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### ***Inherent Vice*: Thomas Pynchon beyond the Postmodern Fiction and Anti-Detective Novel**

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the development of noir genre in *Inherent Vice* written by Thomas Pynchon in 2009. In fact, this novel seems to be a time of reflection about all shifts and changes of detective fiction, starting from the Californian *hard-boiled* school and the postmodern *anti-detective fiction* to the contemporary noir. In *Inherent Vice* Pynchon shows his awareness and considerations about the genre tradition – to which some of his novels such as *The Crying of Lot 49* belong – playing out a thought-provoking parodic representation of the detective story and its doom. This paper aims to decrypt the meaning of the references that *Inherent Vice* contains about noir genre and to detect what is the position of the author in writing this novel.

**Key words:** noir, detective fiction, Thomas Pynchon, anti-detective novel, postmodernism, postmodern fiction.

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– Under the paving-stones, the beach!<sup>1</sup>

The uncommon epigraph that we can find at the beginning of the novel *Inherent Vice*, written by Thomas Pynchon in 2009, can be traced back to the famous counterculture French slogan "*Sous les pavés, la plage!*", used by protest movements in France during revolutionary May '68, when students began to gouge out tiles from the ground, symbolizing their disdain for the urbanization process and their reluctance to accept modern society.

This way, Pynchon seems to enlighten immediately some of the keys that will help the reader to open his novel, but mostly this epigraph concerns problems and changes discussed during the long postmodern debate that we can find in most of the postmodern novels starting from the '50s. The reason is that *Inherent Vice* offers a vast map of places which can be detected in the tradition and rise of the postmodern novel, for its geographic, socio-politic and literary values put into play.

Above all here, the aim is to identify the matrix and the development process of detective fiction, a subject that Pynchon makes clear, as we will notice in this paper, through his postmodern devices such as metanarrative and parodic ones. Since its publication, *Inherent Vice* (2009) was defined as a noir, a detective story, in a period in which this literary genre is widely used all over the world, in literature, in cinema and TV series, as discussed in some recent journal articles such as in the one written by Charles Scruggs<sup>2</sup>. Although it may not be a wrong definition, it is necessary to account for the history of detective fiction and how its models have changed in time and have been changed by postmodern writers, including Thomas Pynchon, in particular in some of his former novels such as *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) or *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973).

Although it goes beyond it, basically the *Inherent Vice* model of detective fiction can be traced back to the Californian *hard-boiled school*, not only for the setting of the novel, but also for the similarity between the actors (the detectives) and the plots. Far from the rational and comforting values of the first *British*

<sup>1</sup> T. Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> C. Scruggs, "*The Power of Blackness*": *Film Noir and Its Critics*, in *American Literary History*, Oxford University Press, Vol. 16, No. 4 Winter, 2004, pp. 675-687.

*detective novels* by Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie, the *hard-boiled* Californian writer such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett introduced a new type of detection, set in the Californian *wastelands*, and were much more realistic, with night-clubs, alcohol and gangsters. Chandler's and Hammett's detectives, Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, are ordinary men (not like the extraordinary Sherlock Holmes) "with a hangover the next morning, a jaw that really hurts". The *hard-boiled* detective "is above all a man who accepts and endures absurdity"<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, in *Inherent Vice* we can find the echo of the innovation and subversion depicted by the *anti-detective novel*. Postmodern writers such as Jorge Louis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon radically changed the criteria and the leitmotifs of detection.

Thus a stress on the solution was the automatized principle of the hard-boiled formula against which the anti-detective novel shaped itself, reacting by its opposite constructive principle, that is, the suspension of the solution<sup>4</sup>.

Considering the three major steps of a detective story (the detective, the detection and the solution) we can affirm that the solution is the *condition sine qua non*, and this will be the most important object of change in *anti-detective fiction*. As William Spanos suggests in his brilliant article *The Detective and the Boundary*<sup>5</sup>, the anti-detective novel will question and challenge the positivistic readers' expectations, creating anxiety and terror through the alteration of the solution.

Above all, this choice is the result of a different need, the postmodern writer's one. In this context the detection and the *quest novel* seem to be a way to analyze the postmodern condition, and more precisely, in Pynchon's case, to analyze the evolution of Los Angeles values as the postmodern town *par excellence*, as Edward Soja suggests in his essay "Taking Los Angeles Apart"<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> S. Tani, *The Doomed Detective*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1984, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> S. Tani, *The Doomed Detective*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> W. V. Spanos, *The detective and the boundary: Some notes on the Postmodern literary imagination*, "Boundary 2", 1 (1), Autumn, 1972, pp. 147-168.

