

Abstract

In his works, Pynchon engages the difficult concept of entropy and exposes how certain trends in contemporary culture and society, such as consumerism, exhibit tendencies similar to those of entropy. This observation has disturbing implications for contemporary culture and society, such as eventual cultural heat-death, where new ideas cease to develop, because all the useful intellectual energy has been exhausted. Therefore, I have decided to examine this concept of entropy and how Pynchon engages it in his works "Entropy," *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, which expose the main contributors to greater entropy and the disturbing implications of this concept for contemporary culture and society, some of which we are witnessing even today.

The two main scientific types of entropy, thermodynamic and that of information theory, are explored by Pynchon in his early short story "Entropy," which I have analyzed in the second chapter of this thesis. As such, this short story provides an unobstructed view of Pynchon's early engagement with the concept of entropy, which increases in complexity in his later works *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*.

The Crying of Lot 49, explored in the third chapter of this thesis, indicates a considerable development of and change in Pynchon's perspective on the concept of entropy with the introduction of Maxwell's Demon. Despite the objections raised against this theoretical concept, it provides some hope of reversing the inexorable tendency

toward greater entropy and heat-death. This demon also represents the point where thermodynamics and information theory come together. Readers are prompted to actively participate in reversing the effects of entropy by sorting information encountered through the protagonist of the book, who, like the reader, also assumes a similar sorting role to that of Maxwell's Demon. Furthermore, *The Crying of Lot 49* exposes how consumerism and corporations that perpetuate it contribute to greater socio-cultural entropy and eventual heat-death.

Gravity's Rainbow, which I have briefly examined in the fourth chapter, marks the height of Pynchon's engagement with the concept of entropy by providing a postmodern reading experience that is also highly entropic and threatens to exhaust readers engaged in an attempt to sort the huge abundance of information contained within, which subverts traditional reader expectations and reflects the chaos and excess of information in contemporary culture and society. Corporations, such as I.G. Farben most prominently, emerge as the main antagonists and instigators of entropy and acceleration toward heat-death not only by perpetuating unsustainable exploitation through consumerism, but also by fueling the war to create a market and demand for developing technologies of mass destruction, such as the V-2 rocket.

By devising his later works to yield widely differentiating interpretations through highly entropic reading experiences, Pynchon seems to counter the effects of entropy and promotes the circulation of unique intellectual ideas instead. Readers are enriched by the experience of active participation in the information sorting process and

become more experienced at distinguishing meaningful information from the excess of redundant and misleading, consumer oriented information that is spread by corporations through mass media in the contemporary world. By extension, this encourages readers to find their own interpretations of the chaotic, contemporary world permeated by consumerism, instead of accepting pre-arranged interpretations offered by mass media.

Keywords: Thomas Pynchon, entropy, heat-death, consumerism, corporation, thermodynamics, information theory, Maxwell's Demon