse full of money, who arrives at Betty's apartment by chance, senses that she could have been in some kind of trouble before the accident and that she might be pursued by dangerous people. The two women try to solve the case of Rita's identity which takes them to various Los Angeles landmarks, many of them known from classic Hollywood films, which deepens the sensation of hyperreality. Parallel to this, another mysterious story unfolds which appears to be the main thread of the film: that of a director suddenly losing control over his production due to some

hazy conspiracy between film studio officials and a mafia-type organization who force him to pick a lead actress of their choice.

As the plot thickens and its different strands start interweaving, promising some kind of shocking revelation, Betty becomes less and less self-confident and carefree. This change augurs the collapse of the intricate paranoid fantasy woven by Diane Selwyn, who dreams up Betty Elms and her Hollywood success story to appease her own pain, humiliation, and guilt stemming from being a failed actress, a cruelly abandoned lover, and, finally, a killer. Even though Diane appears only approximately half an hour before the end of the two-and-a-half-hour long film, Lynch infuses its first, daydream part with clues indicating that Betty Elms might not be a real person and that her adventure in Hollywood might be something entirely different from what it seems at first glance. These clues include affected acting, frequent references to the spurious, illusory nature of life in the contemporary world —and especially in Los Angeles— or striking background characters who seem to possess secret knowledge about whatever is going on. Initially, the audience is led to believe that it all concerns the conspiracy that Betty is trying to crack together with Rita. The last part of *Mulholland Drive*, in which Diane and her dismal life suddenly take center stage, can be confusing at the beginning, but soon it becomes more and more clear that the downbeat woman is both the protagonist of the film and the creator of its fantasy first part. The beautiful illusion was a defense mechanism employed by Diane to ease her distress after learning that the hit she had ordered on her traitorous lover was successful. In the illusion, she not only pictures herself as a promising actress on the threshold of her career and in an equally promising budding relationship with the woman who had treated her so cruelly in real life, but she also indulges in a paranoid fantasy of shady organized crime dealings and film studio conspiracies in which she grants herself the role of the fearless detective on the track of a mystery and a protector of a confused victim.

In this case, paranoia fulfills a slightly different function than in the case of Oedipa. Diane is not aiming at connecting with people in a similar situation, with other "dispossessed" like her —she is just desperately trying to stay afloat in the terrible situation she had found herself in. What links her with Oedipa's approach, however, is that she also takes on a paranoid perception so as to attempt to be in control of the chaotic circumstances in her life, to feel empowered and capable of navigating the male-dominated environment with ease. While the heroine of *The Crying of Lot 49* seemingly achieves this goal —she frees herself from the toxic relationships with men and follows her own path defying the gender stereotypes of her times— Pynchon never really reveals the outcome of her quest, nor does he hint at what becomes of Oedipa later on. The "cliffhanger" ending of the novel that never gets a continuation —which could imply that the ultimate "revelation" never comes to Oedipa, that the predatory men surrounding the inquisitive woman never allow her to succeed— might mean that the feminist movement is doomed to fail as any hopes for truly equal rights for women will sooner or later be suppressed by the insidious patriarchy. Diane and her paranoid Hollywood fantasy, that takes place over three decades after Oedipa's "awakening," testify to the condition of the women's rights movement in the US, to its failure to achieve anything more than merely cosmetic changes in the way in which women were treated and perceived at the beginning of the 2000s. California, where both women experience paranoid feelings that serve as their defense mechanism against the chaos in their lives, has been long viewed as a *petri* dish for global social change movements. It is also, however, as Jean Baudrillard points out in *America*, "hyperreal in its vitality, it has all the energy of the *simulacrum*" (104). That is why it is difficult to spot, underneath all the dazzling sunshine and superficial indications of wealth and success, the rot consuming this dreamland from within. The different ways in which Pynchon and Lynch present their heroines and their struggles with the harsh reality, sugared with illusion, is a sign of the changing times, of the shift in the direction of the

feminist movement. Oedipa, who possesses less autonomy as she is bound by social restrictions imposed on women in the 1960s, but leads a relatively comfortable life, is more concerned with spotting the "enemy without" who is causing harm not only to her but to a wider group of "dispossessed." Diane, who, on the other hand, is given much more liberty when choosing her path in life, soon realizes that said freedom is just a construct, a measly scrap women were thrown by men who continue deciding about their success or failure. The protagonist of *Mulholland Drive*, a product of second wave feminism, nevertheless feels utterly responsible for her own plight and searches for the enemy within herself. Still, both Oedipa and Diane try to fight their invisible foes by "projecting" worlds of their own. For the former it ends neither in victory nor in defeat and for the latter it means almost utter obliteration. Yet, the paranoid Californian landscapes they create are their only means of defying the omnipresent illusion of happiness they are fed, their only means of self-expression, of survival in a world incessantly hostile towards ambitious women.

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