<sup>6</sup> E. Soja, "Taking Los Angeles apart", *Postmodern Geography*, London, Verso, 1989.

This brief foreword is probably redundant but also extremely necessary because in writing *Inherent Vice* Thomas Pynchon shows his complete awareness of all these changes in *noir*; not only in the literary tradition, but also in the crime history of modern America.

In writing his important essay *The Doomed Detective* Stefano Tani depicted the destiny of the *anti-detective*. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa falls in the middle of nowhere, in the labyrinth of non-solution, as well as Beckett's Watt does. Facing the emptiness of the chaos is the true role of the *anti-detective*, and Larry Doc Sportello in *Inherent Vice* is the first detective totally aware of being in this mess. So, if we consider *Inherent Vice* as a *quest novel*, maybe the quest would be: What happened during the Sixties in Los Angeles? What could a hippie detective find out through the foggy chaos of the postmodern city?

Starting from these questions, *Inherent Vice* can be nothing but a pastiche, a parodic re-writing of an era from the perspective of a writer who directly experienced the postmodern period and the Californian counter-culture. In fact, Pynchon lived in Venice Bay during the Sixties, along with folk songwriters and poets such as Richard Farina, to whom *Gravity's Rainbow* is dedicated. Los Angeles, like Borges' Aleph, is impossible to describe due to its wide development, its globalization and gentrification processes. As Mike Davis stated, "Los Angeles, a city without boundaries, which ate the desert, cut down the Joshua and the May Pole, and dreamt of becoming infinite"<sup>7</sup>. *Inherent Vice* can dialogue with Mike Davis' and Edward Soja's essays, which analyze the development of Los Angeles' geographic space with some considerations that can be found in the metropolis described by Pynchon. The influence of unrestrained late-capitalism is visible in all its forms, especially in the reorganization of the urban and suburban spaces, creating social phenomena such as segregation (Los Angeles is the most segregated American City), isolation and social class division, and that's why the most important role in the plot is played by real estate and land speculation. This is also a motivation for the spreading of gang neighborhoods and the division between who lives by the sea (hippies, surfers, tramps) and who lives in the flatland (professional, government, boosters). The political situation of terror due to the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon's iron hand against protesters, and the spread of the drug-cul-

<sup>7</sup> M. Davis, *City of Quartz*, New York, Vintage books, 1992. p. 12.

ture come to be the background of a novel based on chaos and paranoia. The boundary between what is real and what is not becomes very thin; what is pure paranoia and what is happening, indeed. This is what Doc Sportello (a drug addicted detective) has to deal with, and this is also his limit, "this glittering mosaic of doubt. Something like what Saunchos colleagues in marine insurance liked to call inherent vice"<sup>8</sup>.

The counter-culture dreams are doomed to end as well, as the detective knows it to be doomed facing the postmodern mosaic of doubt. Doc Sportello cannot do anything but observe the manifestation of the detection limit and be overwhelmed by the dense network of events. He will look at Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade through the lens of envy and nostalgia. Pynchon creates many plots and sub plots, and a large number of links between the numerous characters, especially in the past (which is still the most used tense in detective novels). To these are added the several trips made by Sportello and other characters due to drug abuse, acid paranoia: so a high volume of mental projection ends up being a parallel plot.

Psychedelia makes the detection very difficult to conduct, and it will be hard for the reader to pay attention: it is clear that Pynchon wants to play with him once again, telling story after story, a domino effect to recall the early Seventies spirit.

If, in *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, paranoia and parody were Pynchon's mere narrative tools, precisely imposed from above, in *Inherent Vice* the mystery, the paranoia and the parodic situations are actually part of the world inhabited by Doc and other characters. They face those kinds of situations horizontally rather than vertically. These literary devices are therefore absorbed naturally by the characters: in my opinion this is one of the motivations (along with the autobiographical tissue of the novel) that makes *Inherent Vice* the most realistic fiction that Pynchon has ever written. The classic artifice of his writing (unlike in *V.* or *Gravity's Rainbow*) is just a mirror of the represented era. I'd say a rather nostalgic mirror.

If, during the Forties Raymond Chandler's noir anticipated the feeling of disillusionment and defeat that the counter-culture generation would experience twenty years later, it is no coincidence that Pynchon chose noir (largely

<sup>8</sup> *Inherent Vice*, op. cit., p. 450.

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survived as a genre) to resume the Sixties tale. As previously mentioned, Pynchon is aware of noir tradition, not only the literary one, but he is also familiar with the chronicler tradition. This also reverberates through the novel. When the L.A.P.D. detective lieutenant Bjornsen talks about the Manson family murders, he also mentions the oldest famous Californian crimes: the Elisabeth Short<sup>9</sup> and Thomas H. Ince murders.

"It's all turned to sick fascination," opined Bigfoot, "and meantime the whole field of homicide's being stood on its ear—bye-bye Black Dahlia, rest in peace Tom Ince, yes we've seen the last of those good old-time L.A. murder mysteries I'm afraid."<sup>10</sup>

At this stage it is necessary to ask an urgent question: how does *Inherent Vice* sit within noir and detective fiction history? First of all, we must consider two dates: the one in which the narrative takes place and the one in which Pynchon lives while writing this novel. In the first case, 1970 represents a watershed in noir's evolution as a genre, thanks to the contribution of writers such as James Ellroy, Walter Mosley, Sara Paretsky and many others, who introduce in their plots some elements of conspiracy and political civil wars. As noted by Paolo Simonetti<sup>11</sup>, the noir production in those years contributed to the remarkable education of Thomas Pynchon, as a writer and to his approach to the genre during his adolescence. In the preface to *Slow Learner* (1984 edition), his early collection of short stories, Pynchon claims to have read "a lot of spy fiction, novels of intrigue"<sup>12</sup>.

The second crucial year is 2009, the year in which *Inherent Vice* was published, and it is a florid year for what concerns worldwide noir production. Among the main characters of this time there are many Scandinavian noir wri-

<sup>9</sup> The murder of Elisabeth Short will also be mentioned by James Ellroy in his 1987 novel *The Black Dahlia*.

<sup>10</sup> *Inherent Vice*, cit., p. 209.

<sup>11</sup> P. Simonetti, "Bye Bye Black Dahlia»: Pynchon, Coover e il 'vizio intrinseco' della detective fiction", in *Crime e Detective Fiction nel Novecento: voci a confronto*, edited by M. Ascari, F. Saggini, Pisa-Roma, Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> 140 T. Pynchon, *Slow Learner. Early Stories*, New York-Boston-London, Little, Brown and Company, 1984, p. 18.

ters (most of them are Swedish), such as Henning Mankell, David Lagercrantz, and Camilla Lackberg. As Simonetti suggests, it is not a mere coincidence that in a period in which the detective fiction speaks mostly Swedish, Pynchon decides to say goodbye to the traditional mystery genre by calling his policeman character Christian Bjornsen. At first sight his name could be one of the Swedish policemen of popular contemporary novels, such as Mankell's Chief Wallander, also considering his dubious morality. It is very likely that Pynchon chose for Bjornsen the nickname "Renaissance detective", alluding to the renaissance of the mystery genre policeman in a new noir guise. In fact, in *Inherent Vice*, Bigfoot, as a co-star in the novel, represents for Pynchon a passage from the *hard-boiled* tradition to the new mystery frontiers. But what about the role of the main character, Doc Sportello, in this passage? This could be harder to outline.

Doc is moving in Los Angeles but his city – as caricatured as realistic – is different from the dark and obscure city in which Chandler's Marlowe or Hammett's Spade live. Their affinity, however, is quite visible to a keen eye.

"Cause PIs are doomed, man," Doc continuing his earlier thought, "you could've seen it coming for years, in the movies, on the tube. Once there was all these great old PIs—Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, the shamus of shamuses Johnny Staccato, always smarter and more professional than the cops, always end up solvin the crime while the cops are following wrong leads and gettin in the way"<sup>13</sup>.

Through these lines of the book Pynchon underlines the similarities between these private eyes (PIs), but above all he analyzes what is the destiny of post *hard-boiled* noir, what Stefano Tani defines "a decline in quality" for what noir "thus turns into kitsch or, at his best, self-parody"<sup>14</sup>.

Doc – or Pynchon in this case – suffers from detection's fate: no country for smart or high moral value PIs such as Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade. The detective is doomed, screwed. This concept is expressed as well in the following and last Pynchon novel *Bleeding Edge* (2013), through Ernie's thoughts:

<sup>13</sup> *Inherent Vice*, cit., p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> *The Doomed Detective*, cit., p. 25-26.

"What happened to private eyes, lovable criminals? Lost in all that post-sixties propaganda"<sup>15</sup>.

PIs such as Marlowe and Spade are the best examples for Doc as a detective and for Pynchon as a writer. Doc always tries to keep that moral integrity, that moral code inherent in the *hard-boiled* detective's nature. Just like Marlowe, Doc shows a cynical, stubborn character: he tries to remain indifferent to situations (as with Shasta, the girl he was in love with) and to all the paranoias that recur like an infinite boomerang ("‘Uh-huh.’ Doc typed, ‘Not hallucinating’"<sup>16</sup>). Similar to Marlowe's characterization, even some routine basic activities as eating or sleeping don't seem to affect the detective's routine: all Doc cares about is his work and his professionalism, which he defends at all costs ("Bigfoot, can we at least try to be professional here?"<sup>17</sup>), even if he keeps a self-deprecating and ironic attitude. In a sense he always shows some respect for the mystery itself: he is totally aware of detection's inherent vice, that is "this glittering mosaic of doubt. Something like what Saunchos' colleagues in marine insurance liked to call inherent vice"<sup>18</sup>.

In addition, following his hippie lifestyle, Doc uses marijuana, acid and other drugs, continuing the long tradition of drug addict detectives, from Sherlock Holmes – who used cocaine – to Marlowe, who shows, like many *hard-boiled* characters, his alcohol dependence.

The echo of Chandler's novels, especially *The Long Goodbye* and *Farewell, My Lovely*, is clear not only for what concerns the location (Venice Bay above all), but also for the obscure atmosphere that lies beneath the intricate puzzle of narration, weighing down the sequence of events. Doc has got all the credentials to be a *doomed* detective: he is often helpless and overwhelmed, and he faces all those tricks he cannot decipher. He is unable to concentrate on his main target because he is constantly distracted by drug-induced paranoia, and his deductions are often wrong and slow to show up. Despite everything, at the end of the novel Doc will not be as terrible as we expected. At the very

<sup>15</sup> T. Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, New York, Penguin Press, 2013, p. 418.

<sup>16</sup> *Inherent Vice*, cit., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Inherent Vice*, cit., p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Inherent Vice*, cit., p. 351.



end, thanks to his obstinacy, but not necessarily thanks to him, he will be able to solve mysteries, he will cash his check for the bet in Las Vegas, and Coy Harlingen will be back home with his family. In short, Doc is not as doomed as postmodern detectives: unlike Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Doc will not fall in the void, and his investigation will be successful, just like Marlowe's one. In his own way Doc is an antihero – sometimes clumsy, grotesque – who is not able to restore order or to solve all the enigmas through the chaotic clues. In conclusion, he is an intentional parodic version of Philip Marlowe and – considering the categories proposed by Northrop Frye in his essay<sup>19</sup> – from an epic hero he turns into an ironic hero; *hard-boiled* models are still identifiable, and Marlowe's paradigm remains recognizable.

In fact, we can find Coy Harlingen and his dubious death; the relationship between Doc and Bigfoot (with his latent homosexuality) is the typical expression of ambiguity, the friendship/hatred between PIs and police detectives that can be traced back to Sherlock and Lestrade; the disappearance of a woman, Shasta Fay, Doc's ex-girlfriend, who, just like Terry Lennox with Philip Marlowe, reappears at night straight from Doc's past, so that he thinks he is hallucinating.

In view of these considerations, it is necessary to ask another question about the history of detective fiction in which Pynchon is an undisputed protagonist: what kind of debate does the author advance in writing *Inherent Vice*? If he is aware of how his literary innovations recoded a genre forty years before, what is the role of this awareness in the writing of the novel?

The first consideration to make is about Pynchon's attention towards the genre. Above all, he seems to pay homage to the *hard-boiled* golden age, carrying its clichés, and dissembling them in order to draw a personal caricature for both settings and characters.

On the other hand, he goes beyond that paradigm – as is clear in *The Crying of Lot 49*, in *V.* or *Gravity's Rainbow*, which represent *anti-detective fiction* since they are an expression of postmodern fiction and the deep reconstruction of the *quest* novel – adding more and more chaotic elements, fragmenting the plot in impossible pieces of a parodic puzzle; Pynchon embraces the doubt, the irregularity, showing the *inherent vice* of detection.

<sup>19</sup> N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, 1957.

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So the writing of *Inherent Vice* is a still further step, a different approach that Pynchon shows towards the genre: at this stage he not only acts towards the tradition and evolution of the genre – just like in his Sixties' novels – but also in virtue of his own contribution to the genre's tradition. In short, it seems that Pynchon is looking at Pynchon, at times imitating him in a sort of self-parody. From this point of view, *Inherent Vice* is not only a post-Chandler novel but also post-Pynchon, and the game it plays is often caricatured. A parodic paranoia spreads inside the novel's whole universe, changing the individual and introspective value that paranoia had in Pynchon's previous novels.

Ultimately, we can state that looking back at the genre's whole tradition is the way in which Pynchon is taking a step forward in his literary production. *Inherent Vice* is a time of reflection (and redemption) on what writing noir implies in the twenty-first century.

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